

Pierced Heart



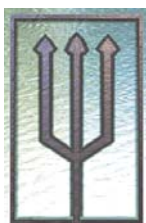
An Over the Edge™ Novel by
Robin D. Laws

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ATLAS
GAMES



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to Valerie

I

A boom box, a flotation device, a purse; these were the things she carried with her into the pool area of the Bienvenidos Hotel that night. The already-inflated flotation device was shaped like an inner-tube and colored to look like a hollowed-out lime slice. The small purse was made of transparent plastic. It was empty except for a vial, also made of transparent plastic.

A large sign warned her, in eight languages, that use of the pool outside regular hours was at her own risk. She checked the times posted on the sign to make sure that no lifeguard would be on duty. She stepped quickly through the shower area. She had already taken a shower up in her room, washing herself very thoroughly.

Once into the pool room itself, she checked to confirm that she was alone. As she expected, the place was empty. It was eleven P.M. People vacationing in the Edge had better things to do at eleven at night than splash around in a pool. Or worse things, depending on your outlook.

She walked over to the pool's edge, tossing the inflated lime slice onto the water's surface. It landed with a gentle slap. She set the boom box down on the blue ceramic tile floor. She squatted and gazed down into the bright blue chlorinated water. She reached forward and swished the water between the outstretched fingers of her right hand. It was very cold. She figured the management of the Bienvenidos didn't really like people using the pool. Or maybe they were just cheap. She wanted the water to be warm and welcoming, like a bath. But perhaps cold was the thing. It would make her numb.

She pulled her plain white sweatshirt over her head and slipped out of her gray fleece sweatpants. Underneath she was wearing a modest one-piece navy blue swimsuit. She was in her late twenties, very pretty, without cosmetics or other adornments. She dipped the outstretched toe of her right foot into the water and shivered, hugging herself. Then she leaned over and hit the boom box's "play" button.

The silence of the pool room was filled by the plaintive first notes of Vivaldi's *Stabat Mater*. Although she herself was a musician — a singer and guitarist — she didn't know much about classical music or own a lot of tapes like this one. She picked it up on a whim a couple of years back, during a tour in the UK. It caught her eye because of the

painting of Renaissance Venice on the cover. When she played the tape in the rented tour bus, she found it really soothing. Its long, slow baroque cadences spoke to her from a forgotten time of order and grace. That summer she drove the guys in the band crazy, listening to it over and over. She decided to use a piece of it in a song on her next album, perhaps sampled in or as part of an intro or something. After all, even if it was a little on the Catholic side, it was still a Christian piece.

Then, one day, waiting for the road crew to set up a sound check in Liverpool she read the liner notes. And, oh dear, it turned out to be much too Catholic for her to use. The *Stabat Mater* was a poem written in Latin seven hundred years ago. It was used in the Church liturgy on and off from the fifteenth century onwards. She learned that many different composers had set it to music; Vivaldi's wasn't even the most famous.

*Stabat Mater dolorosa
Juxta crucem lacrimosa,
Dum pendebat Filius.*

The poem was all about Mary, Jesus' mother, watching her son slowly dying on the cross. The poem was very simple and heart-wrenching. But Jonna knew her audience. They weren't big on the suffering and torment that Jesus suffered — at least not on the specifics of it all. They wanted the joy, the unconditional love, the uplift. True, just lifting a few bars of it, no one would really know what it was about. That, though, is what made Jonna think her idea was kind of hypocritical or something. And Patrick, so detail-oriented, would check it out, and probably disapprove, in that sulky way of his. So Jonna had given up on using the music on one of her records. Instead, she would keep it for herself, her private soother, something to listen to while drinking herbal tea. Something to listen to when the loneliness came upon her, sitting on her shoulder like a big black raven.

*Cuius animam gementem,
Contristam et dolentem
Pertransivit gladius.*

Jonna swam through the cold, cold water to the floater, her little plastic purse still slung over her shoulder. She grabbed the float and wrestled her way on top of it, thrashing about until her bottom was in the hole, her legs flung over one side and her arms and head back over the other. She watched the goose bumps rise on the tanned flesh of her arms. She threw her head back and watched the blue lights on the surface of the pool dance about on the plaster roof of the cavernous room. And she listened to Vivaldi's beautiful music of mourning, written

three hundred years ago in Venice. Jonna had read in the liner notes that Vivaldi had written this music to be played and sung by the girls of an orphanage. Everyone came to hear these girls play his music. The spectators could listen but not see; the girls were hidden by screens. The screens probably inspired more horny imaginings than they prevented, Jonna thought, thinking of some of the disgusting fan mail she had gotten over the years. She pictured herself as an orphan girl in the city of canals, singing and playing violin behind a screen, unable to see her audience. She'd want that curtain to go away, so she could see her listeners and they could see her. Then, if the curtain did vanish, she'd learn that getting your wish doesn't necessarily help you any.

*O quam tristis et afflicta
Fuit illa benedicta
Mater unigenti!*

Jonna reached into the purse and pulled out the vial of pills. She didn't know much about these things, but she knew that this was enough to do the job. A thought surprised her, and she allowed herself a low, quiet laugh. The bar she had bought them at — it was called Sad Mary's! It even had a cheap plaster statue of a weeping Mary stuck out on its marquee, in place of a sign. When she had first seen it, she had thought it just a sick joke, like so much else in this strange city. But now she realized that it was a communication.

She began to stuff the pills into her mouth. She fought back a powerful animal impulse to spit them out. She shoveled nasty bleached water into her mouth, to help get them down.

*Quae moerebat et dolebat,
Pia Mater dum videbat
Nati poenas inclyti.*

Once she had swallowed all of the green capsules, she threw her head back and spun herself around on the lime slice. She let go of the empty vial and watched it bobble along on the waves she had created. Her throat felt like it was full of crackers. I could still throw up, she thought, but I won't. I will lie back and feel death creep into my bones. I will feel it take me away from this world.

A wave of doubt came over her. Would He understand? Normally He did not forgive this sort of thing. But Jonna reminded herself of the special circumstances. She knew Him well enough now to know that he would forgive her. Those deep, deep eyes of His. His rough, carpenter's hands.

Alex, in Minneapolis, leaned against the bar, wondering what it was about her that made her always want to chase her anonymous sex in the early afternoon. Was it because she liked doing it in the daylight? No, she was no more interested than anyone else in letting strange guys get a complete look at all of her flaws and blemishes. Maybe it seemed more daring, less pathetic, to be doing the pick-up thing at a different time than everyone else. It certainly made for a different selection of prospects. Could be that was it. It made things more interesting. At midnight on a Friday or a Saturday night, you developed your radar for who was looking for what. Alex knew she wasn't bad-looking, and she knew how to take her pick of the guys who were looking for your basic meaning-free fluid exchange. Which took the edge off it after a while. No challenge, no surprises, no risk. You wanted X, they wanted Y, you swapped X for Y and went on your separate ways. Big deal. Alex wanted to sneak up on a guy, offer him some when he's thinking about having his car waxed or buying some shoes. Maybe he's married, maybe he has a girlfriend. Maybe he even has a boyfriend but he's keeping his options open. That's what Alex wanted. A little randomness, some suspense. Pick a miscellaneous dude and see how far you can peek into his head. The freedom, the unpredictability, that was the jolt. The sex was a necessary ingredient, to make the whole situation work, but it wasn't the point. She wanted the feeling that anything could happen, from getting hurt to finding a whole new life. Mostly in practice it was still sad and pathetic, but during the afternoon it seemed like there was a bigger range of possibilities.

Alex scratched the back of her neck. Something was gnawing at her today. A feeling of rootless anxiety. Like there was something waiting for her around the next corner, something ready to pounce. She downed the rest of her scotch, slammed the big-bottomed tumbler down on the table, and decided to put the moves on the guy she'd been eyeing. The first thing she'd noticed about him was the way his shoulder muscles moved under his Sister Machine Gun T-shirt. He was in some sport or other or at least worked out. A swimmer, maybe? His head was shaved — she'd have to find out if that was function or fashion. She'd seen him get carded at the bar, so he had to be at least twenty-one. Old enough to deserve whatever happens. She caught his eye and smiled at him.

Bingo. He instantly went into full display mode, tightening the muscles and returning her smile. He paused for a moment, as if thinking, and strode over to her. She decided that maybe this guy was a little too eager. Not going to be much sideshow with this guy. Oh well, let's give him a shot.

“Hey there,” she said. Her normal approach was to start out real friendly and then get distant partway through. She’d stick with that game plan until he gave her a reason to switch tactics.

“Hey.” He let this response hang in the air. Great, Alex thought, a talker.

“My name’s Alex. Not much happening here at this hour.”

“I’m Nick. Want a drink?”

Maybe this would be an interesting game, she thought. See how few words it is possible to exchange with someone before getting to the part. How many have I said so far? One-two. Three, six. Twelve words and counting.

“No, let’s go for a walk instead.” That makes nineteen.

She watched him pause and look her body up and down. Yeah, it was a pretty effective body for these purposes — slim, taut. A gymnast’s body. He appeared to be confused. Like he wanted things spelled out a little clearer. Alex tilted her head towards the door, using a gesture to repeat the invitation without increasing her word count. He shrugged and followed her.

“You wanna buy me an ice cream?” Twenty-six.

“Uh, yeah, sure.” He fumbled through the right front pocket of his shorts, like he was wondering whether he had enough change for a couple of cones. “You know a place around here?”

Alex pointed to an ice cream truck parked near the corner of University Avenue. They walked towards it, in silence.

Nick decided it was time to submit a topic. “Someone told me that Stabbing Westward was going to be playing that club, and I was in the neighborhood so I thought I’d ask about it. But they said they didn’t do live music, that Stabbing Westward was going to be playing downtown at the Entry, and they thought it was sold out anyway. Which I guess is okay, anyway. Since none of my friends are into Stabbing Westward, they’re more into like the Pumpkins and REM and stuff. You know, whatever’s on the radio. Are you into Stabbing Westward?”

“I suppose.” Extra points for ambivalence. Twenty-eight words total.

They arrived at the ice cream truck. Alex was pleasantly surprised to find out that it had the real stuff, not just that soft-serve crap. Words uttered to third parties not counting against her total, Alex ordered a lemon ice in a waffle cone with blue sprinkles. It was a hot day, so the sprinkles immediately began to leave pools of green sweat in the lemon ice. Nick carefully contemplated the list of available flavors and finally said, “I’m supposed to be staying in shape, but hey. One scoop of rocky road and one scoop of tiger tail.”

“You swim?” she asked him as they walked away. (Thirty.) She was heading down University towards her place, and he was following her without questioning where they were going. Nick was a sport, at least.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Tough challenge! Alex responded by running her hand along the top of his head. Her hand lingered for a moment at the base of his thick neck.

“Oh, the buzz.” Nick pulled his own hand across the width of his skull. “Yeah, I’m on the U of M relay team. I’m feeling really out of place there, lately, you know? I have to say, being wet sucks. And the other guys, they’re such a bunch of jocks. They’re even worse than my real friends. For example, they like *Aerosmith*! I mean, what kind of conversation can you have with a person like that?”

“Sounds like they suck.” Thirty-four.

“They don’t suck, really, so much as I just don’t have much in common with them. But I’m going through this thing where I’m starting to feel I don’t have much in common with anybody. My real friends, they’re like from high school, and even though some of them are off to different colleges, it’s like for them Wayzata is the center of their existence. Now, I’m from Wayzata too but it’s not like I’m proud of it. For them it’s like it’s the big friggin’ Holy Land or something.” Alex knew Wayzata, a suburb of privilege thirty to forty minutes west, but was proud to say she’d never gone there intentionally.

Nick stopped and looked at her.

“Where are we going?”

Shoot. “We’re just taking a walk or we’re going to my place, your choice.”

Nick put his big hands on her shoulders. He didn’t grab her — his hands rested on her gently. The move distracted Alex in the middle of counting the words from her last sentence.

“You’re a mysterious person. I feel like I’m doing all of the talking. I feel like maybe I’m not really real to you.”

Alex decided that Nick was more interesting than he looked at first. She started to feel bad that she’d been playing this game on him. But she had started, and an experiment was an experiment. *We’re just taking a walk or we’re going to my place, your choice* — that’s thirteen, thirteen plus thirty-four is... forty-seven!

She put her left hand on his right cheek. “Any of your Wayzata, Pumpkins-fan friends, what would they do in this situation? Are you going to do the same thing they would do?”

Alex tossed her half-finished cone onto the sidewalk. She leaned forward and kissed him, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He was

stiff at first, but then relaxed into her assault. He began to kiss back. Eventually he disengaged.

“Your place is good.”

You are doing the same thing your Wayzata friends would do, Alex thought. Because it doesn't matter who or what they are, I could get them into my bed if I really wanted to. And it would probably not be difficult.

Ice cream from Nick's cone had dripped all over his hand.

Alex's apartment was on the third floor — the top floor — of a low-rise apartment building, close enough to I-35 that the roar of traffic lulled her to sleep at night. Alex was twenty-seven and the oldest tenant in the building. Nick didn't seem at all out of place standing in the corridor as she fumbled with her keys.

“You got a sticky lock, huh?”

Alex nodded, and finally opened the dead-bolt. Her place was a mess, with stray bits of clothing strewn all over the carpet and furniture. And worse: crumpled chip bags, half-empty boxes of cereal, piles of unclean dishes. Alex glanced sideways at Nick; he looked kind of appalled. Then he caught Alex looking at him and said:

“Jeez, looks like my room.”

Alex could tell he was lying; he'd outed himself as a neat freak. She could picture an immaculate room in his parents' big suburban home, its swim trophies polished to perfection. But she appreciated his willingness to fib for her. She wanted to get his clothes off right away, because she was getting tired of the experiment. She wanted to be able to talk to him without counting words. Ask him why he was still looking for peoples' identities in the bands they liked. Tell him that it was nothing strange or terrible to not know what you're looking for. To bite that thin lower lip of his and tighten her fingers around the shoulder muscle that had captured her attention back in the club.

“Come with me.” (Seventy-three.) She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and pulled him into her tiny bathroom. She led him into the shower. It was a tiny, stand-up shower with a plastered plywood divider separating it from the rest of the irredeemably filthy bathroom. There wasn't really room for two people in it, but Alex liked the symmetry of being washed clean at the same time she got dirty. She pulled his T-shirt up over his abs and pecs. She left it rolled up over his chest for a moment as she bent down to gently bite his left nipple.

He put his hands on her waist and then moved them upwards, pulling her black tank-top up to expose her black lace bra. He pulled the tank top over her head and threw it over his shoulder. Alex watched it land in her sink, and thought: This now officially counts as a sexual encounter, so the minimum number of words you can say to a guy before getting it on with him turns out to be seventy-three. That would be a tough number to beat in the future.

She grabbed his face and pulled his lips towards hers. When she ran out of breath, she pushed him against the divider and tore his shirt off. She grabbed his shoulders, turned him around, and kissed her way slowly down his spine.

*Eia mater, fons amoris,
Me sentire vim doloris
Fac, ut tecum lugeam.*

His shorts were held up by an elastic waistband, which made it easy for Alex to reach down into them and get a nice solid grab of firm and chunky buttock. "Oh god," said Nick. She squeezed extra hard, then pulled his shorts and briefs off, letting them drop around his ankles.

"Kick those off, I'm gonna turn the water on."

Nick did as he was told. Alex quickly slipped out of her bra, bicycle shorts and panties, rolling them into a ball and tossing them through the open door onto her living room floor.

"You're beautiful," he told her. She turned on the shower. The initial blast was cold. Nick let out a yelp, pulled her close to him in a bear hug. Then a wave of hot hit them and they both jumped from the water's spray, slamming into the divider. They laughed. Alex turned and adjusted the water until it was lukewarm.

She grabbed his head and pushed it down, down.

*Fac ut ardeat cor meum
In amando Christum Deum,
Ut sibi complacem.*

"I want you to kiss the insides of my thighs. Slowly, lots of them, lots of kisses. Don't start going anywhere else until I tell you you're finished."

He bent down, struggling to arrange his big frame in the cramped shower. Eventually he sat himself down on the uninviting ceramic tiles of the shower stall. Alex looked down at him, watched the water running off her breasts, hitting the top of his nearly bald head and streaming down from it in all directions. He began to kiss her, and she tensed up in pleasure, her spine curving, her hips out-thrust.

Amen.

Alex screamed and doubled over, toppling Nick and pushing him out onto the grit-covered tiles of the bathroom floor. She curled up under the shower head, lying on her side and pulling her knees towards her chin. She gasped for air like a goldfish on a sidewalk. Nick untangled his legs and stood up, bracing himself against her bathroom sink.

"Alex, are you okay?" Nick felt stupid for asking. Of course she wasn't okay. He knelt down again, touching her shoulder, but she brushed his hand away. He looked for his shorts, found them, and hastily pulled them back on.

"Talk to me. Do you want me to call a hospital or something?"

Alex, unable to speak, held up a hand, gesturing him to just wait. She gasped for a while longer, then struggled to her feet, grabbing the shower head. Alex reached in and turned the water off.

"Is this a seizure? Do you have epilepsy or something like that?"

Alex shook her head. "No, no. I mean, not that I know of." She breathed some more. "I don't know what a seizure feels like, but — this was more, I don't know, something went through me, just pierced me from the inside out."

"A muscle spasm, maybe?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Alex took her by the shoulder and led her to her bed, sitting her down on it. He took the bedspread and wrapped it around her. He sat on a folding chair next to her stove.

"That wouldn't be a drug reaction or anything, would it?"

Alex was starting to get ticked off with Nick's attempts at diagnosis. She didn't want to talk about it. She sensed that whatever had just happened to her wasn't physiological. Her body was speaking to her, sending her a message. Maybe it knew something she didn't about this Nick character.

"Not unless I'm suddenly allergic to scotch today and I wasn't yesterday." That came out snippier than Alex had intended. Seeing the hurt on Nick's face, she patted the bed next to her.

"I don't know what it was, it was just something funny, but I'm over it now. Come over here and sit next to me. I'm shivering, warm me up."

Nick stayed in the folding chair.

"Uh, jeez, actually, I just realized..." He trailed off, looking aimlessly around Alex's apartment, as if searching for a cue card containing his next line. Alex knew what was coming.

"Realized what?"

"Realized that I shouldn't be here. I mean, thanks for bringing me here and everything, but — my car." Nick stood up and headed into

the bathroom. He came out with his shirt and a more determined expression on his face. "I think I left my car in a tow-away zone. I know it sounds stupid, but — I can't be spending the entire day chasing a towed car around, I gotta get back to my job, my shift starts at six, and it's out in Wayzata, and it's — it's a security job, really humiliating I know, but I can't afford to lose it, which means being there on time, which means I think I'd better go and make sure my car isn't towed."

Alex launched herself from the bed to where Nick was standing, raining a series of ineffectual slaps on his chest. "No way did you leave your car in a tow-away zone!"

Nick turned his back on her to avoid her attack, stepping back into the apartment. Alex backed up to the apartment door, blocking his exit. Nick turned to confront her, then turned away again.

"At least put some clothes on, please."

Alex was shaking with rage. She asked him how he dared. How did he dare? Sure, the mood was kind of ruined now, she admitted. But he was still being a total shit. And a fucking little Wayzata boy. A child.

Nick kept his back turned. "You shouldn't say things like that to someone you don't know." His voice was breaking. "For all you know I could be some kind of violent asshole or something."

"Violent? You wanna see violent?" Alex reached over to a knick-knack shelf containing a variety of tacky salt-and-pepper shakers. They had been given to her by her first boyfriend, and she'd broken most of them since she'd last seen him. She broke another one, heaving it at Nick. He ducked, and the shaker — a ceramic lobster wearing a bib and a cannibalistic gleam in his eye — bounced against the curtains of her window and broke off a claw when it hit the floor.

Nick turned to her, hands upraised, flinching, ready for another shaker. "Okay, okay. You can go ahead and think I'm a bad person. But whoever spoiled the mood, it's spoiled now, right? I mean, it's not like we're going to — going to... So why don't you let me go, okay? I'm sorry, I'm sorry I reacted wrong. This is not something I — this is not in my normal experience, I'm sorry."

Alex stalked past him, moving away from the door. She grabbed the bedspread and wrapped it around herself. She turned back to Nick, and saw him standing there looking stunned.

"Well go, then. Go!" He was still frozen in his tracks, so she pointed to the door. He stood there another moment longer, as if expecting the whole scene to suddenly work itself out, for Alex to let him off the hook. Alex said nothing.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, and headed out the door. Caught in a draft, it slammed resoundingly shut behind him. She could hear his footfalls in the hallway: He was sprinting away.

She rushed to the shelf of pepper shakers and began to rain them down on her apartment door, shattering a Santa Claus and a Mrs. Claus and a happy trout and a dancing cabbage and a Snoopy on his doghouse. She cursed out Nick, she cursed out everyone who ever lived in Wayzata, and finally she cursed out herself for failing once again to control her anger. By the time she threw her sobbing self onto the bed, repeating her long list of crippling character flaws, she'd forgotten the strange spasm that had destroyed everything in the first place. So she sure wasn't trying to work out why she'd had it.

It wasn't until that night that she remembered the feeling again, when she was trying to get to sleep and couldn't. She tried to sleep with the window open, and with the window closed. With the fan on, and with the fan off. With a blanket and a sheet, with a sheet but no blanket, with no covers at all. Like so many nights before, nothing worked. The fact that she had to open the store the next morning just made it worse. She knew she had to be asleep, so she couldn't fall asleep. If only I weren't so isolated, she thought, if only there were someone warm next to me. But then she remembered the times when there was some strange guy snoring next to her, and how that just made it worse. Which launched her racing mind back into the events of the afternoon, the bad scene with Nick, which turned into a body memory of her spasm in the shower.

And then she really couldn't sleep.

She hauled herself out of bed for the second time that night, turning on the light and stumbling through the debris on her floor towards her crappy little television set. The set took everyone and everything on it and colored them orange. Which was fine with Alex, who wasn't much of a TV watcher. She only turned it on in the morning, to get the weather for the day, and at night, when she couldn't sleep. Infomercials were especially good for fighting her insomnia. She had several of them virtually memorized, and would chant along with the hucksters and their fake guests. This would clear her mind, drive out all of the thoughts bombing around in her head. Infomercials were even better than James Fenimore Cooper novels.

She clicked the button on the remote in search of Dionne Warwick and her psychic friends. She stopped on CNN Showbiz news, drawn by a familiar face in the graphic over the announcer's shoulder. The announcer was already in mid-story.

“ — died suddenly today while vacationing in the tiny island nation of Al Amarja. In a statement, her family reports that her death was sudden and unexpected. Al Amarjan officials indicate, pending an autopsy, that Sky appears to have died from natural causes. She was twenty-seven years old. Although a popular draw on the Christian music circuit for years, she came to national attention with the pop hit *All Lit Up*, which reigned at Number One on the Billboard charts for eight weeks during the summer of 1993. No plans for memorial services have been announced.”

Alex sat, unmoving, on the edge of her bed. The next stories washed over her, unseen and uncomprehended. Alex dropped her head into her hands. Then she darted up, scrambling through the papers stacked on her bookshelves. She tore through them several times, trembling from the frustration. Finally she saw what she was looking for, lying on top of a row of Stephen King novels. The phone number. She seized it up and grabbed her phone, dialing the number. The ring sounded tinny and distant.

“Bienvenidos Hotel, how-may-I-help-you-please?” The voice had an accent that Alex couldn’t place. In fact, she couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman.

“Room 704.”

After a short pause, the voice came back on. “Mr. Sky regrets to say he is not taking interview requests from the media.”

“I’m not the media, I’m his sister! Let me through to him!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Another, even more tinny ring followed, repeated six times. Patrick finally picked up. “I’m sorry, but there’s a mistake. I told the switchboard —” His voice was deep, but every so often one of the vowels cracked, and a strangled goose-like cry randomly punctuated his words.

“Patrick, this is Alex.”

“Alexandra!”

“I just saw the report on the news.”

“Yes, I...” A silence hung there, over the electronic buzz of the trans-Atlantic phone line.

“Why didn’t you phone me, Patrick? I had to learn about it on CNN?”

“I ... I’m not thinking, that’s why. Oh no, I’m... I’m really not thinking. How can I apologize to you? I can’t, I’m sorry.”

Alex had to stop herself, suck down a big old breath, just like she did every time she spoke to her stepbrother. “Never mind. I mean, it’s all right. I suppose I understand. Just tell me what happened.”

"I — I can't talk on the phone, Alexandra. You'll have to come here. In any case. I've decided to hold the service here, on the island."

"What island?"

"Al Amarja, like I told you before. We're staying in Al Amarja."

"I can never remember it because I've never heard of it before. It's part of what — Spain, Italy?"

"It's south of Italy, but it's its own little country. You won't have airfare, will you? I can wire you the money."

"Why not bring her back here to Minnesota?"

"I want to do it quickly and quietly. I don't want the media showing up and spoiling everything. You know this is going to be a tabloid event."

Patrick was right. Jonna's music so positive and uplifting, her being so beautiful, then dying, so young and pretty. Anybody could see it was going to be a big story. The irony value. Alex imagined microphones being jammed at her, trying to hold her temper and not say anything stupid.

"They'll circle us like jackals no matter what," Patrick said, "but at least we can get her taken care of before they find us. Al Amarja places visa restrictions on foreign journalists, so we can do it here quietly."

"Can you tell me how she died, at least?"

"She was in the pool in the hotel, late at night. Unsupervised."

"She drowned, is that what you're telling me?"

"No, no. Look, we can talk when you get here. I really need to — I'm shaken, Alexandra, of course I'm shaken. That you can understand, right?"

"Sure. Okay. I have some emergency money, that oughtta get me there one-way. It's not like I'm going to get a cheap flight with no notice anyway. Though I wouldn't mind if you could reimburse me for the ticket." Alex hated to be indebted to Patrick, but she couldn't afford to suddenly spend two or three thousand bucks because he wanted to have the service out at some weird resort no one had ever heard of.

"Of course, Alexandra, of course. Just get here, and I'll tell you everything. Everything I can."

The line died. Patrick had probably just hung up without saying good-bye. That was a habit of his that drove Alex nuts.

Jonna dead. She couldn't believe it.

Then she thought of the feeling that afternoon. That must have been the time she died. The feeling of being cut in two. Her bones and muscles had known for hours, known even before Patrick or anyone else. In a way, they were the first on the scene.

Dealing with travel agents tested Alex's promise to herself to be better with the anger thing. The lady at Sunshine Tours hadn't heard of Al Amarja. Even more infuriatingly, she refused to look it up.

"Someone has told you a joke. There is no such destination." The woman had a vaguely Slavic accent.

And a thoroughly European concept of customer service. Alex thought of saying this but didn't. She was going to be good. She took a deep breath and said, as calmly as possible: "My brother is there right now. I'm supposed to go there for a funeral."

"I have not heard of this place."

"Maybe you should check." Alex gestured to the woman's computer terminal, on her desk.

The woman sighed operatically. "All the time, people think when I tell them the answer, and it is not the answer they want, that the answer will appear on the computer, as if it is a magic box. The computer is not a magic box. I have been in this business for longer than you have been born. If I know there is no Al Amarja, it is true. Perhaps you have been given the wrong name. Perhaps you think of Andorra, which is a tiny European country. Or Antigua, which is in Central America."

Alex decided that picking up the woman's ashtray and mashing it into her face, Jimmy Cagney-style, would be a bad choice. So she simply stood up. "I am not thinking of Andorra, or of Antigua. I am thinking of Al Amarja, which is an island south of Italy, which my brother would not be mistaken about, because, as I told you, he is there right now. Maybe you have to fly to Italy and then get a commuter connection from there or something. Which you could check on if you would just get off your — if you would just look it up. I don't care if you look it up in a book, or on the computer, or up your — just, please look it up for me, will you?"

The woman had in her hand a bottle of flavored mineral water, which was shaking. "Please leave my establishment, please."

Alex left.

The woman at Adventure Destinations had heard of Al Amarja, but refused to book Alex a flight there. She was very apologetic about it, though: "I'm awfully sorry, but it's for insurance reasons. The owner here used to book package tours to the island. This would be four or five years back, before I started working here. There was this one tour that went horribly, awfully wrong, and a lot of our passengers were hurt. Francis — that's the owner — he doesn't like to talk about it, so I never got all the details. I think maybe a bunch of people were poisoned, drinking wine with fuel oil in it or something like that. And it had something to do with the government there. The government is very strange, more like a third world sort of thing than a Western

democracy. So normally I wouldn't recommend going there at all, even though I know you need to go there for a funeral, not for a holiday. But Francis, my boss, couldn't have been clearer about his instructions about Al Amarja. Booking anyone a flight there is a firing offense, for insurance reasons, like I said. In the legal repercussions of the last incident, Francis went from a chain of locations to just this one here. So I feel for you in your situation, and as a person really wish I could help, but Francis does not want me to do anything that would lead anyone to go to this place for any reason. He would be horribly upset with me if I even recommended another travel agency with less scruples *vis a vis* booking flights to this place, such as Globo Village Travel on Oakland Avenue near the American Swedish Institute."

Aaron Globo, president and proprietor of Globo Village travel on Oakland Avenue, did indeed prove to be helpful. He was a short, bearish man wreathed in a cloud of smoke. He was able to maintain this halo of smoke without ever seeming to puff on the cigarette in his ashtray, which burned without seeming to ever get any shorter. When Alex told him about the funeral, his eyes softened with what looked like genuine sympathy. He did, however, grimace when he heard the words "Al Amarja." Alex tensed, ready to explode.

But then it turned out that he was going to help her after all. "That's a tough one. There aren't that many international flights that take you directly there, and the connections from Italy are — well, let's just say I wouldn't fly 'em, safety-wise. Your best bet is probably the British Airways direct flight from Montreal, but if I recall correctly..." He paused to tap away on his computer keyboard. "Yep, that's a once a week deal, and that leaves Mirabel Airport in ... damn, a little over six hours. Which means we gotta find you a connecting flight to Montreal right this second. You packed?"

Alex nodded. She had her toothbrush and so on in her bag, along with a couple of changes of clothing.

"Okay, I'm typing in a hold for a ticket on an Air Canada flight to Montreal that takes off in thirty-two minutes. You got a car to worry about?"

Alex shook her head.

"Then I'll call you a cab. I'll also call the airline and warn them you're coming and see what we can do about speeding up your check-in and maybe they can even hold the plane a few minutes in case you're late. You got a passport with you, right? Al Amarja doesn't have visa requirements, but I should warn you. Their Immigration procedures are kind of weird — there's a chance that they'll turn you away at the airport there."

Mr. Globo saw panic in Alex's eyes, and moderated his tone.

“It’s strange and very arbitrary, but just be honest and don’t let ’em get to you. They got no reason to turn you back. I been through it myself, and the trick is to pretend their procedure is all perfectly normal. That really throws ’em.”

He then quickly processed Alex’s payment and got on the line to the cab company.

When he was finished, Alex asked him: “You’ve been to Al Amarja?”

“Yeah, three or four times. I got some special hobbies, and there are many other hobbyists there who share my interests. I don’t know if you’ll allow yourself any enjoyment time, this being a funeral situation and all, but if you do I highly recommend Sad Mary’s. It’s a bar in a place called the Plaza of Flowers. Speaking of which, do you need a hotel booking?”

“No, my brother is already there, he’ll take care of that. Some place called the Bienvenidos.”

“Ah, well, that’s right in Flowers Plaza. Sad Mary’s is directly across the way. Anyhow, enough yakking, we gotta get you into a cab, young lady.”

Globo shooed her out the door, heading back to the phone to call the airport. Alex stood on Oakland Avenue, her heart suddenly pounding. Travel always made her nervous. Flying was no problem — she didn’t have a car of her own, so surrendering control to the pilot of an airplane felt no more dangerous than taking a ride in somebody’s Chrysler. But dealing with customs agents and security checkpoints and the chance of missing flights or getting bumped from them or losing luggage — all those things made her jumpy. This whole business about Al Amarjan officials possibly barring her entry on completely capricious grounds — was Mr. Globo messing with her, or what? Given her new experience with travel agents, she decided he couldn’t have been as helpful as he seemed. They were all evil. So he must have been joking about the Immigration thing. Right?

A cab swooped up, and she waved to it. Drives to airports made her nervous too. She was always afraid that the car would break down.

But the cab didn’t break down, and the check-in wasn’t a hassle, and the plane didn’t take off without her. There was, in fact, a slight delay, because another flight to Montreal on another airline had been canceled, and all of those passengers had to be processed and extra hot meals ferried aboard wherever the hot meals are ferried. Alex riffled

through her tickets to double-check the departure time of the flight from Montreal to the island. Plenty of time. The rush was in getting the connecting flight from the Twin Cities. The layover at Mirabel Airport would be a couple of hours. The additional wait for those extra hot meals ate up only twenty-five minutes of that time.

When the 737 finally left the tarmac, Alex threw her head back against the seat and let out a massive sigh. The frantic dash to the airport had made her forget the ache of Jonna's death. Once the plane was at cruising altitude, Alex's heart rate slowed to normal, and grief came back on her.

Alex thought about how it was hard for her to believe that people she loved were gone forever. She hadn't seen her father die, hadn't seen her mother die, and now Jonna's death had taken place thousands of miles away in a place she couldn't even picture in her mind. And she didn't even know enough about the circumstances to imagine the situation. She at least had a mental picture of her father's stroke, which came while entertaining clients in the restaurant of a golf club. She had never seen that golf club restaurant, but she could picture its floor tiles, its ceiling fans, its red tablecloths. Her mother's cancer had taken her during the night in a hospital bed, and anyone can picture a hospital bed. But this pool in the Bienvenidos Hotel — it was easy enough to imagine a pool. Alex was thinking of the pool at the Y where Patrick and her mother forced her to take lessons as a kid. But what was Jonna *doing* in that pool, if it wasn't drowning? If Alex couldn't picture it all, how could she adjust to Jonna's disappearance from her world?

Her father had been displayed to the mourners in an open casket, but seeing his heavily made-up face lying there in the box hadn't helped her accept his departure. It just scrambled things: he was there but he wasn't. Alex clearly recalled her seven-year-old thoughts at the time. She remembered herself thinking that she expected her dad to wake up at any moment, to step out of the coffin and laugh at everyone for falling for his joke. Or maybe he would be waiting outside the funeral home, ready to jump out at them in the parking lot, slapping his knee. Alex remembered looking for him hiding in the back seat of the car for the ride home. For months afterwards, whenever she heard the phone ring, she lunged for it, ready to hear her father's voice on the other end. She didn't know whether he'd be calling from Duluth or from the land of ghosts, and didn't care. She just expected him to call. Patrick was a teenager then, and he got angry at Alex for answering the phone all the time. He was waiting for calls from his friends, and didn't want them getting a little girl voice whenever they phoned.

Jonna, on the other hand, had accepted her father's death right away. Even at that age she found complete satisfaction in the Sunday

School explanation of the whole thing. Alex recalled a conversation they had about it, and as she did so, quiet tears began to stream down her cheeks.

“He’s gone to Heaven to be with the angels,” Jonna had said to her, as they swung on the swing set in the back yard of their house in Edina, Minnesota.

“But angels can come back to Earth to visit people, right?” Alex wasn’t as big a fan of Sunday School as her sister — she was always looking out the window and imagining herself playing outside instead of listening to the boring old teacher — but she knew that much.

“Yes, the angels came down to tell the shepherds that the Baby Jesus had come.”

“If angels can come to Earth, there’s a chance that Daddy can come to Earth too, then.” Alex had said this in her don’t-argue-with-me voice. She didn’t want to think it was going to happen. She just wanted to think it was possible. But Jonna had to explain things.

“Nobody wants to leave Heaven. Daddy is happy there. And someday we’ll all be happy there with him.”

Alex jumped off the swing and stood behind Jonna. She started to push her sister faster and faster, so she was flying up higher and higher in the air. Jonna was a scaredy-cat, and Alex knew this would make her either scream or cry.

“Daddy loved us, so why wouldn’t he want to come and visit us?”

“Alexandra, don’t. Don’t!”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

As she pushed Jonna again and again, and Jonna went further and further up into the air, and the swing set began to rock, one of its metal legs jumping a few inches from its divot in the backyard at the apex of each upswing, Alex decided that this whole Heaven thing was stupid. It didn’t make sense. It was just something people wanted to think. And since Jonna wanted to think it, that made Jonna stupid too.

“Stop it!”

“Answer my question and I’ll stop it!”

“You’re not allowed to leave Heaven.”

“Who says?”

“Stop it! You said you’d stop it!”

“*Alexandra!*” It was Patrick, stomping out from the back porch, trying to walk like a grown-up but go quickly at the same time. “Stop doing that to your sister!” He would have been fifteen years old. Just a baby. But to Alex, then, he was as big and threatening and stupid as any grown-up.

“You’re not the boss of me,” Alex retorted. Patrick barreled off the porch like a quarterback, grabbing Alex and roughly scooping her up

in his arms. Alex squirmed, and knocked Patrick off his feet. She landed on his stomach, winding him. Alex jumped up immediately, ready to run back over to keep pushing Jonna, but Jonna had leapt off the swing and was already high-tailing it back towards the house. Patrick crawled over and grabbed Alex's ankle, tripping her and sending her face-first into the unmown grass. He then pinned her arms behind her back and growled into her ear.

"Now that Dad is dead, I am the man of the house. And that means I *am* the boss of you. You can't go treating people like you were treating your sister. Especially not your sister."

"You're not even my real brother."

"I'm the only brother you got, so you're gonna have to settle for that. Now go in and apologize to your sister."

Like most really vivid memories, this little scene began and ended abruptly in Alex's mind. She couldn't remember whether she had actually apologized to Jonna or not, though she thought it pretty unlikely that she would have. Alex couldn't remember a time when she was the apologetic sort. She thought maybe she had told Patrick that Heaven was stupid, but maybe that was another incident several years later.

In order to transfer flights at the Montreal airport, Alex had to go through Canadian Customs, even though she was only going to be in Canada for the length of her layover. The customs official, a small-nosed woman in a neutral brown uniform, seemed very friendly until she saw that Alex was going all the way to Europe with just one piece of carry-on luggage.

"And that's your only baggage?" The woman had a way of pointing at the bag without moving, using only her eyes. Alex found it very unnerving; her heart was back to pounding again.

"Yes, I'm going for a funeral, and I had to throw things together on very short notice." Alex's voice choked on her words the first time and she had to repeat them. This was going really badly, she thought. But then the official softened the rigid set of her shoulders.

"Whose funeral is it?"

"My sister."

"Yes. I'm very sorry. And your destination again?"

"Al Amarja."

"Al what?"

Alex handed over her ticket so the woman could see the spelling. "It's an island in the Mediterranean. Some kind of resort place. I'd never heard of it either."

The woman quizzed her a bit more on the place, whether it was part of Italy and so on, and Alex had to plead ignorance. At this point, though, it was more small talk than an interrogation. Alex was relieved when the woman waved her through. If this is what Canada Customs is like, what about Al Amarja Customs?

Alex decided that it would ease her nervousness a bit if she was a little more prepared on what to expect. After finding the gate for her flight, Alex spent most of the rest of her time looking for travel guides to Al Amarja. Airport bookstores are very big on travel guides, but none of them seemed to have anything about the island. She thought there might be a slim volume devoted specifically to it, but no. She looked in general travel books on Europe, and found nothing. Finally, she thumbed through every book on Italy, hoping that Al Amarja might be mentioned in an appendix or at least a footnote or sidebar. Still no luck. Asking the clerks yielded her a healthy crop of blank stares.

Most of the food joints in the airport were the same general kinds of chains she was familiar with from Minnesota. One place looked like a mom and pop operation; it was a deli offering Montreal bagels and Montreal smoked meat. The bagels were stale and the smoked meat soaked with jellied fat. So much for an authentic Montreal experience.

After a pit stop in the ladies' room, Alex looked at her watch and wandered back to the gate. She surveyed the people sitting in the leather chairs there. It didn't look like it was going to be a very full flight. There were maybe a hundred or so people. About a quarter of these looked like obvious tourists, already wearing sun hats and shades and atrocious casual wear. Another quarter were decked out in business traveler uniforms featuring dark-colored polyester jackets and matching slacks. The remaining people were harder to place. A knot of fellow slacker-types stood in a corner, passing around a hand-held video game. Only one of the young women had fewer piercings than Alex did, clocking in at a mere three holes in one ear and two in the other. An elderly couple hissed quiet arguments at one another in what sounded like a Chinese dialect, which was odd considering that they looked African. A sad man wearing a *yarmulke* and a red sweater sat cradling a violin case in his arms as if it were an infant. Alex stared at one person for a long time, trying to decide if she was a tall, broad-shouldered woman or a guy in drag.

Alex lowered herself into one of the leather waiting area chairs, only to have a young boy with dark curly hair zip in beneath her and

beat her to it. She nearly lost her balance, and turned to him, laughing. The kid, wearing a Lion King hat and wrestling with a plush toy snake, had an infectious grin that pre-empted any irritation she might have felt.

“This is Jonathan’s first plane trip,” he said, indicating the snake. He spoke with an accent, maybe Greek. “He’s scared and doesn’t want to go.”

“Are you scared?”

“Nope, I get to fly all the time, because my mom and dad hate each other and live thousands of miles apart,” he said, cheerfully.

A woman — his mother, judging by her mortified expression — gathered him up in her arms and hauled him away. The boy waved to Alex as she carried him off.

The pilot and copilot approached, heading for the gate, joshing one another in ringing patrician voices.

“— you could always see if you can get one of the passengers to fly for you,” the copilot said to the pilot, elbowing him gently in the side.

Alex walked over to a pillar and did a few warm-up exercises, stretching her legs. She felt self-conscious doing it, but her limbs were already anticipating the trans-Atlantic flight by cramping up on her.

Finally the boarding call came and Alex got on the plane. When it taxied to the runway, both of the other seats in her row were still empty. Alex was happy to see that she’d get to stretch out and not be bothered by anybody. Sleep drifted through her soon after take-off.

Alex jolted awake when the flight attendant asked her whether she wanted the chicken or the pasta. Groggily, she chose the pasta. Then she realized that a man had taken a seat next to her, on the aisle. He was tall, and thin as a cane, with a short crown of snow-white hair. His hawk-like face was deeply creased. He smiled unctuously at Alex.

“I hope you don’t mind my taking this seat. I didn’t want to disturb you to ask.” The man was a Brit. His accent reverberated with privilege; the pilot and copilot had been cockneys by comparison. “I was up in business class, but I strongly suspect that the man assigned to the seat next to me is a Serbian war criminal. I’ve had him at parties, and he’s a defiant and single-minded bore. And a snorer, to boot. So I crept back here in search of a seat next to a quieter sleeper.”

He extended his right hand to Alex, a gesture resembling a porpoise lazily clearing the ocean’s surface. Reluctantly, Alex shook it. His

hand was damp, completing the porpoise analogy. He didn't introduce himself, as if he was somehow expecting Alex to know him by sight. Alex wondered if maybe he was an actor or politician or something. He was certainly wearing an expensive suit; it hung on him perfectly, like he was a picture in magazine.

"My name's Alex. You're welcome to sit here if you want."

"Thank you ever so much, Alex." He then returned to reading the book in his lap. It had an old binding and smelled of mildew. Alex wished she'd thought to buy a novel or something to read on the plane while she was puttering around in those bookstores. It was going to be a long flight, and now she'd be stuck inside her memories and worries. She leaned over to steal a glance at her new seatmate's book. It was in Latin. Every so often the man came to a page with a diagram on it, but when this happened, he tilted it ever so slightly away from Alex's field of vision. He put the book down when his meal came, but the title on its spine meant no more to Alex than its contents.

"There's something sinful about deplorably bad food, don't you think?" said the man, biting into a morsel of cardboard-colored chicken. "Consuming it is surely connected to the masochistic impulse. Defiling the temple, as it were. Yes?"

"Uh, well, personally I don't think it counts as a sin unless you get some enjoyment at some point."

The man chewed thoughtfully. "Hmm, interesting. Let's run through the sins and see if that holds. All of the sexual sins, of course — but what if you cheat on your husband and don't come? Surely it's adultery regardless of one's orgasmic status." He looked over at her with a self-satisfied expression. This expression fell into petulant disappointment when he saw that Alex wasn't looking particularly shocked.

"I'm not married, so I wouldn't know first hand. But I'd figure getting off is just one consideration. There's the pleasure of sneaking around, the love of the risk of getting caught — or the vengeance thing, hurting the person you're screwing around on."

"Ah. Granted. You are much more interesting than a Serbian war criminal, my dear. Let us see: masturbation, embezzlement, murder, karaoke ... they all check out. Your theory does appear to be sound."

Alex looked out the window into the darkness above the clouds. "I just thought of one that doesn't apply."

The man waited patiently for her to continue.

"Suicide. There's no pleasure in that. And it's definitely a sin."

"I am afraid I must disagree," the man said. "There is no act more deliciously self-involved. You bring your personal universe to an end, imagining the effect of your shocking act on all you leave behind. It is

a dark pleasure, perhaps the darkest and most selfish. One that even I would not indulge in. Even assuming there was someone who would mourn my departure.”

Alex closed her eyes and let her head fall back against her seat’s headrest.

“Ah,” said the man. “Someone you know has suicided. Recently.”

Alex felt suddenly ill. “No. No. It was just an example.”

He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “You are not ready to speak of this. Have you been to our fair island before?”

Alex heard his words but didn’t process them at first. She was thinking: of course, Alex, you idiot, that’s what Patrick couldn’t talk about on the phone. Jonna had to have killed herself. But that couldn’t be. It would be so out of character for her. But why else wouldn’t he —?

She realized that the man was watching her closely. “Have I been to Al Amarja before? No, I’d never heard of it until a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yes, it’s rather an exclusive club. I’d extend an offer to be your personal tour guide, but you will not have time.”

“No, it’s not a vacation. I’m going to a funeral. My sister was on vacation there, and she died.”

“My condolences.”

“I’m not clear yet on the details. Of what happened. How she died. Excuse me.” Alex rose from her seat and squeezed past the man. She wobbled down the aisle, stood behind two other people waiting to get into the washroom, waited for them to get in and out, entered the washroom, bent over the toilet, and threw up into it. Eyes watering, she stood, leaning against the washroom wall. She gasped for breath, splashed water on her face and into her mouth, and sank to her knees. A knock came on the door.

“I’m all right,” she said. She struggled back to her feet, her knees weak. She took baby steps back to her seat, her face pale.

“Flying bothers you?” her seat-mate asked.

“No, not usually. Must have been all of that talk about how bad the food was.”

“After the sin, the confession and absolution.”

Alex had recovered sufficient composure to give him the fish-eye. “I’m not Catholic.”

“Neither am I. C of E. But I can wish, can’t I? It would have been a much richer tradition to rebel against.”

Alex was beginning to find the man kind of tedious. “I told you my name but you didn’t tell me yours.”

“Arthur.”

“My first boyfriend’s name was Arthur.” Her tone made it clear that this was not a good thing.

“So was mine. Dreadfully confusing, but it had a certain self-recursive quality I found most interesting. Caught in the throes of ecstasy, I could shout out my own name over and over without his knowing the difference. Highly gratifying. But our love was fleeting, a candle destined only to burn down.”

“He caught onto you?”

“He was eaten.”

“By what?”

“I decline to specify.”

That was enough for Alex. The guy was playing games with her. She got up again and searched through the magazine compartment. She found a couple of British music magazines and returned to her seat. Every so often Arthur tried to start up a conversation again, but she ignored him. Eventually he went back to his Latin text. After a while, she fell asleep again. She dreamed that she was getting off the plane at the airport, to be greeted by her mom and dad and Jonna. Jonna had a big bag of pink candy popcorn for her, and a candy necklace, which she placed around Alex's neck like a *lei*. But Alex made the mistake of turning her back on them when she went to collect her luggage, and suddenly they were gone. She wandered around the airport looking for them, but the place was suddenly deserted. The airport had started out looking normal, but by this point it had gotten strange. It was a network of sleek, bone-colored corridors, a maze that looked nothing like an airport. There were all sorts of doors along the corridor, and finally she decided to go through one of them. She opened it, and then woke up.

The in-flight movie was starting: *Dunston Checks In*, starring a monkey and the bald guy from *Seinfeld*. The flight attendant had stuffed a headset into the magazine compartment of the seat back in front of her while she was sleeping. She looked over at Arthur. He was fast asleep, wheezing ever so slightly. Unconscious, he looked extremely old and fragile. Alex unwrapped the headset from its plastic bag and plugged it in. Normally she was not a big fan of monkey comedies, but she needed the distraction. At least there wouldn't be any suicides in it.

Arthur stirred just as the movie shuffled to its dopey conclusion.

“No! Get away!” he shouted.

Alex started. She turned towards him. He blinked several times, then ran the back of his hand along his lips to soak up the accumulat-

ed drool. After another moment of disorientation, he sniffed and smiled sheepishly.

“Dreaming bothers you?” Alex asked.

Something dark flickered through his eyes. “Yes. It’s the only time they can get me.”

“They?”

But Arthur was pointing at the big video screen and fumbling for his headset. “Ah, this is the best part. I watch this every time. The government makes them play it.”

The title *Al Amarja Welcomes You* flashed on the screen, gold optical letters floating over an artfully-lit background of folded red velvet. Alex put her headset on. A French-accented female voice spoke over a bed of cheesy organ music, like something from some mod-era Italian flick.

“— from a vacation elsewhere, welcome home. If you are visiting Al Amarja for the first time, this brief video presentation of the Al Amarjan Tourist & Visitors Bureau is for you.”

The title card gave way to scratched footage of passengers disembarking from a plane, walking down a set of steps to the runway tarmac. Judging from the clothes, the film had been shot sometime during the Carter administration. “Al Amarja is a special place, not for the casual visitor. We are proud to serve only the elite of the world’s sight-seers, thrill-seekers, entrepreneurs, and explorers. We do not advertise our existence. We wait for people like you to come to us.”

Arthur elbowed Alex. “Don’t you adore patently transparent flattery?”

“Please remember that you are guests on our fair island,” the narrator continued. “It is a haven of freedom and democracy, but we do have our rules. After all, democracy cannot exist without order.”

A pair of police officers in body armor passed a sidewalk cafe, smiling and waving to the customers. The diners in the middle of the shot waved back with suspicious enthusiasm, while those on the edges of the frame seemed sullen and resentful.

“I knew the one on the left,” Arthur said. “The centipedes got her.”

Cut to: WWII stock footage. It showed soldiers manning a howitzer, blasting the hell out of some unseen target.

“The history of modern Al Amarja began on October 7th, 1940, when partisans led by Monique D’Aubainne liberated the island from the cruel hand of Italian fascism.”

More vintage footage, showing a handsome brunette in combat fatigues smiling and handling a rifle.

“Since that day, Her Exaltedness, Monique D’Aubainne, has governed the island with wisdom and skill. It has prospered under her stewardship, enjoying uninterrupted peace and economic success. It is now a haven for free expression and individual responsibility.”

The video cut to a fifties-vintage shot of this D’Aubainne woman taking part in a parade, riding in a convertible with the top down, waving to unseen adoring crowds. Confetti and shredded paper fell on her car like a summer rain.

“Her Exaltedness has demonstrated far-reaching geopolitical forethought throughout her tenure. For example, she adopted that most resilient and beautiful of currencies, the US dollar, soon after Liberation Day. Since the rebuilding of Europe under the Marshall Plan, Al Amarja has thereby maintained close links with the world’s sole remaining superpower.”

“Isn’t this a bit much for a tourist film?” Alex asked Arthur.

“Monique is very proud of her currency policy. It makes her hot.”

On the screen, happy tourists gave happy US sawbucks to happy merchants.

“Our official language is English, although our citizens are the most cosmopolitan in the world, and you may hear many other languages while staying here. You may also hear the colorful *patois* of our less sophisticated residents.”

A happy beggar thrust out his palm at a group of happy tourists, only to be shooed away by happy police officers.

“Remember those rules we mentioned earlier? Your stay will be much more comfortable if you keep them in mind.”

The film cut to a darkly-lit shot of a woman in an expensive evening gown sitting at a table in a night club. She was tying off her arm, ready to stick a syringe into it.

“One, drugs and other controlled substances which are illegal where you come from are also illegal here. Don’t let appearances fool you.”

Alex sat wide-eyed at this sudden segue into the bizarre. She looked at Arthur, hoping for an explanation, but he just looked back, entertained by her reaction.

The scene shifted to an airport check point. A sweet-looking, stooped-over Chinese granny placed her bag on the conveyor belt of an X-ray machine.

“Two, firearms of all sorts are completely illegal on Al Amarja.”

The X-ray machine showed the outline of a small pistol in the woman’s luggage. The granny looked up at the video display in over-acted shock. She attempted to bolt from the security area, moving with surprising speed. But a fast-thinking security guard pulled out his

baton and brought it crashing down onto the old lady's head. She buckled and fell to the bone-colored tile of the airport.

"Be warned that penalties for violating this basic law of our state are severe, up to and including summary execution."

"Summary execution?" Alex asked Arthur.

"You aren't packing, are you?"

The word *DRAMATIZATION* flashed up on the screen, over the image of the woman being led away, bleeding from the scalp.

"Of course not."

"Then what's the problem?"

"In a truly free state, only those who would take our freedom need guns," said the film. A swastika in a red circle with a bar through it replaced the clubbed woman on the screen. "Three, fascist activities are strictly forbidden. A truly tolerant state cannot tolerate intolerance."

Alex looked around at the other passengers. About half of them were as bewildered by the video as she was. The others looked bored, or paid it no attention, as if it were a safety demonstration seen for the hundredth time.

The barred swastika faded into an image of a woman in a business suit furrowing her brow with concentration as she bent a spoon. Alex had seen so-called psychics pull this sleight-of-hand trick before. She wondered if the video could possibly get any stranger.

It could. "Fourth, and finally, all visitors or immigrants who possess psychic powers must register them with the government. You will be presented with convenient forms for this registration during your Customs and Immigration interview."

The spoon-bender faded into a smiling bureaucrat in a small, featureless office.

"Before you deplane, all non-citizens will be assigned a time and location for a Customs and Immigrations interview. This is not optional. Although your Customs and Immigration officer is empowered to expel you from the country, or to order you imprisoned, you have nothing to worry about. Just tell the truth."

Again Alex turned to Arthur.

"That's good advice," he said. "Don't lie to them."

All of Alex's fears of bureaucracy and airports bubbled to the surface. For a moment, she thought she was going to throw up again. But instead she just broke out into a chilly sweat. The rest of the film slipped past her. It soon ended anyway.

Flight attendants came up through the aisles, checking the flight manifests to see which passengers needed Customs and Immigration interviews. The attendant stopped and asked Arthur where he was

originally seated; Arthur responded by showing him an Al Amarjan passport. Alex thought she caught a look of alarmed recognition on the attendant's face. The attendant handed Alex a bright yellow card bearing a form filled out by on a computer printer. It had her name on it, and told her to report to room E120 at 7:15 A.M. Alex checked her watch; it was 6:04.

Through the P.A. system, the pilot announced that the plane was about to begin its descent. The seat belt lights went on. The attendants quickly finished up the process of matching passengers to appointment cards and took their seats. Alex fastened her belt with trembling hands.

She leaned out the window to look at the island. It was still a small green-brown speck in the Mediterranean. The sun was still making its ascent into the morning sky, and Alex had to shade her eyes with her hand.

The descent took about twenty minutes. The island seemed small until the last minute. There was a large city on its western tip and a smaller one on its eastern tip. In between were two ranges of low, volcanic mountains. The plane circled the island before landing near the large western city.

The airport terminal was the most peculiar building Alex had ever seen. It looked like a big inverted cone, or maybe a child's top. Its base was a small circle of white concrete sitting underneath eight other, ever-larger circles. The massive structure looked like it could blow over in a heavy wind. Alex had a vague recollection of having once seen a picture of it in a magazine. She wondered why it hadn't made a bigger impression on her then. And why it wasn't as common an image as the Eiffel Tower or the Statue of Liberty.

"Insane, isn't it?" Arthur asked her.

"Is it safe?"

"It's structurally safe. But make sure you hire a guide to help you through it."

"You're kidding."

"No, it's very confusing, and you don't want to get lost before your appointment. They frown on that. I'd take you there myself, but I need to get going."

Alex jumped as the plane hit the runway. It was a splendid landing. Alex desperately wanted to lie down somewhere. The PA system warned passengers not to get up before the plane had finished taxiing, but a few did anyway. After what seemed a long time to Alex, the plane finally stopped.

The odd design of the terminal meant that it had no gates. Passengers had to disembark from the airplane via stairs and walk to the arrival lounge along a route marked out on the tarmac with white

paint. Arthur stuck by Alex's side. She thought about ditching him, but decided that she wasn't sure she wanted to. Sure, he was annoying and creepy, but he did seem to know his way around. The point seemed academic anyway, since the old man was more than spry enough to keep up with her, even though his carry-on luggage looked as if it was really heavy.

"I have quite enjoyed talking with you, Alex." He was a little out of breath. "In fact, I must confess that I have fallen utterly in love with you. I have not had this feeling in a long while."

Alex tried to decide if he was back to pulling her leg. But he had dropped the ham actor persona he had been using on the plane. His features were neutral and his voice flat.

"It is not generally an auspicious thing to become the object of my attentions, Alex. People tend to come to bad ends, and all that. Normally, this fact means nothing to me: in fact, in many ways, I consider it convenient. But, in your case, given your recent tragedy — which again, normally, would mean nothing to me..."

He stopped, apparently at a loss for words. He withdrew a linen handkerchief from an inside suit pocket and tapped his forehead with it.

"There is a sort of ...? Empathy, perhaps? I had a similar experience to yours, when I was a little younger than you. My mother. A bathtub, blood all over. It was I who found her. She intended that I be the one. A final act of malice."

His eyes went blank again, and his tone hardened.

"What I am saying to you is that I am promising never to approach you, never to see you again. This may seem odd to you, but if you knew who I am, you would know that this is a gesture of unprecedented unselfishness. You won't understand that, I know, but ignorance is indeed bliss."

He stopped and looked inside her eyes.

"I shan't give you my blessing, because such a thing would be indistinguishable from a curse. I know, though, that you are apprehensive about your Immigration interview. If things get rough, mention my name: Sir Arthur Compton. It may prove helpful. Good-bye, my dear."

He took her hand in his damp paw and brought it to his dry lips. He then turned from her and picked up his pace, heading for the terminal.

Alex shrugged and continued on towards the large doorway labeled *Arrivals Lounge*. She crossed the threshold, finding herself in the midst of a throng of similarly bewildered passengers. Compton was already out of sight. The room consisted only of a bank of elevators and escalators. With nowhere to go but up, Alex stepped onto the nearest escalator.

The next level was given over to baggage claims, snack bars, and a big waiting area. The acoustics were terrible; the sound of the crowd doubled in on, and amplified, itself. A shrill voice cut through the racket: "I'm stuck! I'm stuck!" It was the little boy with the Lion King hat from the Montreal terminal. He had plunked himself down into a plastic chair and was refusing to get out of it, as if he were glued there. His harried mother was attempting to move him through sheer force of guilt, looking as bedraggled and tired as she could. The kid didn't seem to be falling for it.

"Frank Carmody, white courtesy telephone. Frank Carmody," said the building's announce system.

"Guide services! Guide services!" Half a dozen men and women were competing to herd dazed passengers towards various booths and kiosks along the far wall. "You need a guide to make it through the Terminal," one of them barked into her ear. He was short and swarthy and looked Middle Eastern. He wore a uniform, one vaguely like a bellhop's, but of khaki-colored polyester.

Alex thought it was nuts to have to pay somebody to get through a building, but she no longer had the energy to question the lunacy of this place.

"How much?"

"Ten dollars per hour."

"Ten bucks?"

"Hey lady, we got to eat."

At least I get to be ripped off in a currency I already know, Alex thought as she handed him a ten and her appointment card.

"I need to go here. And then I need to get out of here and to the Bienvenidos Hotel."

"We guide you inside airport. After that, you take jitney or cab."

"Whatever."

Alex was standing in a small cubbyhole of an office. The interview room was close to featureless. In its center was a desk and a leather chair. In front of the desk was a stool with a wooden seat and metal frame. Alex tested the stool, finding that sitting in it would put her three inches below the eye-line of someone sitting in the leather chair.

On the wall behind the desk was a photo of a woman with gray, frizzy hair. She recognized the woman from the orientation film — it was Monique D'Aubainne, ruler of the island.

The only other thing in the room was a long pane of reflective glass, which she figured had to be a two-way mirror. She walked over to the mirror and waved at whoever was watching her on the other side. Shortly after that, the man came into the room and held out his hand for shaking. The immigration officer had a faraway look to him. He was a slim East Indian man with an absolutely neutral accent, a voice disconnected from any sense of place. He wore a blue wool suit and a white cotton shirt that had seen better days. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard, just like her dad had taught her when she was six years old. The man winced slightly and then smiled to cover it up.

"I am Dinesh, Dinesh Rajpal. I am your Customs and Immigration officer. Your name is ...?"

Alex told him, handing him her yellow appointment card. He took the card and put it into a jacket pocket without looking at it. He sat down in the leather chair; she reluctantly perched on the stool, a cocked eyebrow letting him know that she thought the old eye-line trick was pretty cheap. He coughed in what might have been embarrassment.

He had a several-page form clipped to a clipboard. Instead of giving it to her to fill out, he asked her questions and wrote down the answers with a small, stubby pencil. The questions were routine: her name, address, citizenship, occupation, the flight she came in on. This surprised Alex. After the orientation film, she expected to be quizzed on her political leanings and her belief in UFOs, if any. She was beginning to relax.

Dinesh had completed about half of the questions on the first sheet of the form when he put the clipboard down.

"The rest of the questions are a little bit unusual, and I can tell that you're very upset about something. I don't feel right about asking you these questions. We are supposed to ask if you are a fascist or if you believe that unidentified flying objects are alien spacecraft. These questions are designed to intimidate people, put them off balance. This makes them reveal the things we wish to know — if they are members of subversive groups, if they are smuggling things onto the island without going through proper channels. That sort of thing.

"But I can sense that you are not the kind of person we are interested in prying into. You have some great sorrow resting on you. I see this despite the admirable composure you present in the face of this intimidating procedure. Do not worry that you seem transparent; my prolonged experience with depth meditation techniques provides me insight beyond that of ordinary men. I know that you are tired from the flight, and likely wish to get to a hotel and sleep. However, I would like you to know that I am here for you, that I can help you unburden, if there is something you wish to talk about, to a sympathetic stranger."

“Uh, is this normally the business of the government?”

“I speak to you not as a government, but as another human being. You need a confidant, Alexandra Sky.”

“I prefer Alex.”

He slapped himself on the forehead. It was not the standard version of the gesture. He really whacked himself, hard enough that Alex’s teeth clenched at the sound of the slap. “I should have intuited that. I am sorry, Alex. Already I fear that our rapport is in danger of weakening.”

“I’m from Minnesota. We don’t believe in rapport.”

He got out of the leather chair. “Please, please, I must make amends. Sit in the vastly superior chair. I will sit in the stool.”

“You don’t have to —”

“I want to. Please, I insist completely.”

Alex stopped relaxing. Dinesh was obviously cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs, and he had the power to refuse her entry, or even to throw her in jail. She was going to have to humor the guy. She sat in the vastly superior chair. After a moment’s thought, she put her feet up on the desk. If he’s into the submissive thing—

“Please do not put your feet there. I admire the gesture, but there is the possibility that my supervisor...” He glanced meaningfully at the mirror. Alex took her feet down.

“I’m coming here for a funeral, if that’s what you want to know. So maybe I do have a burden on me. But it’s not the kind of burden you can talk your way out of. It’s something you just have to live through. So if there’s anything else I need to do to complete this interview...”

Dinesh dropped his face into his cupped, long-fingered hands and began to sob.

“I am losing my soul!”

Alex got out of the leather chair and put a tentative hand on his shoulder. He immediately clapped his hand onto it, pressing it tighter to him.

“Have you ever had a job eat your soul, Alex?” he burred.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“This job, it is designed to intimidate people, to play with their minds, to make them look small in comparison to the superior mental powers of Her Exaltedness and her officials. There is no power that corrupts like petty power, the ability to frustrate, to inconvenience. I have tried my best to resist the unrelenting seduction of my position here. I wish merely to serve in my small way, and to earn a respectable living.”

Alex wanted to withdraw her hand from Dinesh’s shoulder, if she could do so without having to yank it dramatically away from him. She

tested Dinesh's grip on her fingers. Like glue. "This wouldn't be some weird head game you're running on me now, would it?"

His sobbing intensified into a terrible noise wrenched from his esophagus. "See, see what I refer to! This job, it erodes all trust, all of the possible perfect beauty between human beings! This is exactly what Vishnu told me! I was engaged in depth meditation the other night — I have embarked on this course in search of my higher self, seeking to somehow fill in this great and terrible vacuum in my inner being. I sought the guidance of Vishnu, and he said —"

"You mean, like, the Hindu god Vishnu?"

"Yes, and he told me that this job was devouring my basic goodness, and that I would have to atone not by quitting the job, but by seeking to do this intrinsically anti-spiritual job in a kind and healing manner. Vishnu has given me a very difficult challenge — you see what havoc comes when one tries to break the traditional barriers between interviewer and interviewee!"

He stood, fishing a tissue from his pocket and wiping his tears away. He leaned against the mirror.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?"

"You are talking about having conversations with Vishnu."

Dinesh laughed. "Oh, that! Of course, how silly of me. You will not be familiar with this, seeing as you have not been to our island before. That part of it is perfectly scientific, not mad at all." He walked over to the desk drawer, pulling out a tinfoil card of drug caplets in individual plastic blisters. Some of the blisters were empty. Others contained bright yellow pills. He handed the card to Alex.

"This is Communion, a rare pharmaceutical sold among certain circles in the Edge."

"The Edge?"

"The main city here on the island. It is where your hotel is located.

"Communion is a meditative aid. It allows you to commune with the deity of your choice. Naturally I seek the guidance of Vishnu. I am not hallucinating. I am simply employing a chemical aid to enlightenment."

Alex rattled the pills in the card. "Well I guess you're not mad then."

His shoulders slumped again. "But I am not prepared to give you the sort of solace that you deserve. I must strive to be a more accomplished person. Empathy is not enough. Skill is required."

"May I go now?"

Dinesh sank into the vastly superior chair. "Yes. I am sorry I have failed you." He bounced back out of the chair. "But if you do ever need a sympathetic ear, please call me at this number any time during your

stay.” He pulled a business card from his wallet and passed it to her. She put it in her purse.

“Well, thank you, Dinesh. I’ll certainly keep that in mind.” She headed for the door.

“One more thing.”

She turned back towards him. “Yes?”

“May I have a hug?”

“No.”

II

Abbas Nadjafi's heart pulsed with primal joy as his leader, Hans Knudson, applied a brutal, chain-wrapped fist to the jaw of his opponent. Said jaw responded with a gratifying popping sound.

Hans was the head of the Aries Gang. Abbas was one of his proudest soldiers. The Aries Gang was devoted to the honor of personal combat, the higher principles of astrology, and the consumption of vast quantities of mind-altering substances. They were once again waging spectacular war against the craven and vicious forces of a rival gang, Lucifer's Glorious Lords of Passion. The Lords were devoted to intimidation through force, the conspicuous worship of Satan, and the consumption of vast quantities of mind-altering substances. The Aries Gang claimed as its turf the portion of the Edge known as Flowers Barrio. On their roaring battle bikes, they had plunged deep into Great Men Barrio, territory of the Glorious Lords, in search of enemies who needed a thrashing. On this mission, Hans and Abbas were accompanied by many fine fellow warriors: Bjorn Nkwera, Peer Solgerkvist, Erik Gudne, Saxolf Hermann, and Thorvald Bladh. Foes they found in the person of such notorious Glorious Lords as Bellow, Frogbreath, Lope, Shreds, and Olimpia. Golden had the morning sun glinted from the shaven scalp of the muscular, mustachioed Hans Knudson as he brought his battle bike to a shrieking stop at the feet of Shreds, the most feared and blooded of the Lords. Shreds was a mountainous behemoth of a man with a really tiny head. Hans tossed a cellular phone at him.

"Call your leader and have him send more forces to this fight," Hans had said. "There are five of you and seven of us. If the odds are not even, we shall gain no honor for besting you." Hans' notion of an honorable battle was flexible. It didn't matter to him that he and his men were well-rested, and that the Lords hadn't yet turned in after a night of loathsome revelry. For showing weakness, for failing to maintain battle-readiness at all times, the Lords deserved the ignominy of defeat.

"Grrahh!" Shreds had responded, and the battle had begun.

Making a definite tactical error, Shreds commenced hostilities by throwing the cell phone at Hans' face. This provided Hans an opening for a ferocious roundhouse blow to Shreds' forehead, a blow delivered

by a fist wrapped in bicycle chain. Shreds roared in anger and pain as blood rushed down from his forehead and into his eyes.

Abbas had a moment to admire the martial cleverness of his honorable leader. The forehead bleeds like a fountain when pierced, he thought. An ideal initial target for an adversary as dangerous as Shreds. Abbas thrilled to the aforementioned popping sound as Hans hit Shreds once again. Then the second-largest of the Lords selected him as a target and charged.

Abbas was the slightest of all of the active Aries gangsters. Unscarred was his sharp and handsome face. Unblemished by welts or slashes was his silky, olive skin. No doubt his unimposing appearance played a large part in Bellow's decision to go after him. Bellow was a towering mass of muscle, his upper body alone weighing more than the average man. His face was flat, a frame for a rack of impressively huge and misshapen teeth. It had been hit so many times that it was no longer possible to determine Bellow's age or ethnic background. The bleary-eyed and shabby onlookers of Bilge Street watched the two men square off with jaded anticipation. They had seen Bellow quickly crush many men larger and tougher-looking than Abbas Nadjafi.

But Abbas was a thinking man. He saw the world as a set of clear and unwavering fundamental principles. As long as one understood those principles, one would prosper. This was true when facing a difficult programming challenge in C++, when negotiating a drug deal, or when facing a hulking psychopath with more spittle than brains.

Bellow was fast. Once he started accelerating, his bulk combined with the laws of inertia to make him a moving object to be avoided at all costs. From side to side, Abbas danced, finally selecting a spot in front of a panel truck to make his final stand. At the last moment, he dropped to the ground, and rolled under the truck. From beneath it, he heard a resounding, metallic thud, and saw the truck rock alarmingly on its shock absorbers. He rolled out to the other side of the truck. Its driver, who had been drinking coffee in the cab, was now opening the door to bail the fuck out. Abbas leapt up onto the opening door, deftly plucking the Styrofoam coffee cup from the trucker's fingers as he boosted himself up onto the roof of the cab. Mmm, *latté*, he thought.

"Heads up, defiler!" Abbas shouted. Bellow, still reeling from his head-on smack into the panel truck, lifted his swelling face up towards him. Abbas dashed the lukewarm *latté* into Bellow's eyes and then began whipping him about the head and shoulders with a swiftly-drawn length of bicycle chain. The spectators stepped back to avoid baptism in aerosolized droplets of Bellow's blood.

Then Bellow grabbed the flailing chain in his massive ham of a hand and pulled. Abbas toppled towards the street. His progress

towards the pavement was briefly interrupted by a piercing blow from Bellow's free elbow. Abbas analyzed the aerodynamics of the situation, turning in mid-air so as to convert the force of impact to his advantage. He executed a forwards somersault as he hit the sidewalk, dissipating the force and allowing him to recover to a kneeling position. He turned back towards his opponent with the grace of a figure skater. Bellow was charging at him again. Or rather, two Bellows — that elbow to the face had him seeing double. Herein lies the disadvantage of fighting a tougher but dumber opponent, Abbas observed. You have to hit your enemy a dozen times to put him down, without ever getting hit yourself.

The advantage of tougher but dumber is that dumber doesn't learn from mistakes: Bellow was once more charging at Abbas with reckless enthusiasm. Abbas tried to maneuver him so that he'd smash through the plate glass window of Veronique's Pet and Bondage Supply store behind him, but it didn't work. Bellow just thunked into the glass, leaving a red face-print on it, without falling through it. He growled a cloud of beer breath at Abbas and swatted at him, bear-like with the back of his hand. Abbas took two nimble, bouncing steps back, only to bump into a glassy-eyed spectator in a Hawaiian shirt. Bellow reared back to launch a steamroller of a punch. Abbas ducked, and the punch tagged the spectator full in the face. Abbas felt a small object fall inside his collar and tumble down to the small of his back. Many hours after the fight, he would find a bloody tooth in his briefs and shudder in disgust.

Abbas drew a hunting knife from his boot and rolled through Bellow's legs, sending the blade probing up into the thug's privates on the way through. The knife flashed sparks as it screeched across Bellow's metal cod-piece. Now behind Bellow, Abbas stayed low and sent his right leg hooking towards his foe's ankle, in hopes of toppling him. It was no good — despite his top-heaviness, there was simply too much of Bellow to knock off balance from a standing position. Bellow turned, emitted his namesake, and dived on top of Abbas, pinning him to the sidewalk. Shockwaves danced through Abbas' field of vision, and he found it suddenly hard to breathe. The bright light of morning began to fade.

Then Bellow's weight on him decreased. Abbas blinked, vaguely saw a blotchy figure behind Bellow, and rolled out of the way. Bellow slammed down onto the sidewalk. Frantically, Abbas scrambled to his feet, hoping his vision would clear. It did. Hans was standing behind Bellow, his chain around the Glorious Lord's neck like a garrote. Bellow was making hideous choking sounds and flopping around like an enraged rodeo bull. Finally he bucked Hans off him. Hans flew

backwards into a parking meter, grunting as his shoulder muscles made impact with it.

Abbas no longer had any idea of a rational course of combat action. But Hans was in trouble, so he dived onto Bellow's back as the big man lunged for his leader. Bellow shook him off like a flea and resumed his lunge. Abbas landed flat on his back. He was suddenly and separately aware of each and every one of his vertebrae, and this was not a good thing. For a moment, he thought he might be paralyzed, but then he realized he was really just in immeasurable pain.

He sat up just as Hans, using the parking meter against his back as a brace, was planting a motorcycle boot squarely in the middle of Bellow's pan-like face. Abbas knew what was coming next. The retractable spikes in Hans' sole popped out on impact. Bellow reeled backwards, clutching his face. He scrambled around on the concrete, waiting for Hans to deliver the killing blow.

Hans instead struck a pose, thrusting his arms high into the air. Victory! He was rewarded with a smattering of applause from the spectators. Some of them were already drifting away, bored. Others, less familiar with the customs of gang warfare in the Edge, froze, afraid that Hans might attack them next.

"To the battle bikes!" Hans cried. Bellow crawled away into an alley, whimpering and cursing.

Abbas achingly rose to his knees and finally to his feet, using the fender of a parked taxi as a brace. He saw the other Glorious Lords running off towards the Plaza of Great Men. No one seemed to have been killed, although Frogbreath was leaning on the shoulders of two of his comrades. He wasn't putting weight on his left leg.

He surveyed his comrades as he staggered towards his bike. Bjorn had a six-inch cut on his forearm; with pride he would wear this new scar. Badly scraped was the left side of Saxolf's face. But it was Thorvald Bladh who had suffered most. His face was a single mass of exposed red meat; three fingers of his left hand jutted out like broken pencils.

Abbas had been surprised to see Hans even allow Thorvald out on this mission. He was the oldest and least fit of the band. These days, Thorvald was more devoted to the chemical consumption portion of the Aries lifestyle than anything else. Abbas thought that Thorvald perhaps needed a hospital. But to suggest this would simply shame him further.

Saxolf wasn't concerned about shaming Thorvald. He was looking forward to it. "Abbas, you missed seeing Thorvald here get beaten by the woman!"

“She has mystic shit powers,” Thorvald grumbled, drooling redly. The others laughed a hearty spaghetti Western laugh. Half of the population of the Edge were into mystic shit, if you believed some people. What a lame excuse! Abbas felt bad for Thorvald; he had grown too weak even to feel shame. Hans would need to take a firm hand with him. That’s why he was allowed to come, Abbas realized. As a final chance, to see how far he had slipped. Yet still Thorvald could not see this. It was sad.

Abbas started up his bike, wondering where he would be in ten years. Surely not like Thorvald — fat, pathetic, without self-knowledge. He would have to make sure that never happened. It would be better to die than to bring dishonor on his comrades. Hans had taught him well.

“I’m going to smoke. I hope you don’t mind,” Patrick Sky said.

Giuseppe did and did not mind. Like all of the True People, he was extremely susceptible to the effects of nicotine; even second hand smoke made him twitch like an insect on a griddle. As a funeral director, however, he was used to customers who needed a cig. So he was well prepared for this circumstance. He reached across his desk and switched on a powerful air filtration device housed in a tall black plastic case. The gadget emitted a low, cicada-like buzz, one that Giuseppe’s client clearly found slightly distracting. So much the better. Giuseppe enjoyed the weakness of the False People. He had selected his profession not only to serve his people, to help conceal their existence from the mutants, but to indulge this peculiar peccadillo. He would never admit it to his friends in the Community, but observing the mutants in their most wrenching, private moments of grief was now his greatest source of pleasure. Perhaps his only source, since the passing of his Violetta. Her death had taken all of the sweet things from his life. All he had now were corpses. And the bereaved — mutants like this pushy American, this Patrick Sky.

Sky inhaled deeply on his cigarette: it was a Green Rooster, a local brand. A social or emergency smoker, not a habitual smoker — Giuseppe knew this from the False One’s tentative grip on it. Sky was reasonably presentable by mutant standards. He was somewhere in his middle thirties, blond, with the beginnings of a receding hairline. The short hair at his temples was already turning white. Behind rounded, tortoise-shell spectacles sat blue, penetrating eyes. He was not dressed

for mourning, but for a vacation: white linen jacket and white slacks, a thin red sweater, loafers, a gold chain around his neck. Sky had arranged himself as comfortably as possible in the rich wooden chair Giuseppe provided to clients in his consultation office.

The office was a marvel of subtle psychological warfare. Giuseppe had designed it to take advantage of the full range of perceptual flaws that mutants were subject to. Although on first, second, or even third glance the dimensions and details of the room seemed perfectly in order — dark woods, antique furnishings, indirect lighting — every custom-made piece had been carefully created to be just slightly wrong. The lampshades were fractionally asymmetrical. The light bulbs lit the room with a barely perceptible flicker, on a rhythm contrary to the mutants' natural metabolic cycles. The perspective in the landscape paintings arranged about the walls was skewed just enough to create cognitive dissonance, but not so much that the casual observer noticed. Giuseppe had created this parlor as an elaborate in-joke, so that the mutants would know for once what it felt like to live in a world hostile to their sensibilities. He had since found it an indispensable negotiating tool. Like any immoderately successful funeral director, he prospered through the exploitation of grief. His den of sensory aggravation was merely the most baroque weapon in his arsenal.

Sky was a tough one, he had to admit. The American carried himself as a man who expects others to defer to him. Sky was using his grief as a weapon, as an excuse to be demanding. Typically ill-bred mutant behavior. He was prolonging the meeting, obsessively tearing into every detail of his sister's service. Giuseppe was forced to fight down a growing feeling of agitation. Nadjafi would soon be here, for a product pickup. Sky could not be around for this. When it came to matters concerning the product, no degree of caution was excessive.

The current detail under the Patrick Sky microscope was the selection of pastor. Sky continued to repeat how important the deceased had been in the evangelical world. He had been in the Edge long enough to understand that it specialized in the unorthodox. Sky wanted a guarantee that the preacher in question, one Randy Rogers, would not in any way embarrass the family. To Giuseppe, the details of the mutants' various false creeds were of little interest. Yet, in order to get the man on his way, he would have to pretend. He knew that Rogers was a charlatan, a venal television priest with unsavory ties. But Rogers was above all else a superlative performer, and he knew that he would give Sky value for the dollar.

"The most prominent and respected evangelical minister on the island, that is Pastor Rogers," Giuseppe said, evenly. "He has his own television program."

Sky leaned in towards him. Giuseppe was forced to lean back to escape the curl of smoke from his cigarette. "Believe me, I've been around televangelists for all of my professional life. That's why I'm asking. Half of them mean it, and for the other half it's just showbiz. I'm relying on you, Mr. Sizo, for the straight word. I won't have a fake at Jonna's service."

Giuseppe threw up his hands. "I am also an experienced professional. I have great respect for Pastor Rogers. The sincerity in a man's heart, can I measure this? No, that is for God. Trust my judgment in this matter, Mr. Sky, I beg of you." Giuseppe stole a glance at his watch.

Sky leaned back in his chair. "It's just that I feel I let —" He shifted again, back to a more formal position. "Everything is going to go right. This is going to be perfect."

Giuseppe rose, hoping Sky would do the same. He didn't. "Please, leave these matters in my hands. You have all necessary assurances."

Finally Sky got to his feet. "And the media will be completely barred from the proceedings."

Giuseppe had seen no evidence of media interest. The presence of reporters was bad for him, too. "Of course, Mr. Sky. Scavengers, I take the dimmest possible view of them. You need not fear tabloid photographers. The laws here on the island, they permit me to deal with such intrusions ... harshly."

The implied image of a cameraman receiving a lead pipe up the cranium seemed to calm Sky down. He put an unwanted hand on Giuseppe's shoulder.

"I'm sorry if I'm being a pain."

You are not, Giuseppe thought. You are not sorry.

"But — well, you understand."

I do. All too well, you stinking carcass.

Sky turned and wandered back into the visiting area. Giuseppe shut the door and began to pace.

Was this mutant deluded, or was there the possibility that press people would care about this woman's funeral? Packs of trained snoopers sniffing around, that would be unacceptable. Perhaps this was a trap. The reporters would seem to be coming to cover the American woman's death, but they would really be checking to see if he was manufacturing. If a member of the Community had suspicions...

It would require a great deal of planning on their part. Finding this dead woman, hiring a mutant to act the role of Mr. Sky, presumably also hiring mutants to play the reporters — no, it was implausible, this would risk exposure for the Community too. It was also too conspiratorial of them. Only mutants engaged in such complex games. Did

anyone in the Community possess even the slightest inkling of the source of the product? No, interest in the product would be below them. They would consider it just another vice of the False People. Scarcely worthy of notice. The chance that they had connected it to the Community at all, that was slim! The chance that they suspected Giuseppe, that was no chance at all.

Giuseppe batted away at the last lingering traces of cigarette smoke. It was the nicotine in the air, that's what was getting him worrying again. It was too troubling. Clandestine activities such as this, no Real Person was made for such an existence! For the thousandth time, Giuseppe asked himself why he had become a manufacturer, why he had stooped to such a mutant-like level. Hadn't Franco warned him of the stresses of this life? And what did he gain from it, truly? Money? His financial needs were modest. He already squeezed more than enough from the mutants, presiding over their barbaric death rites. Giuseppe took a deep breath. He had gone in circles on this issue countless times before. Always he reached the point where he had to admit to some fundamental flaw in his character. Some self-destructive impulse that forced him not only to flirt with the ultimate blasphemy, but to root around in it up to his elbows. No woman could replace Violetta, so now he was courting destruction. That was it. Part of him wanted to die. Not only to die, but to be forever reviled, to be held up among the People as an example of cosmic infamy. The other part of him wanted to live, to forget his awful deeds, to somehow seek atonement from the great god Armzhak. But it was too late. The dealer, Nadjafi. He presents himself as an honorable man, as if mutants can understand true honor. A man of violence, this is what Nadjafi is. He would never permit Giuseppe a graceful exit from their arrangement. A drug dealer losing his source, he does not take that in stride. Nadjafi wouldn't even have to flick the switch of his blade to destroy him; he would only have to leak word to the Community. Float a rumor or two. Word would travel. And then the end would come, quicker than a breath. There would be no turning back, no atonement for Giuseppe Sizo. Only an everyday existence of oxidizing fear.

Traffic in the Edge seemed universally congested. On the way from the airport to the Hotel Bienvenidos, Alex took a sleek black cab run by an outfit called Total Taxi. The driver was well-groomed and mercifully silent. From the hotel to Sizo's Funeral Home, Alex rode in a battered cab that smelled of prosciutto and garlic. Its sign labeled it

as part of the Giovanni's Cabs fleet. Its driver was maddeningly chatty, but refused a tip at the end of the ride. During both trips, Alex got a chance to see the city, or at least some of its major thoroughfares. The place was an odd mixture of old and new. Most of the buildings were low-slung, with an Arabic feel to them. Even the glass and steel towers of what Alex assumed to be the business district had their share of minarets. The buildings she got a good look at were packed tightly together on roads that better suited horses than cars. They were businesses, mostly; residences would be on less congested avenues.

On the sidewalks, there were also lots of interesting people to look at. The Edge clearly had a vibrant street life. It seemed like a larger, more eccentric version of the Uptown district back home. Here the average number of body piercings went up, and the number of people without leather jackets went down. Everybody seemed to be sporting a tattoo, an outfit from some far-flung corner of the world, or both. It reminded Alex of driving through a gigantic Madonna video. The nooses were an interesting touch; she saw a number of men and women wearing these instead of neckties.

This is not the kind of place Jonna would intentionally pick for a getaway, she thought.

She stood in front of Sizo's Funeral Home for a moment, without heading inside. Alex had learned that the city was divided up into different neighborhoods, each called a Barrio. Sizo's was in Sunken Barrio, which she gathered was considered the safe area for tourists. It was a small building done in deep brown brick. Only a brass plaque on the door identified its purpose.

Alex steeled herself with a breathing exercise.

"Pardon me, ma'am." It was a kid, maybe fourteen years old. He wore an expensive business suit and carried a cell-phone and a briefcase. "I don't wanna intrude, but you obviously a Burger."

"Burger?"

"Tourist. Newbie. Not been on the island for long."

Alex nodded.

"It not safe to hang around looking lost in thought. See *hombre* over there?" He pointed to a tall man in a dirty raincoat, who quickly darted into an alley. "He sizing you up as a potential vic. Robbery, even worse maybe. This is safe part of town, and *it* be dangerous. You is have to be careful. Sorry at the botherment, but you needed the tip."

Alex was about to respond, but the kid was already heading off at a speed walk pace. Alex headed up the steps of the funeral home, then halted. She checked her purse. The wallet was missing. She thought about darting after the kid, but stayed on the threshold of the funeral home. The *concierge* at Bienvenidos had already warned her to take

anything irreplaceable out of her wallet, so her passport and other ID were still safe back at the hotel. The kid had netted somewhere under \$50 and a collection of frayed coupons and business cards, most of them bearing scrawled Minneapolis phone numbers. Still, it shook her to have been taken like that. She'd have to keep her guard up at all times, grieving or no grieving. She glanced back, saw the man in the raincoat looking at her again, and darted through the door of the funeral home.

One of Sizo's assistants, a nondescript woman in a dark suit, was there to greet her.

"I'm here for Jonna Sky."

The assistant directed her to the visiting room, which was down a long hallway lined in red flocked wallpaper. Patrick tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped. Her reaction startled him, too. He was holding a Styrofoam cup of tea, which he spilled on his white linen jacket. Alex opened her purse and pulled out a tissue. She mopped at the stain, to no particular effect.

"I'm sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm jumpy, I just got robbed."

Patrick turned, as if looking for an attacker. "Robbed?"

"Outside the funeral home. A kid came up and told me to look out for thieves, and while he was doing it he lifted my wallet."

Patrick balled his free hand up into a fist. "You shouldn't keep it in your jacket like that. I'll have the staff here call the cops."

"I have a feeling there's no point to that. Anyway, he only got a few bucks. Didn't get my passport or anything."

Patrick went on about the island and its high crime rate, how something should be done about it. Alex didn't feed him any lines, so his rant ran out of steam. He paused. Looked around. "Well, so far so good."

Alex felt the old desire to snipe at him rise up in her. And for what? Nothing; force of habit. She was, she really was going to maintain an effort not to get back into that on this occasion. She was going to resist her inner asshole. As blankly as possible she said, "What do you mean by that?"

He looked around warily. "You know. No one showing up."

"If you didn't want anyone to show up, why did you bother with visitation?" It was an honest question, not a peck. Delivered mildly.

Patrick looked around vaguely. "Uh, I don't know. You're right, it's foolish. I'll cancel it after you go in and see her." He lowered his voice. "You know, the funeral director here talked me into it without my really realizing. I think there's something fishy about him."

“You’re suspicious of everyone, Patrick.” Statement of fact, very neutral. An observation, not a criticism.

“You should be more suspicious.” He pointed at her purse. Sixty seconds into the conversation and he’s already telling me how to live. Which, okay, is why it was difficult for her not to go at him. He’d trained her to strike preemptively. But Alex would concentrate. Stay in command. He wanted to rag at her, fine. He couldn’t make her play that old routine with her, not if she didn’t want to allow it.

“I can’t say I really enjoyed my trip here. There was a creepy old guy on the plane, and getting through Customs was...creepier. This place is really unsettling, coming here hasn’t helped me... I don’t want to come down on you, Patrick, I mean, I’m not questioning your — why here? We should be doing this back in Edina. At least there are the aunts and uncles back there.”

Patrick’s features hardened. He had a way of going inside himself when challenged. “You know it had to be this way.”

A second pause. All right, he really did want her to dredge something out of him.

“I don’t know that. All’s I know is, there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

Patrick turned away from her. “On the business side, I’ve taken care of everything. I’ve called the promoters for her fall tour, of course they’d heard the news, but all of the formalities are done with. There have been calls from the record company, can you believe it, already they want to talk to me about a compilation album, some kind of greatest hits thing, asking me if there’s some unreleased material we can use. They call themselves a Christian record label, and the moment something like this happens — cannibals!”

He punched the wall. Alex heard fingers crack against it. Giuseppe’s assistant trotted down the hallway to briefly check on them, then stepped back again.

“You should just go in and see her,” he said. As quickly as they had appeared, all signs of anger in him had disappeared beneath the surface again.

“Patrick, how long has it been since you last slept?”

He shook his head and waved her away.

“She killed herself, didn’t she?”

Patrick opened his mouth to speak but no sound came out. He nodded.

“Why couldn’t you tell me that?”

He lurched forward, wrapping his arms around her. He put his hand on her head and pulled it next to his. She rocked him gently for a long time. Finally he let go.

“The reason I’m having the services here is the media problem I told you about on the phone, and, in addition, it turns out the authorities here are very bribeable. I’ve paid off the coroner to label the cause of death as natural. No one will ever have to know except for you and me. I don’t want her whole life, all of her accomplishments, to turn into a circus, a tabloid story, just because of one — a moment of weakness or whatever, maybe it’s lying, you can call it that if you want to, but this is between her and the Lord and is no one else’s business.”

A note of mistrust crept into his voice. “You are going to cooperate with me on this, right?”

“What, you think I’m going to be on the phone to the *National Enquirer* soon as we get back to the hotel?” Easy, easy. But he was sort of accusing her of —

“I’m not questioning you. I just find myself in need of some assurance. I know you want the best for Jonna, same as I do.”

She stroked his back. He stiffened. “I’m sorry, Patrick, I — this is hard on both of us. Obviously. Let’s just ease off on each other and get it done with.”

“Go see her, Alexandra. Please. They’ve made her look beautiful.”

Alex walked into the sitting room. The coffin was white, highly polished, with powder blue padding. Alex didn’t have direct experience with these things, but the casket looked very expensive to her. Poor Patrick would have been a pushover for the death salesman, she thought. When it came to production values, he always went for the best. Jonna was dressed in one of her stage gowns, a very nice one. Simple, modest, and tasteful. Alex suddenly felt self-conscious about her casual outfit: denim sleeveless top, print skirt, black leggings.

Alex sidled up to the coffin and leaned over to peer into the face of her dead sister. Alex closed her eyes. For a moment, Alex and Jonna, identical twins, formed a near-perfect mirror image.

Bored, Abbas wandered around the embalming room waiting for Giuseppe to join him. He was still aching from the rumble that morning. His left eye was shot with blood and surrounded by bruised flesh. His back muscles were tight and shot sharp spikes of agony up towards his neck every time he took a step. These were the sorts of minor injuries an Aries was meant to be proud of. Abbas knew that Giuseppe would leap to some bizarre conclusion or another as soon as he saw them. For a member of a supposedly superior race, he was inconveniently panicky. It was frustrating to rely so heavily on a busi-

ness partner as easily spooked as Giuseppe Sizo. He required constant maintenance, which Abbas found wearying. Given a choice, he would deal only with straightforward, sensible people. If it weren't for the great profit in the arrangement, he would have eased out of it long ago. Just last week, though, Hans had been able to order an additional two battle bikes, all because of Abbas' sales efforts. The money that Abbas brought into the organization kept him at Hans' right hand. It had taken Abbas, scarcely the gang's greatest warrior, a long time to win his leader's trust. He had first tried to do so by computerizing the astrological system that Hans used to make decisions. Abbas spent over a year on his pet project, basing his computer models on the more sophisticated astrological sciences of ancient Babylon. After fourteen months of late nights in front of the computer monitor, he came to the disappointing realization that Hans used astrological forecasts only to justify decisions he had really already taken. This didn't reduce Abbas' respect for him; Hans was unquestionably a brilliant leader. He was, however a leader, who had no great need for Abbas' talents. It wasn't until Abbas was approached by Giuseppe's predecessor that he found a way to make himself indispensable.

It was only luck — or, rather, an auspicious arrangement of planets — that brought Franco Luchetti to him. Franco had seen Abbas dispensing drugs to clients at Sad Mary's. Watched him night after night, in fact. Franco was as cautious as Giuseppe, though calmer. He sized up a number of potential partners before speaking to Abbas. He hinted that he might have an interesting substance in need of a distributor. Abbas would have to prove himself worthy of trust. Only he could know the source of the product. He could tell no one of the source of its manufacture. He could not demand specific quantities, but would have to accept whatever small amounts of the product became available. And he could not make mistakes. If anyone used Abbas to trace the product to Franco, Franco was worse than dead. Abbas could not, at first, get his new contact to elaborate on what "worse than dead" meant. He knew that Franco was a funeral director, that he kept to himself, that he had neither close friends nor enemies. He was just a quiet, solitary businessman with little reputation one way or another. He certainly wasn't a seasoned drug supplier; he even allowed Abbas to take product on consignment!

For many months, that was all Abbas learned. He began to sell the product, which quickly found an appreciative audience among the chemical connoisseurs of the Edge. At twenty five bucks a hit, it sold itself. Abbas could have been more aggressive, priced it higher, made the freaks compete for its limited supply. But the additional revenue

would not justify the added risks. Franco had made it clear that the supply would simply dry up if too much heat fell on him.

Abbas didn't fully capture Franco's trust until he proved that he was capable of playing it smart. When Franco finally opened up, Abbas didn't believe him. At least, not at first. Luchetti claimed to be a member of a different species. A secret race, a group that called itself the Community, or the True People. Franco told him a variety of outlandish legends of the great civilization of the True People, one thousands of years ago, before *homo sapiens* came into being. According to the tales, humanity was a twisted offshoot of the True People, bursting with inherent aggression and savagery. *Homo sapiens* demolished the advanced society of the True People, driving them nearly to extinction. Now the True People existed only in small pockets, forced to keep their existence a secret from the people they called mutants or False People.

Abbas considered this a fairy tale. Even after he searched ancient Arabic texts and found oblique references to the legend, that is all it was to him — a legend. He kept his ears open for similar stories floating about the island, among its dense population of visionaries and crackpots. And sure enough, there were hints to be found, here and there, about a secret species called “glugs.” They gathered in Al Amarja like Jews did in New York. Their language had been declared illegal by order of Her Exaltedness, Monique D'Aubainne. They had terrible seductive powers; one romantic encounter with a Glug could leave you obsessed for life. Like most legends, these stories all seemed to be projections of basic human desires and fears. Employing Occam's Razor, Abbas concluded that they were unlikely to be true.

Then one night, meeting in Franco's office for a payment, Abbas made a mistake. He let it slip that he had been researching these stories. And that he considered them mere nonsense. For a moment, he expected Franco to break with him on the spot. Instead, he changed the subject. Months later, he invited Abbas to witness an embalming. Abbas was curious but not intimidated. A career as an Aries warrior had inured him to the sight of gore.

As Franco embalmed an old man named Adam Ludo, he showed Abbas the features that marked Ludo as a member of a different species. Ludo's skull had a ridge of bone running from his hairline to the back of his skull. It was hidden by supporting musculature, but was obvious when touched. Franco bent over to allow Abbas to feel his own skull; it too, had such a ridge.

Franco continued, opening the front of the man's skull. He tugged out a small, tadpole shaped organ from the front of the corpse's brain. He carefully dropped this into a jar, which he then quickly sealed.

“The prime ingredient,” Franco had said. It took Abbas a moment to realize that he meant it was the active ingredient in the product.

After the procedure, Franco had continued: “So you see this is why I must have absolute secrecy. The others in the Community would consider this a terrible blasphemy.” His countenance darkened. “And a blasphemy it is. This is why I do it. But I do not wish to be discovered, for it means death, and worse: the ritual of severing. I trust you, Abbas Nadjafi. Unlike most mutants, you are trustworthy. And you do not make mistakes. I have no friends now. You are the closest I have to a friend.”

Abbas had been touched by this statement. It did not let him get closer to Franco Luchetti, however. He would never tell Abbas why he sought to commit this great crime against his people. He kept other secrets, too. One day, the supply suddenly doubled. Only months later did Franco tell him that he had secured the services of a confederate, another funeral director among the True People. He would not tell Abbas who this new supplier was.

This revelation did not come until Franco was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Franco blamed exposure to formaldehyde; the True People were overly susceptible to many chemicals. Franco introduced him to the other supplier, Giuseppe Sizo.

His relationship with Giuseppe never teetered close to genuine affection, as it had with Franco. Giuseppe was ruled by fear and guilt. He seemed to resent Abbas, and at the same time feel dependent upon him. His highly cultivated paranoia turned even the simplest transaction into an ordeal. Abbas missed Franco.

Giuseppe slipped through the door, agitated as usual. “You have the money?”

“If I didn’t have the money, I wouldn’t be risking the meeting, would I?” Abbas reached into his satchel and tossed him a roll of twenties and fifties held together by a big rubber band. Giuseppe caught it, rolled it around in his fingers. Abbas had seen the same expression a thousand times before — the look of a junkie who had just copped. A heady mixture of anticipation and shame. “Go ahead and count it, Giuseppe. You know I don’t mind. I don’t want you coming back to me later saying I shorted you.”

“You don’t short me, I know that. It’s always right.” Giuseppe was still looking at the roll guiltily. He wanted to touch the money.

“Always right — so far. I could always make an error. Double-check for me, I insist.”

Thus absolved, Giuseppe counted out the money, laying it in piles on the embalming table. He unfolded the more wrinkled of the bills, ironing them with his hands. Comforting them. Those poor lost bills,

they were finally home. The amount was correct, of course. When he looked up to confirm this, he finally saw Abbas' injuries.

"Armzhak!" He was taking the name of the glugs' god in vain. "Someone has hurt you. What is it? Is someone closing in on us?"

"An unrelated matter. I am Aries. We fight."

"How do I know it's unrelated?"

"Because I am telling you it is, and, as you know, I do not lie to you. I did not lie to Franco and I do not lie to you."

Giuseppe looked satisfied for a moment, but then started in again. "So who exactly did this to you?"

"His name is Bellow. A member of the Glorious Lords."

"And they are trying to take the drug trade from you, is that why you fought?"

"No, we fought because they are our rivals, and we sought to prove our valor. So we rode into their territory, and we vanquished them. This is the price they pay for being our rivals."

"So it has nothing to do with the product?"

"Nothing."

Giuseppe spit into a wastepaper basket. "A rational man, would a rational man do this?"

"There is nothing irrational about proving yourself. It is the highest possible calling. You do not want to deal with a man afraid of a small amount of pain, do you?"

"I do not want to see you killed and have to break in a new partner. I am not Franco. How I'd find one, I don't know."

Abbas wasn't sure, but he thought there might have been a note of concern somewhere in there. Maybe that made this a good time to broach a difficult subject. His supply was running low. He had been forced to restrict sales only to his best customers. He wasn't stupid enough to ask when more was coming. More would come when another Glug died. But still, he had to ask: "You don't have any reserves on hand, do you?"

Giuseppe's head snapped towards him. "Are you accusing me of holding out on you?"

"Of course not, Giuseppe."

"You know I don't keep product on hand. I give it all to you. Do you think I want a drawer full of product waiting in my desk if someone from the Community comes to sniff me out?" He began to walk in little circles.

"Forgive me for asking."

"You should know better than that. A great deal of pressure, that's what I'm already suffering. I made a terrible mistake today. I foolishly

allowed myself to accept a celebrity as a client. It may attract attention. Attention is what I don't need."

"What kind of celebrity?"

"A singer. Her name is Jonna Sky."

"Never heard of her."

"Her brother is also her manager. He says she's popular in America. Some kind of religious music. Even asked me if I wanted a copy of her tape! Worried about press coverage, that's all he can talk about. Press coverage! I said I would do my best, but what if my best isn't enough, it will bring disaster on us all! Foolish risks, why am I always taking such ..." His sentence trailed off into an inarticulate wail of self-mortification.

Here we go again, Abbas thought. "You have never taken a foolish risk in all of the time I've known you. Even if the press does come, they're not going to be checking to see if the funeral director belongs to a different species. Or if he's a drug dealer. The chances of exposure are minimal."

"Perhaps you should stop selling until the woman is in the ground and her family off the island."

"If anything, the lack of product is exposing us. If I can't supply it, my more devoted freaks are going to start asking elsewhere. And when there's demand, there are people who will look to satisfy it. We don't want those people to be interested in us. It's shortage that attracts heat, not supply."

"You think so?"

If I didn't think so, I wouldn't have told you this fifteen cursed times already! "Yes, Giuseppe, that is how it works."

"The risk, if it is increasing, perhaps I should go against my better judgment and dip into my emergency supply. You know I keep this only if I need to raise cash quickly, to get off the island."

You will never need cash, Giuseppe. You swim in cash.

Giuseppe opened up his wall safe, using his body to shield the combination lock. "This decision, you will not allow it to come back and bite my asshole, I hope!"

"You know I won't. You know you have my word."

Giuseppe produced a small stack of blister packs. Each contained a bright yellow caplet.

Alex and Patrick sat across from one another in a corner of a coffee shop near Sizo's Funeral Home. The shop was called The

Screaming Bean; its sign featured a parody of an Edvard Munch painting, one featuring a howling, anthropomorphic coffee bean. Patrick had been talking about everything except what Alex wanted to hear. He asked her about her trip, told her about his own odd experience with Customs, went off into an extended anecdote about a crazy person in the airport who told him that the Terminal “takes you where you need to be.” He complained about the rudeness of the hotel staff and of Europeans in general. This led him to a discussion of the disgusting pornography shown on television in Europe and then to a prediction of imminent collapse for this decadent civilization.

“You always get apocalyptic when you’re upset,” Alex said, blandly, hoping to steer him to the subject of Jonna’s death. She needed to know what happened, to understand. And Patrick would need to unburden himself. But none of her subtle gambits worked. After he continued for several more general minutes on the need for a return to decency and self-control, she decided that he just wasn’t going to get there unless she forced him there. “Patrick, I need to know the story.”

“The story.” He took his coffee stirrer and used it to push around the cookie crumbs on his plate. “I wish there was a story to tell you. I can’t even say I saw it coming. I couldn’t believe it. I argued with the coroner, actually argued, told him it couldn’t have been pills.”

“That’s how she went? An overdose?”

“Barbiturates. She took them down with her to the pool, swallowed them there.” He told her what was found: the lime slice pool float, the tape machine, the purse. He told her that Jonna had been discovered by a janitor named Enrique. Already dead. That there was no note.

“So how did she seem that day? What was her mood?”

Patrick banged the fake-marble tabletop, rattling the plate around. He looked down shyly when a couple of noose-wearing patrons glanced his way. “She — she was, uh, subdued, I suppose you’d say. Like she’d been the whole trip. I’m not sure how much you were following the ins and outs of her schedule...”

“I got those faxes you sent to the store.”

“Then you know that initially we had a tour scheduled for the summer, and we decided to push those dates back to the fall because Jonna was just feeling exhausted. Whenever she went on-stage or into the studio, she was great, just great, singing with this clarity and intensity. In fact, I thought she’d hit a higher level, suddenly broken through to something even more powerful and, you know. Right there, right in the pocket. But at the same time she was telling me she was tired, just worn out physically and emotionally. Goddamnit, I should have picked up on that much earlier. She was telling me she wanted to rest, and I just kept convincing her it was getting better and better. Pushing her,

you know, like a stupid football coach or something, when I should have been letting her persuade me.

“You remember Nita.”

Alex nodded. Nita was Patrick’s former fiancée. She was a grief counselor. After several years of the long-distance thing she finally left him for a widower she was counseling.

“Nita would always tell me that the first thing people do in something like this is blame themselves. So I know I’m not supposed to. But all I can see is reasons why it’s my fault, why I should have been more sensitive, more attentive, instead of my usual bull-head self. There are times when I don’t think I can go on, where I just expect this feeling inside me to tear me up into little bits, like a piece of paper, and scatter me on the wind. Believe me, there’s nothing more I want than an explanation. Except that I know that whatever the explanation is, it’s going to lead back to me, it’s going to be a big arrow pointing at my head.”

His voice had risen as he’d gone on, and his last sentence was loud enough to turn heads. The noose-wearers at the next table were staring at him unashamedly, as if he was on television. Alex started to rise, wanting to get her brother away from them.

Patrick’s expression settled, like concrete. “Though it’s not like I’m the only one who should be thinking this way. We’re both in the same boat on that issue, aren’t we, Alex?”

Alex parked her butt back in her chair. “Excuse me, Patrick?”

“I mean, if we’d been more of a family, the three of us, maybe you would have been there for her too. Maybe you would have been there to step in, to notice what I hadn’t noticed. There are things your presence would have prevented. But of course you were too busy off doing whatever you were doing, drinking whatever you were drinking and sleeping with whoever you were sleeping with.”

He let that hang in the air for a moment.

“Maybe it’s time you fucked right off, Patrick.” She stood and walked out the door.

Patrick followed her. “Jonna worried about you all the time, you were a burden to her, never a help. You were the one always taking the concern, not giving the concern. She always said how much pain you were obviously in, given the way you choose to live —”

“Well then Jonna can fuck right off too.” Alex sped up, breaking into a half-run. Patrick stopped.

“Alexandra, where are you going?”

She signaled a cab and got into it without answering him.

At first, she was planning just to go back to the hotel and sleep, but as she thought more about Patrick's wild accusations, and got steadily more steamed, she decided she needed a distraction. So when she arrived in the Plaza of Flowers, she headed over to the bar she'd heard someone mention. Who was it? Oh yeah, the travel agent back in Minneapolis. Sad Mary's, that was the name.

The first thing she saw when she got in the door was a fight in a cage. Two women, topless, were circling one another. Each was wearing a pair of bright red boxing gloves and a pair of stretch pants. Alex started to retreat back out; she hadn't realized that the place was a strip club. Then she looked around, and saw that the large crowd inside the warehouse-sized bar included as many women as men. A small knot of people were gathered around the ring — again, including both men and women — but the majority of the patrons were ignoring the action. Most of the people were dancing to an old Iggy Pop tune thundering from gargantuan speakers arranged around the club. Others stood at a number of long bars or among banks of tables. Batteries of flashing, strobing lights lined the ceiling; it was an epileptic's nightmare. The place was hot and humid, and it stank of sweat. So despite the half-naked women, it was, in fact, the kind of place Alex was looking for.

Looking around at the patrons, she realized that it wasn't just the entertainers who were exposed. If there was a dress code in effect, it had been devised by a committee co-chaired by Jean-Paul Gaultier and the Marquis de Sade. Leather, metal studs, masks, latex; Alex felt positively demure. Not that everyone in the place was a refugee from a stroke magazine; there were just as many obvious tourists gaping at the freaks. Plus a few people in elegant evening wear.

If you were to take what Patrick imagines my social life to look like and hire people to act it out, this is what you'd get, Alex thought. The idea amused her at first, but then the old resentments came rushing back at her. Even when she was still a virgin, he acted like she was some kind of slut. She pictured him at the dinner table, back in her high school days, interrogating her about her friends and whether they did drugs or not and why she didn't come in until four on the morning on the last day of school. She remembered looking to her mother, hoping she'd tell him to get off her back. Instead all she got was an embarrassed look of sympathy. Why did she let him get away with it? And Jonna, she remembered her sister's shy little smirk whenever Patrick would start hassling her. Alex felt anger at Jonna, and then a crashing wave of guilt.

It was definitely time for a drink. She headed over to the bar and ordered a scotch on the rocks. Then she opened her purse and remem-

bered that her wallet had been stolen. She started miming a retraction of her order.

"It's on me." Someone tapped her on the shoulder like it was a telegraph machine. She turned; it was her Customs officer, Dinesh Rajpal. "I never expected to see you again," he said. He had to shout into her ear to be heard above the music.

"Me neither." Alex was glad to have someone to pay for her scotch. Things would be grim without it. She wasn't too pleased to have to talk to this guy again, though.

"I am sorry for the weird encounter this morning. All part of the job," he shrugged, indistinctly.

"You mean, that whole routine about needing to show more empathy, that was just an act?"

"I prefer to think of it as performance art." He gave the bartender an intricate hand gesture and was rewarded with a bottle of Tsing Tao.

"So that whole thing with the drug that lets you contact Vishnu, what was that? Some kind of test to see how travelers deal with bullshit?"

"Oh, the Communion, that is not the bullshit. It is real; I try to use as much real-life detail as possible in my work. Makes it more credible. In fact, this is why I am here. I have heard a rumor that the source is drying up, and I wish to make certain that my supply remains uninterrupted. I am deep into my inner exploration process, and cannot afford to break now." Dinesh spotted someone back among the tables along the far wall. "Ah, I must leave you for a moment." He pointed to Alex and shouted to the bartender: "SHE'S ON MY TAB." Then he trundled off towards the tables.

I wouldn't mind Customs officials if they all bought you drinks, Alex thought. She sucked on an ice cube and thought about Jonna. How she had never really known her. Some identical twins had an almost abnormal closeness. Dressed the same, always hung out together, liked the same food, had the same attitudes. Like the Murrow twins in grade school. Unlike Alex and Jonna. From as early back as she could think, Alex hated it when people tried to make her and Jonna alike. If Jonna picked a white dress, she'd go for the black one. If Jonna put mustard on her hot dog, Alex would grab the ketchup.

Alex threw the rest of her scotch into her throat and signaled for another. She remembered the time, they couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve, when she was sitting on the bleachers in Braemar Park, watching Seth Haber and Ricky Norngaard play catch. That was one of her earliest memories of thinking, my, boys can actually be kind of interesting to look at sometimes. She was sitting there, looking at

them and dreaming very vague dreams of her and Seth and Ricky. Then she felt a bump beside her. It was Jonna.

“What are you doing here?” she had asked her sister.

“I’m doing what you’re doing.”

“No you’re not. I’m thinking.”

“I can sit here and think, too, can’t I?”

“I can’t make you go away.”

“What are you thinking about?”

Alex hopped off the bleachers, landing in the grass and skinning her knee. She stormed off, angry at Jonna for getting near to her. She couldn’t even remember why this was a big crime. Had Alex already decided that Jonna was too much of a brown nose, that boys would avoid her presence? Or did she even have a reason?

Alex thought there were probably lots of examples like that, of her pushing Jonna away. The band trip to Winnipeg. The first night she came home drunk, when Jonna tried to get her a glass of water and she — Alex slammed down her second scotch and waved for a third.

The bottom, basic line is that she didn’t know Jonna then, didn’t want to know her, and certainly didn’t know her now. She knew her stepbrother all too well, could predict what Patrick would say before he said it. Even after years of separation, Patrick was just a slightly grayer and balder version of the guy she knew growing up. Of course, Patrick was already a teenager then, had already pretty much formed. But Jonna was a mystery to her, and she had to admit that this was mainly because she hadn’t wanted to know her. She loved Jonna, and certainly liked her a lot better than Patrick. As far as understanding her — Jonna was the good girl, the girl with the faith, the girl with the beautiful voice and the lovely clothes and the kindness for every occasion. What else was there to know? Some major things, obviously, or Alex wouldn’t be standing here in the middle of this, this... Al Amarja, wondering why the hell Jonna killed herself.

Well, it’s never too late to learn. That’s the least thing Alex owed her sister, to figure out who she was. And also, what kind of pain could have driven her to a thing like that. Someone would have to know her, even too late. It would never be Patrick. He’d construct some kind of mythological Jonna, one that either absolved him of blame or dropped him in the flaming shit of hell, depending on which attitude he chose to take. But if Alex didn’t find out what the real situation was, well, there was no one else left. Okay, maybe, since she was on the radio and all that, some journalist some time will write some crappy book about it. The real truth, though, that was going to either be Alex’s job, or nobody’s.

These thoughts circled back in on themselves and chased each other around Alex's head throughout her third scotch. She looked around for Dinesh. Even talking to him would be better than going over this again and again. She saw him coming out of the washroom in the company of a slight man with Arabic features. He and the man exchanged a comradely half-hug and a complex handshake before parting. Judging from the bulge in his jacket pocket, Dinesh had scored some more of the wonder drug. The dealer wore a denim jacket with the sleeves cut off, and was shirtless underneath. He was heavily tattooed, but Alex couldn't make out much detail on them from across the bar. Was that a black eye, or a tattoo on his face? There was something striking about the man that Alex couldn't quite place. A sense of confidence, or self-satisfaction, or something. Another, much taller man with the same tattoos and general thug look was bending the dealer's ear. He had definitely been beaten up recently; his face was a mess of bandages and scabs. Whatever the big thug was saying, the skinny one didn't like.

Dinesh returned to the bar and snagged another Tsing Tao for himself. He sidled up next to Alex, getting a bit too close in her opinion.

"So who are those guys you scored off? They look pretty rough."

"Aries Gang. Ah, they're not so bad. You should see some of the other gangs in the city. At least I feel safe in Aries territory."

"And they sell this Communion."

Dinesh looked worried. Unconsciously, he patted the bulge in his jacket. "Ah, no. No. I get that somewhere else. They, they, maybe they're into selling the more usual drugs, but — and gambling, they run a little book, that's what I had to be doing there, collecting on a little wager. Cricket match. I don't suppose you're a cricket fan, coming from America and all?"

Alex shook her head. She wasn't really interested enough in Dinesh's drug habit to quiz him about it any further. She was only trying to make small talk anyhow.

A few feet away, a woman with a shaved head and a tongue stud openly dumped a small pile of coke on the marble surface of the bar. "It's my birthday," she shouted, inviting people to gather around with a wave of her hand. "I'm feeling generous."

"I thought drugs were illegal here," Alex shouted to Dinesh.

"Technically, they are. But the Peace Force only makes an issue about it as a pretext if they want to destroy you for some other reason. People like you and me, if we avoid fascist activities, we won't be bothered." A line-up had formed for the coke. "Interested?"

“No.” Alex had tried some years ago, back in college, and found she’d liked it a little too much. This feeling scared her, so she stayed away from it after that. She didn’t want anyone or anything to have that kind of power over her.

Dinesh looked a bit disappointed that Alex wasn’t diving towards the white stuff. She saw in his face the understanding that he wouldn’t be getting lucky with her tonight. Or any night.

He put his hand on the small of her back and once more leaned into her ear. “I’m going to go and talk to some other people. Thank you for speaking to me. And welcome to our island.”

Dinesh wandered around until he spotted a pair of blond women wearing T-shirts they had just purchased at the bar’s souvenir stand. He said something to them, and both of them laughed uncomfortably.

Across the room, Abbas found himself in an awkward place. Thorvald wanted some product. Abbas didn’t have enough on hand to go dispensing it for free to his buddies. More importantly, Hans had put Thorvald on probation; Thorvald’s miserable performance in the morning’s battle was intolerable. Thorvald would have to get back in shape. No more chemicals until he was once more in fighting trim. Abbas agreed with this decision. These days, Thorvald was no use to his comrades in battle. And worse, he was a menace to himself. It shamed Abbas that Thorvald would ask him to help side-step Hans’ commands. It shamed him that Thorvald was begging. When Abbas had been but a pup, begging to join the gang, Thorvald had been one of its pillars. A warrior stalwart, the last of the legendary ones. It was sad to see him in this state.

“You know that Hans is right.”

“Of course, yes, that is true, Abbas. Hans is very right. I must get better at fighting again. I am hurt bad, you can see I’m hurt. I don’t want to be hurt like this again.”

Pitiful one. It is not getting hurt that is the problem. It is losing. Abbas wondered if there were some way he could point poor Thorvald back to the light, help him see that his problem wasn’t just his beer belly, but his failing to understand the Aries way. It would do no good to further erode the man’s confidence. How could he let Thorvald down without doing so? How did he end up as everyone’s unpaid therapist? It was bad enough that we was everyone’s unpaid computer support. And Aries should not need therapists.

“You need time to reflect, Thorvald. To think on today’s events, on the meaning of our leader’s edict. It is a time to be clear-headed. The product will only be a distraction.”

With his large left hand, Thorvald grabbed Abbas’s jacket, as if suddenly struck by the key to his argument. “But it is Wotan I seek to commune with! I have lost my way, my warrior’s spirit, I admit that. I need guidance. I need Wotan!”

Half a year of unrestrainedly slurping down Wotan’s essence has done nothing for you so far, Abbas thought. He grabbed Thorvald’s unwelcome hand and firmly uncurled its fingers from his jacket. Any other Aries would have twisted his wrist behind his neck as well. “You won’t find the answer in Wotan. You’ll find it in here.” Abbas’ index finger jabbed firmly into Thorvald’s breastbone. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

Thorvald nodded, but from the longing in his eyes, Abbas could tell that he understood nothing. Thorvald turned from him and dove into the throng at Sad Mary’s. Abbas shook his head in a motion so controlled as to be almost imperceptible.

The big man stomped carelessly across the dance floor. Wotan, Wotan, if only Thorvald could commune with Wotan, everything would be all right. Abbas was a good enough fellow, but he did not understand. It was good to be young. Young and powerful and sure, oh so sure of himself, that Abbas. Let him feel the aches of age and a thousand worthy injuries crawl, crawl inside his bones, and then see what he has to say!

Hans did not understand, either. Hans never seemed to age. Thorvald was not like Hans. He was like the others, the dozens of others who had once been Aries. Magnus, Ulf, Nikolaj, Teodoro, Massimo... Thorvald had seen them all in their prime. Full of fight, ready for glory. When Thorvald had first joined, they were the stars, the daring, the mighty. The gods. Now where were they? Magnus, Nikolaj and Massimo were in Valhalla. Victims of a Glorious Lord’s machete, a Peace Force bullet, and a collision between battle bike and jitney. Ulf was now a low-life, a zero, holed up in some Four Points tenement with a needle jabbed in his arm. Teodoro was back in Spain, blind in one eye, selling mutual funds. Did Hans mourn for them? Even think of them? No, for they were no longer warriors. Hans might have a body and a soul of cast iron, but ordinary men were ... ordinary men. And Thorvald knew he was an ordinary man. Ordinary and

nearly forty years old, still dressed in leathers and denim, still carrying on like a Nordic Hell's Angel. He could quit, should quit, but had no idea what to do or where to go. He could not stay on the island; the others thought he knew no shame, but the one shame he could not face would be being an ex-Aries. A former somebody. Thorvald could not imagine life away from the island, either. There was no family or home to return to. He knew no honest way of making a living. He knew no place on this earth he wanted to be.

Valhalla it would have to be, then. He would join Magnus, Nikolaj, and Massimo. The four of them would be at their fighting peak again. In Valhalla, Thorvald's fat belly would melt away. (It was easy for the others to tell him to lose it, but harder, much harder to do! Let them try when they get old, when their bodies slow down!) Thorvald's bad knee would be right again. His reflexes back to speed. His courage, his willingness to fight and get injured. All of these would come rushing, rushing back to him in Valhalla.

The problem was finding that lost courage again, finding it just long enough to go back into one more battle. Valhalla had to be earned. Earned not with the acts of a lifetime, but in the way a man chose to die. Hans was right. His performance this morning was pitiful. Worse than pitiful. As they rode into the Great Men barrio, every inch of his being was screaming, *no, Thorvald, no! You will be harmed! Turn back!* His body and mind were conspiring against him. They would not let him dash through Valhalla's gates. They wanted to keep him here, in this world of dung. When it was time to leap from his battle bike onto the enemy, he'd hesitated. He had to hesitate. His body wouldn't let him move! It was fear. Along with the flab, the constant pain, fear had gotten into Thorvald's bones. Like dry rot. Thorvald had gotten off the battle bike, but he had done so too slowly. Shamefully, he had picked the woman as target. And been thrashed. She did, she did have mystic shit powers! But that didn't matter. It was Thorvald who had beaten Thorvald. Did the others think he didn't know that? How could he not know that? With the terror screaming around his ears the whole time. He knew! That was the problem! How could he find Valhalla without first finding some courage, some temporary courage, a small, dismal scrap of it? He couldn't, that was the answer, he couldn't. That's why he needed to commune with Wotan! Wotan was a god. If anyone could give him that last hit of courage, it would be Wotan. Thorvald would treasure that courage. Hold it close to his bosom, and wait. Wait until the situation arose. When courage was needed. When honor was at stake. When a last stand could be made. Then Thorvald would take that courage inside himself, feel it burn through his cold and aching marrow, feel it bring him to life again. A brief moment, a

spark of life, enough to scramble headfirst against impossible odds. Insane odds. He would suffer. Suffer like Wotan when he cast his eye out for knowledge. He would die. Die like Balder, felled by the arrow of treachery. And find Valhalla. And find Magnus, and Nikolaj, and Massimo. There they would be free from Hans, and his, his stinking superiority. And from upstarts like Abbas, fools like Saxolf and Bjorn. He would forever be the real Thorvald, the original Thorvald, the Thorvald before everything started rotting away.

And for that he needed Wotan, Wotan. How could he convince Abbas, that greedy, cold, fish-eyed son of a whore?

Thorvald did not see the man heading towards him, and the man did not see him. The man, a reasonably good-looking American in a suit jacket, casual shirt and slacks, had just seen another person in the bar. Someone he did not expect to see, or wish to see. His complexion had turned two extra shades of pale. He was looking at her, not at Thorvald, who was right in front of him. So it is no surprise that he slammed into Thorvald's chest with tooth-rattling impact. The drink he was carrying, a martini, splashed up into Thorvald's face.

Thorvald howled. Not in pain, but in rage. He reacted with the speed he thought lost forever. He seized the man by the shirt and heaved him to the floor. He dived down to that floor, to grab the man again and haul him to his feet. Well, not exactly to his feet. But to a position more upright than not.

The bar patrons in the immediate vicinity stepped back a few feet and watched the proceedings with only mild interest. There was a more decadent fight up in the cage: a kickboxer smeared in peanut butter was kicking the crap out of a dazed grizzly bear.

"You smashed into the wrong person!" Thorvald breathed.

"Sorry, sorry. It was an accident. No intent to offend you. I apologize. I didn't mean anything by it."

Thorvald began to shake him. Already the rage was seeping from him. In the old days, Thorvald thought, he would be a terrier to this fool's rat. But now he didn't have it anymore. He didn't have the spirit to dash an idiot's brains out just for making a mistake. Thorvald almost felt like crying. He threw the man to the floor again. "I should kill you! I should kick your brains out!"

The man wisely stayed on the floor until he judged Thorvald's mood, saw that the big man had the trembling under control. Then he dusted himself off.

"I have to make this okay. I don't want trouble with the Aries gang."

Thorvald couldn't look the fool in the face. "Just get out of my sight."

"I have to make it right, really. Look, I know you guys are into astrology. And some pagan stuff, too. I run an occult bookstore, and we have a great section on both astrology and on Odinism."

Thorvald knew he should attack the man for not going away when ordered. All he could think was that he was out of breath, that he really, really needed guidance from Wotan.

"Here, take my business card. My shop is on Krigstein Lane here in Flowers. Any time you or any other Aries want to buy a book, we'll talk discount. A nice, very generous discount."

He thrust the business card into Thorvald's damp hand. Thorvald looked at it for a moment, half-crumpled it, and shoved it in his pocket. "Just get out."

This time, the man got out.

Alex got tired of the scene at Sad Mary's. She saw a couple of guys she might be interested in under different circumstances. She could have kept ordering scotch on Dinesh, but didn't consider it fair. And once she'd had a few, she surprised herself to discover that she didn't want to keep going. Getting obliterated wasn't going to make her feel better. What she was feeling now was too big to erase with alcohol, even temporarily.

She headed back over to the Bienvenidos. She'd already gotten the key to the room. It adjoined Patrick's room, but if there was any justice in the world she wouldn't have to face him. He might try to apologize for the earlier scene, or he might just continue on where he left off. Either response would be the last thing she needed right now.

The room was the same one Jonna had occupied. Alex had thought at first that this would be creepy, but actually she liked it. Jonna's clothes were still hanging in the closet. Alex opened the closet door and, just as she had done when she first checked in, she paged each piece of clothing along on the metal bar, running her hands over one after the other. It was like a little bit of Jonna was still left here, a reassuring bit of her presence. The clothes were a better reminder of her than the made-up corpse lying in the funeral home. They felt good, all soft fabrics. Lots of cotton, not much rayon or polyester. Jonna had good taste, even if it was a totally opposite taste to Alex's. Alex hadn't brought much clothing with her. Maybe she'd even wear a bit of Jonna's stuff, as a way of showing somebody that she could still go on. They'd never shared clothes when they were alive, maybe this would be some kind of tribute to her now that she was.... or maybe that was

just weird. Alex couldn't decide with the scotch still rolling around in her bloodstream.

She sat down on the bed. She thought about Jonna, and about Patrick. If she was going to figure out what had happened to Jonna's mind to make her take her life, it would be no good trying to deal with Patrick. As he'd so pleasantly reminded her back in the coffee shop, he liked to see people a certain way. He just didn't process information that clashed with his notion of who someone was supposed to be. Maybe Jonna had shown all kinds of signs of being in trouble and he just hadn't noticed them. Or, to be fairer to Patrick, Jonna was devoted to him. She was definitely the self-sacrificing type. There was a good chance she hid her depression from Patrick, so as not to upset him. She probably thought she could get through whatever it was without bothering him. And then it got worse and worse until it was too late to talk, and she just went ahead and—

Something still didn't make sense, though. Why hadn't she left a note? Or consulted a minister, the way a good Christian in trouble is supposed to do?

There was the possibility that there had been a note. Maybe Patrick found the note, didn't like what he saw, and destroyed it. Unfortunately, that wouldn't be out of character for him. Spin control, public relations. He would have to protect her especially now that she was dead, even from her own words. However, Alex would need some reason, some evidence, before she could accuse her brother of this.

Jonna was very perceptive. She knew Patrick had faults, and knew what they were, and loved him anyway. This was the main difference between her and Alex. She was always better at the tolerance and understanding thing. Alex recalled telling Jonna once that it was no good forgiving someone for stepping on your toes if he hadn't moved his foot yet.

Anyway. Jonna knew Patrick well. So, if she wanted to leave a note, she knew that Patrick would probably just tear the thing up if he got to it first. Which would mean she would have to hide it somewhere. Maybe she mailed it. Could be there was an envelope containing a suicide note sitting in her mailbox back in Minneapolis. Or maybe it was here, somewhere in the hotel room, somewhere Patrick wouldn't look.

Would Patrick have searched the room? Hard to say. She could see him in a fever to find a note, and to understand. Or he could just as well have left it alone, hoping never to find an answer he didn't like. Alex headed back to the closet, this time searching every pocket in every jacket and every pair of pants. She looked for false seams. She didn't find anything.

Alex thought: If I were Jonna, knowing that Patrick would go through my stuff, I would hide it somewhere he would never think to look.

She rushed into the bathroom, rifled through Jonna's large make-up kit, still sitting next to the sink. She pulled out a razor, three sticks of lipstick, a palette of rouge, a stick of deodorant, a toothbrush, a tube of Crest mint gel with tartar-fighting strength. And a box of tampons. Her hands shaking, Alex opened the box. Inside were tampons, naturally enough.

And a tinfoil-backed blister pack of pills. Over half of the twelve blisters were already popped. The remaining six contained bright yellow caplets.

Communion.

Alex looked at her watch. Three twenty A.M. She hadn't checked the hours, but she was pretty sure that Sad Mary's would be an all-night operation. Thinking it might be cold, she threw on one of Jonna's jackets — a comfy little buckskin with a short waist — and headed back out towards the night.

As Alex crossed the plaza, she did some more thinking, this time about the drug. Drugs in Al Amarja were either highly illegal or not illegal at all, depending on what you chose to believe. This particular drug she'd never heard of before. Had thought it was some kind of joke when Dinesh first showed it to her. She had to assume that it was at least as illegal as everything else here, or at any rate was some kind of secret for some other reason. She'd seen Dinesh make what she was sure was a buy, and he sure wasn't eager to admit to it. This would mean she'd have to proceed with the same kind of discretion she would if she were into this sort of thing back home. It had been years since Alex had gone to a dealer. Midway through college she figured alcohol made a mighty fine intoxicant of choice, considering that it was cheap and legal. And booze had never let her down since then. Still, she knew lots of people who indulged now and then, and knew enough of the etiquette that she would have felt confident buying stuff back home. Here, though, the rules were different and many of the people plainly psychotic. She'd need to be very careful.

As she stepped across the threshold of Sad Mary's again, she realized that she wasn't entirely sure what she was looking to find out. If Jonna had been doing drugs, that was — well, that was nearly impossible to believe, even with the evidence right in her hand, that's what it was. If Alex found whoever had sold the drugs to her sister, maybe she

could get some ideas as to what kind of changes had taken hold of her, why she had gotten into them. Or who she had gotten into them with. It seemed pretty tenuous. Alex figured she'd just have to play it by ear.

At least she knew who she was looking for: that Arab-looking guy, the one Dinesh had bought from. That at least removed the needle and haystack element of her search. She'd still have to find the guy, and then approach him without seeming like trouble. She wasn't sure whether she'd be able to get that together or what. That wouldn't stop her from trying. She kind of liked the fact that it was dangerous. Risking her neck was maybe a kind of penance.

The crowd at Sad Mary's had mostly turned over. She walked around, scanning the tables and dance floor. She didn't see Dinesh, or the Arab guy. The original two topless boxers were back in the ring, jabbing at each other with an even greater sense of futility. And over in the corner, gazing forlornly at an empty glass and a still-sealed bottle of Jack Daniel's, was the big, facially injured guy who had been with the dealer guy.

Alex circled for a while, trying to figure out a good line to approach him with. Then she thought, duh, this is a meat market. I'll pretend to be interested. This big walrus probably thinks women are dying to get next to him. Hell, maybe the women of the Edge are dying to get next to him, who knows?

She walked over and pulled a chair up to his little table.

"You looking to be alone?" she asked him.

He looked up at her. She could see the wheels turning. He didn't seem suspicious, exactly. More like he was deciding whether alone was a good thing or not. Evidently, he decided not. He waved at her imprecisely; it was an invitation to sit down.

"My name's Alex," she said. "This is my first night on the island. I was in my hotel, but I couldn't sleep. So I came back here."

He looked at her sleepily, without any hint of lustful interest. "I'm Thorvald. I'm security here at the bar. Sorta unofficial security."

"You've lived on the island for a while?"

He nodded. Getting small talk out of this guy was clearly going to be like pulling a rubber boot out of a mudbank. She pointed to the swirly rune-like thing painted on his denim vest.

"That's a cool symbol. Is it Celtic, or something?" Alex knew it was probably Norse, and knew that a wrong guess might get him talking.

"Norse."

"Oh. What's it mean?"

"It means I've outlived my usefulness." He wasn't looking at her, he was looking at the bottle.

“Do you want me to open that for you?”

He shook his head. “Hans — my boss — says I’m on the wagon.”

“Then I suppose you wouldn’t want me opening it and having any.”

For a while, it looked like he wasn’t going to respond at all. Finally he said, “Sure, go ahead. I’ll watch you. Maybe I’ll get a buzz that way.”

She opened the Jack’s, poured what was probably a two-ounce shot, and whipped it back. If he wanted a vicarious slug, she might as well go whole-hog. And indeed, it looked like she’d brightened his mood a bit.

“Is your boss here?”

He looked around, shook his head again.

“Then maybe he wouldn’t find out if you had a shot.”

Thorvald sighed. “He wouldn’t find out, chances are. Doesn’t matter, though. I’d know I’d cheated. And I might not be much of an Aries any more, but I’m at least going to try to follow orders.” He was staring at the bottle again; he sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

“So you Aries guys, you’re into abstinence?”

This made Thorvald laugh. “Not us. You name it, we inhale it. It’s just me that’s been singled out to hit the showers. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Alex poured herself a second, smaller shot, and sipped it this time instead of shooting it. “Since there’s no way I’m getting to sleep tonight, I thought I might do some non-abstaining myself. That’s why I came here. I heard there was some pretty wacky stuff you could put in your system out here. I’m having trouble finding a connection, though.”

Thorvald grunted in an “is that so?” kind of way. He knew where she was going, but he wasn’t going to help her get there.

“If your boss is really into the mind-altering substances, I’m thinking maybe you can point me towards something.”

Thorvald thought of Abbas. This cute little burger would be an ideal customer for the disrespectful prick. Looks smart enough to keep her mouth shut. Probably has the cash. Thorvald was not looking, however, to do any favors for Abbas.

“Sorry, we’re customers, not pushers.”

“But you have to have a connection, right?”

Thorvald decided to get rid of the bitch. He fished into his jacket for the business card the idiot gave him. This would shut her up, as well as inconvenience some other asshole. “I got a number you can call. I’m not vouching for you, you understand. I don’t know you well

enough to let you use my name. I'm just passing along some information and otherwise not being involved."

Alex took a notebook and pen from her purse. Thorvald read out the phone number, not telling her that it belonged to Arthur Pendrick, proprietor of the Pneuma Center new age bookstore.

Alex looked around the bar for a pay phone, but then decided that the place was too noisy. So she headed out into the Plaza of Flowers to find one. There was a bank of them just outside the club. The phones were European in style, big and blocky things with cast iron casings, painted a sickly orange. Alex fumbled in her purse, hoping to find a loose quarter lying on the bottom amidst the balled-up tissues and lint-covered Life Savers. Otherwise she'd have to call from the Bienvenidos, and a little cautious voice was telling her not to have drug dealers' phone numbers showing up on the hotel bill.

Yes, there was a single shining quarter waiting for her. She dropped it into the phone's coin slot, not stopping to wonder whether this dealer would want to be called at three in the morning. If she had thought about it, she likely would have called anyway. She had to at least *try* to get ahold of him immediately.

She waited for the dial tone, checked her notebook again, and then punched in the numbers. After a quartet of rings, there was a click and the outgoing message of an answering machine:

"Hello, you've reached the Pneuma Center, Al Amarja's most comprehensive source of new age, esoteric and occult books. We are open seven days a week from 11 AM to 9 PM. Please feel free to visit us at 15 Krigstein Lane, in Flowers Barrio."

Alex dropped the receiver like it was hot. It clunked against the wall. The voice. It was Arthur.

It was when she tried to navigate across the Plaza back to the Bienvenidos that Alex became aware of her current blood alcohol content. She'd sobered up after the three or four scotches earlier in the evening, but the three shots of Jack's had reversed the trend. Alex was somewhat proud of the fact that she held her liquor better than the average one-hundred-and-ten pound woman, but she was a one-hundred-and-ten pound woman nonetheless, and her legs weren't quite

cooperating with her efforts to walk. The incident in front of the funeral home, with the pickpocket and the guy in the rain coat, came abruptly to mind. She was alone and drunk in a very strange place, and she was therefore in danger. She looked around, and sure enough, there was a man following her. He was short and shirtless, his chest covered in dirty gray hair. Alex thought she saw something flash in his right hand.

Another man, a big man, stepped out of the shadows between Alex and her possible pursuer.

“Piss off or die,” he said to the hairy man. It was Thorvald; he must have come out of the bar to keep an eye on her.

The hairy man chose pissing off over death, and dipped into an alleyway.

“Thanks,” Alex said to Thorvald.

“My job,” Thorvald mumbled, though it wasn’t actually his job to watch out for patrons once they left Sad Mary’s. The Aries were paid to make sure people stayed safe inside the club. Outside, they were on their own.

Alex waved to him and recommenced her weaving way back to the hotel lobby. Thorvald stood on the street, watching her, until she got inside. He didn’t know what had made him come out. Maybe he felt bad for steering her wrong. It didn’t really matter. He shrugged and slouched off towards the Aries clubhouse, where a basement room and damp bedsheets awaited him.

Patrick was in her room, sitting on the bed, big humps of bedspread bunched up in his tight, clawed fingers. Alex sighed in disgust when she unlocked the door and saw him there. She didn’t have the energy for this. A replay of a scene from her teenage years. Patrick opened his mouth to start in on her, but she cut him off before he got started:

“I need to sleep, and I need to think. In that order. Since I already know what you’re going to say, my listening to it takes a low priority. Go to bed, and we’ll talk in the morning.”

This preemptive strike put Patrick off his stride. The red drained from his face. “How do you know what I’m going to say?” he recovered.

“You’re going to ask me where I was. Whether I tell you or not, you’re going to hassle me for being disrespectful to Jonna’s memory for going out and — and at that point, I’d say you’re just going to pause, leaving exactly what it was you think I’ve been out doing, you know,

kind of unspecified, as if it might extend from getting drunk — which I am, incidentally, I'm a grown person and I'm allowed to be drunk, even after my sister kills herself — extend from getting drunk, to, I don't know, engaging in demonic rituals to contact the undead spirit of... whoever." In an ultra-controlled way, she placed one foot in front of the other until she stood in front of Patrick. Then she pulled at his shoulders, trying to get him to his feet. "Get off the bed. I need to be on it." He got up and she plunged face-first into the pillow.

"Are you done now?" Patrick asked.

"Did I get to the part where I tell you to go away?" she said, into the pillow.

"Maybe you don't want to hear it, but it is disrespectful —"

"What I am saying to you, Patrick, is that I have already heard it. You are already in my head, telling me that I don't measure up. Don't meet your standards. You'd done the speech already, long before I got to the hotel room, do you understand? You can congratulate yourself that you are now to the point where you are so good at this you don't ever have to actually open your mouth. Okay?" She had not moved her face from the pillow, and Patrick got only the gist of her words.

He took a step towards the door, but then retracted it. "The point is you are still behaving this way."

"What way?"

"Going out and getting... It was always you I was worried about all these years, I thought it would be you — from the way you live, you can't tell me that the way you live isn't, doesn't tell me that you're full of despair. Can you?"

With effort, Alex lifted herself from the pillow. "You're telling me you thought I'd be the one to do myself in?"

Patrick turned away from her, looking out the window at the lights of the Edge. "I just think you need to admit you need some help."

Alex doubled over, laughing silently. She might have tried to hide this response if it weren't for the Jack's in her system, but screw it.

Patrick tensed up again. He had always hated being laughed at. "What?"

"Yeah, I'm the one who needs help."

"You're drunk."

"Difference between you and me is, I'm not going to lecture you on how I think you should be." She sat up on the bed. "You are your responsibility, I am my responsibility. And Jonna was her own responsibility too."

"You know that I think there's Someone else involved here." Patrick warily placed himself in a stuffed chair opposite the bed. "We sign our hearts over to Him."

Alex got prone again, this time facing the ceiling. “Even if you believe that, you know that Someone’s not hanging around giving you advice. He’s letting you work it out for yourself. That’s the whole point, right? And by the way, don’t answer that. I’m not interested in getting into a big God conversation.”

“I’m not either. I just want to help you. Or see you help yourself.”

“You know what’s going to help me? Finding out why she did this. I wasn’t just out getting drunk for no reason. It was all part of my investigation.”

“What?”

“I’m checking things out. Making progress. I am going to find out why. That’s the only way I can start even trying to feel better about this.”

“You can’t.” Patrick was half out of his chair.

“Sure I can.”

“You can’t go asking around about this, because it’s a secret that she killed herself. I have worked very hard to make sure it stays a secret. You can’t go around making a trail for someone else to follow.”

“Patrick, I don’t care about this staying a secret. I’m not even sure I approve.”

He was standing over her.

“You can’t!”

The bed was spinning. Patrick was spinning around her.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to ask you not to.”

“I’m going to find out, Patrick. I’m going to find out.” Alex passed out.

Abbas was worse than bone-tired. After he had finished his shift at Sad Mary’s, making himself available to the customers, he had already been beat. He wanted to get back to his apartment and sleep. On his way out, he’d run into Hans, who corralled him and took him off to a croissant shop to talk strategy and astrology. Hans wanted to bring a few new Aries on board. He’d heard that the Lords were recruiting, and he wanted to keep parity with them. He was worried about “weak links.” He meant not only Thorvald, but Erik as well. He’d been looking over Erik’s charts and found too much Scorpio in there for his liking. Abbas couldn’t get him to be specific, but from the hints Hans dropped, it seemed that he figured Erik for a potential traitor. This sort of thing was Abbas’ main frustration with his leader.

He'd never tell it to Hans, at least not straight out, but he thought the man put too much intuition into his astrological readings. Maybe Erik had said something to piss him off, or had committed some other minor offense. Now Hans was certain he was going to go sour. Abbas promised to go over the charts on his computer program and prove to Hans that Erik was all right. He might not be the gang's greatest warrior, but he was straight with them, Abbas was sure of it. Abbas tried to sneak off home at that point, but then Hans wanted to discuss astrological criteria for sizing up new recruits. That went on for a good while. Then Hans launched into the war stories, the stirring tales of the grand old days with Massimo and Ulf and Magnus. Normally Abbas basked in the glow of Hans' tale-telling. Tonight, he was just too tired to enjoy it. He didn't dare say anything, though. He had to pretend to be enthralled.

So here it was, three in the morning, and Abbas was only now getting home. Being tired just made the morning's bruises and muscle tears worse. He wouldn't even get the chance to sleep it off properly. Tomorrow, the day job beckoned. Abbas thought for the hundredth time about slowing down, doing less. Sure, it would be better if there were someone else in the organization shouldering more of the weight. But then Abbas wouldn't be indispensable any more. Sometimes it was — sleep, Abbas needed sleep. And freedom from these unworthy thoughts. At least he lived where a man could find quiet, away from the clubhouse.

He worked the key into the lock, stepped into his grubby tenement apartment, and turned on the light.

There were people waiting for him in his living room. Two of them. One of them was slumped in front of his moth-eaten couch. It was the other one, the man sitting on the couch, who caught Abbas' attention. He was a scarecrow of a man, vaguely Caucasian, with a long mop of well-shampooed black hair, a sharp grin, and a sharper knife. He wore a khaki jacket, dark shirt, and a pair of black slacks.

"Please step quickly into the room and have a seat, Mr. Nadjafi."

Abbas felt adrenaline reluctantly pumping into his system again, but decided not to start anything. Not until he had the situation analyzed better. He closed his door and walked over to a wooden chair, slowly lowering himself into it. He studied the face of the knife man, hoping to recognize him. He didn't. Neither did he recognize the wretched low-life crouched at his feet: a pale, goateed man in a T-shirt and checked polyester pants. Judging from his general attitude, and from the pee-stain at his crotch, goatee man was some kind of hostage. Abbas had no idea what goatee man was supposed to mean to him. He waited for the knife man to launch into his pitch.

“My name is Gayth Silver. You and I are about to enter into a negotiation concerning certain intellectual property rights. I represent powerful business interests. You represent nothing and no one. Should you attempt to hinder our objectives, you will be downsized. In other words, you enter into these negotiations in a position of weakness. A position not unlike that of the party at my feet.”

There wasn't much doubt who Silver was fronting for. In the Edge, the phrase “powerful business interests” was code for the Net, the international crime cartel headquartered in Al Amarja. The Net was the point of intersection between the old-fashioned mob and multinational corporations. Their minutes were managed; their profits were maximized; their quality, controlled. Abbas had never before met anyone who claimed to directly represent them. He had to assume that Silver was the real thing. Abbas knew a lot of crazy mofos, but no one crazy enough to take the Net's name in vain.

“Maybe you can tell me what intellectual property we're negotiating over, Gayth.” Abbas of course knew that he meant the product. He needed to keep things preliminary for as long as he could, to gather as much info as he could from this man.

“Call me Mr. Silver, please, Mr. Nadjafi. I would like to preserve a sense of formality here. So we know our limits. You need to understand that this is an impersonal transaction. Our research on the Aries indicates that you hold to some kind of belief system, something centering around ideas of honor and personal combat. Please realize that these items are out of bounds in the current discussion. They are ruled out. Simple statement: you and I are businessmen. Clear-cut, end of sentence. I am not threatening your manhood, or your honor. I am merely saying that the interests I represent must be given appropriate consideration.”

“You seem to be in command of the situation, Mr. Silver.”

Gayth narrowed his eyes. He distrusted compliments. “When giving a business presentation, it is good technique to not only introduce a concept, but to reinforce it. And also to use props. This is where Mr. Fade comes in. Abbas Nadjafi, meet Drizzle Fade.”

Goatee man increased the intensity of his cowering.

“The following demonstration is symbolic of our seriousness as regards our objectives here.”

With one spidery hand, he seized the back of Drizzle Fade's head and pulled it close to him. Fade struggled, but could not resist the pull towards Gayth's other hand, the one with the knife.

This demonstration was Gayth's specialty. He had honed it so well that the Net's worldwide torture expert had invited him to write it up in a training manual. This manual entry had led to a critical promotion

for Gayth. His method was now being used all over, from Brazil to Tadjikistan.

It is counter-productive to begin a negotiation by torturing the individual you are negotiating with. (Let us refer to this individual as the target. The target has something you want. Keep that objective always in mind. Never let torture become an end in itself. To do otherwise is unprofessional in the extreme.)

If you torture your target, the target will likely struggle. If you have failed to properly secure the target (for example if you are unable to control all of the parameters of the environment), you may be harmed. More likely, the struggling target will force you to harm him irreparably. This prevents you from getting what you want from the target. In some perverse individuals, torture inspires courage and/or a refusal to back down. The following innovation of method counters this tendency:

Torture another party in the presence of the target individual. (This other party will henceforth be referred to as the victim.) You might think that it is best to select a victim well known to the target. This is not so. The selection of loved ones or close associates often backfires; again, the target is in an unacceptable number of cases inspired to courage or self-sacrifice. Your interest is instead in inspiring primal, biological terror. Your weapon is fear, the target's fear of being cut. The target's vicarious experience, as you apply visually dramatic forms of mutilation and injury to the victim, is acute and vivid. You seek the cringe at the nearly imperceptible sound made by a truly sharp blade as it is slowly drawn through soft flesh. The more impersonal your violence, the more fear you will inspire. Your goal here is to rob both target and victim of their specific identities, to enroll them in a mutual community of meat.

Your bottom line: everyone bleeds.

Drizzle Fade bled copiously as Gayth drew parallel vertical lines through the flesh of his face, each line an inch apart. His shirt turned red. So did a widening moist spot in Abbas' carpet.

Abbas knew the way to win this round was to remain unmoved by the low-life's plight. To show no compassion. To display no hint that he imagined his own flesh being sliced. To show nothing.

When there was no more room for vertical lines, Gayth started crisscrossing them with horizontal lines. Fade wasn't moving at all. Abbas decided that he had passed out from pain or shock or just plain fear. If so, his body was making a good choice for him.

Sweat beaded on Abbas' forehead but he gave Gayth no other sign of victory. After twenty-one minutes of methodical cutting, Gayth stopped. He let Fade slump to the floor, and turned back to Abbas. He studied Abbas' expression, perhaps letting a small measure of disappointment through his own grinning mask of a face.

"End of demonstration," he said.

"Interesting. But it leaves me a little cold," Abbas said, rising. "It might have been more effective if Mr. Fade had been wailing or screaming. You terrified him to the point where his responses were dulled, and it became difficult to empathize with him.

"I would like to show you something, something in my kitchen. I assume you'll want to come with me to make sure I don't try any of that funny stuff."

Rocking on the balls of his feet, Abbas passed through an archway into his kitchen, which adjoined the living room. Gayth followed him, curious. Abbas reached into a cupboard and withdrew from it a large box of table salt.

"In the Aries gang, we believe that muted suffering is no suffering at all. Our tastes incline towards the larger gesture."

He headed back into the living room and stood over Drizzle Fade.

"Decadent. You've lost the point of torture. Your approach seems...well, effete."

Abbas poured the salt, in a long, generous stream, onto Drizzle's crisscrossed face. Drizzle woke up and screamed, bellowed, howled. His cries rattled the windows.

Gayth shifted from foot in what Abbas hoped was nervousness. Actually, Gayth was trying to restrain himself from slicing Abbas' throat open. The Aries was directly attacking his methodology!

"Don't worry. The screams won't attract anyone. Not in this building," Abbas reassured him. He sat back in his chair. "Let's consider the urination contest done with, shall we? Get to it."

Gayth smiled and tipped an imaginary hat to him. He sat back in the couch, using Drizzle's again-unconscious form as a footstool. "It has come to our attention that you are running an enterprise which flouts the island's traditional distribution system. Our understanding is that you are operating in a sector in which we have long held a sizable market share. Manufacturing *and* retailing. As distributors, you can see how this might disturb us. Distributors distribute. It is what we do. It is a time-honored right. To cut the distributor out of the product flow is to deny the value of accepted marketing processes. We have a strong interest in maintaining these processes. And we have a strong interest in your product."

Gayth stood, examined the many neatly-sorted books arranged on Abbas' shelves. "In a capitalistic system, products must be free to rise to their maximal potential. By maintaining a vertical monopoly on your product, you are restraining its freedom and growth. It must be deregulated. There are vast markets you are not even seeking to penetrate. Cross-promotion, product recognition, line support ... all of these crucial areas lie fallow, unexploited. It is an unnatural and therefore intolerable situation. One which we are offering to remedy. You need to be plugged into the system, Mr. Nadjafi. The profit which you and your organization stand to generate by such an arrangement is beyond your capacity to evaluate."

Abbas couldn't believe it, but he found himself drifting off to sleep. His eyes kept fluttering shut. Silver's words were lulling, hard to understand. "Get to the point."

"You will supply us with the formula for Communion, with the identity of its manufacturer or manufacturers. You will inform us as to your sources of any exotic or difficult-to-acquire ingredients. You will supply us with a database of your customers. And you shall, from time to time, be called upon to act as a consultant in matters concerning the manufacture and marketing of Communion.

"In exchange, you — meaning either you personally, or the Aries gang, we don't care which — will be paid a two per cent royalty of our gross receipts from the international sale of Communion, and a point five per cent royalty on any derivative or spin-off products we create based on the information you supply us. Royalties will be calculated quarterly and deposited in your favorite bank account. In US dollars."

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a palm-top computer. He powered it up and hit a couple of buttons.

"Our projections indicate that worldwide sales of Communion could gross up to one billion dollars during fiscal year 2000. Between now and then, you could expect a royalty figure of three hundred million dollars, with an additional two hundred million dollars per annum

after that. (This is an estimate, not a guarantee or obligation.) To put it in layman's terms, the biggest problem you will have for the rest of your life is figuring out ways of sheltering the money from taxation. And since you live in Al Amarja, that nearly takes care of itself."

He held up the palm-top and said, "Carrot." He gestured to Drizzle Fade and said, "Stick. Which shall it be, Mr. Nadjafi?"

Abbas stood and stuck out his hand. "I will take this under consideration, Mr. Silver. Thank you for stopping by."

Gayth stayed on the couch. "There is nothing to consider. The case has been presented to you. The difference between the player and the non-player is the ability to make quick decisions. You will agree to our offer, Mr. Nadjafi."

Abbas turned his back on Silver. A calculated risk; he knew that the Net wouldn't risk harming him, yet. He was their only link to the commodity they coveted. "Then I'm afraid the answer is no."

"You should get that speech impediment looked into. That 'yes' sounded a great deal like a 'no'."

Abbas turned to him. "It was a no, Gayth. You said honor was off the table. But honor is never off the table. Honor *is* the table. The basis on which any agreement between free men is made. It's not that I don't want two hundred million dollars a year. But to get it, I would have to go back on a prior agreement. An agreement made upon my honor. You must see that making an agreement with someone who breaks agreements is not in your rational self-interest, Gayth."

"I see that you are going to give us the fucking drug."

Excellent, thought Abbas. He'd penetrated the guy's persona. Pissed him off. Anger equals leverage. He floated the coolest of tones through his next comment, as he opened the door for Gayth, showing him out: "If it's any consolation to you, the product can't be manufactured in quantities anywhere near what your projections suggest. This is strictly a cottage industry, Gayth. Not worth your associates' time."

Gayth hesitated, then swept through the door.

"My associates feel otherwise. You're dead." Gayth turned and backed his way to the nearest stairwell, disappearing. Abbas had no intention of going after him. Even if he did take the guy down, the Net would just replace him and send somebody else. Abbas let the door slam; he was already half-way to Drizzle Fade's side.

Once there, though, he didn't know what to do for the man. He thought about getting water and pouring it on his face, trying to wash the salt out. He didn't, because he was worried that he might end up causing him more pain, or maybe floating off some of the needed chunks of skin still left on his ruined face. He ended up going into the bathroom, soaking a towel, and wrapping it around Drizzle's head. He

then lifted the man up. He thanked Wotan that Drizzle was malnourished; he was able to lift the man despite his exhaustion.

As soon as he got out the door, he saw that his annoying neighbor, Mr. Palavine, was standing in the hallway. Palavine didn't seem to have a job, outside of causing trouble for other residents of the building.

"I'll call the Peace Force," Palavine threatened.

"That would force me to kill you."

Palavine thought for a moment.

"Oh, I won't, then."

"Good."

Palavine went back into his apartment.

Abbas staggered down the hallway and down the stairwell. Once in the lobby of his building, he struggled to get Drizzle through the self-locking outside door. He hit the street and waited for a cab to pass. He had to wait for a Giovanni's; Total Taxi would charge outrageously to transport someone who might bleed on the upholstery. Drizzle was unconscious but occasionally stirred enough to give off a low groan. After about fifteen minutes a Giovanni's came by. He installed Drizzle in the back seat, and told the driver to take him to the Aries clubhouse.

Once there, he placed Drizzle on the stoop and grabbed the hunting horn hanging by the doorway. He blew the horn. Saxolf came to the door; he was still up, smelling like beer.

"Ugh, who's that?" Saxolf burped.

Abbas picked Drizzle up and took him over to the large kitchen table in the clubhouse's roach-infested eating area. "Go wake up Thorvald."

Thorvald tramped into the room a few minutes later, wearing fleece shorts and a greasy tank-top. He squinted at Abbas and the unconscious low-life on the table. "What's this?"

Abbas was gingerly unrolling the towel from Drizzle's head. "This man suffered on our behalf. The Klinik is closed at this hour, and we can't take him to the Hospital without signing him up as a medical experiment. What can you do for him?"

After rubbing his eyes, Thorvald looked down at Drizzle's face. "What kind of sick bastard did this?"

"I'll tell Hans everything. Right now we need to see if we can help this man."

"Best I can do is disinfect the wounds, which is going to sting like — is that salt?"

Abbas nodded. He couldn't bear to tell Thorvald that he'd done the salting. He'd have this on his conscience for a long time, even though it had been unavoidable. His first duty was to Giuseppe, whom

he'd vowed to protect. Abbas had no choice but to respond to Gayth's display with maximum ball size. He knew he'd likely have to make other cold decisions now that he was dealing with the Net. Other random bystanders were likely to be harmed. But Abbas would uphold his word to Giuseppe. He would win, or die. Either way, he would retain his honor.

"Yeah, I'll peroxide the wounds, then I guess just wrap him up in gauze, like a mummy. He's just gonna have to heal as best he can. He'll be a festival of scabs for a long time to come. I don't know whether he'll heal right up or be scarred forever."

"We still have morphine, yes?"

"Yeah, if you're willing to reimburse the kitty."

"Of course. Now I'm going back home. To sleep. I can leave this in your hands, yes?"

"Yeah."

Abbas stepped towards the door.

"Wait," said Drizzle Fade.

Abbas stopped. Drizzle gasped for air. "I heard what you were saying back at the other place." Lying flat on his back on the table, he couldn't see Abbas tense up. "You sell Communion?"

"Yes."

"Could you maybe give me a tab? M-maybe going to see God will help me, you know...pain-killer."

Abbas reached into the money belt at his waist and pulled out a foil card of pills. "It's not a pain-killer," he said, tearing off a single tab at its perforations. Thorvald's eyes widened. "But you can have one if you want." He placed it gently in Drizzle's palm.

"Th-thank you."

Abbas turned on his heel and left. Thorvald plucked the pill from Drizzle's hand.

"Doctor's fee," he explained.

The Pneuma Center was tucked into a cozy, curving laneway lined with boutiques. Its quaint, tasteful storefront, all done up in new yellowy brick, was a contrast to the grime and decay of most of the buildings of the Edge. The name of the store was marked out with decal letters on its large, airy display window. Alex steeled herself going inside.

An old-fashioned bell attached to the door jangled to announce her entry. The store was surprisingly deep, and displayed thousands of

books on attractive pine shelving units. The section titles revealed the store's specialty: Alex saw cards that said *Phrenology* and *Aromatherapy* and *UFOs* and *Psychic Research*.

She looked tentatively up at the cashier's desk. He wasn't there. A young woman sat on a high stool behind the desk, reading a palmistry magazine. A big pile of white-blond hair was perched on top of her head; her tight silk blouse was buttoned so as to present maximum cleavage. His tastes haven't changed, Alex thought. She knew she was being a bit uncharitable, but so what?

Alex walked up to the desk and asked the sales clerk, "Is Arthur Pendrick in?"

She looked up at Alex with slow eyes. "He is at the back." A thick French accent. The clerk picked up the phone and hit its intercom button. "Customer to see you, Arthur." Alex listened carefully to the way she said his name, trying to tell whether he was banging her or not. She couldn't really decide.

Arthur Pendrick came through a pine door, saw Alex, and froze. He was still good-looking, she thought, in that average, bright-eyed kind of way. She decided that if he looked over guiltily at the sales clerk, he was definitely banging her. But his glance to her was neutral: "Delphine, I'll take care of the store. You can take some extra time for lunch today, okay?"

Delphine brightened. She quickly reached under the sales desk, grabbed a huge suede purse, and was gone in a shot.

They stood for a moment, each waiting for the other to start. Arthur had a minor cut on his lower lip, and a scrape on his cheekbone. Alex didn't like that. He always looked hotter when he was a little banged up, and she in no way wanted to be thinking about his hotness. She didn't want to think about the new laugh lines he'd accumulated since she'd last seen him, how they were looking pretty good on the lying, no-good, slippery, back-stabbing son of a bitch.

It was Arthur who finally broke the silence. "You're in Al Amarja," he said. He spoke feather-softly. "For your sister's funeral. Right, I should have thought. Yeah. That was pretty dumb of me, not to expect... I heard about that on the news. Had no idea she was on the island. That's terrible, a stroke, so young, she was such a sweet kid." He held out his arms to her.

Oh, hell. She rushed to him, clamped her arms around his back, and cried lying, no-good, slippery, back-stabbing son of a bitch tears onto the collar of his sports jacket. He awkwardly returned the embrace. He didn't wear that awful Brut cologne any more. It was something different, maybe a hint of sandalwood? Anyway, it was better than his old smell. After a minute or two she roughly disengaged,

shoving him away a little too obviously. He tried to act as if she'd done it right.

"You've come here because —"

Alex cut him off. "You've got quite the selection here, I see. You've really gone into this in a big way. I guess that aluminum siding thing didn't work out, huh?" There were bits and pieces of anger in her tone.

"Aluminum...? Oh yeah, boy, that was a long time ago. It's been what, nine years?"

"Something like that." It was seven.

"That was just kind of a summer thing. I found out that the guy was crooked —"

"You knew that all along."

Arthur smiled defensively. She'd seen that smile before, often. "I found out he was crooked in a stupid way, so I got out before he got busted. And I've, you know, kicked around and I guess you're surprised to see me in the book business."

She picked up a book on the ancient astronauts who built the pyramids. "No, I mean, this is the scam part of the book business, isn't it?" His earlier attractiveness was already fading. Must have been the light he'd been standing in.

Arthur went over to the magazine rack and started straightening. "So, ah, you heard I was living here now, and came over to be mean to me?"

"Actually I was looking for a drug connection and this guy at Sad Mary's gave me your store's phone number. This is a surprise to me. I had no idea where on the planet you were."

"Drug ...? Huh? What guy?"

"Big guy, one of the bouncers there. Walrus mustache, smashed-in face."

Okay, okay. That was... That guy. The Aries Arthur had bumped into. Bumped into when he saw Alex standing at the bar. "Oh. Him. He was pissing up your leg. I gave him my business card; thought I could sell him some books. Those Aries guys, they're really into astrology and stuff."

Alex took the pills out of her purse. "So you don't sell these things."

He walked over to her to take a closer look at them. "I don't even sell vitamins. Try Drug-O-Rama down on The Ramble. What are these?"

She wondered whether she could confide in him or not. She'd trusted him once with everything, and he'd chucked it away. He could maybe fill her in, though. "Some kind of acid or something like that. Supposed to give you hallucinations of Vishnu, or maybe the god of

your choice, I'm not sure. Maybe someone is pissing up my other leg, too."

Arthur took the blister card and rattled the caplets inside it. "I've heard of these, but I always assumed they were just another rip-off. I mean, if you could really take a pill and contact God, I wouldn't be able to sell very many of these." He waved around at his books. "Have you tried 'em?" Alex told him she hadn't. "Then what's the deal, why are you looking to buy more?"

Alex took them from him and put them away again. "I just had this weird experience in my Customs and Immigration interview. The guy assigned to me tried to sell me some, I think. I just was curious, that's all. It seemed weird."

"He tried to sell you some, or he did sell you some?"

"Uh, he did. I thought he might refuse me entry if I didn't buy. And at the same time I was worried it might be entrapment. I didn't know what to do. Maybe he thought I was somebody else. Like I said, it was weird."

"Yeah, well Customs specializes in weird things. You should have seen what they did to me first time I came here." He mimed the pulling on of rubber gloves, mimicked the sound of rubber snapping against forearm. "So you thought you'd look for a dealer to find out more about this drug? The one the Customs guy sold you?" There was something untrusting in his voice. Back when she knew him, he'd been as gullible as the people he had fooled. It was part of what made him seem honest, as honest as any good con artist.

"Yeah, I'm just curious."

"How's your step-brother?"

"He's pretty broken up, you can imagine. He was her manager, you know. They went everywhere together, even here on vacation. I don't know what he's going to do."

"Yeah, that's rough."

"So you haven't heard much about this Communion stuff?"

Arthur sauntered behind the counter and opened the till. He started going through the bills, pointing the faces of the Presidents all the same way. "I've heard rumors, but you hear all kinds of strange rumors here on the island. There's a big slice of people interested in fringe phenomena. Which is why I settled down here, right?"

"So what kind of rumors have you heard?"

"Supposedly it's a pipeline to God. Take it, and you get a guaranteed mystical experience. Like you said, it's probably just acid. But since it has a legend built up around it, people come to the trip with ideas ahead of time, so sometimes those ideas figure into whatever hal-

lucinations you end up having. At least, it happens often enough to keep the legend going.”

Alex and Arthur had dropped a tab or two of acid themselves, back when. LSD was not something you were supposed to be doing in Edina, Minnesota in 1985. A little pot, the average person could understand that. And, of course, excessive underage drinking was the main recreational activity of any right-thinking high school student. Drinking and puking as transformative experience. But acid, no chance, that was what the strange people did, the freaks. You laughed at Nancy Reagan for telling you not to do it, but you still didn't do it. It made you think funny. And thinking at all was suspect at Edina Senior High School. No, LSD was not what Alex was supposed to be doing. So of course she took it, when she got the chance. And that chance came with Arthur. Together they did a whole lot of things you weren't supposed to be doing.

She was sixteen when she met him. It was summer, and he was standing in front of an ice cream truck. He was wearing shorts; his skinny little legs had great calf muscles. He turned around to her and there was that smile, and that was it. They didn't even have to talk or say anything to know that separately they were just kids, and together they were hell on a hot-plate. Years later Alex had decided that it was a cruel thing to fall in love — really in love, hard in love — with someone at the age of sixteen, because that person ends up rewiring your brain for the rest of your life. At the end of many late nights, especially recently, Alex had found herself wondering what sort of person she'd be without those three vivid-bright, up-yours years and their Hüsker Dü, Replacements soundtrack. Together they did everything Patrick was afraid they were doing. Patrick hated Arthur. Hated the idea of him before he even met him, despised him based purely on Alex's verbal description. This made him more attractive than Alex had words for. He was a rocketship out of that quiet house and all of its good behavior and nicey-niceness.

She wasn't a virgin when she met him. A kind of painful incident in Dave Priskie's backyard tent the summer before had gotten that out of the way. But with Arthur — and they got to it a mere seventy-three hours after the ice cream truck — it contained the advertised enjoyment. She spent every minute she could with him. Touching his skin. Talking inarticulate teenage babble with him. Blowing his mop of hair around. Sneaking into clubs, getting more wasted than the band. Shopping for school supplies while tripping. Going to his cousin's wedding while tripping. And walking, a lot of walking. The world sucked when he wasn't there to hold.

Arthur knew that she saw him as a big adventurer, even though he was only a seventeen-year-old with bad grades and an older brother too stoned to notice when you raided his stash. He'd never thought much of himself. He was good at lying, and at pleasing people. That hadn't made him proud, not until he started pleasing Alex. All the other girls who drooled over him, he thought they were stupid for being interested in a guy like him. But Alex, that look in her eyes, it had changed him, enlarged him. He got afraid that she would one day turn to him and notice that he wasn't half of what she'd built him up to be. He was going to have to live up to the role. He was supposed to be the things her stepbrother wasn't.

Arthur had actually kind of liked Patrick, and envied him. It frustrated him, hurt him, that Patrick treated him like he was a lump of steaming-fresh dog dirt. Ever since he was a little boy he'd been able to charm the wheels off a tricycle. If making people like him was Arthur's super power, Patrick was kryptonite. He tried for months to win the guy's trust. There was a lot about Patrick that Arthur respected. He was in business college, he had goals. Arthur could tell that Patrick was going to make a lot of money one day. Arthur's mom and dad had always lived beyond their means, were always one payment away from foreclosure. Should have been living somewhere cheaper than Edina. Wouldn't let him check the mail, so he wouldn't see all the bills with "Final Notice" written on them. Arthur knew he'd have to make his own way out there. No college money for him. And there was Patrick, also going it alone, and sure he was going to make it. Sure in a way that Arthur only pretended to be. And already out there breaking his back helping his other sister, Jonna, start a singing career. Humping gear to the local religious TV station, to the Christian radio station, slugging stuff like crazy so she could do a twenty-minute set opening for whoever was opening for whatever contemporary Christian recording artist was playing in the Twin Cities. He was a good guy, but Arthur just couldn't win him over. He even defended Patrick to Alex for a while, until she straightened him up on that point.

So if it was his role to be the anti-Patrick, he'd be the anti-Patrick. He dropped out of school — no point anyway, college wasn't happening for him. He decided to take the thing that had hung over him his whole life, the fact that his family was just pretending to fit in along with all these well-off Edina privileged types, and make it work for him. He knew rich people. How they felt about themselves (shitty, usually, like everyone else), how they felt about money (it owned them, they didn't own it) and each other (a bunch of wolves jockeying for position of pack leader). Those rich people needed someone like Arthur around. A cute, non-threatening kid who grew up inside the

walls, just like them. He got a caddie job at the golf course, the spiritual center of Edina. He dragged Alex out there every spare moment he could. Practicing. The swing. The putt. Putting the ball in the hole. With Alex watching, it came easy to him. She was sure he could do anything, so he could. In the course of one summer, he became a killer golfer. Poker came even easier to him; it was just a matter of reading people, learning to smell fear and hope, and inserting those smells into the equation. By the time he was eighteen and Alex was seventeen, he was already on the hustle. There wasn't a rich dude on the course who hadn't had to stuff a wad of bills into Arthur's pocket. If they were good golfers, he got them at the card table. If they were card sharps, he nailed them on the links. The guys at this one country club, once they realized they had a hustler on their hands, they loved him all the more. If he'd been from another suburb, they would have run him off. If his skin had been a different color, they would have had him arrested. But being Arthur Pendrick from Blake Road, he was their pet shark. They took him around to other golf courses, introduced him at other poker games. Grinned as they watched him fleece their buddies. Soon he had all the money he and Alex could spend. And they spent it. He got the fast car of their glossy-magazine dreams, let Alex pick out the color. Drinks, clothes, shows. It made him nervous, throwing the money away like that. It was exactly what his folks had done all their lives. But the more flash Arthur got, the more he got up Patrick's nose. And, therefore, the tighter Alex held him. If you're going to play a part, you need a costume. Arthur's costume was made of other guys' money.

If Alex regretted falling too deep in love at sixteen, Arthur wished he'd never been an eighteen-year-old who could get whatever he wanted. If there was a roll of dough idling there in the back pocket of some self-made yahoo's white polyester slacks, Arthur knew before he even started that he could nip himself a nice piece of it. If he wanted that self-made man to give him a stock tip, so he could pass it along to the head waiter at the country club, who paid good for that kind of information...it was worse than simple. Arthur got used to winning. He got used to having Alex beside him. He started to forget the fear. She couldn't find him out, because he wasn't a fake anymore. He had become the guy she had wanted him to be. He was already an operator, when other guys his age were still popping their zits and cramming for Calculus. He was the guy. He saw something he wanted; he reached on over and plucked it right up.

Alex went off to college, majoring in staying out of the job pool. Arthur wanted to spend all of their spare time together, but she found new friends. He didn't like these people. Like Patrick, these new types were immune to him. All the things he'd learned to make him a win-

ner, these weedy mutts, they spat on it. They hated him for having money, even when he bought the drinks or supplied the fairy dust. They hated him for not reading and not having ideas, like he had time to get any. He had plenty of ideas about how people were all the same, had notes you could play like a piano. Those ideas, they didn't want to hear about. They wanted to talk politics and philosophy and other excuses for not understanding jackshit about the real situation.

So Arthur got involved in bigger things. The aluminum siding thing. Selling time-share units. Any kind of operation that needed a bit of extra people grease to get going. He and Alex, they didn't argue exactly. They just spent time apart. Like normal couples, right? They can spend time apart and most people think it's healthy. Alex and Arthur became a regular couple like other couples, and went along for a couple of years and Arthur began to think it was good, thought that maybe they had a chance at turning into grown-ups and having the normal, unexciting happiness that other people have together. Which meant having two lives that met up now and then, not one life intertwined like vines on a wall.

So that night, at that party, the one that the guy next door threw, he didn't know where Alex was. He thought she was still down in the city. And he was pasted. So he started necking with this chick. She'd had these great fatty lips, and they had this candy-colored lipstick on them, and the chick just made herself into something he wanted. He'd done it before, and nothing bad had happened. He never went all the way, never technically went for the full dictionary definition intercourse thing. Didn't plan to with this chick, either. In no way, in his mind, was he cheating on Alex. Who, we have already figured out, also knew this guy throwing the party and walked in and saw her big fatty lips all over his thin pale lips and there in slow motion Arthur Pendrick found himself right in the dead center of *The Mistake*.

Alex and Arthur realized that they'd stopped talking to each other at roughly the same time.

Arthur was still as good as ever at covering. "It's like attending a peyote ritual in the Native American church," he said, continuing his mini-lecture as if there'd been no pause. "Their color hallucinations will be eagles, spirits, things that make sense in their mystical superstructure. But you, going in with a brain full of the random junk of our culture, you might see the flag, or a train, or Papa Smurf. So that's what this Communion is, probably. Acid with a mystique."

Alex couldn't stop fidgeting with her hands. She looked around for something to do, started picking up books again. "You've become an expert."

"You want a coffee? There's a pot back in the office."

“No thanks.”

Arthur strolled around his store. After he'd lost Alex, he'd found this new angle. Started reading all those books he never had time for. Discovered that her college friends were full of it anyway. “Okay, maybe this is all a scam. I haven't turned into a big believer or anything. If you want to say I've just switched from one hustle to another, you can. Make some kind of joke about this being a better hustle, 'cause the customers keep coming back.” He was surprised to feel a great bitterness rising up in him. Nothing that had happened was ever Alex's fault. Maybe that's why he was bitter. He continued, trying to hide the choke in his voice. “On the other hand, there are things you can't explain, can't put your finger on. I've seen a few things since then in this business, heard some stories. You'd laugh at them, maybe.” He slapped himself below the throat, increased his volume. “So yeah, the update is, I'm still doing very nicely, thank you, I have a kinda better self-image these days, I've found myself a bit of humility, and I'm not the drug dealer you wanted to talk to.”

He stopped. Alex realized it was an invitation to leave.

“Sorry to have bothered you,” she said. She walked out of the store. The bell over the door jingled good-bye.

III

The hotel room now seemed very lonely and empty. Alex didn't get to stay in hotel rooms very often. She usually liked them, liked their cleanness, their anonymity, the permission they gave you to do anything you wanted. This hotel room, though, wasn't anonymous. It was full of Jonna's absence. Maybe Alex would arrange tomorrow for her twin's clothes to be shipped back — back where? She really didn't know. It was the kind of detail Patrick was meant to attend to. She didn't know if he'd be offended if she said she wanted to get away from these reminders of Jonna. It would all depend on Patrick's mood at the moment she chose to ask him, whether he happened to have a store of conniption energy built up and ready to blow. She weighed the emotional cost of more histrionics versus the benefit of getting these reminders of Jonna away from her. She decided not to ask him. Jonna should be hovering over her, she decided, keeping her going on her mission. It wasn't supposed to feel good. If you try to run away from grief, it will only follow you.

Alex tried to visualize her sister in the hotel room. What kinds of things did Jonna do when she was alone? How did she spend the moments just before she left for the pool, where she planned to kill herself? Did she pace around? Was she calm? Did she have second thoughts? Was it something she had to work herself into, or was she completely rock-solid on her decision? What was she actually physically doing in those last few minutes? Alex just couldn't picture anything specific. Did Jonna read something from the Bible? Or would that not happen? Would she not want to be reminded of what a bad thing she was doing? Or would she wallow in it?

There were two Bibles in the top drawer of the bedside table. One belonged to the hotel; it was a New Testament left by the Gideons, who were apparently active even in Al Amarja. The other was a leather-bound Good News Bible, the one with the really flat language, as if the narrator of the Good Book was sitting on a chair in your kitchen chatting to you while you made strawberry preserves. The Good News Bible belonged to Jonna; like all of her books, it was in very good condition, like she'd never touched it. Alex briefly riffled through its pages in hopes that Jonna had made marginal notes or hidden some kind of

suicide clue in it. But she knew she wouldn't find anything; Jonna thought it was a crime to mark up a book.

Alex was no closer to knowing any of this stuff. Looking into the source of the pills had just gotten her somewhere else she didn't want to be. Somehow it had upset her to see how Arthur had been different from that last time she saw him, that last dinner out two weeks after the party incident. She wanted him to be exactly the same as he had been that day, the same shame-faced twenty-year-old with no better explanation than "it won't happen again." Or at least a twenty-seven-year-old version of that guy, still hustling golfers and playing poker for a living. Running a bookstore and selling books on spirit channeling? Saying stuff like "mystical super-structure"? She never would have guessed that in a million years. His going and changing like that, it meant he wasn't frozen in regret. Alex had always imagined him wasting away somewhere, eaten up by could-have-beens. He probably hadn't even thought of her in years. Their love, it was just who he was for a while, and now he's someone else, taking his life in an active direction, he's moved on and kept living, and where was Alex? She was the one encased in amber, still living like a student, still not knowing where to go or who to be. She was the one who was lost. It wasn't fair. She wasn't the one who had ruined it. It wasn't up to her. If she had forgiven him, it's not like everything would have been all right. He just would have done it again the next time. Forgiveness just would have prolonged it, and made her a chump besides. She couldn't remake him into a different person, into a faithful person who loved her. So *of course* he wasn't thinking about it all the time! He'd been in control. He'd been pulling the levers. She was just a town Arthur had driven through once. A place he'd stayed and had a nice time. And now he was in Al Amarja, having another nice time.

Alex stood up. She was mad at herself for letting him get to her. After all this frigging time. He was a distraction. It was Jonna, she was the point of this all. Jonna was the one she was supposed to be figuring out.

The Communion. It was the key, but asking drug dealers about it wasn't the direction to come from. It was figuring out what was in Jonna's head, what she was looking for in those pills. Jonna dropping acid? It was impossible to think. Jonna was even reluctant to take aspirin. She had a basic Protestant prejudice against anything you could ingest that wasn't a potato or a pot roast.

Maybe Arthur had it wrong. Maybe Communion wasn't like acid at all. There was only one way to find out. Alex popped a caplet out of the pack, walked to the bathroom sink, cupped some water up into her mouth, and dropped some C.

If this is acid, she thought, this here is a bad decision. She hadn't dropped acid for close to nine years, and it's not wise to do it alone. Especially if you're alone and feeling down. She was practically begging for a bad trip. Though it wasn't like there was anyone around she could ask to be her spotter. Patrick — well, *that* went without saying. And she sure wasn't going to be asking Arthur for any more assistance, or even running into him again if she could at all help it.

So, if she did have a bad time, she'd just have to tough her way through it. Just remember it wasn't real. That it was all just chemicals in the brain sloshing around. Getting nervous about it would just make it worse. She would be calm, and ready for whatever. She sat on the bed, closed her eyes, and did some deep breathing to get back into control.

She checked her watch, ready to time the effects of this mystery drug. She considered getting out a notepad and pen and writing everything down as it happened, but then decided that would be silly. If she couldn't remember things clearly enough to write them down, well then Jonna wouldn't have been able to either.

She started to get bored. Nothing was happening. She looked at her watch every thirty seconds. Nothing. Fifteen minutes went by. No dry mouth, no big bump in her heart rate, no big jolt of nervous energy. None of the visual stuff from the beginning of a trip — no flashes, no traces, no distortions. She got up, headed to the bathroom, and looked up close at her eyes. No pupil dilation. She gave it another fifteen minutes, and still nothing. Communion wasn't acid. As far as she could tell, it did nothing at all. She wondered how long she should wait it before giving up and going off to do something else.

She decided to look closely at a surface. Maybe that would trigger something. That's what she mostly remembered from those old acid experiments: getting downright rapturous over the texture of peeling paint on a wall, or the weave of fibers on a pillowcase, or frost crystals on a freezer-burnt popsicle. She looked at the stained wood of the bed's headboard. She played that old kid's game of finding patterns in the wood. That bit around the knot-hole there looked kind of like Woody Woodpecker lying on his back. That bit there might look like a frying pan. And there, that was maybe a face. A man's face, vaguely, with a beard and long hair.

The bit of wood grain began to shimmer and re-resolve itself. Now it looked more like a face, a profile. There was a long, strong nose. There were dark, recessed eyes. That was the tip of a beard. Something running cross-wise on the crown of the head. Thorns? No. Yes, yes, it looked more like thorns. It re-resolved itself again. Now it really looked like a head. Jesus' head.

Alex checked herself again for the physiological effects of an acid trip. Still no burst of energy, still no banging pulse. She was calm; felt perfectly normal, like she was doing a boring science experiment back in high school or something. She looked away from the increasingly Christ-like wood grain, checking to see if she'd see other hallucinatory things elsewhere in the room. She focused on the curtains, on a pattern of soap splashes on the bathroom sink, on the folds in the bedspread. All of it looked perfectly ordinary. She looked back at the headboard. The image had increased its resolution several times. Now it looked like a painting. Except for the fact that it was all in tones of brown, it looked like one of those soft-focus, friendly Uncle Jesus illustrations she remembered from Sunday School pamphlets. It was more impressive than your average flour-tortilla image of Christ, but still kinda missing something as a visionary experience.

"If you wish to say something, I am listening," The Voice said. Alex's head swiveled as she tried to place the source of the sound. There was nobody in the room. The Voice seemed both close up and distant. Very warm, definitely not electronic. It had deep tones in it; The Voice resonated in her chest cavity. But it was also kind of even and flat, like Minnesota.

"Who said that?"

"Who do you think?"

She studied the image on the headboard carefully. She was happy to see that its lips weren't moving. That would have been altogether too silly, like the time Arthur had hallucinated up Grover from Sesame Street.

"Who do I think? I think I'm having a drug hallucination, but it's missing things I remember from the last time I did this kind of thing. Like it's been carefully edited or something. I'm not feeling any physical side-effects. It just feels like a normal situation, almost. Except I'm seeing this very modest visual thing here, and hearing your voice, which seems to be coming out of nowhere."

The Voice didn't answer her. The image had stopped changing. It had reached a level of fairly tight rendering and stayed there. She touched the image. It didn't feel any different from the rest of the wood.

"Are you still there?" she asked.

"Yes," said The Voice.

"Are you a drug hallucination?"

It didn't respond. She waited a minute and then said, "Are you able to hear everything I'm saying?"

"Yes."

"Are you just choosing not to answer certain questions?"

No response.

“Should I take that as a ‘yes?’”

No response.

“If this is a vision, it’s a pretty minimalistic one.”

Nothing.

“Is there something you’re waiting for me to say?”

And more nothing.

“I thought it was Your Father who was supposed to be the cryptic, distant one. Aren’t You supposed to be the communicative one?”

The image started to blur and fade.

“Wait, have I offended You?”

The image stopped fading. Alex bit her lip in frustration. This was more like a puzzle than a trip. The presence, or hallucination, or vision, or whatever it was, seemed to start to short out on her whenever she acted skeptical or demanding. What if she tried believing in it, believing hard? It was a contradiction, forcing yourself to believe something. She tried, though. Maybe she was only succeeding at squinting and furrowing up her brow, but she tried.

“Okay, you’re Jesus.”

The image got sharper again. Like it was rewarding her.

“This pill I’ve taken, it’s a pill that lets me talk to Jesus.”

And again.

“And here You are.” The image on the headboard returned to its sharpest point. “I am talking to Christ.” She sounded a bit doubtful here, like she was talking herself into it, and she thought she saw the image sort of blister and bubble for a moment, but then return to form. “Are You willing to answer questions?” No answer. “Are You willing to answer certain questions, depending on whether You like the question or not?”

“Do you expect me to answer questions?” The Voice responded.

“I don’t know what to expect,” she said, carefully. She’d finally coaxed The Voice back and didn’t want it to shy away again.

“Most people come to me with very certain expectations.” There was a new element in this latest pronouncement, something Alex couldn’t quite identify. An emotion of some sort?

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“Who are you speaking to?”

“Jesus.”

“Would you expect to make Jesus uncomfortable?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

No response.

“But then I would expect Jesus to be very confident.”

“You are not making me uncomfortable.”

“You’re not just conforming to my expectations, are you? If so, that doesn’t make you very Jesus-like.”

No response. It was very disconcerting to talk to someone who only replied to certain things. Alex realized that she found this more difficult to deal with than the fact that she was speaking to a disembodied voice.

“Is this the sort of experience my sister had when she was on Communion?”

“Your sister?” The Voice was registering surprise.

“Jonna Sky.”

“You are not Jonna Sky?”

“No, I am her sister, Alex. Her twin sister.”

“Oh.”

“You didn’t know?”

“This circumstance is — I find it ...”

“I’m not supposed to be able to contact You this way, am I?”

“It is —” The Voice seemed to falter. “When you ask that question, how do you mean ‘supposed’?”

“Well, I certainly haven’t ever been to any church where they told you this is the way to get in touch with Jesus, to take a pill. I haven’t done anything in particular to qualify for this experience, have I?”

Another non-response. She was tempted to try and provoke The Voice again, use sarcasm. But that tack had just made it fade out before.

“You know my sister, Jonna Sky, You know she’s dead, right?”

“Ah.” A pause. “Yes, I know that she is dead.”

“She spoke to You in this way, didn’t she? Using the drug?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s why You thought I was her.”

“Yes.”

“Even though she’s dead, which You know.”

There was another pause, long enough that Alex thought she’d drawn another blank. As she was trying to think up another approach, The Voice said: “I am not used to this way of communicating.”

“It doesn’t happen very often, people using this drug to contact You.”

“No.”

“Is it new, is it a recent thing?”

“The words ‘new’ and ‘recent’ are not helpful.”

“Why not?”

“Are you here to ask questions about the drug?”

“Yes, about the drug, and about Jonna.”

“I have the answer. But it is not the answer you think you seek.”

"If I knew what I was looking for, I wouldn't be looking for it." Alex thought she'd sounded kind of sharp with The Voice. She worried that the image might fade, or that The Voice might stop talking. But neither happened.

"Are you ready for the answer?"

"Even if I'm not ready, I want to hear what You want to tell me."

"You've heard the answer before."

"Please don't play riddle games with me!" She immediately regretted her outburst. "I'm sorry, I'm frustrated."

"I do not seek apologies."

"Please give me the answer."

"The answer is Love."

"Of course." Alex's shoulders sank.

"It is easy to say, 'of course', but it is hard to live as if Love is the answer to all questions. Isn't it, Alexandra?"

"I was hoping you would tell me something that would explain to me why my sister killed herself."

"I understand that."

"But you won't help me."

"I have given you the only answer there is."

"Could you possibly give me, I don't know, a more, go into a bit of specific detail on how this answer applies to — I don't mean to sound selfish, but my particular situation. The specific question I'm asking you?"

"If you stop to think about it, what do you think I will say to that?"

"You will say that Love is the answer, and figuring out the rest is up to me."

"And this is why it is unnecessary to use this, this, Communion, to contact me. I am within you. What you seek is within your grasp. I have already done what you need me to do. What everyone needed me to do."

"So I should go away and stop bothering you."

"I am not bothered." The Voice sounded — she thought The Voice sounded almost *hurt*.

"You don't get bothered."

"I am divine, but I am also human."

"Why do I get the feeling that You want to say more than You're saying?"

"Because you are perceptive."

This time Alex had no response. Finally she said, "Do you want me to let You go now? How do I go about letting You —"

“We can speak longer, if you wish. It is just that what needed to be said was said, a long time ago. All that’s left is repetition. Repetition is needed. It’s essential. But it’s still repetition.”

“Is this how You appeared to Jonna? As a spot in the wood grain, and as a disembodied voice?”

“No, this is how I appeared to your sister.” The Voice was now localized. It was over Alex’s shoulder. She turned. Christ was sitting in the stuffed chair beside the television set. He looked just like the pictures from Sunday School. Brown hair, blue eyes, neat long shoulder-length hair, well-trimmed beard, long beige robes, sandals. He smelled good, like fresh-mown grass.

Alex was afraid. She inched away from Him, hoping He wouldn’t notice that she was doing it. But He did notice: “Please don’t be afraid.”

“Why did You appear in different ways to me and to Jonna?”

“It is what you were ready for.”

“So You were changing to meet our expectations.”

“I don’t change.” He seemed almost wistful. He stood up, began bouncing slightly on his toes. Like he was testing his muscles. Enjoying the sensation. He certainly looked solid.

“But You were different for each of us, You just said.”

“I do not change. Expectations change. The answer remains the same.”

“Love.”

Jesus nodded. “Love.”

“Do you — do you mind if I touch Your hand?”

The left side of his mouth turned up in what must have been a smile. “Are you ready to touch My hand?”

Alex started to tremble. “How would I know if I’m ready or not?”

Jesus just shrugged. Alex wondered if He’d been shrugging all along, each time she asked something He wouldn’t respond to. It was a strangely human gesture. She really, really didn’t like the idea of a Christ who shrugged.

And you don’t even really believe that any of this stuff is real, said a reminding voice inside her, a voice that was shrieking in protest, this is a drug hallucination, don’t fall for it! It doesn’t match what you know about acid, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a drug. It’s just a hallucinogen you’re not familiar with! You do not really believe this. Jonna did, but you don’t! You are not Jonna.

Jesus was looking at her like He could hear what this voice was saying, too. Alex felt like a guilty child, felt a flush rise up through her. Jesus smiled again, a wide smile, revealing perfect gleaming teeth.

The real Jesus couldn't have had teeth like that, not in ancient times. That's not how teeth looked back then... Those are Hollywood teeth! This is just your image of the real thing! Which isn't real at all. It's all a story people tell themselves so they can feel better. Just because you want to feel better doesn't mean that you don't know better, that you can just throw your good sense out the window. This is a hallucination. A hallucination.

"Sometimes it is good to face something that you aren't ready for," He said. "To let it bowl you over."

He reached out His hand for her. She reached out hers.

Don't throw away who you are, Alex!

She withdrew her hand. But Jesus reached out with His, and snatched up her fingers, catching them and holding them tight.

The next moment felt like forever. Alex left her body, left all sense of her surroundings, exploded into rapture. She became everything. She became completely herself. It was an bliss unlike sex, unlike drugs, unlike physical exhilaration. It was beyond words, beyond experience. It was peace, but an active, eruptive peace, revolving eternally into and upon itself in frenzied, volcanic harmony. **JOY!**

“**A**bsolutely out of the question,” said Patrick. “I have to confess, I’m shocked that you’d even ask.” Patrick was not actually even a little bit shocked that televangelist Randy Rogers would ask to broadcast Jonna’s memorial service. Nor was he in any way reluctant to confess to this imaginary shock. He had to admit to himself now that maybe he wasn’t the greatest judge of character in the world, but he still knew men like The Reverend Randy Rogers from the inside out. He hadn’t spent his near-decade in the Christian entertainment business wearing idiot glasses. Patrick was good at his job, and part of being good included the ability to size up business associates. Patrick placed Christian businessmen in three categories:

1. the sincerers
2. the phonies
3. the sincerers who were compromising their way into becoming phonies

Patrick, of course, was sincere. Whenever he felt the pressure to compromise, he’d just look over at Jonna, reminding himself what really mattered. The Lord was not a way of making a living — though if you made a living doing His work, that was acceptable, especially if you were also working really hard. The Lord was not a marketing

scheme to target a pre-sold niche audience. The Lord was not a pyramid scam; he was not a sale without a product. He was The Lord. Patrick never forgot that, but he'd met lots of people who were experts at forgetting.

Like this Randy Rogers, in his shimmering tailored suit and hair-sprayed hair. He smelled of coin and carried on like a ham actor daring his audience to disbelieve him. Patrick was sitting in Rogers' office in the AATV studios, where Rogers rented studio space and air time. It was a show office, for meetings. Even if Rogers hadn't reeked of the carnival, the neatness of the office would have been all the tip-off Patrick needed. He'd never yet met a sincere Christian minister who could keep his desk tidy. If you were really doing the Lord's work, you didn't have time to file. You didn't care if other people thought you had a cluttered mind. Unlike Randy Rogers, you weren't out to impress anyone.

Rogers smiled awkwardly at Patrick's "shocked you would even ask" line. He probably surrounds himself with yes-folks, Patrick thought. Hasn't been called on anything in a while. Let's watch him squirm.

"Honestly, Mr. Sky. I am shocked that you would doubt my motives."

Are you shocked, Patrick wondered? Have you been on the game so long that you've fooled yourself?

"I only seek what is best for your beloved sister, and for the Christian community. You know that she will become a figure of inspiration the world over. Her dedication, her talent, her beauty. And now, being called to the Lord's side so young. She is a role model for youth today. We should celebrate her." The Reverend leaned in close and trained his pool-bottom blue eyes on Patrick. "I don't understand your reluctance, Mr. Sky."

Yes, there was clearly an insinuation lodged there in that last sentence. It made Patrick sit up. The thing about the phonies was, they were also very good judges of character. Better than the sincerers, usually. They had a nose for human weakness. You can't BS a BSer. If this guy even suspected the reasons why Patrick wanted this quiet, he'd be a big problem. Patrick felt like going back and reaming out that funeral director for recommending this snake.

Patrick would have to select his words carefully. The way out was to pretend to be as big a phony as Rogers. "My sister is gone, and I grieve for her. At the same time, I rejoice for her. As you say, even in death, she will be an inspiration. A role model. Because of this, her image must be carefully guarded." Patrick leaned forward, placing an unwavering hand on the soft fabric swaddling the Reverend's arm. He

hated to have to touch the guy, but it was time to slap it on with a trowel. "I'm sure, you, Reverend Rogers, have on occasion been attacked by the cynical. By the mockers." Patrick was imitating a memorably unctuous Illinois clergyman/promoter who'd once tried to bilk Jonna out of seven bills. Rogers nodded slowly, not liking where Patrick was headed. "On an island like this, with all of its perversions, its blasphemies in public view, I am sure there are many who jeer at you. And at your service to the Lord." Patrick leaned back, tilting his head so as to tell Rogers that he was speaking in code. The paradox of the situation would have seemed funny if there weren't so much at stake: he had to pretend to be a phony pretending to be sincere in order to win the trust of a phony.

"There are those who seek to undermine me, yes," Rogers said, slowly, pedaling hard to keep up with the multiple layers of meaning in play. "But their efforts, they can be shrugged off. The other cheek, it should be turned. We should pay them no mind."

"Ah, I wish I had the luxury of adopting your position. But Jonna, as you said, the circumstances of her death will make her a worldwide phenomenon. Which means I face an entire world of mockers." He thought about taking out a handkerchief and dappling it along his forehead, just like Reverend Rip-off from Illinois, but decided that might be going overboard. "I must not only avoid tasteless exploitation, but the *appearance* of tasteless exploitation. And although I am sure a memorial planned by a broadcast minister as experienced as yourself would be tasteful in the extreme ... let's just say that my plans call for a certain period of silence. I can't afford to look like I'm marketing a martyr. That would tarnish her potential, wouldn't it?"

What would Jonna think if she heard him saying these things, even though he was lying to a liar, and trying as always to protect her? He felt like puking.

"I see what you mean." Patrick could tell that Rogers wasn't quite ready to let this idea go. He put himself in the Reverend's shoes: a Jonna Sky memorial broadcast service would be his ticket to an international audience. Patrick decided to make him think twice about that.

"I'm also afraid that it would attract unwanted attention to you. If they attacked me for exploiting my sister's death, you would also be targeted. I have seen your program. The work you are doing here is remarkable." Patrick had caught a broadcast, this morning, and had been appalled by the shameless theatricality of the presentation. It was more like an Italian variety show than any kind of ministry Patrick recognized. He would never have let Jonna appear on Rogers' show when she was alive, and he sure wasn't going to let him parade her corpse around. "I understand it is beamed to twelve countries in Europe now."

On the broadcast, Rogers had repeated this fact several times. He seemed very proud of his increased household penetration. "And I'm sure, in time, that your show will find an audience in America. Don't let your first appearance there be on the tabloid shows."

Rogers opened his mouth, but no words came out. Patrick could tell he'd hit a vein. Finally, Rogers said, "I hope that you'll keep me in mind when this...period of silence seems no longer...when you decide that the time is right for Jonna's story to be celebrated."

Patrick stood, shook his hand again, locking Rogers in the rocky grip his stepfather had taught him. "I'll definitely think of you, Reverend Rogers." Think of him as an example of everything not to do. Patrick thought that maybe he would pull all of Jonna's records from circulation, block the release of any kind of greatest hits album, or video compilation, or anything. That would be the way to protect her. Otherwise there would always be Randy Rogerses around, throwing garbage on her memory.

"I'll see you at the service tonight, Reverend." Patrick would do anything to get this man away from the service, to find someone else. But to try to replace Rogers now would just get his suspicions revved up again. Patrick hated being stuck this way, but he could see no better option.

"It shall be an honor and a privilege, Mr. Sky."

He left Rogers' office, walked down the hallway, and headed into the men's room. He entered a stall. His shirt was soaked in sweat. It had only now hit him, how hard it was going to be to keep shielding Jonna. There would always be predators like Rogers, and there would always be questions if he failed to play ball and exploit her to the hilt.

For the hundredth time, Patrick wanted to weep, but couldn't. He prayed for tears to come, but nothing. He was trying so hard, and it wasn't going to be good enough. His success with Jonna had always been his primary accomplishment. On bad days like this, he thought it was his only accomplishment. His relationships had all failed. His own music career had failed. And, most seriously, everything he had tried to do for Alex had backfired disastrously. It was funny and sad at the same time: A piece of advice that would work perfectly with Jonna would have the opposite effect on Alexandra. Back when the girls were still just kids, whenever Patrick had seen Alexandra headed for trouble, he'd try to steer her in the other direction. In response, she'd just paddle towards those rapids with twice the effort. Whether he suggested gently, or acted all stern, the results were the same. Like she wanted to show him, teach him a lesson by hurting herself. He still had no idea what exactly she blamed him for. For not being their father? For trying to be their father? He just didn't know, could never understand her like

he did Jonna. And no matter how often he reminded himself of this fact, he couldn't stop trying to help her. Isn't that the lesson that Christ was teaching in the parable of the Good Samaritan? That you can't just stand by and watch when someone is in trouble? Patrick had to try, at least. When she started drinking, when he suspected she was on drugs, when that terrible — every time he failed with her, he'd told himself he would get smarter, figure her out better, discover the right way of approaching her. Except that every time he failed, he pushed her further away, made her want even more to spite him. Also, there was the rivalry element with Jonna. She was so anxious to make herself different from Jonna, and she did it by doing all the bad things her sister would never dream of. That was something Patrick had given up hope of ever untangling, even though you weren't supposed to give up hope. Maybe now that Jonna was gone, and the bond between her and Patrick couldn't be, maybe there was room for a connection to grow between him and Alexandra. It would be a sad thing, and a strange consolation. But maybe that is why the Lord made a world full of so much grief, to help us find those strange consolations.

Which brought up a difficult point. (Patrick had finished in the stall, was standing over the sink, cupping cold water in his hands and over and over again slapping it against the skin of his face.) To protect Jonna, Patrick wanted to get off the island as soon as possible. The sooner Al Amarja forgot about Jonna Sky, the likelier it was to protect her secret. As it was, he'd be paying off that coroner and those pool attendants forever, as soon as they realized just whose story they had stumbled into. Which gave Patrick another reason to keep Jonna from getting extra fame for being dead, one that he hadn't thought of before.

On the other hand, if he wanted to get closer to Alexandra, he'd have to prolong the stay on Al Amarja. Once they returned to America, they'd go off in different directions again. He could tell that Jonna's death had really hit her. She probably felt guilty for not being present in Jonna's life, for not knowing her sister. And if her behavior the night before was any clue, she'd be showing this by continuing on hurting herself and getting into danger. Plus, she was determined to stick around and nose into Jonna's suicide, which could double the number of people he'd have to pay off.

Patrick just didn't know whether he should he try to get her off the island as soon as possible, or if he should he stick around and try to manage the situation. Only weeks ago, he'd thought he was in charge, had all the decisions made. Now he was totally lost. For a moment, he blamed Jonna. How could she do this to him, after all of this time, do something so wrong, so out of the blue? Then he realized what he was doing, and felt even worse.

When Alex woke up, Jesus was gone.

Gayth liked dealing with oppenheimers. Scientists were such simple beings. All you had to do was give them research money, and they loved you forever. Like dogs. He liked simple behavior. It made things easy to predict. The key to good business was good predictions. And the key to good predictions was to pick sure things. Gayth knew with this Communion he had a sure thing. It would knock crack and heroin and probably even alcohol right off the charts. In doing so, it would make him phenomenally wealthy. Finally, after all of his years of careful positioning, he was in the right place at the right time. Opportunity was giving him the eye. He hated it when he heard stupid people on TV talking about how money is no good measure of success. Morons! What could be a better measure? It's a number. Numbers don't lie. They behave predictably. Every time you punch an equation into a calculator, it comes up the same way. Unless the calculator's defective, of course. But that doesn't change the numbers. That's just the calculator.

Gayth stood amidst the disinfected white-tile order of the Net's pharmacological research and development lab in Golden Barrio. It was listed in the phone book as J. Louwrier Associates, but it took no outside clients. The Net had a one hundred per cent interest in it. For a matter as important as this, Gayth wasn't willing to trust any other lab. After all, the Net was far from the only international conspiracy with a presence in Al Amarja. If Gayth could successfully bring Communion to the world market, it had the potential to entirely change the structures of societies around the globe. Imagine if every consumer now sitting in a church, temple, or synagogue could schedule a personal one-on-one with the god of his choice just by unscrewing a child-proof cap? Oh, it'd have to remain illegal. Better margins that way. And with the Net's political contacts, ensuring its international illegality would be easier done than said. But even so, the social changes that widespread Communion use would engender would be far-reaching. In fact, Gayth had to admit to himself that he had no damn idea what the effect would be, other than tremendously huge. As he waited for Louwrier to arrive, he whipped out his palm-top and punched in a note to himself: REQUISITION TIME WITH SOCIAL ANALYSIS GROUP RE: COMMUNION SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT. If the Net was going to shake up world society, it had damn well have a good guess ahead of time as to what those

changes might be. Some goods would go up in value, others would go down. Money could be made either way. New people would rise to power; the Net needed a head start in subverting and corrupting them.

Big changes like this might not be appreciated by the other conspiracies. Gayth would have to be especially careful during these early, critical stages of the operation. He was vulnerable now, just another Al Amarjan street operative. He'd also have to protect himself from being cut out by his own higher-ups. And by his higher-ups' higher-ups. Make sure he was an indispensable component of the property every inch of the way. There would be a time to call in head office, but not till he had the bag sewed shut. Gayth would win, he knew that. He was relying on the one person who could never let him down — himself.

Louwrier stepped soundlessly into the room. She was a small brunette with big glasses and a big lab coat. The glasses made her look smart. Gayth liked smart-looking people, especially ones who worked for him. In the old days, he might have even found her attractive, might have wanted to fall upon her, tear her up, force himself into her. That would have been before he had himself castrated, so as to remove all distractions from his greater ambitions.

"Have you finished analyzing the compound?" he asked her.

She looked up at him from her clipboard. He thought there might be attraction in her eyes. Or, just as easily, gratitude for the funding. Louwrier was working on some kind of anti-aging compound, one equally likely to change the world and catapult its controller to the Net's highest ranks. If Gayth thought she was close to her goal, he would have killed her, to stop her from eclipsing him.

"I have been able to reach only preliminary conclusions. The compound is, in some rudimentary ways, an analogue of hallucinogens such as —" Gayth tuned her out as she went on about bonding rings, molecular structures, and receptors in the brain. That was detail.

"The question is, do you know enough about it to synthesize it?"

"No."

"How long will it take you to know enough?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't expect any time soon. We know its structure, but we don't know how to create the compound, or anything about why it works. As I was saying, we don't even know what receptor it acts on."

How it works, he wanted to say, was that people want to pay us a great deal of money for these pills. And then, we are rich. He didn't, though, because he knew that such real-world issues would mean nothing to an oppenheimer. You could buy them, you could rent them, but you couldn't rush them.

Gayth took the full report from Louwrier, giving her the impression that he intended to read it. He had no such intention. Oppenheimers needed to think you cared about the things they cared about. He said good-bye to her and told her to keep working. And to remember that everyone else was on a need-to-know basis on this project. Your silence now means unlimited funding later, he implied.

Maybe someday they could synthesize it. Maybe they could get some useful clues when Abbas turned over the source. But the main point here was that his only current route was through Abbas. He would have avoided conflict with the Aries if he could have, just to keep the risk factors predictable. But if it took blood to take it to the next level, blood there would be.

Alex had a headache and everything was gray. She'd woken up feeling exhausted. All of the assorted bits and parts of her that occasionally bothered her were now doing so, all at once. Her trick elbow ached. The tooth that didn't like to touch ice cubes was throbbing. She had heartburn so bad, it made her cough. There was some kind of sour coating gummed all over her tongue. When she brushed her teeth to try to get rid of the taste, the toothpaste tasted wrong, too. When she showered, the water felt thick and chalky. She couldn't get clean. When she got dressed, her clothes felt like they were covered in soap scum.

When she left the hotel lobby and stepped out into the afternoon, the blue of the cloudless sky looked dull and flat. The city stank of pollution. The crowd in the plaza was stocked only with ugly people. She could see everyone's open, dirty pores.

She didn't want to be late for the service, so Alex checked her crappy watch. She really noticed the scratches along its face now. Felt embarrassed for wearing such a cheap watch. Looked again at her clothes and realized how shabby they were. She wanted to rush back into the hotel and grab another shower, but thought that it might make her dirtier. The veins in her temples were pushing in, in, crowding out her brain.

One thing was sure about Communion: it gave out a wicked hang-over. Made you feel physically awful and then threw in an emotional crash. A two-for-one deal.

The hallucination of meeting Jesus, that was one thing. Alex figured there were all sorts of things to think about in what the hallucination had said to her. Right now, though, she couldn't concentrate on any of that. It was the sensation He had given her, that was all she

could think about. Everything else sucked by comparison to that sensation, reminded her she was no longer having it. For that split-second of eternity everything had been...Alex couldn't even come up with a word to describe it. The feeling was elusive now, and slipping, more and more of it, away from her every second. The more she tried to recall it, to bring its memory back up into her body, the more it seemed old and gone. By the time she spotted and hailed a cab, she was half-convinced that it had never happened. It was like having a dream, and in the dream you have memories of a past experience, memories that aren't part of the real world. You didn't even dream of the experience, you dreamed of *remembering* an experience. But that wasn't right either.

"Where to?" said the cabbie. It was a Giovanni's, one of those stinky cabs with the talkative drivers. Great. Just what she needed. The driver had a mouthful of jagged teeth and smelled like glass cleaner.

"Sizo's Funeral Home, Sunken Barrio."

"Oh, should I be passing along condolences?" he said, half-cheerfully. She had to strain to hear him. It was like he was talking underwater.

"Please, I just need to be alone in my thoughts."

"Right." He looked disappointed. Alex was sure had some great nugget of dollar-store wisdom he was dying to toss at her.

All of her problems now seemed small. Small and bleak and stupid. Didn't matter. Weren't cosmic enough.

It was the wrong thing to be thinking, that Jonna's funeral thinking was depressing because it was too tiny and insignificant. Jesus' gift had robbed her of the right perspective, a human perspective. The last thing she'd needed was the viewpoint of a supernova sun or the heartbeat of the universe or whatever it had been. She needed, now of all times, to be human, to have regular feelings of loss and sorrow and pissed-offness. Taking the pill had been a big mistake. It had cheated her.

Now she really did need more information about it. Wanted to talk to someone about coming down from it, about adjusting to life in the wake of its rapture. Maybe she could find Dinesh again. No, his advice would be useless. You got a whole other experience if you were expecting Vishnu, that was probably it. That's what Arthur had said, it was all about expectations. Come to think of it, the hallucination had sort of said that too.

She had the cabbie drop her off at that coffee shop near the funeral home, the Screaming Bean. The sign over the shop window, the one with the Edvard Munch parody, it just made her mad. What a stupid, juvenile — been done so many times! Everyone should sign an agree-

ment to stop parodying that for the next decade at least. Two decades for frigging Roy frigging Lichtenstein parodies. And the original Munch and Lichtenstein images were pretty empty to begin with, now that the subject —

Alex stopped herself. What is this, Communion turns you into an art critic? No, into a complainer, that's what. One of those people always looking for something wrong. She promised herself to just say no to thinking until this comedown phase was over. As far as the physical things — the headache was spreading from her temples to her whole skull — coffee, the coffee would make it better.

She read the cutesie little descriptions in front of all of the available pots of gourmet coffee, selecting the one that sounded the strongest. Its brand name was Heart of Darkness. "Parental advisory. Contains caffeine of extreme violence," its blurb read. Alex walked over to the stand with the sugar and the cream. She normally drank her coffee black, but now she was seized by a craving for sugar. She dropped some into her Styrofoam cup, tasted the Heart of Darkness. Not enough. She poured and poured and poured from the tall glass sugar dispenser into the coffee. Finally she poured some into her hand and clamped that right on into her mouth, chasing it with another swallow of sociopathically strong coffee. Sweetness, she needed sweetness. She needed some pleasure, some minor ordinary everyday pleasure. Something to shock her out of her emotional pall. She had planned to walk and drink, but suddenly she sat herself down at a table and chugged the whole thing down in one near-scalding go.

She could feel the caffeine kicking in even as she walked the short distance to the funeral home. It made her feel better. Took the edge off her headache, made her feel connected to her body again. She knew plenty well that she'd pay for this burst of artificial energy with a crash of its own later on, but for now it was worth it. This was a situation that cried out for cross-medication.

She paused to take a look at herself in the reflection of a store mirror. She was wearing the outfit she'd packed for the service: black jacket, black slacks, white blouse. Earlier, she'd decided it wasn't good enough. Now she thought she looked okay. She glanced at her watch again. She was as ready as she'd ever be.

Patrick was waiting for her in the foyer of the funeral home, along with a blond man in a six hundred dollar suit. "You're right on time, great." She could tell Patrick was nervous. He was just saying this to say something; he wasn't implying that he expected her to be late. Which he would also be capable of. "This is the Reverend Randy Rogers, who will be performing the service. He's Assemblies of God. That's right, isn't it, Reverend?" The Reverend started to move into

her space, but Patrick beat him to it, wrapping her in a thick embrace. "The man's a leech," he whispered into her ear, "Best I could do, sorry."

Alex didn't know what to do with this information. She didn't especially like ministers of any sort. She especially didn't like ministers at funerals, and the dumb-ass, unconsoling things they usually said. She knew that Patrick liked some ministers and not others, but she had no idea what his standards were. Maybe if Patrick considered him a leech, he was okay. Or maybe not. If not, it was at least good to be ready in advance for some sustained teeth-grinding.

Rogers resumed his advance after Patrick and Alex disengaged. "I am most sincerely sorry for your loss, Miss Sky. I was a great admirer of your sister's music, and hoped to meet her one day." Rogers saw that she was shy of him and did not try to shake her hand.

Giuseppe Sizo slipped into the foyer and motioned towards the chapel. "This way, please."

Alex felt awful when she saw how empty the chapel was. As if someone was swinging a hammer around inside her. Her knees gave out under her, and she had to be helped into the front pew by Giuseppe and her brother. As they were doing this, she directed an ineffectual punch to Patrick's shoulder. Secretive bastard! I should stand up and wreck his secret, shout to Rogers what really happened. Jonna deserved to have people here for this. She deserved to have this happen back home, and with her family present. Her friends from the band. From the church groups, her old friends from school, even her fans and people she'd met in the business. Unlike her, unlike Patrick, they could have packed a cathedral with people who loved Jonna. It wasn't fair that he was cutting her off from this. She would have wanted a big, gorgeous send-off, with singing and flowers and people getting together and crying and laughing. She would have liked the idea that people came from all over for the ceremony. That wasn't a sin in anybody's book, no chance. Even if they knew she'd killed herself, they still would have come. They would have been shocked, and hurt, but they would have damn well come! If Patrick can forgive her terrible choice, and she could forgive, where did he get off thinking that no one else could? This isn't medieval times or anything. People understand trouble, and they understand weakness. Why deny Jonna her forgiveness?

Because Patrick doesn't forgive her, that's why. Alex turned towards her brother, saw his impassive face, decided that he was punishing Jonna, getting back at her. He'd made her into his personal idol of perfection, and by ending her life, she'd burned up his map of the universe. Alex remembered again all of those fights she'd had with him in high school, how he could only see all the things Alex did as some

kind of attack on him. As if he was the center of everything. As if it wasn't possible for Alex to want to do something because she wanted to do it. And now it wasn't possible to him that Jonna would kill herself for any reason other than to get him. And this empty chapel, this row upon row of seats empty of the people in them who should be in them, this was his revenge. Bastard. Bastard!

She hit him again, and this time Rogers saw it. Patrick turned his head towards Alex, a scrambled look in his eyes. Rogers directed a questioning eyebrow at Patrick, who nodded for him to start. Alex saw that there was something sparking between the two godly men, some touchy undercurrent. She didn't have room in her to bother to wonder what. Time to get this travesty over with.

The service was brief and simple. Rogers didn't do or say anything to upset her further. Given an audience of two, he kept it low-key, steering clear of general-purpose preaching. Alex waited for the words of consolation to come, and to sound painfully hollow. When he got around to the whole "she's in a better place now" theme, she was surprised not to feel like she was being told a nursery tale. Maybe Jonna really was in a place that felt like the feeling of Communion.

Wait a minute. Oh no. What if that's exactly the feeling she wanted to get? If that, that *experience* from the hallucination's touch was supposed to be like Heaven, and you felt so crappy once that experience was gone from you, crappy like Alex felt now — what if you keep taking it, and after a while, that feeling, it isn't enough, doesn't go on for long enough? Jonna wouldn't have done this to feel that way all the time, would she? You could you get hooked on that; that was easy to imagine.

Would Alex kill herself, if it meant she could feel that way all the time?

Again at the Screaming Bean. All Alex wanted to think about — **A** could think about — was the drug possibly being the direct cause of Jonna's suicide. That would make a lot of things simpler to understand. It would be the kind of answer Alex was looking for. Jonna wasn't the kind of person who could kill herself. Jonna did kill herself. How could that be? Because she'd taken a drug, a drug that made her into a different person.

Patrick, though, wasn't letting her just think. He was full of words, was trying to get to something he wanted to say, and taking the scenic route to get there. As much as she blamed him for those empty pews,

she didn't see the benefit in hurting him any further. She wanted to get out of that chair and go find more answers about the drug, to fit the final few pieces into the puzzle and be done with it. Instead, she would sit there and placate him, listen to him winding his way towards whatever point he wanted to make.

“ — it's all about finding the strange condolences, when people say that stock saying about the Lord's mysterious ways, that's what they mean. I know you don't, uh, put a lot of stock in that, so, I don't know, maybe I should put it a different way. You know, the cloud and the silver lining? If I was better with words, I could find a way of saying it that doesn't sound so corny. What I guess I'm saying, is that we owe it to Jonna to use this as an opportunity, to try to find some sort of bond between the two of us.”

Owe it to Jonna, right. Maybe she really ought to let all her anger loose. Get into the overall subject of who owed what to Jonna. But there was no point, didn't make sense. Her punishing Patrick for punishing Jonna. Just let him go on, try to make him feel better, then get on with the investigation. Alex had enough strength for that, right?

“Do I make any sense here, or am I just babbling? Should we talk about this later?” He radiated need. She wanted to say, “Yes, later,” and then never let him bring up the topic again. She saw them at the age of ninety and eighty, in a nursing home, Alex still refusing to talk. She didn't think she had that kind of long-term buttheadedness in her, though. And besides, he radiated need. Asking him to put the talk off till later would not be right. She had to be better than him.

“We should be closer, that's what you're saying.”

“Yes, I guess that's what I'm trying to say, but somehow also I'm trying to say it in a bigger way, one that carries the kind of — I don't know what I'm saying.”

Alex signaled the counter girl for another coffee. She'd be up all night, but that was good. She couldn't let herself crash again now. “Look, Patrick. It's something that you can say, all right, but let's face it, we have a history of — I mean, it goes back my whole life — things have always been...hard between us. For as long as I can remember. That might just be something in who we are. We can love each other. We are family, we can't not love each other. But maybe we have to accept that we're not ever really going to get along. Some types of people just aren't ever comfortable around other types of people. So maybe we should look at this and admit that you and me are different types. And that's all there is to it. We aren't bad people, we don't hate each other. We just react totally differently to a whole lot of things. Like for example.”

Oh hell. She knew she shouldn't, but she went ahead anyway: "Like for example, your decision to keep Jonna's suicide secret. I just can't accept it. It makes me furious that you prevented her from having a service filled with people. I think it's wrong and totally unfair and it's hard for me to forgive you for it. But somehow you looked at this situation and honestly came to the conclusion that this was the good way to handle it. I guess you have the right to decide, seeing as you were the one who was beside Jonna all the way, and I was off somewhere else. Which isn't the point. The point is, I see it one way, you see it another. That's just always going to happen. Maybe we should just decide that that's the situation, and leave it like that."

Patrick's voice got very low. "You have to see that I'm protecting her."

"Or punishing her."

No, no, that's not the point, Alex told herself. You're turning this into an argument while you should be talking about just leaving things be.

"I could never punish Jonna. I could never punish anyone."

Alex got up. "Let's walk for a while, Patrick. I need to move my legs."

They headed outside. The sun was setting, sending rose light up into the clouds and bouncing back onto the people in Sunken Barrio.

"How can you say a thing like that?"

"Because that's the way it looks to me, Patrick. Nobody knows what they look like to other people. And it's a nasty thing, sometimes, to learn how other people see you. But I look at what you're doing, and that's all I can think, that you're trying to punish her, bury her shame below the ground somewhere where no one will ever see it. I just don't think that's right."

She was waiting for him to explode, but he stayed quiet. Maybe they were both just out of the energy it took them to fight.

"You're forgetting that Jonna isn't just an ordinary person. There will be the media interest. That's what I've been thinking about, that's been the main thing in my mind from the first moment."

"Maybe you shouldn't care what assholes will think of her. Maybe that doesn't matter."

"The world is made of assholes, Alex. That's the thing I've learned. If you stop thinking about the assholes, they surround you and take you apart. Could be that's wrong. I don't think so. But there's no way I was trying to punish Jonna. Not even a little bit."

Intellectually, Alex was ready to believe him. Emotionally, no. People do things for all kinds of reasons, most of which they aren't

even aware of. Can you blame them? Who cares? Alex just needed to end it.

“Fine, then. I’m wrong, forget I said anything.”

“It really wounds me that you’d think that.”

“Like I said, I’m sorry. I’m not pretending to be an angel. I’m not saying it’s tough between us all because of the things you are. It’s mutual. Oil and water.”

He suddenly grabbed her hands in his and turned her towards him.

“But that can’t be. It can’t be as easy as all that, just writing off any chance that — Look, Alex, I have an idea that I want you to listen to, and probably this is a bad time, but it’s always going to be a bad time, so please just listen to me and listen to all of what I have to say. Your voice, you always had a good voice, maybe even a voice better than Jonna’s before she did all the training. You were the natural, she was the one who had to work.”

“Hold on a sec—”

“Please, please, listen to me. To come at it another way, what is it that you want from your life, Alex? Where do you see yourself being in three years? In five years? Wait, wait, before you answer, I’m not blaming you for anything, I’m not implying anything. Me, I always thought I knew exactly where I was going and what my plans were and then all of a sudden, I find myself unprepared, lost, I don’t know even what I’ll be doing next week, let alone next year. So it can happen to anybody. There’s nothing wrong with that. And anybody at any time can pick up and go off in another direction, so what I’m asking you, is what is your direction?”

“Actually I’m happy enough not having one.” Happy wasn’t exactly the accurate word. Satisfied would be closer. But she didn’t want to give Patrick any extra ammo.

“Oh, come on, you can’t be.”

“You’ve always had this idea in your head that I’m tortured with unhappiness. Patrick, not everyone wants what you want.”

Patrick rubbed the back of his neck, thinking of a new tack to take. “Okay, just listen to my thought here. You don’t have to say one way or another right away.”

“No, I’m just not interested.”

“No, no. Please listen and think. Think about the idea. Your voice, it’s great, has this sort of deep quality to it, I mean, Jonna’s voice was pretty and clear, but yours was always full, full of — I don’t know, something you can never quite grasp. I think that’s the kind of voice people want to hear.”

Alex couldn't believe this. Well, actually, she could. How could he not see what a wacked idea this was? "What, you want me to be in the Christian contemporary market or whatever you call it?"

"Don't be thinking I want you to do Jonna's material or anything. I'm not talking about being some tribute act, some kind of ghoulish cash-in. That's the last thing I'd want, I'd hate that. People would know you're Jonna's sister, it's not like we'd hide that or anything, but we'd start out from the beginning, build a whole new career for you, write new material. It would be a lot of work, I have to tell you that. And it might not work out. You always have to know all your work might be for nothing. But it's a chance for us to —"

"No matter how motivated you are, you can't turn me into a singer, Patrick."

"You're already a singer, Alex. I believe in you, I know you can do it. I remember that voice, it was heartbreaking, even when you were a kid. I can only think of what it sounds like now."

"There's a hitch, Patrick." Alex saw a crowd gathered across the street, surrounding some kind of street performer. She headed over, weaving through cars stopped in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Patrick followed her.

"What do you mean, hitch?"

The street performer was a woman in clown make-up doing acrobatics and juggling. She had a little black and white puppy beside her, jumping around with a chiffon neck frill at his collar.

"You also can't turn me into a Christian."

Patrick didn't miss a beat. "You're a Christian."

Alex laughed. "Maybe I would know whether I was or not."

"Maybe you've made some, uh, decisions I wouldn't have, but that doesn't mean you're not a good Christian. Your mother — you were raised —"

Alex draped her hand over his thick right shoulder. "I didn't say I'm not a *good* Christian, I said I'm not a Christian at all. I don't believe in it. Any of that God stuff. Jesus rising from the cross and the parting of the red sea and Heaven and Hell. I think it's imaginary. I thought you knew that."

Patrick bit his lip, looked at the woman performing. "She's really flexible," he said. Then he turned and continued along the sidewalk. "We'd, ah, I guess we'd never really...I just assumed."

"So, you can see why there might be problems with me singing all of Jonna's type stuff. It's just not gonna work."

Patrick started walking faster, running his fingers through his hair. "Well then, well then, that's difficult, that poses some challenges, but we can beat that. We'll make you a star in the pop market, I mean, it's

a whole different set of contacts, but Jonna did have that crossover period, I do know a lot of those people too, and in a way they are more honest because at least they aren't hypocritical. The greed, the screwing you over, it's more out in the open. I can't say it'll be easy for me to, you know, adjust to the different styles in arranging and songwriting. To be honest, the Christian market, it likes a nice tight formula, all you need to do is hit that formula, and I learned it, got it down pat. The pop market, it'll be tougher, there's all of that alternative stuff now, I'd have to figure out what kind of a formula is in it, but I'm sure I could work it out. Although. I don't suppose you like new country, do you? That's kind of closer..."

Alex had stopped walking about halfway through his monologue. He noticed she wasn't beside him, walked back to where she was standing. She was shaking her head. She put her hands on his face and pulled it down to hers, kissed him on the tip of his nose.

"Patrick, Patrick. I know you're doing this out of love, and because you're confused, you don't know what to do. So I don't want to disappoint you, but you'll just be much better off scouting for some other singer to develop. That way you can stick with what you know how to do. Build on the connections you already have. And you'll have someone who wants to do it. I don't want to do it. It just doesn't interest me."

He put his hands on her face, tilted it a little so as to best catch the day's dying light. He was imagining this moment as a photograph on a CD insert booklet. "Just think about it, that's all I ask. Just don't close any doors this minute, when we're both all thrown around."

He was just not a hint-oriented person. Missing clues was a strategy for him. "Patrick, it's all beside the point anyway, because I've wrecked my voice, from smoking and drinking. Even when I sing in the shower I sound like a piece of construction equipment."

"I don't believe that."

So she sang for him, there on the street. She sang a bit of Jonna's hit song, making her voice sound as strained and terrible as possible.

He had a new enemy now. An enemy he knew very little about. That was dangerous. You had to know your enemy. Know what he wants, how he plans to get it. Know his strengths, and how to avoid them. His weaknesses, and how to exploit them. Abbas was used to winning through brain power. It was really his only weapon, especially against a foe with the resources of the Net behind him. Abbas real-

ly didn't want to spend the rest of the day, after finishing his morning shift at the straight job, wheedling information out of his various unsavory contacts. He wanted to go home and plummet into bed. His aches and pains were competing with one another for status; it's always worse on the second day. He'd developed a flutter in the muscle directly below his right eye, the result of sleep deprivation. He was even thinking slowly. If he happened to find himself in a fight, he'd be at a serious disadvantage. Not that he thought a fight was likely right away, at least not from Gayth. But that was only a guess. He didn't know enough about his new foe to predict anything. So he had to find out.

He knew all kinds of rumors about the Net in general, but he wasn't about to rely on rumors. The Edge was a breeding ground for bizarre stories; anyone who believed even half of them qualified as clinically paranoid. Abbas needed the true facts. The difficulty was finding sources willing to talk. The Net was like God used to be; people were afraid to speak its name. Its members cultivated a reputation as shadows who killed in the night, with a whisper. Abbas needed to know how much was rep and how much was real. When he started on his rounds, Abbas already knew that it would be tough to get people to give him anything useful. And he was right.

First he talked to Agustin the Goose, his connection for off-the-rack drugs: the coke, heroin, and pills that made up the bulk of the Aries trade in Flowers Barrio. He knew that Agustin had Net contacts; if the Goose's source wasn't Net, his source's source was. Agustin was a cheerful, short-sentences fellow, an almost-respectable businessman. He fronted a half dozen illegal operations, operating under the benign (and well-compensated) neglect of the Al Amarjan authorities. Abbas liked Agustin. His greed was long-term. He wouldn't screw you for a dime now if he knew he could make a dollar from you tomorrow. That, right there, made him smarter than most criminals. Unfortunately, he was also too smart to tell Abbas anything about the Net. He sat smiling in his moth-eaten office, coolly denying that the Net even existed.

"It is only a rumor. What's that smell? Do you smell something? Perhaps a rat has died in here." Agustin the Goose was always clambering around his office hunting down wayward aromas. In his left hand, he waved a cracker with liver paté piled atop it. He seemed to survive entirely on crackers and paté, hence the nickname.

Time to try some logic. "So if I have a problem with the Net," Abbas started, "I have no problem with you, because of course the Net is only a rumor."

Agustin broke from his smelling campaign to give Abbas a look fraught with the unspoken. "If you have a problem with the Net, which is only a rumor, it was nice knowing you, Abbas."

The Goose would not be drawn out any further, so Abbas went to Sammy Shei-Mei, gossip columnist for *Al Amarja Today*. Sammy, a man who was still proud to be fat, knew everything that happened in Al Amarja. "The secret to knowing everything and not being killed, it is to know what not to print. Or say," he said to Abbas, as he turned down a trade offer for a piece of information about the inebriated behavior of a certain celebrity at Sad Mary's.

Next on the list was Giblets Granberry, a low-level hustler desperate enough maybe to cough up some facts in exchange for money. He sat on a park bench, adjusting an oil-stained Lacoste shirt over his belly, chewing a chocolate bar. Flies buzzed around him, confusing him for carrion. At least Giblets didn't try to pretend the Net didn't exist.

"Whatever you've heard, it's true. Whatever you need to know, I can't help you with."

Did Giblets know someone named Gayth Silver?

"Don't know him, would deny it if I did."

So he wouldn't know where this man lived?

"If I accidentally found this out, I would already have carefully forgotten it already."

Giblets also did not know how Gayth thought, what other crimes he'd committed, who his associates might be, or anything about his position in the Net hierarchy. Nor did he know anyone else who might know these.

Abbas had a similar lack of success with Cyclops Nabeshima (fence), Ivy Ivanova (panderer), or Buboe Bayat (you don't want to know). Abbas knew of other, more connected people who might know things, but he also knew they would have no reason to talk to him. What's more, they might be Net themselves, and might tell Gayth that he was nosing around.

It was discouraging, if not surprising. By now, Gayth no doubt had dossier on Abbas as thick as a computer manual. The Aries did not lead secretive lives. If anyone went around asking about him, there would be no one too afraid to talk. His neighbor, Mr. Palavine, probably talked Gayth's ears half off. As he dragged his feet upstairs to his apartment, Abbas made a note to himself: I must learn to inspire more fear. The fear of others is useful in so many ways. It was possible to inspire fear and still be honorable, surely.

When Abbas staggered through his front door, it occurred to him that Gayth would have an easy time killing him now, if he were again waiting inside. But Gayth wasn't there. Abbas made it to the bedroom and then fell into bed. He had time to think the following eighteen words: I must only nap, I must get up, go to the clubhouse, and practice sparring. Must be ready.

Then he fell asleep, and remained that way until morning.

Racing. In her room at the Hotel Bienvenidos, Alex was not sleeping. The H-bombic dose of caffeine in her bloodstream foreclosed on that possibility. Racing, racing. Three thirteen in the morning. She was physically exhausted, but her mind was racing racing racing running fast racing racing Jonna killed herself because of racing racing racing racing Communion racing racing racing she couldn't take the racing racing racing thought of not having that racing racing racing what if you built up a resistance to that feeling racing racing racing running running God, I need to sleep, I will be able to think better if I racing racing racing, cycling, turning over, racing racing racing, how come if that's the answer racing racing racing it doesn't feel like the racing racing racing racing racing racing racing how could she possibly racing racing racing need to sleep racing racing racing confirm this racing racing racing?

She got up and washed her face and peed for the tenth time in ninety minutes. She hated it when her mind got going like this. It just couldn't get stopped again. Well, it was the coffee, wasn't it? She knew this was going to happen and she thought it was worth it then but now she was racing racing racing paying for it and —

Alex let out a small scream of frustration, stamped her feet on the cold tile floor. She turned on the hotel room television and flipped between the few available channels. None of the programs held her attention. They made the infomercials back home seem exciting. She thought of maybe getting up and using the gym or something, but her body didn't want to be moving. Her mind might be on overdrive, but the rest of her was completely drained. She could go to Sad Mary's and try to wait the caffeine out, but the streets of the Edge were no place for her when she was this frazzled. She'd just have to bounce off the walls now and sleep it off the next day. She crawled back onto her sweaty, tangled bedclothes.

Communion. Take some more, Alex. Admit it, that's what you really want to do. That's really why you can't sleep. Because there's business you must attend to. Caffeine doesn't like unfinished business. If your mind to has anything to chew on, it'll race race race you into the ground ground ground. The last time, when the hallucination of Jesus touched your hand, you slept like the dead, for hours. Racing racing racing. That'll put you under. You're worried that contacting Jesus just because you want to sleep, that this would be some kind of racing

racing racing sin? “He’s not a sleeping pill!” Remember, you don’t even believe racing in him. He’s just a hallucination! It’s a drug, a drug just like this racing racing racing caffeine! Cross-medication, remember? Jump off one lily pad to get to the next. They’re just sitting there in your bag, those caplets. You’re going to take another one eventually. You’re going — racing racing racing — to take one tonight, you know that already. So get it over with and take it now.

Night. If only you could think as well at night as during the day. If only your brain didn’t racing racing racing change on you when the sun went down. Racing racing racing.

Screw this! Alex jumped out of the bed, turned on the lamp, scabbled like a digging squirrel through her bag, pulled out the foil pack, and before she knew it was swallowing another caplet, pushing it dry down her throat. Racing racing racing.

Jesus didn’t come. Jesus wouldn’t come. Of course not, stupid. Took him half an hour to arrive last time. That means you still have another thirty minutes. Which will feel like three hours. Before he even gets here. You should racing racing racing have taken it earlier! Gotten started!

There was a shimmering over the chair where Jesus had last sat. It pulled the light out of the already-dim lamp. Shadows moved around. Air shifted. The man in the chair faced away from her, was topped in a messy wreath of hair, was wearing a dark and smudgy robe.

“Is that you?” Alex asked.

“Don’t look at me,” Jesus said. “I’m bleeding again.”

Alex stood, stepped towards him. Stopped. “Bleeding?”

“Don’t worry yourself. It happens all the time. Just don’t look at me.” He was angry. Maybe this was the Communion version of a bad trip. Because she’d been feeling bad, full of caffeine and anxiety, now she was getting a Bad Jesus. This was a clue here — the experience was subjective! Wait a minute, she knew that already, she knew it wasn’t real.

Alex hovered over him, not knowing what to do. “That is you, though. Right?”

He shuddered.

“You’re scaring me,” Alex said.

“Maybe then you shouldn’t have taken that pill.” He seemed to pull the shadows in the room around him. It was even harder to see Him than when He’d first appeared. He shifted in His chair. His tone changed a bit, became softer. “I don’t wish to seem harsh. It’s bad for you to take those, you know.”

Alex sat back down on the bed. “Why are you bleeding?”

“People are given a choice between doing good and doing wrong. Always, there are some who choose evil. When enough of them choose to do this...”

“Do you mean me?”

“You are not the only soul in the world, Alexandra.”

It was the same kind of cryptic BS she’d been getting before. She decided to get aggressive on the hallucination, walk over and look at it. Disobey its wishes and see what happens. “But me, I’m contributing to Your bleeding, that is what You’re saying?”

She looked him straight on. Long streams of blood were sheeting down from a number of punctures along his hairline. The face looked the same as last time, but with deeper wrinkles. The eyes were dark and warm and sad. Injured. He looked up at her with a pleading expression.

“I don’t suppose,” she started, ashamed. He’d warned her not to look. “Is there anything I can — I don’t suppose if I got some bandages and some — no, that’s stupid, isn’t it?”

He reached out a bloodied hand for her, brushing against the extra-large T-shirt she wore to bed. She looked down at it, realized that the shirt bore an advertisement for Seagram’s Crown Royal. She cringed. Then realized she wasn’t wearing leggings or anything, just panties. Torn ones, at that. She turned red, jumped into bed, and pulled the sheets up over her legs. Then she started groping around on the floor for her track pants.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” He said.

“I’m sorry,” she said, apologizing for everything in general.

“If you are sorry, perhaps you could do me the favor of listening to some advice.” He said, swiveling towards her. The flow had stopped, but his face was still slicked almost entirely with fresh, bright arterial blood. “Please don’t take this drug any more.”

She’d found her pants and was trying to scrunch them on under the covers, but one of the legs was inside out. All she could think was what a total idiot she must look like. “It harms You, somehow, doesn’t it?”

The shadows swirled around His face again. “Whether it bothers me or not doesn’t matter. The question is whether it is right for you. My advice is to not take it anymore.”

“Does being contacted in this way, through the drug, does that make you bleed?”

His voice became indistinct. She thought He said, “It was long ago that I made My sacrifice.” But she couldn’t be sure. He looked like he was starting to fade out on her. That would make this a very short experience compared to the day before. She’d lost track of the point of

this. Why had she taken it? It had been a logical plan a couple of minutes back. Quick, she had to think what she wanted out of this.

“When you touched me like that, when you made me feel that Heaven feeling — you did that for Jonna, too, didn’t you?”

The fading stopped. “I can’t discuss what passed between your sister and Me.”

Alex pulled back the covers — she finally had the frigging track pants on — and lurched forward on the bed. “Why not?”

“Why do you think?”

“Why do you keep answering questions with questions?”

“I am a teacher. Why do teachers use questions?”

She wanted to tell Jesus to eff off, but even though she thought He was a hallucination she wasn’t quite prepared to go that far. And besides, she knew the answer. To make the other person think. She drew a big breath. “See, what I’m trying to decide is whether you’re real or not.”

She couldn’t tell if He was smiling, or if it was just a trick of the shadows. “And what have you decided?”

“I’m still trying to figure, but the fact that you won’t tell me things I don’t already know, well, that tells me that you’re just from my own mind. A hallucination.”

“I have another question for you.”

“Go ahead.” She was really losing her patience.

“You remember Sunday School.”

“Yes.”

“God is within you.”

“I remember being told that.”

“Which means God is within your mind, too.”

“Point being?”

“I can be from inside your mind, and still be real.”

“Sounds like bu— like philosophy to me, Jesus.”

“Long ago, I supplied all of the proof required. Now it is a matter of faith.”

Alex got up and started pacing the length of the hotel suite. His head seemed to follow her. She read either bemusement or sorrow in his posture. “You understand why I want to find her reasons, right?”

“Are you asking the right question?”

“I’m asking why my sister killed herself. And if she was taking these pills” — she picked up and rattled the foil card — “then you have some idea of why. If you’re really real. And not just the kind of phony, metaphor kind of real you’re hinting at.”

He didn’t take the bait, but instead, rose and looked out the window.

“There is so much pain out there,” He said. “It’s in the air, like humidity. Or smog.” Alex started hearing a tapping sound, wondered what it was. Then she realized that His bleeding had started up again. The tapping was the sound of blood drops hitting the window sill.

“Jonna was in a lot of pain, wasn’t she?”

He might have nodded a bit in response.

“And it was a pain that we just didn’t see, because we didn’t expect it of her. We had a whole different idea of who she was. Families, we have a set idea of what our relatives should be. I resent Patrick for it, then I go and do the same thing. So does everybody, maybe. From our friends, we think it’s interesting when they do things we don’t expect, when we see another side of them. But our relatives, we don’t allow that, they’re part of our identity, we don’t want them switching all around on us. I depended on Jonna to be happy. To be someone I didn’t have to worry about. Knowing she was happy, I figured, hey, someone’s happy, and maybe I could be, too.

“You can interject here at any time, you know.”

He kept looking out at the Edge. “You’re doing fine.”

“But because I saw Jonna as being what I needed her to be, I wasn’t seeing this mystery pain, the thing I’m now trying to identify. I feel like I let her down. Like if I’d been looking earlier, I could have turned her around long before she got to — the least I can do now is find out... And I don’t know, but it seems to me like You’re thinking I’m figuring out something new here. I’m not. I’ve been over this a million and a half times already, and I don’t have the faintest idea where to look next. There has to be more of an answer than just vague, general... The only clue I have is these pills, and all they’re getting me is silence from You!”

She flung the pill pack at His feet. He bent down, picked it up, turned it around in his blood-coated fingers. They seemed to confuse him, or tempt him somehow.

“I can tell You want to say something to me, I can see it in Your eyes. Just say it!”

He shook his head slowly, tossed the pills down on the bedspread.

“You are my only clue. If You don’t want me to keep taking the pills and bothering You, You’re going to have to give me something else to go on!” She began to cry, angry at herself for showing weakness. The tears made her threat look pretty lame.

He sat down on the bed. “What if I give you more questions? Will you accept them?”

She turned away from Him so He couldn’t see her crying. “Just say anything that might help me.”

“If I do so, will you think carefully about my request? About not taking any more of the pills?”

“Yes.” Just to think about it, that was easy to promise.

Jesus turned to face her. The blood on his face was gone. So was the blood on the window sill.

“You feel you did not know Jonna. Is that the root of your sorrow?”

“Feels that way to me.”

“Then the question is: How do you know someone?”

“What do you mean, how do I —?”

“Name someone you know well.”

“Uh, there’d be my friend Shanice, I guess. I don’t exactly get close to a whole lot of —”

“Shanice Johns, who lives on Grand Avenue in Saint Paul.”

She nodded. For a second, Alex was impressed. Then she remembered that of course *she* knew where Shanice lived. The hallucination still hadn’t told her anything she didn’t know already.

“How did you get to know her well?”

“We sat, and talked. A lot. Over a long time.”

“Can you know someone without talking to them?”

“No.”

“To look at another example: How do you know Me?”

“I don’t know you. I don’t even know whether you’re real or not.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m confused.”

“Before you took the drug, how did you know Me?”

Alex shrugged. “From the stories. From Sunday School, and from seeing them on TV and so on. Look, I haven’t exactly been what you’d call a religious —”

He held up a halting hand. “You know me from the stories. And what are the stories about?”

“About the birth of Jes — about Your birth, the crucifixion, the walking on water —”

“About things I did, and said. That is how you know me, from these stories passed down, stories that describe my actions. They are all you have to draw conclusions from. Yet they are all you need.”

“That’s not a question, but I still don’t understand what it is you’re trying to tell me.”

“Is Jonna by your side now? Can you spend time with her, talk to her?”

“No.”

“Then how will you know her?”

“I will find stories?”

He started to fade away. She rushed over to him, tried to wrap her arms around him, to prevent him from escaping. There was nothing

there to hold. “That’s total general crap, how do you expect me to...?” She choked on her words and her anger. She needed a clue! “You don’t want me to have to — to have to—” She grabbed the pill card, rattled it at his disappearing form. Which accomplished nothing. He was gone.

“I’ll give you a story!” She was shouting to an empty room. “You touched her in the way You touched me, You gave her that feeling, and she wanted to keep having it, but then You got uncooperative with her, just like You are with me, and You wouldn’t give her that feeling again, and she kept trying and trying and finally, when she realized that You were going to keep cheating her, she — she — that’s when she did it! That’s the story, all the story I need!”

She wanted to throw herself on the bed, to scream or to cry, but she wouldn’t let herself do it. She had to keep herself under control. Because she was admitting something to herself, something that made her hate herself. She wanted that feeling again too. And now that He’d left without giving it to her, she felt completely ripped off. Even more than last night, she needed it now. Why wouldn’t he give it to her? Was there some specific answer to one of His questions that she didn’t give Him? Was it some kind of —

“I should never have given it to you,” He said. She looked around for him, but The Voice was coming out of nowhere. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you give it to Jonna? Answer me one thing!” she shrieked. But no one answered. The guest in the next room thumped the wall to get her to shut up.

It took her a long time to get to sleep again, because soon her mind was once more racing racing racing. Maybe it softened the caffeine overdose, but that was it. She couldn’t find a comfortable sleeping position. Her knee hurt wherever she stuck it. Her arms cramped up on her. She was too hot with a sheet on, but broke into sweat chills each time she took it off. She got up half a dozen times to mess with the controls of the air conditioner, which eventually she concluded couldn’t be working properly. Somewhere in there, she went unconscious.

Urgent dreams tore through her, mashing together Patrick with Jonna and Jesus with the Arthur she met on the plane and her Arthur, all wandering through the airport trying to find her. She kept waving to them, trying to speak to them, but none of them could hear or see her. Every hour or so she would wake up again to pee, and then she’d collapse back into the same dream again, the dream ceaselessly frustrating and always a step ahead of her.

Turned out that the Jesus hangover had nothing to do with whether He gave you that Heaven feeling or not. Because the second one was even worse than the first.

At nine in the morning, Alex found herself half-awake and squinting at Jonna's travel alarm clock. Conscious of the room but still caught in her frustrating dream. Then at nine fifteen, her eyes opened and would not close again. They burned. She inched herself out of bed. She hurt all over. Alex found herself seized by the notion that her bones had gotten weak and crumbly, as if they might at any moment pop apart. She studied the tiny spots of peeling skin on her hands and decided that she had cancer. She knew better. It was just normal peeling skin. Skin dies and peels off all the time. She had a tough time fighting off the fear nonetheless. She caught a tremble that lasted for a good ten minutes.

She showered, the water as hot as she could stand, staying under the spray for what felt like half an hour, but that greasy, chalky sensation was even further into her than the day before. She felt like she'd never be clean again. She looked around and decided that the colors had all been stolen from the world. She could tell that her toothbrush was still red and her toothpaste still green, but there was just, just something wrong about them. Maybe it wasn't the color after all, maybe it was something else entirely. They didn't exactly seem real any more; that was it. If they'd faded right away on her, Alex wouldn't have been surprised. It was like discovering she'd been all along living in a movie studio back lot, that all of the items of her life were only props, and her house was just a big façade with nothing inside it. It's not that the hallucination of Jesus wasn't real. It was that *she* wasn't real. Even though she'd just stepped out of the shower, she ran the water in the sink until it was as cold as it could get, and then stuck her head under the tap. She had to wake up, to shake this feeling.

It was like years ago, with those other drugs. When all of a sudden she found herself wanting them too much. Except worse. She didn't remember ever being so strongly affected by any of that other stuff. This was some mean-ass chemical to be messing her up so badly after two measly little hits. No more Communion, ever, ever.

She was determined now, but what if the weakness fell upon her again? She marched right over to the bedclothes, where she'd last seen the remaining pills.

She hunted through the blankets and finally found the card. She was going to unpop every remaining caplet from its little plastic hut and toss them all right down the old flusher.

Then she saw the one thing in the room that still had a vivid color on it.

It was her T-shirt.

The purple and gold Crown Royal logo was just as bleached as any other color in the room.

But the bloody partial handprint, from where He'd touched her last night, its brown-red hue shone as if it was as bright as neon.

Alex quickly scanned the room for more evidence of His presence. There should have been enough blood around for two entire murder scenes. But the spot on the T-shirt was the only trace. The rest had all gone.

It didn't make sense, she thought.

But then, it wasn't supposed to make sense, was it?

This whole thing, she decided, it was a wrong avenue. Handprint, schmandprint, that was the lesson. The entire experience did have a point to it: it was telling her to move the hell along. Time to forget this nonsense and concentrate on something tangible. The weirdness of Communion and Al Amarja was making it all seem more complicated than it really was. Ignore all the freaky distractions. Just because there was a mystery didn't mean that it tied into *her* mystery. This was her sister, and Alex did know her. And by keeping both feet on the ground and her eyes out in front of her, she'd find the real story. She'd have to find more about what Jonna had actually been doing in Al Amarja. Forget the hallucination. Even if, in doing so, she was sort of following the hallucination's advice.

Ow, that made her head hurt.

Throb throb throb.

Which wasn't the worst of it. Now that she had the handprint, and knew that it all might be real (if beside the point), Alex really regretted taking the drug. It opened up a lot of doors. Ones that would have been better off shut. At least she hadn't gone through any of those doors, was still upright on the proper side of reality. Shaky, but vertical still.

Nope, she certainly wasn't going to go near Communion ever again. Whatever was waiting for her over the edge, it couldn't have her. Maybe it seduced Jonna, but Alex, she was more experienced at seduction, from both sides. She had better resistance built up. Two Jesus hangovers were more than enough for a whole life.

Alex told herself to remember her current condition later on. This was the feeling she didn't want to repeat. Later on, she knew, after the feeling had passed, it wouldn't seem so bad. Or so the voice of temptation would tell her. She had to feel her suffering, catalogue it, every ache and pain and nagging fear, so she could throw the catalogue at temptation when it came buzzing her doorbell again.

Temptation.

Alex looked down at her hands. There were the pills, still unflushed.

Tremble, tremble.

Okay, if she really meant never to take them again, she could flush them, right?

Not flushing them, though, that wouldn't mean she was going to take 'em again. It meant she thought she might need them to show to somebody, as proof of something.

No, that's just a rationalization.

A pretty good rationalization, though. Might even be right; might be useful to have them to show someone, sure.

But that wasn't the reason.

The reason was:

It was Alex proving to herself that she had the strength. What kind of determination was it not to do something if you were prevented from doing it anyhow? Because you'd already poured the stuff down the crapper? Flushing them, that would be planning ahead to be a screw-up. Assuming she'd fail the test.

No, Alex was going to pass the test.

If she got rid of them, she'd never know whether she was strong enough. She needed to be strong enough.

And of course she would be. She didn't even get any pleasure out of this last time. Just frustration during the thing and now this. This would not be any serious temptation. If she ducked this piddling chance to prove herself, she'd totally suck. Lose her confidence in all kinds of departments. Confidence being one of the only things she had going for her.

There was that voice way in the back of her mind, the one that was calling her a chicken. Saying she was afraid to open those doors. The Communion was forcing her to face all kinds of things she was too frightened to — Saying that not taking any more, that was the easy way —

That voice, it would have to stay in back. She would not even start to listen to it. It was just the voice of temptation disguising itself.

Temptation is the voice, when you're a real little kid, that sees the hot element, and knows your mother has told you not to put your hand over the hot element, but you stick it out there anyway, and she has to come screaming into the room and scoop you up.

Alex would have to scoop herself up.

Which meant not thinking about this any more, concentrating on what the whole point was, like she'd already told herself how many times now? Jonna, Jonna was the point. Solving the mystery of Jonna.

And the way to do that was...?

And the way to do that was:

Simple things. Basic clues. How did she spend her time? Who did she know on the island, other than Patrick? She had to know someone. Alex decided to start with the hotel staff.

Oh shit no, first thing, Alex had to ask Arthur about the handprint.

No, no way, she'd just decided the handprint was a distraction.

Not to mention Arthur was a distraction. There was no need, no need at all for him, and all of those feelings, to be dredged into this.

The hotel staff. Who did Jonna know?

A mega-cholesterol breakfast absorbed anxiety. Once Alex got egg yolk and toast into her mouth, once she'd chewed on some sausage and seen the little beadlets of grease gather on her plain white plate, she began to feel part of the real world again. The meal had tasted kind of cardboardy at first, but then she relaxed and poured on the salt and pepper and gradually it regained its normal flavors, returned her to a daytime frame of mind.

She was eating in the hotel restaurant, which was named the Smorgasborgia. The wait staff looked pleased as frigging hell to be wearing its Renaissance-themed outfits at ten fifteen in the morning.

Her server, whose name tag said she was named Dina, came back to refill her coffee. Dina looked Filipino.

"Is that decaf?" Alex asked.

She could tell from Dina's eyes that the pot wasn't decaf. And that Dina didn't want to go all the way back to the kitchen and get the decaf. Alex had waited enough tables to know the deal with decaf. She'd lied to more than one decaf-requesting customer herself, in just this situation.

"Yes, is decaf." Yeah, obviously lying.

"Uh, I think I'll skip the refill anyhow." She held her hand over her cup to make sure Dina was paying attention. She had made up her mind to avoid caffeine for a while, too. There was still a bunch of it lying dormant in her bloodstream, waiting to be all charged up again by a fresh dose.

Alex opened her purse, pulled out her wallet, and slid one of Patrick's ten-dollar bills towards Dina.

"Did you serve my sister over the last couple of weeks or so?"

The ten-spot both tempted and repelled the waitress. She had the look of someone who has learned not to answer questions.

"I'm sure you'd remember her if you had," Alex prompted. "She looked just like me. I mean, different hair style, I'm a pound or two skinnier, but we were twins."

Dina had served her, all right.

"She was the one who killed herself. In the pool, here."

Dina's hand zipped out and snatched up the bill. "I served her breakfast, yes. And sometimes lunch. I work morning shift."

"Did the two of you ever talk about anything?"

"I not talk much. My English not good."

"Did she ever try to start a conversation with you anyway?"

Dina averted her eyes, as if she were saying something shameful. "She talk about God. She say she singer. Give me tape of her music."

"And what did she say about God?"

Dina looked back at the kitchen. "I have to go."

Alex opened her wallet again, meaningfully.

"She say she wish she think things simple, like me. My English not good, but good enough to be insulted by what she say. Though she not mean it, that just make me more insulted. Stupid people. Not want to talk to her any more."

Alex handed her another ten. "Was there anyone else on the hotel staff who did want to talk to her about this?"

"Don't know."

"Was there anyone else on the staff you saw her talk to at all?"

"No, I not have time to watch her talk to other peoples."

Ding ding ding ding ding! Dina's face clouded over with her deceptive look, the same one she got when she said the coffee was decaf.

"You're lying, Dina," Alex said, as level as she could. She slid her a third \$10 bill. "Tell me who your sister talked to, and your name will never be mentioned."

Dina replied very quietly. "One of porters. His name Abbas."

IV

Until the dead woman approached him, Abbas had been thinking that this was going to be a better day. He'd gotten caught up on his sleep. He'd seen no more of Gayth Silver. Which meant that Silver was waiting for him to make the next move. Which meant that Abbas would have time to maneuver. He didn't exactly know what kind of maneuver he ought to be making, but at least now his head was clear. And he'd be ready for a fight if it came at him. So he wasn't out of trouble, but he felt at least now he had a chance. The solution would come to him, and then he would act on it. He was anxious to finish his shift at the Bienvenidos Hotel. Normally, the job was pure sugar. It gave Abbas access to many well-financed customers who wanted to buy his wares, but would never go near Sad Mary's. But now that he was a target of the Net, the day job was a liability. It tied him down to a set location during set hours. Made him too easy to locate. And it took up his time, time that had abruptly become precious. Abbas was half-convinced that he should drop the job until the Gayth situation had worked itself out. But Bando, the concierge, already wanted an excuse to get rid of him. Bando wanted to install a dealer who was offering to throw him a bigger cut. Bando wouldn't risk the wrath of the Aries by sacking Abbas without cause. But if Abbas just bugged off on him until the heat was off, Bando would have all the justification he wanted. The guests needed a reliable source of chemicals, after all. They represented a big chunk of Aries revenues, more than Hans or the others even realized. And it was easy money too, almost exclusively delivering standard drugs to clients with standard tastes. His hotel trade didn't carry the risks of the C operation, didn't really carry any risks at all, so long as Abbas kept the Peace Force and Bando paid off. Abbas was not yet ready to destroy the Bienvenidos trade in order to keep the C. If anything, just looking at the numbers, it was the Communion side he ought to dump. The product was lucrative on a per transaction basis, but there just weren't enough transactions. Drugs were a volume business. The numbers, though, weren't the issue.

For the moment, Abbas would try to keep both operations going. Letting Gayth spook him would be unwise for a dozen reasons. He had to relax, and remember he was a warrior. Once he punched the

Bienvenidos clock, he was going to head to the clubhouse, fire up his astrological software, and look for the direction. A clear and obvious solution would be waiting for him, laid out for him in the geometrical relationships of the planets. Certainty. The difference that made an Aries an Aries.

Then Bando paged him down to the lobby. Where the dead woman was standing, waiting for him. He thought at first that he'd covered his surprise. But he could read in her eyes that she'd caught him out. The woman looked tougher, harder, smarter than she had before she'd killed herself. She shook his hand, which she had never done before, and her grip was tight.

"You're Abbas Nadjafi?" she said.

He nodded dumbly. Ran down the possibilities. A woman was back from the dead, that made mystic shit a high probability. Or her suicide could have been some kind of hoax. Some kind of gaslight Silver was running on him, possibly. Or maybe this was connected to some other conspiracy, involved Abbas only peripherally.

"I believe you knew my sister. Can we talk privately somewhere?"

Abbas tried to keep what was left of his poker face. A twin sister, of course! He had been on Al Amarja too long. He had discounted the mundane, leapt immediately to the insane. He promised himself a vacation when he got through this. He'd visit his mother in South Lebanon, where everything was safe and normal.

Abbas pointed to a pair of leather chairs positioned in an alcove of the lobby. "Is that sufficiently private?"

She nodded, and the two of them walked over to Abbas' makeshift office under Bando's smirking gaze. Abbas decided to muss the man up, after he got back from Lebanon.

But first things first. He needed to place this woman. Perhaps he should take the initiative. "I assume you are here for the funeral. My sympathies are yours."

"Cut the crap," she said, pulling a half-used foil card of the product from her purse, "You sold her the stuff that killed her."

Remain calm, Abbas, remain calm. This is why you do this work, and not the others. Because you are calm.

"It is not a good idea to wave those around, ma'am. Please put them away." He watched her think for a moment, clearly deciding whether to increase the pressure or ease off. He should have picked somewhere more secluded. Where he would have more options in dealing with her. Though he couldn't assume she was foolish enough to follow him to such a place.

Alex put the card away, glad that she hadn't flushed the pills. This was the guy, all right.

"It would interest me to know how you learned who I was," Abbas said. He would speak vaguely, give as little away as possible, until he knew who she was and what she wanted.

"Someone told me you were seen talking with Jonna. Then I asked for you at the desk, and the concierge seemed to assume I was looking to buy some drugs. Then when I saw you — I've seen you before, dealing in that club across the way."

Abbas leaned forward. "I won't pretend I have no connection to the pills you were waving about. You caught me off guard, and there is no point in saying otherwise. However, those pills did not cause your sister's death."

"That's a load of crap and you know it."

As subtly as he could manage, Abbas scanned the lobby. In one corner, he saw something that got his blood to pounding in his ears: a man in a chair. All he could see of the man was his left leg. At the end of the leg, Abbas saw a Gucci loafer. The same make that Gayth had been wearing in his apartment. Abbas had to assume it was Gayth. Keeping an eye on him. Was the woman a confederate, or just a random fool? Abbas had learned his lesson: assume the mundane before the insane. She was a grieving relative with more guts than sense. A random element. Her actions could not be rationally predicted. "We are not in a good place for this meeting."

"I think it's a good place. You're a drug dealer, and I'm a retail clerk from Minnesota. I know enough to guess you do bad things to people, Mr. Nadjafi. I don't want to give you the chance to do any of those things to me." Alex didn't mind admitting she was frightened. The guy would know it anyway.

"What is your name?"

"Alex."

"Alex, I want you to listen to me very carefully. Yes, I sell drugs. You must remember, however, that this is Al Amarja. Here a drug salesman does not need to be a man of violence."

"That's why you wear that three-foot sword when you're hanging out in the bar, I guess."

This was not going to be easy. "It is true, I carry a big weapon. I am a member of the Aries gang. We are warriors. We fight, yes. We fight worthy opponents. To strike you here, or anywhere else, would not be honorable. You have nothing to fear from me."

She tried to interrupt, but he kept going. "When I tell you that this is a bad place to have this discussion, I mean a bad place for us both. I am going to stand up and walk away now. You are not going to call after me or raise any kind of fuss. You are especially going to leave those pills in your purse. Then you can go out and ask about the Aries gang,

and about Abbas Nadjafi. Ask at Sad Mary's. You will learn that I am a man of honor, that I when I promise not to harm you, as I do now, that you know I will not harm you. Later, I will send you instructions. And then we will meet, and you can ask me whatever you wish. Although, I am afraid, I do not have the answers you want."

He stood up, not knowing what he would do if she screamed or did some other crazy thing. She remained silent, still sizing him up. Still drinking him in with defiant eyes.

He stopped. He had to say something else. It wouldn't be the smart thing to say, but honor demanded it. He had to leave himself an out if he had misjudged her.

"My promise to you has one proviso. If I learn that you are Net, my promise is null and void."

He walked quickly out of the lobby. He hoped to see more of the man in the chair, to determine whether or not it was Gayth. Knowing one way or another would make a big difference in his projections.

The chair was empty. No way to know.

The day job had exposed him. It would have to be sacrificed. Good-bye, money. Abbas walked out the front door, scarcely hearing Bando's shouts after him.

The leg and the shoe, they did belong to Gayth. He knew about Abbas' day job. Aries gangsters were not difficult to learn about. Their theatricality did give them a high corporate recognition factor. High profile, though, is not always a positive; Gayth had learned that at seminar one. Gayth's current short-term objective: to personally get a feel for his man. Habits and activities. Anything to go into the profile. His initial presentation had not impacted Abbas according to projections. Gayth's original business plan had him with the drug and the data already in hand at this point. The flaw in the plan was attributable to bad research. Superficial. He'd figured Abbas for a type. A generic street-level punk: a bully and, therefore, a coward. Incorrect. Abbas was non-standard. Instead of folding like he was supposed to, Abbas was engaged in opposition research. Tsk³. Gayth had heard back already, from Agustin. From Giblets. This Aries was checking him out. Gayth liked to be the checker. Not the checkee. It perturbed him. Detracted from his focus. Abbas would pay a surcharge for that.

His intelligence-gathering mission was solo. Gayth could have tapped some flunky to keep an eye on Abbas, to report back. Which would mean requisitioning a flunky from upstairs. Which would be

stupid. He wasn't ready to let some upper-up cherry-pick his operation.

So yes, that was Gayth in the lobby of the Bienvenidos. He saw Abbas talking to Alex, and he figured her for a type as well. Saw her waving the pack of product around, threatening to generate a public relations problem for her associate. That made her for the usual flaky broad hanger-on. Probably the chick of the oppenheimer who'd concocted the product in the first place. Gayth could see the whole picture. The opp would be socially challenged; she'd be his interface with the world. Pushy, in your face, expecting everyone to be as afraid of her as the boyfriend was. Gayth had a past familiarity with babes like that. Their limits radar never quite worked right. They always went over the line. Disrupted the profit stream. Generated unpredictable cock-ups. Gayth remembered having to erase a chick like that once. Happened before his operation. She'd gotten under his skin a bit too much. Something about the bad smell of her breath and the contempt she showed for him. She'd made herself too interesting. So when the time came for Gayth to pink-slip her, she suffered more than would have been otherwise necessary. She'd ramped down his efficiency curve. Made him get emotional.

Gayth wasn't going to let this chick let him get emotional. She a fresh access point to the goal he was visualizing. And nothing else.

Alex, back again in that rotten hotel room, didn't want to touch the phone at first, thinking that Nadjafi might ring at any moment. It was silly, she knew. He'd told her to ask around at Sad Mary's. That meant he wasn't going to call her right away. Possibly he wouldn't call her at all; he was just giving her the brush.

So she dialed information. She had to; there was no phone book in the room. "Can I have the number for the Customs and Immigration office at the airport, please?"

She got the number and dialed it. The man who took the call identified himself as Dwayne. Alex asked to speak to Dinesh Rajpal. Dwayne explained that Dinesh was with a client. He took a message and told her he'd tell Dinesh to call back.

The phone rang fifteen minutes later. "Hello, is this Alex Sky? I am returning your call." Judging from the lilt in his voice, Dinesh seemed to consider her call a happy surprise. "It is Dinesh."

"Thanks for calling back, Dinesh. I have a favor to ask of you."

"I would be only too pleased to oblige, Alex."

"I need some information."

"Oh." His voice fell a disappointed half-octave. "Certainly."

"Those guys you were hanging around with the other night at the bar. The Aries gang."

"Uh, I would not say I was exactly hanging around with —"

"One of them told me to ask around. See if they have a reputation for being good guys or what."

"It is like I said, they are fine fellows."

"So if one of them, let's say this Abbas Nadjafi guy, if he says he's giving me his word, I'm supposed to actually trust him, right?"

"I would trust Abbas. I am not his friend. Just a customer. But, yes, I would trust him."

"Okay, thanks."

"I am, I am happy to be of service. Are you planning to stay on the island long?"

"I don't know yet. Is that a Customs and Immigration question?"

"No, no, just chit-chat."

"Well, like I said, thanks. Oh, wait. And by the way. Another question."

"Yes?"

"Communion. When you take it, do you feel really shitty afterwards? Like, cosmically shitty? Like everything bites, down to the cellular level?"

"Gracious, no. My experiences with Vishnu have all been very positive and enlightening. I feel like a feather lifted on air, for days afterwards. Often my feelings of bliss distract me from my work and make me much less cruel and contemptuous than our employee manual requires."

"Huh. So which do you think is typical, the hangover thing or the feather one?"

His voice brightened again. "Have you been taking the drug, Alex?"

"No, I just keep hearing it come up, in different — anyhow, I'm sure I've already taken up too much of your time, thanks a third time, good-bye."

Alex hung up the phone without waiting for him to say good-bye too.

So it would have to be Arthur again, after all.

She called information to get the number of the Pneuma Center, then called that number. Arthur wasn't there. He wouldn't be back until nearly closing time.

Just like him, wasn't it?

She left a message just in case. That made two calls she was now waiting for. Now she was really stuck. Sitting in the hotel room, with the pills. Though this time she wasn't tempted by them. Not even a little bit. Even though the second hangover had already faded. It had been more intense, but was over sooner. Didn't matter, she wasn't touching the pills ever again, but she was strong enough to take them out and look at them. Put them on the bedside table beside her. Peeked over at them every so often. Not ever feeling any more tempted. Every time she looked at them they lost their power over her by another tiny bit. They did. She imagined happy faces printed on their yellow coats. They were stupid pills. You had to be stupid to want them, to fall for the trick. Dinesh was proof, wasn't he? Not exactly the brightest individual known to mankind. Vishnu. Yeah, right. Feathery like a pillow. Or whatever he'd said.

She reached into the top drawer of the bedside table for the New Testament she'd seen there when she was looking for a phone book. She flipped it open to a random page and started skimming around in it.

The phone rang, waking her. She'd drifted away to sleep, the Bible in her lap. It took her a minute to remember where she was and whose call she was expecting. She groped for the phone, knocking the receiver off the cradle and sending it thudding onto the carpeted floor. She reeled it in by the cord and finally answered. It was Arthur. She checked her watch. It was about three o'clock. He'd called into the store to see if there were messages. What was it exactly she wanted from Arthur again?

Arthur said he was busy with a client. (Fleecing a client, she was sure.) Said he'd book a table at a restaurant if she wanted to meet him in the early evening. She shrugged and said why not. He picked a place called Murray's, and gave her uncertain directions to it. It was within walking distance, but tangled in a maze of twisting streets.

Alex got there first. She'd given herself lots of time in case she got lost, but she didn't get lost, so there she was. To kill time, she'd browsed for as long as she could at a magazine store that had a wide selection of magazines in languages she didn't read. There was another customer in the shop. At times, he stood just inches away from her, also thumbing through the magazines. Alex didn't pay him much notice. She had no idea who Gayth was. Or that he was following her.

Getting bored, she took her table at the restaurant. She ordered a club soda with lime. The place was dark and done in stained woods

with cluttered macho imagery all over the walls. Racing cars, paintings of boxers, a rack of crossbows, taxidermied hunting trophies. There was something odd about all of the waiters. It took her a while to catch on. After a while, thinking back on the maitre d' and her server, the timbre of their voices, she developed a theory that they were all female-to-male transsexuals. It seemed pretty hard to believe that anyone would set up such an establishment, but this was Al Amarja.

Arthur breezed into the room and took his seat across from her.

"Are all of the waiters female-to-male transsexuals?" she asked him.

"Oh, didn't I mention that?" He caught the eye of a square-faced, squat person behind the bar. Arthur explained that this person, the owner, was a friend of his. He made introductions. The owner's name was Murray Antoinette. Alex asked him if that was his real name, and he seemed offended. He explained that he and his employees made up a collective, a support community. All of them were now remorseful about their choice. They'd come together from all over the world to be together, amid the only other people who understood. He didn't explain how this connected to her question about his name.

"Testosterone, it's a bitch," Murray concluded. "The stuffed trout special is superb."

He left Alex and Arthur to their menus. Alex accused Arthur of choosing the place in order to discombobulate her. Arthur said, as nicely as he could, that he didn't think his friends at Murray's were in any way discombobulating. And besides, he picked the place for the reubens.

Ever since he was a teenager, Arthur had pursued the Platonic ideal reuben sandwich. He had eaten the perfect reuben while on vacation with his folks in South Carolina. He had never found it again since, never the right combination of sauerkraut, lightly grilled light rye bread, pastrami, Swiss cheese, and sauce. Some places served it cold. Some places substituted other meats. Others had dry, nasty bread. Mostly the sauce was never right. The sauce was crucial. When they went out together, Arthur dragged Alex to a large number of munchie joints in order to find the perfect reuben from his memories, but he'd never found it. She'd heard him tell the whole reuben saga to dozens of her friends. It had been cute at first.

"This is why," Alex was saying, "I'm never leaving Al Amarja again. I mean, not for good. I'm getting citizenship here. Because of Murray's reuben. He promised me he'll never change it. Murray knows what happens when you just carelessly change things."

There was something odd about Arthur's mood, Alex decided. He seemed somehow unrelaxed. Like he felt he had to perform for her.

Though it could be she just didn't know him well enough to judge his moods now. Could be he'd changed, with the years. Speaking of care-less.

She wondered about getting to the point, whether she should do it right away or wait till later. There was a whole restaurant meal to get through. She shouldn't have agreed to this kind of socially trapped situation with him. If she got to the point, then he'd be in control for the rest of the conversation. If she let things wander around...

Then he asked her about Jonna's service. She didn't want to get into it, really, but she had to tell someone, and once she got started... She found herself pouring out all of her resentments.

"And why'd you say Patrick wanted it a secret?"

Oh. No. She'd let too much loose. Now it was either helping Patrick in his lie, or blowing his secret. She hadn't meant to get off on this track. She should have gotten to the point after all.

"It wasn't a stroke, Arthur. She killed herself."

"Oh Jesus."

Arthur's lips went pale. Everyone should get a chance to look shocked like that when they find out, Alex thought.

"Patrick's trying to pretend it never happened, and I'm, I guess I've been going along with it, but I don't like the idea. So don't tell anybody. Not even in confidence. At least, until you see it in the newspapers."

Arthur nodded. "I should have..." His voice got thicker. He gasped a bit, then drained his glass of ice water.

Alex launched into another description of what an asshole Patrick was. If Jonna killed herself in a public place, she wanted people to know.

Arthur said: "Though it's been a long time since I — but she was always the one who seemed that little bit extra fragile, and no one else seemed really to notice that."

"Fragile?"

"Maybe you didn't think of her that way, Alex. I just always thought ... you know. She was always trying so hard to be everybody's favorite." He seemed to be having trouble swallowing his perfect sandwich.

"And that's fragile?"

"Well. It can be hard sometimes to play a role. And never get a night off. Maybe you wanna call that fragile, maybe you wanna call it something else."

Gayth, who was sitting in a car parked on the street outside, constructed his own interpretation out of what he could see through the restaurant window. He IDed Arthur as the chemist, one dressed a

somewhat slicker than the version Gayth had projected. Gayth put together a new scenario. The chemist, with all this new money on hand, had developed a case of confidence. All the nurturing the broad had done for her boyfriend, it was paying off a little too well. He'd gotten his act on the road, and he no longer needed her. Sayonara, ball-breaker. So now she was hitting back with the only weapon she had — she was threatening to blow his cover. And the meeting with Abbas, that was her trying to get him to somehow make the chemist stay with her. Interesting.

For the rest of the meal, through the first course and the dessert and the specialty coffees, Alex and Arthur kept it light and off-topic. Arthur did most of the talking, telling funny stories on people he'd gambled with, or weirdoes he'd dealt with as a mystical entrepreneur. In the stories, Arthur always came out on top.

Alex's point was finally gotten to as he walked her back to the hotel. And again it was a case of her not being able to tell only half of the story once she'd gotten started. Alex told him that she needed to know more about Communion. So, naturally, he asked what for. Alex didn't have a good enough lie ready, so she had to tell him.

"Jonna was taking it right before she died."

That stopped Arthur flat. He didn't think it was possible. He seemed more surprised and concerned than Alex would have given him credit for. He had to sit himself down on a bench, the news shocked him so much. He asked her how she knew for sure. She explained about finding the pills. She opened her purse, passed them to him. He turned the foil card over in his fingers. Warily, like it might be sticky or something.

(Too bad Gayth wasn't trailing them at this point. Arthur's obvious confusion would have screwed up his scenario completely.)

"Okay, so she has the pills. That doesn't mean for sure she was using," Arthur said.

Come on! She had them hidden in her tampon box. He was just like Patrick, Alex thought. Denying the obvious to preserve his image of her. And he didn't even know her really, just as a background character from a long-ago life. She wondered what it must be like from Jonna's point of view, to live a life where everyone needs you to be perfect for them. Family like us, old acquaintances like Arthur here, and then add on thousands of fans. Yikes. Alex had always felt a little sorry for herself being tagged with the old black sheep label. But at least there, when you messed up, you weren't surprising anyone.

Alex wondered if there was a moment before she and Jonna could remember, when they were both babies, when it had been decided that she was the bad one and Jonna, the good one. Maybe it hadn't come

from inside of them at all. Someone had cast them in their parts, and then their whole lives they'd acted like they were expected to. It's not like Alex could point to a reason why she couldn't stay with a job or a relationship. Or why she was just this side of being an alcoholic. That's just who she was. She wondered who it is who gets to pick who you are. Is it your genes, or some offhand comment somebody makes to you before you're even old enough to talk? What did it matter, anyway, if you couldn't do anything about it?

But what if Jonna had wanted to do something about it? What if she was tired of being perfect and wanted to go mess up for a while? That would explain her coming to Al Amarja; maybe she'd heard somebody talking about it as a garden of sin or something. She had never asked Patrick why Jonna had come here, she kept meaning to do that and —

“Alex?”

This was the second time he'd caught her drifting off on him. Though I guess that would be expected of her, too. In her current role, as the grieving twin.

“You were talking before about being stuck in a role,” she said. “I was just thinking —” And she told him what she'd been thinking.

He didn't have much light to shed on this: “Well, I really don't know, Alex.”

Great. Anyhow, she hadn't come to him for stunning insights on her sister, who he'd hardly known. She wanted to know about Communion. He didn't have much more to say than before; he'd never taken it. Said there were all kinds of weird designer drugs available in the Edge. It was kind of a test market for cutting-edge intoxicants. And most of them weren't quite worked out yet, and had permanent side effects he wasn't interested in applying to his personal body chemistry. Running the bookstore, and doing personal new age consulting, he'd run across people who'd taken it. Some of them retreated so far from reality that the only genuine relationships they had were with their visions. Others did it like they were shopping for a mystical experience like they'd shop for shoes, and treated it as just another entertainment.

It seemed like the more seriously you took the whole thing, the more likely it was to take over your life. It must have had some kind of big kind of impact on Jonna, then, because if she certainly took her personal relationship with Christ seriously. Alex tried to imagine what Jonna had said to her Jesus. Would she have gotten the Wood Grain Jesus, the Bleeding Jesus or another one entirely?

Alex asked Arthur: “You ever heard of anybody who took the stuff and saw whichever god they were looking for, and then got rejected? I mean, with the god telling them to stop?” Jesus had told Alex to stop.

She didn't even believe He was anything other than a hallucination, and it still kinda hurt her feelings. How would Jonna have reacted if He'd told her to go away?

"I hear it's pretty common. It's not as if most standard, big religions say that you can swallow a caplet, dial star sixty-nine and have a chat with the Big Guy. There are plenty of tribal religions that use drugs to achieve an ecstatic state, but most people aren't raised in those environments. I mean, the Judeo-Christian God, it's not even polite to use his name in most contexts, right? So just to pop over to Yahweh's place uninvited, ring the doorbell, that makes folks feel guilty. No wonder Jehovah tells them to take a hike."

Possibly, then, Alex had her answer. Jonna had gotten heavy into these hallucinations, came to depend on them, and then got the biggest rejection going. For Alex, just taking two of the things had unbalanced her thinking in a major way. And who knows how many Jonna had taken?

"So have you ever heard of suicides associated with it?"

"You get suicide rumors stuck to any drug people are afraid of. Do I know first hand of any suicides? No."

"But you're sure, though, that there isn't anything really real about these visions, right?"

"There's one thing on this island I've learned, it's not to rule out any freaky possibility. But yeah, I mean, it is just acid with an urban legend thrown in free."

"It's not acid."

"How do you know?"

"I remember acid, and this doesn't have anything like the same side effects. You get a hallucination, but none of the other —"

Arthur jumped right on that one. "Wait wait wait wait. You mean you've been doing them, too?" He still had the caplets in his hand. For a second, he thrust them out towards her, like he'd just been told they were highly radioactive. Then he maybe thought he ought to be keeping them away from her, so he pulled them back.

Alex hadn't exactly intended to bring this point up, but now that she had... She dug in her bag for the Seagram's T-shirt. "Do people ever report, like physical evidence? Independent things that confirm the fact that they're really meeting God?"

"People *report* all kinds of wacky caca."

She handed him the shirt. "See this stain? It's the blood of Christ."

"Jesus, put that away!" He stuffed it back into her still-open bag.

"Are you crazy?"

"Yes," he said, looking around. They had arrived at the Bienvenidos. "I live in the Edge. I'm not saying that is the blood of

Christ, but if it was, you wouldn't want to be waving it around out in the open. There might be all kinds of people wanting to take it away from you. Wanting to take the DNA and clone Jesus, there are all kinds of conspiracies who would find a good reason to do something like that. Here, we need to talk some more, obviously. Let's go sit in the bar."

Arthur had certainly gotten strange since they'd broken up. "Conspiracies?"

"Let's go sit."

Alex decided to stick with the non-alcoholic concept and ordered another soda with lime. Arthur went for a white wine spritzer. She was trying to get him to elaborate on the conspiracies thing, but he was sticking to generalities.

"Look, all I wanna say is you gotta be careful around here. Don't ever forget you're a burger. I was a burger for a long time, and it nearly got me killed on a couple of occasions. Almost as soon as I got here, some guy came at me with a wrench, and I'm still not sure why."

"What has that got to do with —"

"Be careful, is all I'm saying. This is a test market for more than just pharmaceuticals."

"You're talking in riddles."

There was a wild light in his eyes she had never seen before. "I gotta talk in riddles. And don't let your guard down with anyone. *Anyone*. Everyone is someone different than who you think they are. They'll turn around on you in a minute, and boom — they're trying to kill you or you're killing them. I make a good living here, and I got friends. And Murray's reuben. But the real thing is, I can't go back anymore, because my brain cells have adapted to this crazy air, I could never live anywhere sane again.

"Look, Jonna's funeral is done with, what are you hanging around for? Trying to solve some big mystery? Trust me, you aren't going to find any answers. I've known people who've had relatives commit suicide. Through my business. They're looking for answers, they say. What they're really doing is beating themselves up forever over it. I know it's hard, believe me, but you gotta just try to let this go."

"Thing is, I think I have the answer," Alex said. "I think she got dependent on Communion — not physically addicted, but emotionally — and then Jesus told her to stop taking it. And she of all people couldn't say no to a direct order from Jesus, right? So she found herself in a

state of twenty-four-hour-a-day Jesus hangover. If you ever want a wicked, wicked hangover, one that's just totally evil, try taking this stuff. She was in perpetual withdrawal. I mean, what's the thing that's supposed to be in the Bible? Hell is just being separated from God forever."

"That was Jesus' new definition of hell. The kindler, gentler hell."

"Kinder, gentler, my ass. It's what made my sister kill herself."

Arthur downed the remaining half of his drink and signaled for another. "Okay then, you've got an answer, so what are you waiting around for?." He was really agitated all of a sudden.

"My answer's just a theory. How do I really know?"

"There, there you go, that's the trap. You think you know, but you're not satisfied. You'll never be satisfied. There is no answer. What do you want, a bell going off? There are a million answers. And while you're on the island, you're at risk. You don't wanna be playing Master Detective here. If you're going around asking weird questions on Al Amarja, well, bad stuff can happen."

Alex thought of the meeting with the drug dealer. There was likely a message waiting for her at the desk. She thought of the last thing he'd said to her. Chances were asking this question would get Arthur even freakier, but she didn't have anyone else she could ask.

"Arthur, you were talking about conspiracies. Would one of these conspiracies by any chance be called the Net?"

He set his drink very carefully down on the Formica table. "Why do you ask?"

"I was talking to someone, and he said everything was going to be all right between us so long as it didn't turn out I was from the Net. So I'm just wondering what he was talking about."

"You're not mixed up with them?"

"I said, I don't even know who they are. I'm just curious to know."

"The rule is, don't be curious. Especially about the Net... You've heard of organized crime? These guys are, like, extremely organized crime. Very corporate. Think the Mafia, the Colombian cartels, and the Chinese triads all rolled into one and then gone Fortune 500. That's the Net. Don't get mixed up with them, *at all*. You'll promise me that, right?"

"Sure, I'll promise you," she lied. She thought about asking him about the Aries. But she already knew what she needed to know about them, at least she thought she did, and she didn't want to give Arthur any more clues about what she was up to. She didn't want him doing anything crazy, like following her around trying to keep her out of trouble. She didn't need anything extra to worry about. She was remembering the protective side of him now. How much care he always had for her safety, whether she was driving or skinny dipping in

Lake Harriet or just drinking too much. He was always prepared to save her. Like all of the good things about their time together, she'd let that slip from her memory.

Fortunately, distraction occurred. The bar was having a talent night, and the M.C. was blabbing over a microphone. Alex and Arthur let conversation slide and started watching the show. Alex reversed her earlier alcohol decision and ordered a scotch. She needed to relax, plus get Arthur to relax as well, so he wouldn't worry about her.

The acts were mostly awful. The two of them had a great time getting all sarcastic, cutting up the lousy performers on stage. It was like back when, sitting in a movie theater and making fun of whatever garbage was on the screen. They always had more fun at bad movies than good ones.

The evening dragged on, due to the extended, awkward gap between each number as the mostly non-professional performers fussed with their equipment, with the P.A. system, whatever else was around to be fussed with. These acts included:

- a fey Balkan man in white make-up who played what he called "space music" on a dinky electronic keyboard
- a poet named Burford who read, in a declamatory sing-song, epic verse detailing the precise processes undergone by a truckload of dead mink after their delivery to a rendering plant
- a trio of big-bellied East Germans performing a Merle Haggard medley
- a tiny West African girl who did magic tricks with brightly colored handkerchiefs (the best of the lot, really)
- a performance artist who called herself a "Karen Finley tribute act", threatened to shove canned yams up her behind, but didn't, thankfully
- and many more.

Alex was tipsy by the end of the evening, as the M.C. started calling for volunteers from the audience. A nasal-voiced teenager had just finished singing a Joni Mitchell song in Portuguese, badly accompanying herself on guitar. Arthur gave Alex an elbow nudge, misjudging its force and nearly tipping her off her chair.

"You can sing better than her, Alex. Why don't you get up?" he said.

"No, no way," she said.

"No, come on, come on," he said.

"No, I don't sing any more," she said.

"Come on, everybody, make her sing," Arthur said to the room, standing up. Since the other choice appeared to be another reading by Burford, who was dramatically sorting through his *oeuvre* a couple of

tables over, the bar patrons began to clap and clamor for Alex to get onstage.

Oh, what the hell, she thought. She stood up, borrowed the Portuguese girl's guitar, and mounted the stage. She sat down on the stool and wondered: OK, now what do I sing?

Her drunken mind told her that it would be a good idea to sing her offensive parody of Jonna's big hit, *All Lit Up*. Jonna's hit had an upbeat tune and lyrics so simple and annoyingly positive that many people found it impossible to get out of their heads once it had lodged there. During the summer of 1993, it had been impossible to go into a fast food outlet or through a shopping mall or past a patio without risking an earful of *All Lit Up*. Preteen kids, and moms, and grandparents across North America, the UK, and eventually half of the world ate that record up. Hip, alternative types (and sarcastic people in general) loved to hate this song, placing it right up there next to *It's A Small World After All* in the hall of saccharine infamy. Even these people couldn't bring themselves to hate Jonna the same way they hated, say, Milli Vanilli, The New Kids on the Block, or other similarly synthetic excretions of the mass culture machine. Even on TV, Jonna seemed real and sincere. That didn't stop Alex's friends from teasing her whenever they heard the song, as if she were somehow responsible for it, or maybe due for a piece of its royalty money. *All Lit Up* was already the exact opposite of what Alex thought pop music ought to be. Add in the teasing, and she became the person who hated it most in the entire world. She required a defense against it. So she started to sing again, picking up a habit she had dropped in high school, when she saw the first signs of her sister's inevitable success. She wrote new lyrics for the song, lyrics that introduced a narrative concerning sexual congress with ducks. This made the song much longer than the original, as it introduced several characters and then described in detail their search for suitable ducks, the eventual meeting between the lead characters and the ducks, and then their activities together. Alex called her creation, appropriately enough, *All Ducked Up*. It was very popular at parties. One of her friends, who was in a hardcore band called Hell Pez, even recorded the song on a limited release vinyl single. He got a threatening letter from Patrick's attorneys. Alex never knew whether Patrick had personally noticed the appearance of Hell Pez's *All Ducked Up*, or if it had just been one of those copyright infringement search services the bigger music publishing companies sometimes use. Patrick had certainly never brought it up; if he'd ever connected it to her, she didn't know about it. Then, as suddenly and omnipresently as it had arrived, *All Lit Up* vanished from the North American pop charts in October of 1993. Alex stopped getting ribbed about it, and forgot *All*

Ducked Up. She once again stopped singing, stopped borrowing friends' guitars at parties. The need had passed.

Now it was the only song she could think to sing. There were lots of songs that she liked, but few she could remember the words to. Her memory for that kind of thing had never been good. Only *All Ducked Up* was sufficiently ingrained her. So she started the opening chords. Alex played *All Ducked Up* at a much slower tempo than the zippy *All Lit Up*, so you could make out all the words. (Hell Pez's version was really fast, but it was hardcore, and you weren't supposed to get the words anyway.)

She looked through the blinding lights pointed at the little stage, saw Arthur and a pained expression on Arthur's face. It began to dawn on her that this was not a very nice thing to be singing, under the circumstances. So she had no other choice but to do it straight. To sing her sister's song, *All Lit Up*. She'd started it slow, so she kept it slow. She finished the intro, which was very simple to play, especially slowed down. Then she started singing. At first, she was just singing slow. But then she got to thinking about Jonna. About how this song, which had given simple joy to throngs of happy, uncomplicated people, would never again be the same. It would now be the ironically joyful song sung by the woman who killed herself. It would always remind you of sadness. Alex let that thought roll around the lower registers of her voice, and sang. Sang full out. Not to the bar patrons and their disappointed talents, or to Arthur, or even to herself. But to Jonna. Alex really heard her own singing voice for the first time, now that it was thick with both beauty and sorrow. She moved the microphone out of the way, projected her voice through the small pub area. Let it go out there naturally. As the sound left her body, Alex felt other things go out there with it. Her sense of anger at Jonna. Her anger at the world, or at God, or whoever, for letting her do it. It wasn't a sense of acceptance that was resonating through her, at least not quite yet — she still needed to dot a few i's and cross a few t's before arriving at acceptance. But it was the first stages, the starter reaction that gets all of the other ingredients going. Last night, with the hallucination, she had cried her tears. Cleaned out the wounds. Now that this mournful *All Lit Up* was rising through her, she could just get started on the recovery phase. As she rounded the bend towards the last chorus, she realized that she felt good. For the first time since she heard the news. Since she didn't know how long back, in fact.

Then she just happened to look over at the entrance to the bar, the archway between the pub and the hotel lobby. Standing there, leaning against the wall, fists clamped in white-knuckle anger, was Patrick.

Alex finished the song. Didn't bow exactly, just tipped her head a bit to let everyone know it was over. She was rewarded with reluctant, stunned applause. Alex didn't really care what the reaction was. She was hoping there was a second exit from the bar.

There was a second exit, and she saw Arthur slipping out through it. Good thing, too. Arthur and Patrick had never gotten along. This was already going to be complicated enough, with just the two of them.

Alex saw that she would have no shot at that exit. Patrick was already marching through the small round tables around the bar. His hands were rabbiting around, looking for something to shake. He stepped up onto the stage, leaned into Alex's ear, and hissed:

"You lying small bitch."

Alex grabbed the microphone stand, said into it, "Everyone, Patrick Sky. Patrick Sky, everybody. He co-wrote that song." Then she handed the microphone to him. He stood there, with mike in hand, looking into the lights, suffering from acute confusion. Alex hopped off the platform and made her circuitous but speedy exit from the club. Patrick, frozen, just watched her go.

The M.C., infected with Patrick's confusion, edged up beside him and asked, "Are you going to be performing for us, too, sir?"

His words broke the spell, and Patrick rudely shoved the mike stand towards him, following Alex off into the lobby. He arrived there fast enough to see her leaving, hitting the street. Taking long, swift strides, he was soon caught up with her.

"You lied to me," he said.

Alex found it hard to speak. While she was singing, she had been getting somewhere right, somewhere important. And now instead she was back in the middle of guilt and frustration and not being good enough.

Because Alex said nothing to him, Patrick again said, "You lied to me."

"I had to lie to you."

Patrick grabbed her by the arm, tried to spin her around. "At least look at me while I'm talking to you."

She wrenched her arm out of his grip. It hurt. "No. I am not having this conversation with you now."

He grabbed her again. She freed her arm again. She looked around the Plaza of Flowers. She saw a guy standing off to one side of the line-up for Sad Mary's. He looked a little like Thorvald. He wasn't really Thorvald, but that didn't matter. She pointed him out.

"See that guy over there? His name's Thorvald, he's a bouncer, and we got to talking the other night. You grab me one more time like that, I'm calling him over here to push your face in. Even if you are half my

brother.” Alex regretted that last bit before she was even done saying it. Patrick always got very offended when she reminded him they were step-siblings. Then she didn’t regret it. He’d been hurting her for long enough. If he was going to keep on like some kind of lunatic, she’d just plain run out of forgiveness for him. It was time to stop being understanding and start looking out for herself.

Patrick turned away from her. His voice was uneven: “All I’ve done all my life is be the right kind of brother to you. To you and to Jonna. And now I have nothing. You won’t even speak the truth to me.”

“The truth is that there is no way that I’m going to become a singing act for you.” Alex saw a bench so she plopped herself into it. Then she realized that she’d sat in something moist. She slid over to one side. Patrick took it as an invitation to sit next to her. He sat himself down, right in the wet spot. He was too wrapped up in his feelings to notice.

“Why didn’t you just —” Patrick didn’t finish the rest of his sentence, which was going to be *you tell me that in the first place*. She had told him that. And he hadn’t wanted to hear it. That’s why she lied to him. He was wrecking everything. Trying too hard. There had to be a right thing to say. Something to get her to, first of all, like him again. And then maybe even look at his invitation, see that it wasn’t such a terrible idea. Even if she decided not to do it, she could at least admit that it might not be so awful.

“Sorry, pardon me?” Alex knew damn well what the rest of that sentence was supposed to be. Was ready, willing and able to jump right up on top of it.

“Alex, you’ve got to understand that this has been hard on me, too. More than hard on me —”

“You think I haven’t figured that out?” She bolted up to her feet again. If he wanted to do this, at least he’d have to follow her around.

And on they went. As Alex circled through the neon-bathed shops and cafés of Flowers Barrio, with Patrick on her heels, they went down through the worn litany of half-articulated complaints, too-quick comebacks, and pleas for the other one to...*just...frigging...listen* for a moment. It was the same old thing, except this time it was an omnibus of every argument they’d ever had, faster, more hurtful, more disjointed than it had ever been before. They both wanted to break through to the other, to make the other see, to find the magic formula that would put everything sliding into place for the other person. And at the same time, they both watched themselves putting on the same old armor, striking the same old poses, running up the same old flags.

Finally Alex thought, why am I holding back? How could it possibly get any worse? So she said the thing she’d always wanted to say

straight out. She'd said it to him, partially, a thousand times, in hints or in sideways fashion. Now she just out and said it:

"You've been making me feel like dirt my whole life."

Patrick stopped. For a brief moment, her words stabbed through him. They seemed true, possible, new. But they stung too badly, so he swatted them aside, and said:

"No I haven't."

"What do you mean, 'No, I haven't?'"

"You're just feeling sorry for yourself, like always."

"And what do you think it is I feel sorry for?"

"I don't know. Don't ask me to explain you. Whatever your problems are."

Alex found herself screaming and pointing at him, jabbing a finger between his eyes. She nearly actually made contact with his forehead. "YOU! You are my problem!"

He turned away from her. "No chance. Nobody is anybody else's problem."

"And you were probably Jonna's problem, too," she said, and started away again. She didn't know what it meant, had said it only to hurt him.

It worked. He came barreling after her: "What did you say? What did you say?"

"I said what I said." The iron-clad scumsucker. She was stuck with him forever. Even if he died right now, keeled over from a heart attack on the spot, he'd be a voice in her head for always. Telling her she was the one who made the faulty choices, who spit in the eye of everything people were supposed to be. Everything she did was wrong.

"Take that back!"

"Seems I got to you there." Let *him* feel that everything *he* does is wrong. That would be her new project. She'd make Patrick feel as miserable now as he'd made her all this time. Every chance she got, she'd call up and remind him what a shit he was, what a loser he was now that he'd let Jonna die. Now that he had nothing.

She'd never be a voice in his head. She wasn't alive when he was a real little kid, to get that far into him. But she'd come as close as it was possible to come without —

"Are you even listening to me?"

"No, no, as a matter of fact I was thinking."

"Thinking?"

"Writing in my head."

"Writing...? At least try to make sense —"

"I am thinking about the book I am going to write about you and Jonna. Now that I realize that it's your fault, that you drove her to it.

I'm going to find out exactly how and why, and then I'm going to write the fattest fucking exposé the world has ever seen, and I'm going to cruise around the world on the yacht that book buys me." She got right up in his face, so close she could see small spit drops flecking onto him, to deliver the capper: "It's time I started earning back, for me and for Jonna."

Patrick roared, reared back, and lashed out at her. At the last moment, he diverted the path of his fist, so that, instead of pegging her square in the face, it smashed into the stucco wall behind her. He howled silently, grabbing his fist. He'd cut his fingers.

Alex looked down at him, summoned up all the calm she did not feel, and said: "That's going in the book."

She turned and marched back in the direction of the hotel. Patrick finally realized there was no sense in following her. He shouted after her, the pain in his hand so great that for some reason he had to stand on one leg, like a flamingo. "Don't you understand. The point is, I didn't hit you. I didn't hit you!"

Alex veered off. She didn't want to go back to the hotel. It's not like she could sleep now. She'd just be going over all the things she should have said, or should have said better, for half the night. And she'd be alone in the room with those pills. And right that minute, she knew there was nothing about this she wanted to discuss with a hallucination of Jesus, but how she'd feel after two or three sleepless hours was another question, so she went to Sad Mary's instead. For other temptations, the kind she could handle. The old reliables.

The hallucination, though, had other ideas. It was hungry to find her. There were mistakes to correct. It shouldn't have pushed her away like that. Being a hallucination was new and strange. An unfamiliar means of reaching people. Communion was an unexpected development. The hallucination didn't like it. It was important, though, to understand those who took it. Taking it was a way of saying that help was needed. The hallucination should always be ready to provide help. Alexandra Sky, so far, the hallucination had not helped her much. The hallucination wasn't permitted to solve any problems. Like everyone else, Alexandra Sky would have to choose between right and wrong. The hallucination could, however, provide guidance. To this point, its guidance of Alexandra Sky had been lacking. The hallucination was out of practice. It would have to do a better job, overcome Communion's alien demands. Being even half-real, after all of this

time, it was unsettling. Like all men, the hallucination had to struggle to get things right. It would have to allow itself to feel its infinite love for Alexandra Sky, let that inform its counsel. This was oddly difficult, now that the hallucination had been poured into this unaccustomed vessel. It would have to ignore the intoxicating sensation of being back in the world again.

Alexandra Sky was not in her hotel room. The hallucination went looking for her. It followed the scent of her rage and pain. The scent was faint down the hallway and into the elevator. It got much stronger in the lobby, especially over into the bar.

The bar was difficult. So many other strong emotions there, belonging to other people. The strongest belonged to Patrick Sky. Undiluted fury; it burned. The hallucination hoped that Patrick Sky would soon try to reach him. In the conventional way, of course, as Patrick Sky had always done. Patrick Sky hadn't prayed since Jonna Sky had killed herself. That concerned the hallucination. Patrick Sky was adrift now. So many people were adrift. That is why the conventional way is better, the hallucination thought. The conventional way made it easier to reach everyone. Self-serve, they would call it, these days.

The hallucination sorted through the emotions in the bar, looking for Alexandra Sky's. He found Arthur Pendrick's confusion and guilt. He found emotions belonging to other patrons: lust, envy, fear, compassion, exhaustion, hope. Alexandra Sky's emotions were hard to locate, because they were a tangle of everything. Paradoxes, all of them. Acceptance/denial. Sorrow/anger. Pride/self-hate.

Once the hallucination found the tangle, he followed it out onto the streets of the Edge. It twisted around from one laneway to the next, getting hotter and hotter, until her rage seared as bitterly as the simpler, more consistent trail that twinned hers: Patrick Sky's trail.

The hallucination followed the trail until it unwound itself and headed into Sad Mary's. Sad Mary's would be difficult. It would be hard to find her, and then hard to communicate with her. There were too many distractions, all the dark emotions eddying around inside the night club. Maybe the hallucination could convince Alexandra Sky to return to her hotel room. The connection between them would be easier to manage there.

Before Jesus went inside, He looked up at the marquee over the bar. Jesus saw the weeping statue of His mother up there. The statue was both blasphemous and somehow appropriate. Another paradox. This is why He had been born human. So He could understand paradox. Since He was Himself a paradox. God/man. Divine/imperfect.

As He searched for Alexandra Sky, Jesus passed Gayth Silver. The man wanted to sell Communion everywhere, to make money. Unconcerned with the fact that millions would be put in the dangerous position Alexandra Sky was now in. Jesus didn't like that, but there were many things that people did that He didn't like. Gayth Silver, and the others whose paths intersected his, would have to make their own way. Jesus couldn't interfere. Perhaps it would all come out well. Jesus loved Gayth Silver, even though Gayth Silver didn't love Him. There was always a chance that Gayth Silver might one day be turned to love. Jesus had to admit that the chance was very slim. There were many like Gayth Silver, determined to take the other road. Jesus shed tears for them. But He couldn't guide them, until they asked.

Jesus found Alexandra Sky's trail. The trail led over to a bank of tables in a dimly-illuminated corner. She was drinking, alone. Punishing herself some more.

Jesus approached her. Felt itself changing again, as the power of the Communion still in her system began to work its effects. This aura of pain around her, it was going to be a challenge. The pain would try to reshape Jesus. Was already doing so. Jesus would have to work hard to maintain itself, to get the correct message across. No bleeding this time. No telling her to go away. No gifts of unfathomable joy. Do not let the means of communication change the Truth of the message.

The fight with Patrick had sobered her up, but a scotch or two fixed that nice and quick.

The first scotch she spent forgetting the threat she'd made to Patrick. Write a book about Jonna? That would hammer Patrick, but it would also be against everything Alex was. Like usual, she was already wussing out on her plans to avenge herself against him. She could maybe for a while act like she was writing the book. That might be enjoyable. But eventually it would become apparent; she'd just been making another empty threat. And then everything would go back to normal again. Patrick would rack up yet another victory. He'd always win, because he was a voice in her head. That's the way things would always be. Patrick would always win. So the best and only thing Alex could do was try to forget, try to fill herself with something else.

The second scotch she spent scanning the bar for something else. A guy to take her home. The only people she had to talk to on the island were walking reminders: Patrick, Arthur. More reminding, that's what she didn't need. Maybe if she met somebody else, with

friends and relatives, new stories, a new life to tell her about... It always got stale after a while, but Alex wasn't going to be staying a while. All she needed was someone to sidetrack her temporarily. However, the prospects in Sad Mary's right then were limited. She wanted an afternoon guy, but the place was full of night guys. The ones she checked out all looked like carriers of infectious diseases, wanted criminals, or both. (She could have sworn one guy had a withered eyelid in the middle of his forehead.) There were a couple of nice-looking men a few tables down, but they were holding each other's hands, so Alex didn't figure she had much of a shot there.

Then a young man in a leather jacket, with nice puffy half-dreads and John Lennon glasses, started heading over towards her. He looked good. His eyes, especially, had something inviting about them. She could have done without the obligatory scraggly goatee, but that was just being picky. And best yet, he was coming to her. She smiled at him. He smiled at her. And that's when she recognized him.

It was Jesus. He sat down. "I've been looking for you," He said, positioning an affectionate hand on her forearm.

The Communion. It was flashing back on her. She thought she'd beaten it, but it was coming for her now. In public. She was completely losing it.

She stood up in order to run away. Jesus stood, too. He still had His hand on her arm. He was restraining her, preventing her from going. It wasn't like the rough, clamping hand Patrick had laid on her earlier. It was soft and firm; unyielding and loving.

"Please sit down. I must speak to you."

"You're a hallucination," she hissed at him, as if He was really there. She looked around at the other patrons of the bar. Would they look at her like she was crazy, talking to an imaginary friend?

"Don't worry. The others will pay no mind," He said, answering her unspoken question.

The mind-reading was not reassuring. She stayed as still as possible, hardly moving her lips: "You're just in my mind." No matter what, she wasn't going to let anyone else know she was having a freak-out. It would be like soiling herself.

"I'm in your heart. That's what I'm here to say." He was looking very beautiful this time. Light glowed faintly around him, most notably around his head. "I'm in your heart."

She put her head down. "Thanks for the message but I didn't call on you. I didn't take any Communion. Really."

His hand got warmer on her forearm. "I have come to you this time. I left you with some incorrect impressions."

Now I've done it, Alex thought. I've driven myself insane. It's permanent.

"I must explain several things to you. First, you must know that this is very difficult for Me. This method of contact between us — it is not the best method. Prayer is best. I am not used to this. To being so close to everyone's fears and expectations." He looked around the bar. "All of these passions, confusions. They make Me vulnerable in a way that I should not be. Even with one person, with you, alone, I... The communication has become distorted. It is impure."

Alex's throat was drying up on her. "I promised I wouldn't take any more. I promised already."

She looked up at him again, and already he looked different. His hair had straightened, had gotten shot through with gray. His features were becoming more vague, somehow. "Please, can we go somewhere else?" He said. "It is extremely difficult for me being, around all of the others." With a shrug, he gestured indistinctly to the other patrons of Sad Mary's.

"The hotel room, we can go back to the hotel."

"Yes, then. That is what we should do."

Jesus stood, and so did Alex. Together they wove towards the nearest exit. Then Alex saw the door to the ladies' room, and, before he could catch her, bolted through it. There was someone in one of the stalls, but no one else at the sinks. She rushed forward, opened the cold tap all the way and splashed water up into her face. She dripped big wet spots onto her top and the thighs of her jeans.

"Do not run from me," Jesus said. He was visible in the mirror, but could not be seen in the room itself. He was back to looking like a warm, pastel, Sunday School illustration given three-dimensional form. "That would be a mistake. I must put things right between us."

She closed her eyes, but the voice kept going.

"I know you are frightened. I knew you would be frightened. But I had to come to you regardless, because your soul is in danger. You have misinterpreted the meaning of our encounters. I do not seek to drive you away from Me. You must come to Me, as everyone must."

Alex opened her eyes, punched out at the mirror. She imagined that she would crunch a series of great spider-web cracks into it, radiating out from the point of impact. That she would cut her hand. But the punch wasn't strong enough. Her hand hurt, but the mirror was still intact.

Jesus looked very sad. "Don't fight me," He said.

A woman with huge mascara-like blotches tattooed on the bags under her eyes stumbled into the bathroom. She took one look into the mirror and began to wail: "Oh, I sorry, I sorry, I have no idea I am tak-

ing it again, I am been dosed under no will of my own, I know am not supposed to look away or leave a drink unattended at this place, but I swear I not done this intentionally to contact you again!" Alex couldn't place the woman's accent or ancestry.

Alex looked at the hallucination of Jesus. It looked confused, too. Frozen. Just like Patrick had been on the stage, when she handed him the microphone.

The woman had sunk to the rank, damp tiles of the bathroom floor and was abasing herself in front of the mirror. Alex grabbed her by the shoulder, shook her gently.

"What do you see in that mirror?" Alex asked her.

The woman looked up at her suspiciously. Absurdly, she said, "Nothing."

"Then what are you doing —"

The woman pulled Alex's ear close to her reeking mouth. "Anubis, of course. You see Anubis, too, don't you?"

Alex ran from the bathroom. She walked as quickly as she could back to the safety of the hotel. She didn't bother to look for predators. She just went.

Alex unlocked her hotel room door and cautiously switched on the lights. Jesus was waiting for her, lying on his back on the bed. She'd more than half expected him to be there. He jumped, pulled a pillow over his eyes to protect them as they adjusted to the light.

Alex got an idea. How to get rid of him. She threw herself down on the bed beside him. She curled up to his back, spoon fashion, and wrapped her left arm around her chest. Jesus sat up.

"You said I should draw close to You, right?" Alex accused.

"You know that's not the meaning."

Alex pulled a pillow over her own head as Jesus sank into the chair opposite her. She thought she should keep up her tactic of being the wrong kind of close, but even though she knew this was a hallucination, and she didn't believe in what this was a hallucination of, she still thought it would be wrong. It would mess her up worse.

"I'm going to feel awful tomorrow, thanks to you."

Jesus was looking small and old. Jesus was troubled by an observation that had nothing to do with Alexandra Sky: when He walked in the world, He had never gotten a chance to know old age. Empathizing is one thing, but truly feeling it...

The hallucination heard Alex again: "I'm tired of those hangovers you give me."

"I'm not the one giving you that bad feeling. It's you. You're fighting Me. And therefore, fighting yourself. Stop fighting yourself, come to Me, and you won't feel that way tomorrow."

“Did Jonna have hangovers?”

The hallucination bit its lip. He wasn't supposed to share that sort of information. Like the bond between priest and confessor. He had already, though, done so many things incorrectly while under the influence of this drug. Perhaps it was necessary to do one wrong to remedy another.

“No,” Jesus answered.

“She didn't?”

“No.”

“Did you reject her? Did you send her away?”

“I told her what I told you. That she must stay at My side. But not with this — this Communion.”

“Is that why she killed herself?”

“I don't believe so.”

“Why did she kill herself?”

Jesus was gone.

Again it took Alex a long time to get to sleep. There was just one simple thought going through her mind, on a tape loop: you're permanently insane now. Permanently insane now. Permanently. Insane. Now.

Pendrick had been easy to find. Using a palm-sized camera, Gayth had snapped a picture of him leaving Murray's. Ran the photo through the master database back at head office. Employing the database was a little risky. If one of the higher-ups indeed had Gayth under the microscope, said higher-up might be keeping logs of Gayth's sessions. Gayth had a choice little program that was supposed to disguise his activities on the network. That is, if the oppenheimer who'd coded it for him was really in his pocket and not somebody else's. Gayth was looking forward to the fruits of this operation. Once it all came together, other people would have to worry about Gayth watching them.

Pendrick's database entry displeased Gayth. The facts contained in it stubbornly refused to conform to his scenario. Pendrick was no chemist. He was well known to the Net as a grift artist working the alternative spirituality circuit. He'd helped a number of wealthy gulls to transcend their wallets. Pendrick was even marked down as a potential recruit.

So Gayth was just as far as ever from the source of the drug. Pendrick, as owner of a new age bookstore and consulting firm, was in an excellent position to retail the product to its target market. It could

be that he was Nadjafi's distributor. On the other hand, there was just as much chance that both he and the Aries gangster were separate retailers both supplied by a third party.

Like the chick. She was the key. Gayth still had her pegged as the connection to the chemist. Problem: she didn't show up in the database. A search based on her photo yielded exactly squat. He would have to find out about the chick. Pendrick would tell him. Pendrick's was the dossier of a clever man. Too clever to hold out, once Gayth acquainted him with the full parameters of the situation.

Gayth straightened his posture and crossed the threshold of the Pneuma Center.

Arthur was working the sales desk alone when Gayth came in. He sensed trouble right away. The guy's attitude was combative, insisted that you respect him. Arthur had seen this stance before. Usually it belonged to someone who thought Arthur had ripped off his or her spouse, friend or relative. Arthur was well-rehearsed in dealing with this circumstance. Usually Arthur really had ripped off the absent third party in question. Usually he was able to arrange to rip off the new, confident, complaining person as well. It was all a matter of staying friendly. People want someone to understand them.

"You're Arthur Pendrick," the raven-haired man said. More than a statement of fact, less than an accusation. Arthur wondered who the man might be representing here. Dzamilla? Kunigunde? Business had been slow lately. There weren't many injured parties to choose from.

"Yes, that's me." Arthur smiled and stuck out his hand. "And you are...?"

Gayth insinuatingly slid his fishy palm into Arthur's. He leaned forward and whispered: "I represent certain. Influential. Business interests." Gayth held onto Arthur's hand.

Two years ago, Arthur thought, I would have my pants totally down here. If Arthur were still a burger, he wouldn't have been able to decode those words. Now he knew the layout. He was dealing with the Net. He'd expected an approach eventually. He'd made too many juicy scores to escape their attention. This was about something else, though, something involving Alex. She'd been asking about them, after all. Arthur could believe in lots of different things, but not in coincidence.

"Want a coffee?" Arthur asked.

Gayth released his hand. "Thank you, no."

"Then I suppose we should get to it, right?"

Gayth looked around. "We should speak in a more amenable environment, Mr. Pendrick."

"Didn't catch your name there."

"I am Gayth Silver."

"Okay, Mr. Silver, thing is, I'm the only one here in the shop right now. My assistant arrives at 11:30. We can arrange to meet some other time, or we can talk here. It's nice and quiet. Usually pretty dead here, weekday mornings."

Gayth looked around. Probably for a security camera, Arthur thought. Arthur did have a hidden cam, installed in a false ceiling panel. It wouldn't be much consolation if a Net guy decided to put the hurt on him, though.

"Very well, Mr. Pendrick. I'll get right to the point. Communion. You sell it, we want to buy it. Buy all rights, that is, the entire franchise. I'd like to start by clarifying an issue or two."

Arthur rolled his eyes. It wasn't because of Alex after all! "Jeez, not Thorvald again." All for one stupid spilled drink. This was the second time the guy had tried to screw with him. This time it wasn't a joke.

"Pardon me?"

"That idiot from the Aries gang. You asked him where to buy C, and he sent you to me, right?"

The Net guy's eyes didn't exactly light up with recognition. "Thorvald?"

"Thorvald Bladh, the Aries guy. Friggin' moron. I bumped into him the other night at Sad Mary's — I mean, like, whacked into him, spilled a drink on him. And he's, you know, the size of a jitney, so I tried to placate him, offer him and his pals a discount on some astrology books, right? So what does the friggin' guy do? Whenever anybody comes to him asking to buy Communion, he gives 'em my number. I don't know what I'm gonna do about it. I mean, it's not exactly right for him to put a guy like you after me, is it?"

Gayth executed a tight, controlled lip curl. "I am not familiar with the gentleman to whom you refer."

"You're not?"

Both men stood regarding each other, neither of them knowing what to say next. Arthur finally broke spoke: "So what makes you think I have anything to do with Communion?"

Gayth began to patrol the aisles of Arthur's store. "I don't have the time to be jerked on, Mr. Pendrick. Abbas Nadjafi of the Aries gang is a known source of the drug. Yesterday morning I observed Mr. Nadjafi

meet an unidentified woman in the lobby of the Bienvenidos. Last night I observed you at Murray's restaurant with the same woman."

Obviously, back to the original Alex-in-trouble theory.

Gayth was continuing: "I know you're associates, so let's cut to —"

"Afraid you've jumped to some conclusions there, Mr. Silver." What would be best — to tell him the truth, or to make something up? "The woman is my ex-girlfriend. High school sweetheart, actually. Just arrived on the island. I mean, she's a burger with all the condiments. If you're looking for the pivotal figure in the C trade, you're gonna have to keep looking." The truth, that's the easiest thing. Just don't supply him anything he doesn't ask for.

"What is her name, Mr. Pendrick?"

"I'll tell you her name, Mr. Silver. The last thing I need is a misunderstanding with you. But I gotta make a deal with you, first. Get a promise in exchange for the information."

"What sort of promise?"

"Like I said, she's burger. She meant a lot to me once, I don't want to see her get hurt. Look, she doesn't know the Net. You go talk to her, she's not gonna know who she's dealing with. I want you to take that into account. If she blows you off or something, I don't want to feel that I — I want her to come out of this okay. I'm sure it's just some weird coincidence."

"I saw her waving the pills."

"Maybe she bought some from this Nadjafi character and wanted her money back, I don't know. I guarantee you, she's not who you're looking for. So don't go hurting her if you don't get the answer you're looking for, okay? That's all I'm asking of you."

Gayth smiled. Wasn't pleasant. "You think I hurt people, Mr. Pendrick?"

"I think we probably understand each other. Do we understand each other?"

"What is the woman's name?"

"Do I have your promise?"

"Do you think my promise means anything?"

"If it's the best I can get, it's what I'll take."

"You have my promise."

Arthur noted that he hadn't specified what his promise was, exactly. Still, it would be no good trying to steer him wrong. He'd find out eventually, and then come to mess them both up. "Her name is Alex. Alex Sky. She's staying at the Bienvenidos."

"Thank you, Mr. Pendrick. Pleasure doing business." Gayth started for the exit.

Arthur had to do something. He had to recover some kind of foothold. "Uh, wait a sec."

Gayth turned. "Yes?"

Now what? "I just want everything to be all right between us. Look, as a matter of fact, if you do, uh, acquire the franchise, I mean, keep me in mind. As a retail outlet."

Gayth stepped back into the heart of the store. "You're telling me that you're not retailing now, but you'd be interested in retailing in the future."

"Well, we'd have to talk arrangements. Work out the details. But let's just say I have a few marketing ideas. You know, how to effectively exploit the whole, uh, property."

"Is that so?"

"Sure, I mean, I have a lot of years of experience in marketing to this niche, right? Hey, what is Communion except a much more effective delivery system for, for what I've been selling all along?"

"Perhaps you could get into a detail level, Mr. Pendrick."

He could tell he had Gayth on the hook. Now, where to go with this? "I hope I'm not being, you know, presumptuous when I say this to you, Mr. Silver. But you strike me as a practical man. A here-and-now kinda of guy. Am I right here?"

"I might let you say that."

"And would it also be okay to say that you're not, I don't know, really into the psychology of the religious mind, the spiritual mind?"

"I think it's all undiluted horseshit, Mr. Pendrick."

Arthur fumbled in his jacket for his pack of Luckies. "That's what I was trying to say, Mr. Silver. Boy, you summed that right on up for me. Want a cig?"

"Thank you, no."

Arthur pulled out his disposable lighter and set fire to the end of a cigarette. "So by undiluted horseshit, do you mean the alternative spirituality thing, the kind of stuff I got going here, or the whole nine yards and kaboodle? The Pope and Jesus and Buddha and everything, it's all the same to you, is that what you're saying?"

Gayth advanced on him. "What I'm saying is that life is shit. We are born in shit and die in shit. And what lies out there, waiting for us when we die, or when we pray, when we wake up in the night, afraid: it's all a big nothing. A void. Emptiness, that's all it is, staring back at us. And all this, from what the Christians believe to what your marks believe, it's fairy stories to make us feel better in the dark. People believe what they want to believe. Weak people do. I, personally, I believe in what is really out there, whether I like it or not. What is out there is nothing. I believe there is no point to anything except what we

decide it means. And you should better strive and friggig fight to take what you want now, because soon you'll be dead, and when you're dead you're nothing. But what does what I believe have to do with our conversation, Mr. Pendrick?"

Gayth was still uncomfortably close to him. "Let me submit this to you, Mr. Silver. You may be right. The more I work in this line, the more I think anything could be true, including the big nothing you're talking about. But the big nothing, like you said, it's not what people want. It doesn't sell. If you really want to move your product — once it is your product — you're going to need someone who understands peoples needs in this area."

"Someone who knows how to exploit people's needs in this area."

"I think we definitely understand each other, Mr. Silver."

Hangover number three was the worst of all. Cataclysmic. And this one she didn't even deserve. Alex felt like she could and should tear off her aching skull like it was a melon rind, to free the raw, surging brain beneath. She hurt so much that all she could do for hours was lie on the bed and suffer. She called room service for aspirin. The tablets arrived after what seemed like a couple of days. She took them and they didn't help at all.

At about noon the pain finally eased off a bit, turned into just an average headache. Then she took more aspirin, which this time seemed to help a little. Still, it hurt to move around much. She called room service again, for the biggest, greasiest breakfast the Bienvenidos could muster. Her hunger was roaring before the food arrived, but when it did a few bites of ham were enough to make her feel disgustingly full. The wee beads of fat on the plate, normally so reassuring, so Minnesota, glared at her balefully. She called room service a third time to get them to take the food away.

Alex got back to the terrible thought of the night before. The Communion had permanently wrecked something in her brain. At any time now she could expect to have Jesus pop in on her. She'd lost the last thing she had left to her: her control over her own life. It wasn't fair. She'd been stupid, sure, to try something she didn't understand. The penalty, though, it seemed out of line with the crime. Two lousy caplets and she was fried from now to who knows when.

And who had left those two lousy caplets in her path? Jonna. If she was going to go and off herself, maybe she should have done some

more cleaning up first. Flushed them. It would have been better if she'd taken this particular clue out of the picture.

She'd meant to trip somebody up. Knew they were dangerous. Left them as a trap. Probably figured Patrick would look there, after all. Alex developed a theory from this, developed it up to a point where it didn't make any sense. Jonna wouldn't do a thing like that, and Alex knew it, but she wanted to be angry. Her brain was wrecked, there was possibly no way to fix it, so she deserved to be angry at someone. It was okay to get angry at Jonna; she wasn't around to get hurt about it. It was okay to get angry at the hotel. It wasn't a person. It would only cost money to rip off the footboard of the bed and smash it into the mirror, the TV's tube, the window. It would only cost Patrick's money. Jonna's money.

Momentarily out of breath, sitting in the middle of the glass of the shattered picture tube, she saw the closet. A closet full of Jonna's clothes. Jonna's clothes needed to be destroyed. Alex didn't exactly have a worked out reason for doing it, but she needed to do it anyhow. She rooted around in her suitcase for her sewing scissors, which she always carried around in case she needed them. Like she needed them now. She needed them to cut into the sleeves of Jonna's windbreaker. Into Jonna's denim skirt. Into her six Laura Ashley dresses. She cut and cut and cut

and smelled sandalwood. A subtle scent, but it was there.

Sandalwood, like she'd smelled on Arthur Pendrick; his new, improved aroma. Her old boyfriend Arthur Pendrick. Who was on Al Amarja, strangely enough. Al Amarja, where, strangely enough, Jonna had chosen to vacation.

Arthur Pendrick, who still got under her skin much more than any seven-years-gone ex-boyfriend really ought to. Because Patrick had hated him, she'd defended him, and finally he'd gone and proven Patrick right.

Other things about Arthur Pendrick were now occurring to Alex, too.

E-Z Sleep was a wretched little hotel. The desk clerk was rude. The Eplace smelled like mold. The wallpaper was the color of vomit. E-Z Sleep was located in a wretched neighborhood. It was the kind of neighborhood where working girls like Cherry could be found. Cherry didn't look like she was of legal age, if Al Amarja even had a legal age. She didn't even look like Cherry was her real name. Older prostitutes,

Patrick had found, started to look like their fake names after a while. They stopped looking like their Christian names, the ones they were born with. They stopped being people. Cherry, though, was only part-way on her journey to not being a person any more. She was retrievable. She didn't wear whore clothes: just a white nylon top, cotton pants. Her hands were nicotine-stained already; she wore blatant, poorly applied make-up. But there was still a person under there.

She was lying on the bed, one knee up in the air, surveying Patrick with bored hostility. She was suspicious of him, because he didn't want what the other men wanted. It was the usual attitude. The girls never wanted to be saved. Not consciously, at any rate. Deep inside them there was still the desire to love Jesus. It was Patrick's job to find that part of them, to let it out into the air. The girls had to be wrestled towards the Lord.

"Your time tick-tick-ticking away," Cherry said, employing the mutated street lingo of the Edge.

"I'll pay for the time," Patrick assured her. He was looking for a plug for the boom box. What kind of hotel room didn't have any power outlets in the main room? "Whatever amount of time we need, I'll pay for."

She unhappily lit a cigarette. The girls, they liked the simple and straightforward arrangements they made with the other men. Patrick's mission work, it made them feel that they weren't in control, because they didn't know what to expect from him. That was crucial, making them feel out of control. The trick was to break them from their habits, to make them see themselves again.

"Cost extra if you want kinky," she complained.

"I don't want kinky," he said, still failing to find an outlet.

"Cost three times if all you wanna talk."

Three times the price just to talk. That was a new one. Though the girls, surprisingly enough, hated to find out you just wanted to talk. That made them think you were using them for cheap therapists. Understandable mistake to make, Patrick thought.

Finally he gave up and plugged it into the socket in the bathroom.

"I want you to listen to something," he said. He pressed 'play'.

*Stabat Mater dolorosa
Juxta crucem lacrimosa,
Dum pendebat Filius.*

"What's that?" he asked himself.

"Cost four times if you Jesus freak," Cherry said.

He flipped the eject button in deck A. He looked at the tape. It was that Vivaldi thing Jonna liked. He hadn't looked at what was in deck A

since he'd gotten the machine back from the coroner. Patrick couldn't escape the feeling that somehow he'd been caught out at something. Even though what he was doing was wholly good, the work of the Lord.

"Why do you charge more for Christians?" he asked her, looking to see what was in deck B. Ah yes, it was what he wanted. He'd put it in deck B.

"Only chance you get here to be missionary is missionary position," Cherry said. She was watching a smoke ring she'd blown engage in a docking maneuver with a light fixture overhead.

"I want you to listen to this," Patrick said. He pressed 'play' for deck B. His favorite of Jonna's songs, one of the few she wrote without his help, was cued up: *You Are Protected*. It was all about how Jesus was ready for you, if only you were ready for Him. "Listen carefully to the words," Patrick told Cherry.

"I hear word 'Jesus'. That mean four times extra!"

"Please listen," Patrick said. He was getting frustrated with her. He didn't expect results every time out. He didn't know, for sure, that it had ever worked permanently. The best he'd gotten ever was a couple of promises to go to church or read the Bible. Usually it was enough to just try. But this snippy little thing was going out of her way to belittle him.

The song ended and Cherry said, "That tape you can buy?"

"Yes," Patrick said.

"You got case? Lemme look at case."

Patrick reached into his jacket for the tape case. It was the best of her album covers, a simple shot of Jonna at dusk, standing on a nice overlook of the Mississippi, the sun making her hair glow from behind. He tossed the tape case to Cherry.

"So," Cherry said, "you want me pretend to be her?"

Patrick lost it. The next thing he knew, he had Cherry down on the bed and was shaking her, her head bobbling around on her skinny little neck and her eyes blank with terror. Once he realized what he was in the middle of doing, Patrick stopped, backed against the wall. Sweating, he was overcome with the need to go to the bathroom, so he rushed in, shut the door, and dropped himself onto the toilet seat.

Cherry's voice came, muffled, through the bathroom door. "Six time extra if you want to beat me."

Laughter or tears; Patrick couldn't decide.

Thorvald's name stuck in Gayth's mind. Gayth went to Sad Mary's, asked around, identified his man. He waited in the club, sipping one glass of orange juice after another, until Thorvald left the premises. He followed Thorvald outside. Followed him as he passed a row of shops, headed across a small, treacherously curving laneway, past some low-rent offices, and down a street lined with teetering tenements. Thorvald stopped. He leaned up against the corner of a building, next to a narrow alleyway. Gayth hastened his stride, caught up to Thorvald, looked at the way Thorvald's palm was flush against the building's stucco wall, pulled a machete out from under his khaki jacket, and whacked off three of the fingers of Thorvald's right hand. The stubs of his severed fingers shot satisfying gouts of blood onto the white wall. Gayth raised the machete for another strike, placing a several-inch horizontal split in the back of Thorvald's already-injured hand. Thorvald was only then reacting to the attack. He sucked in a gasp, turned, covered his face with outstretched hands. Gayth struck again, this time slashing into the front of Thorvald's right wrist. The blood spray caught Gayth by surprise, blasting into his eyes. He stepped back, blinking, using his free hand to rub at them. Thorvald, now making a high, steady keening noise, body-checked Gayth into the side of the building. Gayth flew backwards, impacting the sharp corner of the building first with his right shoulder, then with the back of his skull. Everything went white for a moment. Gayth slashed blindly at the space in front of him, to keep Thorvald from pressing his sudden advantage. The machete whished through the air. Gayth's legs gave way. His tailbone hit the pavement, shooting a shockwave up through him. He staggered to his feet, blinking the last of Thorvald's blood from his eyes.

A man in his forties, wearing a polyester suit, stood a few feet away from him, staring at his machete, which was coated with thick, dripping blood.

"You're not going to interfere with me," Gayth told him.

The frightened man shook his head to say 'no, I'm not going to interfere', thought that the gesture might be misinterpreted, and so then nodded his head to say 'yes, I agree with what you are saying to me.' The gesture was ambiguous, but his submissive posture was not. Without giving the man a second thought, Gayth plunged into the alleyway in search of Thorvald, who was no longer in his line of sight.

A trail of red spatters made Thorvald easy to follow. He had run into the alley. The spatters led to the opening of an ancient coal chute. You die extra for this, Gayth thought. This whole area of the Edge was catacombed with old basements, disused sewer lines, and even the remnants of an aborted subway project. There was no knowing what dan-

gerous crap was waiting for you below any given building. If Thorvald knew these tunnels well, he'd have one up on Gayth. On the other hand, Thorvald looked too dim to know anything well.

Gayth lowered himself into the coal chute, which had no coal in it, and jumped down. He landed on something unsteady and nearly lost his footing. He heard a glottal roar ahead of him. He thrust out with the end of his weapon, and felt it find purchase in something that made a very faint squishy noise. Thorvald moaned and shrieked. Gayth kicked forward, hitting what he assumed was Thorvald's thigh. He pushed into the dark room, moving Thorvald back. He heard chains rattle. No matter, Gayth thought, he's right handed. Gayth had been carefully evaluating him back in the club.

He pushed himself into the room, knocking Thorvald to one side. He felt what had to be a bicycle chain tap his left forearm. He tugged on the chain, yanking it out of the weak grasp of Thorvald's off-hand. There was only the light coming from the coal chute to go by, and Gayth's eyes hadn't adjusted yet. He needed to locate Thorvald precisely.

"I hear all you Aries are fudge packers," he said.

Thorvald growled. The growl permitted Gayth to approximate the current position of Thorvald's chest cavity, to which he directed a downwards machete slash. The slash tore only jacket and T-shirt, not flesh, but it was enough to stop the big man from attacking. Now able to see, so Gayth danced into the middle of the room, sending Thorvald back, back, back until he banged into a wooden support pillar. The jolt dislodged a fine powder of dust and dirt, which silted down on the proceedings. It also set something to swinging near Thorvald's head — a hanging utility light. Thorvald meekly fainted towards Gayth; Gayth sent him back into the pillar with an diagonal slash meant merely to contain him. Gayth had already seen the light switch. It was set into the concrete wall just past Thorvald. Gayth charged him, let him shrink away, then turned and flipped the switch with his spare elbow. He closed his eyes for a second, just as the light went on full in Thorvald's face.

Thorvald was now blinded, Gayth at his back. Gayth opened his eyes, stepped forward, swung down, and hacked deep through the meat of Thorvald's left calf. Thorvald screamed and dropped to his knee to take the pressure off his mangled leg. Gayth reached around and pressed the flat of the wet machete blade to Thorvald's throat. He noticed that Thorvald's left eye had become red mush. That explained the squishing sound earlier.

"Are you prepared to die today?" Gayth asked him.

"Fuck you," Thorvald replied.

Gayth pulled the blade towards him until Thorvald began to choke. The survival instinct was a marvelous thing. "You're going to brief me on the activities of your associate. Abbas Nadjafi."

"Just kill me, then. I'm not telling you nothin'."

"Who is Nadjafi's source for Communion?"

"I don't know. If I did know, I wouldn't tell you."

Gayth moved in, nibbled gently on Thorvald's ear. Thorvald squirmed. Gayth liked that. "What do you think is going to happen to you if you don't tell me?"

"Fuck you," Thorvald replied.

Gayth grabbed his mutilated hand, wrenched it behind his back. "You're going to die if you don't get bandaged immediately. You're going to bleed to death right here in a grimy basement. Is that what you want, Thorvald?"

Thorvald laughed. It started out as a weak, half-assed thing of a chuckle, became a snicker, and then dropped into the baritone regions, concluding as a hearty, booming barrel-rattler. He couldn't stop shaking.

Gayth was annoyed. This was not the correct reaction to be having. Thorvald wasn't laughing at him, was he? Gayth had made himself into someone who was never laughed at. "What's so fucking funny?"

Thorvald had to laugh some more before answering. "Because I am ready to die today, you fuck, whoever you are."

"What do you mean?"

"You're giving me what I've always feared I'd never get. A warrior's death. I'm going to go down with an enemy's blade in my throat. Standing up for my buddies. Refusing to talk. Giving my life for honor."

"You're insane, you stupid insane fuck."

"You'll be sending me to Valhalla."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The glorious warrior's heaven, that's where you're sending me." He giggled some more. "Blood loss, it, it makes you high, doesn't it?"

Gayth again tightened the flat of the blade against his throat. Thorvald was gagging, but he was still laughing, too.

"There is no Valhalla, you moron. It doesn't exist. It's just an idiot's dream, for idiots." He stopped himself. He was letting the vic get under his skin. That shouldn't happen. In how many seminars had he had that point pounded home? Regain, regain control.

"Whatever you say, asshole."

"You have to be a complete idiot to believe in Valhalla these days. Most dupes, they have an excuse to believe in their crap, they were

brought up waist-deep in it. But Valhalla? How many people believe that?"

"We believe it."

"You do *not* believe it. You are just pretending! Play-acting being Vikings! You know it isn't real!"

"I know it is real."

"This is your problem, you are allowing nonsense to block you from seeing your true self-interest. In this scenario, it is not in your interest to bleed your last blood out here on this floor. It is in your interest to tell me what I want to know about Communion. Then you have a chance of living, if someone gets you to the Klinik on time. A chance of living versus a certainty of dying! It can't be made any clearer than that!"

"I doesn't matter what you say, I know I'm going to Valhalla."

"Cretin fuck!" Gayth shouted, cutting Thorvald's throat back all the way to the spine. He half expected Thorvald to gasp out something like, "You're giving me what I wanted," forcing Gayth to kick him and kick him until his head came right off. But of course he was in no shape to gasp anything.

It took a while for Gayth to calm down and focus. Focus on the now, because this was the dicey part. Killing was easy; mop-up and withdrawal was always the real challenge. And here, the elements of the slaying itself that made it less than textbook efficient were going to cause him friction in the wrap-up phase. He'd allowed the target to lead him to an unfamiliar environment. Gayth looked up at the coal chute. He didn't relish the prospect of jamming Thorvald's two-hundred-and-sixty pound carcass back up the chute. That left a set of stairs going up who knows where into the middle of who knows what. Not good either. And the car was far away, back behind Sad Mary's. At least it had a drop sheet all laid out in the trunk already. Gayth was going to have to go back, get the car, park it in the alley, and somehow drag Thorvald's dead not-going-to-Valhalla-because-it's-fucking-imaginary ass up the chute and into the car. With the clock ticking, because it looked like the floor of a meat packing plant up in that alleyway. Sooner or later someone would call in the Peace Force over all that blood. These logistical problems, they were why it would have been optimal to have some backup. Somebody who could be trusted. But Gayth didn't know anybody who could be trusted.

At his desk in the Aries clubhouse, Abbas was grimly spreadsheeting the new numbers. His exit from the Bienvenidos was going to bite deeper into the budget than he wanted to think.

"Shit, Abbas," said Saxolf Hermann, looking out the window of the Aries clubhouse at the street below. "You'd better come look at this. And somebody find Hans!"

Abbas jumped up and ran to the landing, where Saxolf was standing. He looked out the window, then rushed down the stairs and out the front door to cradle Thorvald's pale corpse in his arms.

To make sure that Thorvald's body was understood as a message, Gayth had inscribed it with an instantly recognizable pattern of post-mortem wounds: a lattice of horizontal and vertical lines, criss-crossing his face.

Regally did Hans Knudson, Aries leader, rest upon his throne of leather and studs. Furrowed was his brow, furrowed with memories of a brave and fallen warrior. When moments like this struck, he remembered proudly all the others who before had fallen. A manly tear did form in his left eye. Perched on his lower eyelid it was, at attention standing. The deeds of the great, lamented Thorvald Bladh this tear did honor.

Hans did have but one cohort with him in his battle sanctum. Standing by him in this time of grief and glory was his right hand, Abbas Nadjafi. Saying something, Abbas was.

"This will be the greatest struggle we have ever faced, Hans. In terms of resources and personnel, the Net is far beyond our rival street gangs. To be honest, this may be our Ragnarok. But we shall fall in battle, and it shall be glorious. Thorvald shall be avenged."

Majestically did Hans' rock-like features pause in meditation. "Give them what they want, Abbas," at length he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Give this Gayth Silver person the information he desires, and be done with it."

"We can't do that, sir." Abbas felt that the battle sanctum might start to spin around him.

"I say it shall come to pass."

"Hans, he's killed an Aries. We can't let him get away with it."

"And if we fight the Net, what shall become of Aries? We shall be destroyed. In this fight, victory does not loom."

Abbas stammered for a bit, his next phrase eluding him. Hans was betraying himself, betraying Thorvald. Betraying everything. No wonder he'd wanted to take this decision in private. "But the others are gearing up for battle even now, Hans —"

"Then instruct them to gear down. My wisdom has been granted you. Act upon it." Impatiently did Hans nod towards the door. Through it, he indicated, Abbas should walk.

Abbas did not. "I must protest, Hans. This goes against everything we believe in."

Hans' muscles did coil impressively around his bare torso as he leaned forward and looked his lieutenant in the eyes. "I am everything you believe in, Abbas. The rest is detail."

"Detail? We are the Aries!"

"I am the Aries. Follow me, and you shall be Aries, too."

Traitorously, Abbas' chin was starting to wobble. No, he would not allow himself to weep in front of this man. "The Aries code is greater than any one of us. Even greater than you, Hans! You can't —"

Hans turned away from him, gazing towards a corkboard with various astrological charts pinned all over it. "Neither of us is greater than the stars, Abbas. And the stars say that disaster awaits if we follow your course. Thorvald is in Valhalla now. An unexpected benefit. I cannot say I expected him exit this plane in such a worthy fashion. The planets say now is a time for caution. The planets do not favor men of principle at this time. Tell the Net what they wish to know."

He leaned back towards Abbas, testing his lieutenant's expression. "From what you tell me, it also seems that revenues will no longer be a problem for us, if we accept the arrangement."

The money? Abbas wanted to leap upon him and pummel him. He knew, however, that he'd just get thrashed, and receiving a humiliating beating would not prove his case.

"It's a moot point," Abbas told him. "The drug can't be mass-produced. By telling Silver what I know, all I would be doing is betraying a solemn vow. I have given my word to the person who manufactures the drug. He has good reasons to fear exposure. Even if he did not, it does not matter; I have given my word. I shall not betray it."

Idly, Hans did study the state of his fingernails. "Your loyalty to an outsider is greater than your loyalty to me, good Abbas?"

Abbas straightened his shoulders, swallowed a lump of mucus that had risen up into his throat. "I honestly did not see a day when one vow would conflict with the other. Now I am shown to be foolishly naive. I now learn that to some of us, words are malleable. You may call them a code, or a way of life, but ultimately they are just words, to be erased

or shuffled around as convenience dictates. Oh, you have an out. You have the stars to blame. They shift about all the time, don't they?"

Tired did Hans now look. A silencing hand he held up. "Abbas, my friend —"

Yet Abbas did continue: "Others of us, I suppose, see words as less pliable. We see them as real. I am a man of my word. If that makes me a man alone — well, then that's the fucking situation, isn't it, now?"

He took his leave from the battle sanctum, and then from the Aries clubhouse. Good-bye, comrades.

She had to talk to Arthur. She went to the Pneuma Center to find Shim. He wasn't there. The young woman, Delphine, was there instead. Alex told her that she needed to see Arthur right away. Delphine replied that Arthur was out. Alex asked her where he was. Delphine subtly rolled her eyes and said he hadn't told her how to reach him. Alex wanted to repeat the question again, to try to win through persistence. However, she could see that Delphine was already annoyed. Alex could see this because she, too, was a retail clerk. She also hated it when customers tried to get the answer they wanted by restating the question over and over. Alex just had to accept it. She wasn't going to get the answer she wanted. She told Delphine to tell Arthur to contact her, and left the number of the hotel. Delphine was sullenly slow in reaching for the note pad and a pen. Alex stood over the irritatingly French, irritatingly stacked, irritatingly irritated girl to double-check that she was writing it all down correctly. It drove Alex nuts when customers did that to her. Delphine was really asking for it, though. Alex decided that Arthur was definitely not getting it on with Delphine. He'd always had taste in this area, unfortunately.

Alex left the Pneuma Center. She considered going to Sad Mary's, then thought better of it. She headed back to the Plaza of Flowers. She was halfway back to her hotel room when she decided that she'd go completely up the wall if she cooped herself up back there waiting for something to happen. She didn't admit to herself that she was worried about the desire that was creeping up on her. She was starting to want to contact Jesus again. She didn't know why she wanted to; in fact, thinking about it, she knew there was no good reason. The answers she was currently after were available from someone who wasn't a hallucination. She would not go back and drop more C. She would wait, and solve her real problems in the real world.

She noticed that a new screening was about to start at the rep cinema in the Plaza of Flowers. Some movie called *The Saragossa Manuscript*. Alex didn't know anything about it, but she wanted to lead herself not into temptation. So she bought a ticket and slipped inside.

While waiting for the movie to start, it occurred to her that she still hadn't been contacted by the dealer, Nadjafi. Or maybe she had; she hadn't been checking her messages at the front desk. She began to get nervous at the thought that he might have been waiting for her to meet him or something. Once she'd smelled Arthur on her sister's clothes, she'd realized that it wasn't really about who sold Jonna the drug or why she took it. It was all closer to home than that. This was something she couldn't expect the Aries guy to understand. Drug dealers have funny ideas of etiquette sometimes, or so she figured. Possibly she was in extra trouble, which wouldn't have been the case if only the people who supposedly loved her had been honest with her.

An area for improvement: it always took Gayth a long time to come down from a killing. The adrenaline rush, it just wouldn't let him go. He had to pace around his apartment. He was naked, naked and wet. Every step he took left a damp impression on the luxuriously deep shag carpet of his stereo room. He'd just stepped out of his third shower since dropping Thorvald off at the clubhouse. All of the visual traces of the deed were gone: the blood under the fingernails, in the grooves and folds of his skin. That had all been removed from the picture. The feeling, though, the sensation of the blood on him; that couldn't be scrubbed away. He liked it too much. If he were still capable of getting a hard-on, he'd have one now. To be precise, Gayth thought, I am, right now, one giant hard-on.

This was sub-optimal. You were not supposed to be a psycho-killer. You were supposed to be a businessman. The ones who killed for sport, who liked the whole prey/predator arrangement, they were the pawns. The stooges. You employed them when the situation merited. When it was acceptable to have a loose cannon in the mix, when you didn't have to worry about exercising maximum control. Gayth was not a loose cannon. He was locked-on, laser sight, entirely focused, goals-oriented. He had been to the seminars. He was an operator. Traveling in an upwards trajectory through the hierarchy. A master of the situation. Whatever that situation was.

Deep breath. Relaxation exercise.

He was being too tough on himself. Perfectionizing. Things were going well. Big picture. Big picture was: he had done what needed to be done. The signal had been sent. All he needed to do was wait. The ball was in the other man's court. When the ball is out of your court, you go into reactive mode, you center yourself, you get ready for the next move. You analyze the range of possible next moves, but you do so calmly. It is when you are not acting, that is what marks the true master of the situation. Let the scenario unfold. Do not disturb it by acting when you do not need to act.

You can only micromanage failure. You can't micromanage success.

Think positive.

Maximize.

Gayth opened his underwear drawer. He would get dressed, stop pacing, and relax. Focus elsewhere. The immediate question: is this a boxers day, or a briefs day?

Do not act.

Master the situation.

Do not act.

Betrayal. Abbas sat in his corner table at Sad Mary's. He was no longer wearing the insignia of the Aries Gang. He'd ditched the rune-inscribed denim vest for a T-shirt he'd purchased from a vendor outside the bar. The shirt had a character from Alice in Wonderland screened onto it and hand-painted; it was the worm with the hookah. The poly-cotton material of the shirt didn't feel right on Abbas' back, but he planned to get used to it. He'd replaced his jeans with a pair of bicycle shorts, also purchased outside. He'd abandoned the jeans and vest in the washroom of the bar. Idly, he wondered who'd claim them. He imagined some stupid burger putting on the vest and wandering into Great Men Barrio, getting pounded on by the Glorious Lords.

Betrayal. He still had his katana. He still had the proceeds from the month's drug sales to date. It was in his pocket now. A nice roll of cash; he could make lots of impulse purchases like that. Though now his income situation was a big question mark. There was little chance that Hans would allow him to simply continue his old trade. The territorial privilege in Flowers was still his. Hans knew the balance sheet as well as he did. It wasn't very likely that he'd just happily let a healthy slice of his revenues go away like that. In addition, Knudson would have the Aries image to keep in mind. Hans was a comparatively benign gang-

ster, but he was still a gangster, and like any gangster his primary commodity was fear. Word would get around that Abbas had walked on him. Abbas could not then be seen to prosper. In short, even if Abbas did take on the entire Net single-handed and somehow win, that still left him with all of his bridges crispy-fried. Sad Mary's would be ruled out as a storefront. So would the Bienvenidos. The gangs of the other neighborhoods would be unlikely to welcome him, given the number of their teeth he'd helped to loosen. Abbas had taken a leap out of the frying pan, without even having a fire there waiting for him. That roll of dough would have to last him indefinitely. That was essentially his only resource, aside from the connection to Giuseppe. Abbas thought about telling the funeral director what was going on, but it didn't take a logician to see the disaster in that. Giuseppe would toss a fit; he had nothing constructive to add to the dilemma. He was an ally, and Abbas owed him loyalty, but he could not be relied on in that way. Abbas was alone.

Betrayal. Waiting patiently on the table in front of Abbas were seven shotglasses of tequila. Beside them, the rest of the bottle of tequila waited, too. Betrayal.

Betrayal is an equation, Abbas thought. It occurs when the balance is tipped. When your usefulness to the person who betrays you is outweighed by some other factor. By desire for a different, newer lover. By the chance to shave a few percentage points off a deal. In this case, by a careful look at the pros and cons. Hans had looked at the cost of honor, and had decided that it was too high. He might lose what he has. And he loves what he has more than he loves any person, more than he loves his honor. The honor, it was just a selling point anyway. Presentation, not substance.

Betrayal is a skill. For some, it is difficult. These types, they form permanent alliances. Friendships. They aren't capable of tearing away at these friendships. It would be easier for them to tear their own flesh. For these people, the friendship becomes a fact. An immutable law of nature, like gravity or the conservation of matter. A pact of love and respect has been sealed, and it cannot be undone. However, there are others who do not suffer from this inconvenient mental block. It does not hurt them to toss love and respect aside. They are untroubled by such foolishness. They are free to make moment-to-moment decisions without factoring in those awkward emotional debts. To be a betrayer, it is an advantage. The one who cannot betray, he'll be tripped up every time. The decision to betray will always come as a surprise, a lightning blow from nowhere. Your smooth exit from the situation is assured; the one you betray is left stunned. You've already run the spreadsheet on betrayal; you've crunched the numbers in advance. You control the

timing. You know when the blade is coming out. The person you betray, he will spend months, years, trying to replace what you have sliced out of him. But you, you will have what you want. You will be forming a new bond with someone else, someone new who has another thing you want. You will make the promises you need in order to get that thing. If you are lucky, and that person, too, is incapable of betrayal — and luck has little to do with it, since the skill of betrayal includes the ability to pick out the gullible... If that person, too, is incapable of betrayal, you will hold that person tight to you, you will milk from him what you need, and then, the time will come when ... Everyone, everyone can be replaced. That is the basic concept you must absorb into your bloodstream if you are to learn the skill of betrayal. There is no one you need forever.

And if. And if the new person who has the thing you want, if that person is also a betrayer, and if that person gets his betrayal out onto the playing surface before you do — well, what of it? The betrayer is not shocked to be betrayed. It is bad luck, possibly even a setback. But it does not tear at your heart. Because you never let that person into your heart to begin with. Shrug and move on, betrayer.

Abbas lifted the first shotglass on his right, looked into it. The alcohol, it was an equation, too. A chemical reaction. It had plans for Abbas' body chemistry. It would slow him up, make it harder for him to walk. Supposedly it would help him to forget. Abbas had no experience of alcohol, or intoxicants of any kind. He had walked away from the teachings of his upbringing, but he had kept the prohibition on drink. It had always seemed irrational to him, to use a substance to seek temporary change. If you want to be changed, change yourself. If you want to be confident, believe in yourself. If you want to be bold, do so. Abbas was now forced to admit that his so-called rationalism was irrational. Some things you could not conquer. Some wounds required medicine. The tequila would not betray him.

He set the shotglass down again. He had to stop to consider the possibility that he was betraying himself by breaking his lifetime rule. It made sense; he would be rewarding the world of betrayal by letting it change him. Walking out on Hans, and on his only friends anywhere, had been the correct action. Without doubt. He was remaining himself. He could not let this chemical change him, even temporarily. The suffering should not be alleviated; it was central to the learning process.

Abbas removed a foil card of Communion from his pack and placed it on the bar, ringing the glasses of tequila around it. He wondered what would happen if he took a dose of the product. He might see Wotan. Or then, again, perhaps not; perhaps Wotan had really only been a symbol to him, all along. A symbol of bravery and comradeship.

Might he instead see Allah, the one he'd supposedly banished from his thoughts a decade ago? Somehow the thought of this seemed blasphemous. There were many Muslims in Al Amarja, devout and otherwise; all of them knew better than to flirt with his product. It is forbidden to even depict...

Might he see Hans, laughing at him? If anyone had been his god, it was Hans. Maybe he was Janus, the two-faced god. Loki, the trickster. Or maybe he was just a regular old, self-serving prick. Another ordinary small-timer. That was his real betrayal. Turning out to be just like everybody else.

Abbas put the Communion back in his pack. Very few of his customers seemed to be happier after taking it. The ones who had good experiences were already sure of themselves before they used it. Abbas was never more unsure than he was now.

He would not betray himself. He would rebuild. He had constructed himself on a false foundation, the foundation of Hans and the Aries. Many of his assumptions were based on this error. His life was a mathematics where one plus one equaled three. He would erase, go back, and start over. He could not predict what his new life would look like once he'd reconstructed everything. But honor, integrity, they would still be part of the foundation. In Hans' mouth, these principles had been false. That did not mean that the principles were invalid. It meant only that Hans was an asshole.

Betrayal. Hans was still jacking Abbas around. Brooding over Hans' assholism was monopolizing Abbas' thinking time. Time that should be spent chewing over the top priority: figuring out how to handle the Net with zero back-up. As a member of the fighting Aries, Abbas had been more than ready to hit the final tarmac in noble, gore-spattered splendor. Now that he was a man alone, pyrrhic victory seemed less attractive. The idea of the warrior's death was just part of Hans' sales pitch, a tool he used to keep his men fighting and dying for him. Hans himself always lived to fight another day. Dying was never true victory. Abbas would die rather than betray himself, but preferably he'd do neither of the above. Which meant he had to get to thinking straight, and stop letting Hans rule his thoughts.

The willingness to die, though, perhaps it was a good bargaining point. He would meet with Gayth, tell him that he and the Aries were quits. That there was no point in killing anyone else over Communion. Abbas was his only connection to the source. If Gayth wanted to kill Abbas, Abbas would fight back and yes, likely fail. He would die. And the secret would die with him. You simply cannot win, Mr. Silver. You cannot get what you want, no matter what you do.

No, that's not the kind of answer Gayth would accept. Abbas had seen his eyes as he'd sliced up Drizzle Fade's face. He would kill Abbas for the joy of it, and then convince himself it was a good business decision.

Abbas could leave the island. He had nowhere to go, though. And the Net had a long reach. Gayth would follow him, given the huge dollar potential he saw in the product.

Abbas' final stand would have to be here, in the Edge. Where he needed an edge, and a big one.

"You know, the idea with the tequila. It's that you have to drink the stuff to get a buzz."

A brown-haired American man, well-dressed, good-looking, stood over him. Abbas hadn't noticed his approach. He chided himself; if this had been Gayth Silver...

The man pulled up a chair and sat down.

"My name's Arthur Pendrick. We have some stuff to talk about."

The movie was a strange one. It was in Polish, and black-and-white. It was a series of fairy tales being told by different people: the old story-within-a-story thing. Alex was kind of enjoying it, but her attention wavered during the middle. Her eyes started to flutter shut on her. For a while she fought it, and then thought, what the hey, the movie is only supposed to be a distraction anyway.

She woke up when something sharp jabbed her in the shoulder. She looked behind her. A pissed off old lady had a long, black umbrella pointed at her from two rows back.

"Didn't pay good money to be hearing you snore!" she said.

Alex, embarrassed, scrunched down in her seat. She would have crept out of the theater, but she didn't want the umbrella-poking lady to think that she'd won anything. So Alex tried to focus her attention on the film again, which was very hard, since the movie had such a complicated setup. Even so, she was starting to get back into it when Jesus showed up on-screen and started talking to her.

He was one of the minor characters in a background scene; a villager listening to someone tell a story. Then he turned to the camera and spoke, in Polish. With English sub-titles. Of course she didn't understand the Polish.

"I'm disappointed in you, Alexandra," the title read.

Alex put her hands on her face. "Oh, no," she said to herself. "I thought you said you wouldn't be coming to me anymore," she said to the screen.

"It is why I am disappointed," said the sub-title.

"What do you mean?" Alex asked.

She got another poke in the shoulder with the sharp umbrella end. "I did not wake you so you could talk!" the old lady hissed.

"Yeah, whadda you think, you're parta the script?" said another loud voice.

Alex shrunk down even smaller in her seat and whispered to Jesus, "What are You talking about?"

The black and white cinematography was very beautiful and made his eyes look particularly deep and sad. "The Communion. You have taken it once more."

Alex nearly spoke aloud again, she was so offended by this accusation: "I did not!"

Jesus just looked down at her, into her hand. There was the foil card. Another bubble had been popped. Another pill was missing.

Oh shit, Alex thought. "I didn't take it," she whispered.

Jesus didn't say anything; he just looked dejected. The next couple of sub-titles were given over to the real plot of the movie. Alex wanted to yell out, "Does anybody else see Jesus there talking to me on the screen?" but she knew what the answer would be. She knew she'd get thrown out, and maybe on top of that they'd call people to take her away in the big white wagon.

"I was asleep!" she protested, still under her breath. "I didn't take it. I didn't want to take it!" Sure enough, there was a slight aftertaste of the pill's sweet coating still on her tongue. Jesus shook His head. The camera was moving to follow a character; Jesus stood up and followed along, in order to stay in the frame.

"Well, it was a mistake," Alex whispered. "Just go away, then." Then, worried that she'd sounded too sharp with him, she added, "I don't really have anything to say. I don't know why I took it."

"I can't just go away," Jesus' sub-title said. "I'm here until the drug wears off. Although everything has long ago been said. Which I've also said before."

"Well, then, I'm leaving. You can stay there and enjoy being in the movie." Alex stood up and darted up the aisle. The woman with the umbrella tried to trip her, but Alex was moving too fast for her.

When Alex got outside, she saw that it had rained during the movie. Big puddles were lying in the many depressions in the streets and sidewalks of Flowers Plaza. She leaned against the wall of the theater, shaking. Frightened by what her unconscious had done to her. It

had forced her to drop more C when she wasn't looking. If you couldn't even trust yourself when you were sleeping, what was left —

"This is why I wish no one would ever start using the drug," Jesus said. Alex looked around; His reflection appeared, faint and transparent, in the glass over the theater's poster display. "The desire becomes too strong. In your case, it is so strong that you take it unawares. I think you should get rid of the rest of the pills."

"I agree." Alex tossed the foil card into a puddle.

"I advise you not to do that," Jesus said, "You would be placing temptation in the path of others. Perhaps you should think about destroying the pills, instead."

"I'll flush them down the hotel toilet."

"That would be a good choice."

"Thank you."

Alex walked quickly over to the hotel. Jesus didn't seem to be following her. But when she entered the elevator, she saw His blurred image in the polished chrome of its door.

"You certain You can't just go?" she asked. "I've said You can go."

"You say you don't want Me here. But you do want Me." His voice bounced metallically around the elevator. Alex was glad there was no one else in there with her.

"And so You're trapped, is that it? You're God, or a part of God, and You have to stay here just because I took a drug? That doesn't make sense to me."

The image was still there, but there was no voice.

"That's what also makes me suspicious," Alex continued, "the fact that whenever there's a question I don't know the answer to, You clam up. That makes me think again that You're just a hallucination. You are a hallucination, aren't you?"

"You wish Me to be a hallucination, don't you?"

"There, there — see? That was another question, and another non-answer."

"If I was a hallucination, you could simply discount everything. Forget the message."

"And what was that message again? You've got me all confused."

"Love. The answer to every question is love."

"Well, Mr. Hallucination, you're kind of a broken record, aren't you? I can understand the whole love idea just fine without your chemical visits. You're not real. Definitely not real."

"Do you understand?"

"More Questions. Don't you see, hallucination? I can come up with enough frigging questions on my own." The elevator stopped; Alex looked up at the indicator and saw that it was her floor. The door

slid open. Alex said to the voice: "I suppose you'll be waiting for me in my room."

"I see now why you have called Me. You still do not —"

Alex walked away in the middle of the sentence, marched down the hallway towards her room. She was thinking of tests for the hallucination, a way to trip it up, force it to admit that it was just a part of her mind working overtime. It was her grief and guilt and confusion all rolled into one, triggered by whatever exotic acid variant was in the pills. Yes, she was sure of it now. It was all false. She had to break its hold on her, make the hallucination into something foolish and small. And get the remaining pills down that toilet bowl immediately. The path of temptation bit, that was one area where the hallucination was righter than right.

The Bienvenidos had a computerized lock system; it used those disposable plastic punch cards as keys. She removed the card from her purse and stuck it into the slot on the door. The door handle was made of brass, polished and reflective. She expected to see the hallucination in it:

"Hey, you in there?" she asked the handle. She fiddled with the card until the small green dot lit up, and then opened the door.

She stepped inside. Gayth, who had quickly moved beside the door, grabbed her from behind. He clamped his left hand over her mouth. His right hand, at her throat, held a four-inch stiletto.

Alex stepped into the room and Jesus grabbed her from behind. He had her mouth covered and was holding something cold against her neck. What? What was that supposed to mean? The hallucination was fighting her, now that she'd decided once and for all it wasn't —

Gayth was acting. He was being pro-active. Sure, he was speeding up the game plan a bit. But Abbas needed the pressure put on him. He wasn't sure how, but Gayth knew that the chick mattered. She was the puzzle piece that didn't fit. Gayth hated puzzles.

Getting in had been easy. Hotels like the Bienvenidos are staffed by friggng chimps. Two simple steps. One, bribe a porter to get the chick's room number. (He'd done that the day he saw her in the lobby.) Two, tell the desk clerk that his wife had checked into 702 earlier and

now he was here and needed a key. The moron didn't even check, just believed Gayth right out. That's because Gayth knew everything was going to work out for him today, so of course that's how it went.

He cooed into her ear. "I have a suggestion for you. Let's just put this suggestion out there and see how you respond. My suggestion is that you be very careful, so I don't cut your throat. I'm going to release my hand now, but you're not going to scream. If you do scream — then we go to the throat-cutting option. And we don't want to do that. That's a lose-lose situation."

Jesus' breath was hot against her neck. "I'm tired of giving you suggestions. 'Let's just put this suggestion out there and see how you respond.' I don't think that's working any more; I think we need to switch to a system where more guidance is provided. People need to follow our suggestions. If you they don't obey — then they go to hell, no options. I don't want to do that. But you people today, you're just not going to respond to the free will situation anymore."

Jesus removed his hand from her mouth. Why had he needed to put it there in the first place? It's not like she was going to call out to everyone on the floor and admit she was entertaining a hallucination.

Gayth said: "Now you're, slowly and carefully, without leaving anything out, going to explain to me just who you are, what your connection to Abbas Nadjafi is, and then you're going to tell me all about the manufacturer: where he lives, what his name is, what ingredients he needs. Because I can tell that you know. From feeling you up against me like this, I can taste that you know."

Alex heard: "Now you're, slowly and carefully, without leaving anything out, going to tell to me just who you think you are, to be calling me a hallucination, to be denying the God inside you, to be contacting me all the time through this drug that warps me. Makes me weak. Makes me lust. I don't like what you're making me do to you. I

can tell that you know. From feeling you up against me like this. You're destroying me, and destroying yourself."

There was always a moment of suspense, here, when the hand was removed. Here's where you discovered if the vic knew how to channel fear, to use it to make good decisions. Or if fear just ruled the vic like it did with animals, made the vic cry out, and forced you to start the bleeding.

The chick didn't scream. Good. Good chick.

Gayth waited for her answer.

"You know that this proves what I've been saying all along. You're just changing with my moods. You're not real at all," she said.

Superb. Top-notch. More *puzzle*. "I don't know what you're talking about, chick. And that's bad for you, for the guy with the knife not to understand your answer. When a clear answer is all that he's looking for. Let me break it down for you. Tell me your name."

Alex heard: "You don't know what you're talking about, Alex. You think answering your question about Jonna will help you? You'll never get a clear answer, no matter how hard you look. You're breaking down, just like she did. Who do you think you are?"

Alex said: "I am Alex Sky, and you can fuck off, Jesus."

Gayth didn't quite catch the 'Jesus' part because, by the time she got to it, he was already throwing her down over the high footboard of the bed, so that it caught her hard in the ribs. He grabbed her by the neck, and placed the knife behind her left ear.

"Fuck *off*? You're telling me to fuck *off*? Is that what you're telling me? Are you also, then, telling me that you want me to cut this ear off? To commence with the cutting? Because that's exactly what's going to happen here if you don't show me that you understand the power relationship here. Do you understand me? Do you *understand* me?"

The hallucination was dismayed. Its image was getting mixed up with what Gayth was doing. Things were too confused. It didn't know how to control its manifestation. All too unfamiliar. And it couldn't stop Gayth, even if it wanted to. Gayth still had the right to free will. Whatever he chose to do to her, the hallucination was forbidden to interfere. Yes, this was what being back in the world was like. It was helplessness and anguish and not being able to do enough. Never being able to do enough.

“Fuck off?,” Jesus howled. “You’re telling me to fuck off? Is that what you’re telling me? Are you also, then, telling me that you want me to go to Hell, with Jonna? The Hell of suicides and fuck-ups? Because that’s exactly where you’re heading if you don’t show me that you understand the power relationship here. Do you understand me? Do you understand me?”

“I understand you,” Alex said.

Jesus relaxed his grip on her.

“Good.”

Gayth relaxed his grip on her.

“Good.”

But he didn't move the knife.

“Now that we have all that sorted out, back to the questions. How do you know Abbas Nadjafi?”

“Now that we have all that sorted out, give up on your questions. They'll get you nowhere.”

“I don't need to give up. I already know the answer.”

“I don’t need to give up. I already know the answer.”

“What the hell are you talking about? That answer does not go with that question.”

“You don’t answer my questions, I’m not answering yours.”

“You don’t get to answer questions! I mean, *ask* them. You don’t get to ask them.”

“I’ve finished my questions. It’s over.”

“You’re right it’s over if you don’t stop fucking with me here.”

“You’ve been nothing but a red herring all along.”

“Are you tripping, is that it? Are you just another frigging customer tripping on the product? Because it that’s the case and you’ve been wasting my time and messing up my scenario all along without even having a frigging point to your existence, I don’t care if it’s good business, I’ll do you for pleasure, you smegmoid —”

The hotel room door opened. It was Patrick. He saw Gayth holding Alex down on the bed, Gayth with the knife. Gayth, hearing the sound of the door, swiveled towards him. Patrick gave out a loud, shapeless sound and hurled his linebacker body at the lithe assassin. Gayth moved the stiletto so that it would catch Patrick right in the heart as he landed on him.

Gayth felt something bend his wrist. Patrick landed on the stiletto, but it plunged deep into the front of his left shoulder, not his heart. The hit of the knife did not interrupt Patrick’s terrible roar, from which the odd intelligible word would now and then emerge: “No!” “Protect!” “Alex!” “Jonna!”

Patrick landed on top of Gayth, who’d been trying to squirm out of his path. He hit Gayth in the ribs, pinning him to the bed.

Gayth reached behind his back for his other knife.

Patrick was now in the room with Jesus. How did that happen? Oh, my; he and Jesus sure weren’t getting along. Everything was slow. Distorted. Jesus had stuck a sharp, splintery shard of the cross into Patrick’s shoulder. Alex thought of the Bible scene where one of the Bible guys wrestles with an angel. Oh, blood all over. Was that Jesus’ blood, or Patrick’s? How exactly did Patrick deserve to be stabbed by Jesus?

Jesus reached behind his back and took out a sword.

Alex grabbed Jesus’ wrist. Now she remembered. Jesus was a hallucination. This was all a bad trip. The trip fought back, tried to grab

the sword from her. Patrick was biting the hallucination by the neck. Jesus was growling and flailing his legs in the air, trying to gain a footing against the wall or footboard to shove Patrick off him. Alex got the sword away from him. Once she had it in her hands it felt smaller than it looked. She ran her finger along its blade. She hallucinated that her blood was running down it, that she was cutting her finger. Nope, that was real, she could taste the blood when she put the finger into her mouth. Wasn't that funny? Her brain was permanently wrecked, you know.

Patrick and Jesus tumbled off the bed. She saw their backs flash by her in super-duper-extra slow motion. She saw the knife in her hand. The knife was real. The hallucination was not. Was it Patrick she was supposed to stab, or Jesus? Oh, right, yes. Jesus, it was Jesus who had been bothering her. He'd been all right until he'd attacked her. Before that, just a little pushy maybe. Just goes to show you can't trust a hallucination. Plunge! The sword went all nicely into Jesus' back. He made a screaming sound. Didn't sound like his old voice at all. But hallucinations, they probably change, especially when you stab them.

Oh wait, she hadn't really stabbed Jesus. Or cut herself. She was just thinking about it. It was hard to tell what was happening and what was just imagining. It was Jonna who was cutting herself.

More thoughts came rushing into Alex, but these felt different. Just ideas in her head, not freaky images. Patrick was really hurting Jesus now. He had him by the ears and was knocking him knocking him knocking him against the dresser, his neck was flopping around like it belonged on a doll. Whack, whack, whack. This was a funny hallucination.

Arthur, Patrick had done this to Arthur, too, when he found out that Arthur was getting her smell all over Jonna. Beat him up, bad. That's why Arthur had those little remnants of cuts still on him when Alex first ran into him. Patrick had found out that Jonna and Arthur were together. See, that's why she came to Al Amarja, to see Arthur. And Patrick found they were getting their smell all over each other, and so he beat up Arthur, knocked him knocked him knocked him against the dresser, until his head went all floppy. And Jonna found out and one of them, she wasn't sure which yet, maybe Arthur, maybe Jonna, decided they just couldn't be together under those circumstances. The circumstances of Patrick. So Jonna killed herself, because she was sad. She used the C, hallucinated Jesus to make her feel better, but that wasn't why she killed herself. It was her last try to find some way of staying alive, but it wasn't enough. Hallucinating Jesus wasn't enough, that's what Alex had learned herself, and got her brain wrecked in the process. And now Patrick had come in and found her and Jesus, found

Jesus getting His smell all over Alex, and so that's why he was knock knock knocking Jesus' head against the dresser. Did that make sense? Alex thought Patrick loved Jesus, loved Him better than he loved her. Maybe Patrick was jealous of Jesus, wanted Jesus to love him instead of Alex.

It was starting to get brain wrecked all kind of like dreaming confusing, and then Arthur came through the door, with Abbas. Abbas pulled his sword out. But he didn't know exactly what to do with it, just stood there watching Patrick knock knock knock Jesus around, until Arthur said to him,

"We can't let him kill a Net guy!"

Jesus was once a fisherman, with a net cast on the waters. A fisher of men. That's what that meant.

Arthur and Abbas pulled Patrick off Jesus. Had to struggle, Patrick was big and strong and kicking all around, kicked into the mirror above the dresser and broke it. Whoops, that's the second time we broke the mirror! The Master Card bill was going to be really big now!

Where was Jesus? Jesus was gone. It wasn't Jesus Patrick had been beating up. It was some other guy she didn't recognize. Some guy with black hair. What was —

"Alex. Alex! Are you all right?"

Somebody's voice was talking to her. Was that Jesus? No, it was Arthur. What was Arthur doing here? Did Jesus call Arthur?

"Alex, are you hurt?"

"That man has a knife in him."

"That's her brother, Patrick."

"Alex, did he hurt you?"

"Why would Jesus hurt me?" Alex asked whoever it was who was asking. Oh yes, Arthur.

"Pendrick, the man has a knife in him!" Abbas was unwrapping a package of pantyhose he'd found in the drawer. It had belonged to Jonna.

Arthur looked away from Alex, kneeled over Patrick. "Patrick, don't get up. Don't do anything. We'll get you to a hospital."

"Can he afford the hospital?" Abbas was using Jonna's pantyhose to tie up the guy with black hair who wasn't Jesus.

"Oh yeah."

"Yes, I can afford the hospital. I have full travel insurance. What's going on here? What's wrong with Alex?"

"If we take him to D'Aubainne H and TC, the Peace Force writes a report. Do we care?"

"We don't have to mention ratbag here. We can say it was a mugging gone wrong. The Peace Force'll buy that."

“H and TC?”

“Hospital and Trauma Center. Don’t worry, Patrick, we’ll take care of you.”

“Why are you —”

“Shh, just relax and don’t move around. That’s quite the sticker he got into you there.”

“Who was the guy attacking her?”

“We’ll have time for all that later.”

“Look at her, idiot, there’s something wrong with her.”

Abbas had finished tying up the dark-haired guy. The dark-haired guy’s eyes fluttered open. Abbas smacked him on the temple with the pommel of his sword. The dark-haired guy’s eyes fluttered shut.

“Alex, Alex, say something.”

Abbas kneeled over Patrick. “You’re a lucky man, Mr. Sky.”

“Do I know you? How do you know my name?”

“If you knew you had to get a blade stuck into you, that would be the place to choose.”

“Alex, can you hear me?”

“Did I cut myself? Is my hand bleeding?”

“No, no, you’re not bleeding.”

“That will hurt for a long time, and we need to get you to a hospital right away, but this shouldn’t be life-threatening.”

“She cut herself?”

“No, she’s not cut, that I can see.”

“Where’s Jesus?”

“What do you mean, where’s Jesus?”

“In fact, I’m not even going to pull the knife out. It’s doing a pretty good job of stopping the bleeding all by itself. Not to mention it could be serrated or something”

“Abbas, I think she’s on the drug right now.”

“That’s not good.”

“What drug? What are you talking about?”

“Patrick, shut the fuck up, okay? What do you mean, that’s not good?”

“Adrenaline and Communion don’t mix. You can get some extreme reactions outside of a meditative setting.”

“Alex, you’re not seeing Jesus now, are you?”

She pointed. “No, Jesus used to be that guy.”

“If she’d taken the product and then Silver came in and attacked her...”

“But then Patrick came in and stopped him from being Jesus.”

“Normally you remain fairly lucid, but...”

“But what?”

"I'm not going to shut the F up."

"He knocked knocked Jesus up against the dresser."

"But what, I'm not sure. I've never heard of anyone being assaulted while communing before."

"What are you talking about, communing?"

"Shut up or I'll stick another knife in you. What are we going to do with Silver? Wait — I know what to do with him. Oh yes, I know what to do. But we first gotta stash him somewhere while we attend to these two."

Abbas picked up the phone. "You have an injured client, room 702. Have a cab waiting to take him to the hospital. That's right, the hospital, not the Klinik. We're coming down with him now."

Someone was grabbing her again. He was taking her into the bathroom. Shoving her head under the shower.

"Is this going to sober her up?"

"Don't know. Try it."

Turning on the cold water.

Cold! Cold!

Alex jumped back out of the shower; Arthur caught her. She screamed.

"It's all right, everything is going to be all right." He was petting her soaked hair, wrapping her head in a towel.

"What happened? What happened?"

"Good question, but first we need your help getting Patrick to the hospital, he's been stabbed."

"I'm all right, I tell you, what's wrong with Alex?"

"Or maybe we'll just let you walk to the hospital with a knife handle sticking out of your shoulder, how would that be, you toxic — oh, man, you're really making me regret a decision I made involving an envelope, you blockheaded —"

"Mr. Sky, calm down. Mr. Pendrick, calm down. We are going to do this in a rational fashion."

So Abbas stayed behind in the hotel room in order to deal with Gayth. Arthur and Alex each took one of Patrick's arms and led him into the elevator. Blood was starting to spread throughout his dress shirt; every three yards or so he dripped onto the carpet of the corridor floor. When they got him to the lobby, only the burger stared. To the regulars, a man with a knife in him was nothing special.

When she'd first started to piece it together, Alex had been imagining a big dramatic confrontation-type thing. But getting the story was all a lot more low-key than that. Arthur quietly told her while they stood in the disinfected hallway outside the D'Aubainne Hospital and Trauma Center, waiting for the doctor to get done with Patrick.

He started with a sigh.

"Last year, Alex, I happened to be in San Diego on business. One of my clients — one of the people I'd helped — she passed on, and it turned out I'd been named a beneficiary in her will. And don't roll your eyes like that. I *did* help her. And I was surprised to be named. Anyhow, she gave me title to a restaurant there, a very nice little Spanish tapas bar. So I had to go over there to check it out and find a local real estate guy I could trust. He'd find people to keep it running and find a buyer for me and all that. Which meant I was there for a while, dealing with all of these details. And you know, San Diego's a fun town, lots of stuff to do and I happened to notice in the entertainment listings that Jonna was playing this small concert hall in the city on a night I didn't have any other plans. So, just on a whim, you know, I got myself a ticket and thought I'd go see her, just for the nostalgia of it all. I'd always liked her singing when I was, when you and I were together, back in high school, and I'd seen her on TV every so often, especially when she had that hit, the one you sang in the bar last night —"

"*All Lit Up.*"

"Especially when that was a hit, so I'd sort of casually followed her career, and I'd always liked her, she was a nice kid, and she was sort of a celebrity I knew back when, not that it was the kind of music I'm into, right? But I thought, hey, you know, when am I next going to get a chance to see her? With me living over here now: never, right? So that's all I was thinking. Go see the kid, enjoy her voice, try not to listen to the sappy lyrics, slip out the back when it's done. And that's all I was thinking. It's not like I'd planned for this to happen. I didn't go after this, you have to understand.

"The thing is, I bought tickets on the day of the show, and I guess it was one of those cases where they clear up more seating after they figure out exactly where the mixing board's going to go. So I ended up with this seat right near the front, kind of off to one side, but right up there, you know? So there I am, right visible to the stage, and it turns out that there's this point in her show where the house lights go on and she walks into the audience and they all have this big Christian bonding thing. This churchy kind of deal. And when she's walking around up to the stage stairs to get back up there, we come face to face, in the light, our noses just a few inches apart. And she recognizes me, right, I mean, I still look pretty much the same, and I can see she's kind of

startled to see me and I think, oh man, here I am screwing up her concentration, here's old Arthur wrecking stuff again. Every time I get the near the Sky family, I think, I screw things up. And man, I should have stuck with that thought, because, boy, have we ever found it to be true, here, huh? But anyway.

"There I am feeling bad that I've blown things for her, but at the end of the show she looks over to where I'm sitting, while she's taking her bows with the band after the final encore and she gives me one of these."

Arthur made a beckoning motion.

"Like she's saying, you know, come backstage, man. And I'm not sure if that's the deal, so I give her one of these."

Arthur pointed to his chest and made a questioning face.

"So she nods, like really enthusiastically, like she's really pleased to see me. Which is kind of a surprise, because it's not like we did all that much together, seeing as how big brother didn't want me around the house, and Alex, you didn't want to be around the house. I mean, my memories of her were just of a sweet girl who — well, I don't know, I always figured she was secretly a little jealous of you and all the misbehaving we got up to. I'm not saying she was always giving me the eye or anything, back then, but there was just this little thing she'd say every now and again that gave me that impression. So what I'm saying to you is, even at this point, that I wasn't, you know, heading back there to hit on her or like that. I was just gonna go back, say hello, exchange the pleasantries thing, seeya later, and that would be it. If I coulda predicted the chain of events that leads to this now, I — I would have turned and walked out the other way. Guess that goes without saying.

"So I go around to the stage door, give it a knock, ready to tell whoever answers, you know, I'm an old friend of the family, Jonna saw me in the audience, she wants me to come back and say hi. I'm expecting a roadie or band member or something. But what to my wondering eyes should appear, but Patrick, big as a linebacker, with this kind of crazy James Caan expression on his face the moment he gets his eyes on me. And again, here was fate giving me another chance to turn around, another little warning, I guess, but instead I think to myself, I'm a grown man now, I'm a successful businessman, I'm not the insecure little punk he used to intimidate the snot out of. I mean, I'd always wanted him to like me, that's the thing. He'd always gotten under my fingernails that way; I don't know if you know that. Never gave me nothing but the back of his hand. So there I am in San Diego thinking, you can't intimidate me any more, and besides there's nothing wrong with my intentions, I'm just there to say hi. So we kind of circle around each other, he's giving me the skunk-eye, I'm rambling on like I'm

rambling now, giving him the explanation. And I can tell he's looking for an excuse to kick me out, but he can't come up with one, so he sorta grunts and waves me through. And so I find her dressing room door, no help from his directions, and I knock on it, and there's Jonna, her hair up, still a bit of cold cream on her face, wearing this silk kimono bathrobe thing. And suddenly I'm thinking, my god, this woman is beautiful.

"And why was she beautiful? Well, you're beautiful. I remembered you as beautiful. I, I loved you. But that's not it, that makes it seem all Freudian or something. She was beautiful, as Jonna, not as your sister. But her. There was this light in her eyes, and her smile — well, she looked really glad to see me, I mean, genuinely, in this actual way. I'm good at charming people. That's my job, making them like me. But a look like this, you don't get that every day. It kinda, you know, made me unsteady on my feet even.

"So she had me come in and sit down, and we got to talking, and you know, just the chit-chat, filling each other in on what we'd been up to, but just the career kind of stuff, nothing really deep or personal. I made a kind of joke about Patrick being the monster guarding the gate, and she laughed, and it all just seemed to flow very naturally. I mean, I wasn't doing my usual charm techniques on her, and *still* she was liking me and we were hitting it off. That made me feel really good to be in this skin, which doesn't happen a lot for me, I guess you could say.

"One thing leads to another, we go out to dinner. Very lovely, intimate Italian place. We share a bottle of wine. And still at this point I was never planning anything. For once in my life, I had no objectives for what I was going to get out of another person I was spending time with. And before I knew it, we were getting into the personal areas. She was telling me how she felt lonely, how she'd had these sort of partial relationships that never went anywhere. That all the people she met, on account of being involved in the Christian music scene, had all of these expectations of her that she didn't think she could live up to. They got interested in the Jonna they saw on stage, and, well, she thought she wasn't really that person. And I kind of anted up myself, told her that, you know, maybe I didn't all the time feel so great about the ways that I got money outta people, even if the people themselves always left wanting more. And we talked about you, how — how... You know, we just talked about you."

"Come on, what did you say?"

Arthur took a deep breath and let the words tumble out like quarters from a change machine. "Well, what I said was that messing up on you was the mistake I've always regretted for my entire life. The one where when I'm feeling bleak, I think to myself, I look back on that and

wonder what I'd be if I hadn't gone and wrecked it." Another deep breath.

"So anyway. One thing led to another, and I invite her up to the hotel room, to talk some more. She didn't have to perform or travel the next day. Said she had a rare day off and wanted to have a reason to sleep in the next day. And, okay, by this point, at this time, yes, both of us were planning something. Mutual, though. More than mutual. She was way ahead of me on that one. Later, even, when we were intimate enough to go back over the chain of events, she said to me that she'd wanted to steer me into bed from only a few minutes into our conversation in her dressing room.

"Maybe you don't want to believe this, but she eventually said she'd always had a thing for me. When she was a teenager, I was the one she thought about at night when she went to sleep, clutching her pillow. And when I heard this I thought, you know, I always did put on a good show.

"So I wake up the next morning. She's still lying warm and asleep in the bed next to me. And I start to get the doubts. I think, you know, I feel sleazy, because she has this spotless-clean Christian-type image, and it's not like I think that there's anything wrong with a guy and a woman getting together in that way, but does she think it's — you know, all kinds of stupid thoughts. And I think about the expectations thing, I mean, she has a problem with guys having expectations of *her*, but here I am, the guy she's had a crush on since her sister went out with him in high school. I mean, look at all of the kinds of projecting that she'd be doing there. What would she think of me when she woke up, looked at the real me and all of the things I do? And on top of that, I'm thinking also that I just went to bed with the spitting image of the woman I've always regretted losing. You know, all of the psychological tangles that implies, they come down on me. And it all converges into my mind towards the one big thought: *Sooner or later, no two ways about it, I'm gonna screw this up just like I screwed it up with Alex.*

"I'm lying there awake and so now what do I do? If I just sneak out on her, just slip out of her life like maybe even now I think I shoulda done, there I am abandoning her and being the total shit I don't want to be. Do I keep this up? Do I give her the just be friends speech? I'm in the middle of a really big mistake I don't see any way out of.

"So finally she wakes up, and we, uh, we. Again, you know. We, uh. And there's no way out of it, I realize. I love her. I love her.

"I need a Pepsi or something."

Arthur took off down the hallway; Alex followed him around the hospital's winding corridors until he found a soda machine. He plunked in his quarters, retrieved the can, opened it, and took a sip.

“So the thing is, we embarked on an affair. Now, normally, these days, you’d call it a relationship, when two people who aren’t otherwise attached get romantically involved. But since we needed to sneak around, not let Patrick know about it, it felt like an affair. Also she was worried that the press would find out that she was sleeping with a guy she wasn’t married to. Not only that, but a guy involved in the New Age movement, which would be a big devil thing to lots of her fans. I didn’t like it, and eventually that’s what — well, I’ll get to that.

“At the time there was a manager I thought I could trust to run the Pneuma Center, so I decided for that summer to just let things slide and travel around, following Jonna’s tour schedule. Dropping my consultancy business, that was going to eat into my savings, but, hey, it was love. She’d do a show, tell Patrick she was going back to her hotel room, and then come and see me. We’d travel separately to the next town, she’d do a show, repeat, repeat, yadda, yadda.

“Eventually it got to wear at me. Staying in hotel rooms, traveling. Being on the road is even worse if you’re not performing or really getting anything out of it. The everyday boredom of it all started to sour things. I wanted to be with her, but the life I was having to lead to do it — we started to snap at each other, you know, the usual. I felt cooped up. Especially the hiding from Patrick part. That really galled me; made me feel like a no-good kid again.

“So finally I gave her the ultimatum. Do it out in the open, make it legit, or, you know, it just wasn’t going to work.

“Alex, I asked her to marry me. But she wouldn’t consider it. Didn’t want to tell Patrick. Didn’t want to tell you; she told me how you’ve hated my guts all these years. Why, with Patrick, she just wouldn’t even get into that. As if she lived her whole life just to avoid disappointing him.”

“I don’t hate your g—”

“Sure you do. And rightly so. But that’s not the point, anyway. The point is, she turned me down, and so I told her obviously this relationship isn’t going anywhere now, is it? And about that time I found out that my manager was robbing me senseless. So I told her I was coming back to Al Amarja, that I wished it could be different, but the way it was going, it wasn’t working out. And it ripped at me to do that, and all along I hoped I’d convince her, but she let me go. And so that was that. At least, I thought to myself, at least this time *I* didn’t mess it up. It just didn’t work, because of all the history. But it wasn’t because I’d thrown it away. Not this time.

“Ten months go by. Then I get a call from her. She’s coming to Al Amarja, on vacation. I knew she’d had one of those exhaustion collapse things onstage, it had been in the entertainment news on CNN. She

wants to see me. And I shoulda said no, but I didn't. And we start sneaking around together again. Because, which you know, Patrick was here with her. Goes everywhere with her. The monster at the gate."

Abbas had trouble thinking of a place to stash Gayth. His apartment building wasn't secure enough. His neighbors would see him dragging Gayth up the elevator and down the hallway. One of them was bound to rat him out to somebody. The clubhouse was out of the question, for obvious reasons. Abbas thought of calling up Frank Germaine, proprietor of Sad Mary's, and asking to borrow the back room. It would be too much to ask, though. No club owner needed Net troubles.

Then Abbas had an inspired thought. He called Al Amarja Customs and Immigration and asked for his loyal customer, Dinesh Rajpal. He made Dinesh an offer. Fifteen minutes later, a squad of Immigration agents were briskly rapping on the door of room 702. They injected Gayth with a tranquilizer and hustled him down the back stairs and into a van. They drove Abbas and his prisoner to the airport terminal and led him to the Immigration Department's auxiliary holding cells. Dinesh was waiting for them in an outer office. He told the agents which empty cell to dump Gayth into, and then dismissed them.

"Thank you for doing this," Abbas said to him.

"Do not thank me. I am pleased to help. Your offer is more than generous compensation for my small efforts." The offer had been a lifetime supply of Communion. "And it is good to do something positive, to do more than simply humiliate and inconvenience."

"Your colleagues are very efficient."

"It is good to have broad discretionary powers."

Abbas once again asked Dinesh if he wasn't taking too serious a risk, but Dinesh poo-pooed him. Gayth still hadn't registered for full citizenship status, which meant that C&I was perfectly within its rights to arrest him. The charge? Suspicion of lying during his interview.

"Everyone lies during their interview," Dinesh said. "It really is quite a beautiful system. Well, it is at this point that I must maintain plausible deniability." He clapped his hands together like a cheerful cruise director. "Buzz me when you are finished with him; my direct line is listed in the directory by the phone. Remember, if anyone questions you, you are operating on my behalf in an Immigration investigation. I'll back your story if problems arise." He handed Abbas a cell

key, and a syringe of stimulant to counter the tranquilizer in Gayth's system.

Abbas took the key and opened the barred door. The immigration agents had done an admirable job of restraining the knife man. They'd left him in a standing position, both arms outstretched and cuffed to the bars. With some sense of relish, Abbas jabbed the syringe through the cloth of Gayth's pants and into his thigh.

It took about a minute for Gayth to wake up. He squirmed against his restraints for a moment, then, seeing Abbas, regained his composure.

"You'll come to regret this, Mr. Nadjafi."

"A risk I'm willing to assume."

Abbas noticed Gayth working his mouth around. "The tranquilizer we used on you, it certainly dries the mouth out, doesn't it?"

"Who is 'we'?"

"I have allies."

"So do I. I'll have my entire organization down on you."

"That's actually what this informal meeting here is all about. It's about you making a solemn vow to cover me. You are going to guarantee that the Net will never again bother me or attempt to interfere with my business."

"You're dead."

"You're thirsty. And I have all the time in the world."

Gayth looked over at the tumbler full of water sitting on the cell's bench. Abbas had turned off the air conditioning in the cells. Condensation beaded seductively on the outside of the tumbler.

"I know what you're thinking," Abbas told him. "You're thinking you don't want to drink that cold, tasty water, because you don't know what's in it. And you're right, you don't. But you're going to drink it eventually, if I have to pour it down your throat. So you might as well save yourself some time and discomfort."

Gayth did not immediately accept the drink. He threatened Abbas for a while longer. Abbas responded nonchalantly, kept reminding him how much he needed some water on his tongue.

Fifteen minutes into it he said, "Get it over with then," and opened his mouth.

"I understand," said Abbas, pouring, "that you believe in nothing. Metaphysically speaking, I mean. You believe there is a vast, indifferent, cosmic zero out there, and that's all there is. I am right in understanding that, aren't I?"

Water spilled from Gayth's mouth and soaked his shirt. He understood, now, what was going to happen to him. "Pendrick! I'll gut him!"

“No, you won’t. The non-interference agreement you’re going to make today covers Arthur Pendrick, too, and also the Sky family. And I’ll take that as a yes to my question.”

Gayth’s response was obscene in five languages.

“This will make an interesting experiment, then. People who believe as you do tend to avoid Communion, for obvious reasons. But you’ve just consumed a powerful dose there, dissolved in the water. I advise you not to get upset about this. Adrenaline tends to intensify the experience. Unpleasantly so. You’re not upset already, are you, Gayth? I hate to see emotions run rampant during a negotiation. So unprofessional.”

Arthur continued: “She’s supposed to meet me at Liberation Park in Sunken Barrio; we’re going to find a café, have brunch, then stroll around and finally head back to my place. We’re talking, what, I guess a week and a half ago. She’s running a little late, which is unusual for her. You know how hung up and apologetic she always got when she was even a tiny bit behind. I’m looking at my watch, looking around, looking at the cabs as they approach. And finally a cab stops, she gets out, pays the driver, and I head on over to meet her. She wraps her arms around me, this very nice full-body hug, a very passionate kiss, too. And I find myself thinking, I’ll ask her again, I’ll ask her to marry me and she can stay here forever, forget the career, forget Patrick. We’d been having such a great time, just going to the restaurants and the bars and walking around and checking out bookstores and so on. And she’d been talking about how she just felt like giving the whole thing up. Not that she didn’t believe in her music anymore, or that she was having a faith crisis or like that. She just wanted to ease off, though, enjoy her life, live for herself, take it easy. Not follow quite so many rules. And, I was a little gun-shy here after being turned down before, but we’d even sort of talked about finances in a between-the-lines kinda way. Taking into account the money she’d saved, the investments Patrick had made for her, and, you know, I was back on track with my business again. And the standard of living here, it’s cheap to live well in Al Amarja. So I’m figuring we could have a very nice life together, assuming that quitting was what she really wanted to do and not something she was just talking about. She’d already extended her vacation time here, which was a good sign. So she had me taking it easy, slowly. Each time we met, edging her closer to this idea. Preparing her to ask the question again. But right then, with her all wrapped up next to me, I

was thinking, this is it, this is the moment, go for the touchdown, ask her.

“So, before I get a word out, what does she say to me? She says, ‘I told Patrick about us.’ She’s laughing, the words are just falling out of her, she’s telling me that she told him that I was the reason she was here. That she predicted he’d be upset, and knows you’ll be upset, Alex, but she doesn’t care anymore. You two, and anybody else who doesn’t like it, well, tough. She’s going to be free, do things the way she wants to do them from now on. She kisses me again, and says she has a very important question for me.”

Arthur paused, drank the last of his Pepsi. He closed his eyes and left them that way.

“So what was the question?” prompted Alex.

“I think I know but I’ll never be sure, will I? Because that’s when I see Patrick coming at me. He’d followed her there in his own cab. She’s facing away from him, doesn’t see him. I try to get her attention, to spin her away, but I can’t get the words out. Like an idiot I’m just kind of frozen there, seeing it all unfold like it’s happening to someone else. Although I’d like to, I don’t think I’ll ever forget the expression in his face. Pure animal. Animal hurt and rage.

“He grabs her by the shoulder, to pull her away from me, which ends up throwing her to her knees, right onto the pavement. And here she is wearing a dress and everything, so it’s her getting her knees all scraped up, right? Which is what I’m worried about instead of the punch that’s coming at me. So next thing I know, he’s smashed me right in the face with his fist, and I’m kind of weaving, and I put up my arms to deflect any more blows to the head, so he gives me a hard one right in the stomach, and I double right over.

“This is where it all becomes a blur, okay? I don’t know if you’ve ever been beaten up — really badly beaten.”

“The guy who attacked me in the hotel today, that was the closest I’ve ever come...”

“I’ve been in a situation or two, especially coming here. But never like this. Patrick just keeps pounding and pounding. I hit the pavement to try to shield myself, to curl up and protect what I can, and there comes kick after kick after kick. When you’re getting hurt like that, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it — you stop being a person and just turn into an organism. All you know is terror. I, I shit myself, he’s kicking me so bad. And this is right out in public, with a big crowd gathered to watch him do it. This is the Edge, right, so nobody intervenes. They don’t know whether he’s crazy on angel dust, or if he’s some gangster, or just a psycho or what, but my getting the bejesus kicked out of me, my getting humiliated, it’s just their daily entertain-

ment. Part of the colorful street life. This was Sunken Barrio, so mostly the people were tourists. Not that it would have been different anywhere else. This place, it likes you when you're strong and hates you when you're weak."

"I don't know how long he was kicking me for. It felt like forever, but it was probably over, like, boom. Next thing I know, he and Jenna are gone. So I give this kid money to help me get to — to get here, to the emergency ward. Most of the injuries turned out to be pretty superficial. Deep bruising, mostly. Even by the next day I was healing up good, at least on the outside. It still hurts when I try to walk fast or exert myself in any real way.

"Once I got home, there's a message for me on the answering machine. It's Jenna. Telling me she's really sorry for what happens, can't put into words how bad she feels, and she'll keep calling me until I get back, and please not to call her. Because you never know when he might be in the room listening to her. Then there are a bunch of hang-ups on the tape. And then there's your brother, telling me that if I ever try to contact Jenna again, he'll do me some more until I figure out the hint.

"Now, in this situation, I got some options. Like you noticed with Abbas, this is a place where it's not abnormal to be walkin' around with a big freakin' sword on you. And there are lots of people who are in the revenge business, a lot of them very good, and at surprisingly reasonable rates once you look into it. And I'll tell you, I did look into it. For two hundred bucks I could have had somebody put him in the hospital. For five hundred, I coulda had him killed. Next time he was out of the hotel, bam, before he knew it, a knife in the ribs. And I'll tell you, I had that money all waiting in an envelope, that was as close as I was to it. I'm talking the five hundred dollar, full service, option. And I would have given the go-ahead and felt more than fine about it if it weren't for Jenna. Since I loved her and everything, I couldn't exactly be having her brother snuffed, no matter what he'd done to me.

"I didn't tell her about that when she finally did call me. I just told her we weren't in a situation where we could be together. Me and your family, I told her, it just isn't intended to be. She said she could maybe do something about Patrick, talk to him, make him see it was okay for her to quit and come be with me, but I could tell she wasn't really facing up to what a head case he is. I didn't put it in these terms, but I let her know she had a choice. Get him out of her life, or forget about me. I was still hurt bad at that time, and my pride was injured even worse, but I don't think I was hostile or aggressive with her. That's not what I wanted. I knew she couldn't cut Patrick away from her. It just wasn't

in her to ever do that. I knew it was over, it's not like I was working a strategy on her. I'd given it up.

"She phoned back a couple more times after that. Only once was I there to take the call. She'd been crying, said she didn't know which world she belonged to. And she said some strange things, which thinking about it now would have been, I suppose, her reaction to being on Communion. Back when we were having fun together on the island, one evening I told her about the various strange drugs you can find here, so that's where she heard about it. And we know Abbas was dealing out of the hotel, so I guess she found out that he had some medicine for her pain, and she took it, and... Would she have killed herself without the drug? I don't know. Probably, I think. What does it matter?"

Abbas didn't want to be in the cell during Gayth's trip. He wanted the place to be empty of human souls. So he stepped into the security room and watched him on a TV monitor. There wasn't much to see. Gayth bucked around for a bit, but the black and white camera had too low a resolution for Abbas to really pick out what was on his face. It wasn't until an hour later, when Abbas returned to the cell, that he saw the devastation in his enemy's eyes. Gayth's face looked like a fallen house of cards.

"So, what is it like, communing with utter and absolute nothingness? Confronting the void?"

Gayth shuddered.

"Our guess is that it's nothing you ever want to experience again. Now that you've seen it, you know that it's real. You're not going to be able to find yourself a reassuring, cozy belief system at this point. No going back, no conversions for you. Which means next time you get dosed... My surmise is that each meeting with the void is worse than the last. Which is a hypothesis I bet you don't want to test for me, am I right?"

"Please don't..."

"Please don't what, Gayth?"

Gayth tried to form more words, but only a whimper came out.

"If you're saying please don't be foolish, please don't think you don't have allies, I tell you, I know you have allies. They're what you're going to protect us from. Because, as you've learned today, I have allies too. I know people with pull, also."

This was a bluff. Dinesh certainly wouldn't sign on for a prolonged war with the Net.

"The people who took you today, they can take you again. So even after you walk out of here today, you know that you're always a mere shadow away from getting another dose in you. Unless you provide the guarantees we seek. Look at the balance sheet, Gayth. You really just have the one option. Don't you?"

Gayth moved his head. It took a moment for Abbas to successfully identify it as a nod.

Alex and Arthur adjourned to the cafeteria of the D'Aubainne Hospital and Trauma Center. They both purchased coffees, tasted them, and decided that they weren't worth drinking.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Alex asked him.

He looked down at the yellowy-brown coffee in its paper cup. "You think I'm enjoying telling you now?"

She knew she wasn't expected to answer that question. She pictured him lying there on the sidewalk, soiled, bloody, with people all around him. Arthur had always been the Teflon guy. He didn't get defeated. He always scraped through. Because he knew what the other person wanted, better than that other person did. And so he got their money, or affection, or whatever he was after. The only time Arthur'd ever gotten hurt was when he actually loved somebody back. First, with her. Then with Jonna. Alex couldn't exactly imagine herself in Arthur's place — she could ever be in the same set of circumstances — but she could see why he wouldn't have just up and mentioned it the minute he first saw her.

"I almost did, you know. Tell you. First thing, when you came into the store. I assumed Patrick had actually told you — how else would you have known I was here, right? But you cut me off, and as you went on I saw that it was all about something else, so I... And then, again, at Murray's, when you confirmed my suspicions, told me she'd killed herself — I was almost ready to say it, but then you kept talking over the moment, gave me the chance to cover up again. To be a Master Detective, you gotta be a good listener, kiddo. You've always been a runaway train, and that gives the advantage to the other guy, and anyhow, does it do you any good, to know even now?"

"I needed the facts."

"What for?"

"What do you mean, what for?"

"I mean, what does knowing the facts accomplish? Does it actually make you feel any better about things?"

"I don't know. Give me time or something."

"You might well be better off not knowing. Now that you know that Patrick contributed in a big way to making her do it. I mean, he's still your brother, right? You still have to live with him. Wouldn't you be better off if you hadn't heard the exact truth?"

"You gotta know the truth."

He stood up, looked at his watch. "I dunno, maybe it's just the business I'm in, and me not liking how everything's turned out for me in this whole situation. But I'm coming to the conclusion that the truth is overrated. I mean, you need some kind of story, some kind of explanation for things. But to keep with this example..." He sat down again. "Your earlier theory was wrong, but it'd be easier to take. Admit it, you'd be happier if you could just somehow chalk it all up to Communion, right? Blame a chemical."

"I knew my theory was wrong, in my heart. I needed to know the truth. Keep looking."

He stood up again. "That's why I feel for you, kiddo. I figure... I figure the people who have the biggest capacity for believing glorious bullshit that makes them happy, they're the lucky ones. I mean, yeah, I make my living exploiting people like that, but the thing is, that doesn't hurt them, really. In general they lead long, happy, prosperous lives. Look, I gotta get going. Check with Abbas and see if the Gayth situation is handled."

Alex stood, put her arm around his. "Are you going to explain to me about that?"

He shook his head. "Unrelated. It's an Al Amarjan thing. Go back to Minneapolis and try to..." He choked up. Alex hugged him.

"I'm sorry I made you tell," she told him.

"No, you're just sorry I feel bad."

"Is that good enough?"

He disengaged, looked into her eyes. "Yes, that's good enough."

He wrapped his arms around her. "What are you going to say to Patrick?"

"I don't know."

What she said to Patrick was not much. The doctor had patched him up just fine; he had to rest and avoid opening up the cut again, but he was ready to be discharged. Patrick didn't have much to say, especially after Alex let him know that she'd talked to Arthur, gotten the story. He didn't seem to care who Gayth was or why he'd been attacking her or what strange drug exactly she'd been taking. And he certainly tuned out when Alex told him that Jonna had been on

Communion as well. He was no longer the pushy, conversation-dominating guy she'd known for always. He'd gone right inside himself. The only thing he said was that he wanted to get off this rotten island as quickly as possible. Which was something Alex had a tough time disagreeing with. There was just one more person to say good-bye to, and then she'd be more than happy to get onto a plane and the heck outta there.

“I thought you'd made a promise to me,” the hallucination said.

“I did make a promise to You, and that promise is good. The promise starts right after this last time.”

Jesus rolled His eyes slightly, like he'd heard that one a million times before. He was sitting across from Alex in her hotel room. The Bienvenidos staff had cleaned up the room perfectly while she and Patrick were at the hospital. You couldn't see any bloodstains anywhere.

This time Jesus was wearing a T-shirt and blue jeans, same as Alex. Well, except His shirt was just a plain white one, no Soul Coughing album cover on it. Alex wasn't quite sure what Jesus was trying to say to her with His choice of attire.

“I know You've probably heard that a lot,” Alex said. “That this is the last time. But it is, in this case. The flight back is booked already. I've already flushed the remaining pills, except for the one I just took, of course. You can't get Communion in the Twin Cities. So even if I am tempted...”

“Don't you think it would have been better to defeat temptation, rather than to sidestep it?”

“I'm speaking to you for a reason,” she said, allowing a note of warning anger to seep into her voice.

“I thought I had conveyed the essential point,” He said, wearily. “That you can always speak to me. Through the conventional means. Prayer; it still works. I hope you will use it when you get back home.”

Alex let that little gambit slide on by. She was not about to be deterred from her agenda. “I have a question for You.”

“There is no question you can't answer yourself.”

“Don't give me that.”

“You have been given the tools. They were provided to you two thousand years ago. And they will be good for a long, long time to come.”

"The specific question is, what do I do about Patrick?"

"You didn't need to do this, to take more of the drug, for that question."

"But I did and here we are so why don't You just cut me some slack, and answer my question for me?"

Jesus laughed. "I can't cut you any more slack than I already have. I know you don't consider this a helpful response, but —"

"If I knew the answer I wouldn't be asking."

"You do know the answer. You are asking because you want that answer to be different."

"Okay, I just want to hear You say it to be sure."

"You are already sure."

Alex sighed in frustration. "Love," she said. "The answer is Love."

"You did not need to contact me in this manner."

"I also wanted to say good-bye."

"I know. But you're not getting off the hook that easy. I'm always around, you know." He smiled. She couldn't help thinking that Jesus was kinda cute. Not her type, but cute.

Hmm, that was kinda a weird thought.

"And ask one more question."

Another roll of the eyes from Jesus. Alex thought she saw a touch of humor in the gesture, this time.

"Are You real?"

"No."

"No?"

"The conventional means, that is real. Prayer, that is real. I am not real."

"You're lying."

Abbas and Arthur met at Murray's. Arthur recommended the Reuben. Abbas instead chose the shish-kabob with wild rice. Arthur updated Abbas on the condition and plans of the Sky family. Abbas told him that an agreement in principle with Gayth had been reached. Neither man had planned to get into depth with the other. But, to fill the silence, they began to speak of related matters. Arthur told him of his feelings of abandonment, now that Jonna had left him behind. This brought Abbas to the subject of Hans, the betrayer. And thus, to Abbas' now-delicate business position.

“You know,” said Arthur, “I was just BSing at the time I first came up with this idea. Extemporizing to try to keep Gayth in the store until I found some kind of edge over him? But. You know, now your old hangouts are whipped out from under you, the Pneuma Center *would* make an pretty good retail outlet. For your product, is what I’m saying.”

Abbas allowed that the idea might have some potential, and soon the two men were working out details on one of Murray’s napkins.

Giuseppe Sizo summoned Abbas to his funeral home. There was a corpse on the embalming table. That of a woman, perhaps sixty years old. Giuseppe was agitated again. He wouldn’t come out and tell Abbas what his problem was, but something was eating at him. Instead he went on about minor details. First he wanted Abbas to go through an accounting of the last quarter’s business, penny by penny. Abbas had his lap-top along and was able to give him a guided tour of his spreadsheets. Giuseppe had to be indulged when he was in one of his moods. No other dealer would be organized enough to withstand this onslaught of paranoia, Abbas thought. He doesn’t know what a good arrangement he has. Appreciation, Abbas did not expect. A small degree of respect, though, that was not too much to ask. A sudden image came to Abbas’ mind; he imagined himself drawing his katana, bringing it down in a blinding slash onto the top of Giuseppe’s head, down his face, slicing down his breastbone. Abbas dismissed the image; he’d sacrificed all of it to keep his word to this man. It wouldn’t be... congruent to murder him now.

Then Giuseppe arrived at the point. He looked down at the woman on the slab, and said, “A friend of mine, she was. She could tell I had a secret. Some mutant-like part of me deep down. Yet she did not care. She sympathized with me without ever once prying into it. Before my Violetta died, the two of us, and this one here, and her husband — we were friends. After Violetta... I was unable... The husband, he waits, upstairs. Into many pieces, he is broken. You mutants do not understand what loss really is. To be one of the True People, and to lose a mate. A physical need, that is what the love of one’s spouse becomes. Her husband, I do not predict that he will last long. He, too, may soon be product.”

Giuseppe was compulsively opening and closing a drawer in his work bench. “Lucky, you are, not to feel things intensely. To let the bruises and slights of this world wash over you, like you are seeing them on the television.”

Finally he withdrew a power tool from the drawer, something that looked like a circular saw. He used it to punch through the top of his dead friend's skull. Abbas thought of Drizzle Fade, of the box of salt. He wondered if Fade was still alive. Giuseppe took a pair of chrome tweezers from the drawer, and began, aching, gently, to tease the tadpole-shaped pineal gland from her forehead.

"And now I betray my friend. Abbas Nadjafi, I hope you are satisfied with what you make me do."

Ah, that's why Giuseppe had asked for him. He needed someone to hand off the guilt to. Like a relay runner's baton. Abbas did not mind accepting it. He had fought the devil, and won. He had kept what was important to him, and, surprisingly, he was still alive, too. He was strong enough, then, to shoulder a section of Giuseppe's burden. Not that he should let this get out of hand.

"I make you do nothing, and you know that." Abbas toyed with the idea of actually telling Giuseppe about his whole run-in with Gayth and the certain business interests he represented. Tell him of the price that had been paid. No. That would just agitate him. Better to keep him in the dark. What was that old joke, the one about your employer treating you like a mushroom?

The example of Alex and Jonna had made him curious, though. Somehow, before now, he had always managed to avoid seeing the impact the product had on people. It had just been a commodity. A means to an end, the end being the Aries. Abbas was going to have to find some greater end now. He wondered what that might be.

"Giuseppe, have you ever given any thought to why this works?"

"Why I betray my people daily? If only I knew what awful defect —"

"No, I mean the drug. Why the drug makes people see their gods."

Giuseppe shrugged. "The malformations of the mutant physiology, these do not interest me."

"You don't think that, perhaps, there is the remotest possibility that people really are seeing real gods? Really Communing?"

"Nonsense. The only real god is Armzhak, the winged bull."

Giuseppe had completed the painstaking process of extracting the pineal gland from his dead friend's skull. "You mutants do not have gods. You grope only at false reflections of true divinity." He dropped the organ into a glass jar, and held it up to the light. "There you are, Abbas Nadjafi. My dear friend is reduced to raw material for our... *commerce*. Forgive me, Alicia. You will have more product in a week, Abbas. More food for the island's hunger."

"Yes, it all keeps going, doesn't it?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

They were in the air, already over the Atlantic, when Patrick was finally the one to bring it up.

"Why are you waiting?" he asked.

"Waiting for what?" Alex responded. She'd been drifting to sleep, and his question had jolted her.

"I know you're dying to condemn me," he said.

"I, uh, want to talk about this. But I'm not sure where to start. I know it's not with condemnation, though."

He looked away from her. "I deserve it."

"Do you?"

"I've done terrible things."

"Yeah."

"I killed her."

"That's not exactly right, is it?"

"I might as well have."

"Don't make it worse than it is. It's selfish."

"All those things you wanted to find out. You knew I was hiding something. You wanted to find it out, and throw it at me. And you were right. Someone needs to avenge her." He was speaking very quietly so that his voice wouldn't crack. Alex found it hard to make out everything he was saying.

"She made her own decision. I sure don't like that decision. And you did definitely make it harder for her to make the other choice. You contributed."

"If I could trade places with her now, I would."

"Yeah. But the question is how are you really going to make it right?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't understand."

Alex put her hand on his and squeezed. "You're going to get help, right?"

"I hadn't thought..."

"Probably not a shrink. But you can find some non-phony minister type you trust, right?"

"Uh..."

"You know you need help, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you know I love you, even with everything."

Patrick retreated into himself again. It was like he was a passenger she didn't know, who of course wouldn't be expected to look at her or notice she was there.

"I wasn't sure," he finally said.

“Neither was I,” Alex replied. Wasn’t going to be fun or anything. The answer to your question, Arthur, is that it does make a difference to know. It has to.

Just then, it occurred to her that she hadn’t gotten a Jesus hangover the last time, or the time before that. And she wondered what that was all about.