

The Electric Cipher

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The experiment was going haywire.

I moved into the house on Capuchino at the beginning of June. I was greeted by a man and a woman--my future roommates--who assured me that the landlord would not have to meet with me to see if I would be a good tenant; they had put in a good word for me. I smiled at them and wondered why they had gone to such lengths to see my installation into the place. I had known Frank only a few months or so; I imagined that was enough, but I had the feeling they needed me there more for financial support than for any company I could provide.

My room was in the back, an addition hastily slapped onto the rear of the house to accommodate another bedroom, to create another renter. Although I hadn't met the landlord, I had a feel for where his priorities were; immediately I sensed I wouldn't like him very much, if at all. But as long as I paid my rent and he left me alone, then things would be fine. There would be no conflict. No reason to get upset. And I couldn't afford to become upset. I had come to the peninsula to relax from the stress of the city, where my job had taken its toll on my nerves; my patience was shot, but at least I had attained enough in disability grants (a post office box served as an address for the checks) to support myself for at least six months or longer without doing any work. When the six months were up, then I could reapply if the problems were not resolved. I considered what I found myself in a blessing.

That night Frank, Marian, and I sat on the living room floor; I talked, they smoked pot. It was a housewarming, a newly kindled friendship gathering bent on promoting the good in us. I felt warm and secure.

"So what are you going to do now that you have the time?" Frank asked me.

"I don't know," I told him. "Maybe do a little writing. I've always wanted to since I was a kid, and I never had the chance. And since I seem to have nothing better to

do . . .”

Marian laughed. She sat cross-legged on the floor, close to Frank. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought she was Frank's girlfriend. She was nice to look at: brown hair, brown eyes, fair skin, medium height, thin. She almost looked native American, but I wasn't certain. If she was sleeping with Frank, I wasn't sure why. He was overweight, had a bad complexion, and looked as if he needed a shower just after stepping out of one.

“Sounds like a good idea. More power to you.” He said.

Marian passed the joint to me. I smirked and handed it to Frank. She eyed me carefully, perhaps seductively, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind to make a correct observation.

“You don't smoke?”

“Used to, but now it would only interfere with my medication.”

“Medication for what?” Frank asked.

“Nothing important.” I smiled, hoping it would answer the question.

“I see.” Marian said.

The evening waned. I was tired and didn't feel like being around people any longer, but I had to be polite about an exit. I didn't want to disturb the new-found “good feeling” we were experiencing.

“Look guys, I'm a little tired, and I still have to rearrange my room. Thanks.”

They shook their heads and I left them. I passed Frank's room; the door was open a crack and I saw no furniture inside--not even a bed--only scattered piles of clothes. I pulled the door shut and looked down the hall. Frank and Marian were laughing between coughs. I thought to turn back, sit with them and spend the remainder of the evening conversing; instead, I walked into my room and shut the door behind me. My room was a shambles. I stood gaping at the disarray before me--a definite mess. No sense in trying to arrange anything; I practically had no furniture either, I had left it all in the last house. All I'd managed to take was a futon mattress and a stack of plastic milk crates that I could make a book shelf out of. I put a couple of books away, stacked some clothes, unfolded the mattress, and lay down. The room was carpeted and warm; I would have to

get a fan to keep it cool, to at least make it bearable. It was warm, so warm--almost too warm to sleep, but it was fairly quiet, and that was a plus. Who knew what was going to happen at this house, but so far I felt okay with it. The diamond silver and black carpet proved to be interesting. I let my eyes wander over the pattern, it was the solace my brain needed to put me to sleep.

“So what are you going to do?” She asks me.

“Hell if I know.”

I am sitting with her in a coffee shop by the beach; the day is overcast and dreary, it is perfect irony.

“Are you going to live up to your promises?”

I look at her, tufts of red hair falling into her eyes. She is pretty while being unattractive. Maybe I'd had a good relationship with her, maybe we had been in love, maybe could have spent our lives together, but that's all dead now.

“I can't, you know, I need some time to myself.”

“You're flaking out of it, aren't you? Do you know how much that hurts me? I don't think you do. I have tried and tried with you. I tried to take care of you as best I could, but it's not enough for you.”

I put my fingers around my coffee cup, the heat searing the palms of my hands.

“My father reserved the hall, and I shelled out nearly \$500. You said only two months ago you still wanted to get married, now you've changed your mind . . . again.”

“Things have changed, I've had a hard time.” She never knew what I went through, how I felt.

She leans over the table and brings her face close to mine.

“I'm going to make you hurt for what you did to me. Really hurt, so you can feel like I do . . .”

“Don't listen to her, she doesn't know real pain like you do.” A voice whispers in my ear. I look in the direction of it and see a tall, thin man in an olive green suit and tie. He is sitting at the table next to us. His clean-shaven face is very long and his complexion pale. He has a frothing latte on the table before him, it spills over the rim of

the glass. His glowing green eyes glance at her and then fix on me. I turn back to her and smile.

“You don’t need her,” he says. “Fuck the bitch, she never loved you, she knows she can’t get anybody else.”

He gets up and puts his hand on my shoulder. His lips are close to my ear.

“I can show you real love.”

I shook myself awake. The room was dark. I cocked my head, all my senses awake, sensitive--I heard the slightest sounds, felt the faintest movements. Frank and Marian were in the room next to me. I could hear them having sex; someone’s ass was squeaking on the hardwood floor. At once I was sickened by the sound, it rang in my head. I placed my hands over my ears, but it did no good. Their breathing became louder and louder--Marian was panting like a rabid dog; Frank was moaning like a mammoth trapped in a tar pit. Almost as soon as the noises began, they stopped. I relaxed and found what was going on next door hilarious. I wished to laugh out loud, but I regained control. The sounds ceased, became barely audible--I found I missed their absence. I knelt at the head of the mattress, on a stack of pillows, and set my ear to the wall so that I might hear them climax.

I managed to get myself back to sleep and woke again late in the afternoon. The house was empty. I showered, washing myself of the oily residue on my skin--stale sweat from the dreams I’d had. I wasn’t sure if what I’d heard in my roommates’ room was real, it could’ve been part of my imagination. Time to focus on reality. I shook off the haze and popped open a soda from the fridge. I had to go to the university today to see an old friend from college, Steve Sanderson. He had come to see me while I was in the hospital after my breakdown in the lab. He told me if I ever needed to talk, to come on by. I felt it was time to take him up on his offer. I knew I should probably go to see my therapist too, she had said if I started to have dreams about Judy, I should make an appointment. But I felt okay, although a little queasy. I’d survive.

Steve was in his office when I arrived. He greeted me, then offered me a seat.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Darrin. How have you been?”

“Okay, I guess. Moved into a new place. I’m in Burlingame.”

“I heard. Nice there?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you want to talk about something? I have a class in ten minutes.”

“I just wanted to see an old friend.”

He laughed and tapped his pencil on his desk. “Here I am, you feel better?”

I laughed. “I don’t know, had some disturbing dreams last night, can’t make anything out of them.”

“Maybe you should see that psychiatrist, that’s what they’re there for.”

“I don’t like those headshrinkers, they play one huge mind game. Besides, she has this patronizing way of telling me things are all right. Know what I mean?”

He sat up in his chair. “No, I don’t, you’re the crazy one. Sorry to cut it short but I’ve got to go. They’ve been cutting instructors again this year, so I have to kiss their ass. ‘Be on time’ they say, nothing matters, just be on time, get your P’s and Q’s straight, dot the I, cross the T, you know. Damn bureaucrats. Ah, you’ve got enough problems, you don’t want to hear about it.”

I looked blankly at him. He sat back in his chair, gritting his teeth.

“Have they been bothering you, the guys from the lab?”

“No, I haven’t heard from them, not since I left the hospital.”

“Good, as long as they don’t know where you live. Don’t tell Doc or that bastard Niles. She might relay the information, and he’ll narc--he’s been sucking a lot of dick these days.”

“Okay.”

“Sorry, I really have to go.”

“Thanks.”

We shook hands and I left his office. He yelled to me as I was walking down the hall.

“Give me a call, maybe I can persuade the wife to make dinner sometime.”

I waved to him.

I wandered around campus; it was choked with students rushing in all directions. I was afraid someone would recognize me, but nobody did. I'd only taught a class or two for a semester, and I hadn't been social. I'd spent most of my time at the lab, and the commute alone wore me out; rarely was I in my office and rarely was I at home. They found me nearly impossible to get to. I hoped I could still pull the disappearing act.

The library provided some comfort. I read through several daily newspapers from around the state and thumbed through a Burroughs novel. My mind couldn't focus on reading; I found that as soon as I set myself in the book, I was staring out the window looking at the unmowed grass that had expansive patches of brown and small piles of dirt that looked like large anthills. A class streamed out from one of the buildings. It must've been a Rec. class; they stood in a circle and held hands--maybe it was a "Throwback Free-Love" class. I chuckled quietly, so as not to draw attention to myself; I knew how easily distracted the undergraduates were here, none of them very bright. It was frustrating trying to teach them anything about quantum physics or even the basics of calculus. They all had the attention span of a dog sniffing out a bush to urinate in. Maybe that was why I got sick of it and had to duck out for a while; I needed some time to myself, to recover, to regain my senses and to find some sort of norm, if there ever was such a thing.

I slammed the book closed. I didn't feel like reading about heroin addicts and how they saw the world, what I needed was a dose of reality. As I left the library, I heard a voice calling out to me. I turned and saw that it was Niles. I took a deep breath. He and I worked in the lab together once upon a time; I'd had him removed from the project almost a year before. He didn't know I had done it, but I sensed he might have a clue--and he was one to hold a grudge.

"Darrin, guy, what's happening?"

He offered his hand, I kept mine in my pocket.

"I'm tired, going home."

"Where are you living now, the peninsula, maybe?"

I glared at him. "I'm not settled yet, thinking about going north where it's cooler

and the people are fewer.”

“You want to have coffee? I don’t have a class for another hour.”

“No appointments, either?”

“Not today. What do you say, old boy?”

I frowned and shook my head. “Really, I’m sorry, but I’m very tired. Another time, perhaps, not today.”

I turned away from him.

“Franklin’s been asking about you, hasn’t heard from you since you left the hospital three days ago. You have to keep him informed of your whereabouts.”

“I don’t work for him anymore.”

He ran to me, grabbed my arm and turned me around.

Doesn’t matter, you’re to keep in touch with the lab, it’s in the contract.”

“It’s been dissolved.”

“It’s not as easy as that, man. I know you have a hard time living up to your responsibilities, but you worked on a sensitive project, you possess privileged information, as do I.”

“You don’t work for him, either.”

He smiled dryly. “While you’ve been away, I’ve taken over. I’m in, no thanks to you.” He patted me on the back.

“Fuck you.” I turned and walked away from him.

“I’ll tell Franklin I saw you. He’ll be wanting to hear from you.”

“Fuck him too.”

I didn’t look back. When I got to my car, I slumped in my seat; I set the radio to an oldies station and let the music echo in my head. I whispered to myself over and over,

“I don’t deserve this . . . I don’t deserve this . . .”

The sun came and went, the sky became filled with clouds. The evening summer fog was rolling in, the temperature dropping; it was getting cold almost to the point of shivers, but I left the window down anyway. I couldn’t command my body to move, for it might disturb the tranquil state I was trying to get myself in. Relax, I had to relax, the pressure was trying to mount me, trying to take over my mind. So they want me back,

huh? Back to the lab. I don't think so. I've seen enough to know I don't want to set foot inside the place. I had thought to destroy it, but they had found me out too soon, before I could do any damage; they said I was hysterical, mumbling incoherent things about some sort of this and that. They said I had gone through AND come back, unlike others who had met with a more violent end. No matter what, I'm NOT going back. I know why they want to know where I am--none of this 'we need to keep track of you because you possess privileged information' bullshit--they want me back, simple as that. I pounded my fist on the steering wheel until a sharp pain stung the bottom of my hand. Out of the corner of my eye I could see some students walking by; they were watching me intently, the beady-eyed little bastards.

I let a week pass before I decided to call Steve. He had seemed a little nervous about having me in his office; he wasn't sure what to do with me or how I might react. I had to reassure him that my life was better. I told him I was settling into a new house with good roommates, the memories of Judy were getting further behind me, and the work at the lab a distant annoyance. Things were going along just fine; I spent most of my days walking around the neighborhood getting my bearings, occasionally driving to the city for a comfortable dinner with Marian (she had asked me since Frank phoned saying he couldn't make it), and reading. No more Burroughs, just Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. I find a lot of truth in the latter, his thoughts are pure and clear, his language cutting a clearing through the wilderness of man's moral turpitude. Nietzsche seemed to have had solutions to every justified problem; it's hard to believe that he died insane.

Steve's wife, Daria, answered the phone. She was a friend of my ex-fiancee, Judy. She was sorry things hadn't worked out between us. I didn't think she knew the extent of what had happened, although Steve did. She invited me to dinner the next night, then handed the phone to Steve. Judging from the hesitation in his voice, I got the impression that the invitation he had extended to me the week before had been made purely out of pity, an extension of his heart that didn't sit right with his sense. I would've refused, but I felt I needed to talk with somebody I trusted. I knew that somehow, somewhere, some maniacal plan was set in motion. I wondered about the project--was it

still progressing, or had it come to a standstill? From the way Niles had acted the day I was on campus, I would speculate it had come to a drastic halt.

“Yeah, Darrin, if you are free to stop by tomorrow, we’ll see you about . . .”

He yelled to his wife.

“She says around seven, is that okay?”

“Fine. Are you still in the Marina?”

“Same place. I want to buy a house or condo or something, but she likes it here. Forever renters.”

“Tomorrow then, bye.”

I hung up and heard someone come in the front door. I left the kitchen and met Marian in the living room. She set down her purse and plopped down on the couch I had bought only a few days before. Since I had more money than they did, I didn’t mind buying furniture. She smiled at me.

“How was your day?”

“Dull.”

“Work was hell, my boss is such a crazy asshole. He told me yesterday there was a screw-up and I might be fired over it, said there were these corporate types coming in to investigate. Turns out there was no screw-up. They were there to tour the office. What a jerk.”

I shook my head.

“Fucking jerk. They say he’s going to quit or be transferred or something. Hope it’s soon. That was my day.”

I sat on the couch. The television was on, I tried to watch the program with keen interest.

“I hope this doesn’t sound weird, Darrin. If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Frank and I had a bet. I thought you were twenty-seven, he thought you were thirty-five or older.”

“How nice.”

“Frank can be a little fucked sometimes.”

“No big deal.”

She sat on the edge of the couch and leaned toward me.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“What? Oh, no, no I don’t.”

“I’m going to take a bath, soak for a while.”

“Okay.” I didn’t take my eyes off the screen once, it was almost as if she wasn’t there. She got up and I heard her slide into the tub some time later. The program ended and I flipped through the channels. I hated TV, it not only had a way of draining what was left of my brain, but also suppressing any new thoughts to refill it. I snapped it off and went into my room, leaving the door open. The new furniture in the room consisted of a frame for the futon, a real bookshelf, a desk, and a small wooden filing cabinet. I had few papers to put into the files; most of the writing I had done prior to my breakdown had disappeared--Judy had probably thrown it away. I sat at the desk and gazed at a pad of paper that had a few lines scribbled on it, much of nothing it was. I wanted to buy a typewriter, an old one, and maybe get back to the book I was working on before, but a non-fiction book on quantum physics in the realms of mysticism seemed too trite for me now. And owning a typewriter would be too intimidating, it would force me to work--the damned machine staring up at me, keys winking, stark white blank paper glaring.

“Darrin, could you come here for a minute?”

I get up from my chair. I think to shut the computer down, but I figure Judy won’t need to talk to me too long. She likes it when I walk in on her while she’s bathing or dressing; she says she likes having my eyes on her, staring at her vulnerability--her breasts floating in the bath, nipples firm.

“Do you find me attractive?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think I’m sexy here in the tub?”

“Yes.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Making love to you . . . my hands around your throat.”

“Darrin . . .”

I rubbed my eyes. The pen was in my hand; I had drawn a series of skewed circles on the pad.

“Darrin!”

“Yeah.”

“Could you come here for a minute?”

It was Marian’s voice. I shook my head. I had been lost again.

“Be right there.”

When I got to the bathroom, she was standing before the mirror, wrapped in a towel.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow night?”

“I’m having dinner at a friend’s.”

She combed her hair, peering through the steam on the mirror.

“Anybody I know?”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I was hoping we could have another nice dinner together, like we did on Wednesday. Frank’s not going to be around.”

I pulled at my lip. “Are you guys going out or something? I’m not sure of the situation between you two. When Frank first mentioned the living arrangement, he said there was another roommate, but he didn’t say it was a girlfriend. So I don’t know.”

She looked at me. “How did you meet Frank?”

“I met him a couple of months ago, through a friend. Um . . .”

I stared into the mirror. I couldn’t, for the life of me, remember who the friend was; in fact, I didn’t remember meeting Frank at all. The memory of my life then seemed to be surrounded by an impassable thick cloud.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know where or how I met Frank.”

She seemed surprised and changed the subject; she went on about work again. I

massaged my forehead, trying to think. Nothing.

“When did you meet Frank?” I asked her.

“We used to go out, a long time ago.” She abruptly walked past me into her room.

“But we don’t get along too well, that’s why I have a separate room. In some ways we need each other, but we agreed to go out with others, although he’s not too fond of me doing it.”

I turned and looked into her room. She had left the door open, and by a mirror on the wall, I could see her dressing. The blank, it was still there. It was as if the knowledge of Frank had been implanted, because I couldn’t remember the actual experience of having met the man. I felt very strange and found I was starting to worry.

“That’s the way it is,” she came out of her room patting her head with the towel. “If you can’t make it tomorrow, maybe we can do it another time.”

“Yeah, maybe . . . maybe in a few days or so.” I was starting to get a headache.

“Don’t worry, Darrin.” She walked to me and kissed me on the cheek. I touched the spot, it was warm and moist from her saliva.

After laying in bed for nearly three hours, I managed to sleep fairly well, only one dream I could remember. It was of the man who first appeared in the coffee shop. He and I were in the lab, on the bottom level. The walls were made of cinder blocks, they were painted, splashed with black. The paint had run; it had dried in pools at the bottom of the wall.

“Come on,” he said to me. “I have something to show you.”

I followed him, down a stairway that wound around a corner. The light was feeble; I could barely see, but I felt as if I knew where I was going.

“This is something that will shock the hell out of the world.” He smiled. “And fuck ‘em if they don’t like it. We’ll shove it down their goddamned throats!”

We came into a room that was expansive. There was a single light in the center the room, illuminating a table. On the table lay a staff mounted into the top of a stone pyramid. A metal ring, shaped like a zero, was attached to the top of the staff. There

were large generators behind the table, and an oblong circle was drawn on the floor. I knew what it all meant. I backed away.

“Take it easy, just one more experiment and we’ll be successful.”

“No, no, I . . . I . . . I can’t.”

His green eyes glowed vibrantly, he stretched his arms out toward me.

“You must . . .”

I shook myself from my sleep, to find daylight streaming in through my window. I sat up and the light of the sun caught my eyes. Alive! Alive again!

I went to the kitchen and put my hand on the phone. I thought of calling Doc; she had said if the dreams started again, I should call her. I could handle it. I survived. The dreams, they’re vivid phantoms screaming through my brain, revealing the atrocities of a life gone unreclected. I needed help, but not hers; she couldn’t understand what I’d seen, how it had and will affect me and how it will all come to a climax where no one shall remain.

I arrived at Steve’s house at half past seven. His wife was all smiles as she opened the door.

“Hi, Darrin. Come in.”

Their flat looked just as I had last seen it, over a year ago. Nothing had changed: same furniture, same pictures, same family. Steve and Daria had been married almost nine years. I felt sorry for them having to live in the same place all that time, without any hope of ever leaving, but they were so comfortable in the familiar, with no taste for the extraordinary. Steve greeted me in the living room.

“Darrin, come with me.” He grabbed me by my arm and led me into the hall. “I invited another guest for dinner, he says he knows you. I don’t think you know him, but he works at the lab.”

I yanked my arm away. “What?!”

“Take it easy, he’s only been there a year. He started right after you left, so he

doesn't know what happened. Besides, he's a friend of mine, so be nice to him."

I let out a long, quivering breath. "Okay, okay."

"He's really anxious to meet you. I talked to him after I saw you on campus. I thought since you were going to be here, you wouldn't mind meeting him."

"Yeah. I'll deal with it."

"Splendid."

He led me into the kitchen. He looked at his wife, who was putting the finishing touches on dinner.

"Where's Sam?"

"In the bathroom."

"Have a seat in the living room. Can I offer you anything? Soda . . .?"

"No, thanks."

I went and sat on the couch. There was a loose string of fabric on the arm; I tugged at it. There were sudden voices in the kitchen, one I thought I faintly recognized, neither Steve nor Daria, still familiar, from somewhere distant, like a voice carried on the wind. Then he came in.

He was tall, thin, his skin pale and his hair jet black. His eyes were a deep hazel, almost glowing; his pants were olive, his shirt black, buttoned to the top. I knew him in an instant. He was the man in the coffee shop dream and in the lab dream. I stared, frozen, with my eyes wide and my mouth open. He smirked and gave me a perplexed look.

"Darrin?"

His voice was exactly the same, down to the intonations, pitch, accent, and pronunciation. I couldn't conjure a word or gesture to acknowledge him. He walked over and stood next to me.

"I'm Uncler, Sam Uncler."

He extended his hand, and after a minute or so, I followed. My palms were wet. After we released, he looked at his hand, then at me.

"A little nervous, are we?"

He sat next to me.

“I’ve heard a lot about you back at the lab, you’re quite a celebrity, famous I might put it, been following your work. Now I have the ultimate pleasure of meeting you.”

I flashed a facetious grin at him. He pulled out a cigarette and put it into his mouth.

“Smoke?”

“I quit.”

“Oh,” he searched his pants and shirt pocket. “I hate it when that happens, I lost my lighter. Excuse me.”

He quickly got up and went into the kitchen. He walked over to the stove--I watched his every move as if anticipating the dreams to recur--he looked back at me and smiled. He flicked on the gas burner and bent over it, extending the cigarette over the flame. He looked at me again. I was still staring. He lifted the corner of his mouth as if to silently say something.

“Sam!” Daria yelled.

“Sam, if you needed a light, I have a . . .” Steve said.

“I got it. You have an ashtray? I don’t want ruin your couch. And I have your guest to talk to.”

He returned and sat next to me again--this time closer. He had a faint scent of cologne on him.

“Sanderson’s a great guy, all manners and British etiquette, Daria too. But you can’t know two better people. Don’t you think so?”

I resumed tugging the loose string on the arm.

“She’s making her specialty, Veal Parmesan, my favorite. Nothing like eating sick young cows. Makes you feel really alive, eating the misfortunes of those lesser than you. Superior, that’s the word I’m looking for, makes me feel superior.”

“Yeah.”

He was suddenly quiet. I could hear him taking long draws on the cigarette.

“You don’t say much, do you?” He said without looking at me.

I turned and gave him a surprised look. “What?”

“Silence, the absence of speech. You seem to have cornered the market on it.”

Daria dropped something in the kitchen. I looked up to see Steve running to her. Uncle was smiling, almost sadistically.

“She might need some help . . .” I started to get up. He put his hand on my leg.

“She’s a big girl, she can handle it. Besides, that’s what the husband’s for. Don’t worry about it.”

I sat back down slowly, eyed his hand on me; he retracted it.

“You feeling a little edgy?”

“Not really.” I looked at the string, but left it alone.

“Seems like it, it’s what your profile says.”

I glared hard at him.

“I’ve read it several times, you know, had to. Franklin, Niles, Sanderson--they all say you’re dangerous, could go off at any second, like a powder keg, boom!” He made the motion with his hands. “But you don’t seem that way, maybe a little edgy, but that’s all--uncomfortable around strangers, anti-social and all that. Ah, don’t worry about it, I’m the same, it’s the damn work at the lab. Can drive you up the wall, if you know what I mean, but I think you already do. That’s what the profile says, but my curiosity got the best of me, I had to see for myself. But you don’t strike me as the murderous type, not at all, you seem perfectly passive sitting in your little corner of the couch pulling on that damn thread. Perfectly passive.”

I looked blankly at him.

“Yes, your defense mechanism. The profile says that too. Pretend you know nothing, good idea, it works for me, especially as far as the government’s concerned, but I’m not here to talk politics.”

“What are you here to talk about?”

“I think you know.”

Another blank expression. He shook his head.

“You’re the man behind the Cipher Experiment, the brain of the operation--I’ve spent a year studying your work. I wanted to meet you sooner, but they wouldn’t allow me to see you at the hospital.”

Another blank expression.

“This is how we’re going to play it, huh? Fine, don’t say anything if you don’t want to. Hell, you probably don’t remember any of it, anyway. The profile says you’re a vegetable up here,” he tapped the side of his head with his finger, “and maybe they’re right, who knows? Only you do.”

He pulled at his lip; the cigarette burned between his fingers, smoke gently curled away. He took a long drag and snuffed it out in the ashtray on the end table. His gaze fixed with mine.

I get the distinct impression that you think you know me, but can’t place the face.”

“Maybe.”

“No bullshit. This is the first time I met you. Well, in person anyway, your reputation precedes you, you ought to be proud.”

“Really.” I looked at the string again. The temptation was too great; I started tugging at it--he noticed.

“Look,” he moved closer, put his hand on my leg again; he brought his face close to the side of my head. I felt his breath on my neck. “I know what happened at the lab.”

I snapped my head around and faced him. “You don’t know anything.” I relaxed and turned back to the string. “Don’t know anything at all.”

“Is that what you think? If so, you have grossly under-estimated me.” He eyed my progress at nearly pulling the entire thread out. “But I do know one thing for certain, if you tear Sanderson’s couch apart, he’ll be pissed.”

I cracked a smile. Steve walked into the living room.

“Dinner’s ready.”

Uncle and I exchanged glances, simultaneously got up, and walked toward the kitchen. He stopped me.

“Let’s try to be friends and we’ll go from there, okay?”

I nodded, and sat at the table; a plate had already been prepared for me. The veal was breaded, a thin tomato sauce covering it, a piece of cheese swimming in all of it--maybe floating. A bowl of noodles was beside the plate; they were cooked, but had no

sauce. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to pour the noodles over the plate, or scoop pieces of veal and soup into the bowl. I decided to wait and see what everybody else did. Uncler looked at me and smiled; he unfolded the napkin and placed it in his lap. I did the same, he nodded.

"Sanderson." He stood up with a glass of red wine. "A toast, to Darrin. May this be the first day to lead to the rest of his life."

"Here, here." Steve and Daria raised their glasses. I had no wine, only water. I gripped my hand around the plastic cup and lifted it.

"Great." Uncler drank deeply from his glass, then sat back down. No more words or glances were exchanged, and the rest of the meal was taken in silence.

I arrived home fairly early, close to eleven; Marian was up watching television. Frank was nowhere to be found.

"How was your dinner?"

"It was okay. Nice to see friends."

"I wish I could get out once in a while. Frank never takes me anywhere."

"You should ask him to."

She laughed. "Yeah, right."

"By the way, where is he?"

"I don't know, he wasn't here when I came home, probably out with his white trash friends. Out drinking beer, belching, farting, you know, all that male bonding stuff."

I laughed and started to walk to my room. I thought of asking her about Samuel Uncler, but there was no way she could possibly know him. A nagging feeling told me to ask anyway, but I ignored it.

I got to my door and she yelled down the hall.

"What are you going to do?"

"Settle down and read, I think. Not much else to do. Too early to sleep."

There was silence, and I went to my room. The futon was comfortable. The room was warm from the heat of the day; I threw the window open and lay down. I had

books, a lot of books, most of them unread. They had looked good in the bookstore; I'd bought them because they seemed interesting. Maybe someday I would like to read a particular author, and when I did, I didn't want to have to go through the agony of not having their work on hand.

I must've dozed off, a knock on my door startled me.

"It's Marian, you awake?"

I looked at the clock. It was well after one.

"Yeah, I'm awake. Come in."

She threw the door open and knelt on the bed. "I thought I heard something downstairs."

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. "We don't have a downstairs."

"Yes, we do. There's a cellar under this room."

"A cellar?"

"Come on." She pulled me off the bed and onto my feet. I followed her through the kitchen to the patio door in the back. She opened the door a crack.

"Listen, do you hear that?"

I looked around the yard, to the wooden fence that enclosed the grounds. There wasn't a sound.

"I don't hear . . ."

"Shhh . . ."

There was an indistinguishable sound of something crying. It was coming from under the wooden stairs below the patio door. Faint scratching echoed. She grabbed my arm.

"What is it?" She whimpered.

"There's a cellar under there?"

"Yeah, lift the stairs."

I went to a drawer and got a flashlight. Marian shrunk back and sat in a chair; her voice was quivering from fear.

"Oh, shit . . ."

There was more crying and scratching, now more fiercely. It sounded like someone or something was trapped in the cellar. I rifled through another drawer and pulled out a steak knife. I didn't know what good it would do, but it gave me a small amount of security.

It was dark outside--no light from the front of the house would illuminate the back--I flicked the switch for the kitchen light, but it was burned out.

“Go to my room and turn on the light.”

It did little good, it only cast shadows, since the cellar was around the corner from my room. Although I stepped as lightly as I could on the stairs, they creaked from my weight. The crying ceased. I stood before the stairs and placed my fingers under the edge of them; I looked at Marian.

“Straight up,” she whispered and gestured with her hands. I quickly pulled and the whole unit lifted up, hitting the wall hard and coming to a rest. The crying began again; it came in soft long cries and short sobs. My hands were shaking, making the light bob before me. I clutched the knife tightly.

Setting a foot on the first concrete stair, I started my descent. I had to duck, and I noticed the stairs curved around to the left.

“Great.” I couldn't see the cellar without first rounding the narrow corner. I crept slowly, moving with the pitch of the cries--my instincts had taken over. I reached the corner and, shining the flashlight around it, peered into the depths of the cellar. The walls were painted black; the floor was moist, small patches of fungi growing out of the cracks. The walls were constructed of cinder blocks. I shined the light around and noticed it was silent. The room was small, not more than eight feet square. I couldn't see anything, so I continued down the remaining three stairs. I was standing on the floor, my footing unsure; I found I was standing in a patch of fungi, the moisture soaking my socks. There was a water heater in one corner, a series of pipes overhead, and junk in another corner. A small, overturned wooden box lay behind the water heater, a piece of plywood leaning against it.

The light went out.

“Shit.”

I shook the flashlight as hard as I could, but it didn't respond. I looked behind me. I was in pitch blackness.

"Need a light?"

I freeze. It's a familiar voice--too familiar.

A feeble light glows, increasing until I can see. Uncler is standing in the center of the room, holding a staff with an oblong-shaped piece of metal mounted to the top of it. His olive drab suit is electric; his hazel eyes shine emerald green. He has a wide grin on his face.

"Tired of the world bothering you, Darrin? Tired of them crying to you when they have problems? Tired of being blamed for everything?"

He extends his arm out and points to the wall. He turns the staff, illuminating the black blocks. Judy is chained to them. The handcuffs and length of chain holding her drip rust. She is struggling to get away; she is gagged, whimpering long, soft cries and short sobs.

"We did it once, pal, a short year ago, nothing's stopping us from doing it again."

He grips the staff tighter, and the light from the cipher glows to a blinding glare; a soft hum emanates. In the corner where I had seen the water heater, there is a generator; it is rocking violently, pumping out juice.

"So many places to see, so many people to meet." He looks at me and extends his hand. "Come with me."

I shake my head, my mouth open, drool trickling down the front of my shirt. He focuses on Judy; she is hysterically flailing herself, desperately trying to get loose from the bonds that hold her to the wall. Uncler leans the staff towards her; a flash of current comes out of the generator, and a rod of light shoots through the cipher. It penetrates Judy, she screams. The sound echoes in my brain.

"Darrin! Darrin!!"

I felt someone shaking me in the darkness of my mind. My back was moist, my skin saturated. I was too fear-stricken to open my eyes.

“Darrin, can you hear me?!”

The shaking; my head fell back and forth, striking the concrete. Slowly, slowly, fear dissipated and I wedged my eyes open. I saw Marian staring down at me.

“What the hell happened? First thing I know is you go around the corner, then the light goes out, I hear you scuffle with something, then nothing.”

She lifted me up and sat me on the bottom stair. She turned my face toward hers; dried foam was glued to my chin, and drool covered the front of my shirt.

“Oh my God, I didn’t know you were epileptic.”

I was regaining my senses, able to sit myself up. She took off her shirt and patted my face with it; she wiped away the grime, trying to clean me up.

“Jesus, I had no idea.”

The cry. I heard it again, like a far off echo of Judy screaming--I could see her body contorting, head twisting into odd shapes, face deformed, red hair falling out in large clumps. The cry--I heard it--is seared into my sickened soul.

“What the . . .”

Marian looked behind her, gripped the flashlight, and shined the beam into the corner. From behind the water heater, a cat slunk out. It cried sharply, then mewed softly. It’s coat was fire-orange.

“Oh,” she set the light down and picked up the cat. It purred in her arms and looked intently at me. It meowed.

“You must be hungry, huh?”

Her attention was focused on the cat. All of a sudden, she realized I was still incapacitated on the stairs.

“I’m so sorry, are you okay?” She knelt and looked into my eyes, searching for something.

“I’ll be all right.”

I had her shirt in my hand. She had only her bra on, the cat tucked next to her small breasts.

“I’ll be fine.”

I showered. It was a long one, almost an hour. The hot water relaxed my frazzled nerves. I put on my robe, went to the living room, and sat down; my head ached. Marian went to feed the cat in the kitchen. She opened a can of tuna; the animal purred loudly between bites.

“Marian.” I had to call her twice.

“What?”

“Do you have any cigarettes?”

“They’re on the table. I thought you didn’t smoke.”

“I don’t.”

I inhaled as deeply as I could. The first time I coughed violently; the second, less so; the third, even less; finally I got the knack of it and my body stopped reacting. I shut the light off and sat in the dark, watching the ember from the cigarette glow brightly. It relaxed me. I heard Marian coming down the hall. She opened the door, closed it, and sat down next to me; she had put on a bluish, flowered sweater. She lit a cigarette and we smoked together; I felt at peace and wondered why I had quit in the first place.

“You okay?”

“That’s the third time you asked me. Yes, I’m okay.”

“Just checking. You scared the hell out of me. I had no idea.”

“I don’t like to advertise it.”

“Does it happen often? Do you have any medication for it?”

“No. And I haven’t been taking it lately--I find it depresses me too much, and I already feel too tired.”

“I won’t tell Frank. It’ll be our little secret.”

I chuckled. “Thanks.”

“Besides, the son-of-a-bitch doesn’t deserve to know. He’d think you were a retard or something.”

I looked out the window. A car slowed before the house; Marian stared at it until it took off.

“Probably one of his friends looking to party. Glad you turned out the light.”

The cigarette tasted good.

She quickly exhaled smoke. “He’s so chicken-shit, he never would have gone down there.” She affected a playful tone. “You’re so brave.”

I extinguished the cigarette and leaned back--she followed. She ran her fingers through my hair--I responded.

“Ahh, that feels good.”

She rubbed the back of my neck, leaned over and kissed my ear. “So brave.”

I kissed her hard on the lips, they were soft and warm. She pulled back and looked at me, trying to figure out why I had done it. She shook her head, then kissed me, her tongue probing my mouth.

“I have an idea,” she said between kisses. “How about a back rub? I think you could use it.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

I led her to my room. I lay on the futon; she straddled me and worked at my back. There were many knots, a lot of tension; if she only knew.

I woke late the next morning with a splitting headache and despair in my heart. I felt as if I’d had dreams during the night--so many, in fact, they had left my body weak; my hand quivered as I went to pull up the window shade. It occurred to me that Marian had gone. In my groggy state I hadn’t realized she’d left. I sat against the wall, then I noticed I was naked--I never slept without clothes. I found myself in a state of panic, remembering nothing save the back rub. Had I actually screwed my roommate? This was not a good way to develop platonic relations. Why couldn’t I remember? I tugged at my lip and looked around the room for a sign as to what might have happened; everything appeared normal, although a little scattered, as if somebody had torn around.

The clock next to the bed read eleven-thirty. I found two cigarettes and a small note tied together with a string. I read the note.

“Relief for my rehabilitating roommate.”

I smoked them back to back; if I’d had a whole pack I would’ve kept smoking until I had finished it. Doc had warned me that as soon as the dreams started, I would be experiencing blackouts again; she had said because of the mild epilepsy and the trauma I

had endured at the lab, it would only encourage repeats in the future. I reached for the phone to call her. I had to dial three times before I would let the line connect, and even then I had to force myself to ask for her.

“Darrin, I haven’t heard from you. I’ve been concerned.”

“Seems like a lot of people have.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Steve called and told me he saw you. You had dinner at his house?”

“Yeah, just last night. Word travels fast.”

“He’s worried about you. He phoned this morning and said I should have you come in to see me,” she laughed. “I don’t mean it like that. I like it when you keep in touch with me.”

Immediately, I noticed she had that patronizing tone again.

“I don’t have your new number, so I can’t check up on you.”

“See, I’ve been busy. I don’t have a lot of time.”

“Would you like to come by and talk about it?”

I thought of saying yes, but something held me back. I let the silence drone on.

“Darrin . . . ?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. Yes, let’s make an appointment.”

“I’m free this afternoon, would that be okay?”

“Yes, that’ll be fine.”

“At three o’clock?”

“Three. Yes.”

“Let me have your number in case I get held up.”

“I’ll see you at three. Good-bye.”

I hung up on her. Something was going on and I knew I was not being paranoid-- a definite plan was in the works. I wandered around the house, got dressed, had a glass of milk, and sat at the table. I noticed the stairs to the cellar were still up. I paced to the patio door, opened it a crack, and gave the stairs a good shove--they crashed onto the concrete with a resounding thud.

There were two messages on the machine, both were for Marian. I saved them.

I sat on the couch and turned on the television; nothing much was on. Over the low volume, I could hear the cat we'd found in the cellar gently scratching the inside of Marian's door; it mewed softly. I thought of letting it out and allowing it to run free through the house. I ignored it and returned to the television.

At three I was at Doc's office. I had to wait for her in a pallid room adorned with framed Norman Rockwell lithographs. The secretary gave me a peculiar glance; I thought to mimic her, but didn't. I wished to smoke, but had no cigarettes.

Doc walked in at three-thirty. She offered me the couch; I opted for the chair--it seemed more ironic. She sat behind her desk, opening my file.

"How are you doing, Darrin?"

"Okay."

"How are you really doing?"

"I had a blackout yesterday."

"Have you been taking your medication?"

"No. I find it depresses me."

"Taking it will do more good than harm."

"Yeah . . ." I stared off into the room.

"Something you need to tell me?"

I rubbed my forehead, a headache was coming on.

"The dreams . . . they've started again."

She leaned back in her office chair. "I knew they let you go too soon. I told them you hadn't fully recovered." She was angry. "Darrin," she got up and held my hand. "Would you like to go back to the hospital?" I looked into her eyes and realized her expression was patronizing, as if she only cared about my well-being because she was being paid to see to it. Like a demon that had been awakened, rage built within me. I mimicked her patronizing gaze and tone.

"You mean the asylum, don't you?"

She let go of my hand. "Darrin, it's not an asylum."

“Don’t tell me what it’s not. I was there, remember?”

“I’d like to see you get some help. You seem to still have a lot of anger. Maybe you would be more comfortable with someone other than myself.” She got up and lifted the phone. “I can give you a referral to . . .”

“The hospital? Where they’ll give me a lobotomy? I don’t think so. Put the fucking phone down.”

She was surprised and shocked, but didn’t heed my warning. “Would you get me the number for . . .”

I grabbed the receiver out of her hand and yanked the phone across her desk; it slammed on the floor.

“I told you to put it down, but you didn’t listen to me! Why?”

“Darrin, take it easy . . .” Her voice was quivering from fear.

“Quit patronizing me, goddamnit! I’m fucking tired of it!” I was screaming. I quickly composed myself.

“You know Doc, sometimes when I look at you, you remind me of Judy.” I touched the side of her face; she reeled back. “I loved her, I honestly did, but she made me so angry. I was forced into it.”

She pinned her back to the wall. She was cornered, her expression that of an animal caught in a snare; she was petrified. I smiled, tapping my fingers on the desk.

“Well, I think I’d better be going, got lots of things to do.”

“Darrin, let me help you.”

I slammed my fist on the desk.

“Will you shut up, for once!”

There was silence, beautiful silence, even in the outer office. I knew they had heard me yelling; soon security would be all over this place and they would force me back into the asylum.

“I’m outta here. Thanks for the clever conversation and the advice, Doc.”

I made a quiet exit; she stayed in her spot on the wall. The receptionist was deathly still. I returned her frightened stare with a Cheshire smile.

The drive home, instead of lasting half an hour, turned into four hours. The landscape, passing by at freeway speed, was a comfortable blur: the houses and businesses, the putrid bay, the smog-choked airport, the square yuppies with their loosened ties and blank expressions, trying to pretend they had an intense problem getting home because the road was overcapacitated with commuters. It was their fault, the assholes, they had chosen their occupations, subsequently applied for jobs, and gotten them; they had known what they were getting into, but still insisted they had the right to honk and swerve from lane to lane, each trying to move the fastest in a beast of their own creation. If I hit any of them, I didn't give a shit. If the car still ran after an accident, I would keep on driving, even if I had badly injured someone. All that was waiting for me was the hospital--no matter what I did. Even if I sat home all the time and did absolutely nothing, the hospital would still be waiting. The tape player was on the fritz, the radio was filled with banal commercials; if I were more paranoid I'd say there was a conspiracy. Why is it that when one station has a commercial, so do all the others? Coincidence? Ah, I don't know. No sense getting twisted in the problems of the world; ordinary, "normal" people--I hated them. And if they glare at me because I'm not driving like they are, because I'm not riding someone's bumper when they cut in front of me, I'll give them the bird.

The house was dark when I arrived home. I had no idea where Marian and Frank were. I opened all the windows in the house--it was uncanny how it held the heat in--my room was the worst of all, the tiny window doing little for air circulation. I opened the door and turned on the fan in hopes the cat was in Marian's room and wouldn't wander into mine. I had bought a large pad of paper, some pens, and a ribbon for the typewriter somewhere in Gilroy--where I had realized (perhaps discovered) I'd driven too far. The mall had been cool, and the people wrapped up in looking for something to buy, or deciding what they and their young friends wanted to do. I sat down, flipped open the pad to the first sheet of paper, placed the pens within reach, and waited for darkness to settle in.

I liked the night. It is far better than the day. The temperature is bearable and when it gets into the morning hours, I come alive. That way, “normal” people are asleep and they can’t contaminate my thoughts. The clear sky is a wondrous sight, and when the morning sun appears over the horizon, it is the most beautiful thing imaginable. The feeling of staying up all night is indescribable, especially so after intensive work. I liked writing and drawing, toiling over a creative design, honing something out of nothing; I know it takes a special sort of person to do it, and I hoped I had what it takes to achieve a semblance of greatness--but I really didn’t much care if I had “it” or not, I had to create in order for my mind to stop nagging me.

I didn’t pay attention to what was going on in the house. I had the radio on and couldn’t hear if anybody came in or not. I was far too involved in what I was doing to be bothered with concerns about nobodies. I was drawing some interesting pictures. Someone--I don’t remember his name--had tried to teach me in the hospital; through the lessons I had tried to listen, tried to duplicate his art, but the damn thing never worked out. I looked at what I had done, flipped a page on the tablet, and drew again. After trying to draw the same picture three times and failing all three, I drew another. I lay my head against the paper; I couldn’t get the image in my head onto the tablet, the transfer from mind to hand wasn’t working. Uncler was in my thoughts; I was thinking about him and realized I had been doing so most of the day. I found it odd that he had made such an impression on me, usually I didn’t think about anyone so . . .

The phone was ringing, distant and quiet.

I answered it. The line was silent.

“Hello . . . hello?”

The slow inhale and exhale of someone smoking a cigarette. A strong image was chiseled into my brain.

“Uncler?”

“How are you, Darrin?”

“How’d you get this number?”

“I have my ways. Trade secret.”

“I see.”

I brought the phone into my room and locked the door. I set the pen to paper. I started drawing a square room with a high ceiling and a round table in the center.

“Heard you made a mess of things at Doc’s.”

“News travels fast. How’d you know?”

“Sanderson.”

“Figures. He’ll probably tell everybody.”

“Always has.”

“Do you think Franklin knows?”

“That’s why I’m phoning. Doc had somebody tail you. I’m surprised they’re not there now.”

“That’s impossible, I ended up wandering to . . .”

“Gilroy. To the mall, yeah, I know.”

I almost dropped the phone. “What am I going to do?”

“I’d say get out of there. And fast.”

I was sweating, nervous. I didn’t want to go back to the hospital, or the lab, no matter what the cost.

“Where to?”

“Come to my place. They won’t think to look here.”

“What? So you can turn me in?”

“Turn you in? If I wanted to do that, I would have a long time ago. But I don’t care about all that, I just want to make sure you’re safe. Besides, if Franklin gets a hold of you, there’s no telling what he’ll make you do.”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“Now, get out of there and drive to the city. California Street and Sixth Avenue; 137 Sixth. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Leave now and don’t bother packing, you don’t have the time.”

“Okay.”

I slammed the phone down and shoved my keys into my pocket. It was then I noticed I had a smear of black ink on my hand; I wiped it off as well I could and found I had snapped the pen in half--the ink had splattered in several large blotches, covering the paper. I heard the far-off wailing of sirens and figured they were coming for me. On my way out, I accidentally kicked the cat--stupid animal--got behind the wheel of the car and drove away as fast I could. The sirens were louder, approaching; two police cars sped past me as I headed for the freeway.

“You’re one step ahead of them,” Uncler said to me as I pulled up. He was standing in the doorway of his building. He opened the garage and directed me to put my car in it.

His apartment was large; it was a flat on the fourth floor, done entirely in black art deco, with heavy black curtains covering the windows. My attention focused on a blue neon clock, which was mounted on the wall.

“Like anything to drink?”

He was in a casual shirt and khaki pants. His hair was slicked back.

“Um, I think I’ll have . . .”

“I’ll get you a shot of whiskey, it’ll calm you.”

He left the room for several minutes. I sat on the couch with my hands clasped and sweaty, trying to think of what I was going to do, where I was going to go. Maybe I could hide out at my parents’ house up north; it was near the Oregon/Washington border. Franklin wouldn’t think I’d go that far, then again, he’d probably figure it would be the first place I’d flee to. I sat back and tried to relax. I was over-analyzing; my brain was overtaxed with anxiety and there was no way I could have a single clear thought. Best to have somebody else do the thinking for me.

Uncler came back with two crystal shot glasses and a bottle. He poured into both glasses and handed me the more generous of the two. He smiled slyly and swallowed all of his shot in one swift motion. I sipped at mine--it had been a long time since I’d had anything stronger than soda to drink.

“All at once, don’t suffer over it, for Christ’s sake.” He lit a cigarette.

I dumped the whiskey into the back of my throat, it burned as it went down. I coughed, almost heaving it back up. He patted me on the back.

“Pretty good. When was the last time you drank?”

“Can’t . . . remember . . . when.” I hacked dryly.

“I understand. Let me pour you another.”

“No, no,” I waved him off. He put the glass in my hand.

“The second goes down better than the first, believe me.”

I took the whole shot. It didn’t taste as bad as the first, but still bad. He sat next to me.

“That’ll help you relax. Look, it’s late, why don’t you take the bed and I’ll stay on the couch.” He put his hand on my leg. “Unless you’d feel more comfortable out here.”

“I don’t think I can sleep, I’m too wound up in what’s going on.” I attempted to stand and fell back to the couch. I rubbed my eyes. I felt groggy. I looked at Uncler; his face was like a watercolor, blurring at the edges. I couldn’t focus the skewed lines. He spoke. His voice was a distant echo.

“Sleep, Darrin. We’ll talk in the morning.”

I saw a black pool open at my feet. I dove in headfirst.

I woke. I didn’t know what time it was. The apartment was dim, the curtains were drawn; I lay on the couch, with a black blanket covering me. I was still fully dressed, my shoes on the floor.

“Oh, shit,” I sat up and tried to shake the remnants of sleep from my head.

“What was in that drink?” I tried to stand, sat back down--my legs refused to support my weight. The neon clock glowed blazing blue on the wall across from me. I watched the second hand sweep around the red face; I could see the minute hand slowly moving. I concentrated on it as hard as I could, trying to find some sort of continuity. It was working; my mind was clearing as each minute passed. Soon I could stand. The

next task was walking. There was a haze in the air, almost like smoke, it wouldn't go away, even when I tried to fan it with my hand.

“Okay legs, walk.” One step at a time. I made it to the clock without stumbling, much. Then back. On the third trip, the smoke dissipated; I cracked a smile and congratulated myself for having beat it. I tried to remember how I knew to do what I was doing to get over the affect of the drug. I assured myself I must've learned it in the hospital; I had faint memories of doing the same activity while locked in my room--they had given me dynamite drugs. My long-term memory was coming back; soon I believed I was starting to recall why I had been put there in the first place. Hazy details were all I had, and I wasn't sure if they were correct--maybe it was a plot of a book I had read or something. In time it would all come crashing back to me.

I felt brave enough to put my shoes on. I noticed it was almost four. I also noticed the flat had been quiet the whole time I was awake, which meant Uncler wasn't home. I assumed he was at the lab--probably talking to Franklin or Niles. At any rate, I thought it best I make a quick exit; Uncler had been kind to show hospitality to a desperate man, but drugging me wasn't exactly a confidence builder--it didn't inspire any kind of trust. What he had in mind for me was unknown, but I was sure it wouldn't be, as Doc would say, in my best interest.

I buttoned my shirt, tightened my belt, tied my shoes, and threw on my jacket. I headed for the door. The phone rang, the second ring yielding to the answering machine; a simple droll greeting, a beep, then a voice. My hand was on the knob.

“Darrin. Sam. Hope you're feeling better today. More relaxed? Good. If you can hear this, don't bother trying to leave. I have you dead-bolted in. The windows have key locks and if you perchance to look, you'll notice you're fairly high up. I'll be there in an hour with dinner. If you're peckish there's some odds and ends in the fridge. Bye.”

A dial tone. I tried the knob; it turned, but the door wouldn't budge, the deadbolts moved by key only. The door was heavy, no way I could break it down. I had flashes of the hospital. The circumstances were the same; better taste in decor, but I was still trapped like an animal. I decided to sit and wait it out. And he was wrong about the fridge--nothing but a bottle of water, soda, and some rotten Chinese take-out.

“Hope you weren’t too bad off, kiddo,” He smiled cordially as he slammed the door behind him and fastened the deadbolts--the key went into his right pants pocket. He had a paper bag tucked under his arm. “I have my reasons, you know.”

“Yeah.” I smirked and glared at him. It was after six.

“Oh, don’t take it so hard.” He threw his coat on a chair and sat next to me. He put his arm around me. “Your profile says you are a big baby, is that so?”

I said nothing. He smiled and put his face close to my cheek, nuzzling my ear.

“Look what I’ve brought for dinner.”

He ripped open the bag. This display was all a game to him, I was his child at Christmas.

“It’s from the Chinese place down the street, some chow mien, some rice. Chicken or beef?”

I remained silent and stared at the clock, watching the second hand sweep. The brilliant blue neon with tinges of red glared.

“You really should eat, since I imagine you haven’t all day.”

“Beef then.”

He handed me the box.

“I think you have some of these left over in your fridge.”

“Been snooping have we?” He dipped into the chow mien, the noodles like worms squirming off the end of his fork. “A biological experiment, nothing to worry about. How’s yours?”

It was more fun to play with than to eat. “Okay.”

“Eat, eat. Please.”

“Maybe later.”

He looked at me sternly. “Eat.”

I dug the fork deeply into the box and took a big bite, rice falling from my mouth. He leaned back.

“Much better. I also picked up some drinks. Beer.” He handed me a bottle. “Indulge my friend, soon we will have work to do.”

“What kind?”

“I’ll explain later.”

I drank deeply from the bottle, almost finishing it. He smiled at me.

“How’s the old memory doing?” He tapped his index finger on the side of my head.

“Better.” I was suddenly uncomfortable. On the end table beside me was a photo of Uncle and, I imagined, his wife and daughter. I hooked my thumb at it. “Who are they?”

“Family.”

“Where are they?”

“Gone.” He said without expression.

“Where?”

“You do ask many questions.” He glared at me. “Divorced. She left me. She thought I was crazy. You and I have something in common.”

“Oh.”

“Everybody says we are crazy, but we believe in ourselves, in our work. It is our life. She left me after I nearly completed my time machine experiments.”

I choked on my food. “What?! Time machines . . .” I chuckled. “Stupid.”

He set his food down and looked into my eyes, scanning from one to the other. “You don’t remember a goddamned thing, do you?”

“No. But what does . . .”

“Soon, very soon. You will. You’ll see.”

He got up and left the room. I picked at the tasteless remains of the food and set it down. He strode back in, carrying a bottle and two glasses of whiskey, his fingers dipped into each. He handed me one. I thought about the night before, and the drugs he had given me.

“A toast: To failed experiments, may they torment us until we are forced to succeed.”

I eyed him carefully. “Let’s exchange glasses.”

His expression was one of perplexity. “Why?”

“Guest’s privilege.”

“Fine.”

We switched glasses and I downed the liquor. He slammed his glass down on the table, upside down. He left the room again. I relaxed, safe in knowing that he wouldn’t get the best of . . . oh, no, not again. Feeling groggy . . . the world twisting into a haze . . . how could . . . ?

He had his coat in his hand and he threw me mine. “C’mon, we’re taking a little trip.”

He dressed me. I remember going downstairs to the garage. Getting into a car. The slow acceleration of his take-off. Then, nothing more.

“Hey. Hey, Jensen. Hey, c’mon, wake up.”

Uncle was slapping my face. My eyes opened onto bright lights. I tried shutting them again, but he continued to slap me. He set me upright. I felt the cold prickle of a needle going into my arm--the hospital, no--when it was withdrawn, the world seemed to clear. A person on each side lifted me to my feet. They pulled me across the floor, my feet dragging behind me.

“In a few minutes, you’ll be fine,” Uncle said to me. “I gave you something that should help with your memory block, and maybe make you more social.”

He and another man laughed. The voice was familiar. They set me in a chair, it was padded and comfortable. I slowly opened my eyes. Something struck in my memory: the painted black walls; the expansive, smooth concrete floor; the monolithic generator in one corner; the triangular stone box, encrusted with panels of gold and jewels, on a table in the center of the room, with an electrode dangling from above. I had to be at the lab, my instincts wouldn’t fail me. It was the odor that did it, that queer smell; a combination of burnt hair, salt water, jasmine, and faint ozone.

“Strike a chord, old boy?”

I looked in the direction of the voice. It was Niles. His self-satisfied, oafish grin was filled with teeth. Uncle put his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear.

“We need it to work again. We’re so close to a breakthrough. What aren’t we

doing?”

I don't know what you're talking about.”

Niles spoke. “Want me to rough him up?”

“Leave him alone. Listen, Darrin, you have to remember. I need to know. What's the secret? I know it's in that head of yours.”

I rubbed my brow. “I don't know. I can't think. I don't even know what this place is or what all this equipment is for.”

“He's lost it, Uncler. They cut all of it out of him.”

“Shh. Give him another dose.”

The needle in my arm again. I was defenseless. The cool elixir coursed through my veins. My heart pounded harder, my throat swelled, I swallowed dryly every second breath. I coughed. Uncler walked off, returning with a greyish-silver ring. It looked like a zero, an oblong oval not more than two feet in diameter. He placed it in my hands. I rubbed my thumbs over it, the metal was cool.

“Remind you?”

“No.”

“Let me slug him one.”

“Shut up, will you?” Uncler paced before me. He snapped his fingers. “Niles, set it up and turn it on.”

Niles snatched the ring out of my hands, put it on a staff and slid the staff into a channel in the top of the stone box. Uncler knelt beside me.

“Watch. This has to help. Focus on the ring. Remember where you said you found it and the pyramid? South America. You said it was Mayan. It's all in your notes, every detail except one--how you made it work. What is the secret, I have to know. I sort of know what it does, only theoretically, though, so I need your help. There are so many things we can do with this, so many lives we could save, so many places to see. What are we doing wrong?”

Niles flicked on the generator; it uttered a low hum that gradually became louder. I could feel the current it was generating. The power seemed to cumulate in the dangling electrode. Bluish streams of electricity jumped to the ring; it glowed with supernatural

light.

In the cellar, Uncle with the staff. His smile.

The whirl was loud, becoming deafening; the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

Judy chained to the wall, how she struggles to get free.

The machine was screaming, the gold glittered, the jewels sparkled like lasers. The pyramid seemed to want to spin, but remained still. The pitch pierced my ears; I tried to shield them with my hands, but I couldn't move.

The light, streaming out of the cipher into Judy, she screams of pain. The pyramid whirling uncontrollably, lifting itself off the table; the cipher remaining to keep the circuit connected. The gateway opens, the link established; the pyramid near the wall unfolds away from itself. The doorway, a blinding light emanating; I can see others, they want to travel into this world. I cannot let them, they wish to destroy, I must shut it down. Turn off the generator, cut the power, shut it down, too much, can't turn back, destroy the cipher, knock it out of balance, disrupt the frequency, close the door, danger, great danger, too late, too late, shut it down before it's too late . . .

“SHUT IT DOWN!!!! SHUT IT DOWN!!!!”

I screamed. The words stuck in my throat; my head seemed to open, my brain finally recovering lost information, retrieving data--it will not stop--I have seen them, they have seen me, they know me and are coming for me. They know I can open the gate, they are sending out their signal to match ours, they want me to help them. They need me, so they can come to us, so they can travel, explore, destroy, devour. Their faces are alien, features contorted, insect-like. Their expressions are contemptible, their intentions evil--I can feel it. My mind, it will not stop, they have entered me, violated my

thoughts, contaminated me; I have seen their universe, stop it, stop them, must stop them, no matter what the cost. DO SOMETHING!!

Darkness. My feet on the smooth, wet pavement, shuffling slowly toward what's left of Judy--her body withered like a raisin, her once beautiful red hair burnt off, the outer layer of her once milky-white skin gone, the muscles tight around the bones, her face frozen in an expression of great anguish and fear, her eyes merely sockets. She saw their world and did not return.

A distant voice calling to me . . .

“ . . . Darrin . . . can you hear me? Darrin, it's Sam . . . Darrin . . . ”

I am shaken. I open my eyes carefully. My forehead is cool, my skin saturated with sweat. Phlegm sticks in the back of my throat.

“ . . . Darrin? . . . ”

I answer, a garbled croak exits. My vision slowly focuses . . . Sam is looking down upon me like a bug under a glass. His face shows streaks of worry.

“ . . . Darrin, you okay? . . . ”

I raise my hand and touch his shoulder.

“ . . . Darrin? . . . ”

I shake my head.

“ . . . Come back. You can't leave yet . . . ”

I laugh. My frame quivers. My chest hurts, but I cannot stop. I am nearly hysterical.

“ . . . Goddamn you. I nearly lost you . . . ”

He sets me upright. We are back in his apartment. My head aches. He hands me a shot of whiskey. I refuse.

“Take it, there's nothing in it. Trust me.”

I smirk at him and down the drink. My throat burns.

Time passes.

I am coming to my senses--slowly clearing.

Time passes.

Feeling better. Aspirin and more whiskey. Several cigarettes.

Time passed.

I felt awful. I knew I was a wreck. My shirt was covered with crusted drool and spots of blood. I ran my finger along my gums; they were sensitive and bled as I touched them, an iron taste on my tongue. More whiskey. Sam sat next to me, stroking my matted hair.

“You scared the hell out of me.”

“What did you expect? You knew what would happen.”

“I only had an idea, I needed to know for sure.”

“Satisfied?”

“Yeah.”

He whispered something inaudible under his breath and looked away. He knew I was watching him. He glanced back at me and flashed a Cheshire grin.

“Why don’t you take a shower? Clean up. I’ll get you some clothes.”

I stood and held my balance. He led me to the bathroom, set a towel on the sink, and closed the door. I peeled off my clothes and drew a hot bath--soaking seemed like a much better idea.

Steam clouded the mirror, filled my lungs. I settled into the water, rubbing the soap over me.

A sharp pain. Judy holding hands with them, her body charred, their expressions twisted.

“Ahhh!” I grabbed the sides of my head and squeezed.

Uncle rushed in and knelt beside the tub. He pulled my hands down and put my head to his chest.

“It’s okay, relax, all gone now. Gone, gone, gone.”

He kissed the top of my head, brought my face to his. He lightly kissed my forehead, my cheek, my nose, then my lips. I didn’t respond. My expression remained stolid, but it didn’t seem to matter much to him; he continued kissing me--his tongue probing my sensitive mouth, the taste of bile and iron.

He finished bathing me. The images of Judy and the others, they were gone. Sam was a great comfort. I was helpless and he was strong; his energy and desire were overpowering. He massaged my broken body, pushed away the hurt, and brought feeling back into places that I had thought were long dead, places Marian had tried to stimulate, but failed. He seemed to know exactly what to do; a warm feeling started in my stomach, moved up my chest, down to my loins. I kissed him back, hard. My breaths were rapid, my desire awakened. A thought tugged at me. I didn’t think I found him attractive. He was so different, despite the sameness of our sexes, but it didn’t pose a hindrance, couldn’t stifle the feelings I had in me.

He dried me and had me stand on the bath mat. He ran his hand down my back and reached for my sex; my hard-on formed in his hand. He smiled and took me in his mouth. I lay my head back. My thoughts were non-existent; a pleasant emptiness enveloped me. My brain was quiet and for once didn’t bother me; desire was all I knew, flaming desire.

He brought me to the point of near orgasm, then stopped; he stood and, with my fingers, undressed. He was already erect. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but stopped myself. Although everything that was going on was completely unfamiliar, I had faint recollections, memories like a watercolor in the rain. I was doing what I could to open the floodgates in my brain.

He grasped my hand and guided it over his body. I wrapped my fingers around his erection; he squeezed his hand around mine. I could feel him throb, the heat he emanated. I released him and, with my hand in his, he led me to the bedroom.

He positioned me on all fours facing the headboard; the dark wood was carved with many intricate designs. I let my eye wander through them, allowing myself to be lost in the patterns. I was trying to occupy my mind with simple tasks. I was nervous,

unsure of what was to happen, anticipating, hoping--I was shaking. I felt his finger probing me, pulling on the tender ring of muscle, stretching it so it could dilate enough to accommodate him. I massaged myself, pulling on my testicles; he whispered to me.

“Turn on the table lamp, in the drawer hand me the small bottle you see.”

I did so. He squeezed out a portion and put his finger back in me. He tossed the bottle on the floor and brought himself close to me.

“It may hurt at first, I’ll go slowly.”

Pain wouldn’t bother me--I had known so much, nothing else could compare. He slowly worked himself inside me. I must’ve given some resistance, at first he put only a little in, moving it back and forth before he slid his entire member in me.

I let out an uncontrolled yelp--a little pain, yes, but I could handle it. His motions were slow, then he moved more rapidly. I was masturbating.

Time moves slowly when you are unaware of it, it quickly passes you by. He pulled himself out.

“Lay on your back, Darrin.”

I did so and he reentered me from the front. I continued to jerk myself off, my orgasm building quickly within me; I sensed it was happening for him, too. Only a few minutes after he had entered me, we both came.

I pulled the sheet up around my neck. I was cold. Sam sat up against the headboard; he was smoking, the cigarette hanging lazily out of his mouth. I tried to get his attention by staring at him, but his mind was somewhere else.

“Sam, can I ask you something personal?”

“Shoot.”

“Why did your wife really leave you?”

“I told you: the experiments, the work, the insanity.”

“Was it because of someone like me?”

He looked at me and drew on his cigarette. “No.”

I stared at the ceiling, I was experiencing an overwhelming sense of peace. “I guess they destroyed my mind at the hospital.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you know about it? The truth, I mean. I need to hear it, so I can be ready.”

He exhaled slowly, smoke drifting off. “I heard they tried to destroy your mind. Rumor has it you lost it, had a habit of raving about some ‘others’ from another dimension. Ranting about how they’d violated you and how you needed to shut them out, so the doctors fixed you. Fixed you up good. No more ‘others’.”

“I don’t know anymore--I think I see them, or else they see me. A couple of times they actually found me.”

“How did you discover them?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It only makes me upset.”

“You’re in the company of friends, Darrin,” he put his arm around me. “You can trust me.”

“The machine in the lab, that’s what does it. It opens a gate to another dimension, a whole other world, an entire race of people. I remember I was so obsessed with it’s function. My father found one like it in Central America and brought it to California. He fabricated the machine that is now in the lab from original designs, translating the writing as precisely as he could. I resumed his work after he died. He never saw the thing work.”

“I’ve spent the better part of two years working only on your project, trying to figure out your notes. Duplicated them to the last detail, but the machine never worked--something vital was missing.”

“Flesh.”

“What?”

“Flesh, live flesh. Life-force is the catalyst that opens the gate.”

“Why?”

“I discovered the fatal flaw immediately after my father died. The culture from which the machine was created was based on human sacrifice, it was the crux for everything they did. The glyphs said nothing about it, but it made perfect sense. The Maya’s cipher was originally designed as a continuance of their calendar, the gears which

drive the cosmos. It pulls from this cosmic energy culminating between the time the cipher was used and the end of the time cycle--23 December 2012. In respecting and immersing themselves in this ritual, they were given the gift of travel.”

He turned towards me. “Live flesh? Like people?”

“Yeah, people.”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Scientifically, no. Mystically, yes. By their design, the cipher can only operate with someone ready to lose their life.”

“Christ.”

“Let me have a cig.”

He handed me one and lit it for me.

“The idea is very old, centuries before the decline of the Mayan culture, when their interest in astronomy was at its height.”

“Around AD 350 or so.”

“About then. My father discovered the glyphs from walls in the Temple of Inscriptions, in Teotihuacan, and copied them. The machine had originally been kept there. On the Festival of the Cebalba, they would bring out the machine and appease the God of the Underworld. The people who had built the machine were extremely accurate in their calculations, right down to the content of the metal, the height of the staff, the diameter of the cipher, amount of current--everything.”

“Hard to believe they could harness electricity back then.”

“I am continually amazed by the knowledge of the ancients. Too bad so much of it has been lost.”

“Not as much as you are led to believe.”

“Yeah.”

He smiled, grabbing my arm. “So that’s it. The catalyst is a human victim.”

My heart suddenly leaped. I could feel him plotting, conniving a way to see the machine work.

“You’re not thinking of continuing my work, are you?”

He quickly looked at me, smiling furtively. “No. No. In fact, I’m going to go to

the lab tomorrow and destroy it.”

“I’d like to go and . . .”

“You had better stay here, it’s too dangerous.”

“But . . . I . . .”

“You’ve had enough strain. Rest.”

I laughed, the thought seemed immensely funny. “I guess being caught between two dimensions while trying to destroy the cipher takes some time to recover from, huh?”

“Yeah.” He uttered a courtesy laugh, leaned over, and kissed me on the forehead. “Sleep, my friend. We’ll talk more later.”

When I woke, he was getting ready to leave. I kept my eyes closed, pretending to be still asleep. The turnkey he used for the deadbolts he stored in a drawer next to the door. I saw him set it in there as he pulled the door shut. I quickly got dressed, ran a comb through my hair, and left. I let him have a twenty-minute head start to insure he wouldn’t return and catch me. I was quiet as a mouse. I figured I would arrive at the lab after him and give him at least an hour to see if he really intended to destroy the machine--if not, then I would personally do it.

I hit the button for the garage and the door slid up. Luckily, I still had my car keys. I turned on the radio, the music and static making an eclectic background. The road blurred by, the sun a steady strobe as I cruised below an overpass. No dreams the night before, how about that. In the comfort of Sam they had vanished, but through my insecurity and vulnerability, he had used me. I wanted to hit myself for having been stupid enough to tell him everything about the cipher . . . but even he, as manipulating as he was, couldn’t add the final ingredient.

The roadway folded before my eyes, the lane dots twisting into disheveled shapes. The putrid smell of exhaust, burnt flesh, and ozone seared my nostrils; I heard voices, faint voices. I snapped off the radio, but the voices continued; I perked my ears, trying to listen to them. The language was alien, but I understood it with perfect clarity. One voice, then many; I saw the lab, Judy, her soft red hair, her smile, her beauty--she quickly mutated into the decayed heap I had seen lumped on the floor. She reaches out for me;

she wants me to join her.

The car swerved; I nudged another car into the center guard. A quick right onto the off-ramp and I was heading toward the house on Capuchino. I parked in the back, trying to hide myself. I needed to regain control; I was going to get out and walk, although I wanted to stay in the car and drive off--my actions were not my own. I was a spectator.

The clock read three. Marian usually came home around five-thirty.

Wait.

I hid in my room, kneeling before my futon; my senses were keen, my ears tuned to the slightest noise. Activity in the neighboring apartments, I could see them in my mind through the wall; a car going by on the street, my mind's eye watched it. Marian, come home.

Waiting. Four-thirty-three.

Many things happened at once. I know it all; I filter out unimportant details.

Harsh scratching at Marian's door. It was from the inside--the cat. It was furiously trying to get out. With a grin, I rose. I went to the door, opened it a crack; the cat's orangish-red coat was standing straight up. It growled, then hissed at me. I knelt with a facade smile. Its green eyes were electric, teeth bared--small furball, you're no match for me.

It suddenly calmed. It sat and stared at me with wide pupils. As I lay on the floor and looked into its face, it displayed its teeth and formed its mouth to simulate speech. A voice came out of it. Nothing surprised me any longer.

"You stupid fuck, Darrin. You promised to marry me . . ." I reeled back, it was Judy's voice. "Backed right out of it. Now you send me to them and give an encore."

I sat with my back to the wall. The cat grinned and paced toward me.

"Comin' for you."

It leaped for my face. I blocked and it shredded my arm. Streams of blood and

chunks of flesh fell to the hardwood floor. I shook my arm and the cat sailed across the room. It ran under the bed.

“Come here you little bastard.”

It wailed, as it had in the cellar. I shut the door and window; I pulled the sheet off the bed. With one hand, I flipped the bed upright. The cat made a mad dash for the door, but didn't realize I had shut it. Its claws scratched the floor as it tried to make a quick turn. I threw the sheet over it and pulled the corners together, cinching it closed--it was bagged, and struggled violently. I was smiling again, ignoring the pain in my arm.

“Gonna take care of you.”

I drew water into the bathtub--ice cold--filled it to the rim. I lowered the bag into it.

“Bye-bye.”

It struggled. Air bubbles rose to the surface. Less and less it fought, until there was no movement--nothing. I pulled a heavy book out of my room to hold it under for good measure.

A car parked in the street in front of the house. It was Marian. I quickly rushed to her room and straightened it, shutting the door. I locked the bathroom door. Marian was still at her car, digging through it. I had just enough time to wash my arm, put on a long-sleeved shirt, turn on the television, and situate myself on the couch before she came in. She looked surprised to see me.

“Darrin, haven't seen you in a while.”

I pretended to be into the TV. “Been busy.”

She went to her room. I hoped she wouldn't notice anything amiss. She came back out; she hadn't.

“What have you been up to?”

I snapped off the TV. “I was thinking, we haven't had dinner out lately. Let's do it tonight, my treat.”

“I'd love to, but Frank and I already have a date.”

“You know him, he'll flake. Go with me.”

“We’ve been getting along better, he won’t flake.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well . . .”

I stood and grabbed her arms. “Marian. I need to talk and it would be better over a meal. Please.”

“Okay, okay, let me leave him a note.” She scribbled on scrap paper dug out from her purse and set it on the table. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

My eyes darted to the door, then to her. “Something’s wrong with the toilet, it overflowed. I already called the landlord. Can you hold it?”

“I suppose.”

She walked in front of me and looked back.

“Have you seen Max?”

“Who?”

“The cat. He wasn’t in my room.”

“He’s probably wandering around somewhere. I just saw him before you came in. He seemed all cooped up, so I let him out.”

“Thanks.”

A smile was on my face. Soon the experiment would begin.

“Where is this place?”

I drove at blinding speed, toward the lab.

“A great Italian place, in Livermore.”

“Kind of far, isn’t it?” She swallowed hard. I wasn’t sure why.

“Not at all. Be there shortly.”

We were near Livermore. I needed one more excuse to get to the lab. “Oh, shit . . .”

“What? What?”

I looked at her. “Would you mind terribly if I stop by my work and pick up some

papers? I must finish them tonight, I'm going to see a client tomorrow."

"Is it close by here?" She gazed out the window.

"Very close."

"Sure, I guess." She swallowed hard again, almost as if she were keeping a secret that, if found out, would be the death of her. Ironic. I must say, Marian was quite cooperative, just like Judy had been--until the very end, of course. But by then it had been too late. We arrived at the gate; the guard leaned his head out the window.

"Darrin Jensen. Project Cipher."

"Jensen?"

"Call Uncler, he knows who I am."

He looked at Marian, then at me.

"She's okay."

He smirked. "I gotta check it out, buddy."

He returned to his post and phoned in; he nodded several times. I detected an uneasiness in Marian. Only a few more minutes, relax, almost there.

"Must be a new guy, I don't recognize him. The security rookies are so into their jobs, makes you sick, doesn't it?"

The guard waved.

"You're clear, Dr. Jensen." He opened the gate.

The lab was housed within a series of nondescript buildings on the hillside; I followed a winding road to the very back one.

"You ever been here before, Marian?"

"Uh, no. Why do you ask?"

I knew she was lying.

"Well then, why don't you come in? I can give you the tour."

I wasted no time and took her directly to the lab. I flung the door open; Uncler and Niles were setting up the apparatus. Niles walked over to me.

"What is SHE doing here?"

Sam walked over, glaring at both of us.

“Goddamnit, Kathy, you’re supposed to keep an eye on him, not bring him back here.”

“Kathy? Your name’s Kathy?! Who’s Marian?”

“Calm down, Darrin.” Sam put his hand on my shoulder. I shook it off.

“Fuck calming down.” I said.

“Watch it, old man.”

“And fuck you too, Niles.”

Niles pulled his fist back; Sam shoved him away.

“What the hell is this, Sam? Destroy the machine? I knew you had lied. And Kathy, is it? Your little spy. And Frank too, I’m sure. Had to keep check on the ‘crazy man’. Let’s see who’s really crazy. Want to find out, Sam old buddy?”

“Take it easy, Darrin. We are in the process of . . .”

“You really want to see it work? Is that all you want? Let me gather my papers.”

“Darrin . . .”

“No. We’ll find out tonight who has the stomach for this.”

Niles shot a look at me; I glared at Niles and at Uncler. The room was deathly still. From a small refrigerator, I pulled out two bottles of psychotropics. I set one into a needleless syringe, the other into my pocket. I winked at Niles; he looked at Marian or Kathy or whatever her real name was--he had no idea what was going on. Sam knew, but did nothing to stop me. A fine scientist he was, he’d do anything to acquire pure knowledge; we’re so much alike, he and I. Sam looked at Marian, perhaps warning her with his eyes; I crept behind her and quickly jammed the syringe into her shoulder, squeezing the high dose of drugs into her bloodstream. She winced and put her arms around herself; she whirled around and gave me a confused look, then collapsed back in the chair.

“Stop gaping you assholes, help me get her up.”

Niles stared at me.

“What’s the matter, tough guy? Can’t handle it?”

He looked to Sam, who nodded. He dragged her out of the chair and draped her over his shoulder. I dug in a drawer at the desk and found a generous length of non-

conductive nylon rope--exactly what I had used on Judy. Niles propped Kathy/Marian up against the wall where the iron rings I had installed years ago were still in place. Uncler and I tied her arms and legs, suspending her a foot above the floor.

“Get a wooden step to support her weight. We don’t want her body to touch the floor.”

Niles returned with the item and put it in place. Uncler had a faint smile on his face; I returned it.

“Tonight, we shall have success.”

I checked the humidity of the room.

“Niles. Hose her and the wall behind her down--we need to increase the moisture.

I jumped into the chair by the panel and whirled around in it. Niles shut off the water and went to the generator. Everything was in place--Uncler was at the pivot of the cipher; I was in control of the ignitor for the electrode--a flick of a switch and the experiment would start.

“Ready?”

I pointed to Niles; he turned the generator on. I watched the gauge on the panel. The amperes rose at a frenetic rate.

“Level it off at 8K. Then, when I engage the electrode to the cipher, give it full throttle. Wait for my signal.”

He nodded.

“Sam, on my cue, set the pitch at 12.37 degrees.”

“Roger.”

“For now, set tolerance at 25 degrees, frequency 124.86 MHz.”

“Roger.”

The generator whined as it built up juice. Excitement throbbed in me.

“About three meters before the cipher, that’s where you’ll be able to see the gate, boys.”

The needle on the gauge increased: 6, 7, 7.5, 7.8, 8.0. It leveled. I turned a knob on my pad and set the electrode into position.

“Two centimeters above.”

Blue streaks of lightning playfully encircled the cipher. I pointed to Uncler, he pivoted the cipher and stopped it exactly at 12.37 degrees. Through all his lies, this part was the truth, he had followed my notes to a ‘T’ and had done the experiment perhaps hundred of times. He was good.

My finger was on the switch--one flick would power up and fire the ignitor. I looked at Marian, the little deceitful spy; she was slowly moving back and forth, as if in a trance. I was glad I had given her a bigger dose, after seeing what a lesser one had done to Judy.

“Ready, boys?” I yelled above the whir and hit the switch. The cipher ebbed with brilliant greyish-white light. I nodded to Niles; he threw the switch. The amp needle climbed quickly to nearly the top of the scale.

“Uncler! There!” I pointed at the cipher. It discharged a bolt of light that contacted Marian. She screamed, painfully and excruciatingly. The gate, where was the gate? Waiting: Seconds seemed hours.

A flat light appeared on the floor before the cipher. It rose oddly as a cube; yes, soon the gate would be opened. Both Uncler and Niles gaped with wide mouths. Marian’s screams had ceased. I made a mental note; the new dosage of drugs was far better.

The cube rose, its shape was still odd. There was a problem with the flow of current, it was surging. I tried to clean it up. The cube continued to rise; at the height of two meters, I would have to stabilize the cipher’s resonance--having to set it perfectly. Almost there . . .

But I was having trouble with the damn current surge. The ammeter had started to bounce; the cube looked almost liquid. Something was wrong.

A cloud of smoke and a buzzing from the panel. “Overload” was flashing. The ammeter was jumping all over the scale. The cube started to dissipate.

The generator had overheated, smoke enveloped it. The cube quickly dropped to the floor and disappeared. A sick metallic grinding sound, and the generator came to a dead stop; the system automatically shut down. The light extinguished as if it were a

candle that had just been put out.

Silence. The cipher glowed with supernatural light.

“Fucking son-of-a-bitch!” I slammed my hand on the panel, picked up the chair and hurled it across the lab.

“Goddamnit!” I rubbed my forehead. It was all for nothing--they were almost here, then quickly whisked away. I leaned against the panel, trying to think. Uncler and Niles joined me. The smell of burnt flesh and ozone hung in the still air.

“The fucking generator, piece of shit. We’ll need another installed, this time a newer and bigger one.”

Uncler nodded. “How long?”

Niles looked at Marian’s body with disgust. “Might be able to get one out of Oakland. Tomorrow. Have it ready to go by the afternoon.” He frowned. “I’ll whip the shit out of maintenance, overtime if necessary, we’ll have the damn thing running.”

“Get one with a phase discriminator.” I said.

I paced over to Marian’s body. Her arms had separated at the wrists, her body lay in a twisted, blackened, indefinable heap. She had been too fragile; it was possible that when she had separated, the circuit had been broken, thereby overloading the generator. Quite possible. Uncler walked with me. He tapped me on the shoulder and handed me two tablets in an aluminum wrapper.

“Next time it’ll be easier with these.”

I thrust my hand into my pocket. “Thanks.”

Sam smiled tentatively, as if to alleviate the tense atmosphere we were both in. I looked pensively at him. I didn’t care about the particulars--the disposing of the body, Marian/Kathy being missed, and all that. That was Uncler’s problem. I was consumed with the failure at hand.

“I need someone with more stamina.” I looked around. Niles was sickly pale, anxiously looking at the gauges on the panel. “And better shackles--no cheap nylon rope--leather would be best, no conductivity.” I tugged at my lip. My mind was racing a mile a minute to solve the problem. I should have realized that continuing this work would be dangerous, but I couldn’t stop. Three years ago I had seen their world and they

mine. I had partially gone through before deciding to turn back and destroy the machine--I was a part of them and they were a part of me, the fraction of myself still in the other realm.

Uncle cracked his knuckles. "What are we going to do?"

The problem nagged at me, beating a constant monotonous rhythm.

"I don't know . . . but . . ."

In an instant of dumbfounded revelation, the solution was simple, quick and concise--

I still had one more roommate.

The house was dark--not even the porch light was on. Marian's note was still on the table. No Frank. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I had seen him. There would be more waiting, but I could be patient. Scientific success is a hard-fought battle won by the accomplishments of genius--soon, very soon.

Time passed. It was well after midnight. I had stopped checking the clock a long time before. I was tired, but still obsessed with my plan. If I could just catch a few hours sleep, then I would feel better, and perhaps Frank would be back by morning. I laid down to settle to sleep and closed my eyes. Instead of peaceful blackness, I saw many brightly colored lights; they flashed before my eyes like a carousel. I concentrated on them, trying to form shapes--if I could tire my mind, then maybe I could sleep. I saw Uncle's face, his expression twisted, his smile malevolent. I thrust open my eyes. I heard a sound similar to the hum of the generator powering up to activate the cipher. The sound changed in pitch and grew louder; I gritted my teeth and held my hands over my ears. Stop. Why won't it stop? Louder and louder, my eardrums felt ready to burst.

"Leave me alone! I'm doing all I can!"

The hum steadied, as if to acknowledge me. They were calling to me and I knew it, the bastards. Frank still wasn't home. Anything that could be done without him would render inefficacy. Still, the hum continued with piercing amplitude.

Relax, cease the noise, control. They were trying to drive me out of my mind; they knew how, knew very well, but I was stronger; I was the one in control. I performed the experiments. I opened the gate.

“You have to wait, you fucks,” I laughed loudly. “Kiss my fucking ass, I’m the master, and if I decide to scrap the cipher, then you’re fucked.” I laughed again, this time at the top of my lungs. I had it, had it all.

The remainder of the night passed without incident--without the hum and without the colored lights. I managed to sleep and didn’t wake until the phone rang.

“Darrin, Sam. Got some bad news, the generator has to come from Chicago. It’ll take a week. We’re shelving the project until then.”

“What did you say, a week?”

“We want the correct equipment, right?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll have to sit and wait.”

“Why are you so fucking calm? I thought you were into this project as much as I am.”

“What gave you that idea? Your project doesn’t work. It’s only a fancy way for you to murder people.”

“What? This isn’t Uncler. Who is this?”

“You know who. I don’t want to see you around the lab. You’re insane, brutally so, fucking bonkers. Thinking of driving out here? Don’t bother.”

“Sam . . . ?”

“And if you do, you’ll be arrested, charged with first-degree murder, and thrown back into the loony bin, you fucking psycho.”

“Sam, what the hell is . . .”

The phone went dead. I stared off into the darkness of the kitchen.

The sun hit my eyes. I hid from it; my body ached from head to toe. I couldn’t feel my leg. I tried to sit up and discovered I had trashed my room. All the books were

thrown to the floor; the bookshelf lay across my leg, cutting off circulation. With my free leg, I shoved the shelf off the bed. It was hard work dragging myself out to the kitchen. My thoughts were on the call from Uncler. I was trembling violently from fear, fear that I wouldn't be able to finish my work and see the cipher to completion. I didn't want to end up like my father, broken and disheartened, desperately trying to hold onto life, only to end it by my own hand.

I tripped over the corner of the baseboard and fell to the linoleum. I reached for the phone cord and pulled it; the receiver fell from the counter to the floor. I dialed the lab, the number engraved in my memory. I got Niles.

"Is Sam Uncler there?"

"No. I haven't seen him today. What time are you coming down?"

"Where?"

"Here, stupid."

I rubbed my eyes, my head was full of confusion. "What time is it now?"

"Three. I think it would be best if we did this later, around eleven."

"The experiment?"

"Of course. What else?"

"We got the generator?"

"Yeah, a big one. Had eight guys working to get it installed. Finished it about two hours ago. I've been trying to call and tell you."

"Call me? When?"

"Hey, man, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, fine. It's all set up, then?"

"Everything."

"Do you have Sam's home number?"

"Yeah." He gave it to me.

Something was going on. At this point I wasn't sure if the conversation with Uncler during the night took place at all. I couldn't trust my senses, couldn't trust anything that was going on.

"Listen, Niles, if he comes in, have him call me. I have one more detail to clear

up here, and I'll be in later, with the new participant.”

“So you have that item taken care of? Uncle said you would.”

“Yes. And by the way, who was that Kathy woman?”

“Obviously someone expendable. Bye.”

He hung up. I pulled myself to a standing position and went into the bathroom, forgetting about the cat. But it was gone; the water had been drained out of the tub, not even a trace of a smell. I wondered where my book had gone to. I showered, shut myself in my room, and waited.

It was well after ten when I heard the front door being thrown open. I sat up like a shot and frantically dug through my pants pockets, searching for the tablets. Frank went into his room, slamming the door behind him. I quickly dressed and knocked on his door.

“Frank? I need to talk to you.”

“I'm going to bed. Tomorrow.”

“It's important.”

“No, it's not.”

“Frank.” I tried the knob. The door was locked.

“I'm serious, leave me alone.”

“It's about Marian. There's been an accident. She's been hurt.”

He stumbled to the door and opened it. A stench of sweat-soaked clothes, cigarette butts, and stale alcohol wafted out. “Say what?”

“She was broadsided on her way to work today. She's in a hospital in Livermore. I just came from there.”

He sighed. “Is it bad?”

“She's cut up. Broke four ribs and a leg. C'mon, we'll take my car.”

“Fuck. I got a wicked hangover. I didn't even go to work today.”

“Sorry to hear that . . .” I felt the tablets in my pocket. “Want some aspirin?”

“Yeah, that might help.”

I got him two Advil--Marian always insisted on non-aspirin--and a glass of water.

I tore open the aluminum package and dumped the pills into the water. They dissolved instantly.

“Here you go.” He popped the Advils into his mouth and gulped the water, wrenching his face.

“The water here tastes awful.”

“I never drink it. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

I walked ahead of him. The living room light was on. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the note Marian had written to Frank about our dinner date. I whisked my hand over it and snatched it up.

“What’s that?”

“Trying to keep the place neat. Marian’s always leaving things around. I’m tired of picking up after her.”

“Christ, she was just in an accident and you . . .”

“Let’s hurry.”

I opened the car door for him. I wondered why the pills were taking so long to work; he stopped and looked back at the house.

“Wait. Marian didn’t work today. I know,” he glared at me, “she’s been bugging me for weeks to go to the Peter Gabriel concert. She didn’t go to work.”

“And I guess you flaked again, huh?” I swallowed hard. “All I know is that I saw her laid up in the hospital.”

“Yeah . . .” He touched his forehead. “What the . . . ?” He sat in the seat and gazed up at me. I put his legs in. “What’s going on . . . ?”

“Relax, Frank. You have nothing to fear.” I shut the car door.

“Not yet anyway.”

Frank passed out shortly after. I nearly drove to the gate with him asleep beside me, then realized it might look suspicious. I passed the exit and drove on to the next one; it was a truck scale and, being this time of night, it was closed and dark. I put him in the trunk, careful not to disturb my set of organized tools and road flares. Frank smelled bad,

real bad. My watch read twelve-thirty when I arrived at the gate. The guard eyed me carefully. He knew I had come in with Marian the night before, but he never saw her leave with me. I smiled broadly.

“A little late, isn’t it, Dr. Jensen?” I didn’t act surprised.

“Big project. I have to finish my thesis before morning. Sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m with Project Cipher. Phone Uncler or Niles--again--if you don’t believe me.”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe.” He reached for the phone, then stopped. He raised the gate and waved me on.

“You’re clear.”

I smiled. Uncler and Niles were outside smoking when I pulled up to park. Niles yanked open my door.

“About damn time, I told you eleven.”

“Back off. I had to wait for the participant.”

Uncler walked over. “You should have phoned. Where is it?”

“In the trunk.”

Niles and Uncler shared the same blank expression.

Uncler directed me to the loading dock in the rear. Niles fetched a gurney. We lay our coats over Frank. As we wormed our way through the maze of hallways and elevators to the lab, I had an odd feeling in me. It felt as if my whole being were light, without weight, like air; I had experienced the feeling once previously, when I had performed the experiment on Judy. Like before, it was as if I knew I would be succeeding, and had to prepare for the consequences. My body as I knew it would not be able to withstand the transition into the other world. The feeling had been frightening then, and fear gripped me now, for this time I would not disrupt fate by destroying the machine. For the sake of Samuel Uncler, I would let the process come to completion.

The three of us wheeled Frank into the lab. Niles was right, everything was ready and in order: the floors polished smooth, lights dim, panels cleaned, and papers clipped

down. The new generator was huge, almost twice the size of the old one--an ample dynamo--and the leather cuffs had been installed. I also noticed a video camera and a reel-to-reel recorder near the control panel where I was to sit. Niles saw me looking at it.

“Franklin insisted.”

“He knows?”

“He has to be kept informed.”

“About everything, including Kathy and Frank?”

“No, not everything. Not right away, anyway.”

At that moment, I could've killed Niles and not had a second thought; just grab him by the scruff of his neck and twist his head so he could see behind himself. I had the strength and the anger, an abundance of both since coming into contact with Uncler. The way he had finagled the information out of me, fucked me, and driven me to resurrect the cipher project--pure genius. Perhaps it was him I should kill. Niles was just an annoying asshole, but good ol' Uncler, well, he was a manipulating bastard, continually belittling me and casting doubts on my sanity, not to mention my competence. I thought of the phone call I'd had last night.

“Hey Sam . . .”

“Yeah.” He uncovered Frank and prepared to hoist him up.

“Thanks for the call last night.”

He wrinkled his nose. “What call?”

“You know.”

“What are you talking about?”

Niles became incredibly interested in the conversation.

“Oh, don't give me that shit. You woke me late and said the cipher project was scrapped.”

His face was blank. “No, I didn't. Why the hell would I do that? I've been working . . .”

“Save it.”

Niles was smirking.

“What the fuck are you looking at?”

“You’re cracked, Jensen. Hell, I bet you dreamed it up just like all the other things. They told me about the time you fried your fiancée. I hear you relive it once in a while.”

I shot a look at Sam; his eyes were wide. He shrugged his shoulders.

“You told him?” The anger turned to pure disconsolateness. “I can’t believe you told him.”

Niles laughed. “Quit crying, you fucking baby.”

Sam lunged at Niles, swung and hit him hard on the jaw; he fell to the floor. Niles glared and clenched his teeth. “I’ll get you for that, Uncler, you can be damn sure.”

“Shut up and get off your ass. We’ve got work to do.” He looked at me. “If you don’t mind.”

I bit my tongue. Once again, I found my mind in a whirl; this time not on the experiment, but in the tangled briar patch of my inept emotions--they had my full attention. I analyzed all the relationships I’d had in my life--the break-ups primarily--trying to figure out if I had been in the wrong and, if so, what had brought me to it. I thought of everybody I had been close to, focusing on my father and Sam. I couldn’t believe Sam had betrayed my confidence to someone as obtuse as Niles. In time I noticed that I was performing the experiment as mechanically as if I were washing the dishes or mowing the yard. Niles occasionally rubbed his sore jaw as we were setting up, giving me dirty looks. The experiment, I had to concentrate on it; a monumental task was at hand.

Frank was all set up, his head hanging lazily to one side, his shirt covered with sweat. I gave him another dose, then sat at the control panel. Uncler hooked his thumb at Frank.

“Where’d you find him?”

“Trade secret.”

“Look, Darrin, I’m sorry about Niles. He doesn’t know shit, except bits of gossip he can suck up here and there. I swear I didn’t say anything to him.”

I looked into his hazel eyes; they were soft and warm, as they had been that night in his apartment. I could sense my body wanting to repeat the encounter, but my mind

was back. I had full control of all my faculties--the cipher called. I smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Let's not think about anything except coming out of this in one piece."

He swallowed hard, nodded, and stared at the cipher. He took his position, as did Niles. I motioned for the generator. The slow whirl began.

"Remember, level at 8K."

"I got it, I got it."

My hand was around the trigger for the ignitor, the metal cold and placid--no life, we're only here to take it away, so sorry. Cannot contribute. My eyes were glued to the ammeter: 7, 7.3, 7.8, 8.0--it steadied. I set the electrode. Uncle was shifting the cipher into position--how I hated the fucking thing, I should have never restarted this project, never should have done it in the first place. I should have listened to my father. He had written: "After I'm gone, burn my notes, destroy the things that lie in my workshop. You must do this or all will be lost."

Then he'd calmly gotten into his car and driven off; the wreck was found later that night. Why hadn't he destroyed his work himself? I don't know. I figured it was an indirect way of telling me to continue. So here I am.

Everything was in perfect placement. All that remained was for me to throw the switch, squeeze the trigger, drain the life out of my remaining roommate, and open the gate. My finger quivered. I looked at Frank one last time in his present form. It wouldn't be so bad for him--at least he and Marian would be together. If they could work out their differences, they could endure the eternity.

My hand gripped the controls and the cipher was engaged. Starting lambently, the light increased to a blinding wash of white and grey. The whirl of the dynamo became a scream. Frank was a silent participant--his body convulsing, being thrown sickly back and forth, like a child's doll. I watched as his face contorted, his jaw moving to one side, twisting the whole shape of his head--nose folding over, eyes turning clockwise, hair and skin melting away, spine being pulled extremely forward, resembling a skewed T-square.

The flat light appeared. It rose quickly and, in a matter of moments, the

prescribed two meters was reached. I quickly checked the panel--no surge of the current, frequency at resonance--the machine was operating perfectly.

Niles moved away from the generator, staring into the steady cube of light. He forgot to make minor adjustments to insure the current stability. I was able to do it from my panel, but it took all my attention--I wasn't able to watch what was going on in front of me.

A low, reverberating moan came from the gate. It froze my spine. One last setting, the current wasn't leveling; instead, it was fluctuating. The gate was drawing more energy than we could produce. I yelled to Uncler. No response. I knew if I took my eyes from the gauges, something would go awry; the resonance could shift and the gate would decay.

I managed to do my best and looked up. Niles was only a few feet from the cube, Uncler farther back. Their gazes were fixed; they were mesmerized. I yelled to them. Nothing.

The low moan again. I looked toward the gate; several specks of black had appeared in it. My heart seized; it was them, the ones I had seen when I'd had my head through the boundary. I felt the other part of myself coming out with them to rejoin me--to make me whole again. The need to stop the machine became overwhelming; the need to adhere my tattered soul was even greater.

The specks grew in size, the moan became clearer. A chorus of voices, hoards of travelers all speaking at once. Niles was at the threshold, ready to put his hand through. A massive grin spread across his face.

"It's beautiful," Niles gloated, "we can go anywhere in the universe through this . . ."

The moan for a second became laughter, I'd swear to it. Uncler turned and looked at me, his face stricken with fear. He wanted to shut it off as badly as a part of me did. The specks were nearly the height of the cube--ready to exit. The moans became distinct voices; chanting, calling in their alien language, but I understood them. The gate had been opened, and they were free to enter and destroy what they could of this world. I swallowed dryly.

The panel buzzed, red lights flashed, then it appeared that everything was malfunctioning at once. The current failed, then recovered. The cube flickered and the vibrations fluctuated, but the gate seemed to automatically hold itself. I looked around the lab. I couldn't see Sam anywhere. Behind me, he was at the main panel, randomly throwing switches and dials. Niles had his hand through the gate.

“Paradise! It waits for me!”

I jumped up and shook Uncler. I was yelling. “What are you doing?!”

“Got to shut it down, too unstable, it'll suck the whole world into it.”

“What?! This was your idea!”

“It's a crack in our reality. We're in danger!”

A wave of anger filled me, the other part of myself was almost through, and Sam was trying to prevent me from being complete. I couldn't let that happen.

I squeezed his shoulder, hearing his fragile bones break. He screamed. I shoved him away, using a mere ounce of my strength. He slid across the floor and struck a wall, more bones breaking. I laughed.

“Come, come friends. This pitiful world is ours for the taking.”

A chorus of voices chanted in elated agreement.

I felt Niles' gleeful infatuation with the gate turn sour, horror had taken him. He backed away slowly, looking at the hand that had crossed the threshold; his skin bubbled, muscles gleamed--he had begun the transformation.

“Enter, my friend, so that we may show you our true selves.”

He shook his head. Drool dripped from the corners of his mouth, blood from his hand; both pooled black on the smooth floor.

A figure exited, its stark black silhouette stretched toward me; a sable hand reached. I walked over to the cube and took hold of the hand.

“My brothers, we are one.”

I pulled. My newly granted strength made it easy. I felt my brother coming through.

An electric spasm shook me, something was wrong. The cube was vibrating, the pitch sporadically shifting. It was Uncler, damn him, he was at my panel, lying on the

floor, grabbing levers to pull himself up.

--The Cipher.

“No!!!”

I released the hand; if Uncler reached the lever that operated the pivot, it would disrupt the cycle, change frequency, shut down the cube, and blow the lab and most of the surrounding area off the map. In four strides I had him in my grip, his fingers barely on the toggle. I flipped him around and our eyes met, my twisted blackened hand on his throat, ready to squeeze off his head. Although he was completely fear-stricken by my transformation, he smiled gently, with passion, his hazel eyes soft and comforting.

“I love you Darrin Jensen.”

The anger immediately dispersed, drawn away from me like a sponge, the intense vitality vanishing with it. I looked at him--he was a bug under my glass--I found him intoxicating.

“Darrin . . .” he rasped. I released him. “Niles.”

I turned to look. Niles was screaming, just as Judy and Marian had. The hand, no longer in contact with me, was receding back into the cube. Along the way, it had wrapped its lanky fingers around Niles’ leg. Instead of him helping to pull the others out, they were pulling him in. His putrid, dripping hand stretched out toward us.

“Help! Help me! Please God!”

His form vanished into the cube with no more than a pop. I propped Sam up against the panel. His face was twisted with pain, his shoulder folded behind him.

“You fucked me up pretty good. I know you broke my leg, probably shattered my shoulder, shit, it sure feels like it.”

“I’m sorry pal.”

“We have to shut the gate . . . now.”

“Yeah, but . . .” My anger was building again. Brute power settled into my frame. “Can’t do it, friend.”

I returned to the cube and renewed my grip with the inky hand. The pull was easy and steady.

“Darrin, don’t. Let go.”

I grinned, it was Cheshire. I felt my face expand to accommodate it. His fear was welcome to me. I fed on it.

“Sorry, Darrin.”

Uncle yanks the lever, the pitch is thrown off. My brother’s hand recedes again, returning to leave me broken, desperate and disfigured.

“No!!” I can’t let it happen, no matter what the cost. I hold on as tightly as I can . . . if I can just pull him through before the strobing gate shuts entirely . . . then . . . then . . . I . . . I . . . I do not know . . .

The cube is shrinking, reducing in height. I still have a firm hold and, like Niles, I am being pulled inward.

“Stabilize it . . . NOW!”

“Let go! Darrin! LET FUCKING GO!”

I can hear Sam yelling. He keeps on repeating what he’s saying. I understand him, but choose not to heed . . . I’ve had enough . . .

In a rapid snapping motion, I am pulled through the cube--the world a blinding hot flash of alabaster, then a cool ooze of onyx.