

Blood, blood everywhere. On the walls, in big garish splashes like the creation of some berserk postmodern artist, pooled on the teak floors, even inside the refrigerator where one of those who'd done this had left bloody handprints in search of a snack. There wasn't a room in the mansion that wasn't marked. Seventeen bodies so far, including the B-movie actress found naked at the bottom of the empty swimming pool out back. The party at the Long Island home of a prominent plastic surgeon had turned into a nightmare that looked like the inside of a slaughterhouse. So far they had not turned up anyone famous among the bodies, not anyone they could recognize on site anyway. That was something to be thankful for, at least. There was one man, however, without a face, pending identification.

It was bad enough that these were monied people, men and women of influence, or those closely associated with them. They wouldn't be able to keep this one out of the public eye, not entirely anyway, although they would certainly blur the picture. So long as his terrors had been confined to teen runaways, bored housewives, and philandering husbands it had been perfectly excusable. Even when he had graduated to bars, offices, and the occasional family home in places like Winchester and Fontana it had been "doctorable," given the right spin.

But this—well, what to do with *this*?

Nikka stood outside under the portico, out of the cold rain, and lit one of her long black cigarettes, but, of course, with no intention of

smoking it. He was getting more dangerous, or more reckless, depending on how you looked at it. He either wanted to be stopped or believed he couldn't be stopped.

Either way, he had become a malignant entity.

She was wearing a long black leather coat, black leather gloves, black leather boots. Her lips were arterial red and carefully drawn between high cheekbones on an unlined face that never saw the sun. She understood perfectly well the importance of her iconographic image and secretly enjoyed being endlessly photographed for the mass media and for the many historical documents in which she appeared.

A large, powerful man jogged up the walkway towards her, pulling the collar of his coat over his head. He stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up, in an attitude of stylized reverence. His face was coarse and brutal. He was wearing an ear-piece connecting him to God only knew who, or what, or where.

"Yes Agent Mahoney?"

Her tone was bored, indifferent. She might have been an actress doing a rehearsal walk-through of a movie. Everyone knew that Mahoney was her right hand. And, when necessary, as it so often was, her left, as well.

"We've secured the area, Chief."

"Good. Final count?"

"Twenty-one."

"Survivors?"

"Zero."

"Good. Names?"

"So far, only the girl in the pool."

Nikka nodded. That, in itself, was a nightmare averted. A B-movie actress could be easily disposed of in any number of ways. A Gwyneth Paltrow, for instance, could not.

"Get an ID on that faceless man. We don't want any nasty surprises. And get back to me immediately."

"Yes ma'am."

Mahoney smiled, an uncomfortable and uncharacteristic expression, but Nikka could see the relief that relaxed the big man's heavy and brutal face. There was appreciative laughter from some of the assistants who had

followed her out into the vestibule of night. Among them her personal image manager stood on the bottom step beneath an enormous black umbrella awaiting her descent. Her eunuch makeup artist, Tonee, followed Nikka up the landscaped walk dabbing texturizing cream onto his mistress's perfect face so that she would look absolutely stunning when she faced the media glow beyond the gates of the mansion and told the world exactly what it wanted to hear.

Is it possible to live too long? He wondered. There must have been a time when he wasn't alive. But he'd be damned if he could remember it. He'd existed forever, as far as he knew. And he would continue to exist, forever, without end, unless he decided to end it himself, or made an error of some gross and uncorrectable kind. There were certain very definite ways that he could be terminated. They weren't secret; they had been published fairly openly for many centuries. Yet he had survived witch-hunts, pogroms, wars, personal vendettas, and cataclysms both natural and unnatural. He had done so by adhering to one simple law: *change*. You could live forever, but you could not remain the *same* forever. There were many who couldn't--or wouldn't--understand that. They were only memories now. Others like them would be memories, too, eventually. He had mutated over the millennia like a virus always one step ahead of the vaccine. Lately, in the last two hundred years or so, the changes necessary had come at a dizzying speed. So, so many had fallen. And yet he remained, strong, undefeated, like death itself. That was no coincidence. In some ways, he *was* death itself.

The whip cracked loudly, but Nikka wasn't looking at the moment. The light touch of her Asian Reiki boy was playing around her closed, tense eyes. Nikka enjoyed the Japanese bio-energetic art because, unlike ordinary massage, it didn't require any actual physical contact whatsoever. She was sitting in a chair of space-age alloy chrome and white rhinoceros leather that had been ergonomically designed especially to accommodate her unique lumbar configuration. Every three months or so she had her

vertebrae scanned to record any slight change that might necessitate a modification in the chair.

There was another crack of the whip and a soft pretty moan escaped from the blonde club t-girl she knew hung by her wrists on the polished onyx platform. Jaleel, her favorite whip master, was doing the honors tonight. She liked the traditional contrast of his huge, heavily-muscled black body next to that of the slight, petite, pale flesh of this silly, hormone-enhanced champagne stripper. Jaleel had worked in the seraglio of a Middle Eastern oil tycoon until the vicissitudes of allegiances in that turbulent part of the world had forced the wealthy Arab's murder. Jaleel had been one of the spoil's of war, so to speak, a favor from a top-ranking Pentagon official. Nikka had seen his work at a dinner, years ago, when the State Department was trying to work out the release of some hostage or other.

This underground lair, impervious to any foreseen—and even unforeseen—disaster, including viral contagion and thermonuclear war, was Nikka's gift to herself. She had designed and built this sanctuary from the world as recompense for a life lived far too much *in* the world. She was not unaware of the similarity that the place had to the tomb of an Egyptian queen, a dark necropolis protected by curses, in which she alone roamed, and those select slaves she required to attend her, even in semi-death.

She had money, lots of it, an obscene and sinful amount of it, actually, a card hardwired into the World Bank itself, unlimited wealth, quite literally. What do you want when you have everything in the world--or the means to acquire it?

You want, of course, those few things that money cannot buy. Nikka was beyond, naturally, such pedestrian concerns as love and happiness, and all that pre-21st century propaganda. *You want*, Nikka thought, *a challenge*. You want a reason to go on living. Is that what this latest mass murder was?

The business on Long Island troubled her, but it was a good kind of troubling—the revitalizing kind.

They got out of hand, occasionally. It was something you had to reasonably expect, being what they were. That's why she existed, after all, and why she was granted a power and autonomy that would have made many of history's worst dictators jealous. She had the authority to question anyone; and the obligation to answer no one and nothing beyond her own merciless perfectionism.

She kept them under control, like an immune system destroying cancerous cells. It was her job to destroy them *before* they got out of hand. Usually, they were minor problems, localized malignancies, a simple matter of quick extraction before any symptoms arose. No one ever knew the world was poisoned. Life went on.

And on.

And on.

Is that what this was? A mere annoyance? Asymptomatic?

Somehow she didn't think so. Not this time.

She sensed Mahoney beside her. Fact is, she had sensed him coming down the pneumatic a half-hour before. He would have first gone through the routine x-ray search and sterilization procedures that everyone coming or going into the necropolis did. He would have been scanned not only for germs and weapons, but for the beginnings of any undiagnosed organic disease, microbic or structural, that might have compromised his system. She herself submitted to these tests, unnecessarily, but so dedicated was she to ensuring that death have no inroad into this place of death. That night's entertainment ended abruptly at an imperceptible signal of dismissal from Nikka. The whip master and yet another still perfectly edible blonde boy were hustled off into one of the lair's many antechambers. The little freak would be paid off, perhaps, or killed, most probably both; well, whatever—his disposal, as the disposal of thousands before him, was a matter of absolutely no concern.

Meanwhile, the ex-commando stood there, knelt, really, but with the devout impatience of a man of action using every ounce of his will to remain inactive. Nikka smiled inwardly to herself and waited the beat of nineteen of her extraordinarily slow heartbeats. She opened eyes, unshaded, that were seen exclusively in this underworld realm. Her expression might have been described as one worn by a woman just waking from a deeply satisfying sexual encounter, that is if Nikka still had sex in any of the usual ways.

"Have we put a face on our faceless man?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Arbak Shaara."

"The son of the exiled oil sheik?"

"The same."

Yet another oil-rich Muslim. Nikka would be well satisfied when they finally mass-produced an affordable energy alternative to oil and one could then fly, by black helicopter, over miles and miles of beautiful, lifeless lunar desert that would one day be the entire Middle East. She was tired of running around after Arabs.

"Well, he can pop up dead somewhere else if there is a problem. Put him in a wrecked car someplace. Or at the bottom of a river after an unfortunate diving accident. The usual."

"There *is* a problem," Mahoney said. "But it won't be that easy to solve."

"Oh?" Nikka said. She clicked her eyes onto her most loyal assassin with the precision of a finely calibrated measuring device. In those eyes, the brutal man saw the first flicker of real interest that he'd seen in a half-dozen years.

"Seems he was dating, on and off, Princess Alison Faye."

Nikka's eyes didn't move, nor did the pupils contract or dilate, not even a fraction. Mahoney noticed things like this. He had no allegiance to anyone or anything outside of becoming the quickest and surest method of dispatch between Nikka and whatever she aimed him at. He was as tuned to her wavelength as an EEG. That was part of the reason he was so good at doing what he did. Only, he thought, grimly satisfied with himself, a *part*.

"How on, how off?"

"She's missing," Mahoney said, semi-smugly.

"Hmmm...that won't go away, now will it?"

"I should think not," he said, permitting himself the treat of a syntactic sarcasm.

Nikka engineered the slightest of pauses by way of appreciation. She didn't even bother to look down at yet another of her many effeminate boys, this one kneeling between her long, pale, untouched legs.

"Stop," she commanded.

She wanted to think a moment, and even the specially designed pleasure device that the boy held between painted fingertips, soundless as it was, made, in the deeply contemplative state she was immersed in now, an intolerable white noise. She had come to a decision. Mahoney could see that, and although he didn't like it, there would be no argument. He tried

not to show any emotion when she gave the order, taking his cue from her, but, as usual, he failed. She wasn't taking any chances with this one, not this time.

"Summon him," she ordered. "Immediately."

Once upon a time, they were gods. But that time was over long ago. It was hard to believe now, considering the way they lived, existing in the shadows, hunted down, killed in abandoned warehouses, old hotels, alleys, bus stops. How many of them were destroyed on a rented bed in an anonymous room at three p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon? It was sickening to think that this is the way that gods died.

Caleb sat at a table at an outdoor café on the Montevedio. He watched with a vague distaste the people walking passed. Human beings disgusted him. Ignorant, arrogant, materialistic, crude, and self-centric, they lived little better than the animals from which they were descended and the machines they invented. He had seen it coming, centuries ago.

They had laughed at him then—all of them. But those that laughed the hardest were now only ghosts. His kind had been arrogant, too, but it was an arrogance of a different sort. The arrogance of gods, it was. They never believed it would be possible for humans to live without them. An ironic idea, perhaps, or so it seems now. It seemed perfectly logical then.

Still, Caleb had noted the change and he'd tried to warn them. He'd warned them that the time was fast approaching when Man would throw them all off and attempt to live on their own. It was an absurd idea, of course. It was mad, impossible, and for just those reasons no one believed him...and for just those reasons it had come to pass.

Humans *were* impossible. Mad and absurd.

And very dangerous.

It was hard, even for him to believe, they had survived on their own for so long. But they had. They had turned the tide and driven his kind from the places of power. Toppled them from wherever they found them. Hunted them down. Killed them. Driven them into invisibility and obsolescence. And their bloodlust wouldn't stop until every last one of his kind were destroyed. That was the human way.

He watched them walking passed now. They seemed relatively harmless. Stupid and inane. They walked to their pointless jobs, their shabby love-affairs, their ridiculous past-times. They talked to each other about the most appalling trivialities, ate food they barely took the time to taste, and spent countless hours in front of televisions all the while they were rapidly dying. They acted as if they would live forever and not for what would be scarcely a handful of heartbeats in the cosmic scheme of things.

Not even a handful of heartbeats...

Once in a while, when one of them died, they seemed to suddenly remember their collective fate. It would all appear to them then, if only for a time, as it really was: meaningless. Caleb, at precisely those times, relished the look of horror and hopelessness on their faces. He would sometimes lurk in churches or funeral homes during a memorial service for exactly that purpose. It was then, he thought, that humans were, at least for a brief period, nearly bearable. It was then, he thought, they could be almost beautiful.

But they always returned to their mad insanity. This terrible purposeless crusade they perversely called life. Life. As if they could ever guess what Life really was.

He watched a man at the next table, fat and old, white tufts of hair fluffing out of his enormous ears. The man was eating a plate of penne ziti with a light red wine sauce. He had put far too much cheese on the dish. His choice of wine, a vin rose' was an affront. This man had been arguing with someone on a cellphone for ten minutes, something about a shipment of wool fabric. The whole time he was shoveling the food into his mouth. Now, he was reading the newspaper as he ate, keeping his eyes on a story about an internet merger while he sipped his wine.

He was going to die, soon. Sixty-three, from the stink of him. Two more years. Four at the most. He had only that many more springs to see. Only that many more...and then oblivion.

Why was he reading a newspaper article about internet mergers? What importance could that possibly have in the face of extinction? Why was he arguing about wool fabric?

He wasn't even worth killing, this fat old sack of sour blood. Imagine that, not even being worth killing. Caleb looked out over the square.

This man and the world around him were nothing—nothing but dust. This man—he was already dead.

And yet, humans were dangerous. Humans just like this stupid fat old man. Humans *especially* like this stupid fat old man. Somewhere, deep down in their cells, they must know that they were dying. Maybe that is what made them so crazy. Maybe that is what made them so lethal.

Caleb knew, better than most, just how lethal they could be. There was a girl in the square in a pale blue sundress, a wide-brimmed hat, and dark glasses. She was looking up at a building and then at a tour map. She seemed to have become separated from her group. Caleb watched her. He liked the shape of her calves and the golden brown of her skin. He guessed, from the bone structure of her face, that she would be one of those exceptional ones who retained her good-looks post-mortem.

There were still things in this world to appreciate, he thought, wryly. Like good wine, for instance.

He sipped a glass of della Streggha 1845. He understood that nowadays it was an almost impossible vintage to acquire. Only prime ministers, computer software tycoons, and the occasional celebrity had the means and connections to acquire its rare taste. The della Streggha's, it was said, sacrificed the most beautiful virgin on their estates for each vintage. You had to be a connoisseur to detect the taste, of course. For the profane, it was just a titillating and chic rumor. But for someone like Caleb...ah, it was unmistakable...it was the wine of the sacred sacrament. He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the rich collusion of flavors and in that instant he saw it all. The cross in the middle of a fallow field, the pitiless sun, the pale girl in the plain muslin smock, and all those crows. All those crows.

On his tongue, he tasted her pain and confusion. He tasted her faith. He tasted her final resignation. He smelled the sweat shining on her suffering, boyish figure, a body-type which would not be fully appreciated for another hundred and fifty years or so, not until the advent of bulimic teenage pop stars. He gazed appreciatively at a face more celestially beautiful than any painted by Botticelli or Raphael, precisely because, perhaps, it was so temporary, it would never be recorded or preserved. It was a face whose clear-eyed serenity it would have seemed a sacrilege to sully with the sordid earthiness of human copulation. She was not for marrying or child-bearing. She was not meant to be touched by mortal man.

She had been chosen, not by the master of the della Streggha estate for this sacrifice, but by fate itself, a fate that even the youngest village child immediately recognized.

He stirred the wine with his tongue and saw her as if she were again before him in the flesh, slumped, stained, the blood dripping off her twitching toes. And the villagers leaving her broken body in the field and returning to their thatched cottages in silence. There would be no returning to work until the following morning. This day would be a holiday.

Yes, in those times people still believed in the gods, and knew how to worship them.

Caleb swallowed the wine and opened eyes that forever looked out at nothing. It was the same view no matter where he was in the world: Cairo, Hamburg, Oslo, Tokyo, New York City. He could see through all of it. And it bored him. Sometimes, he thought, if it weren't for his hatred, he would have no reason to go on at all.

He had seen it happen over and over, like the seasons, one empire following another. One people smashing another's idols. The old gods falling. He'd been there to see the death of Shamash and the final murder of Osiris; he'd seen the disgrace of the elder Olympians and the corruption of Shiva and Shakti. He'd stood witness at the murder of a hundred minor gods and goddesses in the back alleys of unrecorded history and he watched as the new ones took their seats in the old temples and were worshipped in their place. He stood in the royal courts of the Babylonians and the Syrians, the Hittites and the Chinese Dynasties, he accepted the sacrifices of Jew and Shinto and African tribesman alike. He'd been there when Rome ruled the world and human Emperors declared themselves gods and the divine appeared to be dead and buried. Yet from within that chaos of human degradation and godlessness there rose a prophet from Nazareth and a new god was raised up for the next two thousand years.

Was it any wonder they thought it would go on forever? Up until now, it had gone on forever. From the first time man had crouched in the dirt and gathered up mud and shaped it into the shape of the Great Mother, he had always believed. Ever since he first saw lightning flash or an animal die, men had believed in gods.

That time was over.

He had taken a long time to die, this god did. Somewhere in the 1500s, Caleb reckoned, that's when the death-blow had been struck. Four hundred years of dying. It had been a long death agony. Sometimes he would rise up, wounded, as if he could still stand on his punctured feet. Then he would fall again, harder, more bloodied than the time before. It had happened before, this death of a god, but this time, there was no other god to take his place.

Christ would be the last god and Caleb knew it.

The world wars of the last century finished him off once and for all. Computers, vaccinations, space travel, television, fast food, "miracle" drugs, test tube babies, the hydrogen bomb. The horrors of Hitler, Stalin, and the assorted lesser dictators. The countless millions slaughtered. Man had become God—a god more terrifying than any god before him.

There would be none to come after.

From hereon out, the masks were off. What fed upon the world would now feed upon it naked.

Caleb was hungry. He approached the girl in the square and smelled the moistness of her, an earthy scent that was stimulating to him only inasmuch as he would derive an almost perverse pleasure in destroying what it meant: the girl was fecund with life and her role in the continuation of life. She smiled at him as he approached, not recognizing even from a distance of less than ten feet or so that he was not a possible lover, but a destroyer. That he had not come to sow her ripe womb with seed, but to lay her barren with salt and fire and miles of black crosses. She might have caught a glimpse of that and been momentarily startled if he'd come upon her suddenly; instead, he let her seem him as a human being: his black coat open, hands thrust behind his back, dark hair swept from a face whose pale severity gave him the look of a devastatingly handsome fictional crusader who, if not for the invisible omnipotence granted him by his aristocratic wealth and power, could equally have been a matinee idol.

He spoke to her in flawless Italian, which she understood not at all, seeming a little desperate, and using her hands to aid her in communicating that her knowledge of the language was severely limited.

“Ah,” Caleb said with a slight nod, in equally flawless English. “I understand perfectly.” He enjoyed the look of relief and pleasure that graced the girl’s face, which suddenly unfolded, like a morning glory, the least and more superficial of unfoldings that were to come.

She was traveling abroad from America with a group of student artists to soak in the history and ambiance of Italy. She had broken away, she said, to escape the rigid and relentless program of their instructor, who marched them around the province with the efficiency of a state official checking off items during an inspection of a chicken processing plant. Caleb laughed and learned her name was Ashley, which she hated, and so she called herself Juliet instead.

“That is a beautiful name,” he said, and meant it. “There aren’t many women with that name anymore. It suits you better than the silly one you were given at birth.”

She seemed delighted and lifted her hair for him, a mass of raw sienna curls shot through with sunbeams, loosely tied back, but still partially concealing a throat which, she now exposed in an unconscious gesture of such sublime submission that it drew every predatory instinct in Caleb to a laser-like one-point intensity. She was still young, nineteen, three years passed her prime, but that was to be expected in this regressive day and age, healthy, her body under the long thin peasant skirt, tight cotton bodice, and faded jean jacket was entirely natural, not artificially altered or enhanced in any way.

“Let me see,” he said, nodding towards the black sketchbook she clutched to her chest as if it contained the revelation of the secrets of her heart.

“Oh it’s not very good,” she blushed beneath the tan, but Caleb could tell anyway, sensing, under the creamy smooth, all-over brown, the incrementally increased warmth of her gently seasoned flesh. He lowered his head slightly, and smiled, in a gesture natural to alpha male wolves when conveying a reassuring and peaceable dominance, and popularized some years ago, Caleb noted, by an actor he’d seen by chance, someone named Clooney. “Per favor,” he said. “I would really like to see.”

“Okay,” she said shyly and with additional commentary about her lack of experience, her problem with shadowing, her greater affinity for abstraction, etc.

Caleb opened the book and moved quickly through the first sketches, awkward attempts to depict various still-life clichés: bottles, flowers, a painfully arranged set-up of oranges. Dead, dead, dead, dead, his fingers riffled through them all, bored and disgusted. And then he saw the faces: waitresses, cab drivers, the homeless, and, finally, the one he stopped at: a woman on the verge of losing her beauty.

“Ah,” he said. “Ah.”

“Those aren’t for class.”

“Yes,” he nodded, and did not lift his eyes from the page on which the aging woman looked out, her pleading rage staring at a world that saw her less and less each passing day. “I can tell.”

“They aren’t very good, I know. We aren’t supposed to go to portrait until much later.” And she took the sketchbook back and flipped the pages passed a few more faces to the sketches of various pieces of typical Italian architecture: cathedrals, cafes, palazzos, bridges, arches that her class had no doubt trudged passed so far. She held out the book and he took it once again, staring at the sketchbook.

“Awful,” he murmured, and she nodded a little sadly and laughed, “Perfectly goddamned awful. Give me your pencil.”

She handed him a short piece of black conte crayon and he made a few casual strokes over a depiction of an aqueduct, sketching in a slight correction of the perspective and loosening the lines. As he sketched he felt her breath on his neck as she leaned over to watch, the touch of her hair on his cheek, and all of it scented, vaguely, of zinnia and almond. He handed the sketchbook back, slightly distracted, and nodded towards it. “Like that, signorina.”

The girl looked at it and then up at Caleb.

“That’s wonderful. It has... *life* now.”

“Yes,” Caleb said drily.

“Are you an artist?”

“No,” he said. “Just someone who *sees*.”

The wind, and there had been none up to now, but rain was on the way, had picked up and riffled the pages that her thumb did not hold down and Caleb could see each page as it passed, although at least fifty-three passed in the space of a half-second, and he slid his forefinger between two,

and held it down. It was a sketch done quickly, but the rendering was unmistakable.

“Oh,” the girl blushed again, and this time she looked stricken. “I’m sorry.”

It was a café scene, tables and patrons, waiters and wine bottles, a few sparrows pecking fallen crumbs. There was an awning and conversation and others dining alone or reading, or gazing out at the dying sunlight over the cobbles of the square and one man, sitting, lost deep in thought, sipping a wine that drew his gaze away to a scene on a day in late summer of 1845. That she had drawn him wasn’t what interested him in particular, although the rendering, though distant and archetypal, was strikingly faithful enough. No what interested Caleb and sharpened his hunger, and roused his interest in her, was that she must have seen him long before he’d seen her. And even so, Caleb had not felt the sharp prick of her pencil as she touched the outline of his omniscience.

“Come with me,” he said softly and took her hand. “Come.”

And she went without question, as they all did when they were chosen. That evening, as a steady rain fell outside his rooms in the Villa Generalli, he pretended to make love to her and, afterwards, while she lay unconscious, his hunger raging, slipped out into the steamy streets. He found a pretty shop girl who, returning home from work at the perfume counter of a department store, had stopped for a drink in a tavern. Caleb seduced her, took her back to her apartment, and killed her.

Death, when it came, was never easy for them. Let’s be honest. It came with outrage and intolerable pain and finally a numbed resignation that no matter what they had previously believed or trusted about life, and about death, it was all a lie. Sometimes, after it was over, their mouths gaped open, the question twisting bloodless lips, but no breath left to ask it, as if it could be answered anyway. The truth was, the question had no answer, so Caleb often reflected and reflected now, as he withdrew his penis from inside yet another once pretty girl's corpse, still warm, which he had been pretending to fuck the entire time, mimicking a passion that was for him only a form of foreplay, as was everything else.

It wasn't, of course, always like this. There had been so many beautiful deaths in the past, excruciating yes, but transfigured at the moment of crisis into something that might almost have been a work of art, if a work of art could be something that lasts but two seconds, maybe four, and is seen by only one, the one whose inspiration perpetrated it, and whose need obliterated it almost simultaneously. And, after all, why not? Yes, Caleb thought, that was all a work of art was--or should be. Sometimes, for wholly arbitrary reasons, he thought of human life as a fashion show, and the audience comprised of members of his race. He had seen so many girls and boys step from out of the curtain of oblivion and walk down the runway to their doom, their faces composed and smiling, trembling inside, and coming apart so sweetly beneath his lethal kisses. They were sustained against terror and flight by the magnificent lie of their imminent apotheosis, of an orgasm so brilliant that death wasn't death at all but a life that would last forever.

Of course, no such thing had ever existed. There was no resurrection, no return from the dead, no life forever. It was all a fairytale, a come-on, a line of seductive bullshit like any other: sometimes it was a slick advertising campaign for Jaguars or Mastercards, or maybe it was a line from a new pop song, or something said by someone in a movie. The simple fact was that Caleb couldn't transform a human being into a god any more than he could get a stick to talk or stop a stone from dropping if he let it go. This world was governed by its own laws and only the ones that were made by man could be broken.

But the hope that his kind could work such miracles had sustained the human race for thousands of years. And that is what kept them obedient and fruitful and relatively happy up until recently, happy enough to go on, in spite of the famines, plagues, and wars that descended upon them again and again throughout history with a cruelty so savage, so random, it had to be attributed to the will of God, or it would have been intolerable.

Their "faith," as the delusion had come to be called, was nothing more than a psychological opiate, a lullaby that allowed them to accept the most catastrophic of fates with relative equanimity. Caleb had seen animals in the wild, buffalo came to mind, brought down and eaten alive by wolves, so numbed by shock and loss they seemed to feel nothing at all, and the

process by which humans lived was not a great deal different. There was nothing in the end but acceptance and the degree of pain suffered was in direct ratio to how long it took for an individual to resign him or herself to the inevitable, no matter how unacceptable.

It was unfortunate all around, he reflected, that they no longer believed in anything anymore, and that faith was so difficult to come by nowadays. They died all the more abjectly for that, and their suffering was not transformed into imagined erotic bliss, but full of hopeless fighting, mad adrenaline, rage, broken bones, dislocated joints, massive internal damage, and, of course, such pain and terror as there was no cry so awful that could ever begin to express their sense of shock, alienation, and betrayal.

The girl lying on her back on the stained and tangled sheets before him, spine arched unnaturally inwards, broken actually, lopsided hips thrust immodestly up to reveal a ravaged secret, arms "popped" from sockets, calves frozen in pain, her throat *unzippered*, was little more than a case in point. In her death throes, she had broken her sternum and neck, ruptured several vital internal organs, suffered a massive and messy rectal hemorrhage, and dislocated her jaw and left ankle. She'd had a stroke, apparently, that affected the appearance of the left side of her face and her teeth, stained red, were bared. One eye, almost unaccountably, was missing. She had not died as beautifully as he had hoped, and this was almost always the case, but a disappointment all the same. It had all become a rather sordid business, this nonsense of survival, and Caleb had begun losing his taste for it, albeit slowly, in the last couple of centuries. But, after all, what was he to do?

He slipped the miniature cell from the breast pocket of his coat and speed-dialed the service whose sole job it was to clean up the untidy messes that his occasional hungers left behind. He spoke on a secured channel, via satellite through a series of coded clicks, to an operator who recorded his precise coordinates and who would dispatch a team of "busboys" to the apartment after a discreet but efficient delay, as in any five-star restaurant, of some ten seconds or so, more or less, after his departure.

He replaced the cell, which folded up to the size of a matchbook, approximately, in his pocket and took the stairs to the street. He could sense by the quality of the light that dawn was just under twenty-seven

minutes away. He started walking briskly towards the river beneath the ancient house-fronts behind which lay scores of sleeping mortals and nodded to a drunken student he might have killed if it had been any other morning. He thought, quite randomly, of something Nero once said and slipped a wintergreen Altoids in his mouth to mask the scent of sweat and ureic acid on his breath although, it occurred to him, that he seldom even pretended to breathe, anymore.

“They’re lying,” Vince said. He stood in front of the big-screen television that dominated the cold flat like a five-hundred-channel altar. It was the only piece of furniture that hadn’t once been someone else’s garbage. One of the cult members had stolen it, or maybe it had been donated by some mysterious benefactor, the same one, presumably, who’d provided the jet to London, but who that might be, Vince had no clue.

On the screen the Director of the Central Department of Protection, an agency, incidentally, that he'd never heard of before, was talking in a ritualistic manner that seemed almost entirely void of content. Her calm, impassive, strikingly beautiful face had the unanswerable authority and appeal of a propaganda poster, or the inscrutable high priestess of a suicide cult. The scene behind her was shot in broad daylight, she was not standing in front of the mansion, and the crime she described bore no resemblance whatsoever to what had actually happened.

“Of course they’re lying,” Io said. “But you can’t look away, can you?”

Vince, angry and ashamed, turned towards the slender, white-haired young man reclining in a ratty yellow armchair. He was wearing a midi-t, his flat tummy exposed, a French-cut bikini in royal- blue silk, one pale lean leg over the arm of the chair. He was blowing on the fingernails of his left hand, while a nude girl, alive or dead it was hard to tell from behind, painted the nails of his other hand.

“I don’t think we should have taken her,” Vince said.

The kidnapped princess, lying in an undignified heap in the corner, hadn’t said a word since they’d abducted her from the bloodbath at the mansion. She looked like she’d been shocked into a state of almost

complete objectification, like a mannequin that could be looked at, moved, or taken apart on a whim.

“Why not,” Io asked sharply, not angrily, but annoyed, as if someone had just questioned him about using the color orange in, well, just about anything.

Vince looked from Io to the pile of girl in the corner and back again. Someone had removed her bloody pants and had given her an oversized men’s shirt to wear, which remained unbuttoned, showing off her sexy black underwear. Even from across the room she smelled of blood and urine and no one had bothered to wash her face, which was stained by black eyeshadow, mud, and more dried blood. She looked like the orphan of a holocaust, or a zombie in a very hip new rock video.

Vince was gripped with the dizzying unreality of it all. He had watched her grow up, in parallel worlds, of course, on the covers of newspapers, books, and magazines, on televisions and computers, ever since he could remember. He felt like he knew her, almost, as if she were a younger sister, but somehow still distant enough to be a source of sexual fascination. “Don’t worry,” he had tried to reassure her on the private jet, where she sat catatonically, staring down at the clouds. “We won’t hurt you.”

He had no idea if that were true or not, but he said it anyway, because that is what one said in such a situation. He was pretty certain they weren’t going to hurt her; if that were the intention, wouldn’t they have done so, already? Still, she had just seen them casually slaughter twenty or thirty people. It was silly to tell her not to worry.

Hell, Vince was worried.

“They’ll look for her.”

“So?”

“I mean they won’t stop until they catch us.”

“That is the point, silly—to capture their attention. Do you think the end of the world can be brought about without anyone noticing?”

“I thought you said the end of the world had already come?”

“It has. I am just letting everyone know it.”

Io was inconsistent, as usual. He always claimed that he was inconsistent on purpose, that it was a form of revolt, a method of radical

deconstruction, of shaking up the totalitarianism of the narrative order, whatever exactly he meant by that, if anything.

“It seems too soon, that’s all.”

“How long do you think we should wait? The world has been waiting—*I have been waiting* for five-hundred years.”

Vince was used to this kind of talk. Io often spoke for the world and claimed the world was speaking for him. He was megalomaniacal, but in a coy way that left one wondering if it weren’t all some kind of joke that you weren’t getting.

“I’m just not sure it makes sense...”

“Sense, sense..” Io jumped out of the chair, waving his wet fingernails around theatrically. “Why are you still talking to me about making sense?” He stormed to the corner where the girl was sitting and yanked her across the floor by her arm. She didn’t resist or even try to get up. Vince wanted to intercede but he didn’t: the suddenness, the fury of Io’s movements, like his speech, his sex, his thoughts, blocked all spontaneous response, numbed, paralyzed. He was crouched behind her now, holding her head to one side by the hair, exposing her neck and, in particular, an artery that suddenly seemed all too prominent, all too vulnerable.

He was holding a small blade, or rather, he was suddenly wearing a kind of ring equipped with a small blade that seemed to be made of titanium. It curved at the end, like a cruel metallic fingernail. Vince had seen him—and the rest of them—“trash” victims before. He had seen them do it casually, without so much as interrupting a conversation, as if opening a can of diet soda.

“I’ll kill her right now, just to prove my senselessness, to illustrate my total identification with chaos, I’ll kill her even before the story properly begins, for no other reason than to deliberately defy sense.”

“Io, please...for crissakes.”

The white-haired boy froze for a second, and then his lips parted in a sexy grin. “I should,” he said evenly, “just for that dumb remark alone, strangle her with a foot or two of her own extracted intestine.” And for a second or so, Vince thought he would do just that. But then Io closed the hand with the ring and pushed the girl over. She lay there, unmoving, in a fetal position and one of the nine or so cats in the room sauntered over to sniff at her, curious.

“But I won’t kill her,” Io said, taking his throne once again in the ratty armchair. “And do you know why?”

“Why?” Vince said, knowing that if he didn’t ask, Io would never answer the question.

“Behind you,” Io said, “on the wall, there is a spider. It walked down towards the floor. If it had walked up...” He drew a finger across his throat and made a *gakking* sound. “You see, dear Vincent, I am a roll of the dice. A cut of the cards. Oh my look,” he said, suddenly examining his hand with a pretty pout. “All this philosophizing has smudged my polish.”

Nikka was in her coffin, speeding through the starless night. That is what she called the black armored customized limousine in which she sat, alone in the back seat, her naked body as untouchable as liquid nitrogen. She gazed out the tinted window, the weapon-proof glass as close as she got to the real world nowadays, and felt as if she were visiting life from another dimension.

The fact was that the life she lived now, though more fulfilling than any she might have imagined, really didn’t belong to her at all; it was the product, it sometimes seemed, of someone else’s imagination. In this life, she touched no one—and no one touched her: she was perfect, self-contained, invincible. She was like one of those perpetual motion devices that once given a single initial impetus would keep on going, without the need of any further aid, or inspiration.

She’d had another life once; she caught glimpses of it on occasion, at odd times usually, in the middle of dictating a memo, pausing for the voice recognition software to catch up, or while coming out of anesthesia. She remembered a man, and even a child, and she was reasonably certain that they were connected to her, but in exactly what way, she couldn’t be certain. There were other oddities, too: an irrational fear of water, a repulsion for a certain kind of tracking light, and a level of ambiguity towards oral sensation that would have seemed abnormal in anyone less studiously and determinedly abnormal. And there was pain—a brief, searing, inconclusive pain that stood between her and whatever had been separated from her on the other side of the selective amnesia that she interposed between her personal history and her world duty. Whatever lay

on the other side of that wall was too horrible to think about and so Nikka followed the simplest and most straightforward of strategies: she didn't think about it. She might have been a woman who one day walked out into the ocean and kept on walking until she disappeared into the waves. She might have been; but she wasn't.

“Show me something ugly,” Nikka said.

Her driver was a government killer she had rescued from a disgrace so unredeemable his only option had been suicide—or to find a manner of living that insured he'd never have to look a living soul in the face again. He lived as solitary as a monk, in a self-imposed isolation even greater than that of his mistress, his only function to ferry her on these three a.m. jaunts. At her command, he steered the coffin north through the most hellish parts of the city.

Nikka gazed out the window momentarily distracted by crumbling buildings, demonic graffiti, uncollected detritus, and the forlorn piles of humanity leaking onto broken pavements. What city was this—what difference did it make?

The route had been pre-planned, of course; it was one of several computer-generated tours selected at random each night by a self-activated logarithm in order to thwart assassins from other departments, as well as assorted terrorist and revolutionaries. Within these pre-planned routes there were enough pre-planned variations so that the mathematical permutations were virtually endless and the journeys would seem unique each night if Nikka lived for a thousand years. It was, perhaps, not even a real city that she passed through at the moment, but a simulation so authentic as to be indistinguishable from the real thing—an archetypal city of man's soul. She had hoped to see some spontaneous violence tonight of one sort or another. Sometimes an “event” was planned for her, a shooting, or beating, or rape. But Nikka found that these staged happenings, as bloody and fatal as they usually were, did not bring the same excitement and frisson as the ones that happened “accidentally,” although she had left strict instructions that she never be told the difference, because she knew there wasn't any.

For some reason, Nikka thought of Mahoney and how she had plucked that killer, too, out of obscurity and saved him from death, although of a different kind than the driver. She had surrounded herself with men, hard men, men who'd lost their souls and had no consciences.

These men formed an inner circle of charmed monoliths that forbade the approach of both friends and enemies. Nikka had obsessively rid herself of any feminine influences and cleansed her physical and psychic space to contain her own pure female energy in its most unadulterated and most potent form.

“Excuse me, Ms. Seven.”

“Yes.”

“We are being followed.”

There was, of course, no other car in sight. The source could have been any number of remote surveillance systems, a satellite, perhaps, or an implanted bio-bug, or even a psychic in trance a continent away. The car’s defense system had picked it up, but Nikka was sensitive enough herself to have already detected the intimate, dictatorial, invisible sense of violation that was the unmistakable symptom of being “seen.” She knew, however, that it was no ordinary satellite or bug or psychic watching her. She had been under observation for some time now. She did not yet know by whom, nor why, but she sank back in the seat of the coffin and let the disgustingly familiar sensation of being watched flood over her, and she reached down between her legs, and touched herself.

“Show me,” she said to the driver, feeling an incestuous contact that she hadn’t felt since she didn’t remember when, “something that breaks the heart.”