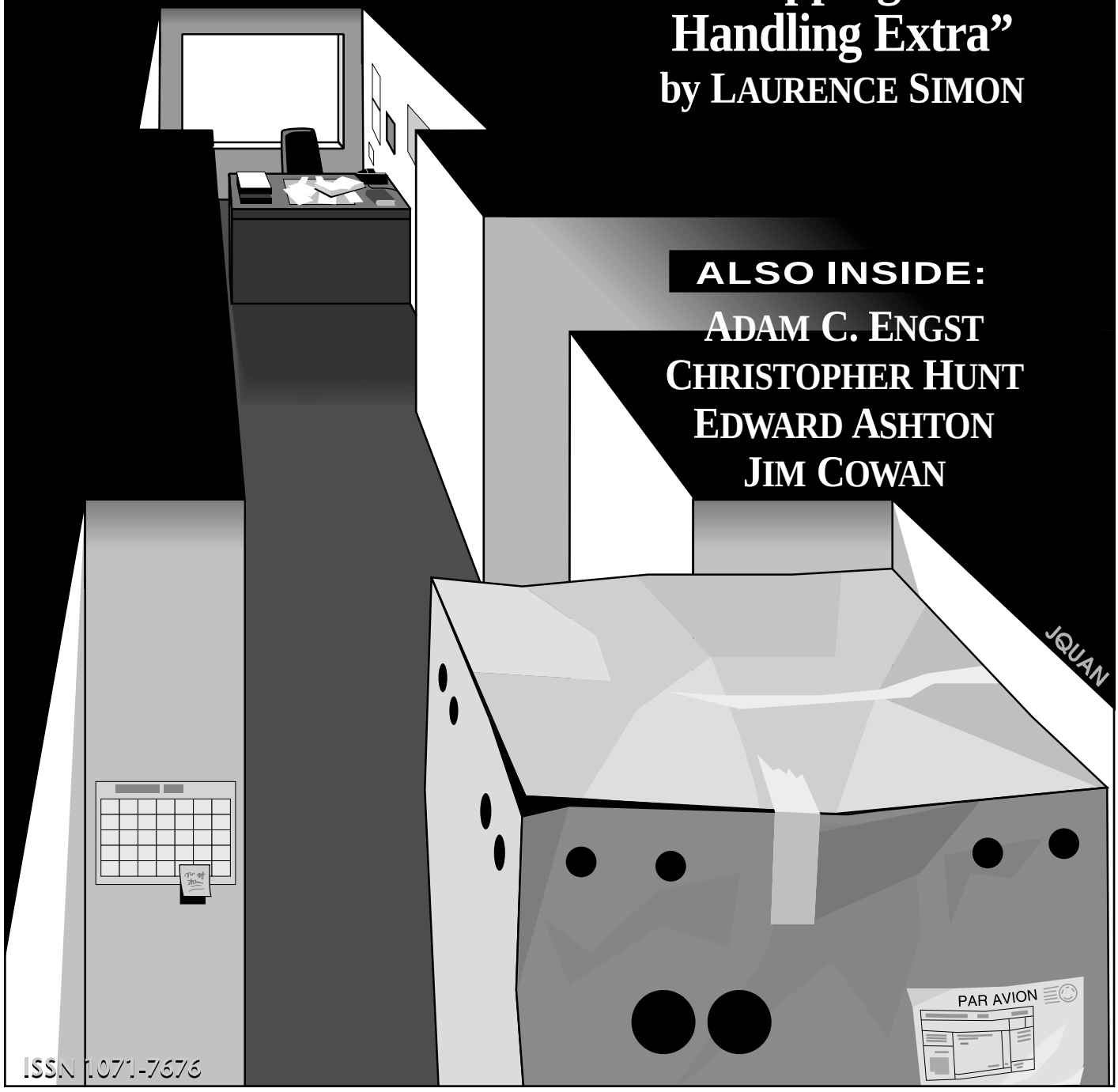
InterText

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 3 MAY–JUNE 1995

"Shipping and Handling Extra"
by LAURENCE SIMON



ALSO INSIDE:

ADAM C. ENGST
CHRISTOPHER HUNT
EDWARD ASHTON
JIM COWAN

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***InterText*'s next issue will be released July 15, 1995.**

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First Text

JASON SNELL

THE DIGITAL FINISH LINE

WHILE THOSE OF US HERE at *InterText*'s virtual offices have been accused of a lot of things, failing to be punctual has never been one of them. One of the things I take great pride in—especially when I'm being interviewed by journalism students, which seems to be all the time these days—is the fact that since our second issue, we've managed to appear every two months, like clockwork. If it's the 15th of an odd-numbered month, you can pretty much bet that an issue of *InterText* is nearing completion. (You can also bet that I'll be chained to my desk, stressed out, but that's a different topic for a different time.)

We set out to make sure that *InterText* came out on a regular schedule because (as I've no doubt noted before), the world of electronic magazines can often seem insubstantial. What are all these electronic publications? Just little collections of bits of information flitting around the Internet. There's no main office you can point to, no 800 number to call for subscription queries, and no stack of back issues to point to (unless you print out every issue, as I do). And since so many on-line publications are volunteer-driven, a lot of them tend to disappear from the surface of the Net quite soon after they're born.

We intended that *InterText* would be different, and it has been. But one way we were able to show people how serious we were was by keeping a regular schedule, just as print publications do.

This issue, due to all sorts of personal and professional issues in both my life and Geoff Duncan's life, *InterText*'s production cycle has been a bit more of a sprint than a marathon. And as I write this, I can see the finish line ahead. We could've used some extra time to put out this issue and save our sanity, but… the show must go on, and the issue must go out. So it does, again and again.

WE'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES SERIOUS ABOUT ONLINE publishing and online fiction, of course. Lots of people are serious about this field—editors, readers, and writers alike. One of them, Jeff Carlson, has decided to put his time where his mouth is. In an effort to increase awareness of the online publishing world, Jeff has created *eScene*, a collection of the best online fiction of 1994. Jeff hopes to publish this collection into the future, giving online writers some well-deserved recognition.

This year's *eScene* is being finished as I write this, and I'm happy to say that several stories for *InterText* are being considered, though I don't yet know the final results of the *eScene* editorial board's decisions. But regardless of our level of participation, I'm excited about *eScene.* It's a great way to draw public attention to what we and so many other online publishers do, and it also points out just how much good material is out there. Just because it's not on paper doesn't mean it doesn't have value. You and I know better.

For more information on *eScene,* contact Jeff Carlson at **kepi@halcyon.com**. When *eScene* is released, it will be found on the World Wide Web at **http://www.etext.org/Zines/eScene/** and via FTP at **ftp://ftp.etext.org/pub/Zines/eScene/**.

Thanks for reading *InterText* and supporting the concept of online publishing. Until next time…

Shipping and Handling Extra

LAURENCE SIMON

Maybe it's a good thing we usually draw a firm line between our professional and personal lives; after all, a man's home is his castle.

JERRY'S NOT MUCH OF A PUBLIC SPEAKER. HE'D GIVE everyone the news from the inside of a cardboard box if he could, but the company president doesn't allow cardboard boxes in the conference room. So he's stuck up there at the podium going through charts and figures as fast as he can. There's sweat on his brow, his face, and his hands. He's just covered with sweat, so much that you'd think that he had come out of a rainstorm, but that's Jerry. He's biting his nails and drawing a little blood, which isn't good for the charts. And when he's done, he charges for the elevator and goes straight back to his office to cower among his boxes.

Sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I'm Hal. Jerry and I work for Tarpley Publishing in Chicago and we have offices at two ends of a very long hallway on one of Tarpley's three floors in this building. Four floors, if you count the ground-level shipping area. Both of us have been here a while, and we've worked hard to get those two special letters—VP—in front of our titles. I like to think that I didn't lose much in the fight for those letters, but I think Jerry lost more than he bargained for.

Let me try to explain. Every copier, computer, and television monitor comes in a large cardboard box. After the packing peanuts are judiciously removed and taken to Steve's office, every one of those boxes goes straight to Jerry's office. For a while, Jerry would put the boxes through rigorous testing, to see if they meet his high standards. About two months ago, he stopped checking the boxes and took every single one of them.

Jerry takes the bus to work every morning, grumbling about the bus schedules as he sprints for his office door, and he takes the bus home every day. There are slips of cardboard in his shoes, gloves, and glasses, so he has the feeling of being in a box as he's in transit. Nobody's seen his home—there've been jokes about him living in a cardboard box, but Personnel says he's got an apartment he shares with someone. *Who is this someone?* we asked Personnel, but that's confidential information.

And then Jerry won the lottery. All six numbers on a slip of paper, and he's fifty *million* bucks richer. There's a picture of him that shows him shaking a lottery official's hand, and he's holding this huge check. If you look closely, you can see the ragged nails on the tips of Jerry's fingers. After that, he's gone for a few days, and there are rumblings by the water cooler and in the bathrooms.

But Jerry doesn't tell the boss to kiss his red-blooded American ass and quit his job, no: he goes right back to work. But he doesn't come in the way he always comes in, covered with cardboard slips and grumbling about the bus. No, he's all smiles and grins, skipping through the hall to his office door.

The water cooler's buzzing with all sorts of strange news. Jerry's been seen in the employee lounge getting a cup of coffee. Jerry's pushing the copier buttons with his fingers instead of using pencils. Jerry's going to other people's offices without first spraying himself with insect repellent. *And what's with the skipping?* someone asks. Did those fifty million big ones turn him into some sort of fairy?

I fix my tie and head back down the hall. I'm going to talk to Jerry. I'm going to ask him what the hell is going on. I'm going to…

Oh my God! The cardboard boxes are gone!

Jerry takes the bus to work every morning. There are slips of cardboard in his shoes, gloves, and glasses, so he has the feeling of being in a box as he's in transit.

Jerry comes out to greet me, shakes my hand, and he offers me a seat. I politely refuse a cup of coffee and I look around his office. There are pictures on the walls. There are subdued knickknacks on his desk in the place of all those nails that were pounded into the wood surface. All the nail-holes are covered up with putty—you can barely tell where the holes were. His telephone isn't foaming with Lysol anymore. And all the chairs aren't covered with plastic and crazy-glued to the carpet to keep them from rolling around.

But strangest of all is that there are no boxes anywhere, not a single cardboard box in sight. Even the refrigerator box, his favorite, has been taken from the corner by the window.

"Jerry," I say, "do you have the figures for next week's presentation?"

"Sure thing," he says, folding his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. "I'm working up some charts and graphs that should show where we're heading for the next five quarters. Good times ahead." Then he pushes back from the desk just a little and his chair rolls a few inches back.

There are some charts on the spreadsheet program on his computer screen. He's actually working up charts. Is this man—who is a solid week ahead of schedule on his presentation—the same man who would tear, rip, and maim his charts before a presentation in order to avoid having to stand in front of others? He knows I'm not asking about the presentation. He knows I'm looking around for the boxes and the nails and the foaming phone, but he isn't telling me anything.

"Everything all right, then?" I ask, trying desperately to look him straight in the eye.

"Everything's perfect," he says, leaning back just a little more. "Everything is just the way I always wanted. It's all so perfectly perfect. There's nothing to worry about anymore, Hal." And then he looks straight back at me and laughs.

I don't remember anything more from the conversation. I just couldn't get over that look in his eyes. It was something like a blackboard or something, dead center in his pupils, and something fierce and holy was written on it. Something that you just knew you weren't supposed to ever know, but it's right there in front of you and ready for the whole world to discover. Call me crazy, but that's exactly what I felt trying to keep eye contact with the New & Improved Jerry.

When I get back to the water cooler, I'm surrounded. They're asking me what's with the skipping. They're asking me about the lottery check. And they keep asking about the boxes. I don't have a single answer for any of them, any one of the secretaries and managers and marketers drooling for gossip. And it's not because I don't want to tell—I want to tell them desperately—but it's just that after I got that look in Jerry's eyes I couldn't remember a damn thing.

They suggested that I go back and ask Jerry point-blank what's going on, but I refuse. People keep asking me for days, and I tell some of them to go do it themselves. And the ones that do, well, from the way they walk and the way they're looking at things and holding their coffee mugs, I just know that they got that look from his eyes and they saw what I saw in them.

Then a few days later, Ed from Accounting comes in and we're going over figures for the last quarter. Nothing in the numbers or columns has any whiff of Jerry's story, and Ed gets up and closes the door.

"He doesn't take the bus anymore, you know," he says, sitting back down.

"Who doesn't take the bus anymore?" I ask. "Jerry doesn't take the bus anymore?"

"You remember," he says, and he waves his hand around for no reason. "I told you about the cardboard gloves and blinders for his glasses and all that. Well, he stopped taking the bus to work. And he doesn't take it home, either. Or a taxi. I haven't seen him go out the door at all, now that I think about it."

"Look, he probably just goes out the back door to the garage, where he has his brand-new car just waiting for him to drive home," I say. Ed waves again, and nearly knocks over his coffee. "Ed, let me finish—he could have a limo driver waiting on him with what he's worth."

"But he doesn't drive!" Now Ed waves hard enough to knock the coffee over. He pulls away the charts and figures before the stain reaches them. "I know, I know—he could buy any car on any lot. But he doesn't have a license and he doesn't know how to drive. There's no limos in the lot, except for *El Presidente's*, of course." Ed stands and salutes briefly before sitting back down. "Honest Injun, Hal, I swear. Oh, sorry about the coffee. I get carried away sometimes."

"Duh," I reply, getting some paper towels out of a drawer in my credenza. "Good investigative work, Secret Agent Ed. Now go play actuary while I pretend to manage the publishing figures."

We blot out the coffee spill together, and he leaves with his folder in one hand and a bunch of dripping paper towels in the other.

After the weekend, I ask Gladys in Personnel if there's anything different with Jerry, and the instant she opens her mouth I know that she'd seen the look in Jerry's eyes, too. I swear, I don't know how I know that everyone's seen it, but I just can tell and I think that they can tell I've seen it, too.

"Our Vice President of Marketing has been abducted by the government," she says. "The only reason why I can't tell you is because they brainwashed me, and they're drugging everyone through the water bottle deliveries."

"Seriously, Gladys. Please," I say. "I'm new at trying to play detective."

"I can't give away this information without a good reason, you know," she says. She taps her pen against the blotter, and it makes a rat-rat-rat sound like raindrops on a window.

"OK, you win the free lunch. Where and when?"

She looks back in her files again. "There's nothing to say. Same old Jerrold Timothy Hardaway, same social security number, unmarried—what a shame on that. He did change over to direct deposit, but I've been hounding him for over a year about that." She went back to her files and brought out another. "And I've been hounding you on that, too, it seems. Care to sign this form?"

"No, I don't," I say. "I know it's funny working with publishing software and accounting software and using credit cards all the time, but I just like the feel of having a check in my hands and taking it down to the bank to deposit it."

"You know," Gladys counters, "in the big picture of things a check is just as hokey as an electronic transfer of funds. If you and Jerry were serious about being paranoid about your money, you should come in here and demand bags of cash to carry home with you."

"You know something, Gladys," I say, signing the forms, "you're absolutely right."

"I can't believe what I'm seeing," she said. "You're the last one to give up control. I ought to buy you that lunch."

"You're right," I say, and I can't stop grinning. "You're abso-fucking-lutely right."

"Go back to work, Hal. Unless you want to sign up for the shipping position. You can work your way up from the bottom all over again."

"Same salary?" I ask.

"No," she says. "Bye."

So Jerry doesn't have his boxes anymore, he doesn't take the bus anymore, he's having his checks deposited, and I owe Gladys lunch. Time to check the mail and get ready for the presentation tomorrow.

And what a night it's going to be. While I was out playing Sherlock Holmes, every one of my Technology minions decided to empty out their filing cabinets, stick all their papers in manila folders, time-stamp them, and stick them on my desk. I do my best to sort through whatever falls in the category of Final Draft or Summary Report before going home at midnight.

I dream that I'm looking into his eyes.

THE NEXT MORNING WE'RE ALL IN THE BOARD ROOM. Everyone's in the same chairs as the last presentation. Oliver something-or-other nudges me.

"Steve's got pretty big dandruff this morning," he says. He nods towards Steve, whose suit jacket has a few packing peanuts clinging to it. "I hear he's got the pile so deep that he can dive into it from the top of his desk."

"As long as he doesn't hang himself, it's fine by me," I say. "Any news on when Jerry's going to show up?"

"I don't know. Didn't you give him a radio collar or an ear-tag?"

"They're still in my briefcase. You want one?"

Then the doors boom open. Jerry strolls in, goes to the podium, and picks up the remote control.

"He's going to use the automatic electronic overhead networked computer display system. Nobody's used that thing ever," hisses Jones, who smells something like burning leaves.

"Why doesn't anyone use it?" I whisper back. The lights dim slightly.

"I don't know," says Oliver. Maybe he's the one who smelled like burning leaves. "We bought it to keep up with ReMont and Yellowjacket. Ours is better."

"How can you tell?" I ask.

"I don't know," says Oliver. "I hear they haven't used theirs either. I think they're planning on buying a better system first."

"Nice cologne," I say. Something lowers itself from the ceiling and the presentation begins.

Next thing I know, he's shaking everyone's hand. He shakes them a few more times, and holds up the remote. Everyone applauds, and then he walks calmly to the elevator. I race up behind him and stick my hand in at the last minute.

"Great show, Jerry," I say.

"What show?" he says, and he gives me that look again. He hands me the remote. "Take a look inside."

The door's about to close on us, but Joe from Advertising is rushing to the door. "Hold it! Hold it!" I push the Open Door button and Joe steps in. "Thanks, guys. You so sure that we're ready to expand?"

Steve's suit jacket has a few packing peanuts clinging to it. Oliver nudges me. "I hear he's got the pile so deep he can dive into it from the top of his desk."

"I know we're ready," says Jerry, and then Joe suddenly jumps out of the elevator.

"I'll take the next one, guys," he says, and walks away from the door.

"Whatever," I say. I pop open the remote. There are no batteries in it. "Needs batteries. Hey, Jerry—want to hit somewhere for dinner?"

"Already got plans," he says, and he starts humming along with the elevator music. "Hum with me, Hal. It's a good tune."

So we hum along with the elevator music for a few seconds and the door opens. Jerry heads off for his side of the hall, and I start toward my office, but Jerry's talking loudly, so I turn around.

Jerry's shaking hands with this really big guy in work boots and a jean jacket. They go into his office and Jerry closes the door. I walk over to Janice, his secretary.

"Who's the thug?" I ask her.

"Hi, Hal," she says. "That guy's the new shipping clerk."

"What does Jerry need with the shipping clerk?" I ask.

"Maybe they're talking about those cardboard boxes without homes," she says, giggling. "Although that's probably all in the past now. I'm just worried that he's going to want someone else to do the filing."

I look at her perfectly manicured nails. "You file just fine, Janice."

"I'm used to it all," she says. "And sometimes it was fun, you know? As long and he doesn't get funny on me and try to look up my dress, everything's just fine. Besides, he was quite generous with his first lottery check. Like my new scarf?"

"Wonderful," I say.

"I'll let you know if anything weirder happens, OK?"

"Thanks," I say, and I go back to my office and answer my messages. I go through the proposals and sign off on a half-dozen projects and I'm reading through another when the light goes out in Jerry's office. I check my watch and discover it's 5:15. Damn, time flies fast some days. I look back out the door—Jerry's closing up shop. I drop the folder I'm holding and run for the stairs. I'm no athlete, but I ran a good mile in my high school days and weekend tennis and golf have kept away the Beer-Gut Fairy. I run down the 16 flights fairly quickly, and it takes me about half a minute to recover my breath while the elevator arrives. Everyone files out of it, and I shut the stairwell door while Jerry passes by. He turns around the hall and I peer around the corner just in time to see him walk into the shipping office.

After waiting for a few seconds, I walk over to the shipping office door… no, let me rephrase that. I *tiptoe* over to the shipping office door for a few feet, then I tell myself "Who am I kidding?" and I walk the rest of the way. When I get to the glass door, I look in. I gasp.

It's his refrigerator box, reconditioned and reinforced at the seams with light plywood, but it's the same old box nonetheless. There's a noise coming from the inside, like a radio or a can opener or something, but I can't tell through the door, and I don't want to startle Jerry by opening it. He steps into it and draws the flaps closed. There are a few clicks, then silence.

Nobody's coming. I open the door and walk over to the box. Its address is this one—Tarpley Publishing, Chicago, Illinois. Overnight delivery by 8:30 A.M. is checked, and it's insured for fifty million dollars. Fifty million dollars worth of books.

I hear someone coming and run back out the office door. I try to close it as silently as possible and I duck under the glass window in the door. After a few seconds, I peek through the bottom of the window.

The shipping guy comes in from the dock, checks the paperwork on the side of the box, taps on it a few times, and tips the box onto a dolly. I run for the stairs before he can see me, and I make it to the third floor before I realize that it would've been safe to take the elevator this time.

I SPEND ABOUT TWO HOURS IN MY OFFICE TRYING TO figure out what the hell was going on, and how to confront Jerry. But I didn't want to see those blackboard eyes of his, because they'd be worse—since that look had started popping up in other peoples eyes. I pace the floor, think about calling the shippers, and even walk down to Jerry's office to see if there's anything that might give me ideas. In the end I just grab my briefcase and go home. I even wrote "J ships himself in box every night" in my planner, just in case I have a major attack of the crazies in my sleep and lose my mind.

Around ten the next morning, I decide to let the shipping clerk know he's mailing a lunatic round-trip in an appliance box. His name isn't on the phone list yet, but he probably has the same extension as the old shipping clerk—Walt, or something like that.

"What and where?" he says. Real charming.

"How much does it cost to ship a Vice President to New York?

"You're that Hal guy, right?"

"Yes, this is the Hal guy," I say. "Do you know you're sending one of our top executives overnight delivery with a round-trip ticket?"

"Back off," he says.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"Back off."

I'm ready to ask him again, this time from the position of a Vice President ready to take his job away. But not over the phone. So I slam down the phone and head for the elevator. I've still got my coffee mug in my hand, so I drink the rest of it and throw the mug in the corner of the elevator. I don't know why I threw it, and I pick it up again. The handle's got a little chip in it, and the door opens. I walk over to the shipping area, and he's wearing the same work boots and jacket. I try to get one word out but he's got the Jerry-look in his eyes, and that look still outranks me, like some sort of magic trump card everybody's got in this building. Without a word, I'm back in the elevator and rubbing the chip in the mug's handle.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror, but I don't see a damned thing in my eyes.

THE NEXT DAY, I GO INTO MY OFFICE AND THE DOOR closes shut behind me.

"I'm Ray," the shipping clerk says. He puts out his hand. We shake. "So you want me as your travel agent? Pretty soon everyone's gonna be lining up at my door. How much you weigh?"

"Why?" I ask him. "Why do let him do it?"

"Why not? He pays the shipping bills, and he gives me a little on the side. Just leave it be, OK?"

"It's wrong!" I yell. "There's just something wrong about it!"

"He isn't hurting anyone," Ray says. He lights a cigarette, throws the match on the carpet. "I hear through

the rumor mill that before I started mailing him every night, he was a pretty bad wreck. As long as nobody gets hurt and he keeps paying the bills, it's fine by me. You done yet?"

"Well, where the hell does he ship himself over the weekends, then?" I ask him. "He doesn't just sit in the loading dock from Saturday to Monday, does he?"

"I don't know."

"Really," I say. "Is he paying you to keep quiet on that one, too?"

"No, really," he says. "Look, I'm saying more than I should, but you're his friend, so I can tell you this much. But it never gets beyond us two, or there's going to be trouble, OK?"

"OK," I say. "Or are you looking for more money than you're already getting?"

He looks out at the loading dock entry and then closes the door to the hallway. "Look," he says, "no money on this one. The box gets shipped out on Friday evening without any special instructions for Saturday or Sunday delivery. So it goes out on Friday and it must come back Monday."

"So where does he eat?" I shout. "Where does he sleep? Where does he go to the bathroom, for Christ's sake?"

"I don't know," Ray says, "and I don't *want* to know. This stuff is crazy—a guy shipping himself to his own office every day, never going home…. I told you enough already, so just leave me alone and go ask *him* if you want any more answers, OK?"

"How does he do it?" I ask, grabbing his shoulders. *"How?"*

"He's got this yoga thing he does," Ray looks me straight in the eyes. "Like those channelers and crystal-sniffing weirdos. After he seals himself up, he just goes into a trance and waits to come back. I use this special knock to let him know he's back—it's what breaks him out of the trance, OK? That's it for the headlines, pal."

The eyes! That's where he got the eyes!

Ray pushes me out of the way, opens the door, and walks out.

FOR A FEW WEEKS, EVERYTHING WAS FINE. I DIDN'T go by shipping at all, and I even took a few days off to see my kids in Florida. They were doing just great, and I came back to work better than ever.

"Well, he didn't come in yesterday. either," Janice says, filing her nails. "I tried his cel phone, but he didn't answer. I even tried his home number, but he must have had it changed after he won the lottery because it isn't listed. I wonder where he is."

"Can I borrow your phone?" I ask.

"Sure. I wasn't using it or anything."

I call Gladys to check up on Jerry's home number and address. No changes.

"Oh, and thanks for that lunch," she adds. "We've got to do it again sometime, OK?"

I write down the address and thank her before hanging up. I turn to Janice. "Keep me informed, OK?"

"Aye aye, captain."

I go back to my office, and once again, I am greeted by my good friend Ray. My floor is littered with spent matches.

"OK, man." Ray stands up. "What are you trying to pull?"

"What is who trying to pull?" I ask. Ray looks me straight in the eye, and for the first time since God knows when, someone in this place doesn't have those Jerry-eyes.

"He's gone, man," says Ray, stabbing out his barely-smoked cigarette. He lights another.

"This stuff is crazy—a guy shipping himself to his own office every day, never going home.... Go ask *him* if you want any more answers, OK?"

"What do you mean, gone?" I ask.

"I mean gone," he says. "Totally gone. The box didn't show up yesterday. He's gone."

"So he decided to open up his box and get out somewhere."

"He can't get out of that box by himself," says Ray. "I seal the edges before it goes out. And the special knock."

"All right," I say. "Maybe he decided to put a stack of books in there, and then he took a slow taxi home to think things over for a few days."

"Nope," Ray says. "I watched him go in."

"Maybe he had someone let him out at the distribution office. I'd certainly let someone out if they were shouting for help from inside a giant package."

"No way. There's a few guys down there who know about it—so that they don't drop him or nothin'. They'd tell me if he was planning anything weird or ran into any problems."

"Weird? You mean like shipping himself in a box every night?" I ask.

"Aw, just shut up, man!" he yells. "What the hell we do now? The guy's been stuck in a box for three days now!"

"What about the weekends, Ray?" I asked. "He lasts three days over the weekends."

Ray looks down, takes a breath. "I lied about that. I show up Saturday and Sunday to re-ship him. He hangs out in the shipping room, reading the paper until they pick

him up. Sometimes, he sends me out to get him a burger or something."

"Great," I say. "Well, what do we do now?"

"I asked *you* that, man," Ray says. "We can't call the cops or nothin' like that—how the hell you explain shipping a guy every night?"

"Well, let's go down the shipping dock and check the paperwork. Maybe you put the wrong label on him or something."

After going down to shipping , we check the labels and the forms. Everything was signed and labeled properly.

"They even check the labels on the boxes," Ray's going through another cigarette. He doesn't leave the matches lying about in his own office, however. "They always check it because the weight was so much, and they wanted to get the billing right. Oh, man! We're screwed!" I pick up them phone, and Ray slams it down. "You can't call the cops!"

"I'm calling the shipping company. What's his account number?"

I try to tell the person on the line that we were missing a package, and they have a good chuckle at the size of the package. "We don't lose many that big, but there's nothing in the system under that number. What was in it?"

"A person," I say, "registered as books, but it was a person."

"Very funny," she laughs. "No really, what was in it? Was it insured?"

I ask her to check again, and she still doesn't find Jerry. I ask for a supervisor.

"We're screwed," Ray moans. "I don't know nothin'."

The supervisor picks up, and I told her as much as I could: the account number, the package number, the billing date, the delivery address and the return address.

"Did you know that your return address is the same as your shipping address?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "But he's still missing and we need to find him."

"Oh, a body. Our policy is not to ship human remains under any circumstances," says the person at the delivery service. "If you want, I can give you the numbers of some shipping companies that perform those services quite adequately."

Then, for whatever reason—I have no idea, I break. I'm screaming into the telephone. "Track him, track him for God's sake!" But they can't find Jerry in their system anywhere. Their computer says that they picked up three packages two nights ago, two letter-sized envelopes and a 20-pound parcel going to our New York branch, but there's no sign of a 300-pound reinforced cardboard box bound for a round-trip back to our own offices. They ask me if it wasn't sent the day before, and I tell them it was, the day before and every day before that.

Ray's sweating bullets, even worse than the old Jerry used to do at staff meetings. He's smoking cigarette after cigarette, and he's putting them out on the top of his desk nowhere near his cracked Chicago Cubs ashtray. He's mumbling something to himself with "Jerry" in it, over and over, but I can't make out the rest of what he's saying. I shake him a little, and he shrugs me off.

"Well," I say, sweeping cigarette butts into a wastepaper basket, "game's over. How do we explain this one?"

Ray explodes, spit flying everywhere. "We ain't explainin' nothin! Nothin! We ain't explaining nothin' because there wasn't nothin' that ever happened! I didn't do nothin' and I don't know nothin' and you don't know nothin' and that's the truth!"

Over the next few days, there's no word from Jerry. Ray comes by the office almost every hour, and he just paces the floor spitting, smoking, and mumbling that same whatever he mumbles with "Jerry" in it. Then, a week after Jerry's disappearance, Ray doesn't show up for work. I ask Personnel about him a few days later, but they just say that Ray called in on Monday to tell them that he was quitting and moving out of state, and he'd call them about getting his last paycheck.

He hasn't claimed it for over a year now.

Jerry never showed up at the shipping dock, or gave anybody a word to say that he was all right and happy to be where he was. Once, when I couldn't stand that message in his eyes going through my head over and over, I went to the regional office of the shipping company and tried to take one of their managers into confidence with the whole story, but they thought I was kidding and nothing I said could convince them a real live human being vanished from the face of the earth in one of their vans, trucks, or planes.

I like to imagine Jerry decided to change the destination address on his package from Tarpley Publishing to Anywhere, Tahiti and he's living the rest of his life on the beaches, sipping drink after drink and watching the sun go up and down. I also have these images in my head of a delivery error, or a distribution office accident as Jerry's fate, leaving him as a corpse rotting in his box in some dusty warehouse, cradling a space-heater and a radio to his chest.

Jerry's old position went to Steve, and the movers spent an entire afternoon carting bag after bag of packing peanuts up two floors of stairs, because Steve wouldn't let them use the elevators with his furniture. Steve handles the presentations just fine, with no sweating or nail biting at all. I look for signs of nervousness and a compulsion to return to the packing-peanut world of his office, but he gets through the meetings and takes his time getting back. There's no talk about Jerry at the water cooler or in the bathrooms any more, and there's no talk

about Steve and his packing peanuts either. I think people are starting to talk about me, though, so I stay around the bathrooms and coffee machine and the water cooler and any other place that people stand around and talk.

I pray to God that Steve doesn't win the lottery, because I don't think I could stand to see what weird fate would befall him.

It's only five more years to the earliest I can take retirement, and I'm going to take it as fast as I can. I'm getting out of here.

LAURENCE SIMON

Is an HTML developer for Nettech and a research producer for CTN in Houston. Nearly every Thursday night he can be found in a local pub battling his arch-rival at Scrabble. He is known for travelling everywhere with his lucky Slinky in his pocket, and will hastily produce this object if challenged or threatened.

Game Over

CHRISTOPHER HUNT

In one way or another, we all try to fit in somewhere we don't belong: Maybe it's a city, a group of people, a job… or an escape.

RAMÓN DOWNSHIFTED AS HE CAME INTO THE CURVE, eyes flicking across the display panel. He still had 15 seconds on Mansell and only three laps to go. He grinned, swinging smoothly into the curve, hugging the inside wall like a surfer in a tube.

He'd been running the Grand Prix every day for two weeks, and this was the first time he'd ever been out in front. It was the first time he'd lasted this far into the race.

Normally, Ramón stayed away from arcades. Once you found your game, it put a hook in you every bit as sharp and unshakable as synthetic cocaine. Just another way to escape the grind. Another way to kill time while you waited for death to catch up with you.

Ramón preferred to keep moving. Besides, he didn't have that kind of disposable income.

But Grand Prix was different. It was more than a game. It was real. More real than the twilit world of concrete, glass, and hurtling machinery outside the cubicle, the gray half-life that haunted him like the fading memory of a bad dream.

Grand Prix wasn't an escape into fantasy. It was an escape into reality of a higher order. A world where the sun still shone and being alive was the biggest thrill of all.

He'd been introduced by a skinny Japanese biker boy with long orange hair and amphetamine eyes. He sold the drugs Ramón brought him to bike gangs up in Kawasaki. "Magic," the kid had said. "Pure magic, you gotta try it."

It didn't look like much. A black plastic injection-molded cubicle with a flex-chair, steering wheel, floor pedals, and a stick shift. There was a thin white jump suit hanging on a hook. It was sour and sticky with the sweat of a hundred drivers and disinfectant. An equally foul-smelling full-face headset was clamped to the console with a pair of data gloves. Bundles of fiber-optic ribbons were attached to everything. The clothing was lined with electrodes.

The kid grinned, giving Ramón the thumbs-up. "Go ahead," he said in English. "It's oh-my-god totally fucking brilliant."

Ramón was unsure. A half-gram of *synth*—synthetic cocaine—cost less than a ride in this machine. And Ramón had tried VR games before—a kick at first, but the thrill wore thin. It was like swimming through a computer-generated swamp. Moving was awkward and touching something just gave a mild electric shock, no real sense of touch.

He told the kid no, it was too expensive.

But the kid was eager. The absolute latest in VR technology. Real drivers used it for training. He started reading off the tech talk on the hype sheet taped to the side of the cubicle, rattling it off like it meant something. Explaining how newly-developed ultra-precise synchrotron rings had made it possible to pack billions of transistors onto microscopic protein chips capable of cruising along at something like a trillion instructions per second. How comprehensive brain-mapping allowed new micro-accurate electrodes to stimulate appropriate neural receptors and delude your brain into believing the simulation was real. How the latest sensory recording devices had been used to capture vast quantities of actual visual, aural,

and sensory data that was then used to generate complex, interactive sensory fields so true-to-life you could feel the wind on your cheek and the grit in your eye.

"No way," said Ramón.

He offered to lend Ramón the money. If Ramón liked it, he could pay him back. If not, no problem.

And Ramón decided to give it a spin.

He was hooked immediately. Hooked so deep he was soon "borrowing" a little money from his employer—not a smart idea since he worked for the Kotobuki branch of the Yamaguchi-gumi. But, then again, nobody ever said Ramón was smart.

All he wanted was to win. Just once. Then he'd stop. He would return the Yakuza's money before they'd even noticed it was gone.

HE SAW THE PLUME OF SMOKE AS THE VOICE CRACKled in his headset. "Crash on the inside corner at K 2.3! Watch out, Ramón—Andretti's gone down."

"Shit!" He was all the way around the curve now and Andretti's Ferrari was right there in front of him, sheets of orange flame and oily black smoke rising from the wreckage. He saw Andretti somehow pulling himself from the twisted metal, thin tongues of flame licking at his crash suit.

Ramón slammed down another gear and swerved hard to the right. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Andretti scramble to the embankment, rolling in the grass, slapping at the flames on his suit. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear a siren, a mournful wail like the plaintive lament of some sad, wandering spirit.

He realized he'd over-steered too late. His British-built Fondmetal X6 spun wildly in a double 360 and slammed rear-end first into the crash wall on the other side of the track. The engine gave a desperate gasp and stalled. He quickly restarted it, watching as the other cars flew by, waiting for a chance to slide back into the slipstream. The warning display was blinking wildly. The tire indicators flashing red. The crankshaft an ominous yellow. He'd have to pit now.

He punched the display, calling up the lap times. He still had seven seconds on Mansell. If he moved now…. He flattened his foot on the gas pedal and popped the clutch, squealing back onto the track. Two cars were coming up fast. He flipped into third and peeled down the straightaway, waiting for the tach to hit 12,000 before shifting into fourth. He was doing 120 now. Maybe fast enough to stay out of trouble. The two cars roared past.

He checked the lap times again. Now he only had two seconds on Mansell. That wouldn't be enough if he had to pit. He had to figure seven to ten seconds just to change the tires. And if the crankshaft went, he'd be out of the race.

He had about a kilometer of straightaway. A few seconds to think before he came around the final turn and to the pit-stop pullover. What to do?

He had to go for it, that's all. If he pitted, he was finished anyway. He just had to pray to God that his tires could hold on for the last two laps.

"Ramón, your tires are torn up," came the voice on his headset. "Your shocks are practically gone and your crank's looking iffy. You're gonna have to come in."

"Forget it," said Ramón. He glanced at the lap time readout. He was still holding his two-second edge on Mansell. But Yoshida was coming up fast behind them. Barely a second between him and Mansell. "I can still win this thing. The tires'll hold up. It's only two more laps."

He was turning now and sailing past the pits. His crew were flagging him. Fuck them, he thought. It's me who's gonna win or lose this thing, not them.

He careened into the hard right just past the pits and headed into the penultimate lap. He could feel the adrenaline juicing through his veins, steeling his nerves, stoking his will. 260 KPH. Pure speed. The purest rush imaginable. A flood of endorphins washed through his body. Goddamn but he felt good. Nothing could beat this sensation. Not even sex.

Two seventy-five now. The track was just a crazy gray blur sliding beneath his eyes. The people in the stands lost their individuality, blending into an amorphous multicolored mass. He glanced at the readout. He'd picked up half a second on Mansell. Yoshida was starting to fall further back.

He could feel the adrenaline juicing through his veins, steeling his nerves, stoking his will. 260 KPH. Pure speed. Nothing could beat this sensation. Not even sex.

He thought about that movie *The Right Stuff*. He and Jinky had rented it from the disc shop the other day, watched it on Jinky's big-screen. The picture was a little shaky; she'd scavenged the TV and it must have been 20 years old. It couldn't pick up satellite broadcasts. But that didn't matter—it still beat the hell out of anything the other Kaitai-boys had. It was big and bright and it took the edge off those cold, homesick nights in their one-room mansion down in Kotobuki.

He remembered how the test pilots in the movie talked about a demon that lived beyond the sound barrier, inhabiting some kind of magical hyper-dimension where speed and time fused, a place just a step beyond human comprehension. He felt like he was heading for that place

now, that if he just went a little faster, he would break through that barrier and speed effortlessly to the finish line, flying on some kind of spiritual automatic pilot.

He was coming into the triple hairpin now. He'd have to take them pretty fast if he wanted to keep his edge on Mansell and Yoshida. Both of them were old pros, much smoother on tight corners than Ramón. The acrid smell of burnt rubber was sharp in his nostrils.

The voice in the headset was shouting urgently, telling him to slow down, telling him his tires would vaporize if he didn't drop down to at least 180.

He shook his head, licked his lips, leather-gloved hands wrapped tight around the wheel, roaring into the first turn, easing off slightly on the accelerator, slowing to 220. The car's composite plastic frame shrieked under the strain. He breathed slowly, deeply. In. Out. In. Out.

He came out of the first turn, breathing hard. The linings of his gloves were slick with sweat. His heart was pounding so hard against his ribs it felt as if it were trying to smash its way through.

Second hairpin. Everything running in slow motion now. His concentration narrowed to a pinpoint, focusing on the thin line of probability that would take him safely through the turn. The smell of burnt rubber was overpowering now. It seeped in through the air vents in his helmet, stinging his eyes. Trails of black sooty smoke streamed over the chassis. The engine's whine had reached fever pitch.

"Slow down! Slow down!" screamed the voice in his headset.

He twisted the wheel to the right. The car shuddered, bucked violently, and flung itself forward. Metal ripped into the blacktop. He felt himself rolling, the car spinning around him. The warning display was an angry mass of flashing red indicators.

Finally the spinning stopped. The car creaked gently, leaning slowly into the embankment. Ramón cursed, blinking through tears, watching helplessly as Mansell sailed by, a chrome-edged streak of blue and white light.

Then everything went black. Red letters flashed in the darkness.

GAME OVER. GAME OVER.

RAMÓN PUSHED UP THE LCD VISOR AND PULLED OFF the headset, careful not to get entangled in the bundle of ribbons connecting it to the console. He hooked the helmet onto the clamp next to the console and stood up, unzipping the electrode jump suit and carefully sliding out of it. The display monitor blinked harshly at him. "No. 18 R. Ventura. Disqualified." Then it ran through the top ten finishers. Yoshida had won it. By a fraction of a second. It took a little of the edge off his disappointment—at least it hadn't been Mansell.

Ramón stepped out of the cubicle and lit a cigarette, still trembling. It was the best race he'd ever run and he hadn't even placed. Next time. For sure next time.

A swarm of tiny silver spacecraft from the Earth Defense Force holo game buzzed past his head, laser cannons shooting needle-thin beams of light at an approaching Death Star the size of a baseball. He blinked, startled. A couple of Japanese kids in tight black shorts and thigh-high socks giggled, jerking their joysticks frenetically.

Ramón put on his sunglasses, muting the blaze of flashing neon, and walked unsteadily past the holos, legs like jelly, weaving a circuitous path through the dim, smoky arcade. A big-breasted, life-sized blonde woman in a bikini floated in the air just above him, arching her back like a cat. A gang of blue-suited *sararimen* were gathered around *Desert Storm! The Holo Game*, shouting loudly as wave after wave of sleek attack planes dove down on Iraqi positions.

Ramón didn't think much of these holo games. Just gimmicky versions of old video games. If anything, the added dimension merely emphasized the fakery. Cheap, dime store illusions with no style, no grace.

VR, on the other hand….

Ramón wondered what would happen when they downsized the high-end VR sets for the mass market. How would they keep the economy going? How would they get people to leave their homes? With the option of tuning into a private reality at the touch of a button, living a life on the edge without ever leaving your sofa, why would anyone spend time in the "real" world?

Ramón supposed they'd figure something out. They always did.

OUTSIDE, A COLD DRIZZLE FELL ON THE LITTER-strewn sidewalk. The smoky smell of meat on charcoal braziers filled the air. Ramón winced with hunger, but he wasn't in the mood for yakitori.

He hurried down the narrow sidewalk, deflecting the bristling arrays of out-thrust umbrellas with a practiced arm. Several wizened Japanese day laborers clustered on a blue plastic tarp near the yakitori stand, half-pint glasses of *sake* in their hands, giving up their day's wages to a hemiplegic Yakuza who waited there every day with his loaded dice and plastic cup stuffed with crumpled yen notes and black market cashcards. The Yakuza's paralysis made him look curiously unfinished, one side of his body hanging loosely from his skeleton like wet clothes, his face twisted in a perpetual sneer. He looked evil, fraudulent, deceptive. As if his character flaws had somehow been imprinted in his physical appearance.

Ramón stepped out onto the road, giving the group a wide berth. With his long straight hair, sunglasses, and

all-black Japanese designer knock-offs, most Japanese didn't peg Ramón for a Filipino—not at a glance anyway—but these ones knew him and today of all days he didn't need the aggro. A smoke-belching delivery truck that must have been doing twice the speed of light screamed angrily at him with its horn, slapping him with a wave of muddy water as it sped by. The Yakuza laughed shrilly, calling him a *Firupinjin baka*—Filipino idiot. The words were distorted, spat half-formed from one side of his mouth, inflections lost in a bubbly gurgle of saliva.

Ramón ignored him. He hurried on down the street, pushing his way through a raging tide of amplified noise and flashing lights. Blood-spattered fish mongers chanted out the day's catch, fierce-faced nationalist storm troopers screamed out for the return of the Northern Territories, elderly sweet potato sellers wailed discordantly about the deliciousness of their wares, whispering Iranian cashcard dealers offered discounts on stolen cards, and leering teenage touts in tuxedos jumped out in front of him singing the praises of the weary, soft-bellied women who stared mournfully from the dimly-lit windows above. And, through it all, the searing beat of some old hard-core metal rap blasted from 200-watt speakers hanging outside a disc shop, imposing a harsh rhythm on the swirling cacophony.

Ramón ducked down a side alley and cut through the grounds of an abandoned shrine. The silence was so sudden and the darkness so complete it was as if a soundproof door had slammed shut behind him.

He slowed down, breathing easier now. Rain splattered like a spray of spittle on his face. In the distance, the edge of the darkening sky began to glow orange with the city's lights.

HE WAS SOAKED THROUGH BY THE TIME HE GOT BACK to his apartment building, a gray and unwelcoming, six-story terraced concrete block. The foyer was covered in strips of wet cardboard and smelled faintly of mildew and cat piss.

A sheet of paper covered in scrawled Japanese characters was taped to the elevator door. He couldn't read it but he knew what it meant. Out of order.

He took the stairs, loping up them two at a time, pulling himself along the handrail. A wide crack—a relic of the big quake last summer—meandered up the side of the pitted concrete steps like a dried-up creek bed. The ammonia reek of cats was sharper here, stinging his nostrils. Fading scatological or sexual slogans in Japanese, English, Farsi, and Tagalog were scrawled on the walls.

He was panting lightly when he reached the fifth floor. A miniature crone, barely up to his waist, her head wrapped in a stained blue scarf, was pushing a stringy gray mop across the concrete floor. Her watery eyes flickered with animosity as he walked across the wet concrete. She grunted sourly when he greeted her.

Ramón shrugged and slid his card-key into the slot by the door to his apartment. The thick gray metal door wheezed heavily and clicked open.

Some Russian blues singer was on the mini-disc player. A hoarse rasping voice as cool and barren as the tundra. Arkady Somebody-or-other. Jinky's latest fave. She played it over and over again. Discs weren't supposed to wear out but Jinky's did.

Jinky was in the bathroom, doing her hair. Rainbow-streaked blond waves coiled high on her head, a few twisting strands artfully curled against her cheeks. The place reeked of hair spray. It made him sneeze. The bathroom floor was so coated with the stuff it was like some new high-tech glaze, slippery and indestructible.

Jinky was Israeli. A hostess, a hooker, and occasional performer in low-budget video porn. Her white skin and blonde hair assured her a remarkably high status—where Japanese women were madonnas and Filipinas were whores, Western women were both. The fact that Ramón both slept with this woman and lived with her elicited respect and resentment from his fellow Filipinos. It also made him an outsider. And Ramón liked that just fine.

The fact that Ramón both slept with Jinky and lived with her elicited respect and resentment from his fellow Filipinos. It also made him an outsider. And Ramón liked that just fine.

Jinky wasn't the only thing separating Ramón from the close-knit Filipino migrants. His discreet appearance, the easy way he blended with the Japanese crowds, and his near-flawless command of the language freed him from the hide-and-seek life of his compadres. He was taller than average and lacked the half-grown, underfed look of other illegals. His smooth, square-jawed face exuded an openness, a confidence that was almost American in its assuredness. It had none of the fatigue and bitterness so deeply etched in the harsh, hollow-eyed faces of the men who unloaded the freighters or carted away rubble from the construction sites.

Ramón never dirtied his hands at the docks or the construction sites. His conveniently illegal status and suave anonymity had caught the eye of a local crime boss; now he ran numbers and synth-cocaine for a local syndicate. The work was easy and the money was decent, but he knew it couldn't last. His value to the Yakuza rested solely in his expendability.

And if they found out he was stealing from them….

Jinky had told him if he wanted to live a life of crime, he should hook up with the Russians and Israelis in Shinjuku. The Russian mob was easily the world's most powerful crime syndicate. An international conglomerate headquartered in New York, it was everywhere—Tel Aviv, Moscow, Berlin, Montreal, Ho Chi Minh City, Tokyo… the exuberant Russians showed an acumen and flair that made the more insular and tradition-steeped Italian, Chinese, and Japanese mobs look like small-time hoods. Join up with the Russians, Jinky said, and you can travel the world, go where the action is, see real glamour. You don't want to stay in Tokyo; it'll just suck you dry. Sure, it'll dazzle you with glitz and hyper-tech, spin you around so fast that you'll never see that the whole city's just an endless hall of mirrors.

Reflections of reflections of reflections.

Truth was, Ramón didn't want to live a life of crime. He didn't know what he wanted. In Manila, he'd been part of that city's tiny but tenacious avant-garde. A DJ and sometime band manager, he'd come to Japan out of an urge to get closer to the heartbeat of the modern world, a world that in Manila could only be experienced second-hand via bootleg discs and high-priced foreign magazines. Listening to the music, watching the videos, or reading the magazines stirred a lonely excitement in him, a wistfulness like a rummy standing outside an art gallery window, staring into the warm brightness where the rich and beautiful gathered, sipping champagne and popping designer drugs. People whose lives were so far removed from his they seemed to be in another dimension, glassed off and boxed in by reinforced steel and molded concrete.

Coming to Japan had been Ramón's way of stepping through the door. He was inside now, though still unsure of his welcome. Hugging the shadows along the walls, trying not to be noticed, reveling in the heat and scent of the bright and beautiful, admiring their easy elegance and polished pretentiousness, waiting for a word, a sign. Just a casual nod or a passing smile, anything acknowledging his existence, validating his reality.

The TV was on, the sound turned down, showing footage from the latest war in the Gulf. Part 4 or 5, he didn't know anymore. It went on and on. A big-budget spectacular for the jaded masses of North America and Europe.

The picture was grainy, unreal, wobbling. A target grid was superimposed over shadowy outlines of buildings. Petals of light blossomed in the night sky. Searchlight beams swung choreographed arcs through the darkness.

Arkady played the blues.

Jinky came out of the bathroom, her small body wrapped in a thin beige towel, made-up eyes bright and startled in her delicate oval face.

"Did you bring cigarettes?" she asked. "I'm out."

Ramón fumbled in his pocket, staring at the faraway explosions on the TV. He found a crumpled pack of cigarettes and gave them to Jinky.

"I might not be home tonight," she said, lighting a cigarette. "Sato-san's booked in."

"He the Mitsubishi one?" said Ramón distractedly, still staring at the TV.

"Yeah," she nodded, sucking in a lungful of smoke. "Big tipper."

Ramón picked up the remote control and turned off the war. "We've gotta upgrade," he said.

"What? The TV? What's wrong with it?"

He turned to face her, looking into the startled eyes. "No. Not the TV. Us. You and me. We gotta upgrade."

"Don't start pulling any macho possessiveness trip on me. What you do is just as sleazy as what I do." She ground out the cigarette in an empty sardine tin. "I gotta get ready."

He followed her into the bathroom, watched as she built her face, layer upon layer, with delicate pencil lines and sweeping brush strokes. She pursed her lips, studying herself carefully. The raw-boned Slavic prettiness had disappeared. In its place was an older, more elegant face. High-contrast cheekbones had magically arisen. Pale, colorless lips now bloomed red and seductive. "How do I look?" she asked.

"Beautiful," he said, putting his arms around her, feeling the radiant heat of the flesh beneath the towel. He buried his nose in her neck, breathing in the mingled scents of lavender soap, talcum powder, and tobacco.

She pushed him away. "I'm late."

He watched as she slid into black fishnet stockings, standing poised, one foot on the lip of the toilet, as she attached the garters. The classic movie pose. It was the first time he'd ever seen anyone actually do it.

She put on a black lace bra that hooked up in the front. It pushed her small breasts up, squeezing them together. She dusted them with powder.

"There's some egg salad in the fridge," she said. "You could make a sandwich if you're hungry."

"Why don't you call in sick?"

She frowned, stuffing herself into a tight black leather miniskirt. "I don't get paid if I'm sick."

AFTER SHE LEFT, RAMÓN RUMMAGED THROUGH HER red cardboard dresser, looking for money. He'd dropped his last twenty on Grand Prix and he wasn't due for another handout from his *oyabun*—the local gang boss—for another week. And he couldn't risk stealing more from them. Not for the time being.

He felt a vague sense of guilt. Jinky was saving for a holograph recorder—an expensive piece of hardware,

but worth it if she could come up with some marketable programs. Once, in an Akihabara electronics shop, she'd shown him a program she'd done at college in Tel Aviv—a very high-resolution, diamond-scaled dragon that coiled long and serpentine on the shop floor, ruby eyes fierce and glittering, spitting out flickering flashes of blue-white flame. The salesclerk hadn't seen her stick the program chip in the player and it scared the hell out of him. Red-faced and furious, he had chased them out of the shop. Obviously, Ramón had thought, not an art lover.

His hands were moving through densely-packed piles of underwear. Lacy and insubstantial, they didn't seem like real clothes at all. The bottom of the second drawer was layered with newsfax. He pulled out the drawer and lifted the edge of the newsfax. Dozens of 10- and 20-thousand yen cashcards were spread thickly underneath. There was even some paper currency. He caught his breath, exclaiming aloud. "Jesus, there must be over a million yen here."

A couple more nights with Mr. Sato and she'd have enough for her recorder.

She'd be ready to upgrade.

He grabbed a handful of cards, brushing aside the nagging reproaches that buzzed through his brain.

She was probably going to dump him anyway. Trade up for a new model.

HE RAN THE FORMULA ONE GRAND PRIX TWICE THAT night. Once in Monaco and once in Montreal. He made it all the way through both races, placing 13th in Monaco and seventh in Montreal. Not bad considering the smash-up he'd had that afternoon.

Sooner or later, he was going to win. He could see himself up on the podium, cradling the trophy in his arms, the crowd roaring his name, a couple of surgically-enhanced Eurogirls in bikinis clinging to his elbows while he grinned through a cascade of champagne. It was only a matter of time.

Still hyped on adrenaline, he hurried past the pachinko parlors and yakitori bars, heading for Imelda's Revenge. The place was always packed with *pinoys*—short-fused country boys from Luzon and Bataan stoked on cough syrup and San Miguel, flashing butterfly knives and skeletal grins.

The *pinoys* didn't like Ramón. They didn't like his city manners and Japanese clothes. They didn't like his white girlfriend and his cushy job. Most of all, they didn't like his arrogance.

Usually, apart from a few sneering insults and muttered comments, they left him alone. He was a friend of Juan's and that made him inviolate. Juan had been here so long that the Japanese had made him a *sacho*, a kind of low-level foreman. And that made Juan a powerful guy. He could pick and choose his crews on a daily basis. It was simple, really. You mess with Juan tonight, you don't work tomorrow.

The only reason Ramón was going to Imelda's was because he owed Juan 60,000 yen. He could use what he had left from Jinky's stash to pay back the debt.

RAMÓN STARED AT THE BLURRED HOLO DANCING ON the bar. It was Tiny Christina doing her hit "Make Me, Make Me, Make Me"—a chart-topper in the Philippines the year before. The *pinoys* were gathered around her, cheering and singing along. Someone asked if her clothes could be removed. The bartender, a long-jawed old-timer with a Japanese wife and a spouse visa, said no, the projector was just a player. It didn't do special effects.

Everybody laughed.

Ramón sipped his San Miguel, wondering if Juan would turn up.

His companion, a thin, ratty little man with a punch-perm and a polyester suit flashed a cashcard. "Live sex show. I'll pay."

A couple of Japanese sat in the corner with three Filipinas. The two men looked like Yakuza. Ramón thought he recognized one of them. Both men were red-faced and drunk, shouting slurred insults at the holo, calling her an ugly Filipina whore. The Filipinas sat quietly, absently stroking the men's crotches, smiling nervously and smoking cigarettes.

One of the Japanese, a thick, burly man with a short bristling haircut, shoved the girl sitting next to him. "Why don't you go dance for us?" he shouted.

She stood up languidly, her smile bored, her eyes somewhere else. She started rolling her shoulders and shimmying her hips.

"No, no," shouted the man. "Strip tease. Take your clothes off. Come on."

"Hey, why don't you fuck her?" shouted his companion, a thin, ratty little man with a punch-perm and a neon-green polyester suit. He flashed a gold cashcard. "Live sex show. I'll pay."

The Filipinos at the bar were quiet, watching the Japanese through hooded eyes. Though most of them didn't understand much Japanese, they knew an insult when they heard one. In the Philippines, such flagrant disrespect could be justification for murder. Imelda's Revenge was considered de facto Philippines territory.

Ramón eased slowly along the wall, moving closer to the door.

Tiny Christina dissipated into the smoky haze as the final bars of her song faded into silence.

"Come on! Fuck her!" yelled the skinny Yakuza, his voice too loud in the sudden quiet.

Ramón saw a glint of steel. A short cadaverous man with a squashed nose named Bino stepped forward, shrugging off halfhearted attempts to restrain him. He bared his teeth. They glowed like old ivory in the dim light. His baggy suit ballooned around his bony frame. His narrow ugly face was blank and grim behind dark glasses. He held the knife behind his back, cupped in the palm of his hand. The steel glittered cool and precise.

Bino ran long, thick-knuckled fingers along the edge of the blade, as if confirming its sharpness, then strode rapidly towards the Japanese. He pushed the girl out of the way, approaching the larger of the two men.

The Japanese struggled to his feet, still cursing. Bino put his arms around him. The Japanese swayed, pulling at Bino's arms.

For a long moment they stood like that. Frozen. Two old friends embracing.

Then, suddenly, movement. Bino seemed to climb up the big man's chest, left arm wrapped tight around the thick neck, right arm swinging in flashing strobe-like arcs, the knife burying itself repeatedly in the man's upper back.

The Japanese bucked beneath him like a wild bull.

The girls screamed.

Bino released his grip on the Japanese, stepping back. The big man crumpled, slamming into the table. Blood spurted in torrents.

The other Japanese stared curiously at his companion for a moment, eyes wide. Then he looked at Bino.

Bino stepped forward, grabbing the man's hair and forcing his head back. He drove the knife into the jugular. Blood sprayed Bino's suit. The Japanese watched Bino through rolling eyes, hands fluttering weakly at his neck. This his head fell forward, lolling limply on his chest.

Ramón slipped through the door and ran out onto the street.

The air was cool and crisp. Drunks staggered along the sidewalk. Puddles of neon twinkled on the rain-slick street.

Ramón ran.

"THERE'S GONNA BE A POGROM," JINKY SAID. SHE was lying on the futon, wearing a threadbare blue and white *yukata*, smoking a THC-laced cigarette and holding a wet towel to her left eye. Around the towel, Ramón could see the flesh was swollen purple and yellow, vein-streaked and tender like the egg of some strange amphibious creature.

Sato-san had been especially vigorous last night.

"What's a pogrom?" asked Ramón.

"It's what they used to do to the Jews in Europe. Everybody gets together whenever they're pissed off and they go and kill all the Jews they can find."

"So?" Ramón stared out the window, eyes wandering across the shambling blocks of concrete that stretched from here to Chiba and beyond. He felt like a rat caught in the middle of a gigantic maze. A maze with no exit.

"So," she sucked noisily on her cigarette, then exhaled. "So that's what the Yakuza are going to do to you Filipinos."

Ramón shrugged. "I didn't have nothing to do with it. I wasn't even there."

"You were so. You told me."

"Shut up," he said, eyes following the meandering path of an old Japanese woman on the street below. She hobbled past every day, punctual to the second, bent over double, a huge mysterious bundle strapped to her back. Her cane tapped out a solemn rhythm on the pavement.

"I wasn't there. You understand? I was never there."

"Your Yakuza friends are going to want to know who did it."

"Shut up," he said again, still watching the woman below, crawling along the street like a crippled ant. In a few hours, she would make her slow way back through these same streets, her mysterious bundle still on her back, her cane tapping out the same faltering beat.

THE YAKUZA HEADQUARTERS IN KOTOBUKI WAS A triangular slab of black reflective glass wedged into the corner of a three-point intersection in the heart of the entertainment district. A line of gleaming black Mercedes and Lincoln Continentals were parked illegally in front of it.

The *oyabun* had sent for Ramón as soon as he got the word.

"I wasn't there," Ramón told him.

The *oyabun* was a small, birdlike man with a shaven skull and a sharp, beaky nose. He suffered from Graves' disease and his eyes bulged out of their sockets like light bulbs. He was as lean and tough as a turkey. He kept cracking his knuckles. They went off like gunshots.

"This is a problem of international communication," said the *oyabun*. He was wearing an expensive-looking charcoal gray suit and a blue-speckled burgundy tie. He picked up a peanut and cracked the shell between his thumb and forefinger. "I shall try to clarify the situation for you."

Posters advertising golf resorts in Hawaii hung on the wall behind the *oyabun*. Ramón assumed the resorts were owned by the gang.

"I did not ask," the *oyabun* continued, "whether or not you were present at last night's incident. This fact is not

of interest to me. What I want to know is very simple: who did it?"

"I am very sorry," said Ramón, head bowed in deference. "I do not know."

The *oyabun* sucked air in through his teeth. He groaned, as if faced with a very difficult and unpleasant task. "You do not know," he said. He pronounced the words stiffly, carefully, as if trying to assess their meaning.

"I do not know," agreed Ramón.

The *oyabun* groaned again. "You are confused, I think. Unsure of your loyalties." He paused and lit a cigarette, a foul-smelling filterless brand called Hope. "Let me clarify the situation for you. You are loyal to me. You work for me. You are under my protection. There is no question here of national pride or ethnic loyalty. Your people are not your people. You are one of us."

"Yes, your honor, I understand. But they would kill me if they thought—"

"You are afraid of your people?" interrupted the *oyabun*. He stood up, his fierce little face thrust forward, eyes bulging, lips quivering. "They are *not* the ones you should fear." He slammed his fist down on his desk, knocking over a thimble-sized cup of *sake*.

Ramón flinched. The histrionics were overdone, but there was no doubting the man's seriousness. Ramón was, after all, expendable. He could be snuffed without a thought. Since, officially, he did not exist, it followed that it was impossible for him to cease to exist. Which meant that his death or disappearance would never be investigated. Just another nameless migrant found washed up in a sewage canal. They would bury him and bury his file. He wouldn't even be a statistic.

Ramón looked away. "I'll find out, sir."

The *oyabun* sat down again, his expression suddenly sad. "There is… another problem."

LATER, RAMÓN SAT AT A WHITE PLASTIC TABLE IN Mos Burger, his head cupped in his hands. A sharp, throbbing pain resonated over his left eye. The cold draft from the air conditioner chilled his spine. He kept reading the little poem printed on the coffee cup. It was in English, expounding on the joys of sharing a burger with someone you love. Beneath the poem there was a Jack-and-Jill-type picture of a boy and girl holding hands. In their free hands, each held a basket of burgers.

The last line read: "Beautiful Friend. Beautiful Burger."

The burgers were sloppy, thick with mayonnaise and chili sauce. Ramón wondered if young lovers were supposed to lick each other's hands afterward.

The automated table-clearing servo kept trying to snatch his cup away. He slapped at the machine distractedly. It whined metallically, spraying him with liquid soap, then jerked away, rolling towards another table, ungreased wheels squealing on the ceramic tile.

The boy and girl gazed at him from the cup, smiling cheerfully.

Ramón suspected happiness was a marketing ploy, a clever sales strategy conceived in some overlit conference room by glib executives looking for something people wanted so desperately its promise alone would compel them to buy, yet so intangible that its failure to materialize would only prompt them to buy again.

Happiness was hope.

And Ramón's hope had suddenly evaporated.

HE EDGED ALONG THE SIDEWALK, TRYING TO LOSE himself in the deepening shadows. His hands were cold and sticky with sweat. Maybe he should just hop the maglev to Tokyo. Go to Shinjuku. Talk to the Russians.

Talk about what? What did he have to offer them? More to the point, what did they have to offer him?

He should have stayed in Manila. Maybe he'd be running his own club by now.

He should have stayed home last night.

A fat pigeon waddled out his way, puffing out its chest and fluttering its feathers, squawking with annoyance.

The *oyabun* groaned again. "Let me clarify the situation for you. You are loyal to me. You work for me. Your people are not your people. You are one of us."

He figured Jinky would have taken in at least five hundred thousand for her night with Sato. Put that together with what she already had stashed and there was easily enough for an airbus ticket to New York or St. Petersburg or somewhere. Plus enough left over to cover expenses for a few weeks. Long enough to get settled.

"Hey Mister Fashion Model!" somebody shouted in English.

He looked up, face taut, skin stretched tight like plastic wrap over clenched muscles. It was Bino. He was standing with three other *pinoys*, leaning against the streaked glass window of a pachinko parlor. Strident marching music warbled through a loudspeaker above the door. Inside, dozens of Japanese sat enthralled, staring at the tumbling ball bearings. Bells and whistles chimed. Cascades of metal balls flooded into plastic receptacles.

"Hey Mister Fashion Model," Bino said again, rolling his dentures inside his mouth. A thin sheen of sweat coated his pockmarked face. His dark glasses gazed emptily at Ramón.

Bino's hands were behind his back. Ramón thought about the butterfly knife, remembered how it flickered in Bino's cupped palm, how it flashed as it drove into the Japanese man's back. Again and again.

He nodded uncertainly at Bino. "Hey Bino. How are you?"

Bino grinned, clicking his teeth into place. "How I am is not the point. The point is how are you?" The three men with him shifted against the window, straightening their shoulders, pushing out their chests, watching Ramón through cold lunar eyes.

"I'm OK," nodded Ramón. "Yeah, I'm OK."

"And your Japanese friends?" Bino asked. "How are they?" He was still grinning, the lips pulled back in a rictus.

"Hey listen, don't worry. Everything's under control. You can count on me." He glanced along the street. The hemiplegic Yakuza squatted on his blue tarp, rolling the dice in his cup.

"You bet," said Bino. He hawked, spitting out a stringy mess of greenish-yellow phlegm. It was flecked with blood.

Ramón started to walk away.

"Hey," Bino called after him. "Don't bother going to Imelda's tonight. Did you hear? Some lousy gangsters got killed there last night. The cops have closed it down."

THE MONEY WAS GONE.

Ramón emptied the contents of the drawer on the floor, pawing frantically through delicate lingerie and thick wool socks.

The jagged pain above his eye throbbed more fiercely now. Colored underwear slid through his hands.

"Bitch, bitch, bitch," he repeated loudly, obsessively, like a mantra. He sat back on his haunches, staring at the piled clothing, the empty drawers jumbled beside him like discarded Christmas presents.

He had maybe fifty thousand left. Enough for a maglev into Tokyo. A night in a capsule motel. He'd go see the Russians. Offer his services. He spoke Japanese. He had an inside line on the Yamaguchi-gumi. He didn't stand out in the crowds like the big pale Russians and their leathery Israeli enforcers. Maybe they could use him.

Anyway, what choice did he have?

He heard the door close behind him.

"Bastard," she said, her voice flat. "You cheap, lousy, thieving bastard." She delivered the words without emotion, enunciating them with care like a language teacher.

He twisted around to face her. "I'm sorry, Jinky. Really, I am. I'm in deep shit. You've gotta help me."

"Deep shit is right." Her eyes were hard, locking him out like closed metal shutters. He thought he saw someone move in the shadows behind her.

Ramón stood. He put on his best hangdog expression, gazing pleadingly at her. She was so small and soft. "You've gotta help me, Jinky. I need the money."

"Take a hike, Ramón. You're outta here."

"I'm stuck, Jinky. The *pinoys*'ll kill me if I talk. The Yakuza'll kill me if I don't."

"Sorry," she said.

"You've got to give it to me." He stepped closer, clenching his fists.

She smiled sadly, shaking her head. "I really thought you were different, Ramón. But you're not. You're worse. At least the others don't pretend to be what they aren't."

His face tightened. A muscle in his cheek started twitching. "Bitch," he hissed. "Give me the money."

"Sorry," she said, stepping away from the door as Ramón advanced.

A man stepped in through the open door. Tall and dark, dressed in a biker jacket and black jeans. His faded blue eyes were as hard and pitiless as the desert sky. He held a short-barreled automatic pistol leveled at Ramón's midsection.

"You are to return this lady's money," he said. His English was clipped, precise.

"This is Benjamin," said Jinky. "He used to be with the Israeli Special Forces. He doesn't believe in peaceful negotiations."

Ramón swallowed, stepping back. "I've only got fifty thousand," he said, the words catching in his throat.

The Israeli moved towards him, raising the pistol. "Don't kill him," he heard Jinky say as the handle of the gun collided with his face. He felt the cold grinding clash of metal against cheekbone, felt his face fragmenting, shivering apart in a thousand tiny shards.

A streak of white light seared his brain as darkness closed in.

HE CLAWED BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH A haze of pain and pulsing light. The naked fluorescent bulb on the ceiling glared down at him, bright and unforgiving.

His face was screaming. He touched it gingerly. It felt huge, swollen and tender as an overripe melon. His left eye wouldn't open, soldered closed with dried blood.

He staggered to his feet, went to the mirror. He looked like some mutant from a horror holo. The left side of his face had swelled to the size of a hydroponic tomato. A crushed one. Pulp leaked all over his face and the collar of his jacket.

He checked his pockets. Nothing. Not even his wallet.

Bitch.

Heartless fucking whore.

He saw his hands around her neck. Crushing her windpipe. Her eyes even brighter and more startled than usual.

Maybe Juan could help him. Hide him from the Yakuza. Keep the *pinoys* at bay.

He washed his face carefully, wincing. The pain was excruciating.

Afterward, he headed out into the night, not bothering to close the door behind him.

THEY WERE WAITING FOR HIM IN THE FOYER. TWO OF the *oyabun*'s enforcers. Oversized slabs of meat and gristle in Indonesian silk suits and cheap plastic sandals. They leaned against a wall of gaping mailboxes, grinding their cigarettes into the green linoleum floor.

Ramón followed them out to their hydrocar, a fat black Mercedes, bulging with armor plating, tinted windows as thick as aquarium glass.

One of the men opened the back door and shoved Ramón inside. Juan and two other *pinoys* were already sitting on the lacy white seat covers that protected the expensive leather upholstery. They squeezed over to make room for Ramón, glancing briefly at him, then looking away.

The car smelled of pine freshener and sweat.

"Hey Juan," whispered Ramón. "What's going on?"

Juan stared at him glassily. There was no sign of friendship there. No sign that there ever had been. Juan shrugged, narrowing his eyes.

One of the Yakuza closed the door behind Ramón.

"It's not what you're thinking, Juan," Ramón said urgently as the car sped off down the narrow street.

"What I am thinking," said Juan coldly, "is that you are a piece of shit."

"You're wrong," said Ramón. "You're all wrong."

The other two *pinoys* sat with arms folded, staring blankly at the headrests in front of them.

Ramón sighed and sat back in the seat.

THEY DROVE DOWN TO THE WATERFRONT AND PULLED up on a deserted quay. Ramón shivered in the cold.

So this is it, he thought. What a fucking waste.

The gangsters ordered the four men out of the car and marched them over to a stack of container boxes.

There was a flash of color at the base of one of the containers. Cloth flapping in the wind.

The Yakuza urged them forward, barking harshly, slapping the backs of their heads to encourage them.

It was Bino. He was lying on his back, sightless eyes staring at the murky ultraviolet sky. A round hole in his forehead glistened darkly. His broken dentures lay on the ground beside him, gleaming like a handful of dice.

The *pinoys* were quiet, hugging themselves against the cold. Water lapped softly against the side of the quay.

One of the Yakuza clapped Ramón on the back, slipping a cashcard into his pocket.

"Severance pay," grunted the Yakuza, then walked away, leaving Ramón alone with his countrymen.

Juan turned his head. They started moving towards him.

"It's a setup," Ramón said. "They set me up because I wouldn't tell them."

Knives flashed in the darkness.

"You gotta believe me," Ramón whispered hoarsely.

HE RAN. IT SEEMED LIKE HE HAD BEEN RUNNING FOR hours. His throat and lungs were raw. He gulped for air, his breath getting shorter and shorter. His legs were leaden, his shoes clung to the ground, refusing to move.

He could still hear them. The shouting had stopped but their heavy footsteps echoed relentlessly off the concrete. Their laboring breath scorched his neck like a volcanic wind.

Ahead the lights of the arcade beckoned. Bright and vibrant, pulsing with life. He focused his gaze on the sparkling holo that danced above the entranceway, trying to push everything else out of his mind, to ignore the sharp stabbing pains in his chest, the hammering of his skull.

Just keep moving.

Just keep moving.

Finally, he was there. He pushed through the door, panting hoarsely, his head reeling.

One of the men opened the back door and shoved Ramón inside "It's not what you're thinking, Juan." "What I am thinking," said Juan coldly, "is that you are a piece of shit."

The cashcard the Yakuza had given him was worth twenty thousand. Not enough for his life. Just enough for one more run at the Grand Prix.

He stumbled down the aisle, pushing past startled game players, wading through shoals of bright holo space ships.

The Grand Prix cubicle was empty. He shoved the card into the slot, hearing a wash of street noise flooding the arcade as the doors crashed open and a gang of shouting Filipinos forced their way in.

He climbed into the cubicle and closed the door behind him. He quickly pulled on the jump suit and the data gloves then sat down, jamming the headset hurriedly on. He pressed the start button, letting all his breath out in one big huge sigh of relief.

He punched through the options and course selection, pausing only to enter his name. He'd take whatever the machine decided to throw at him.

The car took shape around him. The instrument panel glowed. The day was clear. The sun warm. The air was thick with the smells of motor oil and adrenaline. Colorful crowds lined the slopes above the track. He heard people chanting his name.

"Ramón! Ramón!"

He checked the starting grid. He was in the Number Six spot. That would give him a real shot at winning this time.

Then the call came. Loud and clear through his headphones. Echoing through the stands. A hush fell over the crowd. "Gentlemen, start your engines."

He turned on the ignition. The engine growled confidently. Its vibrations calmed him, smoothing the edges of his shattered nerves, dulling the pain in his face.

He slowly began to accelerate, starting to roll around the track with the other cars. Keeping pace with them. Waiting.

The flag came down.

Ramón yanked his foot off the clutch, simultaneously smashing the gas pedal into the floor. The car surged forward eagerly. People were shouting his name.

The car roared out of its starting lane and began moving through the cars ahead.

Ramón laughed out loud. This time there was no question. He knew it, sure as he knew his name.

This time he was going to win.

CHRISTOPHER HUNT

Did the usual mishmash of menial jobs after graduating from college—encyclopedia salesman, waiter, cook, clerk in a porno bookstore, factory laborer—before ending up in Japan, where he taught English and worked as a copywriter with a Japanese ad agency. He has also appeared in the Canadian magazine Exile. *In order to avoid doing what he's supposed to be doing, he's now working on his own Internet magazine, tentatively called* Circuit Traces.

The Rock

EDWARD ASHTON

In the story of the tortoise and the hare, you really don't notice when the tortoise goes into the lead for good. But sometimes in life, that moment can be locked in your memory forever.

TEN MILES EAST OF MIDDLEBURG, WEST VIRGINIA, State Route 36 began to climb. It rose over a thousand feet in just under five miles, a slope steep enough to make my father's Volkswagen bus strain and lug until he cursed and downshifted to third. It was my 16th birthday, and we were going to Wilder's Rock, as we had on every birthday I could recall. I was sitting on the back bench trying to concentrate on *The Catcher in the Rye,* but mostly listening to my father and brother talk basketball. Keith was 14 and already six feet tall. He was on the middle bench, leaning forward between the two front seats and saying something about Jerry West while my father nodded and scratched his belly. My mother hated basketball. She was staring out the window and doing something to her fingernails with an emery board. Coach Bailey watched Keith play at the East Marion Big Man's Camp that summer and told him he'd probably start at center for the freshman team the next year. I lettered in track that spring, but you can't really talk track.

As we crossed the Preston County line, my father took one hand off the wheel and turned half around to tell Keith about Hot Rod Hundley's game-winning jumper in the fifty-something NCAAs. It made me nervous when he did that, but Dad hated back-seat drivers, so I said nothing as the bus began to drift to the left. We were straddling the yellow line when the hard blare of an 18-wheeler's horn pulled my father's head around. The truck was in the west-bound lane, still a few hundred yards away. Dad cursed and jerked the wheel hard to the right. I fell half over, and when I caught myself on the back of Keith's bench my book dropped to the floor and snapped shut.

"Asshole!" yelled my father as the truck roared past in a rush of air. "Christ, did you see how fast he was going? I hope he burns his breaks."

"Bill! That's horrible." My mother hated it when he said things like that. He was right, though. The truck was going too fast. That slope was too steep and long for a loaded rig's breaks to handle without help from the transmission, and the only escape ramp wasn't long enough to stop a truck with a real head of steam. The ramp wasn't fixed until the summer after I graduated, when a trucker from Cumberland named Scott Simpson hit it at

95 miles an hour, pitched off the end, rig and all, and fell 70 feet into the forest above the North Fork River.

I was wondering what it would be like coming down off Booker's Ridge with no brakes, flying around the curves and waiting to crash, when Keith turned half around and asked me if I thought a player like Jerry West could still make it in the NBA.

"Sure, I guess so…. I mean, he was a great player, wasn't he?"

Keith laughed and shook his head.

"He was a great player in the '50s and '60s, but that was before the fast break and all. I don't think he'd be quick enough to play pro ball today."

"Maybe you're right. I don't really know that much about it." Neither did he, of course. Neither of us had ever seen Jerry West play. All he knew were Dad's stories and what they told him at the camps he went to every summer. Keith stared at me for a moment, then turned away and said something. I couldn't quite make out the words. Dad laughed and started in again about Hot Rod Hundley, over his shoulder this time and with both hands on the wheel.

I picked up *The Catcher in the Rye* and thumbed through it, trying to find my place. The last thing I remembered before Dad made me drop the book was Holden sitting in a hotel room talking to a whore named Sunny, telling her he'd just had an operation so he wouldn't have to have sex with her.

I guess most people would say Holden was pretty stupid to hire a whore and then not even use her, but I knew how he felt. My prom date that spring had been Jody Pritchard, the daughter of my father's best friend. She drove, and when the dance was over she took me down past the Motor Lodge and out to the end of Goose Run Road, almost as far as the Meadowdale Dairy Farm. Woods ran along both sides of the road, and I'd heard that a crazy old man sometimes came down out of the hills with a shotgun and stalked Goose Run, looking for young fornicators.

I guess Jody never heard that story, though, because she turned around in the farm entrance, drove a few hundred feet back toward the lodge and pulled halfway off the road.

"Have you ever been here before?" she asked. I shook my head. Clouds had covered the half-moon and the windows were like black ice, already beginning to mist over. She laughed, leaned toward me and started to say something else, but I knew she was waiting for me to kiss her, so I did. It was dark and I closed my eyes and I sort of missed her mouth at first, but she slid across the bench seat and pressed herself up against me anyway. I knew she wanted me to try something, but I couldn't. If you don't try anything you can at least pretend you're a gentleman, but if you try something and screw it up you're scarred for life.

The bus slowed as my father eased onto exit 12-B. At the end of the ramp was a narrow mountain road with a brown Park Services sign along side it that said WILDER'S ROCK STATE FOREST 7 in letters six inches high. Dad slowed a little, then gunned the engine and screeched into the south-bound lane. There was no traffic. Dad just liked to pretend he was driving a Ferrari instead of a Volkswagen bus sometimes.

I knew she wanted me to try something, but I couldn't. If you don't try anything you can at least pretend you're a gentleman, but if you try something and screw it up you're scarred for life.

We'd turned onto Route 27, which rides the crest of the Alleghenies north into Pennsylvania and south as far as White Sulphur Springs. If you go north you run into farm country pretty quickly, but south of 36 the road cuts through the forest like a fire break, and you can go 20 or 30 miles between side roads. When I was a kid Dad took me hunting in those woods a couple of times. He bought me a .22 and a blaze orange vest, but I didn't have much enthusiasm for shooting things and he gave up on me when I was 14. I haven't once touched a rifle in all the years since then, but Keith was a better study. He used to get out of school to hunt, and as far as I know he still comes home for a week each November to drink beer and shoot at shadows with our father in the Preston County uplands.

Five miles south of 36 we passed another Park Services sign. WILDER'S ROCK STATE FOREST, it said, and below that in bright silver letters, NEXT LEFT. My father slowed and stopped, waited for a coal truck to rumble past in the northbound lane, and made the turn. We were on a Park Services road then, patchily paved and just a little wider than the bus. My father slowed and honked his horn at every turn, and it took us almost 20 minutes to cover the five miles from 27 to Wilder's Rock. Every half-mile or so an even smaller road branched off to one side or the other, each with a wooden, arrow-shaped sign identifying it by its destination. We passed them all: RANGER STATION, PICNIC AREA, TOURIST INFORMATION, even WILDER'S LODGE.

Then the pavement ended, and we were riding on gravel. The trees drew back and the road widened into a parking lot. There were no lines or spaces. You just left

your car wherever you could find a spot and tried not to block anyone in. It wasn't very crowded, but my father parked at the high end of the lot anyway, 30 yards from the nearest car. Keith opened the sliding door and climbed out. I marked my place in *The Catcher in the Rye*, dropped the book onto the bench and followed him, pulling the door closed behind me.

Outside, the sun was almost directly overhead in a perfect, powder-blue sky. The air was cool and dry and the sun felt good on my bare arms. My father opened the back hatch and pulled out our ice chest, a metal and plastic monstrosity almost three feet long. Loaded it weighed 60 or 70 pounds. Dad couldn't carry it by himself anymore. I expected him to ask me to help him, but instead he motioned to Keith, and together they lifted the cooler and headed toward the picnic tables, stiff-legged and waddling like ducks. My mother locked the doors and handed me the basket of bread and paper plates. I tried to glare at her as she dropped the keys into her purse and started after my father, but she was already looking away and I don't think she noticed.

By the time I got to the picnic table the cheese and soda were already out. Keith was sitting backward on the bench, leaning with both elbows on the table and working on at least three sticks of Juicy Fruit. Dad sat beside him with his hands clasped and his elbows on his knees. They looked like Andy and Opie Taylor. I dropped my basket onto the table and walked away.

"Honey? Where are you going?"

It was my mother. I'd hoped Dad would ask.

"I'm just going to see the Rock, Mom," I said without turning. "I'll be back in a while."

"Be careful," she called after me. "And stay off the rails!"

I didn't look back.

A hundred yards from the picnic area was a worn flagstone path. It wound down through a stand of pines and ended at a pinewood footbridge across a chasm 30 feet wide and maybe twice as deep. On the other side was the Rock, a flat, slightly tilted slab of stone overlooking a thousand-foot drop to the North Fork River.

When I turned 18 I came to this place with Ben Thompson. He and I climbed down under the bridge, followed a ledge around to the south face and tried to climb up to the overlook. He went first, and 50 feet from the top he slipped, tumbled past me and fell another 200 feet before wrapping himself around the trunk of a pine. I hugged the face and watched him sail past, and all I could think was that I'd seen him fall before, in a dream. When I was older, though, I realized I hadn't — not Ben, anyway.

But on my 16th birthday, I just leaned against the heavy wooden rails above the south face and watched the hawks wheeling in the middle air below. There were a half-dozen coin-operated telescopes spaced around the rim of the Rock, but I never used them. The view from there didn't need amplification. From that height, the North Fork was just a stream of silver trailing back into the hills, and the mountain opposite was laid out like a salt map, huge and rough-textured and decorated in late-summer browns and greens. The hawks followed one another from updraft to updraft, spiralling as high as each one would take them before gliding downwind to the next. I thought at first that they might be hunting, but in twenty minutes not one of them dropped into the treetops. They weren't hunting. They were flying for the sheer joy of flying.

I was about to turn away when a hand pressed against my shoulder and bent me half over the rail. My feet lifted off the Rock. My hands groped blindly for the top rail, and I couldn't breathe until Keith's forearm wrapped around my throat and pulled me back to safety.

"Saved your life!" he crowed, then pushed me back and danced away like a ballerina. I staggered a half step backwards, then caught myself against the rails. My ears were ringing and I could feel my pulse pounding in my fingertips. Keith was laughing so hard he could barely stand.

"God, Phil, if you could see the look on your face!" He bent double and pounded his fist against his thigh. He was trying to say something more, but he was laughing too hard to get it out. I drew a deep, slow breath and shook my head. My hands were trembling. Keith stopped laughing and slowly straightened. I could feel my face twisting into a snarl. As I started toward him Keith backed a half step, raised his fists and bared his teeth like an animal. I hesitated another moment, then lowered my head and charged.

I still don't know anything at all about fighting. When we were younger I didn't need to, but that day Keith avoided me easily. He skipped away, tagged me twice with his left fist and then stepped in and put his weight behind his right. The sun flashed in my eyes and my hands and feet tingled, then went numb. When I raised my head I was lying face down on the Rock, just a few feet from the edge. Keith was standing over by the tourist scopes. His fists were still clenched and his eyes were leaking tears.

"You can't do that anymore!" he shouted. The corners of his mouth twisted down and he had trouble getting the words out. "You're not bigger than me any more, Phil. You can't do that to me."

I pulled myself to my feet and imagined hurling myself over the top guard rail and flying, soaring after the hawks, chasing the next updraft while Keith stood at the edge begging me to come back. I put my hand to my face. It was

a little swollen, but at least there was no blood. Keith was still standing with his fists at his waist. He thought I was going to come after him again. Instead, I turned my back on him without a word and walked back across the bridge to solid earth.

MY MOTHER FOUND ME SITTING ON A STONE BENCH A little off the flagstone path. I'd been there for most of an hour.

"Phil? Honey? What are you doing here?"

I looked up. She winced when she saw my face.

"I fell down," I said, before she could even ask.

"You gave yourself quite a bump. Where is your brother?"

"He's still out on the Rock." I looked away. I was sure she knew what had happened.

"Your father's ready to go home. Let's go find Keith."

She held out her hand to me. I shook my head.

"You go ahead, Mom. I'll go help Dad pack up the stuff."

"Your father doesn't need any help. Now come on."

I hated doing this to Mom. She couldn't understand why Keith and I fought. Once when I bloodied his nose she cried for almost an hour, until I went to her and promised it would never happen again. She laughed then, and told me never to make promises I couldn't keep.

I pulled up short as we stepped out onto the Rock. Keith was sitting on the top rail, facing outward over the south face with just his hands on the wood beside him to keep his balance. My mother gasped, took two steps forward and stopped.

"Keith! Have you lost your mind? Get down from there!"

Keith's head snapped around. His face was wide-eyed and startled as a spotlighted doe's. He sat frozen for a moment, then began waving his arms and tottering back and forth on the rail.

"Keith!" My mother was almost screaming, and there was a twinge of real fear in her voice. "That's not funny. Get off that railing before I come pull you off."

But Keith wasn't listening. He waved his arms more and more wildly and moaned in mock terror. And then…

And then he was gone.

There was the barest moment of silence before my mother's scream filled the dry summer air, echoing off the bedrock and coming back to us sharper and more frightened than before. She dropped to her knees and slapped both hands over her mouth. I looked to her, then turned and ran to the edge, threw myself against the rails and leaned over.

And there was Keith, crouching on a ledge three feet below the bottom rail, two knuckles shoved into his mouth to stifle his laughter.

THAT NIGHT I HAD A DREAM, THE ONE THAT MADE ME think for a while that I'd dreamed Ben's fall. I was standing on the Rock a little before sunset. A hard, cold wind was blowing from the north and little white clouds were racing across the sky, like a fast-motion film of a building storm. At first I was alone and I felt like the last person on Earth, but then there was someone with me — a tall, thin boy in a long black overcoat. He was walking around the edge of the Rock on the top rail with his arms spread like a tightrope walker, tottering back and forth and leaning against the wind. I tried to yell to him, to tell him to get off the rail before he fell, but the wind was so strong by then that it carried my voice away and I was sure he couldn't hear me. So I chased after him, grabbed him by the coattails and tried to pull him to safety.

But instead of pulling I pushed, and without a sound he toppled off the rail and fell. He pinwheeled and shrank as he dropped, until he was just another tiny black shape far down among the hawks.

And I wasn't sure, but then I thought I saw him catch an updraft and spiral upward, chasing a robin into the teeth of the wind.

EDWARD ASHTON

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Genetic Moonshine

JIM COWAN

Watson and Crick are separated from Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker by an ocean of water and a gulf of culture. Or are they?

THE RINGING OF THE PHONE WAS A HARSH ELEC–tronic jangle. Stupid with sleep, Inspector Scopes, Pasteur Police Class of 2214, rolled over in the dark and mumbled "Scopes here."

"So sorry to wake you." Even at four in the morning, Commissioner Bolt's voice was smooth and cultured. "We have a First Law problem, Scopes. Two suspects and the usual stuff: illegal use of alien genes, reverse engineering of the human genome. But their excuse is quite novel: enhanced creativity. Whatever that means."

"Uh huh." Why the hell had Bolt woken him up? This was one more crackpot scheme to improve humanity, another bad joke that could wait until morning.

"Scopes, these people are experts. They are transbiologists working for General Genes on a planet called Meadow."

"Meadow. That's a *Bioworld,"* said Scopes, exhaling gently as if to blow alien microbes from his lips, germs that kindled hectic fevers, bone-rattling chills, green choking phlegm and bloody vomit, germs that killed people in a few hours on the Bioworlds.

"I'll brief you in my office. Get down here now. And pack some clothes. I'm sending you to Meadow." Bolt hung up.

Scopes clambered out of his single bed and padded to the bathroom. He felt nauseated from fear? Or was it disgust? Standing at the sink, blinking at his bleary face in the mirror, he could not tell. He studied the reflection of his scrawny body, his sand-colored hair, his thin Celtic features, and finally he looked at his left cheek. It was crumpled by an old battle scar that never faded. Inexorably, he stroked the scar with a slow wiping motion even though he despised the habit. His day-old beard rasped under his fingertips. He would not shave this morning. Not shaving was an old PP superstition before Section Six jobs, and this would be one for sure.

At the back of his closet he found his last clean shirt. He was fumbling with the buttons when he saw his old white cadet cap, dusty, forgotten, lying on the shelf. How many years ago? Fifteen? He held the cap between his fingertips and blew away the dust. The silver PP badge was badly tarnished: SALVARE PER STERILUS—Salvation through Sterility. He tossed the cap back on the shelf. Only death could release him from his oath.

The hallway was dark. He wheeled his rusty bicycle into the alley and screwed his eyes half-shut against the swirling eddies of trash that floated on Hermes' endless Coriolis winds. The streets of the cylindrical life-island curved four miles above his head, a quilt of darkness stitched with tiny lights. Scopes pedaled doggedly into the wind and his solitary hunched figure passed slowly through the yellow pools of light under the city's streetlamps. Hermes' artificial dawn was breaking when he arrived at the headquarters of the Pasteur Police.

Bolt's penthouse office was a quiet cocoon of dark wood and wrinkled faux leather. French windows opened onto a bright rooftop garden furnished with wrought-iron chairs and a pretty white table. The Commissioner, tall, thin and stooped, was standing in the gloom behind his desk prodding a robotic insect that lay on his glass desktop. When he picked up this metal scarab, gold cufflinks flashed at his wrist. They were made from *Krugerrands,* he had once told Scopes. Gold coins from an ancient country he admired.

"Ah, Scopes, glad you came so quickly. No time to shave, I see. That's good."

He wheeled his bicycle into the alley and screwed his eyes shut against the swirling eddies of Hermes' endless Coriolis winds. The streets of the cylindrical life-island curved four miles above his head.

Bolt waved an arm in invitation and said, "Let's step outside. It's a beautiful morning." They walked side-by side in the penthouse garden, crunching gravel beneath their feet. Bolt bent down and set the scarab free in the flower bed. The little robot scurried out of sight.

"Did you know that model can track individual mammals by scent alone?"

"Yes," said Scopes. He had worked on many Bioworlds. Scarabs were essential for the exploration of those hostile biospheres.

"Everyone well at home, I trust?"

"Yes, quite fine, thank you," said Scopes, thinking of the unmade single bed that would greet him on his return. His loneliness made him glance up at the curving cityscape four miles above his head and search for the small splash of green that was the Academy Pasteur. On those smooth lawns, 15 years ago, he and Blue and the rest of

their class, shoulders back and heads held high, had sworn to enforce the Human Gene Laws, and when they were dismissed they had cheered hoarsely and thrown their white caps high into the air.

Bolt dragged two chairs to the little white table. Scopes sat down. There were violets and roses, honeysuckle and nightshade in Bolt's garden, all grown from the gene banks of old Earth. But these flowers bloomed year round, their endless blossoms and heavy fragrances made by alien genes culled from the plants of a hundred Bioworlds. Scopes breathed deeply, relishing the fantastic scents. This was transbiology at its best.

Bolt was pacing back and forth. "What do you know of a man called Foster? A transbiologist, a black man, but I'm told he did good work when he was younger."

Scopes stirred impatiently. "Foster discovered the N-fix genes in rare alien plants that fixed free nitrogen from the atmosphere. He added those alien genes to plants from Earth and invented modern hydroponics. He's why we eat so well in the life-islands."

"Ah, yes. I remember reading something about nitrogen. You've such a good memory for these scientific details, Scopes, I quite envy you. It's a good thing you're the field man and I'm the mandarin."

"Foster was working in Lumena when I was there, but I never met him."

"You were assigned to Lumena? I'd forgotten."

"Undercover. I taught Bio Law for two semesters. It was a waste of time."

"Well, Foster's broken the Gene Laws. He says he's trying to make the human mind more inventive, more creative with an alien gene that codes for new pathways in the brain." Bolt shook his head. "That's a clear violation of the First Law. You know, Scopes, I never trusted those people in Lumena with their organic government. Rubbish! That whole life-island lacked discipline, authority, structure. But things do work out for the best. After what they did to you, you must agree." Bolt was looking at Scopes' scar and Scopes felt his cheek burn as it had burned ten years ago when the laser scorched his face.

That was ten years ago, outside Lumena, The Island of Light. Two million people had bled to death in a week. The official story was that carelessness and poor technique had let in an alien plague from a Bioworld. But there other rumors. Bolt had sent hundreds of PP's. As always, Scopes and Blue worked in the same team. Bolt told them their task was quarantine and sanitation. A few months later he had called it a success.

Bolt turned and gazed through the dawn mists at the distant spires of Hermes. Scopes touched his scar briefly, then quickly clasped his hands on his knees and fought to refocus his mind on Foster's crime. "Enhanced creativity sounds like an intriguing idea. Maybe Foster's trying to bootstrap his own mind?"

"That's a Faustian scenario, Scopes, but an incorrect one, I'm afraid. Foster's not tinkering with himself. He's altered the neural circuits of the other transbiologist on Meadow—a young woman called Maria Mataya."

Maria Mataya. Instantly he found her face in the graveyard of his memory: high cheekbones, and eyes that were luminous pools of brown across the table during earnest conversations in Lumena's campus bars. But that Maria was one of the two million. Bolt must be talking about someone else.

A scrabbling amongst the flowers made him turn and look over his shoulder. Bolt's scarab scuttled across the gravel, grasping a weakly struggling mouse between its claws. Bolt pulled a remote from his pocket and pressed a button. The scarab tightened its grip. There was a popping squelching noise. Blood and brains squirted from the mouse's eyesockets.

"Amazing," said Bolt, but Scopes had turned away, angry and disgusted.

The scarab carefully buried the mouse in the mulch. Bolt picked up the mechanical insect and removed its mind module. "Can't be too careful," he said. Scopes followed him inside.

Bolt collected papers from his desk. He looked up at Scopes. "I have a breakfast meeting at General Genes about this Meadow business. A drone-freighter's leaving for Meadow at ten. Ride cargo and you'll be there by tonight. I'll follow you tonight."

Scopes nodded glumly. "Section Six?"

Bolt handed him a data disc labelled with General Genes corporate logo: double G's and double helix, red on white. Underneath, Bolt had written *Personnel Data: Foster and Mataya.*

"Yes. Section Six. Foster's a criminal, Mataya has a contaminated genome. There is no other way."

WHILE SCOPES WAS RIDING THE ELEVATOR DOWN TO the subway, he thought of the mouse and wondered if Bolt was born like that, or if he had spent too long in the Pasteur Police. Yet Bolt was right. *Salvare per Sterilus.* There was no other way. *Homo Sapiens* was the most successful species in the known universe; attempts at improvement had a way of turning sour. The Gene Laws stopped transbiologists like Foster from messing with the human genome. The Police enforced the Laws, operating under the authority of a secret codicil—Section Six: Summary Execution.

After the Academy his second case was a Section Six, two failed grad students and their pathetic black lab. That's when he began to see Police work for what it was: brutal and disgusting. He should have quit years ago. But

he'd sworn an oath and if he quit the Police would make sure he never worked again.

The subway stank of urine and the floor was gummy underfoot, like walking on velcro. Far down the platform, hidden by the sullen crowd of workers in GG overalls, someone was playing the saxophone.

Morosely, Scopes pushed his way towards the music. A ragged boy was blowing hard on the sax, watched by an emaciated man in a white T-shirt. The man was nodding, smiling, sometimes frowning at the boy. The man was often here. Scopes knew him well. His name was Blumenthal. When they were plebes together, Scopes had laughingly called him Captain Blue. Blue was from Lumena; he was a little older, and married with a child. Captain Blue. The name had stuck. Scopes thought of their white caps thrown in the air, like a rising flock of doves, and how quickly the caps fell and lay scattered in the dirt.

The boy finished and the crowd threw a sprinkle of coins. Blue bent down, whispered something in the boy's ear that made him smile, took the sax and blew a phrase or two, showing him how to do it better. Scopes watched quietly, wishing he was a father.

Then Blue saw him and began to play. The crystalline music cut through the hollow subway air and rose like a bird into the vaulted ceiling, a glorious celebration of life. The gray faced crowd was suddenly silent, attentive, as if they had been offered hope. The ragged boy stood spellbound. Scopes smiled because Blue had chosen well: a little scherzo written by Bach, defiantly, on a Sunday morning when his favorite daughter died from scarlet fever.

Two minutes and it was over. Blue ignored the rain of money. He looked hard at Scopes and waved slowly. It was an enigmatic gesture, part wave and part salute.

Yes, Blue had done it right. He had done his duty to the end, even when they'd asked him to do the worst thing anyone could do. Then he had quit and walked away with his head held high, shoulders back, and chosen a different way to live.

Scopes rode the train to the northern space-dock, staring at his reflection in the window. Maybe he should make this his last mission. He'd do the work he'd sworn to do, no matter what waited for him on Meadow, but this would be the last time. He'd quit when he got home. He'd make a living somehow.

ONBOARD THE FREIGHTER, HE TOOK HIS GEAR DOWN to the cargo hold and hung a free-fall hammock from the tie-down rings. He slept through hyperspace. When the freighter was decelerating into Meadow orbit, his hammock swung against a bulkhead and he woke up feeling refreshed and calm.

He climbed to the bridge. The freighter was docking with an orbital shuttle. On the shuttle's wings and fin the GG logos were bright in the alien sunlight. Below, Meadow was a blue-green globe streaked with white clouds. All the Bioworlds looked like this, and they teemed with carbon-based life: alien animals, plants and deadly microbes.

The commlink chimed. Bolt's hawkish face appeared on the screen and his panelled office filled the background. "Scopes, your mission is more important than I thought. General Genes will pay you a bonus for a speedy resolution." He named a figure. "Enough for you to retire, I'd say. Good luck. I'll be there late tonight." And he was gone in a burst of static.

Decisively, Scopes pulled the personnel data disc from his gear bag and slotted it into the bridge computer. He would confront Foster and Mataya and Section Six them right away. With luck he'd even have the paperwork finished before Bolt arrived tonight. He tapped a few keys to select Mataya's data. He looked up at the screen and was stunned. He was staring at her familiar face, her high cheekbones and brown eyes, the quizzical expression she'd used when asking questions in his class. Scopes sat before the screen for a long time. There was no way out. He stroked his scar.

Blue had chosen well: a little scherzo written by Bach, defiantly, on a Sunday morning when his favorite daughter died from scarlet fever.

An hour later the shuttle crossed a coastline where whitecaps marched towards a curving beach and a vast savannah. In the far west a fiery sun hung low over a range of snow-peaks; on the savannah a cluster of domes shone in the fading light, their shadows long ellipses on the plain.

Telemetry was coming from the domes. One inhabitant: Foster. Temperature 98.8, white cell count and differential normal, T-cells nominal, blood cultures times three negative, probes for alien DNA all negative. OK. So Foster was free of alien infection. But where was Maria?

The shuttle taxied to a halt outside the largest dome. Scopes pulled on a clumsy yellow E-suit, lowered his helmet over his head and snapped the seals. Rows of lights glowed at the edges of his vision. Steady greens shone on the left: seals and pressure intact. Blue and yellow telltales blinked on the right: life-support and recycling systems nominal.

He walked into the smooth whiteness of the shuttle's airlock. The inner door closed behind him with a sucking

thud of black trans-rubber on chrome. Pumps rumbled under the floor, misting him with fresh dioxychlor to kill the microbes riding on his suit. Contamination of the Bioworlds was always strictly forbidden. Massive bolts in the outer door slid back, newly sterile air hissed out and the hatch opened. Scopes stepped onto the dangerous savannah of Meadow. He tramped through waist-high grass that swished against his suit. The evening sky was filled with alien constellations.

Inside the airlock of the dome, fine sprays of dioxychlor washed his suit again. When the pumps shut down he shucked the clumsy yellow thing and waited for the door to open. Soon he would Section Six a crazy old man who had once been a genius, and do the same to a girl he'd known and liked, and maybe, if his work had not crippled him he could have learned to love. The smell of dioxychlor hung faintly in the air; it was an acrid, bactericidal smell that brought tears to his eyes.

He heard faint music in the air, like the perfume of a woman who has gone. He listened carefully, picked out a trumpet driving hard above a band, a New Orleans jazz band. The 12-bar chorus ended and the next chorus was subtly different, marvelously innovative. This was Blue's kind of music.

The music got louder as the airlock's inner door swung open. Foster was waiting for him: a black man, thin, shorter than Scopes, with eyeballs that were yellow with age. The hair at his temples was white and trimmed very short. On his bald head there were patches of paler skin that looked like alien continents.

"Inspector Scopes, Pasteur Police." Scopes waited for shocked horror to show on Foster's face, but Foster merely held out his hand and said "Come in. I'm glad you came so quickly."

Slack-jawed, Scopes stepped into the smooth white hallways of Meadow Base. "You were expecting me?"

"Well, not you exactly, but someone from the Police. We've asked for a scientific review. We want an official exemption from the Gene Laws."

They walked to Foster's quarters. There was a neatly-made single bed, a sofa, several chairs, and clean shirts were hanging in a row in the closet. The galley was immaculate. This was the home of a self-sufficient man.

Foster waved him to the sofa. "What do you think of our project?"

"Well, I'm not sure I really understand your work," said Scopes cautiously.

"We've made the ultimate discovery: we've discovered the secret of discovery itself. We've found a way to make the human mind more inventive, to help people think in ways they never thought before. But we've been careful not to break the Gene Laws and we need an exemption if we're to move ahead."

Foster was looking at him carefully, perhaps trying to judge his reaction. Scopes remained impassive and merely said "What exactly do you want from the Pasteur Police?"

"We should wait until Maria gets back," said Foster. "The story's more hers than mine. She's at an outstation in the south, but she'll be back tonight. She took the hovercraft." He looked down at his watch. "About an hour."

Get them both at the same time, thought Scopes, lying to himself, thinking of Maria driving across Meadow's dark and dangerous sea of grass. She would be peering through the windshield, like the pilot of some antique bomber with the faint glow of instruments shining on her face.

"Whiskey OK?" Foster was asking him if he wanted a drink. Scopes nodded. Foster went into the kitchen. Scopes heard ice-cubes clinking in glasses. Foster came back carrying two drinks. "Wanna listen to some jazz?" he said.

"Sure. Back at the Academy a friend of mine played the sax."

"Great. I've been to New Orleans you know, after the floods went down." He had taken a starship to old Earth, ridden down the Orbital Elevator to Porto Santana, taken a flight to Denver, high in the Rockies, and made a tedious four-day train journey to New Orleans. "Just a few people left there now, scratching in the ruins like chickens. The old city's buried under ten feet of silt. I took a scarab with me, programmed to dig through mud and hunt for shellac. Under the silt, in a basement on Ursulines Street—the old French Quarter, you know—that scarab found gold. Hundreds of forgotten 78's. Must have been a collector's place. They were all broken, there were thousands of pieces."

He had brought back the pie-shaped wedges of shellac, and he showed Scopes how he had made digitized images, painstakingly fitted the wedges together, made complete discs on his computer screen.

"Now watch," he said, and a red dot traced the groove in the image of the 78. Thin scratchy music started to play. "That's what I started with." He had used artificial intelligence techniques to remove the hiss, add missing harmonics, even fill in sections where a wedge was lost. "You know, people thought this stuff was all gone and lost for ever in the flooding."

They listened sitting side-by-side on the sofa. Scopes sipped his whiskey, sat back and closed his eyes. He was in New Orleans in a small courtyard with a fanlight that was a graceful half-ellipse and where the flagstones were wet with rain. His hand rested on the banister of a curving stairway and while he waited for someone to come down the steps, he glanced through the courtyard's arched

carriageway with its wrought-iron gates. A jazz band was marching down the street outside. A crowd was dancing on the wet cobblestones. The funeral was over, they were all coming back from the graveyard. The music was triumphant.

"Great stuff," said Scopes, thinking of the music, but Foster was looking at his empty glass and asked him to have another.

"Sure," said Scopes.

"It packs a punch."

"I make it in the lab. They used to call it moonshine." Foster refilled their glasses. Maria would be there soon. Scopes realized he was happy.

"New connections, that's the secret of creativity," said Foster. "Jazz is a good example: European melodies and complex African rhythms. New ideas always come from new connections."

Scopes swirled the whiskey in his glass and sipped carefully. "Creativity is new connections?"

"Yes. The connections that really matter are those in the human brain. Those are the physical basis for new ideas. I'm talking about dendrites, Scopes, the tiny filaments that grow between the neurons. New dendrites mean new ideas." He was looking at Scopes intently. Scopes sipped his moonshine slowly and nodded to show he understood.

"Maria and I have a protein that stimulates the growth of dendrites a thousandfold: Dendritic Growth Factor, DGF for short. We've got the gene to synthesize it too."

"You found this protein on Meadow?"

"No. I traded with a friend, a man called Sour Belly, a maverick transbiologist if ever there was one. Legal though. Years ago Sour Belly made big money, patented a gene. He bought himself a ship, installed the best shipboard lab I've ever seen. For years he's roamed the edge of the known universe, prospecting on Bioworlds beyond the reach of General Genes.

"He wanted some early Satchmo, the Hot Five cuts from 1927. He knew I'd found them in New Orleans. I traded them for DGF. They're classics, you know." After a moment Foster added thoughtfully, "Years ago, Sour Belly wanted me to join him, offered to let me buy a small share in his ship. If I'd been smart I'd have done it too."

Scopes swirled the whiskey in his glass and said "I like that idea, being your own boss out there on the frontier." He looked straight into Foster's eyes. "Believe me, there are worse ways a man can make a living."

The radio crackled and it was Maria's voice, scratchy in the narrow bandwidth, saying "ETA in five minutes." He felt impatient, eager, hungry.

"We can wait on the loading dock," said Foster. Scopes forced himself to walk slowly. The music faded away behind them.

They waited on the observation deck behind a thick glass wall and stared across the loading dock into the night, Scopes strained to see the white dot that would be his first glimpse of the returning hovercraft. Behind him a circuit breaker closed with a crash; harsh light flooded the dock and its dusty freight compound. The hovercraft, brilliant white with red GG logos on its side, swept in from the night trailing clouds of rolling dust. The craft swirled across the compound and nudged against the dock before settling on its billowing skirt.

The cabin door opened and a figure in a clumsy yellow E-suit jumped down onto the dock and walked towards the airlock. Despite the suit Scopes recognized her. She walked proudly, like a tired ballerina walking home after class. She was still so graceful, as graceful as she was when he was young.

He waited impatiently beside the airlock until the whining pumps were silent. The inner door opened, she stepped through and he saw once again her high cheekbones, her jet black hair and her deep brown eyes.

"I traded with a friend, a man called Sour Belly, a maverick transbiologist if ever there was one. Legal though. He wanted some early Satchmo, the Hot Five cuts from 1927."

"Scopes!" she cried, laughing with surprise and maybe joy. "Of all people, they sent you!" She hugged him and he wiped tears from his eyes.

"It's that damn dioxychlor," he said sheepishly.

She hugged him again and laughed and said to Foster "Scopes is more sensitive than he thinks. He always was."

He held her tightly. Her blue denim shirt was so soft to touch and she was beautiful and he had sworn to kill her.

"Hey, Scopes, don't look so sad," she said, holding him at arm's length to see him better. "But what the hell happened to your cheek?"

He touched his scar. "It's nothing, just a flesh wound," he said. "It happened at work."

"You should get a better job."

How cruelly right she was. But Bolt would kill her anyway, and so he said defensively, "PP stuff is all I know. Besides, I took an oath. Remember?"

She smiled at him and shook her head. He struggled to think of something to say to recapture the brightness of their meeting. She turned away to get her gear bag.

"So what have you been doing in the lab?" he asked.

"We'll show you," said Foster, and led the way through smooth white passages to Maria's lab. It was a jumble of equipment, mainly DNA sequencers and gene function

analyzers. Scopes was familiar with the craft of transbiology; it was a tedious comparison of thousands of base pairs, a search for similarities, fits, possible ways of using a gene from one world to modify the function of a gene from another. The work required an encyclopedic knowledge of the biology of many worlds. It needed the mind of a chess-master to see combinations, chances, opportunities. The work was extraordinarily tiresome. But in the center of Maria's lab was a music synthesizer and four speakers.

"What's that for?" he asked, pointing at the synthesizer. "I'll show you." She sat down at the keyboard and he stood behind her, looking over her shoulder, smelling the fresh scent of her hair. A silver bracelet hung at her wrist, many heavy links, an articulated snake that tinkled when she slotted a data disc and tapped a key.

Mournful hollow whistling music filled the lab, interwoven melodies in a minor key, poignant harmonies leading to a last sad chord. Loneliness lingered in the silent lab and Maria sat at the keyboard, head bowed, hands resting simply on her lap. The life support system whirred. She nodded to herself and looked up at Scopes with her head tipped at a quizzical angle. "That's music from the genes of a whale that used to live on Earth."

"Beautiful," said Scopes.

"Maria's discovery," said Foster. "DNA into music. The human ear's a great tool for pattern recognition, far better than the human intellect. She programmed a neuro-analog processor to modulate the output from the DNA sequencer with musical paradigms."

She picked up a disc and read the label, "Human neurons/growth phase." This music was a plainsong—boy sopranos singing in unison, slow and beautiful, echoes in a vast cathedral. "That's us humans, thinking," she said. "Laying down new dendrites, one by one."

She slotted another disc. "DGF." Pure timpani, driving drums, multiple rhythms weaving in and out, coming together and diverging, always fascinating.

Foster handed her a final disc and she silently showed Scopes the handwritten label: Human Neurons plus DGF. She slotted it.

A wave of sound washed over him. The music was a riot of harmony and rhythm, a blast of noise, a huge pulsing fugue in eight, 16, 32 voices—he lost count. The fugue drove towards harmonic resolution but always modulated to another key in a wonderful combination of control and invention.

Maria stopped the music. Her bracelet tinkled in the silence. She said "DGF will make people think better, think differently."

Now he knew why Bolt and General Genes wanted a Section Six job. Maria and Foster were not genetic criminals, they were living vessels that carried a dangerous idea. Scopes felt a cold, damp, hopelessness seep into his brain. He could never persuade Bolt to let them go and if he broke his oath and helped them escape the PP would hunt them down like animals.

"I synthesized the DGF protein," said Foster, "and injected it into Maria's bloodstream. The half-life of the protein is short in human blood, only a few minutes, but that was all it took for Maria to write the program that transforms DNA structures into musical paradigms."

"What you've just heard," she said, "is the first product of DGF. I sent Sour Belly a copy of my DNA-to-music software so he could see what we had done with the gene he found."

"So you two haven't broken the Gene Laws?" said Scopes.

"No way," said Maria. "We know all about Section Six."

Scopes ignored her. "You've injected the protein for a brief test, but you haven't inserted the DGF gene into your own chromosomes?"

"Right," said Foster.

"I need to file a report with Hermes." Maybe he could persuade Bolt. "I can't do anything until the morning."

"In that case, I'm going to bed." Foster yawned and smiled. "It's late for an old man." He left.

Suddenly, Scopes was very aware that he was alone with Maria in the silent lab, but before he could speak she reached up and touched his scar. "Please tell me what happened to you."

"Lumena. The hemorrhagic plague, back in 2219, Remember, people bleeding from everywhere, exsanguinating, dead in minutes?"

She nodded. "I remember."

"I was stationed in Hermes. They sent a whole detachment of PP's, said it was a quarantine job. I worked with my buddy, his name was Blumenthal but we called him Captain Blue. We had a salvage tug and they told us to weld the airlocks shut. There were two million people inside the life island and we welded the airlocks shut." He was watching her face, searching for disgust, but she was impassive.

"While we were working some men broke out through a small maintenance lock. I remember one of them coughed when he got close to me and the blood poured down the inside of his faceplate. They were desperate, trying to steal our ship, trying to escape. One of them got me with a laser. The scar's nothing, but an inch closer to my eye…." He shrugged. "Blue was looking out for me, killed them with the Bofors cannon, saved my life."

"You were lucky he was your friend," she said.

"We were at the Academy together. He was my buddy. He was watching out for me, even though his wife and

child were there. They were inside Lumena, that's what I mean." Scopes stroked his scar and watched her like a caged animal, searching for her condemnation, but she just shook her head.

"Go on."

"We spent another week inside that stinking tug, shouting above the roar of the engines until we had slowed Lumena down. They were all dead by then, all two million of them. Lumena was a hulk, a coffin. We sent it spiralling into the sun and we went home. But nothing was the same. Blue quit the day we got back to Hermes. He's done nothing since, gets by somehow, busking in the subway."

"Nothing is the same," she said and spun her chair around to work at her terminal. She pulled up a picture of a frail dark-haired girl standing in the doorway of a reed hut. Inside, in the shadows, there was a small color TV on a cheap plastic table. Behind the hut white Mayan ruins rose above the green jungle. "That's me, when I was ten years old. They'd just called from Lumena, told my parents I'd won a scholarship.

"My parents went with me to Lumena because I was so young. My father got a job there, the first real job he ever had. We lived in Lumena and we loved it, but in the summers I went back to the Yucatán and stayed with my grandparents. That's where I was in the summer of '19, in the Yucatán. But my parents stayed in Lumena, just two people inside, when you welded the airlocks shut."

Scopes held his face in his hands. He could not look at her. He felt he should cry, but he couldn't. He felt blighted, unable to escape his depraved career. Finally he looked up at her and said what was true. "I didn't know."

"You did what had to be done. It wasn't your fault. When it was over, in honor of my parents' memory, I vowed to do my best to free people from this constant horrible threat of alien infection. DGF is my best chance. Listen."

She pulled out another disc. Human immune system: modified. This gene music was like jazz, raucous, carefree, a bright march played by a band that might once have strutted down a wet street in New Orleans.

She let the music play for a minute or two. "I did that with the DGF protein in my bloodstream. I can see how to modify the human immune system, speed up its responses, make it improvise and handle anything the Bioworlds have in store for us." She looked at him earnestly. "I want to free people from the life islands, I want people to walk on these beautiful Bioworlds and let the sun shine on their faces and the wind blow in their hair."

And suddenly he knew what he would do. "I'm going to help you. I was sent here to Section Six you, and Foster too. But I'm not going to do it. I'm going to break my oath."

"Scopes, we know you were sent here under Section Six. We knew they would send someone, but I didn't expect you. But that doesn't matter. You must do what you have sworn to do."

"I can't," he said. "I can't do it any more." He buried his face in his hands as if to hide his shame.

"Then you'll ruin everything," she said relentlessly. "You must be true to your oath, you must carry out your orders. That's what we're counting on. Only that way can you make my dreams real." She took his hand. "They are your dreams too, Scopes. Remember?"

He remembered their earnest conversations in the student center and he smiled and squeezed her hand and said "Yes, I do remember. That's why you must let me save you."

"You must be true to your oath, you must carry out your orders. Only that way can you make my dreams real." She took his hand. "They are your dreams too. Remember?"

"No, Scopes. We are bound by different oaths. Yours—*Salvare per Sterilus*—leads to death. Mine brings forth life. *Salvare per Sacrificius:* Salvation through Sacrifice."

She reached up and touched his scar again. "We must both be true to ourselves. Truth is the only foundation for the future that we want." She ran her finger down the length of his scar and across his lips. Her touch was so light he barely felt the warmth of her fingertip. She kissed him, surprising him when she ran her tongue along the inside of his lip, letting her passion flow into him like a powerful electric current.

Later, while the alien stars spun slowly above her bed, she slept in his arms, her breath warm on his skin and her dark hair tangled on his shoulder.

He lay there, confused and angry, thinking of the old PP rumors about Lumena: that the alien plague was deliberate, that Lumena's Constitution of Freedom was a great threat to General Genes, that the corporation had deliberately seeded the life island with an alien disease.

He thought of the part he had played in the murder of her parents, of Blue's wife and child too. He thought of Hermes, the stinking subway, the crowds of drudges in their GG uniforms, and Bolt in his pompous office high above, ignorantly dismissing Foster's brilliance. He thought of the wasted promise of Blue's life, and Maria with her secret vow to her dead parents and her talk of sacrifice. At last he leaned over and gently kissed her sleeping face. He did not know what else to do.

Overhead a double sonic boom split the night sky. The shuttle banked and turned into its final approach. Bolt stirred in his seat and peered down at the sleeping domes. He reached into the pocket of his suit and lovingly fondled the mind-module of the scarab.

BOLT STEPPED OUT OF THE AIRLOCK AND STRAIGHTened his cuffs while listening to Scopes' report. When Scopes had finished Bolt said, "So this DGF protein enhances dendritic growth. When the protein was injected into Mataya she had a few new ideas. Now they want to insert the DGF gene into her genome so she can modify the human immune system. Then everyone lives happily ever after on the Bioworlds. Of course, I'm just hitting the highlights."

"Yes. She and Foster have not broken the Gene Laws."

"And Section Six does not apply. Is that your point? Is that why they're still alive?"

"Yes. I had no authority."

"You're right. You're a good field man, Scopes. You had no authority under Section Six. But we're left with a difficult problem."

Scopes felt the muscles of his face tighten, felt his mouth set firm and unyielding.

"Let me explain, Scopes. Our society is pure and stable, the pointless conflicts of the past are gone for ever. Politics is dead, economics rules. We live in a world of interstellar commerce that is smooth, stable, and homogeneous. Even our homes in the life islands are engineered to optimize the health of our species."

This was standard PP propaganda. But Bolt's voice was losing its cultured sheen. "Hyperimmunity!" He spat out the word. "What does that mean for the future of our species?" His speech had become harsh and guttural. "It means humans living freely on all the Bioworlds, and there are millions of these planets in the galaxy. It means human language, culture, and certainly human Biology diverging endlessly, the very thing, Scopes, that we in the Pasteur Police are sworn to prevent." He jabbed his finger at Scopes' chest. "Control of biology means control of society. You are a tool, Scopes, merely a tool, crafted to control Biology, crafted to preserve the purity of our species. *Salvare per Sterilus."*

He caught his breath and said smoothly "We face a serious and highly unusual threat. But my job, as a mandarin, is finding elegant solutions to unusual problems. Legal but effective solutions. For example, I have brought some new equipment for a field test."

AN HOUR LATER, AT DAWN, SCOPES STOOD IN THE coolness of the airlock, his helmet cradled in his arm, and peered through the porthole in the massive door. Outside, Meadow's vast savannah was gray and dim. A herd of para-deer had moved in through the early morning mist to graze around the domes. He avoided the reflection of his own scarred, unshaven face.

Behind him, Bolt zipped his E-suit from toe to chin with a single pull and sealed his helmet. The bright displays of the control panel were reflected in Bolt's faceplate; the colors hid his face like the crude mask of a tribal priest. Bolt lifted, one by one from their dull-gray alloy racks, four Webley SC-4 electric guns. Scopes was glad to see he left the flamethrower hanging there, a metal tank glinting between jumbled tubes.

Foster was sitting in a corner carefully rechecking his equipment. Tiny beads of sweat covered his black scalp as if a mist had settled on the wet pavements of some ancient river-city. Mutely, he took a Webley from Bolt and sealed his suit.

Maria stood beside the lockers, tying her hair back with a thin white ribbon. She wore the same faded denim shirt that was so soft to touch. The button on its pocket hung by a thin white thread. She stuffed a blister pak into the pocket and tucked the flap inside. Before she sealed her suit she blew Scopes a tiny secret kiss. She took down the black scarab case from the top of the lockers.

They cycled the lock and stepped out onto the savannah. Startled, the para-deer walked away, insolently flicking their tails.

The rising sun had washed away the alien stars and bleached the sky until it was the palest blue, the color of Maria's shirt. The air was still and the insects were silent, sluggish, waiting for Meadow's white sun to catalyze their chemistry. Each blade of waist-high grass was bent in prayer, its head bowed by a tiny globe of dew, and every dewdrop was a prism touched by the sun. A zephyr stroked the grass and the vast savannah shimmered and sparkled— brilliant, chromatic, alive. Scopes bent to pick a small blue flower, tearing the fleshy stalk with his gloved hand. He wanted to give it to Maria. She was walking up ahead, swinging the black scarab case, jaunty, graceful, she looked happy. The flower wilted before his eyes and he threw it down into the tangled grass.

After half an hour they were climbing up a bluff. The sun was warm on their backs and the para-crickets were tuning-up, thin wind-chimes tinkling urgently before a storm.

Scopes had set his suit's thermostat too high and he was sweating. He could feel it running down under his armpits and there was no way to get rid of the irritating trickle. He reset the thermostat: blue and yellow LED's flickered in his faceplate, accepting the command.

In front of him Bolt held his gun at the ready, arms rigid in the awkward position approved by the trainers back in Hermes while Foster and Maria slouched along with their guns held loosely by their sides.

From the top of the bluff they looked down on the broad oxbow of the river. The smooth brown water slid by fast on their side but looped in slow eddies on the other bank where mammals and reptiles were drinking side-by-side, standing in the shallows with rows of birds sitting on their backs. A thick cloud of insects hung over the herds and shifted like smoke.

The herds scattered; a plume of dust ploughed through the haze and stopped abruptly. A para-deer lay on its side, kicking feebly while a trans-tiger tore into its belly. Huge winged vulture-ants spiralled down from the sky, beating the air with their iridescent chitin wings. Bolt watched carefully. Scopes slipped the safety off his Webley and felt a thousand amps surge through the barrel. The laser sight glowed red even in the bright sunlight, but the para-tiger paid no attention while it gnawed at the bloody carcass of the deer.

"We'll do the test here," said Bolt.

Maria opened her case and took out the scarab. She switched the little machine on; it whirred and briefly jerked its legs. Holding it like a child holding a turtle she walked to the edge of the bluff. The E-suit couldn't hide her straight back or the curve of her haunches; she was still as graceful as that tired ballerina.

She set the scarab down. Across the river the trans-tiger raised its bloody head and looked up at her. Scopes gripped his gun.

Maria turned away from the scarab and started to walk back. Her gait was loose-limbed and carefree and she was smiling. Scopes heard a whirr, a scrabbling of metal legs, saw Maria's smile change to terror. She ran toward him, screaming "Get it off my back!"

She stopped and turned around. The scarab had cut her suit from heel to collar. The edges of the suit's proto-cotton were fraying in the breeze. The scarab ran down Maria's back and scuttled away.

Like an ancient clockwork machine jerking into motion Foster swung his Webley and blasted the rogue scarab with a single shot. Scopes ran to Maria and took her in his arms. The bright red dot of a laser sight flickered across his suit, a warning from Bolt. Scopes turned, still holding her, and saw Bolt disarming Foster.

Bolt said "Foster! Scarab maintenance, testing—whose job is that?"

"Mine," said Foster.

"We've had a fatal scarab malfunction. I'm charging you with gross negligence. It's a pity you destroyed the evidence; you'll have no defense when you go before the board. I'm sealing your lab. You're confined to quarters. Tomorrow I'm taking you to Hermes, for interrogation."

"You'll burn in hell," said Foster.

Maria lifted her useless helmet from her head, pulled at the thin white ribbon in her hair and shook her hair free in the wind. "You scum," she said to Bolt. "Scum that killed my parents, Lumena, scum that would kill everything that's human, if you could. You'll never win."

She turned to Foster, gave a thumbs-up sign, both hands. "We did our best. We came real close."

"Closer than they think," said Foster. He waved, almost a salute. "You're the best."

He turned away and headed back to the dome. There was no need for a guard, there was nowhere to go, but Bolt followed close behind with his Webley in the crook of his arm as if he were shooting grouse on a Scottish moor.

"Scopes, you finish up," he shouted as he left. Maria shook her head in disgust. She shucked off her flapping, torn suit and stepped out of its empty neon-yellow shell. "I think I'll go down to the river. Come with me, Scopes." And they set off down the bluff, holding hands, her small slender fingers lost in his clumsy glove. Digging their heels in they slid down the sandy slope and rivulets of sand ran before them down to the water's edge.

"We've had a fatal scarab malfunction. I'm charging you with gross negligence. It's a pity you destroyed the evidence; you'll have no defense when you go before the Board."

At the bottom she stopped and inhaled deeply. "These worlds are new Gardens of Eden," she said. She picked a flower, smelled it, smiled. "Believe me, it smells good."

"I did what you asked," he said, hopelessly. "We could have stolen the shuttle. Got away. If you'd let me."

"And gone where? I'm too much of a threat to them. Bolt would hunt me down, kill me, even if it took him years. No. This was the only way."

"To die without a struggle?"

"Death without a struggle, that's what sacrifice is all about. To choose death to make way for something new, something better, the very thing Bolt can't do, can't even understand."

"Make way for what? For this?" Scopes laughed sarcastically.

"Come on," she said, taking his gloved hand and they waded out into the river, the smooth, brown water sliding round their thighs, and sat side by side on a flat rock, Maria in her faded shirt, her jeans dark and wet, squinting into the dancing sunlight coming off the water, Scopes clumsy in his yellow suit.

She stripped off and dived into the river, freestyling upstream, drifting back to Scopes with the current, laughing, splashing water on his faceplate.

Later she got her clothes and they sat on the beach. He lit a driftwood fire because she was starting to chill. He put his arm around her and wished he had a blanket for her.

She had another chill, then a massive rigor and her breathing quickened, some kind of rapid pneumonia, he thought. Her fingertips and lips were tinged with blue. Her breath came in grunts.

"In my pocket," she gasped. "My pill's in there." In his hurry he tore the loose button from its thread, but he found the blister-pack. Hyper-cyanide. He cradled her head in his arms.

"Daddy, take care of me," she whispered.

"I will," he said, ignoring her delirium.

"Thank you." She smiled and closed her eyes. He slipped the capsule under her tongue and she was dead in twenty seconds. He laid her down on the sand and closed her delicate mouth with his gloved hand.

Something was climbing down the bluff behind him. A robot, sent from the domes, was carrying some kind of tool, he couldn't see what. Overhead there was the throbbing of chitin wings and a brief darkening of the sky.

The robot arrived. Bolt had sent it with the flamethrower, a reminder that contamination of the Bioworlds is forbidden.

When Scopes had finished there was only a smoking patch of earth. When he stepped back he saw the charred cracked button and ground it angrily into the dirt. In his rage he swung the flamethrower at the sky in a great arc and caught one of the vulture ants in its yellow flame. The creature screamed in terror and fell to the ground, a smoking pile of flesh and feathers.

He trudged back to the dome with only his lonely shadow for company. He went through the acrid decontamination procedures mindlessly but dry-eyed.

Bolt was waiting for him in the command module. "I've sealed Foster's lab. None of his equipment, none of his data leaves this planet. Nothing. Ever."

Foster was signing a report.

"You should read it before you sign," said Bolt, ever the bureaucrat.

"Why bother? You gonna change it if I don't like it?" Bolt took the paper from him, studied his signature, folded the sheet and tucked it in a pocket of his suit.

"OK if I go to my room?" said Foster. "I got a lot of moonshine I don't wanna waste. Maybe you should try some, Commissioner? Do you good to loosen up a little."

"Er, no thank you, not quite my kind of drink," said Bolt smoothly.

"How about you, Scopes?"

AN HOUR LATER, AFTER FINISHING THE PAPERWORK, Scopes, grieving, walked down the passage to Foster's room where the music was loud and fast, the trumpet driving hard above the band, chorus after chorus, endlessly inventive, bold, triumphant. He pushed open the door. Foster met him with a broad smile and grabbed a disc from the table.

"Here's something for you. A gift," he said. "Not jazz, but I think you'll like it. Moonshine music. Bootlegged. The best stuff in the known universe." He slotted the disc. The music was loose-limbed, sometimes jaunty, sometimes graceful—like a tired ballerina walking home after class—and once there was a high-pitched tinkling that made Scopes think of a bracelet of beaten silver. "The original was great," said Foster, "but forgive me, I've added a few bars." A few bars of pure timpani was what he had added. Then the magnificent endless fugue of invention began.

Maria's genome, DGF added.

He tossed the disc to Scopes. "Take it to Sour Belly. He'll know what to with it. Music into DNA."

Scopes stared dumbly at the disc he held in his hand. Smiling, Foster said "It's against the Gene Laws, you know. Alien genes, cloning, all that stuff."

"Screw the Gene Laws."

Foster re-slotted his jazz disc and the rough music filled Scopes' mind with that wet courtyard in New Orleans, the graceful fanlight and the curving stair. This time a little girl skipped down the steps and took his hand and her palm was soft and warm in his. They walked across the shining flagstones together and out through the wrought-iron gates into the street. They held hands and watched the carefree band march by. A white cap, lost, lay on the cobblestones. It was smeared with dirt. Little Maria picked it up and handed it to him. He wiped away the dirt, turned the cap over in his gentle hands and looked inside. The name written there was Blumenthal. He bent over and lifted the child in his arms. She hugged him and pressed her warm face against his left cheek. His cheek was smooth.

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The Electronic Lingua Franca

I'm all for progress, but let's face it: sometimes it's simply inappropriate. I could give oodles of examples if pressed, but right now I want to focus on formats used in electronic publishing.

You're familiar with many of them: things like Adobe Acrobat, Common Ground, DOCmaker, and even HTML, the tag-cluttered language of the World-Wide Web. This is progress, right? Nothing beats fonts, styles, graphics, sounds, movies, and the promise of teledildonics, right?

Not so fast. In my (admittedly humble) opinion, the ideal format for electronic publishing is text: straight text, plain text, ASCII—call it what you want.

I can hear gasps of horror from those interested in "progress," especially those heavily into graphic design, electronic audio, or desktop video. I don't dispute that graphics may be lovely, audio stentorian, and video breathtaking. But those aren't what electronic publishing is all about.

So what *is* it about, then?

Readers. The conveyance of information from a publisher to a reader.

The goal, in my eyes, is to make it as easy as possible for as many people as possible to read, hear, view, or otherwise experience my information.

Point #1: ASCII *text is universal.*

The lower 128 characters of ASCII text can be read on basically *any* machine. Just try playing a QuickTime movie from a Unix shell account, or reading a DOCmaker document on a Windows-based PC. It just doesn't work, and frankly, it's going to be years before data formats for graphics, audio, and video—particularly when mixed with text—will be ubiquitously cross-platform between a Mac and a PC, let alone across the range of all computers everywhere. I don't want to limit my readership to the people with the "right" sort of computer— I want to be able to reach everyone.

Point #2: ASCII *text can convey information without design or graphics.*

The howls of protest grow stronger. "But ASCII is so... plain and boring!" I guess that's why no one has ever read Herodotus or Dante or Hemingway or Steinbeck or even Stephen King's fluff.

Words both convey information and inspire the imagination. I can imagine and describe a scene far faster and cheaper than effects wizards in Hollywood can create it, and I'll bet I can do it faster than those spiffy new 3-D rendering and video editing packages too.

But hey, I'm not even talking about literature here, I'm talking about more prosaic publications. Consider this: take a publication and eliminate every design element, but leave all the text intact. The result might be pretty ugly, but I'm willing to bet that almost all of the information in that publication has been accurately conveyed.

Conversely, if you rip all the text out of a publication and leave all the design elements intact, you won't even be able to determine the name of the publication, much less what's in it. The point is that the text of a publication is of paramount importance.

It's going to be years before data formats will be cross-platform between a Mac and a PC, let alone across the range of all computers. I don't want to limit my readership to the people with the "right" sort of computer— I want to be able to reach everyone.

Point #3: ASCII *text will survive the passage of time.*

I'm not saying layout and design are bad, or that all publications should resort to straight ASCII. That's silly. I *am* pointing out that although good design can enhance the information conveyed in the text, the text is preeminent. In most cases, if you have no text, you have no content.

One problem in the electronic world is that our various types of computers don't understand the same file formats. But, they *do* understand ASCII, and since it's so universal now it's likely to be supported for years to come. Perhaps you don't care whether your publication is totally unreadable in ten years, but if you're related to an archivist like I am, you *do* care about the future.

Point #4: ASCII *text is reusable.*

The universality of ASCII text has another benefit: it works wonderfully as a base from which to expand. A simple macro in my word processor can take an existing ASCII publication like *InterText* or *TidBITS* and transform it into HTML for the World Wide Web. No fuss, no muss. Similarly, I could dump an ASCII version of *InterText* into Acrobat format—or any other format I want—using whatever tools I want on whatever computer I want, all starting from the primal ASCII text. And, I can do this at the time of publication, after the fact, or whenever I choose.

Point #5: ASCII *text is flexible and puts power in the hands of the reader.*

Consider what I said about tools. I was talking about using them as a publisher, but what about tools for readers? What if a reader wants to search through an issue of a publication? What if a reader wants to search through several *years* of issues? Few of specialized electronic formats lend themselves to a simple task like a full-text search, but as a reader I can use any number of tools to search through an ASCII publication.

But let's not stop there: some people are color blind, and others simply don't see small text well. With an ASCII publication, readers can easily adjust the display to match viewing preferences. Some designers absolutely hate to give readers this power, and although I won't argue that good design can improve readability, to the naysayers I have but one word: *Wired.* I just *love* reading yellow text reversed out of a picture.

One final example. ASCII text can be turned into Braille or read out loud by a speech synthesizer like the Macintosh PlainTalk technology. Just try *that* with 95 percent of the specialized formats out there!

Point #6: ASCII *text is small and compresses well.*

How fast is your connection to the net? If you rely on a commercial service like America Online or a bulletin board system, I'm confident that your connection speed isn't faster than 28,800 bits per second. Internet connections can be much faster, but the majority of individuals now connect at those same slow modem speeds. Text is small and compresses well, whereas graphics, sound, and video (and thus all the specialized file formats that use them) are bit-bulky.

File size doesn't much matter in a world of fast connections, but in the real world, people think twice about downloading a 600K file that contains the same amount of text (but additional graphics and layout) as a 30K text file. The goal in publishing is to disseminate information, not to restrict it to those with fast connections or patience.

In the end, friends, I come not to bury these specialized formats, these over-evolved and inflexible residents of the electronic plains, but to praise the grande dame of information communication: the humble word, as represented in the least common denominator of ASCII text. No one should pretend that a world without color, sound, and pictures would be a good thing, but in the world of electronic publishing those things often do little more than enhance the text, often at what I consider too great a cost. If what you have to say is important, people will listen—will *read*—without the trappings.

—Adam C. Engst

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Never taunt a walrus with a live jackrabbit. *Never.*