

LAZARUS KANE & THE BENEVOLENT TERRORISTS

Part One: "The path to hell..."

Chapter 1: In which many merry meetings transpire.

Chapter 2: In which someone purchases an iced tea.

Chapter 3: In which a steam iron is put to improper usage.

Chapter 4: A trip to the museum leads to a promotion.

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Interlude:

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Part Two: "... paved with good intentions."

Chapter 7: More hot pies!

Chapter 8: In which both baseballs and hobby-horses play a large part.

Chapter 9: In which terrible secrets are exchanged.

Chapter 10: Denouement.

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For Doctor Patricia Reiff, the most humane and apt practitioner of any profession I have ever encountered.

And for Nathan, my “keeper of the possible”.

And, as always, for my husband Stormy who teaches me more things in a day than most people learn in a year—truly, Beauty, I am lost without you.

PART ONE: “THE PATH TO HELL...”

ONE

Davis felt things slipping away from him almost at once; from nearly the moment he arrived at his new place of employment that Monday morning, things gradually became more and more surreal.

Maybe I expected too much???

He'd arrived in Arizona only days before, secured a modest apartment, unpacked his clothing and the various tools of his trade and tried to familiarize himself with the neighborhood.

Summertime, just a few years shy of the new "roaring two-thousand-and-twenties" and the young Detective suddenly found himself thousands of miles from home and surrounded by a heat he could taste in every nerve in his flesh. Local denizens of Arizona claim it has only two seasons—Spring and Summer. Spring lasts from October to March. For the remainder of the year the state of Arizona isn't so much a tourist destination as an open-air kiln... baking the sand, clay, and people who reside in the vicinity.

Detective Davis had no time to get his bearings at all before Monday arrived and he had to locate his new place of employment: The Gilbert Police Department. He arrived late, of course, and the Detective they had assigned Davis for orientation looked both unpleasant and unpleased.

Detective Rawlins, a man of few words with a protruding squared jaw, led the new recruit past the rows of desks which appeared somehow too clean, past banks of phones which remained utterly silent, past the dispatcher who remained motionless in a chair. Occasionally Rawlins nodded perfunctorily to other officers they encountered, but he made no introductions and didn't comment on anything they passed.

Davis looked around and took the place in slowly; the Gilbert Police Department failed to match up to any image movies or television had implanted in his brain. This is a police station? It's too damned clean.

Where's the grime? Where's the crime? Not even a hooker on a bench somewhere or a crack-head passed out on the floor. No one screaming? Even the phones aren't ringing.

It looks like the dispatcher is asleep at the switch too.

The "tour" continued on in without a word until just after the two men crested the stairs to the second landing. They passed by a closed office door; the sign on the door read: Captain Robert Holbrook Connor. From under Captain Connor's door wafted a familiar smell—a smell both easily definable and just as clearly out of place. Davis couldn't help but mention it aloud.

"Isn't that..?" Davis asked his escort and added an extra sniffing sound.

"Yah," came the reply.

True, Arizona had passed medical marijuana usage laws recently (and was even toying with the idea of recreational availability) but smoking it right out in the open? And in a police station, of all places! More and more the building Davis tried to acquaint himself with seemed less and less familiar.

Davis wore street-clothes and so did the detective showing him around. In a small station like Gilbert, you could not find a uniformed officer or even a uniform most of the time. Davis had worn plainclothes since his promotion to detective back in Flint, but still kept his old uniform as most cops did out of sentiment.

Detective William Rawlins continued to aim Davis down the hallway, away from the captain's office. A laconic man of thinning hair and quiet habits, Rawlins had a sharp intellect but little to say.

In a tone that required a reasonable reply, Davis demanded, "The captain smokes weed in his office and everyone around here is okay with that???" In his mind he struggled to make sense of things. According to everything he understood people just didn't smoke dope in the middle of the average police station. He began to wonder if it was some sort of test for the new recruit to measure his abilities or possibly his integrity.

Rawlins interrupted the other man's thoughts with a loud snort.

Davis tried again, "Seriously... what the hell is going on here?"

"First day?" Rawlins asked in a strange and significant tone. He already knew the answer, having been tapped earlier that morning to welcome this new arrival, show him around the precinct house and give him the usual rulebooks, fliers, and sensitivity awareness pamphlets. Rawlins had even assigned the younger man a locker-- though he'd accomplished most of those feats largely by pointing and shrugging.

Davis registered confusion, "You know it's my first day!"

"Quitting tomorrow?" Rawlins asked seriously.

Davis considered that for a long moment. Two years of criminology at Arizona State University, the time spent at the police academy, the months of interviewing and applications (as well as psychological and pharmacological testing) all to get here. Would he flush all that down the drain in an instant if he pried into this matter too closely?

He thought a second longer and decided that discretion remained the best possible course until he understood the situation better.

Davis told his surly escort hesitantly, "There are some questions people just shouldn't ask..." He tried his best to sound as offhanded as possible and gave every indication he stood on the verge of forgetting he'd ever asked a question.

"Right," said Rawlins. He gestured with his thumb down the hallway.

About two hours later, Davis sat at his brand new desk (new to him) and fidgeted with the release mechanism for the top drawer. The drawer continued to stick despite his best efforts and he could not see where anything rubbed or hindered it from moving freely. In an entire building of spotless, eerily-untouched equipment he somehow had the one desk with a sticky drawer.

When he got the drawer to open at last he discovered supplies left behind by some previous occupant. He tried to force it closed, wondering abstractedly if it would ever open again but not much caring. When Davis looked up from the drawer for a moment he found Captain Robert Holbrook Connor looking down on him like a gnarled oak tree—impossible to mistake the man for anyone else considering the many pictures

of him with various officials and dignitaries littering the environs.

In surprise, Davis accidentally surrendered his car keys into the drawer just as it finally slammed closed.

"Sir?" Davis stammered.

"My office. You've seen it over there?" Connor waited.

"Yes sir!" Davis replied, overloud. He did not mention that he had also smelled the office.

"So be a good lad and wait in there for me."

Davis got up and walked away from his desk. As he did so, he heard the captain give a number of orders in quick succession. Davis took his time crossing the room so he could overhear.

"Everyone out on the floor, please," Captain Connor called to the others as Davis languidly passed through the room. In a few moments some four officers (nearly half his department) assembled before him.

"I want a unit over at the Carl's Junior on Gilbert Road," Connor began. Recalling something he'd nearly forgotten he added, "Send Donleavy. Tell him he can find the guy in or about the dumpster in the back. And tell him the man is armed and deceptively fast-- I don't want any slip-ups.

"Baker and Rodriguez I want you to get over to Judge Wally-- yes I know he's fishing in the Salt River this week. Find him and get him to sign a search warrant on this address," he handed a slip of paper to a nearby officer. "If you can't find him in any of his usual spots then call his wife because Elveera always knows right where he is. Tell him we expect to find guns at this address I've just given you-- a lot of them.

"I wish old Wally would start carrying a phone, but some folks never accept all this marvelous new technology that's killing us..."

The captain didn't expect a laugh at this irony and his crew didn't disappoint him.

"Carly, you and Bill get over to..." Connor turned and walked towards his office. He nearly tripped over Davis, who continued to slowly inch his way towards that door the whole time Connor had spoken.

The captain opened his office a second, ignoring Davis entirely, and checked an address with an unseen person inside his office. From within came a weary call of confirmation.

Captain Connor walked back to stand in front of the gathered detectives. "Go check that address out. Today is Monday. My information says we're going to find a major chop-shop in operation there tonight about eight."

Detective Bill Sommers smiled wickedly. "That's right near Tent City, Captain. Should we call the Sheriff's Department for backup?"

"Sheriff Joe? Are you nuts? God bless, and keep that man... far away from any real police work. If he had his way he'd barricade the entire state and search every car that passes.

"Call Phoenix P.D. They're still reasonable."

"What about jurisdiction?" Carly wanted to know.

"Tell them it's a statewide taskforce on vehicle theft. Make something up. They won't care. Besides, the guys you're after have a public lot three blocks from this very station where they're reselling the stolen cars. That makes it our business, no?"

"Right, Captain."

Davis nearly had the handle of the captain's office in hand and prepared to enter. He'd heard enough.

The meeting seemed about to dissolve but a soft voice put in, "What about the Stansfield case?"

A soft groan went through those assembled and a number of faces turned away. Connor sighed and turned to the female detective and started, "Carly..."

Detective Carly Ramirez intoned a litany softly, "Little girl kidnapped in Scottsdale? Man in a white van with Gilbert plates seen lingering for days in the area? Never heard of again? Ring any bells???"

"That case," the captain said wearily, "is a year old. Hell, one of the local rags just did a morbid sort of anniversary of the thing in the headlines. It gets moved to open/unsolved. You know the procedure."

The female detective tried to stand her ground but something about her expression clearly expected the response she'd received.

"I'm sorry, Carly. It's not even really our case and we couldn't turn up any leads. Let it go."

Detective Davis could see how crestfallen the female detective felt; this woman couldn't hide much with a broad honest face like the one she sported beneath her tightly tangled ebon locks. Carly Ramirez clearly took all failures of justice as personal defeats. Davis could understand that; his past had cemented such lessons in place beyond possibility of forgetting.

Davis walked into the captain's private office and sat down in one of the chairs facing the desk. He noted the chair behind the desk already contained an occupant—who lounged in the high-backed leather seat as if the office belonged to him. From outside, Davis heard the meeting end.

"Well don't just stand there people. Move it! We're going to settle out some major criminal activity today--so much for the quiet of a small town police department."

Connor turned on his heels and walked towards his office. He closed the door behind him.

The scene that greeted him was not unexpected but Connor still chuckled silently to see how flagrantly Davis reacted to the room's other occupant. Davis stared at Connor in irritated perplexity.

"I take it you've been introduced," Connor said to Davis.

"We haven't," said an oddly dressed man sitting behind the desk in Connor's own chair.

The man in the captain's chair had a gaunt face, laughing brown eyes and very long hair for any man who made an honest living. He had long, thin fingers which he splayed over his mouth for a moment. His clothing defied cursory examination and the fashion of the last few centuries. He reeked of peppermint, patchouli and marijuana.

Connor pointed, "Lazarus Kane? Detective Miles Davis, no relation."

Kane smiled.

"He didn't have the look of a jazzman. I bet he listens to country."

Davis, who did prefer Dwight Yoakum to even the coolest of jazz riffs, said nothing. He instead watched intently as the strangely dressed man produced a small pouch from which he poured a pungent green pile

onto the blotter of the desk. Sifting through the pile carefully, Kane removed some odd bits he didn't like or which were seeds or stems, and then produced a small book of green rolling papers.

"Absinthe, today," he told the captain.

"I prefer the smell of the peach papers myself," Holbrook sniffed the air as if in offense.

"An unrefined palate I see. That is simply the sweetest flavored paper they make."

Davis said nothing. He watched as Kane rolled what anyone would have to admit looked like a perfect cigarette from the pile of green on the desk. Kane swept the excess grains onto the floor haphazardly and in a quick motion had the joint lit. He inhaled deeply upon it.

"Must you?" Connor asked with a slight weariness. His mood seemed to echo Davis' own silent discomfort but with a bit more acceptance and tolerance of the inevitable.

"Oh I must. I must. It's not actually too bad today but you never know when it might flare up. Call it a preventative. Mark Twain used to drink two shots of scotch every night as a preventative of toothache... he said he'd never had one and didn't plan on it either. We can all learn from his example."

Captain Connor snorted.

Kane shuffled the blotter around on the desk a moment as if perfectly centering it and then asked theatrically, "And while we have famous names on our lips, what imports the nomination of this man, dear Holly? This Miles Davis who does not like jazz..."

Connor looked uncomfortable. He replied, "Shakespeare again? Tell me you aren't stuck on him this week. I preferred the time you got caught up by Tennyson. It did make for very long phone calls, though... and Shakespeare is interminable."

"So I shouldn't telephone you late at night and start off by telling you we are in the summer of our discontent or any other such abridgements? What a pity. If you insist on Tennyson I can do you 'Lady of Shallot' really quick right now if you like," Kane offered.

Connor snorted. "Pass. Davis, here, is your new Friday-- you may recall you are currently between drivers."

Davis looked utterly dumbfounded upon hearing this.

"Oh that..." Kane glossed over his single-handed discovery and removal of one of the most corrupt officers ever to work on any police force (a man who'd worked quietly at his crimes and avoided drawing any notice for many years-- until he wound up with Kane as his near-constant companion for about two weeks) with those simple words.

Connor looked at Kane significantly.

Kane took another deep inhale of very fragrant marijuana and replied in a cloud, "Well this fellow has to be better than that—I know all about him. One of our modern children of divorce, father suffered an accident of some sort? Entered the academy to right wrongs and do all that sort of heroic nonsense.

"Frankly I can't be bothered wading through all that just now. I'll go wait outside. I'm sure he has questions; they always do. Do put him in the picture, Holly."

Kane stood to leave, then had a thought, "What color?" He adjusted his odd garb and paused to wait for the answer.

Connor asked Davis, "What color is your car?"

Davis, too stunned to think properly, blurted out, "White."

Kane nodded.

"Bye. Call you later, Holly, if I think of anything else."

Connor winced again at being called "Holly".

Kane smiled and walked out with an oddly deliberate and slumping gait that somehow seemed natural for him yet incomplete in some unfathomable way. The joint of marijuana dangled from his lips.

"Doesn't he want to know the type of car?" Davis asked.

A call from outside the office loudly answered, "It's intolerably rude to talk about people behind their back until they are at least as far away from you as will prevent them overhearing. And I know that white is only the most common car color in the state but I'll find it. It won't even require a tenth of my mental agility.

"Now if you could only find that matchbook at the back of your desk drawer... that would be something!" Kane added enigmatically.

"I suppose you want to know what all that was about," Connor started, once he'd closed the door to his office and taken his own seat behind the desk. He carefully flicked a few remaining pieces of marijuana into the trashcan.

Davis glared at his superior.

The door flung open again without warning and the odd little man returned, "And find out if there are any hog or pig farms in the area of size or note. I need that as soon as possible." Without awaiting any reply the door closed just as quickly.

"What the..." Davis cut himself off.

"You can speak freely," Connor told the other man.

Davis sat and fumed in silence, not knowing quite where to begin.

"I mean it. Say what's on your mind."

Davis tried to put everything he'd seen or thought since his arrival at the station into one concise query.

"What the fuck was that???"

"That was Lazarus Kane. Kane's your new assignment. Didn't I make that clear already?"

"Okay. I thought I signed up to learn detective work. I know it's my first day and I don't know a damned thing about how you do things yet, but I had no idea modern law enforcement duties included serving as a taxi-cab for the local potheads."

"Kane is a valuable resource," the captain told him with just a hint of resentment over the fact, "Kane is probably the most valuable resource we have at our disposal. We haven't needed to use our forensics team more than a few times in the last year."

Davis took that in. Then he dismissed it as ludicrous.

What is this place anyway? A police station or a USA movie? No one is that good. What was that shit he had on??? He looked like Brad Pitt in a vampire movie! He must be sweating balls in all those layers of clothing."

Connor looked the recruit up and down in appraisal.

Davis looked a few years less than the twenty-six years his personnel file indicated. Connor knew the younger man hadn't seen enough to become jaded yet. Davis' hair remained a sandy brownish-blond that showed no signs of the impending gray that Connor knew came with the job they had both chosen. The clear blue eyes confronting the Captain had a sharp openness that betrayed the other man's emotions in a way that said "newbie".

Overall, Davis looked fresh-faced and eager as any newly commissioned detective aching to make a difference in the world. He badly required some seasoning and a taste of the realities of criminology and Connor wondered how hard Davis would make those lessons on himself or if the man might crack under pressure before he ever wised up.

Captain Connor knew all too well that the realities of police work in a modern world insured moral compromise-- down that path lay despair for the unprepared mind. Giving in to this demand or that of the public, the Mayor, the City Council, fast-talking spokesmen and lawyers... it all lead to a carious progression of rot that ate away at the best of men. The kind of moral certainty Davis exuded often proved detrimental, and the sort of passion which underlay it could drive even a good man to extremes.

The captain had to consider again if Davis was the right man for this job??? Did Connor have the right to drop him or anyone into Lazarus Kane's insanity? Would the young detective learn to shed some of his rectitude in favor of expanding his awareness? Would Kane carve him up into little pieces for sport?

Who could ever know for sure about anything in life?

And was the man staring at him right now? Yes, Davis eyed him most closely; Connor had spent too much time gathering his private thoughts and the other man had noticed.

Aloud, Connor said blandly, "Kane's a special case."

"Obviously."

"He's a very formal man and he doesn't appreciate some realities of this world in which we live. I'm not going to make any excuses for him. He is what he is. I can see your reaction to all this but go ahead and finish up. You were telling me what's on your mind, Davis..."

Clearing his throat, as if he'd previously prepared the remarks, Davis said in a tone of feigned awe, "This place is unreal. Unreal. You send Frankenstein to drag me around the building grunting at people, while the rest of you all wait for some drug-addict to come along and tell you who to arrest? Doesn't anyone work in this place when Kane's out of the building?

"The phones don't ring, no lines of people swearing out complaints or making reports. This place isn't even possible. And that stuff a few minutes ago, where I wind up sitting in an opium den with last year's winner of the World's Most Ridiculous Get-up Award... someone who you want me to personally drive around the city while he runs whatever sort of errands a lunatic has in his daily planner..."

Davis ran out of steam, recalled that he addressed his superior, and modulated his tone with care to show some respect along with his anger and sarcasm, "I'm sorry, sir. I just don't like being jerked around because I'm the rookie."

"That what you think is going on here?" Connor shook his head dismissively, "Look, I could tell you a lot of things. I could try and explain it all to you. But that would take a lot of time and I'd have to confront a few things I don't really like to dwell on overmuch. We've all had to make compromises to get where we are.

"Let me put it this way... you're aware of our crime statistics?"

Davis nodded. "It's one of the reasons I came here. You have one of the lowest unsolved crime rates of any similar city in the country."

Privately Davis had to wonder if this community actually had any crime, or needed a vast and largely abandoned police station at all. He'd seen maybe ten people in the whole place, and none of them seemed to be occupied in solving much of anything.

Mentally, he corrected himself hastily: *Oh wait, I forgot... every now and then some freak in gothic drag comes in and gives the captain a wish-list and magically the detectives appear and go arrest people.*

"You afraid to be in the line of fire in the drug wars in Phoenix?" Connor goaded.

"No. I'm interested in seeing how a town with proper enforcement does things," Davis countered.

"Good answer, Davis. Well we're not like the big city and we don't have their budget or staff. We use the methods at hand. But before Lazarus Kane moved here we had one of the highest unsolved crime rates of any city with similar population. He's been donating his time and services to us for years now. We need him."

Davis tried to splutter a reply to that; clearly the captain engaged in wishful thinking or outright nonsense making such a claim.

Connor looked the man over again as if deciding something crucial. "I'm placing Lazarus Kane in your custody. You're to see to it that no harm comes to him."

"Like him getting arrested for smoking pot in the middle of a police station???" Davis voiced the thought his mind had screamed at him since early in the day.

"Yes. Exactly like that," Connor snapped sharply. "This isn't funny. I'm giving you one of the most important assignments in this little precinct."

Davis couldn't believe his ears. "The new guy gets the plum jobs? Since when?"

"Since Kane asked for you. He knows all about you."

"Then why didn't he know what color car I drive?" Davis retorted.

"Just give me a break, okay? I know it's not routine. Routine doesn't always get the job done; Kane does. Can you trust me for a few days and just follow a simple order? Or do I have to ask you to write your letter of resignation before your paperwork as a new employee even gets filed?"

Connor let the threat hang in mid-air a few seconds and then repeated, "Trust me. It's important."

Davis shook his head in negation. "I trust me. Everyone else has to earn it. I don't like threats either--not much of a way to begin a new relationship."

"Three days. I'm asking you for three days," Captain Connor said heavily. "What's three days to the rest of your life?"

"Fine, whatever. I'll do it. I'll babysit this weirdo for a few days if you insist my job depends on it. But after that I'm going to want some answers... or I may start talking to a few people in the press, or the D.A.'s office, about how you people really do things around here."

Connor nodded. "You'll find him in the lot with your car. He doesn't like our squad cars much so use your own. We'll cover your gas. Get out there; take him anywhere he wants to go. Do what he asks you to do... within reason. Keep him safe."

Within reason? What about today counts as reasonable???

Davis stood and exited without another word. His manner showed his mood more clearly than any further verbal expression of his confusion and anger could manifest.

He went out to his own desk and fumbled to get his keys out of the sticking drawer. In frustration he pulled harder than he should and the whole drawer came out in his hands. Paperclips and paperwork, scissors and keys, a tape-dispenser and some rubber bands all clashed to the floor with variegated volumes of loudness. Then a matchbook dropped.

The matchbook had fallen out of the track which guided the drawer. It had stuck in the groove of the drawer at the back of the drawer itself and wedged itself unevenly into the sliding mechanism. The cover on the matchbook read: Lucky Strike.

Upon replacing the drawer, Davis found that the rails now slid quite freely with no obstructions.

How the hell did Kane know about the matchbook?

Angrily the rookie detective stuffed the matches and the other items back into the drawer and slammed it. He kept his keys in his hand. A few moments later he walked to the station's exit feeling nearly homicidal.

Detective Miles Davis (no relation) stepped out into the blistering July heat. If there had been a thermometer handy it would have read, "Ouch!" or something in the six-score region of temperature. He mopped his brow disconsolately with his hand and wiped the sweat on his pants.

He spotted his car across the lot-- near the back where available spaces remained. He saw no sign of Kane, though.

Davis fumbled for his keys and hit the button on his keychain that unlocked the door and disabled his alarm with a loud chirruping sound. Davis had the driver's-side door halfway open when he realized that the passenger's seat contained an occupant.

Kane said, "Well don't just stand there! It's deadly hot in here; I'm going to get a headache or faint or something! Come in and turn on the air."

Davis stood hunched, half in and half out of the car, in complete surprise.

How had the other man obtained entry without disturbing the alarm? How had Kane even picked out his car among all the others which sat on this common municipal lot? The lot handled not only the police station but also the traffic from the Motor Vehicles Division across the street and the Department of Economic Security office on the far corner; it contained hundreds of vehicles at any given moment.

"Did you throw your back out?" Kane called in an irritated tone. Then he repeated, "I'm hot, I tell you. Get in and turn on the air conditioning. I want to go to Mill Avenue."

Davis could not understand how, from the well-planned life he had lead, and the reasoned steps he had taken along the way, he ever ended up at this moment. The oppression of the summer heat convinced finally him to move and he got into the car. He turned on the motor, the air conditioning and the radio.

Waylon Jennings began to croon something about loss and despair.

"Off!" Kane shouted.

Davis turned to look at the man. Making demands before the car even pulled out of the parking lot?

"I like it on when I drive," he told Kane.

"OFF!" Kane repeated even louder, shouting as a child would. Then he pinched the top of his nose with his right thumb and forefinger and began rocking back and forth in his seat, keening.

"This is ridiculous," Davis said with gritted teeth.

"Awoo. Awooooo. AWOOO!" Kane continued to keen and rock.

Davis shut off the radio.

Kane did not stop rocking but he discontinued his vocal sonata. He kept his nose pinched off and closed his eyes.

"Well what's wrong now?" Davis demanded in the silence.

Kane responded as if suddenly drained of life in a dull and nasal tone, "Mill Avenue. Park near the Lotions & Potions shop."

"Why are we..?"

"Mill Avenue," echoed a pinched-off reply. Then, "I have to meditate now."

Kane closed his eyes more firmly and squeezed his nose and did not reply any further.

Davis had a thought. The thought went like this: Lazarus *Kane is a major psycho asshole.*

The young cop had another thought; this one about his new boss. This second thought involved tired old bureaucrats torturing the "new kid" with insane or pointless assignments. He imagined everyone at the Gilbert Police Department having a good laugh at his expense sometime in the next few days, and then the camaraderie as they all shared in the humor of the thing.

Right now, it didn't seem very funny but a good practical joke never does seem all that hilarious to the victim of said joke. Well, Davis would show them all. He'd take his medicine. He might even manage to find the whole thing funny someday.

They rode in silence for twenty minutes towards Tempe in morning traffic. Towards the end of the ride, Kane's eyes opened and he made a show of coming out of some supposedly altered or enlightened state of being.

"Good. We're nearly there. I feel much better."

"Joy," Davis replied dully not even bothering to feign enthusiasm.

"No I don't feel that yet. But hang on a moment and I think I will." Lazarus Kane produced his pouch and papers from inside a pocket of his purple vest.

Davis nearly swerved into another car; the driver of a yellow Volkswagen gave him a one-fingered salute and screamed something incomprehensible at him. He told Kane, "Don't even think about it."

"Wait until the car stops, you mean? So I won't spill it everywhere with the bumps and jars of the road? Funny bit of road back there, actually. Looked perfectly smooth at first sight, but the way it nearly heaved us into that pair of insurance agents from Iowa in the Volkswagen... you never know."

"I swerved because of you," Davis pointed out in a tone of authority.

"Well it's most kind of you to look after me but I am sure I can manage. I'll just use the back of the glove-box door..."

Kane popped open the compartment. Davis always kept it locked on account of the spare pistol inside. It opened all the same. Apparently Kane had handled that lock along with the doors and the alarm system in the five minutes it had taken Davis to join him outside in the lot.

"That isn't what I meant," Davis growled.

"Let's all keep civil tones if we're going to be a team, shall we?" lilted the man in the passenger's seat.

Kane used the flat surface in front of him like a tray and rolled another expert cigarette quickly-- spilling almost nothing.

Before Davis could raise further protest the joint burst into flames, courtesy of a silver lighter Davis still hadn't seen clearly yet; Kane had made it appear and vanish with such fluidity that the lighter seemed an extension of his thin and delicate fingers somehow. The smell from the joint became swiftly overpowering and Davis opened the windows.

"You don't like to clambake?" Kane asked with a laugh. "Very well. But turn up the air. I'll faint, I truly will, from the sticky-heat." No matter what Kane said it somehow rang as if he quoted someone else and the other man grew more irritated with the air of pretense as the literal air clouded with curling columns of marijuana smoke.

Davis grunted and turned the air conditioning up to maximum. He imagined he could feel the pot seeping into his hair and clothing, branding him with that unmistakable lingering odor which never quite faded to a trained nose like his own.

Downtown Tempe sprawled before Detective Miles Davis in a wonder of shops, and people out walking, and street musicians, and college students on bicycles. He located the lotion shop, across from Border's bookstore. He parked behind the place, in a public lot.

Kane continued to smoke (with the air running and the windows down) until he had reduced the large tube he'd rolled down to a nub. He stuck the nub into the ashtray and removed his seatbelt.

Kane stepped out of the car.

Davis emptied the ashtray into his hand and locked the doors and got out. He poured the contents of the ashtray down the first sewer grating he spied as he walked closely behind Kane.

Kane didn't seem to notice; he shambled along obliviously with his odd deliberate steps. He rumbled his way forward like an assembly of chipmunks who had crawled into an overstuffed bag of prop-clothing for a Victorian film. He came to a restaurant with pink-and-white checkered tablecloths clearly visible through the front window; a sign on the door said: Romaggio's. Kane stepped inside as if he owned the place.

Davis caught the door in his hand; Kane hadn't held it for him.

The fledgling cop followed along in Kane's wake, sweat rolled down behind his ear and onto his neck; even as little as a minute spent outside in this temperature made a person instantly bead up with profuse sweat.

How could Kane stand to go about in velvet and silk with a topcoat and vest on? Madness!

He heard Kane say, "Turkish coffee. And tell Marie it's to be 'lightning' today. So tell her not to play 'colorless' or she'll get whumped. And yes I know she loves her Pidgeys and Pidgeots; she will just have to learn to do without them at times. True genius is never trapped in a rut; foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

That quote Davis recognized for a once: Emerson.

Kane staked out a table nearest the counter which afforded a view of the entire restaurant and the street. It also had an unobstructed view of the area behind the main counter where they prepared the food.

Davis felt no obligation to join the other man. He sat across the place at a table near the far wall. When a small, dark-haired woman with delicate nails and a warm smile asked him his order he meant to glare and send her away but Davis found her disarmingly friendly somehow and managed a smile.

He thought a moment, "Something cold. Sweet."

"I know just the thing," she said.

She went behind the counter and started chopping something. It definitely had mangos in it. Possibly pineapple and white grapes too. Whatever it contained, Davis found it delicious.

Sometime during the preparations, a small child with long blond ponytails sticking out of a white hat had appeared. She sat across from Lazarus Kane at Kane's table and looked up at him impishly with some object in her hand. Close inspection, and her young hands dropping some of it, revealed she held a pack of cards-- each protected in its own plastic slip.

From one of the many pockets in his outfit, the man across from her had also produced a pack of cards. These he handled with dexterous flourishes as he shuffled them. Kane's cards also had plastic protectors on them.

"You think you've got me," he told his young adversary.

"Oh I know I've got you, Kane."

They shuffled and dealt with obviously practiced and familiar motions.

Kane tried to sound casual as he asked, "You picked rock didn't you?"

She smiled her impish smile. She swatted at a few strands of hair which got stuck on her ear as she nodded to him; the hairs slowly fell to the floor.

"Well in that case, let me bring out my first defender. Lickitung."

The impish smile faded for a second. "Meanie!"

"You may notice he's resistant to rock. Better hope you get a 'gust of wind' card pretty quick because at a retreat cost of three energy cards I don't have any plans to move him back to my bench any time soon."

"You said lightning!" she protested.

He turned over his benched minions and they all had yellow pictures upon them. "But count on any deck to have at least a few colorless scattered in it, yes? Your own leaf deck has a Snorlax, doesn't it?"

She nodded.

"Lucky shuffle..." she added suspiciously.

"Wasn't it? Bonne chance, mon amie," Kane told the young girl indulgently. At no time did he adopt a patronizing tone; clearly he maintained a stance of parity and treated his opponent as a serious and adult threat throughout the session.

They played quickly and the game soon ended. Then they switched decks with each other and began the process anew. Forty-five minutes passed.

Davis decided to order lunch.

Two old men came in and took a table right next to Kane's. After a few minutes the animation of the game next to them had caught their attention and they began watching avidly as if spectating a grand masters' chess tournament.

Davis resisted any temptation to join the growing circle as the restaurant filled up a bit.

When the blond girl in the hat, name of Ivy, used a stunning move to beat Kane with his own deck, she cried out happily in her triumph and one or two people applauded briefly but enthusiastically.

At one point a man (who introduced himself to Davis as "Rabbi Avram Ben Zion Ben Avram" in passing) sat down at Kane's table to watch the play up close. He and Kane spoke like old friends for a while about the rabbi's upcoming trip to "The Holy Land". Then the bearded man excused himself when his order was completed and bagged; he left Kane's table with a final admonition to the little man that it looked like Ivy had cooked Kane's goose good and proper.

"Well you got me and that's sure," Kane told the little girl in agreement with his departing friend. "But I'm about played-out for the day. Same time next week?"

"I'm not going anywhere," she told him in defiant but happy tones.

"Good. Don't. I need you," Kane replied.

Kane turned to Davis, "Pay these fine people, and don't be stingy."

Then Kane looked over at one of the old men seated at a nearby table and asked if he could borrow the newspaper. The old man gave him his copy of the Arizona Republic and told Kane he'd finished with it.

Davis snarled quietly. *Pay this jerk's check???*

But then the words of his superior rang in his mind: **Do what he says within reason.**

Davis couldn't make a case for disobeying yet. So as Kane walked to the door (reading through the headlines) Davis paid for both their checks.

Davis put the receipt in his wallet and made a mental note to claim his expenses and his gasoline from the department when he returned to the station. Joke or no joke, he'd be damned if he had to pay his own money to make a fool of himself. He tipped generously-- partly to spite Captain Connor and the department by padding the bill, and partly because he found the proprietress and her daughter inexplicably charming despite his foul mood.

He walked back to where he'd left his car and found Lazarus Kane reading a newspaper inside it. Davis got in and turned the air back on along with the vehicle.

"Call dispatch," Kane said, without looking up from the borrowed Republic. "Tell them to have someone arrest Carlos Gutierrez at..." he shuffled to a different page and finished, "the Krispy Kreme doughnuts right outside that horrible mall where there's nothing to buy."

"A mall with nothing to buy?"

"Holly will know the one I mean, when he gets the message. Gutierrez murdered his wife this morning."

Davis sighed. The car continued to eat up gas at nearly three dollars a gallon in the parking lot as the air conditioner blasted on maximum. Kane finally looked up from his paper.

"Is there some problem with your radio, Detective Davis? I can't help noticing it in the door compartment next to you."

"Not that I know of," Davis responded dismally.

"Then would you please do as I ask?" Kane stared at him as if the addition of the word "please" made all the difference in the world.

Davis pondered this latest insanity aloud, as if beseeching some unseen deity for strength, "You want me to have someone arrested at a doughnut shop for murdering his wife... at a mall with nothing to buy? Is that about it?"

"That's the gist of it, yes. It would be helpful if you also passed along the name Carlos Gutierrez-- such a bakery is likely to contain other employees and people don't you imagine? Even people who possibly may not have murdered their spouses this fine day. If you would be so kind? Now?"

Davis grimaced. He could not possibly call this in on the public channel; everyone scanning that frequency would get an earful of nonsense with his name attached to the report. He grabbed his cell phone from his pocket and dialed the Gilbert Police Department directly. He got the personnel department because he had no other number for the station stored in his phone yet.

They transferred him to the proper extension and he shortly had Captain Connor on the line.

"Yes?" Connor sounded harried, busy.

Davis relayed the contents of Kane's message with a sardonic tone in his voice that suggested there had to be better ways for even a rookie to spend his time in the service of the public interest.

"Oh, Arizona Mills Mall," Connor declared. "I know the doughnut shop he means. Tell him I'll get right on it. Does he think the guy is dangerous?"

Davis swallowed a retort. He wondered if the perpetual heat in Arizona had driven everyone around him insane.

Is a man who murdered his wife dangerous??? What the hell kind of question is that?

"He wants to know if Gutierrez is dangerous," Davis said dully to Kane.

Kane looked up from his paper and thought a moment.

"Tell Holly that Mister Gutierrez will go as peacefully as a drowned mouse in handcuffs. I believe he is actually waiting for someone to arrest him. It should prove a great relief to him when the police finally arrive to perform that function."

"Did you hear that, Holly?" Davis asked with a petulant tone.

"Yes. And it's Captain Connor. I want that clearly understood."

"I have some receipts for..." Davis attempted.

"Save them," Connor told him through the phone. "We'll sort it out weekly. Next time use your radio.

That's what it's for."

Connor disconnected.

Davis looked over at Kane who continued musing through the events outlined in the Arizona Republic.

Madness. Sheer madness.

The car remained motionless in its parking spot, wasting fuel.

After a few minutes of this, Davis needed to break the silence. "Were you and that girl playing Pokemon?" he finally asked.

"Awoo." Kane had leaned forward and had his eyes squeezed closed as his slender fingers pinched again at his nose in that oddly disturbing way he had.

Davis fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. Not this again! Not even a radio playing this time. What bothered Kane now?

Not knowing what else to do, Davis asked, "Should I drive somewhere or are we just going to sit here until we run out of gas?"

"Awoo," said Kane. "Awoo. Awoooo."

"Shit," said Davis.

He pulled out of the parking space and began driving back to Gilbert. He did not know how much more he could stand from the lunatic he ferried. They hadn't really covered "hands-on care for the deranged and insane" at the academy.

They drove in uncomfortable semi-silence. Davis tapped his fingers idly on the steering column, missing the sound of the radio as he navigated the freeway. Kane had slumped half-forward with his head on the dashboard and his eyes firmly closed. Every so often he emitted a soft sound like a moan.

As they crested the municipal parking lot and Davis could see the station, Kane opened his eyes and sat up abruptly as if nothing at all had occurred.

"We're back in Gilbert."

"Yes."

"Just like magic. Except I don't want to be in Gilbert," Kane told him.

Who does? It's the mouth of hell today for some reason...

Aloud, Davis explained, "I thought you were asleep. What's that on the dashboard?"

"It appears to be a small stuffed frog," Kane responded.

Davis had meant the sweat-spots on the leather above the glove compartment where Kane's face had rested.

"I want to go to the main bus station downtown," Kane said, removing a white lace handkerchief from his overcoat and wiping at the dashboard. Small red stains appeared on the cloth before he returned it to his pocket.

"Are you okay?" Davis barely registered the blood before the handkerchief vanished.

He noted the amount of blood on the delicate linen. More than just a cut or a small nosebleed, the poor cloth had sopped up near-hemorrhages repeatedly from the look of the staining. For the first time Davis felt a pang of sympathy for his odd and foppish passenger. He tried not to let his concern show because he didn't want to stop displaying his anger just yet.

"Is any of us okay?" Kane countered dryly. Then he added, "The main bus station if you please."

"Any particular city or just the closest one I can pull up on my G.P.S.?"

"Downtown, Phoenix, if you'd be so good," Kane lilted, trying to sound as if nothing had transpired to worry a soul.

"Your nose is bleeding," Davis responded, turning the car around and heading back the way they'd come.

"Yes. I'd call the shade 'Grednadier Red' or possibly 'Uncut Ruby' possibly. Does it impact your ability to drive?"

Davis decided that if Kane could pretend nothing important had occurred then they would both contrive at the same illusion. Davis didn't honestly care enough about the other man to worry about any of his nonsense. He chewed his anger like old bones and plotted a route to take his unwelcome passenger to the central bus terminal. While the time passed, Davis allowed the absence of familiar music which should have emerged from his speakers to intensify that anger and deepen it into the marrow of those bones.

After they arrived, Davis watched for more than an hour as Kane spoke at length to a series of hot dog and popcorn vendors who plied their trade downtown at the main Phoenix bus terminal. The heat waxed steadily throughout the day; Davis perspired fiercely, adding to his general anger and unhappiness over the current situation. Despite his earlier protests of fainting, Lazarus Kane withstood the sun for two hours while wearing a white silk shirt, a thick purple velvet vest, a long topcoat and thick black slacks.

*How does he **do** that?*

Worse still, the man didn't even break a sweat! That just seemed unfair to Davis somehow.

Davis felt like he could easily pass out on one of the benches along with the homeless people who slept in and around the area. At one point Kane rolled and smoked another of his marijuana cigarettes. Davis grew uncomfortable but no one around said a thing or made any move to stop Kane.

Madness.

When Kane had finished talking with a bag-lady (and had bullied Davis into buying her two hot dogs and a Dr. Pepper) he announced he wanted to go home. The oddly dressed man slumped and swaddled his way up to the white car with the frog on the dashboard. Just outside, he gave a slight, nearly inaudible whistle. The doors obligingly unlocked and the alarm disconnected.

Davis looked at his car like it had betrayed him.

"Any sound can be duplicated. Bells and whistles indeed," Kane said smugly, taking up his seat in the passenger's side of the car.

Davis shook his head.

Un-possible. No way did that just happen!

He turned on the air and resisted his temptation to blast the radio until Kane's head exploded.

"Home, if you would be so kind," Kane said again in his annoying lilt. Then he opened the glove-box and rolled another joint.

"You never stop," Davis noted dismally, disdaining the foul odor.

Kane waved the joint at him like a toast and replied in a dramatic and ominous tone, "Better than the alternative..."

"Which is???" Davis demanded to know.

"Stopping. Have you considered it? It's like birthdays," Kane said with a regretful smile, "I know a lot of people who don't like their birthday because it means that Father Time has heaped yet another year on their burdened shoulders. But imagine their dismay should birthdays cease to arrive... life... you won't get out of it alive."

Seeing a look of growing frustration on the young detective's face, he added jovially, "Here's to never stopping! For me, and all fine and decent people living in the big wide world, and even for you! Here's to the continuation of Detective Miles Edward Davis, of Flint, Michigan and Bakersfield, newly relocated from Tempe and the campus of A.S.U. to the fabulous delights of the fine city of Gilbert.

"Now... take me home."

"You say that like I know where you live," Davis replied.

The slender man rolled another joint and gave an address to his new companion. Davis obligingly looked it up on his car's navigation and plotted the best route to avoid rush-hour traffic. His first day nearly completed and he hadn't done any real detecting, solved any crimes, investigates so much as a stolen vehicle or a missing pet. He felt thoroughly disheartened and his desire to turn on some music and maybe take his shoes off nearly overwhelmed him.

Normally he kicked off his shoes for comfort while he drove but an unfamiliar formality came wafting from his passenger like a cloud of pot-smoke and patchouli and Davis let the idea die unformed. It fed his anger to carry out the precise letter of his task in every way so he could be entirely justified in his inevitable confrontation over the perceived mistreatment he'd endured today.

Davis dropped Lazarus Kane off around five p.m. in front of a large house that faced a man-made lake in an expensive community in Gilbert. On the water, paddleboats and canoes went by filled with scantily-clad tourists either courting skin cancer or thickly slathered in various degrees of sun-block lotions.

Kane did not invite his driver in.

Gilbert's newest police detective suppressed an urge to offer to tuck the other man in for the night and read him a bedtime story. He drove back to the police station with the radio on loudly. At times he sang along with whoever he heard on the broadcast; he knew most of the popular country lyrics by heart.

When he arrived inside the building, he saw Detective Carlotta "Carly" Ramirez sitting at her desk along with a heavysset dark-featured man whose tears had turned parts of his face bright red. She had a box of tissues in front of him and about half of that box lay in that man's lap or clutched between wet fingers.

She spoke to the man in perfect Spanish and he responded with great gasps of grief and loss as he told her his story. She seemed to pity him.

Her partner Bill Sommers passed Davis with two cups of coffee in his hand. "Gutierrez," he told the new recruit. "Making his confession; sad case. He nearly threw himself on the floor and begged us to arrest him when we got there.

"Oh and we got doughnuts. Want one?"

Davis shook his head. *Un-possible.*

TWO

The next morning, Tuesday, Davis arrived at his desk by an hour early for his shift. He wanted to talk to Connor the moment that man showed up; Davis planned to complain bitterly. He had a list of grievances to air... not the least of which involved a three a.m. call to his unlisted home phone from Kane inquiring if Davis wanted to hear a recitation of "The Lady Of Shallot" by Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Davis didn't think he could put up with much more of the insanity.

His work-shift began and still Captain Connor refused to appear. This added to the rookie's agitation. Davis spent the morning organizing reports and trying to become familiar with the computer system.

Lunchtime arrived but Captain Connor did not. Miles Davis took himself out to a small, but adequate, Chinese buffet.

Connor had not turned up after Davis returned from lunch either, nor the rest of the day. Despite the restrained bustle of his first day at the place, a shroud of silence blanketed the small police department. A few detectives passed in and about at odd times. The phones did not ring.

When he'd had enough of the silence, Davis logged out and went home.

The phone vibrated in his pocket as he got onto the 101 freeway. Damn.

Not many people had this new number. Almost no one had it. His mother knew the number; his sister in New Orleans; some woman who called a few times insisting he was Herman Shultz (who apparently had

the telephone number previously) and about no one else. He looked name of the incoming caller as it showed up on the display.

Shit.

"How did you get this number?" Davis began with irritation when he connected the call.

"Usually one begins a conversation with a polite greeting, upon answering the telephone," Kane chided calmly.

"Hello. How did you get this number?"

Kane said, "I need to go to Circle K. Please come and get me. I am at my home."

Davis hung up.

Miles Edward Davis hailed from Flint, Michigan. He grew up a small and depressed boy in a community that shared those qualities with him. The most exciting or interesting thing that ever happened to him in Flint took place when (as a teenager) he witnessed a film crew setting up to shoot a documentary on how dismal and impoverished the once-great city of Flint had become since the GM plant closed.

Other than that one experience he had nothing in Flint, not a memory or a person, of which he had any cause to think fondly. So why did he miss the place suddenly?

Kane. That's why...

Direct confrontation with something like Lazarus Kane could make anyone long for the simpler times of their youth. Even an escapee from a prison-camp might look back upon his incarceration with fond nostalgia when faced with the likelihood of an extended chat with Kane.

Lazarus Kane conducted a conversation like German composer suffering from manic-depression. He didn't listen to anyone or anything but the scoring playing in his own head. Other peoples' music would intrude; such intrusions proved unwelcome if not entirely **verboten!**

Davis drove towards the planned community in Gilbert where Kane resided, and chewed on the cud of his curiosity about the man. Every time he went over the list of questions he had for Kane in his mind, a new question added itself to the tally. Davis would have asked some of them too, if it didn't mean actually talking to Kane; he could think of thousands of things he'd rather do than ever spend another moment talking to Lazarus Kane. So he piloted his vehicle along allowing his inability to vent either his anger or his multitudinous queries to obscure the beauty of the surroundings.

Davis actually had many lists floating about in his mind. Along with his perplexing interrogatives for Kane, Detective Miles Davis had a list of complaints which would soon land on Captain Connor's desk with a resounding "thud" like falling timber. Of course... that last act required that Davis could ever find Connor; his superior had pulled a complete disappearing act after saddling his newest employee with the unfathomable burden of Kane.

As Davis drove, Sheryl Crow sang loudly about rivers and fields and other such relaxing scenes.

Davis thought about the simplicity of singing to music as he drove and added to one of his mental lists: *I can't even listen to my own goddamned radio!*

Other people's music? Verboten! This meant literally as well as figuratively.

This realization made the radio a separate source of complaint from Kane's impossible conversational techniques. It made Davis angrier, and hardened his resolve to talk to the other man as little as possible. Davis had a hoard of grievances to protect and he didn't want to risk Kane somehow assuaging him with his impossible lilting tones or one of his pretentious quotations.

Detective Miles Davis pulled his 1995 Ford Mustang up to Kane's drive. He would have beeped loudly but a waved hand from the front door informed him that the occupant of the home had already noted his presence. Davis nearly beeped anyway, to annoy Kane. Instead, he cultivated an angry look that he hoped would convey his level of displeasure for all things Kane. He had a nice grimace prepared very quickly; it required little effort.

It took Kane nearly seven minutes to get outside to the car.

Davis ticked off the seconds as if each one qualified as a new item on his personal list of annoyances. By the time the other man finally showed again, the grimace Davis wore had flourished into glare which might have unnerved most people if they'd seen it up close.

Kane saw the driver through the windshield and gave him a broad and oblivious smile.

He descended the four steps leading down from his front door, his long hair bouncing on his shoulders lightly as he moved. He gave a chirping whistle and the car door unlocked itself for him. Taking his time and moving with continued exaggeration, the overdressed enigma approached the car with the airs of an emperor taking up his seat in the Coliseum.

Davis couldn't help notice that Kane's current garb topped all previous attempts at outlandish couture.

The sun had not set as yet, and the temperature remained over one-hundred ten, but Lazarus Kane came towards the vehicle in the following garments: a long, tweed, morning frock coat; a blood-red silk shirt; a white lace scarf wrapped cunningly around his neck to appear a second collar (this with a Trifari crown brooch attached at the nape of his neck); a black velvet vest with watch fob attached to the second highest button leading into the vest's right-hand pocket; and a floor-length velvet broomstick skirt which billowed out and telescoped back in with each step he took. On his feet he wore knee-high black leather fringed moccasins which Davis recognized as Minnetonka because a previous girlfriend had dressed as a hippie and owned a pair.

Detective Miles Davis resisted the temptation to put his head down on his dashboard and start making, "Awoo" sounds.

In his right hand Lazarus Kane held a black walking stick. He swung it briskly and with practiced ease between steps. It changed hands sometimes as he moved or rested lightly on his shoulder. Clearly he knew how to handle a cane as if he'd studied song-and-dance routines from old films. Every few steps the

cane would spin suddenly with flourish like a cheerleader's baton, and then return to rest on a shoulder or accompany a step along the pavement.

Davis sized up the entire effect skeptically; overall he wondered about the heat the sheer layering must accumulate. Presumably Kane had on underwear and socks as well. Possibly he wore a few pairs of each, if his penchant for overdoing things held true consistently.

Why the hell wasn't the man drenched in perspiration???

"Thank god it's Friday," Kane said, settling into the car and laying his cane between them. The cane had a wolf's head with glittering blue eyes; the shaft appeared highly polished. Kane reeked heavily of marijuana and patchouli and what might have been Roman chamomile.

"It's Tuesday," Davis told him sniffing the air with a scowl.

The madness begins anew. Davis added to his list of irritations: *He doesn't even know what goddamned day of the week it is!*

"Nevertheless," Kane told him in a happy tone.

"Where are we going?"

"As I said, to Circle K. Make a left when you get to the corner and it's right there."

Davis thought about that for a moment. He'd passed that convenience store on his way to get Kane; it lay about a thousand feet from their current location.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Circle K, if you please." Kane made a move to go for the glove compartment and roll another joint, with a quick smile that said he knew this would irritate Davis further.

Davis quickly pulled out. The young cop knew they could get to the end of the block and to the store in about forty seconds, and that alone might forestall Kane. He hadn't seen Kane smoking his pot inside any public establishment save the police station-- the freak probably considered it unpardonably rude or

something. So if they got to their destination quickly enough he wouldn't have the time to further the reek seeping into the upholstery of the young policeman's car.

Hopefully Kane had better sense than to try anything funny once they actually got inside the store, although Davis had no certainty on that score.

Davis raced the car to Circle K in eighteen seconds.

Kane smiled as if reading all this silent byplay. He said, "Well done."

Kane pulled his hand back from the dashboard and retrieved his walking stick.

Davis got out of the car and, for the first time he could recall, did not bother locking the doors. He had always locked them; he even drove with them locked. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter anymore.

Why bother, when some idiot can whistle at it and make it do tricks for him? Screw it.

Kane did not hold the door for him, but Davis had learned to expect this.

Detective Davis entered on the other man's heels-- narrowly avoiding stepping on the skirt Kane wore.

As Kane walked to the back of the store, he did not use the cane as a prop, but swung it in his hand and spun it in various patterns. His oddly sloped and deliberately uneven gait seemed to make more sense, once the walking stick completed the picture. Without the stick something imperceptible remained wrong with Kane's gait... an awkwardness which corrected the moment that stick fell into his outstretched hand.

Davis waited by the front door of the convenience store. True, he'd been assigned to watch over the bizarre walking anachronism (nearly a *strutting* anachronism) but the store had no other customers at the time and Davis had no intentions of following Kane's every footstep like a small dog or an NSA agent.

Davis saw his job as protecting the rest of the world from Kane; the thought that Kane himself might require protection had not yet crossed his mind.

From the rear of the store came the sound of a door closing on a refrigerated case and then the velvet-clad figure returned to the front of the store. Lazarus Kane produced a large metal can of Arizona Iced Tea when he arrived at the counter.

A tall, mousey woman stood behind the register in a short-sleeved white shirt which had the store's logo on it. She had long hair and a small semi-circular scar to the side of her left eye which made her appear even more tired and haggard than perhaps she felt.

The woman announced in a reedy voice, "A dollar seventy-nine."

Davis saw Kane looking at him with intent.

Right. Money.

Kane never carried any currency that Davis had seen. Davis paid for the tea with a twenty dollar bill.

When Davis looked back towards Kane feigning incomprehension, the man still stared at him with that same odd look of intent or possibly portent. Davis could not figure out what problem Kane suffered from this time so he stared back blankly.

Kane then looked significantly from Davis to the woman behind the register, and then back to Davis.

Davis did not look over at the woman but continued to stare angrily at the man in the skirt. Kane repeated the slow course of movement with his eyes even more theatrically with a soft sigh, drawing the young man's eyes to the woman ringing up the purchase.

Davis finally understood what Kane wanted.

More to stop Kane's current performance than acquiesce, he took a moment to study the employee.

Davis watched as she put the money in the register, handed Kane the change and slipped the can of tea into a small paper bag barely large enough to hold it.

Kane thanked the woman, took the money and the tea in its smart brown-paper slip. "That's a unique scar you have there," he told her as he pocketed the change.

Uncomfortably, she blushed a moment and looked at her hands and then downward below the counter for half a second.

"On your cheekbone," Kane directed her. "It gives you a real touch of distinction. Character."

She attempted a weak smile in the face of unaccustomed attention.

"It doesn't spoil your complexion any," Kane assured her. "You're all peaches-and-cream like a proper Georgia girl should be."

She stammered, "I was born in Atlanta."

"I thought I detected just the barest hint of an accent. You can't take the country out of the girl," he responded.

She smiled again, a little wider this time but still clearly uncomfortable.

Kane smiled back and left without another word.

Davis gave the woman a shrug of apology which said, *Don't blame me. He's not my fault. He's just a weirdo.* Then he followed the other man out the door.

No whistle came from the man in the skirt; he seemed entirely aware the car remained unaccustomedly unlocked and exactly why.

Kane got into the car and waited for Davis.

When Davis took up his place behind the wheel, Kane told him, "Home, if you please."

Davis slammed the key into the ignition. He missed the hole the first few times. He drove back the thousand feet to Kane's driveway, feeling suckered, abused, and as angry as he could ever recall.

Drag me halfway across the city to take you to the end of your own goddamned block, will you? We'll see about this when I get hold of Captain Connor!!!

The ride back to Kane's house took thirty-three seconds, as they had to wait for an opportunity to make a left turn while other cars flowed by the parking lot of the store. The air conditioning provided the sole sound inside the passengers' compartment.

Davis pulled into Kane's driveway sullenly.

Kane must have spent an hour dressing up just for this insignificant outing; Kane had made Davis wait almost ten minutes outside as he fixed his hair and his scarf and all his other trappings. For what? The whole trip, start-to-finish, had taken less time than Davis had spent waiting in the driveway!

Kane did not get out of the car when it stopped. He sat calmly, immune to Davis and his angry inner turmoil and well-honed facial expressions. Kane simply waited to be noticed.

After a short while Davis snarled, "What?"

Kane smiled disarmingly. It didn't work.

"Well? What the hell is it now," Davis spat nastily.

"What did you think?"

"Of what???" Davis demanded.

"I want to know your opinions about the girl. What else?"

Davis shook his head in disbelief. Kane had a crush on someone? That poor mouse behind the counter qualified as "Kane's Type"? If so, she'd better watch out; no one should have a mess like Kane coming after them.

"Not my speed."

Kane stared at the other man patiently.

"I didn't know there was going to be a test."

"Let's play a game," Kane told the driver, seemingly changing the subject. "In this game we will pretend you are a police officer. Are you with me so far? We will further pretend you have had at least some small amount of training in the accurate observation and reportage of events which transpire directly at the end of your nose. Can we go that far?"

Davis snorted.

"You, as a police officer, just walked out of a possible crime scene-- for who isn't robbing convenience stores these days? Those stores are robbery personified and it no doubt infects the community at large. Perhaps the cashier herself is engaged in some small embezzlements of her own? One never knows."

Davis continued to glare his lack of comprehension.

"I am asking you to describe this woman to me. Can you do that?" Kane's patronizing tone filled the car despite his soft voice.

Fine. He wants to put me through my paces? Fine.

Davis said, "She appeared to be about twenty-four. She's just over five-foot ten I'd say... plain in the face, ordinary. Her brown hair is dyed; it's probably naturally red from what I saw of the hair on her forearms. She wears contacts-- I saw them reflect in the light and she rubbed at them once or twice..."

Kane interrupted him, "You saw the forearms?"

"Yes."

"Describe them to me."

"They're thick for someone of her build. Light red hair in some places, nice skin, some freckles. She had a bruise near her wrist."

Kane nodded. "How old did it appear? Pretend you're still a police officer if you would."

Davis cleared his throat. "She had a small bruise like about the size of a quarter, approximately one-inch up from her right hand. I would estimate from the yellowing at the edges that it appeared on her body about a week ago."

"And did you notice the shoulder, when her sleeve rode up a moment as she rang up my tea?"

"I saw a discoloration; maybe an old scar or just a birthmark; possibly a bruise a few weeks old? Or even a stain or some paint. Satisfied?"

"Not really, no," Kane told him. "The whole thing is far from satisfying. But we still have time to fix it I think. Tomorrow we go to the library. Please be here at ten-thirty."

Kane got out of the car. He waved politely and swung his stick as he made his velvet way back to his front door.

Davis almost laughed. Nothing the bizarre figure did or said made the slightest sense at all. But Detective Miles Davis, newly of the Gilbert Police did know one thing about Lazarus Kane for certain at last: everything the man did irritated him profoundly.

Library? Do they even have libraries any more? Hadn't this bizarre steampunk ripoff ever heard of the internet? Who uses libraries???

Kane must have lost what little mind remained to him if he thought Davis intended to go along with any more of his lunacy! Davis had plans of his own for the next day. He had resolved to spend Wednesday morning staking out his superior and forcing some answers from him. He'd wait in Captain Connor's own office, since that seemed so open to all freaks and newcomers who happened by the station. It's not like anyone used the place!

He settled in for the drive home. Alone, finally, he turned the car radio on.

KNIX identified itself and then began playing a song by Johnny Cash that Davis had all but forgotten. He hummed along and tried to think when he'd last heard the song... years and years at least. He drove to the small watering hole near his own apartment and had three whiskey sours.

An hour later he arrived home with some takeout food, unpacked a few boxes, and found a pair of underwear and some clean brown pants for the morning. He watched CNN until he fell asleep in the reclining chair in his living room.

The phone rang.

"Hmm?"

"It's ten o'clock, Davis. You should have clocked in at nine a.m. Just because you're on special assignment doesn't mean you get to flout procedures; you still need to turn up and log in."

"Captain Connor?"

"Never mind. I'm logging you in as of now. Lazarus Kane is expecting you at his house in about half an hour so you better get a move on."

Connor hung up.

Davis swore loudly.

Flout procedure??? I'm the one flouting procedure??? Is Kane's madness contagious? The more time I spend with him the less sense everyone makes. Is it me? Am I losing it somehow???

The call had ended before Davis could voice even the first entry on any of his mental lists to Connor. And had the man actually had the temerity to question Davis about professionalism? After the way Connor ran his ridiculous department???

A small and more reasonable part of the young rookie nursed a bit of fury at his own inadequacy; he'd passed out and overslept and no one to blame but Davis himself for that screw-up. But the other parts of him screamed that the true faults lay with men in skirts, and cops letting people break the law right under their noses, and corruption, and incompetence, and other multi-syllable words often used by The Press to list the failings of the police.

Davis picked up the phone to call Connor back and give him a piece of his mind. Then he decided that he wanted to do it in person. He put the phone back on the table and dressed to go down to his superior's office and shout for a while.

That small voice in the back of his mind said this would not be a good time to confront his superior if he wished to remain employed. That inner adult patiently informed Davis that some situations have to be handled with care and not when blind with fury. It pointed out he could hardly increase anyone's impression of his "professionalism" by aiming himself like a juggernaut and crashing through the wall of a police department shouting profanities.

He drove all the way to the station before that diminutive nagging voice forced him to rethink his plans. On reflection, Davis decided it might prove a wiser course to vent his ire on someone who lacked the ability

to end his career. With that resolve in mind he checked out a black-and-white City Of Gilbert police car and drove to Lazarus Kane's house.

Kane kept him waiting about the same ten minutes once again, and showed up as dramatically attired. Every line of his face and stance conspired to deny that he noticed a police-issue squad car sat outside his home in defiance of his preferences. Lazarus Kane climbed in, settled his walking stick and gave instructions to the driver as if he had entered any ordinary car.

On the ride Kane rolled and smoked two of the perfect marijuana cigarettes. Davis wondered what the motor pool would say when he signed back in a unit reeking of drugs. But he didn't wonder enough to try and stop his passenger.

Davis thought, *Let it raise some flags. Let the captain explain it. I'm just following orders.*

They arrived at the library in short order and when they got out of the unit, Kane gave a completely different chirp and the doors locked before Davis could even reach for his key-remote.

The rookie arched an eye at his companion and Kane told him, "Well this is taxpayer property and we are downtown. Terrible area... all sorts of despicable types about. Not just me. Real villains."

Davis would have locked the door in any case if he'd had the opportunity—the standard-issue shotgun in the squad car mandated that—but he felt more concern at the idea that Kane could control any police vehicle in the city with a couple of whistles. Davis didn't like the idea of Kane with handy access to guns whenever he liked.

The downtown branch of the Phoenix Library stood tall. Five stories of glass overlooked downtown. Once it had stood at the intersection of Central and McDowell at the very heart of the city but it had grown so large that the old facility had found itself converted into a museum with little warning and a new facility underwent construction for the books. The new library lay a few blocks to the south and contained all the modern conveniences one might expect including free wi-fi and coffee.

Many of the downtown homeless gathered to use the free computers or listen to audiobooks or just get something warm to drink on chilly mornings; Phoenix did have some frosty hours before the desert heat made the ground weep rising tears to coalesce into a distortion like ripples in the air. At such times the main floor of the library filled up with those who lived on (or made their living on) the streets.

Kane seemed quite at home and once again swept into the place as if he owned it outright and all the patrons need not thank him for his loving indulgence in hosting their various activities.

The woman who worked at the "New Accounts" counter of the Phoenix Public Library, Central Branch, knew Kane and greeted him warmly. He took her hand in both of his and shook it fulsomely. For a moment Davis thought they would hug right there in the library, across the countertop.

"This the new Friday?" she asked.

"I believe he is more of a Tuesday. Told me so himself."

She turned to the other man and quipped lightly, "Good morning, Officer Tuesday."

Not knowing what to say, and growing more and more used to people in Kane's immediate vicinity behaving oddly, Miles Davis seized on the first literary reference his mind encountered and responded, "Detective," Davis corrected. "Good morning to you, Miss Havisham."

"Oh not me," she assured him. "I loathe the way I look in white. Not a fan of Dickens either."

She shuffled something on the desk and then brought out a small white form, "You'll need to fill this out to get your library card."

"I'm getting a library card?" Davis asked with barely masked irritation.

Kane tried his disarming smile again, with no better results than he'd achieved the previous eve.

Davis accepted the paperwork and a pen from the woman behind the counter.

They'd been in the library nearly an hour and Kane remained his usual bizarre self. Davis had trailed him through the reference department as Kane sought after some obscure tidbits of fact about fresh sod and

crabgrass. Then Kane had gone to periodicals and thumbed some old issues of Sports Illustrated. Then Kane had impelled Davis along to the teen section on the fourth floor.

The two men had eventually come down the stairs to the lobby with Davis uncomfortably carrying a heavy weight of books and graphic novels. Kane had as many layers of silks and satins on as always, though he'd elected on pants today rather than a skirt; he nearly skipped down the stairs in excitement.

It developed, as they approached the checkout counter, that Lazarus Kane did not have a library card of his own.

Kane had instructed his erstwhile warder on the simplicity of obtaining a library card and set out for the correct desk. At no time did Kane explain why he could not open his own account, or get his own card, or even carry his own books. All this had led Detective Davis to the counter of "Miss Havisham".

All morning long, Davis had favored the other man with bleak or hostile glances and bitter remarks under his breath. Kane failed to notice all of these. Kane didn't even give any indication that riding in the squad car had upset his supposedly delicate sensibilities.

Damn the man anyway.

Kane and the librarian chatted idly as Davis completed the form which allowed him a library card he neither wanted nor needed.

"You were right about the dog hairs, of course," she told Kane.

"Ah-so."

"The vet says he isn't getting enough protein in his diet as you suggested. I've told Libby to make sure to buy the better brand from now on."

"I'm sure your Pomeranian will appreciate that," Kane replied.

"How did you know he's a Pom..." she started. Then she smiled and corrected herself, "Yes, I'm sure he will too."

To Davis she asked, "Finished?"

Davis signed and handed her the form.

The librarian took a few minutes and then presented Detective Davis with his new library card and had him sign that too. Kane bid her farewell fondly and crossed the lobby so Davis could check out all the books Kane had selected.

Kane had Davis take him home, but indicated they had more stops to make after they dropped off his selected reading materials. He invited Davis into his house but the young cop refused and sullenly remained in the squad car. Twenty minutes passed before Kane emerged again in an even thicker and darker outfit. He also had another skirt on-- this one embroidered in places. And he'd painted his nails black.

Davis didn't consider the garments an improvement.

When Kane joined him in the car, the driver felt nearly overwhelmed with the mingled odors; the smell of nail polish added to the patchouli and marijuana but failed to offset either satisfactorily.

Without bothering to glare, he asked his passenger, "Now where are we going? Need something from Circle K again, do you?"

"As a matter of fact..." Kane smiled.

They'd spent nearly twenty minutes in the parking lot of the same convenience market they had visited the previous evening-- parked off to the side as Kane had insisted for some reason. Neither man had gotten out of the car.

"Are we just going to sit here and look at your dream girl all day?"

"Look through some papers," Kane told him.

"I haven't any," said Davis, who had none.

Kane sighed softly. He said, "Pretend to look through some papers below your dashboard. Try and appear as if you are completing reports. Policemen often fill out reports in lots such as this. Try and get into the character a little if you don't mind. It's important." Kane put a strange emphasis on the word.

Davis stared at his passenger and weighed his tone. Had a slight crack appeared in the bulwark of Kane's cheery lilt for a moment?

"Try and look like you are a policeman if that is possible, Detective Davis."

"You know all about what police do and don't do, do you?"

"I do," Kane assured him.

Davis made a show of pretending to write on an invisible clipboard in mid-air. He used large, well-looped letters and enough flourishes to compete with any over-dramatized performance Lazarus Kane had executed in his presence.

Kane watched cars come and go for a while until the store reached a moment of complete emptiness except for the employee behind the counter. This took considerable time, because a water-alert issued in Phoenix and Gilbert insured thirsty citizens would disdain their taps in favor of bottled beverages throughout the day.

The same employee they'd encountered the previous night worked her shift diligently as people came and left. From within the squad car the two men occasionally saw her through the glass front of the store as she performed her duties. When the store finally emptied for a moment she walked out from behind her counter and restocked a few shelves and faced some items properly for display.

At no time did the clerk at the counter appear to notice the police car just outside.

"I want you to run that plate for me," Kane said, pointing at the last car in the lot.

Davis dropped his imaginary clipboard and chewed on his intangible pen.

"Why?"

"Just do it, if you would be so kind," Kane responded and folded his arms across his chest to wait.

Davis ran the plate. Another car pulled in and a harried looking woman bustled into the store.

The information pertaining to the car Kane had pointed out appeared in just a few moments and both men read over the computer display.

Kane said, "Lovely. Don't you love these modern devices? I want you to find that address for me please. In fact I'd like to go there right now if possible so we can assure ourselves that this is the lady's current address."

"Are you planning on stalking her?"

"Let's not argue; it's terribly rude to argue in public."

Davis didn't bother to point out that sitting in a police car all alone in an empty parking lot counted as fairly private. Most people avoided the police these days unless they had some dire need for help so no sane person would stand outside with their ear cupped to the windows and listen in on them. He didn't bother to grimace or complain or mutter. He now had too many grievances to list or track and he just couldn't see any further point in the exercise. Davis went along quietly, knowing that tomorrow he had the right to demand some answers.

Captain Connor had asked for just few days and some trust; both quantities had nearly exhausted themselves. Tomorrow, Davis would find Captain Connor if he had to go to the man's house to do it; tomorrow Davis would get an explanation for all the insanity.

Kane and Davis pulled up a few miles later in front of a small two-bedroom house located in a modest backstreet just off the main road. The house had fading cream paint and a long driveway that led to the backyard. At the very rear of the drive, an old Camaro rusted in silence.

The name on the mailbox read: Wallace.

Kane knocked on the front door.

Mrs. Wallace answered the door with a soft pull and a blast of air-conditioning. She also took a step back as she judged the man's attire, companion, and the vehicle parked in front of her home.

She bravely said, "Yes? May I help you?"

"I do hope so," Kane responded with sincerity. "I am trying to find the previous occupant of this address. She ordered some rare books months and months ago, which finally arrived this morning."

He plainly didn't have any books with him and had just as clearly arrived in a police car.

"And you just thought you'd drive them all the way out here to deliver them?" the woman replied with obvious skepticism.

"A very complete service, we offer. But the name on the mailbox leads me to believe Miss Bennet has moved."

"Miss Bennet?"

"Yes? Lucy Bennet?"

"She's not Miss Bennet any more. She's a Cox now."

Kane smiled, "A Cox? That sounds like some alien creature which turns cows inside-out for sport or study."

"You aren't far wrong, there," Mrs. Wallace told him with a sour look.

"Not the cream of the crop, her new hubby?"

"Brad Cox? Not even the clots at the bottom of the cream. Typical frat boy who refuses to grow up if you ask me."

The woman in the doorway went on to say that Lucy had married about a year ago and that she had sold her house to the Wallaces. She told Kane that the new couple had moved to a complex nearby, but she didn't know what unit or the exact address. She'd had forward some mail and papers there and recalled the name of the place. She gave him that name.

Kane thanked her for all her help.

Before she closed the door she added, "There was another fellow looking for her a few months back. Spent an evening mooning out front for a while and pacing until I went out and asked him what he wanted. Said he used to know Lucy and he missed her.

"I sent him on his way... such a nice clean cut young man."

She stressed the words "clean-cut" in obvious disapproval of Kane's long hair.

"I'll have to settle for being slightly better dressed," Kane concluded after a short pause. He walked back to Davis, who'd stood on the sidewalk during the entire interview refusing to trespass on the property.

"Winslow Court Apartments, please. It's somewhere nearby."

Not apartments at all, Winslow Court contained two-story townhouses with large garages, ornamental orange trees, and diligently manicured lawns and shrubbery. Lined on either side by large hedges, which kept passersby from viewing the buildings directly, an imposing metal gate loomed at the entrance of the place.

The electronic box in the middle of the driveway required an entry-code from the two men which they didn't possess. Davis knew the emergency police and fire access code which should trigger the gate but he didn't reveal that to his passenger.

Why let the man learn about that if he doesn't already know it?

"Care to whistle at it?" Davis inquired with mild acid in his tone.

"Park where it says 'prospective tenants'. We can walk through the pedestrian gate."

Over one hundred units lay in a broad U-shape; to the left stood the leasing office and a huge bank of mailboxes. Off in the distance they could see a pool with a fountain, fenced completely in wrought-iron.

Kane got out of Davis' car and walked through the gate as if interested in purchasing the whole complex. He went into the management office and picked up some brochures. He spoke to the leasing agent and asked about occupancy. He asked if he could take a walk around the property.

With the police car in plain sight through her window she quickly agreed.

Kane walked back outside into the courtyard, took a perfunctory glance at the mailboxes and then wandered off towards the pool area. Davis followed along mutely.

Beyond the pool stood a number of larger units.

Kane walked right up to the middle unit in a semi-cluster of three. He looked in all the windows on the ground floor. He looked around the back. Then he snicked aloud as if congratulating himself.

Davis remained nearby but did not emulate the invasion of privacy Kane practiced. He looked about nervously for some sign from within the townhouse or the neighboring homes; no one seemed to mind Kane or even notice him.

How does he get away with this shit???

Davis waited until Kane had satisfied himself to whatever particulars drew his interest and then the two men got back into the car.

"Lunch," he told Davis.

"And where would that be located?"

"I don't know. You're buying. Why don't you choose?"

They ate at McDonald's.

Davis thought first to pick some big fancy restaurant. Then he had another thought. He thought to goad the effete Lazarus Kane by dragging him to a chain-restaurant. He suspected savoring Kane's reaction to such primitive surroundings might result in more vitiation for his grievances than running up huge expenses for the department.

Davis very much wanted to see the expression on the other man's face as they arrived at Mickey D's.

His efforts received a happy, "Why I haven't been to one of these in years..." from Kane as the car pulled into the McDonald's.

Davis tried not to let his disappointment show; he'd hoped for so much more. But Kane remained unflappably cheery.

Lazarus Kane ate his meal with gusto and drank a bottled water slowly. The fast-food chains could not sell any beverages that used tap-water that day because of the continuing "water alert", so they had plenty of bottled water on hand for their patrons.

Despite his outlandish garb and affected mannerisms, Lazarus Kane appeared totally at home in the seating area with its plastic benches. Davis had his sandwich and his own bottle of water downed in five minutes or less, and spent the rest of the time staring around the place disconsolately.

What in the world had happened to McDonald's?

This place had a pair of leather lounging couches, a number of television monitors displaying "Dennis the Menace" on DVD, and a water-feature near the ordering counter.

A water-feature?

Even Kane had asked about that. The woman who had took their order informed the men that her store was one of four purchased by the same local owner, and that he had redesigned them to include the huge play-area outside, game stations, and the trickling ripple of stream hanging on the wall to their left.

After lunch, Kane insisted on screening a matinee of a terrible movie with Jane Fonda and a woman who looked remarkably like the singer "J-Lo" but who the credits insisted was "Jennifer Lopez". Davis didn't enjoy the film much, nor the ride back to Kane's house after. Nothing had gone as planned today.

Kane rolled and smoked a joint before and after the movie. Davis now reeked nearly as badly as a pot-smoker himself.

"I must sleep now."

"Here?" Davis asked.

"At my home. Please take me there."

Kane got a funny look in his eyes for a moment.

"You aren't going to start saying 'awooo' again, are you?"

"Home. Please." Kane closed his eyes tightly and began to rock slowly back and forth against the restraining seat-belt.

When Kane stepped out of the car and onto his own driveway he said in a near-whisper, "Nine-thirty, if you don't mind."

"You mean tonight? Because I don't start my shift tomorrow until ten..."

Each word seemed to hurt Kane in some way Davis could not measure. Kane didn't seem able to speak. He nodded agreement to Davis and shambled into his house leaning on the solidity of his cane. For the first time the cane didn't appear a mere prop or flourish; something inside Lazarus Kane seemed to have pulled taut or momentarily snapped and it appeared to take all his effort just to remain upright. He made his way to the door of his dwelling with increasing pressure on the prop and slumped inside.

Probably smoked himself into stupefaction, Davis thought.

Davis wasted little sympathy on Kane for his self-induced disorientation or whatever had affected the other man so strangely. Just a few more hours and the day would end. He could take six or eight more hours of silliness knowing that afterwards he'd have Lazarus Kane out of his life forever.

He drove the squad car home and had a shower to get the smell of Kane off himself. He ate at six and watched a couple of lame sitcoms he never had time to see before. By eight-thirty the sun had set at last, though it hadn't cooled much outside.

In another half an hour he started getting ready for what he hoped would prove his last ever encounter with Lazarus Kane.

THREE

Detective Miles Davis arrived at Kane's house in the gloaming in almost a happy mood. He had the same sense of relief of someone locked in a sauna for four hours who finally sees the door opening to release him.

The hell of Lazarus Kane would end this evening for Miles Edward Davis.

Kane slinked out his door within seconds of the car's arrival. He'd made another change in his clothing; Kane now wore a pair of black jeans and a black pullover sweater and held a black cap in his hand. In that outfit, with his long hair tied back, Lazarus Kane appeared nearly normal.

Well, Kane appeared normal for a cliché cat burglar in a bad movie... though he ruined the complete picture by continuing to carry his wolf-headed walking stick.

Davis laughed aloud when Kane joined him inside the car.

"Well, you're in a merry mood, Man Tuesday."

The driver of the police car finally understood what Kane had meant by "Thank god it's Friday" and the whole interplay with the librarian earlier.

He refused to find it funny.

Even when he considered the triplicity of the pun as regards Joe Friday on the old Dragnet show, Davis made a conscious decision not to see anything comic.

With no expression on his face at all he told Kane, "I've decided nothing you do or say tonight is going to annoy me."

"A momentous decision... pie-crust? Well, we will see how that works out as the night progresses."

Davis gave the other man a look like a cat about to devour a bug.

"The young lady's house please," Kane said. He opened the glove compartment in preparation for the rolling of another joint of marijuana.

"That stuff isn't doing you any good," Davis couldn't stop himself from saying.

"Your concern for my well-being is most unexpected. But I thank you; most avuncular of you. Permit me to give you my continued assurance that the alternative is worse."

"The alternative being... sobriety?"

"In this case," Kane said with a suddenly serious look, "yes. Disastrous if that ever sets in."

"Stalking after some young thing isn't a much better hobby."

"We'll see about that too, as the night progresses. I'll let you be the judge of that when the moment comes," Kane warned him with something ominous in his lilt.

Two hours hiding in the bushes. What an immense waste of time!

Kane had instructed Davis to return the conspicuous squad car to the municipal lot and retrieve his own car before they drove to their current location. Halfway there, Kane re-decided that having the official car would probably serve his plans for the evening better and directed Davis to Winslow Court Apartments.

He instructed Davis to leave the squad car a safe distance away from the place so as not to make anyone at Winslow Court nervous.

Davis went along, trying to figure what the other man had planned. If Kane thought Davis would allow him to stalk or possibly attack some convenience store clerk then he had another trick coming.

Detective Davis already decided that if Kane did anything to break the law or violate public safety (besides incessantly smoking pot) then Davis himself would arrest the man instantly and damn any career consequences.

He resolved to give Kane enough rope to hang him with later.

In the meantime: bushes; darkness; heat; Kane's dubious company.

"Stay down. You really aren't dressed for this," Kane said for the umpteenth time.

"You mean like Cary Grant about to scale rooftops in a Hitchcock film?"

"Yes," Kane said, missing the insult entirely, "exactly like that. Keep your head down."

From their current vantage they had a direct line of sight to the dwelling Kane had scoped out earlier in the day, as well as the mailboxes and the leasing office by the main gate. Just after eleven o'clock Kane tapped Davis on the shoulder hard with his walking stick to get his attention.

He then had to remind the other man yet again not to stand up.

A stranger with tousled brown hair ambled along the path towards the pool area.

"He's the one," Kane whispered dramatically.

"Who's the what?"

"Shush! Please whisper. We do not wish anyone to overhear us."

"We don't?"

"We do not," Kane repeated. "Not at all. He is the one. He just checked the correct mailbox-- left-handed, I might add. He is the one."

Davis couldn't think of any reply so he continued to crouch as the stranger shuffled past the pool and the two concealed lurkers who stood nearby.

The man looked like a football player coming home from a college party or possibly a date-rape. He had youth, muscles, tanned features, and appeared barely able to stand.

Davis suspected the guy had too much to drink or smoke or something along those lines because the man's steps varied irregularly and he nearly tripped a few times on the way to his door.

That door opened and then closed after the man shambled inside. Kane leapt out of his bush and ran towards the townhouse. Davis walked along behind him in a very ordinary way, making no effort at concealment.

Soon, this farce would end. Then Davis could return to actual police work in a sane environment. He'd done as promised and even Captain Connor could not say otherwise. If Davis couldn't have sanity in the Gilbert Police Department then he'd transfer somewhere else or quit and take his chances on getting another job.

One way or the other, he'd rid himself of Lazarus Kane in the morning.

Davis walked right up to the lighted doorway of the townhouse and stood there in plain view of anyone who passed. Kane had himself flattened against a wall near one of the windows.

Davis laughed softly.

Kane's seen too many ninja movies.

Davis pretended he didn't notice the first twenty frantic waves from Kane. Then he finally moved out of the light and stepped over to join Kane in his dramatic pose against the townhouse.

Davis had no intention of asking Kane why they maintained their incomprehensible vigil. Instead, thinking on something which had bothered him from their first car ride, Davis whispered, "How did you know that Volkswagen had insurance agents in it?"

Kane looked absolutely pleased.

"The sticker on their window... only given to branch agents of the Mutual of Omaha group. The plates read Iowa."

"I didn't notice," Davis admitted.

"Shush!" Kane said quickly, almost in tandem with a slight crashing sound from within the townhouse.

The sound rang softly for a moment, and then all fell silent. Soon, a sound like a loud slap wafted through the insulation of the nearby window.

"Not yet," Kane hissed.

"Not yet, what???" Davis whispered back.

"Shush!"

A few minutes went by.

Inside came another crash and possibly a shout. Both men outside moved closer to the window nearly hypnotized. A shriek came from within the house and cut off abruptly. No one in the surrounding units could have heard it.

Davis and Kane heard it.

"Back to our game... as a policeman what would you say that sounded like a possible domestic disturbance?"

Davis nodded grudgingly.

Inside came a grunt like someone lifting something heavy.

"Would a policeman say that sufficed as 'probable cause' to enter a residence?"

"Well..." Davis started to say.

"Could a clever policeman make a case for it?" Kane prompted urgently.

Davis shrugged.

"Then let's hope you're a clever policeman if this goes awry."

Before Davis could so much as move a muscle, Kane ran around him and threw himself at the door to the townhouse.

The door to the unit caved in spectacularly, the lower parts nearly ripping apart and then smashing into the inside wall. The remaining tatters of wood hung by the top and middle hinges only. Kane entered quickly and set about finding the source of the scream.

You'd think they'd build these things a little better. Paper walls, and tissue-paper doors. Imagine that!

Davis entered hot on the other's heels.

He experienced a strange ambivalence as he tried to find Kane inside the Cox residence. On one hand he knew he could probably be fired for allowing Kane to skulk about hounding people-- and now he'd taken to breaking-and-entering! On the other hand, he finally had the proof he needed to show any reasonable person that somewhere in the world lay a padded cell which Kane should occupy.

Nothing in his experience prepared Miles Davis (no relation) for the scene that greeted him in the kitchen on the ground floor when he finally got there.

As he crossed the living room, Davis could see Kane in the doorway of that kitchen-- fully lit by the fluorescents shining from within. Just beyond Kane, the tousle-headed man they'd seen enter the townhouse earlier leaned heavily on the counter by the sink.

The tousle-headed man had a hissing steam-iron in his left hand. A pile of pink-and-red something moved on the kitchen table. Upon closer inspection, the pile of pink-and-red something turned out to be the bound form of Lucy Cox.

Lucy Cox (nee Bennet) had been tied to a chair, totally naked, with a length of old phone cord. Her arms had been pulled forward across the table so that most of her back stood exposed in the fluorescent light

shining down from above her. The woman's arms were tied to an entirely different but matching chair across the table; an ornamental decoration on the chair-back dug into her wrist right where Davis had previously seen a bruise.

A number of horrible burns and contusions nearly covered the skin on her shoulders and lower back. She also had some bruises on her arms and many more burns matching the profile of the small steam-iron on the backs of her thighs. Someone had used this woman in cruel ways with a frightening regularity.

Davis couldn't believe his eyes. He wanted to vomit. He'd seen so many statistics on this sort of activity that he thought himself immune to inhuman dread such as he now felt.

Who does such things to another human being? Why doesn't he just kill her and get it over with already? Why torture her slowly???

Miles Davis breathed in hard gasps, trying to choke down his rising gorge and rising ire. He looked at the man with the bleary eyes who held the steam iron and he wanted to kill him. But Davis remained unarmed! He hadn't imagined anything like this when he'd picked up Kane for the trip.

Shit, shit, shit.

Davis scrutinized the woman on the table as best he could from a distance and noted with relief that she still drew breath slowly; he also eyed the mess on the floor trying to look casual about it all.

Scattered about on the floor around the table a number of broken plates and some silverware lay under some pasta and pork chops. Apparently Mr. Cox had not appreciated his dinner and had cleaned the table the quickest way possible. The broken plates had likely been the source of the crashes heard from without. The woman's clothing had clearly been ripped off her and lay in shreds on the floor nearby.

Kane took a step fully into the room, and pointed at the man by the sink with his cane.

"Villain!" he shouted.

The man burped at him and took a swig from a bottle on the countertop. He waved the hissing iron menacingly, "Who the hell are you guys? Get the fuck out of here."

Kane stepped closer; the other man stood about six feet and easily had four inches of height on him. The hissing iron came up again, aimed for Kane's face. A second later, the man with the iron spotted Davis stepping into the room just behind Kane; the man grabbed for a knife with his free hand from one of the nearby drawers.

Kane took two quick steps closer and swung his cane at the drawer. The wooden face and handle of the drawer splintered as the entire drawer fell to the floor. The contents of the drawer now splayed across the kitchen tile in some bizarre completion of the food and crockery mosaic already there.

The blow had caught the man near the sink by total surprise.

Davis stepped fully the room to join the party. A small, well-designed kitchen greeted him. Lovely appliances gleamed to his right, a sink directly in front with festive decorative tile adornment, and of course he could not overlook the large rectangular table just to the left of the doorway.

Perhaps Lucy Cox couldn't cook, but she certainly kept a tidy and homey kitchen; the entire house looked immaculate except for the mess her husband had made. Davis might have found the room most inviting, if it hadn't been for the naked woman tied to chairs which sat at opposing sides of the dinette.

While Kane's swinging motions held the attention of the tie-er, Davis began inching to the left towards the tie-ee.

Brad Cox pulled his hand back from the falling drawer with a shout of pain and anger. He'd narrowly avoided having his hand chopped off by the swinging motion of Kane's solid walking stick.

That was the moment when Davis noticed Lazarus Kane had selected quite a different stick for this outing. Kane's walking stick rang with the sound of heavy steel when it landed, not wood.

Cox clasped his bruised knuckles to his chest for a moment. He raised the steam iron and tried to ward off his unexpected attacker. Kane swept the iron to the floor in a practiced motion that struck metal on

metal. The plug came loose from the outlet as the scalding appliance fell; the light on the iron turned off. It lay there on the tile floor on its side wobbling slightly.

Cox cursed and reached out with his uninjured hand and tried to grab the end of the metal cane before it could inflict any further damage.

Davis crept closer to the table, counting on Kane to buy him a few moments of distraction and not noticing that Kane had disarmed his assailant yet. He had to do two things: verify that the woman's injuries would not immediately kill her, and somehow manage to get the wild-eyed maniac fighting with Kane under control.

His officer training reminded him of the shaky ground on which he and Kane stood legally. A good lawyer could turn this "rescue" into a "home invasion" in short order and get any evidence discovered (such as a tortured woman bound on a tabletop) tossed out summarily. Davis dared not overreact to the situation because if it ever came to court his actions already seemed suspect.

Davis had reached the chair which bound the woman's ankles. The cord that bound her to the chair cut into a groove in her flesh that showed some previous similar abuse. He continued to inch around the table cautiously. But his earlier observation proved correct; Cox had not yet gone too far in his madness and his wife remained in the land of the living.

Brad Cox got a slight grasp on the swinging tip of the cane as it waved before his eyes, but before he could get a firm hold on Kane's walking stick, Kane gave the handle a twist and the shaft of the cane dropped away and clattered to the floor.

Brad Cox now confronted a twenty-four inch blade of highly polished stainless steel. He gave Kane his full attention now, and backed away from the man without taking any notice of the second man's position in his kitchen.

"And now," Kane shouted as Cox cringed backward, "I'm going to run you through like a picador! Damn-ed, smiling villain!"

Kane took a step forward. So did Davis, from the other direction.

Cox swooned a moment towards the floor, but not out of drunkenness or fatigue. He had spied a meat cleaver near his right foot and quickly snatched it up and swung it at the blade of the sword-cane. He wore an odd grin like triumph, or defeat, or a lack of care whatever happened.

But he'd taken too long.

As Cox raised up his cleaver he crumpled to the floor; he sagged as if his bones had lost all structure and the pillowcase of his body became a sack of miscellaneous helplessness. Brad Cox never even saw what had struck him.

"I thought you'd never do it," Kane told Davis—who had just clouted Brad Cox hard on the back of the head.

"I needed a few moments," Davis conceded.

"I did my best to provide them. Good ole Shakespeare. I can't wait to tell Holly how the Bard saved the day yet again."

Davis didn't bother to point out that a bash about the head with a fallen pot of creamed corn had actually sorted the matter; while Kane had held Cox's complete attention, Davis had circled behind the retreating man and whacked him on the back of the neck. Davis had almost hesitated to do even that much to subdue the man, but feared Kane had actually meant to plunge his blade into Cox's chest if something didn't happen that instant to prevent him. He chose the lesser of two evils.

The sandy-haired newbie set the empty cookpot down, shook some remnants of the creamed corn off his hand, and then kicked the cleaver and a number of other sharp implements out of the reach of the fallen Cox. He also picked up the fallen steam iron and set it on the countertop in an upright position so it didn't scorch the floor with its residual heat.

Cox lay on the floor swearing and clutching the back of his head. He shed not a drop of blood, which Davis thought a pity but perhaps was the best result possible under the circumstances.

"It wasn't your fault," Kane was saying.

Davis started to answer but realized abruptly that Kane spoke to Mrs. Cox.

Untying her feet from the first chair, Kane said, "He's not well. He needs help."

She whimpered, "He's a good man. He tries..." and the rest of what she said came out garbled through her sobs.

"He drinks a little, he does. They'll help him with that too." Kane said these things sounding almost sympathetic, almost like a real human being with actual feelings for others.

The sobbing continued as Kane freed the woman's hands.

"My fault," she managed to say in tones of self-loathing.

"No," repeated Kane in an adamant tone, "you just didn't know him well enough. He wasn't prepared for your secret Lucy."

He pulled the woman back into a seated position and looked away as she rubbed her sore arms. The burns and marks all over her back would not permit her to fully lean back in the chair.

Kane told Davis to go grab the blanket off the sofa in the living room.

When Davis got back Kane had the woman's face in his hands; he dried her tears with a lace handkerchief.

Kane asked her quietly, "When did your husband find out."

"About eight months ago. Just a few months after we got married," she sniffed, gratefully taking the blanket from Davis and trying to rewrap her dignity with it.

Both men noticed she took little trouble to cover her "private" parts and focused more on the signs of abuse on her slender and scarred body.

Lucy explained, "He's not such a bad man. He tried. Honest he did." She tried to excuse the moaning form which stirred slightly on the floor across the room.

"They'll help him," Kane told her again. "Do you have any tea around here?"

She indicated a cabinet, and then drew her hand back quickly when she saw the fresh bruises.

Kane pretended not to notice and set about making the tea. He called Davis over and said in a near-whisper, "Get me someone down here now. One of those counselors from the rape center should do.

"And I want a uniformed policewoman outside this place until morning at least."

Davis didn't question any of those orders. Somehow, he knew it would all make sense. Cox started to move about on the floor; Davis went up to the man and handcuffed him.

"Is that really..." Mrs. Cox started to say, and then felt foolish. "He's a good man," she insisted, as if trying to convince the world.

"I know," Kane sympathized. "But we all need help sometimes. Don't worry. We'll see that he gets it."

They waited while she went upstairs to compose herself properly. They heard her take a shower and open some closets.

Paper walls, you can hear it all.

By the time Lucy Cox finally reappeared, Madeline Parker from the crisis center had arrived and already sipped half a cup of herbal tea with Kane in the kitchen. Kane introduced the two women and apologized for his partner's absence, and for having to leave so abruptly himself.

Davis had used the interval to move the handcuffed husband outside; he waited there for Kane to emerge.

As Kane left the two women behind he heard Lucy Cox repeating, "...all my fault."

The door thundered closed when Lazarus Kane entered the car and sat down. He seemed to move without using his eyes and performed the entry and closure without shifting his implacable glare from the eyes of the man in the backseat of the squad-car. Seeing anything at all in the little remaining light of a late desert evening made for a neat trick and Kane executed it flawlessly. He flung himself into the car like the Wrath Of God and without ever taking his eyes off the trembling and now terrified Brad Cox.

All three men sat in the silent wake of the explosive arrival of Lazarus Kane. Kane let the silence brood and breed and nag and torture a while. Then, precisely on a cue of his own invention he opened his mouth to speak in a very deep, dark, nearly obsidian or fuligin voice which Davis would not have dreamed possible coming from such a slender and foppish form.

Lazarus Kane said, in tones dripping with the capability of murder, "We stand at the crossroads, you inverter of cows."

Brad Cox continued to look afraid and concerned about the madman he confronted through the wire. He knew that sword would slip nicely through any of the openings in the mesh should Kane decide that appropriate. He listened in confusion and waited for a question he could answer without angering the other man further.

"Don't pretend you don't hear me. I said we stand at a crossroads," Kane repeated when a suitable interval had passed.

That voice. Jesus! Satan must sound like that when he's trying to put someone off their food forever.

Actually, Davis noticed, they sat at a crossroads. They'd parked at a crossroads. Or, more precisely, Kane had insisted the car had stopped in the lot of a Denny's restaurant and there they all sat, motor running.

"So?" Cox snarled.

"My name is Kane. This is my associate, Officer Tuesday. We're here to give you a choice, Brad. I want you to put your thinking cap on for me."

From the back of the car came a sigh that Davis recognized as familiar; Kane had that effect on people fairly fast.

"It is approximately four miles to the police station where this lovely vehicle needs to be tucked in snugly in the lot for the night. We can take you there and show you the place, see that you are properly booked for assault, torture, attempted murder, and possession of anything illegal we happen to have laying around the

place at the moment. I have some extremely high quality opium I can spare if the local constabulary is short on illicit substances.”

Cox gave a drunken snort.

Kane proceeded inexorably in that timbered voice which should have lay well outside the range of his vocal chords, "I know you think you can extricate yourself from all of that and be back 'on the streets' in a few hours. Perhaps you are even correct.

"But I have a squad of officers headed over to your lovely townhouse right now to see that the remaining occupant is in no way distracted by visitors or traveling salesmen while she recuperates and recovers her wits after this evening's performance.

"So banish any thoughts of retaliation against the lady instantly or I will see to it that this fine officer doing the driving for us will implicate you in so many crimes as to deprive you of sunlight for the remainder of your life. If you manage bail, I'll be happy to see to it that you are promptly booked for trespassing if you even set foot on your own property again without my leave to do so."

The man in the back of the car kicked at the back of Kane's seat in drunken fury. As he moved, bits of clotting creamed corn flew off him onto the seats and windows of the car.

"She didn't do this, Brad and neither did I. You did this. You could have left Lucy if you wanted; you didn't need to walk this road you've chosen for yourself."

"Lying bitch," Brad said from the backseat.

"Perhaps..." Kane conceded with a gruff tone which indicated that her lies did nothing to obscure her husband's culpability. "But no one forced you to stay with her. From what I saw on the floor she looked like a decent cook. Perhaps that's what kept you coming back."

In a more careful modulation Kane hinted at other secrets he believed he knew, "Perhaps it was something else?"

Silence.

Then Cox heaved out, "So what's my other choice..."

Kane told him, "We are also approximately four miles from a very fine facility where they teach people such as you how to handle things like alcoholism and drug addiction and domestic violence.

"You can sign yourself in there for ninety days and attend therapy and hopefully recover."

Brad made a derisive sound.

"Yes, recover. You still can recover, if you want to. The choice is yours and the car is running. At the price of gasoline these days, I don't intend to let this young officer waste any more due to your indecision.

"I'll have your answer please. Now."

Cox demanded to know, "What business is any of this of yours?"

"Your answer please, or I'll pick one for you," Kane said with a somehow darker and even eager tone creeping into his voice.

Davis hid a smile at the thought of Lazarus Kane playing "bad cop" with someone. And privately he had to admit he had never seen it better in any movie or training situation he'd witnessed. When he wanted to, Lazarus Kane could easily manage "Scary as hell" with perhaps even a nod to "Demonic".

Cox watched as the driver turned around and gave him a helpless look and said, "You better pick fast, buddy-- he's not in the best mood right now. He really wanted to run you through with his sword so he's a little pissed off that I clobbered you instead."

"Hospital?" Brad grumbled.

"Is that your final answer?" Kane quipped, spoofing a game-show host.

"Hospital."

Kane turned to Davis and announced joyfully, "And we have our winner!"

Davis reclined against the seat of the booth where he and Kane sat. "How did you know?"

"We're talking like old friends now, is it?" Kane inquired as he sipped coffee inside the same Denny's location about an hour later.

Brad Cox had voluntarily signed himself in for detoxification and a course in anger management. It had been made crystal clear to the man that if he so much as set foot outside the facility (before the staff and doctors felt him ready to depart) Kane and Davis would consider him "fair game" and have him arrested for as many charges they felt they could comfortably make stick.

"Why not?" Davis sipped his own coffee.

"Why not, indeed. I'm indebted to you for your fast thinking back there. I am not sure I'd actually have the nerve to kill a man outright, face-to-face."

Kane looked at Davis with a piercing stare and enigmatically added, "That's a hard thing to do, as some of us have had to find out..."

Davis didn't change his expression any but something inside him stiffened. To mask his reaction he said, "The threat of it worked well enough; you didn't actually have to do it."

Then he asked again, "How did you know???"

"About the matchbook stuck in your desk drawer? Which car had to be yours the first day I met you? All about your ignoble birth, and your history of travel across this great nation of ours?"

Davis had indeed wondered about all those mysteries at times but they no longer felt relevant. "About Lucy. How did you know what he did to her?"

"Are you giving me a test now?"

"I think I've earned the right," Davis countered.

Kane sipped his coffee. "Perhaps you have. Shall I compose an ode on the subject in iambic pentameter and recite it?"

Davis laughed, "Pretend you're a cop..."

Kane ran through a lengthy chain of ideas and circumstances in a quick series that Davis could hardly follow. A few minutes later Davis sat in utter astonishment; he tried to recap what he'd heard.

"You saw a bruise on a Thursday on a wrist. That's it."

"Essentially."

"That's it?"

"I saw another one a few weeks later when the first had healed-- also on a Thursday. But perhaps the scar really started the whole thing off for me."

"The one near her eye."

"Yes. Made by a scuba-diver's watch. I found the grooves and the raised external circle very distinct so I had a look through some old sports illustrated magazines until I found the right brand."

"At the library..."

"Marvelous rich source of information is the local library."

"The watch suggested a man," Davis prompted.

"A man's watch, the advertisement insisted..." Kane wore an odd smile on his lips as he continued, "And who am I to argue with the fine advertising executives at Seiko? They say it's a man's watch so I go along like a good little sheep."

"So, I had a man, and a watch-- a left-handed man, from the angle and position of the cut—and a man with a temper."

Davis appeared disappointed at the simplicity of the solution, and at his own failure to have spotted the obvious clues. "You saw a couple of bruises and a scar. So did I."

"But you didn't stop to consider what they meant."

Davis didn't take offence. Kane had nailed it factually; Davis hadn't stopped to consider.

"All this from a couple of bruises."

Kane looked skeptical, "Always on a Thursday? Who only gets bruised on Thursdays and takes the rest of the days of the week off? This suggested a pattern."

Davis nodded.

Kane took up his best storyteller's irony and said, "I am given to understand that in this great nation of ours, some people are paid weekly. They receive little envelopes with a check inside that they can take to their local bank and cash in for hard currency.

"Some of these remarkable men and women then go out and, I am reliably informed, they engage in an activity quaintly known as 'getting shit-faced'. They arrive at their homes in various states of intoxication and depression and at such times little scenes and fights are often picked with their spouses or loved ones."

He waited and then acknowledged imaginary applause with benevolent tolerance and a waving of his hands as if to force a subsidence of same.

"And this is what you do," Davis questioned. "You just go about noticing scars on faces and looking through old magazines and charging to the rescue of brutalized damsels in distress? Reading stories in the newspaper and having the guilty parties arrested?"

"This is what I do," Kane affirmed, "in between visits to the library and the cinema and games of Pokemon with charming young ladies."

"Ivy is a lovely girl," Davis admitted, momentarily sidetracked by Kane's endless non sequiturs.

"She should have had a big brother-- every little girl ought to have a big brother to protect her from all the bad things in the world," Kane said in a suddenly somber tone. Then he added, almost under his breath, "Even from her parents if necessary..."

Davis didn't meet his eyes, he said nothing. Both men knew a lot more lay behind the surface of that comment than wistful thinking. Kane's words cut through Davis in a personal and visceral way and he quickly adjusted his face to mask how he had been shaken.

Just how much does Kane know about my past??? And how much of Kane's own past is he concealing in that one utterance?

They finished their meal and Davis paid without complaint or requiring prompting. He asked Kane what further plans he had for the rest of the night.

"Sleep," Kane avowed stiffly, "I'm feeling quite done in. I need a smoke and some sleep."

Before Kane left the car, Davis asked him, "Tell me one last thing."

"If I am able," Kane replied with formality.

"Why were you so nice to that son of a bitch Cox? After seeing what he did to that poor girl, I wanted to beat the crap out of him myself. Sure, he probably would have wormed his way out of it somehow with our tortured legal system being what it is, but why not run him in anyway and let him take his chances?"

Kane gave the other man a look which suggested that such an honest question deserved a straight-forward answer... for a change.

"Two reasons. First, I know the law much better than you might think. If we had arrested Mister Cox, he might have managed to turn the judicial tables upon us and eventually seen to it that your fellows down at the Gilbert Police Department would be sent to arrest us!

"I don't speak to our personal inconvenience on that score... but what would happen to Lucy Cox left unprotected? And it would certainly have cut short what may be a promising career for one Detective Miles Davis."

Davis nodded. So Kane hadn't been flying without a net when they entered the house; he knew the score as well as any officer.

Davis prompted, "And the second reason?"

"Mister Cox believed in a lie, or wanted to believe in one. He needed to believe in it so badly that, when confronted with the plain solid truth, something essential to his nature simply could not accept it. He shattered and became what you saw."

Davis didn't buy it. "No one snaps weekly on Wednesday nights."

"You never know," Kane said. "But the truth is that Cox did his best to hold in the explosions every day. He'd had a rather serious blow to his male-ego. Only when the liquor lifted the lid to the box did his inner demon come out to play."

"Inner demons my ass," Davis told him. "Cox is a son of a bitch! He tortured that poor girl with a steam-iron. Did you see the marks?"

"More closely than you," Kane pointed out.

Davis took no offence at the jibe; he still had Brad Cox on his mind. He repeated, "Son of a bitch!"

"Possibly."

"So why give him a choice? Why not book him and let him rot somewhere and take our chances? What was the lie she told him? What the hell justified such abuse in his mind?"

Kane turned to close the door of the car and softly told Davis, "Mrs. Lucy Cox of Atlanta, Georgia was born Lawrence Richard Bennett."

Davis digested that.

Kane continued lightheartedly in a tone that sought to banish the horror of the evening, "Tomorrow's always another day. In fact, tomorrow is another Thursday.

"The surrealist exhibit arrived at the Phoenix Art Museum last week and I've been dying to see it. The museum is free on Thursdays, so it won't cost you or the department a dime. I will telephone you at around noon."

Davis smiled and said, "Sounds good."

The young detective wanted to shake Kane's hand, compliment him on an unbelievable piece of police work and detection. But somehow it still just didn't feel right to do that and Davis sensed it might even have made Kane uncomfortable.

He felt like he had to say something positive. So he said this:

"Umm..."

"Yes?"

"Neat sword cane."

"Bud-K. Someone sent me a catalog. They make lovely stuff... all solid metal and very durable."

"They're illegal, of course," Davis added unnecessarily.

"As well they should be! Imagine the havoc someone might wreak with a sharp object in this world of fifty handguns for every man, woman and child of us! Sheer chaos," Kane summated. "Fortunately, we reside in Arizona and you will discover they passed a handy law a few years ago which allows people of good will such as myself to carry whatever concealed weapons they like without a single piece of paper. Ahhh, God bless the wild-and-wooly-west. Ask Holly about it next time you see him. I would never presume to misquote the laws of this fine land of ours."

Davis laughed. "Are you always full of shit, Kane?"

"Ask me to see my derringer collection sometime. I'm very proud of it. While I don't quite have fifty of my own I do manage to take up some of the slack for those who have no firearms at all."

"I'll do that. See you tomorrow."

Davis drove home that night in a much better mood than he'd felt since taking on this unusual assignment. In the back of his mind he still puzzled out the details of the evening-- a bit miffed he hadn't figured it out himself from the hints he'd had: the thick forearms with light hair; the flatness of her. He remembered the way Kane had drawn attention to Lucy's "scar" and how she had looked down at first... towards her waist.

Once upon a time Lucy had been a Larry! Poor macho Brad.

Funny world.

The next morning, when he arrived in Captain Connor's office, Detective Miles Davis smiled at his superior broadly, apologized for his tardiness the previous day, and thanked the man for giving a complete rookie such as himself an unbelievably interesting assignment.

Captain Connor said, "Now that's more like it!"

He took Davis by the hand for a moment and told the man to keep up the good work.

FOUR

Lazarus Kane did not place a call to Detective Miles Davis until nearly two in the afternoon on Thursday. Twenty minutes later, Davis stood outside the man's house awaiting him.

Somehow he felt rude waiting in the car.

The two men drove into central Phoenix shortly afterward in Davis' car with the air conditioning on full-blast. Another hot day in a series oppressed the struggling vegetation and pedestrians of the city.

For some reason, all the traffic lights on McDowell were out of commission. McDowell, a major thoroughfare in the city, now had a uniformed officer of the Phoenix Police Department standing at every large intersection conducting the flow of the city like some immense and noisy symphony-- a sweaty, over-bright and irritating symphony.

Davis navigated each intersection with a silent sigh of respect and pity for the men and women in blue who stood in the sweltering pyre of the asphalt cacophony.

Crossing town took a lot longer than it should have, but Davis eventually pulled his car into the parking lot just off Central Avenue at McDowell Road. The Phoenix Art Museum lay before them... through some gates of hastily erected wire fencing and signs indicating the rather obvious presence of construction work on the property.

As they entered, a man in a red jacket (whose job normally involved collecting admission fees) looked up from his crossword puzzle. He smiled as Kane approached the desk.

"Wondered when you'd show up. Been here more than a week you know."

"I know. I've been busy, George. This is Tuesday," Kane said, indicating Davis.

"That his first or last name?" George wondered.

"My last name is Wells," Davis told him gravely. "The kids at school were hell about it."

"Tuesday Wells, huh?" the man in the red jacket smiled. "Imagine that." He chuckled and nodded.

Kane smiled at the barest corners of his mouth.

Patrons arrived and left through the large glass doors. Some turned left, towards the main art collection; some went right towards the hallway and the stairs leading to the advertised exhibit of surrealist art.

A tall donation box stood in the main hallway for those who desired to contribute to the upkeep of the museum even on days of free admission.

"You don't look like a Tuesday," the man admitted seriously.

"I got into a lot of fights," Davis assured him knowingly.

"I can imagine," George said thoughtfully. With his right hand he penciled the word "L-A-N-C-E" into his crossword in response to the clue for twenty-seven down.

"Kids can be so cruel..." Kane said.

As if by a conspiracy of the universe to provide an example, at that precise moment two children, recently escaped from their pursuing parents, ran past loudly playing and slapping at each other's hair. As the pair of unescorted boys headed into the museum proper, one curled up a small fist and hit the other in the shoulder and ran off ahead noisily; the second gave chase instantly.

"Not that I intended to give anyone permission! It was just an observation!" Kane added in a louder tone as the children passed him.

"It's the parent's fault," Davis hazarded conversationally as the parents in question walked hurriedly past the counter.

"At least they didn't get named for a day of the week," George commented without looking up from his puzzle.

The couple with errant offspring did their best to retain their dignity and maintain the illusion that they had any control over their progeny for the benefit of museum staff and patrons in general. They made every attempt to hurry while conspiring to saunter at the same time. Shortly they caught up to their children near a Georgia O'Keefe watercolor in pink which more than one reviewer had labeled "vaginal".

Kane pocketed a brochure about the surrealist exhibit on display and turned to follow the couple down the hallway. The surrealism exhibit lay in the other direction.

Davis didn't make any comment. He had no problem wandering through the rest of the museum for a while if Kane wanted to do so. He didn't regret that choice either.

If one lives in the area, it is easy to forget that Phoenix stands as the sixth largest city in the United States. To people who've seen it and lived there it all seems so terribly small and rural. But, in keeping with the

provenance of a major metropolis, the museum had an amazing collection of works both modern and steeped in tradition.

Davis and Kane got separated for a few moments by a staircase which Kane nearly leaped up. When Davis reached him, the other man sat on the ground before a squarish canvas easily eight feet across.

The entire canvas lived with flowers and trees and acacia and hyacinth and incredible near-birds-of-paradise and other flora both mythical and lost to the eye of man. The painting had such vibrancy, and so many blues, and shades of yellow and red that it nearly tired the eye to see.

Kane looked out of the painting at Davis.

"I could live there," Kane told him.

"It looks like he did L.S.D."

"L.D.S.? I've always suspected the Mormons are up to no good-- squirreling away mountains of cheesy poofs and bottled water in order to survive Armageddon.

"You go down fighting; you don't give up and hide." Kane grimaced as if the last sentiment contained a personal hell for him or a lesson hard-learned.

"I mean the artist..."

"I know what you meant," Kane replied with a snort that indicated Davis should have by now become accustomed to his little non sequiturs. "This is Joseph Stella's masterwork: 'Flowers'. If I hadn't decided to leave all my money to the American Cancer Society I'd buy this painting. But I suppose they'd rather have the money than a painting."

"Where would you hang it?" Davis asked, not really knowing what to say. He hadn't expected the series of non sequiturs based on his simple comment; Kane's mind made odd associations.

"I'd donate it back to the museum. And I'd come visit it every week or so. As always."

As always.

Davis filed that away. "Are we going to see the rest of the place, or camp out here? I could go get us some sandwiches."

"I think we can do better than that for lunch. In the meantime, the surrealists await us."

Kane stood up, leaning on his walking stick.

He walked down the corridor to the right, appraising things as they passed. He considered the Georgia O'Keeffe watercolors, the nearby sculptures by other artists, the Remington bronzes. They crossed the entryway through which they'd come earlier, and this time headed in the direction of the majority of patrons. The sign read: Surrealism USA.

As they passed the collection box, Davis dropped in ten dollars.

On the way back out, some hours later, he dropped in another twenty.

Kane said, "If you're going to pay that much, we can come here any old day." But he favored Davis with a look of strong approval beneath the comic banter.

They'd spent more than a few hours in the place. Kane nearly had to pry the other man away from a canvas by George Marinko.

The canvas, "Sentimental Aspects of Misfortune" depicted a wide and bizarre landscape replete with giant tools, nude fashion puppets and Catholic nuns. Davis had never seen anything like it in his life and he could not take his eyes from it.

Of course the Dali paintings also captured the eye, and many of the other modern and surrealist sculptures and works had their admirers among the patrons. But someone would have had to fight Davis to get him away from the Marinko painting for at least the first twenty minutes after he'd seen the canvas.

Davis still had the image of the Marinko burned into his mind as he and Kane made for the car. Davis could actually understand Kane making a special trip to visit a painting over and over. The thought scared him a little.

How have I lived so long without art? Art isn't an optional extra!

Following Kane's instructions, Davis disdained the congestion of McDowell Road and turn north on Central Avenue. The two men waited at an inordinately long light but other than that made good time. Kane's directions led them swiftly to George's Delicatessen.

Kane's entire demeanor changed as they walked towards the umbrella-ed tables outside the door. By the time he entered the deli, Kane seemed to hunch a little and take on some odd mannerisms... or rather he took on new odd mannerisms which varied more than slightly from his more normal and regularly exaggerated odd mannerisms.

"George!" he called out. "Abbe gezint?"

"Machen laben," the older, heavysset man replied with a thick New York accent.

Kane smiled broadly, looking about at the glass cases full of freshly baked rugeleh and humentashen and other pastries. To the right of that counter stood an even longer case through which egg salad, tuna salad, pasta salad and about any type of salad Davis could think of (and some he could not) were visible in neatly arrayed metal pans.

"So... nu?" George asked after a short pause.

Davis pondered the odd coincidence—did everything in Kane's life contain hidden patterns? The attendant at the museum had a nametag which read: George. The canvas Davis had nearly drowned in had read "George Marinko" at the bottom. Now, a third "George" awaited their lunch order.

Would today be a "George Day" and did such a thing even exist??? Only in the world of Lazarus Kane, apparently.

"Today? Half a dozen of the 'everything' bagels. Half a pound of the herring salad; half of the whitefish spread. And I bet you've got some fresh cream cheese back there somewhere..." Kane made a show of looking around, sounding more like Woody Allen with every word.

"Maybe," George hedged. A playful glint appeared in his eyes, "I'll have to check for you."

Encanto Park in the late afternoon: the ducks lazily skated on the surface of the man-made lake. Kane and Davis sat at a bench; Davis sniffed the chopped herring in the plastic container before him.

"It smells like onions and that's about it," he insisted.

"Try it," Kane offered.

Davis split open a pre-sliced bagel with a plastic knife from the delicatessen and spread first cream cheese and then some of the grayish fish onto it. He bit cautiously. Then he ate with gusto. Then he had another.

Kane read a discarded newspaper he'd retrieved from the ground nearby. He clucked at something.

"Do I need to call anyone?"

"Not unless you think we can have the mayor's wife arrested for cheating in a 'bake-off' because I swear I saw this same recipe a dozen years ago in a collection of Betty Crocker.

"Shameless, what some folks will do for a little fame..." Davis mused, appreciating the unfamiliar food with increased gusto as he took each new bite.

Davis had a third bagel. He tried the whitefish spread; it too tasted delicious and unlike anything he'd ever sampled before.

Two large men wandered by on the path near their table; they smelled even from a distance; they had matted hair. One ranted something about ducks and lighter fluid to the other, who laughed an insane giggle. The men had the look of those who lived in the park full-time, save when escorted off by the police at odd moments for disturbing the peace or public drunkenness.

"I speak many languages," Kane said, still delicately nibbling his first bagel. "But 'crack-head' is not among them, alas.

"You like the fish?"

Davis grinned. He looked mournfully at the dwindling bag of bagels on the wooden tabletop.

"Oh have another. I'm far too upset over this outright plagiarism in the pastry competition to have a proper appetite in any case."

Davis couldn't tell if Kane kidded him or not, but he didn't hesitate to take another bagel and decorate it properly as he had the previous ones.

"I am thirsty, though," Kane admitted. Looking at a nearby fountain he added, "I wonder if the water is fit as yet for humans to drink..."

"They issued an 'all clear' on the radio this morning. It was always fine... it's just that some test didn't get done on time, so they didn't want to take any chances. But the water's fine. Just a screw up."

"Odd."

"Bureaucracy," Davis countered. His phone chirped and he read a text to Kane, "The captain says there aren't any major pig farms locally."

Kane digested this in silence. Then he asked Davis to take him home and they packed up their trash and the remaining foodstuffs and departed. They drove back to Kane's home in silence; the slender man appeared to ruminate and Davis had no desire to interrupt.

Davis sat in his living room hours later and reflected on the day. He'd had one of the nicest times he could recall. He liked the museum, the park, the strange culinary delights, the movie afterwards and Kane's company throughout the day.

How had Kane become suddenly likable? The man hadn't changed in any perceptible way from their first irritating and irrational conversation. What had altered? Davis couldn't say. From his first impression and reaction to the strange anachronism, Davis would never have anticipated any possibility of friendship. Yet, just scant days later he began to find that he liked Kane, and even missed him a little at moments like this.

Davis didn't really like sitting alone in an empty apartment at night.

Almost in response to his thoughts, the phone rang. Kane.

"Still up?" came in inquiring voice.

Remembering his manners, Davis drawled, "Hello, how are you?"

"Fine, of course. Flawless as ever. And yourself?"

Davis played along, "Oh, fine. Fine. Hanging in there. You know how it is..."

"I wanted to take a little trip. Are you up for a drive?"

"Oh always," Davis assured him, "should I bring dark clothing and a large gaffing hook?"

"No. This castle will open to us unassailed."

They drove up Forty-Fourth Street, just north of Camelback, and followed the winding road up to Camelback Mountain. Many large, palatial homes spread out cunningly across the sides of the mountain—providing privacy, seclusion, and an amazing view of the surrounds.

Kane directed their progress until they reached a high, long drive with a gate. Kane had Davis pull up to a post near the gate and roll down the driver's side window.

Kane whistled at the electronic box next to the car.

The gate began to open. A voice came through the speaker on the code-box, male and tired. "I'll tell her you're here."

Kane made no reply. He waved towards the now-open drive and Davis guided the car up the steep hill to the immense house at the end of the road. Behind them the gate swung silently closed.

As they got out of the car, the front door opened. A youngish man in a bathrobe stood silhouetted in the darkness by the interior light. He wiped his eyes sleepily and waved. The man had a pile of blond hair just a few shades lighter than Davis' own which stuck up as if statically charged. He also had lots and lots of freckles. He motioned Kane and Davis to enter and stepped back into his house.

Inside, the interior had surprising charm and class. Someone had done an amazing job with the décor. The hallway had delicate appointments and three wide arches leading to different sections of the house.

The furnishings that lined the walls, the side-tables, hat-stands and even the sconces reeked of French provincial.

The first open doorway they passed contained a Victorian sitting room—passionately recreated in loving detail. The second, on the left, had summed up the entire ‘Art Deco’ movement as if it had always intended to exist in that one room only.

Davis couldn’t help staring back at it for more than a few seconds as they went down to the end of the hall.

The last door remained closed until the blond in the bathrobe pushed it open with a yawn.

In this room, someone had chosen to recreate the Explorer’s Club from an Allan Quartermaine film, or something similar. It had ancient teak and cherry-wood furnishings, a series of leather couches, a number of lounging seats, some tables and chairs for card-play, a fireplace (not in use at the moment, given the temperature) some high-backed hide chairs, walls lined with animal heads and tapestries, and a huge chandelier of meticulously hand-placed candles hanging low into the center of the room. Several doors leading to other sections of the house faced each other from across two of the walls, all slightly open.

After consideration of the detailed recreations in every room Davis could not help saying, “This place is amazing.”

“I like it,” the blond told him. “I’m Billy.”

“Hi Billy, I’m Miles Davis. No relation.”

“To who?” Billy asked.

Kane interceded, “May I present Dr. William Thomas Crumb.”

Davis nearly choked.

“Inventor of the new bi-valve replacement heart?” Davis inquired in an awed tone.

“That’s him,” Kane said.

"It weren't nothing," Billy assured both men, running his long thin fingers through his hair to get it to settle down a bit. "I had help."

Davis couldn't believe his eyes.

He'd read about Dr. Crumb, of course. Who hadn't? A stock-market millionaire at fourteen and the youngest acceptee to Harvard Medical, Crumb had turned down a post in Johns Hopkins and nearly single-handedly revolutionized a new system to prevent tissue-rejection in transplant patients. After that... the new life-saving heart replacement. All of that accomplished at just under thirty years of age!

But the man Davis saw before him barely appeared mid-twenties and had a vacant and hapless expression on his face that made him look a complete innocent. Davis didn't expect that vacant look changed much even when Dr. Crumb wasn't sleepy.

"I'm standing here with one of the richest men in the world," Davis summed up.

"Would you rather sit?" Billy asked.

"Please," Kane replied.

They walked over to a set of couches in the simulation of the Explorer's Club and sat near the fireplace.

A moth-eaten cat with one eye and a half-torn ear wandered through Davis' legs as it passed through the room. It left behind more than a few black-and-grey hairs in its wake. It went out through one of the doors, probably in search of food.

"Mara's waiting for you in the den," Billy told Kane, still yawning a bit.

"Then I won't strain her patience. If you'll both excuse me?"

"You don't want me to come with you?" Davis asked. He felt left out, suddenly.

"Not this time, I think. I'm afraid Mara is very particular about who sees her-- some of my friends are a bit idiosyncratic at times..." Kane trailed off.

Davis smiled. Idiosyncratic was a good word for Kane, Kane's world and anything in orbit around him.

Oh god, does that mean I am going to become peculiar too? Is it already too late??

Davis nodded and Kane left the room.

Billy had fallen asleep in a high-backed chair with lovely brushed suede fabric in the few seconds it took Kane to depart and close the door. The young blond's robe fell half-open, revealing a lack of any other garments.

With nothing else to do, Davis stood up and looked around the room. He studied the great elephant head for about three minutes before he made up his mind about it. A fake—a clever one, absolutely—but no real elephant gave up his or her life to make it.

The other "trophies" in the room proved similarly manufactured.

Every other object and bit of furniture Davis cast his eye upon appeared genuine and antique, save for the recreations of hunting prizes hanging on the walls. The dismembered heads seemed works of art in themselves. Whoever had designed the place had spared no expense to see to it every detail was perfect—save that they obviously could not bring themselves to use actual dead animals.

At times he heard snatches of conversation from the other room. Davis heard Kane say something about bad poetry and hospitals. The young rookie-detective looked at his host and found him still asleep. So Davis studied the tapestries and perused ancient Persian battles depicted in woven cloth.

A few minutes later, as Billy settled into a regular snore, Kane returned.

"We should go," he told Davis.

Davis nodded and pointed towards the man in the chair.

"Let's not wake him again," Kane answered. "We'll just creep out silent as frogs in the chicken noodle soup."

Davis stopped for a moment, "You say the oddest things at times. Is it on purpose?"

"Have you ever heard a frog in your chicken noodle soup?" Kane countered.

"Of course not," Davis told him.

"That's because they're so quiet. C'mon. Time to have a smoke and a think."

Kane had several smokes and about fifteen minutes of his silent meditation before he again opened his eyes. They'd driven about halfway back to his house in Gilbert.

"Call Holly and tell him I need to see the governor."

Davis couldn't help blurting out, "Of Arizona?"

"Well, the president might be more use-- or those lovely hidden folks who actually run things for him. But I think it will prove easier to catch the ear of our governor and probably a lot quicker.

"But the president may have to be told at some point."

"You're serious," Davis said in realization. He didn't wait for the nod of confirmation he saw coming in the corner of one eye. He reached for his phone.

Without further thought or question Davis called Captain Robert Holbrook Connor and told him Kane wanted an audience with the governor.

Connor sounded unsurprised but less than pleased. "Shit. That bad, is it?"

"Apparently," Davis replied sincerely without any personal knowledge of Kane's misgivings.

Connor's voice sounded in the receiver immediately, "Is tomorrow soon enough?"

Davis relayed the question in a tone which indicated both surprise that it had proved so easy to arrange, and respect for how seriously people who knew Kane seemed to adhere to his every word.

"That will do," Davis echoed Kane's answer into the phone. "He says sooner is best, Captain."

Connor rang off and set about getting Lazarus Kane moved to the top of the governor's agenda. He'd done it before, but only in times of major crisis. As he performed this task, Connor wondered what new disaster loomed which only Kane could foresee and prevent, and wished (not for the first time) that he possessed a fraction of that man's gifts.

"Someone is trying to destroy Phoenix. I believe it may be an attempt to overthrow the entire United States government and plunge the nation into chaos."

Governor Elizabeth Pym sat behind her desk in her office on Washington Street in the Executive Tower. She had short, neat hair with large hints of gray but remained a handsome woman. She listened patiently as Kane, seated across from her, outlined his scenario.

Pym replied with a chuckle, "Because a few street lights are out, and the traffic is bad, and the water is dirty? Honey, this is a city. That's what cities are like."

"I suspect this is just the beginning. Someone has been testing the ground here, and they will soon graduate to a larger scale. I believe they picked Phoenix because it is large enough to prove their theory but small enough that major safeguards are not in place in areas of vulnerability."

Governor Pym shifted uncomfortably; Homeland Security had reported something similar about areas of vulnerability to her office. She'd desperately sought funds from the state budget to close some gaping holes in the border and tighten up local defenses against possible terrorist acts ever since. Her success, to date, proved minimal.

"I don't want to sound unsympathetic, Mister Kane. You've been very helpful before. What is it you actually need?"

Kane thought a moment.

"Unimpeded access. I need access to every state, local and municipally controlled or monitored facility in Phoenix... possibly all of Arizona. Let's settle for Phoenix for right now.

"I need to come and go freely and to have my questions answered. I need it understood that I am there to help and no harm will come to anyone because of their answers-- or paranoia will lock every mouth against me."

"That's a tall order, Mister Kane. Something like that is hard to undo. I'm trying to decide if I trust you that much..."

Lazarus Kane closed his eyes a moment as if pained. In a tone that barely contained his illimitable dismay he told her distinctly, "It is necessary."

Governor Pym studied the macabre figure of Lazarus Kane. He sat across from her with ill-constrained urgency and an implacable look on his face that didn't fully conceal his fear. She picked up the phone on her desk and pressed two digits and hung up.

A slender woman with curly brown hair came in silently behind Kane and Davis.

"Governor?" she inquired.

"Lazarus Kane is appointed Secretary of Municipal Safety and Oversight. I want that recorded by the end of day. Send him to processing and get his paperwork expedited. He's to have an open door in every facility in Phoenix that we have any interest in or control of and I want that to go out today too... everywhere.

"I want him to have his credentials and an official I.D. card in short order. Do-able?"

"Very. But..?" the woman in the doorway hesitated.

"Yes?"

The aide explained, "There's no such thing as a department of Municipal Safety and Oversight. So there can't possibly be a Secretary for that department."

Governor Pym thought about that a moment. "All that's necessary in politics or diplomacy is a locked door. You can make up whatever you like about what goes on behind one. Are there any unoccupied offices on this floor?"

"There's a closet," the other woman replied. "No one really uses it for anything."

"Good. Lock the door, bring me all the keys and have maintenance get a sign on the door reading 'Department of Municipal Safety and Oversight'. I want that done right away as well.."

The governor's assistant smiled, "It's an awfully small closet for such an important office."

"Then have an awfully official-looking sign put on it. It will drive The Press mad with curiosity and confusion, once people notice it's there."

The assistant considered that and replied cheerily, "Reason enough to do it, then," she conceded, needing no further instructions. "I'll get right on it."

She left as soundlessly as she'd arrived.

"So I'm in government now, am I?" Kane mused.

"Temporarily. Everyone knows people who head up tinpot little departments in local government are buffoons who haven't got the first clue what they are doing. Congratulations... you've just joined their number.

"I expect people will talk quite freely to you in that role. Secretary to a department like the one I just invented is going to sound like a graveyard for burying useless nonentities."

"Then I should play it stupid and behave oddly..." Kane said.

He whirled with some actual surprise at the stereo effect of Davis and Pym cutting him off to reply in unison, "Just be yourself."

"Oh, it's a conspiracy, is it? What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive..."

"That isn't Shakespeare," Davis pointed out.

"Oh do not get him started!" the governor put in hastily. "I've a long day to get through and with the brown-outs going around the city right now. I've enough to do without listening to him recite for hours.

"Not that he does it badly," she admitted.

"Brown-outs?" Kane asked.

"It's summertime. The power companies are struggling to meet the need for increased output; everyone's got their air conditioning on full blast."

Kane's voice took on hints of that sharp edge he had used when speaking to Brad Cox, "I want to visit the power company. Right now."

The governor seemed taken aback by his sudden and fervent interest in what she considered a very ordinary happenstance of summer in the valley but she kept any reservations to herself. "There are two

major ones: Arizona Public Service and the Salt River Project. I think I can get you some kind of temporary pass that will let you inspect both places. But this is surely a coincidence,” she told him.

“It is surely not a coincidence,” he insisted with growing urgency. “I need to go right now.”

The governor dialed the two digits again. When the assistant came in she held a typed letter.

“Here is a temporary credential for Mister Kane. I thought you might need one.”

“Doreen, whatever would I do without you?”

The governor took the letter and signed it. She handed it to Kane.

“You will keep me posted on what you discover.” The tone brooked no question.

Kane nodded and excused himself and a bewildered Detective Davis. They left.

They got the directions and addresses for A.P.S. and S.R.P. from the governor’s assistant. It became immediately apparent that the first company had experienced no problems all that day, so they went to the Salt River Project in search of causes. Kane showed his letter to the plant foreman, and was allowed free access to the place. A cursory inspection showed no obvious problems with staff or equipment and the foreman conducted them on a guided tour of his establishment with a bored voice.

Davis and Kane followed the man back to his office.

“What about the brownouts?”

“A necessary evil. When we shift over to alternate turbines, some areas are left without power temporarily. It never lasts long.”

“And the reason you are shifting to alternate turbines?” Kane wanted to know.

“Unexpected demand. We have a formula for anticipating these things but someone made a mistake. So we fell short. We’re buying some energy from a California company to help meet the demand as well.”

“Someone made a mistake,” Kane repeated.

"Yeah," the foreman agreed dismissively. "It happens. Sometimes. Not often. It wasn't really his fault anyway."

"I would like to know who made this mistake," Kane told the foreman.

"You don't, really. He's a good guy. Just had a bad patch and, yah. So we have a few more brownouts this summer than usual. It won't hurt anything really."

"I don't intend to have this man punished or fired," Kane said carefully, "But I do need to know how this happened. It's important."

The foreman read Kane's expression and decided to tell him, "It was Harv Appleton. He does all our energy consumption projections. But at the time, he'd just lost his eldest boy and he was kind of a wreck emotionally. So he didn't check something he should have checked or whatever.

"It could have happened to anyone. Surprised he even came to work at all during that whole period. It must have been hell for him. Maybe he needed the distraction or to get out of the house—I know his wife was a mess for a while too."

Kane took all that in. He told the foreman, "I need to speak to him. Is Appleton in the plant now?"

The foreman nodded.

Kane waited. The man behind the desk got up and walked out. He returned a few minutes later with an older man who had a slight limp and cloudy blue eyes.

"You wanted to ask me something?" Appleton asked nervously.

"Please come in and sit down. Your foreman is going to go get us some soft drinks or something. Don't worry; you're still on the clock."

The foreman hesitated a moment, and then left to follow Kane's instructions

The older man looked relieved as he sat in a chair near Kane.

"So what's this all about?" Appleton asked. "I know I made a mistake in the calculations for..."

“Nothing like that,” Kane soothed. “I wanted to just ask you a few questions about yourself if you wouldn’t mind. I’m the Secretary for the Department of Municipal Safety and Oversight.”

“That sounds mighty impressive,” the other man laughed.

“Doesn’t it? Frankly, I’ve no clue what it means. I’m terribly new to my job and so far I haven’t had any chance to simply talk to the men who actually run things.”

To Davis’ surprise that is what Kane and Appleton did; they just chatted. They had a nice and seemingly aimless conversation. Kane and Appleton spoke pleasantly for nearly five minutes about the workings of power plants, and the anticipated need for new energy sources in light of burgeoning populations, and gardening (Appleton’s hobby) and even Kane’s choice in clothing.

The foreman returned with some Styrofoam cups of ice and a few cans of soda from the vending machine in the employee break-room. Those who wanted helped themselves, while the foreman took up his seat behind his desk.

The tenor of the conversation did not change any until Appleton himself brought up his recent mistake.

“And of course it was stupid. I forgot to attach the new algorithms for growth in the central areas. I was distracted. It wasn’t a good month for me.” He fell silent in thought or grief.

“What happened?” Kane said into the silence.

“Our... my son Jason died. Car accident. Senseless. He just got the car the week before, along with his license. It seemed such a bargain for his very first car; such an amazing piece of luck.”

Kane perked up. “What kind of car?”

Appleton looked up and to the left, “A baby blue GTO. A classic car -- nearly thirty years old and still in perfect condition. I went with Jason to buy it. I couldn’t believe the man who sold it to him only wanted nine hundred dollars. That car is worth thousands.

“Was worth thousands,” he amended with a forlorn tone.

"Those are muscle cars; very powerful vehicles. How terrible for you. I suspect your son simply could not handle it."

"I think you're right," Appleton agreed.

"Well you have my sympathies. And thank you so much for your insights into the workings of this amazing facility. I hope to see you again sometime if I may, when I have more questions about how things actually work." Lazarus Kane shook the man's hand and gave him a slight bow.

"Any time," Appleton told him honestly. "My pleasure. Most people find it boring."

"Not I," Kane told him. "But I had one more little question if you wouldn't mind? Nothing about the plant, just something you made me curious about."

"Sure."

"Who in their right mind would sell a classic GTO for that kind of money to a kid who barely learned how to drive?"

"I've asked myself that a thousand times. But the truth is that the guy probably didn't know what he had. He was some religious guy who lived in Apache Junction and had the thing in storage for a dozen years or more. Nice fellow, actually.

"But I should have turned him down. In the back of my mind I knew better. Gift horses..." he said.

"Thank you again for your time. I really do hope to talk to you again soon," Kane told Appleton.

"I think we're done for the day," Kane told Davis.

They drove to Kane's house and the car filled with pot smoke slowly along the way. Kane invited Davis to come inside and the other man did not demur.

Kane's house looked more like a library than anything else. As Davis entered the foyer he noted shelves of heavy hardbacks lined every available inch floor-to-ceiling. Beyond those, in the living room, a few couches spread out to cover the middle of the room. Tiered shelves and cabinets of books lined every wall.

The kitchen also had bookcases along two of the walls, and some hanging shelves and racks of books lined the wall going up the stairs to where the bedrooms presumably lay.

On a table near one of the couches, a small post-it note read: Davis. Underneath the note, Davis found just over eighteen dollars-- the change from the twenty dollar bill with which he'd bought Lazarus Kane's tea a few days ago. Davis pocketed it.

Kane smiled and indicated Davis should sit.

"Well, what have we learned today?"

"Not much. I didn't want to interrupt you back there, but I didn't get what your questions were driving at."

Kane smiled, "That is the art of the subtle interrogation. I found out what I needed to know."

"And what did you find out?"

"I thought you would never ask," Kane laughed.

Kane took a thoughtful breath and then countered, "Let me ask you a question first."

"Okay."

"Do you believe in luck?"

Davis pondered. "Sure. Why not?"

"So you believe in good luck and bad luck?"

"The one presupposes the other."

"Let's look at Mister Appleton a moment, in that light. His son gets an amazing deal on a car... apparently good luck. Then that same son dies in that car—this would be our example of bad luck."

Davis made a show of pretending to calculate the obvious. "That all follows... so what's the problem?"

"What if I were to tell you that the reason the traffic lights failed on McDowell Road is that the person who monitored that program, and should have performed regular maintenance on those systems, got distracted from his duties because his wife had gone out of town as a result of winning a poetry contest in a religious leaflet she'd found?"

"Are you going to tell me that?" Davis wanted to know.

"Oh yes. I had it checked. Charles Tyler is absolutely lost without his wife, as everyone I spoke to—including the man himself—freely verified. He's the sort of man who can't even match his socks without his good lady wife and she'd flown to New York for a presentation of the collection in which her poem will appear. Thus the traffic lights failed on McDowell for a time."

Davis pondered. Considering the hypothesis of the conversation so far he estimated, "So, good luck for her, but bad luck for the citizens of Phoenix's congested streets."

"Yes," Kane nodded. "And in the case of Harv Appleton we have good luck for a member of his family too, and then resultant bad luck for both him and for the citizen's of Phoenix who need steadily supplied power."

"Umm... okay. I can see the similarity, I guess," Davis ceded.

"Do you believe in coincidence?" Kane asked.

"A lot less than I believe in luck," Davis replied.

"I want to go out to the water treatment facility that handles the majority of the city and find out about the failure the other day."

"You think they are connected?"

"I think we will find that whoever is responsible suddenly had a family member encounter something amazingly and suspiciously lucky... which then resulted in more misfortune for the citizens of Phoenix, yes."

"But that's absurd!" Davis refused to accept the notion, even if he did trust Kane's intellect and deduction skills. "Just because you can solve half a dozen crimes by picking up the morning paper doesn't mean... I mean... it's nuts!"

Kane smiled slightly, "Isn't it? Isn't it just??? Yet I believe that is what we shall find. Care to make a small wager on it?"

Davis shook his head. "Who could possibly benefit from these things: traffic jams and bad water and annoyed people with no cooling in the summertime?"

Kane's glimmer of a smile faded and he stared back at the other man in deadly earnest, and in that obsidian voice of prophecy he retorted, "Anyone who wants to bring the whole system down; anyone who wanted to stir up the populace and increase the level of anger and malaise in the common man.

"I had a word or two with Mara about it and she agrees with me."

Davis shook his head in sudden apprehension, "What makes you so sure you are onto something real here, and not just coincidences—even unlikely coincidences?"

If Kane had the facts correct, the entire city could be in terrible danger.

"Abigail Tyler is a terrible poet," Kane said, sounding galvanized against any doubts. "I've been to her website. I've even read the poem that is going to be included in the book. Awful, syrupy stuff no one should ever have to wade through."

"And from that you deduce???" Davis still tried to form a cohesive picture from the bizarre and mismatched details Kane outlined.

"Based upon my experience I would suggest that publishers don't willingly print rubbish poems in their books any more than friendly fellows part with thirty-thousand dollar automobiles for pocket change... not without a good reason."

Davis shook his head. "You are starting to sound like a conspiracy theorist."

"Tell me that when we get back from the water treatment facility," Kane advised him.

But Davis couldn't. Kane proved correct on all scores.

The reason that the test for water quality had not occurred on schedule was that the man in charge had gone to the airport that day to chaperone his underage daughter on a flight to Cincinnati-- she'd unexpectedly found herself scouted by a talent agency in the park the previous day, and her first

assignment required she start immediately and involved travel. The video shoot, commissioned by a Utah university to aid in student recruitment, seemed an impressive opportunity. So her father, far too suspicious to let his daughter go off alone, had gone with her on the flight and failed to show up at work.

More good luck for a family member of someone in an important but menial position which resulted in bad luck for the city of Phoenix.

By the end of the day, Davis started to doubt any such thing as “luck” existed, and had joined Kane in seeing some subtle and sinister hand holding the threads of all these coincidences.

Maybe I am becoming peculiar...

Two weeks passed and more details mounted to confirm a subtle and possibly immense plot, and Davis found he asked that question of himself with a lighter heart each time it cropped up. Sometimes it even got reworded slightly to this:

So what if I am becoming peculiar???

FIVE

Davis stood in the doorway and managed to lock Lazarus Kane’s door. The last of the trucks had loaded up and one-by-one they proceeded to pulled out as the last of the EMT’s climbed back into a van-style ambulance along with a gurney. A few steps below, Captain Robert Holbrook Connor waited wearing aggravation like it offered protection against the thick heat.

“So what happened?”

Davis pocketed Kane's keys.

"I'm not sure. He called this morning and when I got here, I found him on the floor with the front door half-open. I called in the emergency and tried to rouse him but no go. He was totally unconscious. Nose bleeding, of course... he gets those a lot. But no other marks on him. The other ambulance is taking him to Samaritan right now."

The captain looked around and surveyed all the activity. He nodded his approval. He looked again and turned to Davis.

"Why three ambulances?" Connor wanted to know.

Davis spoke a few numbers-- the code he'd called in when he found Kane.

"That's 'Officer Down', Davis."

"Yah."

Connor looked even more aggravated.

Davis amended, "That is, yes, sir."

"Captain will do," Connor told him automatically. In a somewhat less civil tone he asked his subordinate, "You called in an 'Officer Down' because you found Lazarus Kane unconscious on the floor? Have I got that straight?"

"Yes, sir." Davis looked distractedly down the driveway with something else clearly on his mind.

"He doesn't have a badge," Connor insisted, feeling that some principals needed upholding even in the face of bizarre anomalies like Lazarus Kane.

"He's the Secretary for the Department of Municipal Safety and Oversight," Davis tried lamely.

"That's a closet. Our Governor told me all about it." Connor couldn't help but notice the way the blue-eyed man beside him continued to shuffle back and forth and look away. "Kane has you completely housetrained by now doesn't he? You aren't my man watching Kane; you're *his* man in the department."

Davis didn't try and deny the accusation. He just shrugged quickly and went back to looking agitated as the paramedics did their jobs and drove off with Kane in the back of an ambulance. The captain tried to get his attention a few times but Davis could not take his eyes off the retreating emergency vehicles.

"Did you have someplace you need to be right now, Davis?"

Davis nodded like an errant child and could not keep from glancing towards his car in a way that said he'd really like to leave just at the moment.

"You want to head over to the hospital to check on Kane," Connor concluded.

"Well I rather thought I would..."

"This could be a possible crime scene. Any thought about securing it first?"

Davis actually looked puzzled as if the thought hadn't occurred.

"Try and remember who you work for," Connor said tersely. "I intended you to be of use to us in handling Kane. I didn't mean for you to defect."

"I haven't," Davis assured the other man, but could not stop pacing.

"No, of course not," Connor replied unconvinced.

Connor's keen eye noticed that the his subordinate had passed from mere distraction and rapidly approached frenzy. He modulated his best fatherly tone and told Davis, "Look. You need to sit down for a moment.

"I know you want to get to the hospital, Davis. But a few minutes won't make any difference at this point I promise you. If he wakes up right now he's going to be mad as hell at you anyway... for that circus you raised up around his house when you found him.

"Trust me on this; I know him better than you do. And frankly, Davis, you don't look good just at the moment. Let's go sit down and have a quick word."

Davis chewed on that, feeling suddenly a bit dizzy.

Davis went in and sat. The captain made a cursory inspection of the locks and windows. He looked for any sign of struggle or forced entry and found none. Then he heaved a heavy sigh and came to the inescapable conclusion. He got the attention of the younger man and cleared his throat significantly.

"There are a few things you need to know before you get to the hospital anyway-- so you can be prepared for the worst. Now give me those keys before you fall down, son. You're starting to sway and you look whiter than my wife—and if you ever saw her you would know that no other standard of pale exists."

Davis handed his superior the keys to his car.

Connor said, "It's a brain tumor. It's big. Are you going to need some water or can you **take** it?" On the penultimate word Captain Connor let his voice snap whip-like a moment, applying a verbal "slap" to shake the other man.

Davis recovered himself abruptly and drew some deliberate breaths. He'd been leaning forward in the chair and realized at that moment he'd come very close to passing out and hitting the floor.

"I can take it," Davis told the other man, willing that true. Inwardly he felt harried and his mind moiled with all the things he had failed to suspect and all the signs he'd overlooked.

"It started years ago, when Kane was just a kid. Small little thing that just got bigger and bigger. I don't know what his parents or the doctors tried to do for him but whatever it was didn't work. He got sicker and sicker.

"Runs in the family, apparently," Connor said, sounding grimly resigned. "He had a sister died of it. She slept in the same room as him when they were kids so he saw it all happen and he knows what's in store for him."

Davis finally found voice to say, "Oh my god!"

"Not a pretty world," Connor agreed. Kane's been terminal for three years now. The doctors at Sloane-Kettering gave him a month to live back then. He left and came here. He said he wanted to see the west before he died."

"He sees a fair piece of it most people who've lived here all their lives don't bother themselves about," Davis said with fond recollection of botanical gardens, and symphony halls, and the zoo, and Papago Park, and the many deli's and specialty places to which Kane had exposed him in recent weeks.

"They gave him a bunch of drugs which he refused to take," Connor continued, "but Kane confounded them all by continuing to live on."

"The pot?" Davis finally understood.

"Kane belongs to a buyer's club in California. It's one of the reasons he settled out here-- to be close to his supplier. He doesn't actually need to purchase the stuff ever; Kane's one of the last surviving members of a short-lived federal marijuana program and he's one of a handful of folks that receive actual care packages of top quality marijuana direct from our government every month.

"But Kane says the quality he gets is better going through his club."

"I feel like I'm reading his diary," Davis said with sadness, looking at the door with increased agitation.

"Look you can go in a minute. Maybe I shouldn't be sharing some of these things. He probably won't be any happier with me for violating his trust than he will with you for dragging twenty firemen through his house.

"I just thought you should know," Connor said finally, "In case he doesn't wake back up."

"I think he will," Davis told him. "He's got a Pokemon game tomorrow afternoon and he doesn't like to disappoint his partner."

Everyone should have a bigger brother to look out for them. Who looked out for Lazarus Kane? He had to go! Now!

Davis took a breath. He counted to ten. He did it again. He composed himself and he folded his hands in his lap and tried to affect a calm he did not feel.

"Go on, take them." Connor handed up the keys. "I'll lock the handle on the door when I leave."

Davis thanked the man and told him he would call in any details once he had them.

During the drive to the hospital (with his lights and sirens running) he nearly caused a collision until he managed to reign in his panic. He proceeded more sedately after that and as he pulled into the lot of Samaritan Health he tried to compose his inner turmoil before facing any of the staff.

Terminal? Jesus!

Kane had never said a word, or intimated he had any problems. Of course the man had nosebleeds now and then, but that could have resulted from stress or anxiety or any number of other less malignant causes. Then, too, the man had migraines and odd twitches of movement which he masked with his flourishes and the swordsmanship of his walking stick.

Davis had never bothered to “connect the dots”, any more than he had deduced a bruise on a clerk’s arm at a convenience store would lead to the macabre spectacle he’d eventually witnessed at the Cox household weeks ago.

Bleakly, he realized he hadn’t learned as much as he thought he had about the subtle arts of deduction from Kane.

How do I miss all this shit!?? Jesus!

Davis did his best to control his swearing as he approached the counter at admitting and negotiated with a bored and underpaid nurse until he located Kane. It turned out that Davis need not have hurried. Kane’s condition proved entirely stable. They’d already moved him from the Emergency Bay to a room on the third floor; Kane remained in overall good health aside from his comatose state.

Detective Miles Davis spent the night in Kane’s room, or seated just outside in an uncomfortable plastic chair. People on the floor occasionally asked what dignitary required a round-the-clock police officer for security or protection but they received no answers.

The young rookie had some company at odd times. Carlotta Ramirez came to see the patient and brought a small display of bright flowers to leave in the Spartan room—somehow she knew no one else

bothered to do this. And just before dawn, Captain Connor showed up—escorted by Rawlins, who Davis hadn't really seen since his first day on the job.

As Connor sat near Kane's bed silently beseeching the comatose man for answers, Detective William Rawlins remained outside the door along with Davis. Rawlins snorted regularly and looked into the room through the window in the wooden door every now and then.

"Anxious to go home?" Davis asked the man when he'd had enough of the snorting.

"Waste of time."

"You don't much like Kane do you," Davis hazarded.

Another snort.

"Why?"

"Not a cop. No business messing in. Took down Phil Anders... good man."

Davis recalled hearing something to the effect that the officer previously responsible for Lazarus Kane had wound up facing charges, but didn't know the details.

"Phil Anders?"

"Yah. Don't trust that little freak. He'll get you too, in the end," Rawlins told him.

Davis turned his back on the man and returned to Kane's bed. He spoke for a few minutes to Captain Connor, and assured him he would be informed the moment Kane's condition improved or worsened.

Davis spent the rest of the evening and into the morning half awake inside or outside of the hospital room. He tried not to think about the bitterness Rawlins had expressed and focused on the hope that Kane would soon awaken.

In the afternoon, Davis left the hospital for a few hours to power-nap and changed his clothes. Before he returned to the hospital to resume his watch, he drove over to Romaggio's and steeled himself for the unpleasant task of informing Ivy that Lazarus Kane couldn't make his weekly game.

Davis felt like a complete monster when he saw her crestfallen and worried expression. Ivy clasped her arms around her chest as if hugging herself in dismay.

"He wanted to come," Davis lied.

He could see two things very plainly: clearly this young girl lived for her weekly visits with Kane; just as clearly she knew the nature of Kane's illness because her young face lacked the artifice to conceal her distress about Kane's condition.

Quickly Davis assured her, "He'll be just fine. He wouldn't have missed this for the world. He sent me in his place."

"You play?" Ivy asked suspiciously?

"I've always wanted to learn," Davis fibbed. "And Kane said I could have no better teacher than you. I've brought his cards-- they're outside in the car-- if you're up for it."

She debated silently.

"But you're sure he's okay?"

"No one's laid a hand on him," Davis told her sincerely. "He just needs to rest for a little bit. So, are we going to play, or what?"

That seemed to decide things.

For the next two hours Miles Davis learned the basics and strategy of keeping alive his Pokemon with trainer cards, using energy cards to both attack and retreat his Pokemons, and the nature of resistances and weaknesses. At times he almost forgot his own worries in the face of the childish gusto with which Ivy played. By the time he'd finished the lesson he had gotten totally caught up in the game—something he could not have predicted.

Between games, the little girl excused herself to use the bathroom. Davis glanced around and saw the usual crowd of regulars and a stack of newspapers awaiting Kane's usual perusal. Davis missed the dapper eccentric more than he'd expected or cared to admit. He distracted himself by reading the first few lines of

a story (upside-down) on one of the papers. A little girl about Ivy's age had disappeared in Scottsdale; the second in a year. No trace had been found of the first and the police had no clues about the latest disappearance.

The girl's photo looked uncomfortably like Ivy so Davis turned over the stack of papers before the little girl returned to resume the game. She already seemed troubled by Kane's absence and Davis had no desire to worry her further.

After she'd returned he experienced the walloping of his lifetime at the hands of an adolescent.

"This is a children's game?" he'd demanded at one point. "It's amazing. Like bridge or something!"

"Too complex?" Ivy teased sweetly after winning her third straight game.

"Kids are too damned clever these days!" Davis told her with clear appreciation of her skill on his face. "I can't believe how many details there are to keep track of... and children actually play it? Amazing!"

"You just need another lesson or two. You'll get to know all the cards and all the decks."

"Count on it. I want a rematch. Can you play three-handed?"

"Kane and I have worked out how to play three- and four-player but it's not in the rules the way we do it. It's cool, though" Ivy told him.

"Maybe in a couple of weeks I'll be good enough to join in for real," Davis said. "I've got to get back now, but thank you so much for this afternoon. You're really good."

"I get lucky," she said shyly. But her smile and the hug around his neck let Davis know how pleased she felt.

He did notice, though, when she pulled away from him and left the room more than a few of the delicate blond hairs remained behind on his clothing. He looked down near where they'd played and saw a few strands on her seat and the floor. Suddenly he saw the pale girl through the eyes of a detective and he sighed heavily.

Damn. Not a pretty world at all.

Davis went to his car knowing he had blurred the truth about her friend Kane but he didn't feel like a monster any longer. He'd done his job; he'd done what Kane would have wanted. Davis had kept up appearances and followed the important parts of Kane's routine.

Everything just as it should be.

Now if Kane would only wake up!

The doctors Davis cornered at various times all agreed Kane certainly would wake up, or he wouldn't. Beyond that, they had little to offer.

Captain Connor agreed to stretch a point of procedure and continued to permit an officer from his department to remain stationed at Kane's door during his convalescence—Kane had brought so many criminals to justice that it could have been argued someone might choose this time to retaliate in some way. Davis got himself assigned the duty, since he clearly wanted it.

And five days later, Kane did awaken... angrily.

"What is this nonsense? Haven't you a bed of your own," hissed a sibilant croak.

Davis shifted and lifted his face off the book it had become stuck to in his sleep. He sat up straight, in the chair next to Kane's hospital bed and croaked back, "You're awake."

Kane snorted. He hissed again a bit louder this time, "That's obvious..." Kane stopped a moment, hearing his own voice, and added, "It's a toss-up right now which of us sounds worse."

Davis cleared his throat. "I fell asleep."

Kane's wilting glance told him that little confession also fell into the category of "obvious". But the effort it took Kane to even lift his head or narrow his eyes showed considerably in the redness of his sallow face.

"I learned how to play Pokemon," Davis started to say. Kane seemed a bit angry—although he had a clear right to some disturbance given his current condition—so Davis had opted for a calming note with which to begin his explanations.

"You need a shave," Kane pointed out, after he'd managed a brief glance in the other man's direction.

"How did I get here?"

"I came to take you to look at the Stella painting. That was Thursday morning. You wouldn't answer the door..." Davis had rehearsed this little speech over and over during the course of Kane's coma. He'd tried many wordings that would minimize Kane's possible ire over the violation of his privacy and his home.

"It's Wednesday now..." Davis trailed off, losing the thread of his script in the light of the looks Kane aimed in his direction. Abandoning his rehearsed remarks, Davis settled on the unvarnished truth.

He explained exactly what had happened.

Kane listened calmly and when Davis ran out of words he said, "Poor Holly. I've broken another one of his rules. Even in my sleep, I've managed to add yet another tarnish to his department's procedural record books... 'Officer Down' indeed! Ha!

"Has anyone told you that you have a tendency to over-react, my friend?"

"It's been suggested," Davis conceded with a tired smile that matched Kane's own wan efforts.

"And I am betting my lovely floors will need considerable polishing to redress the trappings of that unholy herd you ushered into my sanctum sanctorum..." Kane trailed off.

Davis looked at the man seriously, "Kane?" He needed to broach the subject of Kane's illness to get out the feelings he'd held bottled up all week.

"Still here..." the other man said. "A bit thirsty."

The man's need compelled him and he set aside his questions and sought to aid Kane. Not seeing any cups nearby, Davis ran out into the hall and called for a nurse.

Now that he had a moment to think, he realized he had been so surprised and excited at Kane's awakening he'd forgotten to inform anyone in the hospital or even push the "call button"! He softly reprimanded his continuing stupidity and walked up to the main station near the elevators and got someone's attention.

"He's up and he's thirsty," Davis announced. No one asked who he meant.

A nurse followed Davis back to the room, took the patient's vitals, and saw to it that Kane received some apple juice and ice cubes. She made a few notes and then left to inform Kane's doctor about his improvement.

"I suppose dear Holly has put you in the picture now and you know all my dirty little secrets," Kane said when he and Davis found themselves alone again.

"Well not all," Davis said trying to minimize a bit.

Kane made to lift his head a bit and Davis lifted the straw in the juice-glass to the other man's lips. He drank and then said, "You won't tell anyone?"

Davis said, "That you're sick? Of course I won't!"

"Not that," Kane said, his head lolling back to the sheets. "You won't tell anyone I have a perfect right to smoke pot whenever I like."

Davis stared at him, totally dumbfounded.

Weakly, Kane explained, "It's my only overt touch of criminal mystique and I'd like to preserve the idea that I'm a shady character. I mean, my god I have no record of any transgression to my name—I don't even have so much as a parking ticket to wave proudly and claim my right as an American!"

The effort seemed to eat up most of his strength and he fell silent.

"You are out of your mind," Davis told him.

Kane managed to say, "Without the reek of marijuana, I appear a law-abiding citizen! I shudder to think of people believing such a thing of me ever!" He said it in jest but his tone conveyed an insistence.

Davis couldn't help laughing. "Your secret is safe with me," he assured the other man.

But in his mind he understood that this was Kane's way of dealing with the situation. He lived not in denial but with a negation-- a relegation to something other than an all-consuming status for his illness. Davis

made his promise knowing it covered more facts and details and suffused layers than even he could realize or conceive.

As the man had said... you don't give up. You fight!

An hour passed. Kane asked for and received details of the outside world and requested some newspapers be sent up to his room.

Davis told Kane how Ivy had trounced him at Pokemon repeatedly. After relating the lessons the game had taught him, a thought that had circulated in his head for most of the week came to the forefront of his mind and he asked Kane, "She has cancer, doesn't she? The little girl... Ivy." He had trouble even saying it.

Kane sighed. "I met her in Sloane-Kettering last year. Figured that out all by yourself, did you?"

Davis nodded. "Maybe I'm finally beginning to look at things going on right under my nose. I've got you to thank for that."

"An observant policeman? That, too, violates a long-standing tradition in your department," Kane joked weakly.

"They're not so bad," Davis defended. "And Carly's actually pretty sweet. She makes decent coffee too."

"I leave you to linger at that police station far too much; they're corrupting you. But camping out at the foot of my bed seems a poor solution."

They returned to the subject of Kane's illness. Davis shared with Kane all that the captain had revealed to him. Davis said, "Captain Connor told me you had a sister and..."

Before he could finish the sentence, the man himself walked in through the open door of Kane's hospital room.

"They told me you woke up at last," Connor said as he approached the bed.

"Then from his anvil, the lame artist rose... wide. With legs distorted, oblique he goes..." Kane quoted.

But he didn't rise or otherwise move.

"That's not Shakespeare," Connor pointed out.

"Homer. What brings you to my deathbed, Holly?"

Connor shook his head in negation of the last remark and reached for the remote control to turn on the television in Kane's private room. Kane gave the box a nasty snort as if only just perceiving its presence among them.

As the image solidified on the screen, they could all read the caption "Twelve wounded; five dead-- at local mall". The live feed displayed a well-attired and attractive reporter standing outside a location Kane knew all too well.

Despite the information conveyed, the reporter's voice never quavered from in her dispassionate recounting. A professional voice-- a voice that had reported too many similar tragedies-- gave utterance to the unbearable without so much as a sharp intake of breath to convey the full scope of events or even a subtle sighing exhalation.

Davis began, "Is that Arizona Mills she's standing in front..."

"Quiet," Kane said.

They watched the story until the reporter ran out of details and the story started repeating. "This is where we came in," Connor said, muting the device.

"A lot of fuss for a mall with nothing to buy," Kane commented. "What has any of this to do with me?"

They said the shooter is in custody. It doesn't sound like there's much left to do."

Connor closed the door to the room with a significant glance that only Davis saw. Kane still remained flat on his back and barely moved his eyes to follow the action in his room.

Connor walked close to the bed conspiratorially and told Kane, "The hostage negotiator never arrived. The substitute they got at the last minute made a botch of the job. And that's the result," he said with a wave at the television screen.

Twelve wounded and five people dead.

“And what has this to do with...” Kane said. Then he changed tacks and asked a different question, “Did someone recently do something unexpectedly nice for the missing negotiator?”

“His name was Sam Weiner, and yes. Someone left him seventy thousand dollars quite unexpectedly... someone that Weiner cannot even recall meeting. As a result he flew to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and in such a hurry he forgot to arrange for anyone to fill his position.”

“It’s money madness,” Kane said.

“It’s another twist in this knotted cord winding through the city,” Davis countered seriously.

“There’s more,” Connor continued.

Kane tried to raise himself up on his elbows. Then he just gave in and found the bed controller and used it to elevate his head so he could see at a better angle.

Connor said, “The shooter says that he found the gun on his porch a few days ago—in a big box with a red ribbon. He showed us the note. It said: For Services Rendered. No signature. His name is Calvin Woods. Ex-marine-- discharged after the Gulf on a medical. He’s a local kook...

“Runs around screaming at people in his neighborhood to slow down their cars, keep a leash on their dogs or their children. He sprays people with hoses and spends a lot of time in a little park downtown accosting passersby to rant at them about the marines and the state department.

“Most of the folks we’ve heard from so far always thought him completely nuts but essentially harmless.

“He’s downstairs in this very hospital having two bullets removed from his right bursa at the moment... the SWAT team took him down. When he comes around I’d like you to talk to him.”

“Perhaps it’s just a coincidence,” Davis said uncertainly. “Maybe some old friend, or...” Davis didn’t want it to be connected; he feared Kane would try and jump right back into some complex web of intrigue for which the man lacked strength. But he himself had made the leap. An obvious connection loomed.

Connor cut his subordinate off curtly with a recitation of facts, "We also had an ex-con named Tommy Grasso who turned in a weapon three days ago. His P.O. says Grasso found it in his mailbox the other day in a nicely wrapped package with a bow. The con thought he was being set up by someone to take a fall.

"You said I should ask around and have people flag unusual events, Kane. It took a few days, but that item about Grasso eventually landed on my desk an hour ago—just after Calvin Woods opened up on the crowd at Arizona Mills."

Kane settled back against the pillows and sipped some water through a straw. After a moment's consideration he said, "You're right. Someone is going around arming the unstable people in town. God knows how many ex-marines and ex-cons, and people with a generally unpleasant or dangerous disposition we have living among us these days."

No one in the room wanted to try and count that high.

Kane continued with his logic chain aloud, "If only one person has turned in such a 'gift' to the proper authorities then I'd guess that probably dozens of people received similar packages. I doubt many people in that position would follow the example of Mister Grasso and take their chances by calling in the gendarmes.

"For every roach you see, there are always dozens more hiding in the walls. This is a stepping-up of the pattern. Some sort of acceleration. I..."

Kane started to pass out. He opened his eyes again and added, "When I wake up I want to see this Calvin Woods... always assuming he survives the ministrations in this place..." and then he did pass out.

Davis rose in concern, but both men could see Kane's eyelids blinking in R.E.M. and it didn't appear as though he'd relapsed into coma. Kane simply slept, and would probably wake again shortly.

Connor told Davis, "I want you downstairs. Keep an eye on Woods. I don't want anyone but Kane to talk to him. Understand? When the press find out which hospital we've used they'll be all over this place. We faked them out by calling it in to County on the public band, but that won't confuse them for long."

“Did you divert Woods here because of Kane? Are you that desperate for his help that you’ll risk his life over all this?”

“Just get down there,” Connor said gruffly without acknowledging the silent reality.

Davis gave a last look at Kane and then left. Connor took up the other man’s chair as if receiving a torch from a runner in a relay.

Though Connor didn’t move a muscle—Kane in his sleeping showed more animation-- the Captain’s mind whirled with questions. What the hell did you step into, Kane? How did you even see all this before anyone else noticed? And what good is finding the pattern if we can’t stop it? How the HELL am I going to have a prayer of solving this mess if you don’t wake back up???

Connor sat by the bedside a while feeling out of his depths and helpless.

Lazarus Kane awoke another five hours later with a nurse again taking his vital signs.

“Just waking me up to take my sleeping pill?”

“Uh... oh! Mister Kane, you’re awake. The officer at the door just went to get something to eat downstairs.”

“I could use some myself,” Kane admitted. He rose to stand and collapsed back just as quickly. “Any chance of room service? I don’t think I’ll manage the cafeteria just yet.”

The nurse laughed and gave a polite inclining of her head and left. Twenty minutes later an orderly named “Hollings” came in with a tray for Kane.

In the interim Kane had just managed to accomplish the ordeal of relieving himself into a handy plastic container he’d found attached to his bedside. Even small movements continued to make his head spin so he took his time and moved with deliberation and nearly-exaggerated caution.

He’d just re-hung the container on the bedrail when the orderly entered.

Hollings smiled, whistled a happy tune as he propped Kane up and elevated the bed further. He wore a disarming grin, hospital togs, and a nametag he’d clearly hand-lettered with great pride.

"Your father was a mailman," Kane said by accident.

"How'd you know?" the other man replied with a broad smile.

"Forgive me," Kane said, "I seem to have misplaced my inner monologue. I don't normally say things like that aloud."

"Well you were right, of course. So it's no worries. I wish I knew how you figured it though."

Kane regarded a small container on the tray which the orderly set before him, "Is this vanilla or banana pudding?"

"Vanilla," said the son of a mailman.

"Good. I cannot abide banana."

"Who can?" the orderly empathized.

Kane tasted some of the pudding and sipped some strawberry-apple juice. Hollings took the waste-bottle from the side of the patient's bed, replaced it with a fresh one, and exited. He continued whistling as he left, but he now also wore a decidedly puzzled look.

The man in the bed clicked the television on but he left it muted. The latest details showed the body count from the mall shooting had risen; one of the victims taken to the hospital earlier in the day had subsequently died on the operating table due to an unexpected reaction to the anesthetic.

A sound in the hall drew his attention and he looked at the door just as Detective Miles Davis shuffled in.

"The line in that cafeteria is madness! And to wait that long for what passes for food here is..." the television caught his eye and distracted him momentarily. Then he added, "And they were out of... say, is that vanilla pudding?"

"Banana," Kane insisted.

"Oh. Never mind then—terrible stuff. How do you feel?"

"Like running a marathon," Kane began as he ate the vanilla pudding slowly. "Unfortunately I get dizzy if I lift myself more than an inch or two here or there. I've slept for days and days and I'm still tired. I can't even hide in the bathroom and have a smoke. It's all terribly undignified."

"The doctors here..." Davis looked away but Kane couldn't miss the man's mordant expression.

"Have evidently told you too much for your own good. Or dear Holly has..." Kane countered wearily.

"It's not fair," Davis insisted.

"What in life ever is? Still, we must press on," Kane enthused with as much effort as he could muster.

"Lazarus, I just wanted to say..."

"I know. Leave it. Save it for when I'm really dying. If you have anything useful to offer..."

Davis reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver tube slightly thicker than a pen. At one end it had a mouthpiece and below it a cylinder of fluid, below that about halfway down lay a single button.

"You turn it on like this..." Davis clicked the little button five times quickly. A light on the bottom flashed three times. "It's on now. Then you hold the button down and you suck like this..." and Davis demonstrated.

He blew out a large cloud redolent of cinnamon and spruce. Kane appeared shocked.

"E-cigarette. Refillable. This is a special blend I thought you would enjoy but we can get you hundreds of flavors. It's not quite marijuana but I have to admit it is quite tasty once you get the hang of it."

Kane appeared about to cry for a moment, though Davis felt certain the expression had been cemented to the man's face by clear intent like all of Kane's displays. Still, it pleased him to have touched the often-distant and effete man with his offering.

Kane tried the contraption a few times and pronounced it excellent. Davis assured him that the mixture did not contain nicotine so the hospitalized man would not find himself with another addiction on top of everything else. The device was simply intended to help Kane control his obvious oral fixation while since the hospital would likely frown on a pot-party in the trauma wing.

They sat in silence, allowing the elephant-in-the-room of Kane's impending demise slowly wander off to find a watering-hole in some other verdant locale and gradually the stillness returned to normal.

After enjoying the vapor-pen for a time, Kane shifted against his pillow and said, "A thoughtful gift and much appreciated. I don't want to make light of it but right now, we are overdue for a little chat with Calvin Woods. I've slept too long but I am still weary and don't know how long I will remain awake. Think he's available?"

They made no further mention of Kane dying. If Kane could put the knowledge aside and live his life then Davis would honor and respect that decision and say no more.

"I think he can be made available to you," Davis assured him, feeling a bit of relief in the face of Kane's assurances.

"Then let's get him up here. I'm not really dressed for visitors but I'm sure he'll forgive me that."

Two officers wheeled Calvin Woods into Kane's hospital room without a word some fifteen minutes later. Woods didn't have any need for a wheelchair, but the officers had cuffed him to it hand and foot with four sets of handcuffs as the simplest way of securing their prisoner.

Calvin Woods looked late-fortyish and had a lean physique and dark circles under both eyes. His short-cropped hair had traces of black left amid all the gray and his strong, calloused hands struggled aimlessly against the handcuffs keeping them taut—the metal biting into his flesh slightly.

"I don't think he's going anywhere," Kane told the two officers, as they engaged the wheelchair locks to prevent its motion.

Neither officer replied or smiled. They did their job and exited.

"Motherfuckers," Woods said.

Davis gave the man a look that most people would reserve for a roach in their ice cream. Kane smiled.

"Not big on authority figures?" he hazarded.

"I was in the service," the man said, as if that explained everything.

“How long?”

“Three tours of duty. Then those bastards just...”

“They cut you loose; turned their backs on you,” Kane prompted knowingly.

Woods began to ball his fists against the chair and yanked at his cuffs; the right cuff dug a little deeper into his arm. Through his hospital gown, a tiny spot of blood appeared near one shoulder.

Kane waited a moment with a patient smile.

“Motherfuckers!” Woods swore again.

“I know the type,” Kane assured him, “only out for themselves. Self-contented, smug bastards running roughshod over the world.”

“That’s it. You nailed it!” Woods bounced in his chair with agreement. Near his shoulder, the tiny spot now became a slowly spreading red drop.

“Like the people in the Arizona Mills shopping mall?”

Woods looked down at his lap a moment with guilty remembrance. “I shouldn’t have done that,” he told Kane.

“Why did you?”

“I dunno. I just been so mad lately. First they kicked me out of the service for being squirrely—like they could spend a year in the dark dodging snipers and come out any better. Then the doctors try and have me locked up and drugged. My wife split even before I came home to the states.

“I tried to get a job but what the fuck? People didn’t like how I snapped sometimes. Worked at Starbucks and threw ice coffee all over some asshole—that job lasted like five minutes. He’s lucky it wasn’t boiling coffee... stupid motherfucker...”

“What else did you do with your time?” Kane asked, diverting the burgeoning tirade.

“Applied for disability; got a stipend; rented an apartment-- there’s a cat hangs out by my back door I feed now and then. I spend a lot of time in the park, wandering the street, talking to people.”

"With mixed results," Kane pointed out.

"So I get into a little trouble or lose my temper now and again. I'm human ain't I?"

Kane offered no comment on that. Davis continued to stare at the prisoner like a rabid dog he wanted desperately to put down. He also noticed that the prisoner had obviously reopened one of his wounds, but made no move to intervene.

"So why the hell?"

Woods sat for a moment in confused silence and then looked up to meet Kane's eyes. "I told myself I was just going to see about a case for it."

"The gun?"

"Someone just left it on my door. A real beauty too! That and the note. I kept it too—only thank you I ever got from anyone in my life. Put my life on the line over and over and... well you know how it is. They don't care.

"They never care," Woods told the room.

"Motherfuckers," Kane said softly.

"Yah." Woods fell silent.

Kane looked at Davis and shook his head dismally. To Woods he said, "So you went to get a nice shiny case for your shiny new gun."

He nodded.

"But you brought it with you..."

"I told myself I was going to leave it in the car. Just so I could check the size was perfect before I drove all the way home with the wrong case."

"But you brought it inside," Kane reminded him.

"I don't know how to... it felt good. Just having it with me. It's been a few years and I missed the feeling. You know?"

"I never leave the house without a sword cane," the man in the bed told him conspiratorially. "Unless, of course I am dragged out by paramedics..." he added for Davis' benefit.

Woods looked at Kane with a rising appreciation for the man, "So you know what it's like, then. How you feel naked without it?"

"I do," Kane assured him. "But I don't cut down the girl with the pigtails outside the Hickory Farms just to watch her little platter of Vienna sausages on toothpicks go falling to the floor."

Woods reacted as if stung.

"Don't know why I did that-- any of it. I guess I just snapped." For the first time a tone of actual misery crept into his voice.

"I think you're right," Kane agreed.

"They going to help me?"

Kane said, "I think you've got their undivided attention at this point. I don't think anyone's going to ignore you any more."

Woods accepted that without really understanding the implications in Kane's tone.

"Thank you for talking with me," Kane said. Davis went out to get the two officers stationed outside the door; he looked back to see Kane reach from the bed and take the prisoner's hand for a moment.

"Officer, take him back to his room. Have a nurse look at him; he's ripped a stitch or something."

"You're a decent guy," Woods told Kane.

The officers undid the wheel-locks and pushed their prisoner out of the room and closed the door behind them.

"I'm not sure if that man's reviews are trustworthy," Kane said with a nauseated look at the departing murderer.

"Yet you shook hands with him," Davis pointed out.

"He's a miserable leftover of our oppressive government and monumental indifference to our fellow man. A few words of encouragement once upon a time might have spared us six dead bodies."

"Five," Davis countered.

"Six," repeated Kane. "Another of the wounded died."

"Damn."

"Motherfuckers," Kane said in the same tone Woods had used.

Then he gave a small sigh and announced, "Well, now that we've learned everything about our case that we're likely to here at the hospital, it's time we got going."

"You're staying in that bed," Davis told him. "You're in no condition..."

"To stand another minute of this hospital without some proper room to breathe," Kane finished for him.

"Breathe?"

"Smoke, then. I want to smoke. Now. Not this pen, lovely as it is. It has no kick. I need proper purple indica. We need to make a call and to get out of this infernal prison."

"You have someone who will bring you something to smoke at the hospital?"

Kane responded immediately, "I have a whole list of dispensaries who will do just that, yes. But I need one of those infernal phones. Look up the number for Encanto Greens if you would. When it rings, hit the numeral one and hand it to me if you would."

Davis still considered the prospects of Kane rising to so much as use a cellphone unlikely and it showed. That did not disturb the room's other occupant.

"I don't care if you bring the whole bloody bed with me, but you and I are going for a proper smoke somewhere. As I understand that places such as this frown upon even the mere smoking of tobacco," he continued, sounding just a bit more like his old self, "and we may have to step off the property entirely in order to comply with their rules. Frankly I am surprised they let you bring in this lovely toy," he remarked, giving it another puff and blowing out a cinnamon cloud of vapor.

"I had to smuggle it in," Davis admitted.

"Good; I feared I hadn't rubbed off on you at all during our time together. Now smuggle me out, if you would be so kind." Kane turned to the phone in his hand and began issuing instructions, leaving it entirely to Davis as to how to proceed on getting the prone man out of the hospital.

Davis looked at Kane and, if not for the resigned look he saw in that man's eyes as he spoke to the dispensary, would have considered arguing. Realizing it would not get him anywhere, he said, "We won't have to go too far. Why don't I find us a wheelchair?"

"And my clothes," Kane called after him.

Davis poked his nose back into the room to say, "You're not leaving this hospital. We're just going to the parking lot. You aren't well enough to go anywhere."

"Leave this lovely bastion of healing? Never crossed my mind," Kane lilted, "but I can hardly go outside in this outfit. Hasn't my dignity suffered enough through all this?"

Davis gave up. He helped Kane dress and into a wheelchair.

PART TWO: "... PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

SIX

Within twenty-four hours of his release from the hospital “Against Medical Advice”, the flood of communication between Kane’s house and the Gilbert Police Station had become so overpowering that Captain Connor had to send Carlotta "Carly" Ramirez to camp out there. This made four intruders in Kane’s house, and even in his frail condition the little man rarely missed an opportunity to complain about the impertinence and inconvenience.

It happened like this:

Kane had, of course, refused to return to the hospital after his smoke the previous day. He had put the chair’s wheel-locks on in the parking lot and spent an exhausting half-hour convincing Davis to take him back to his own house.

In the meantime, a man from the dispensary had shown up with an ounce of their finest indica strain and some large pre-rolled joints. The pre-rolls lacked the elegance of the ones Kane made himself but they had the compensation of proving several times larger and more potent than his usual strain. He made it clear he intended to stay in the parking lot and smoke the entire ounce if someone didn't provide him with a more relaxing environment in which to continue his pursuit.

Kane finally had to drop all the artifice and say, "Look, Miles... if I'm going to die anyway, I would prefer to do it amongst my books and papers and with a joint in my hand."

So far as Davis knew, Kane had never called Davis by his first name (or by any other name other than days of the week) so he intuited the emotion and resolve behind the words even without forcing Kane to summon *that tone*.

Davis froze, unable to argue with the logic and looked about to cry. Then Kane told him, "But I've been through this sort of thing before and I don't think I'll be dying any time soon. Just take me home..."

And Davis had.

And he'd also called Captain Robert Holbrook Connor and informed him of the change in plans. By the time Kane and Davis arrived at Kane's house an orderly and a private nurse stood on Kane's driveway-- along with several canvas bags of medical supplies. Davis refused to send them away when Kane protested, nor would he obey Kane's insistence that he didn't require anything further from Davis for the day either.

Kane grudgingly accepted the assistance of the largish orderly who carried him up the steps and into his house. Davis brought the chair inside. The nurse followed with her large bags of supplies. Davis closed the door and locked it, despite Kane's protests that he should go home and get some proper sleep.

"If I decide I need any sleep, I'll sleep right here, Lazarus," Davis said firmly.

Davis nearly never used the other man's first name either. He hoped it conveyed his own seriousness and resolve. In any case, Kane demurred and accepted his uninvited houseguests.

Then, instead of sleeping, Lazarus Kane began calling Captain Connor every few minutes to ask bizarre or confusing questions: Have the ice cream trucks been running on time or are they leaving the fat kids to run after them in the street? Did your power go out for twenty minutes during the evening news last week? Are there more or less pigeons downtown than is usual for the time of the year?

Kane could barely move any part of his body without feeling a swoon come upon him, so he barely twitched other than to use the phone. This sessile condition seemed to accelerate his mental activity.

Captain Connor did his best to cope with the constant interruptions, and didn't diminish the seriousness of even the most bizarre requests Kane made, but eventually the need for answers defied Connor's resources. Kane needed a legman and Connor needed someone he could trust to report any developments as soon possible. He couldn't help feeling he was fighting against time until the next catastrophe.

Connor knew he already had a man on the scene, but Davis proved himself utterly domesticated by Kane and less than impartial. If Kane figured out something crucial and decided to keep it to himself for a while, Davis would not interfere on behalf of the department. In that gap of non-disclosure lay the possible deaths of how many people?

Connor needed someone who could track the research and see what Kane saw. Maybe no one else's mind worked quite the same way as Kane's did, but someone clever and close at hand might manage to trace the patterns of his thoughts by watching the data he requested and sorted.

After short internal debate, Carly had seemed the logical choice and Connor called her into his office to give her instructions.

Carlotta Ramirez had a quick mind, a pleasant speaking voice, and an attitude that made people want to tell her things. As a detective, this last proved a major boon but the obverse of this meant that in her secular life she ended up listening to a lot of "life stories" from strangers in bars or just at gas stations.

The end result was she knew quite a bit more about things than most people would suspect. People liked talking to Carly, and she knew how to listen and file away what she heard for later recall. She had near-daily contact with so many various sorts of people (public functionaries, and city officials, and trash collectors, and whores, and judges, and snitches) that if she couldn't answer a given question immediately she at least knew right where to look for the answer.

She understood immediately what her captain required of her and told him she'd do her best to get him some answers and see to it that Kane kept the department fully informed on all his theories.

So Carly had arrived at Kane's house unheralded and unannounced within a day of his leaving the hospital. The orderly and nurse had been swapped out by an equally diligent pair, and arrangements had been made to insure such a pair would be on the premises twenty-four hours a day until Kane's condition improved.

Kane had, of course, affected dismay and consternation at the presence of yet another unwelcome intruder in his sanctum. She'd listened politely to the man's grievances and then handed him a small sheaf of yellow post-it notes—the topmost contained a notation about pigeon migrations.

"I'm the one who's been tracking down all this stuff for you anyway," she added, to clinch the deal, "so it can only save you time and trouble if you have me right at your beck and call."

Although she said the last with a semi-snide tone of indentured servitude, she didn't really mind. Carly had seen enough results come from the workings of Kane's brain to have become impressed rather than resentful. If Captain Connor thought this the best use of her time, in the current situation, than she was happy to acquiesce. And it would also give her a chance to study Kane up close a little better—something she'd been meaning to do for some time.

Her initial observations indicated that Lazarus Kane enjoyed being sick less than any man she'd ever met. The man complained endlessly! He also commented on the number of people shuffling back and forth

through his room so often that Carly began to think he doubted the ability of anyone to accurately count them save for himself.

At one point she said, “Yes, it’s four. I see us all clearly and distinctly. Why don’t you go back to sleep for a while and let me know if it changes when you wake up. I could be a figment of your addled imagination.”

This put an end to the counting, but Carly didn’t savor the victory. Something in Kane just acquiesced against his own exigencies-- out of weakness, or a feeling of personal failure.

The orderly took Kane up to his bed. Davis sacked out in the room next door to Kane’s so he could hear if the other man required anything. Carly remained downstairs and stewed.

Kane needed help, anyone with eyes could detect it. The normally boisterous man had seemed to collapse into himself before her and Carly didn’t care for the transformation. Kane appeared to her as if he blamed himself for having taken ill, blamed himself for his irrefragable weakness and mortality. The universe had stopped him in his tracks, the train of his life looked in the process of derailing, and Kane accepted the onus of that as somehow fitting.

Kane, like the shark, apparently had a compulsion to always keep moving forward with shark-like predation and accuracy; becalmed he lacked even mental vigor or the strictures of his life. Carly had seen the man adopt many roles and characters in the last few years, but she’d never seen him as a victim before and it galled her.

Carly knew she needed to do something.

She’d dealt with so many complex and difficult personalities in her lifetime—growing up with nine brothers (and all their friends) made it plain most people dealt with less than full decks. So she thought a while.

She thought on what she actually knew about Kane, considered the man in the fullness of her knowledge. His insecurities and his vanity loomed above his pain like a banner to distort the truth of people’s perceptions of him—but she could easily penetrate beyond all those layers to his inner grief. Kane suffered

from a penury of spirit or some inexorable loss which necessitated he act as he did; he could only solve his inner turmoil by setting to rights the foul and horrific events of the world around him.

Perhaps because he knew his own lifespan severely limited his future, he had decided to secure the future of others less able and brilliant than he. Under all the furls and tantara of his braggadocio Kane simply wanted to make a positive difference in other people's lives.

Carly had the story from Captain Connor of how Kane had witnessed his sister's death as a child—people told Carly things. Taken into account, that childhood trauma surely added to Kane's feelings of personal helplessness and made his desire to help others into a near preterite desperation.

But sitting at his home in a wheelchair, barely able to move, he could not fulfill that desire and Carly feared his unbelievable gifts might soon begin to atrophy with his failed flesh.

Carly nodded to herself in clarity and understanding. On reflection, Kane's vanity and need to aid others did give her an approach that might help shake the man from his lassitude and personal despair. Abruptly, she knew what to try.

Then she thought a second time. Perhaps it would not work.

Perhaps Kane would see right through her transparent efforts to motivate him and sink into an even deeper chasm of anger and disconsolation. But it was something and she had to try it. The loss of Kane's remarkable abilities as a resource for protecting her home state from a looming catastrophe tasted like rancor in her mouth; the thought of her own inaction proved too bitter even to contemplate.

So by the time Kane woke up again a few hours later, he had something new about which to protest: his elegant Victorian desk in a corner of the living room now had a computer and fax machine atop it, along with a number of other modern devices.

Kane lost no time making his objections clear and Carly let him spew for several minutes before she interrupted. At least the man's mouth worked, even if his body failed him at times and his mind seemed

locked into a pattern of complaints that poorly covered his feelings of inadequacy and private agony. When he seemed to run out of steam a little, she took charge of the conversation.

“...and I’m surprised a man with a razor-sharp mind like yours didn’t already have internet service wired up in here,” Carly countered his latest chain of household requisites with a stroke to his ego.

Kane smiled in spite of himself at the flattery. He favored Carly briefly with an indulgent look as if her obvious madness in moving about his books and papers, and taking over a corner of his sanctum sanctorum, somehow now contained the guileless charm of a child. He told her, “Go on...”

“Well, it’s so simple it would only occur to a simple mind like mine,” she said with practiced self-effacement, “But I’ve seen you do it. You pick up a newspaper and solve half the crimes in the city some days. Do you know how many newspapers you can find online? The major news networks all over the world have their own websites updated hourly.

“With your arms still hurting you probably can’t lift a pile of newspapers around all day long... but you can click a mouse easy enough I bet. I expect a man like you wouldn’t want to sit around letting his talents go to waste.”

Kane pondered that a moment and snorted, “So all this is for me, is it? This isn’t just to make your job easier and let you chat at yo’ peeps?” He said the last part in a theatrically bad attempt at street-language.

“Well it’s your house,” she countered evenly.

“Can’t be,” Kane told her, “I would never receive visitors in this outfit.” And somehow he did look less himself when bundled into a robe and simple cotton pajamas.

Carly didn’t smile. “Who else would it be for? If I hadn’t said it was for Lazarus Kane himself, I couldn’t have gotten this set up and service installed in less than a week. I busted my ass to get this all done in one afternoon! The cable companies are backlogged—something else to add to the list of weirdness going on lately.

"We should check and see if someone is doing 'nice things' for cable installers to keep the companies work-logs backed up."

Carly smiled.

Kane attempted a withering look weakly, "I'm serious. Check on it."

"I will," she assured him.

With the change of subject somehow Carly's fait accompli suddenly seemed less important than the new details she may have gleaned along the way. Kane could accept a metal monstrosity in his house if it proved itself useful. Carly hoped that tolerance would also extend to her own presence there.

"Good. Because people who can't get their daily fix of 'Matlock' are bound to be dangerous to let out at night."

Carly pointed at the computer, "Come on, play with it a bit. I bet you'll like it. You're in no condition to run down to the library and thumb through magazines every time you want to check something out."

"I see you and Davis have discussed my habits," Kane said with a small disapproval creeping in, "but you're probably right about that in any case. Certainly, I wouldn't dream of insulting your prodigious efforts on my behalf without at least looking them over.

"I can't have women 'busting their ass' without kudos and plaudits. Let's see the devil machine, then."

Carly wheeled him into position at the desk. To the left of the small speakers, next to the monitor, sat a medium-sized black onyx ashtray that had mysteriously been cleaned, dried and now had four neatly rolled largish joints of marijuana beside it.

"This really **is** for me," Kane acknowledged with pleasant surprise. Then he shifted again and added in a slightly acerbic tone, "You got me a babysitter. So I'd stay out of your way. A new-fangled idiot box. Right?"

Carly decided to ignore that comment for the moment.

She took him through the system she'd hastily setup for him while he'd napped for a few hours. She showed him how to load a web browser, and how to use a search engine. She showed him a notepad on the desktop and how he could cut and paste relevant data there with a couple of keystrokes. She also showed him a small icon in the system tray that allowed him to send notes and instructions immediately to any terminal in the house.

"How many of these things are there?" Kane inquired, wondering what other space in his home had been reassigned while he slumbered.

"Two. There's one in the kitchen..."

"Dreadful place. I never go there. Terrible things happen in kitchens," he added, with no further explanation.

"Then you won't mind that I have a little terminal set up in there so I can check things for you without having to take you away from this one."

"You expect me to get stuck here in front of this box, and allow the display monitors to bleach my skin like old bones as the radiation rots my brain."

"I think it will be good for your brain. And I don't plan on leaving you in front of this thing as a babysitter," she explained patiently. "Use it when you want or not. It's up to you. But if you do decide to use it... well, I know it can be annoying to get pulled away in the middle of researching something or following a chain of web-links to find information. So there's another terminal in the kitchen you won't hardly see—given your objection to kitchens."

Kane accepted that. Then he asked, "Where's the third terminal?"

"It's going into your bedroom right now. Someone just went upstairs to install it as I wheeled you over here.

"Oh, and if you need anyone's attention in a hurry do this."

She executed a keystroke in the small window on the screen that accessed remote terminal one. From the kitchen a pinging went off loudly. It pleeped about every other second.

Carly left Kane at his desk and went into the kitchen to cancel the alert on her screen there. By the time she returned to the desk in the front room, Kane had spawned a browser and was using the default search engine she'd set up to check on cable companies in the Phoenix area.

"So that's what 'googling something' means. I was wondering if the whole world had descended into baby-talk suddenly."

Carly said, "I've put some good stuff on the desktop. Set you up with an electronic mailbox in the department and an account on most of the major newspaper sites—the Times, the Tribune, Wall Street Journal... all want a user name and password. So I did all that and set the cookies on the browser to keep you signed in."

"Cookies and google? Isn't there any milk?"

"There's also this program, if you see anything you want to download," she showed him the icon. "You now have cable television too—it comes with the internet service-- but there aren't any televisions in the house at the moment..."

"Nor are there likely to be in the future," Kane interrupted, but without any of the sharpness or anguish his tone had contained earlier. He seemed more alive and tuned in, less bitter and reproving.

She nodded curtly, "Entirely up to you, of course. But you can still download any shows or films you like, commercial-free, using the bittorrent client. I've set it all up so it's just another search window basically. And the directory where things end up is on your desktop."

"And all this is legal, is it?"

"Downloading? Sure. It's only illegal if you upload and I disabled all those options."

“Funny world,” Kane said. “Receiving stolen property isn’t a crime any longer, just sending it. I’ll have to make a note of that in that handy electronic notepad I already have open. Isn’t technology wonderful? Do you hear horses galloping in the background sometimes?”

Carly didn’t know what to make of that so she just nodded and watched as he clicked on the proper icon and added “Receiving stolen property is no longer a crime”.

Before he could save and close it, Carly leaned over to type a small addendum in that window which read: at least, not on the internet.

Kane looked at her admiring her typing speed a moment and then his expression shifted and he told her, “You were right. It **is** annoying to have someone lean in and use your computer in the middle of something.”

She detected no malice in his tone so she grinned a second. “Well, I’ll leave you to it, then. You’ll figure it out, I’m sure. I’m hardly on your level of cleverness and I make do just fine.”

Carly could see Kane had no immediate plans to dispute any comments that flattered him. She smiled behind his back after his regard returned to the monitor. She saw him cut and then paste a few lines from the browser window into his notepad as she left him to explore the device.

She used the bathroom. Then she went outside to have a cigarette. Despite Kane’s addiction to marijuana he somehow could not or would not tolerate cigarette smoke in his home. Incenses, yes. Skunk-buds that reeked to high heaven? Surely. But not a Marlboro or Parliament dared spark in his vicinity; not a Kool or Newport would ever find itself crushed into any of his plethora of variegated ashtrays.

So she smoked outside. In Arizona, most places had made the transition to “Smoke Free Environments” years ago so she’d gotten used to it. Carly had learned she could get used to almost anything.

When she stepped back inside, the house had a strong odor of marijuana. The nighttime orderly, Richy, arrived just behind her so she held the door for him; he came in and replaced his counterpart, who had

come back downstairs after making up Kane's bed, and now sat reading "Great Expectations" on one of the couches.

Kane sat in front of the monitor, a joint dangling from his lips, typing slowly. He looked up from his screen a moment and told Carly that she now had some notes from him waiting on her computer. He also asked her who had rolled the joints for him.

"I did," she admitted sheepishly and with just a hint of discomfort. "They okay?"

"Perfect," he assured her through the rolled tube stuck in his mouth. "A little too perfect. Like the tomatoes you find in upscale markets these days..." he suggested darkly.

Carly dismissed the odd reference and replied without hesitation, "I had nine brothers. I know a lot of things I probably shouldn't."

"Ah-so." He looked back at the screen and repeated, "Perfect."

Carly went into the kitchen and found a number of notes Kane had sent to her terminal. He'd been busy.

In the fifteen minutes it had taken her to complete her cigarette, he'd solved a few crimes from foreign newspapers and suggested two complex lines of investigation he wanted her to follow regarding horse racing statistics and bus timetables in the Phoenix metropolitan areas. Not all of it made sense to her but none of it seemed unreasonable so she dug in and got started.

She sent a number of emails outlining facts and possible solutions to certain events (using Kane's official Gilbert Police email address in the header) to the chiefs of police in Los Angeles, Denver, and New York City respectively. She logged into the computer back at her own precinct and read her email and compiled a few notes for Kane about things which had been forwarded to her by Captain Connor and others in the department.

She spent some time culling the daily reports from all major precincts and digesting them down for Kane as he worked his own lines of inquiry in the front of the house.

Kane didn't notice time passing. Some part of him had decided very quickly that he loved the computer and the access to information it afforded him. Only his typing speed limited his activities and he barely spoke to or noticed anyone else in the house.

Carly came in about once an hour to ask him if he needed anything and offer briefings on anything she'd discovered from her own efforts. She also made sure that he ate.

Kane remained too weak to move more than slightly without assistance, but the orderly remained at arm's length to aid him. In another few hours, Davis came downstairs and caught the tail end of one of Carly's briefings about daily events.

It developed that no one else died as a result of Calvin Woods and his afternoon of madness, but the papers had a field day with the existing toll. Woods had been moved and now remained incommunicado under heavy guard in the prison hospital at Durango Prison, pending trial; the details on where he'd obtained his gun had not yet surfaced.

"I've heard the hoof-beats; I've seen the marks in the dust. But I can't find the rider. I need to go talk to Mara," Kane said, after Davis had been brought up to speed.

"You aren't going anywhere," Davis replied with casual insistence. "I should never have let you talk me into taking you home so soon. You need rest and you need..."

"I need to talk to Mara," Kane insisted. For a moment he flashed a look that indicated he might die at any second if he didn't get what he wanted.

"Uh-uh. That's not going to work on me twice, Lazarus. You're staying right here where I can keep an eye on you. I'm responsible for you and I'll be damned if I let anything else happen to you."

Davis faced the protesting man with a complex expression that revealed both his own culpability and the helplessness he'd felt when he found Kane unconscious on the floor of his own entryway. Knowing he could not have prevented any of this did not stop Davis from blaming himself for his delay in reaching Kane in his time of need. He also wore determination to match that on Kane's own mouth.

Seeing the stern set of refusal on the other man's face, Kane sighed dismally in defeat.

"Well I can't just sit in this house for weeks. The world could end at any moment!"

"Afraid you will miss it?" Davis asked.

"No. But someone is. In fact I think you have put your finger on the very heart of the matter," Kane replied enigmatically.

Davis managed to keep Kane at home and distracted for nearly two weeks.

August arrived on schedule; the kiln dialed up the temperature a few more notches, and gradually the slender man recovered his strength. After a few days Kane could manage the stairs on his own. A few days later the wheelchair went back into a storage closet outside. Slowly, things seemed to return to normal. Kane's health improved; most of the staff vanished leaving only Carly and Davis there in shifts to tend the man.

On the first Saturday of the month, Davis sat at home enjoying his only day off from the work week. Davis had grown to look forward to spending his sole days of free time each week unpacking the last of the many boxes which littered his new apartment and arranging his possessions. He couldn't afford to live in Gilbert on his salary so he had located a decent two-bedroom in south Tempe. He had a remarkable number of books and always required a study/workroom when engrossed in an important case.

Davis had to wonder if that would still remain necessary, as all his cases these days arrived pre-solved by Lazarus Kane. But he tried not to dwell on that. Accompanying Kane had taught Davis things about detection and police-work he would never have imagined so he considered it a fair trade.

Still, Davis longed for at least some illusory sense of stability or continuity in his life. His professional career might have gotten upended but he could at least manage some order in his own apartment. Sadly, intervening factors since his arrival had prevented him making more than a cursory attempt to settle-in.

Of all the boxed items in particular, Davis wanted to locate his old archery trophy. He hadn't fired a bow in years and didn't even own a single arrow these days but somehow he always held onto that trophy. He'd

earned the award at age twelve for precision in marksmanship and distance. The youngest at his school to ever achieve the feat, he'd carried that trophy through every move from every dorm to every place he ever lived. It reminded him of better times... back when he still had a childhood and his innocence.

It didn't surprise him at all to hear a chirp on the laptop sitting on his couch as he uncrated some dishes.

He glanced at an open messenger window and saw: **Up for a field trip?**

He typed into the window and asked if should bring anything.

Kane typed back: **A car.**

Davis laughed. He grabbed his keys and locked up.

An hour later Carly released Kane on what she called a "Temporary Day Pass".

Kane had not left his house since the hospitalization and while he insisted he had fully recovered Carly remained suspicious and unconvinced. With skepticism she permitted the small man to have a "few hours to get out of her way" so she could clean his messy domicile.

She took a moment to look Davis up and down as if assessing a mess she disdained to clean just at that moment. Davis just smiled sheepishly.

Kane acted the part of paroled convict and shuffled his feet as if dragging leg irons until Carly transferred him into the custody of the arriving detective. The arriving officer in question gave Kane a broad grin when he saw the man walking about like his old self without a wheelchair or even a walking stick. On reflection, Davis wondered if the heavy steel cane might not prove too burdensome for the other man given his recent infirmity; he could tell Lazarus Kane continued to hide the worst of his pain or discomfort from the world because the man's stubborn nature demanded such.

"I'll make sure he takes it easy," Davis assured the woman as he climbed back into the driver's seat. The concern on her face didn't shift one little bit.

"Really," he added nervously. *How did Carly Ramirez always make him feel like a kid brother?*

She snorted. "Believe it when I see it. You better had..."

Kane closed the door and handed Davis an address. Davis took it and read it and then turned to his passenger in confusion. The scrap contained the name and address of a local animal shelter.

"Someone lose a dog?" He asked Kane semi-seriously.

"I'm certain that someone, somewhere has. Wretched things. Can't stand them. I don't take 'lost dog' cases though," Kane said with pride. "No, we have important work to perform. Not a word to the missus..." he jerked a thumb at Carly's frowning form behind the car while they drove off.

Davis chewed on his lower lip a moment. "You sure you are up for this?"

"Absolutely. The entire outing should require very little physical activity on our part."

"Okay. Well... you don't have your cat-burglar costume on, and it's broad daylight, so I'll take you at your word."

Davis barely noticed as Kane expertly rolled and smoked a joint of orange-smelling pot. He brushed sandy hair out of his eyes and realized he no longer worried about the smell soaking into his hair and skin. In fact, somehow very little about Kane concerned Davis any longer—he had somehow grown to accept the multifarious flaws and quirks of the man. Somehow his concerns about the man had melted away and constant exposure transmuted those feelings into concerns **for** the man. But Kane looked his elegant and regular self as he effeteely puffed.

Davis had witnessed this sort of stoking-up of Kane's furnaces before nearly any event in the man's life and it had quickly settled into part of the overall routine.

They arrived at the Gilbert Animal Shelter, maintained by the Maricopa County Rabies and Animal Control Authority. The site lay miles to the south of all communities and housing—no one wanted the smell and noise of a dog-pound close to where they lived. The general public seemed of the opinion collectively that such a facility posed a risk from escaped rabid dogs running loose, and others had concerns over exposing their children to the possible sight or sounds of dogs (which remained unadopted) going to their final

reward. So the shelter lay just at the edge of the city limits, surrounded by scrub and desert and emptiness.

Davis could smell the place before he even opened his car door. They drove up to the "Adoption Center" and Kane led him inside. Kane still walked oddly but Davis couldn't tell if weakness or the absence of the man's normally ubiquitous walking stick which could claim responsibility for the shift in his gait. The two of them approached the counter and Davis let the other man take the lead.

"A dog, if you would," Kane told the man standing in a blue jumper-type maintenance outfit behind the cracked and pitted counter.

The man could have stood as "Poster Child" for oafishness if that ever became an actual disease. He stood with a slouch that failed to hide a height of nearly six-and-a-half feet and Davis estimated the man must weigh close to three-hundred pounds. He had dark brown hair and eyes which framed a perfectly round face that emulated a baby's in smooth pinkness; he wore a blank expression of confusion that seemed his default aspect. Davis looked the man over and the perplexity on that broad pink face made the other seem a harmless simpleton despite the immense proportions.

The poster-child for oafs all over the world retorted with his best wit and acumen by saying, "Huh?"

"Isn't this where you keep the dogs?" Kane inquired with feigned-patience.

The employee regarded him a moment in confusion. He pointed, "They're out in the kennels."

"Yes," Kane confirmed with a sniff. "And?"

The man behind the counter didn't lose a drop of confusion as sweat rolled from under his hat and down his face. He had scraggly hair, pulled back, and looked several days unshaven. In reply he said, "And???"

"I should like one."

"You wanna 'dopt a pet?"

"Not particularly," Kane confessed. "Now, how does one arrange to view the candidates?"

"Um..." the man began.

“That’s alright, Teddy. I’ll take this.” A smartly dressed woman with large round eyes behind large round glasses had arrived as if from nowhere. She swept forward in a cloud of gardenia and yellow cotton; the bun her long red hair formed just above her neckline suited her more to the role of hostess than an employee of an under-funded animal shelter. Nevertheless, there she stood smiling at Davis and Kane.

Teddy shambled off with the steps of a depressed hospital patient; his eyes never left his shoes. He reached out a hand for a mop on the way out the back door which led to the kennels and closed that door behind him without ever looking up.

“You are interested in a dog, I think I heard you say?”

“I am interested in a great many things,” Kane assured her with a regal half-wave. “But for the moment, if you would be good enough to arrange visitation for me with the inmates of this delightful facility I should be ever so grateful.”

The woman found Kane’s style of speech comic and somehow warmed to the man on that grounds alone. “Why certainly. I’ll be happy to show you around myself.”

Kane reached for her arm as if he stood in the presence of a duchess. The woman put a hand to her throat for a moment in surprise and then melted with pleasure and took the crook of Kane’s arm and allowed him to lead her to the kennels as if he had suddenly transformed into the proprietor. Davis followed behind, knowing better than to interrupt one of Kane’s little vignettes until he understood more.

Davis had never seen Kane touch another or permit another’s touch so he understood implicitly that the devious little man was “in character” somehow. Davis did nothing to give the game away, even though he did not understand the rules or point.

The two men got the complete tour. The facility had rooms where cats lounged on all manner of carpeted posts, pillars, and other cat-furniture like bored courtesans in a brothel. Occasionally, one of the felines would lift an extended paw and stretch in pleasure or scratch at something which captured its eye. Kane remarked on the lovely colors of some of the kittens.

They passed on through the cat-house into the dog kennels; these lay outside the main facility in separate buildings to the rear. As they passed, they could see at least five rows with twenty kennels on each side. Each kennel had a food and water station and an eight-foot by seven-foot enclosure, as well as a flap which lead to another area with a grassy patch of about the same size. Each kennel contained only one dog. Some kennels had no occupant at all.

Kane made a show of knowing the breeds of even the mixed animals before the woman on his arm could begin to describe any of the canines; for someone who claimed to detest the species, Kane's knowledge proved extensive.

The sounds of the place shifted from alternately intense to anticipatory. As they approached each kennel, a new applicant for adoption would present itself and begin to sniff or bark or howl. As the humans continued on to the next kennel the previous dog would lose interest as the next in line took up the cries. The smells of the place ranged from intense to revolting; Davis did his best not to breathe, as impossible as that task proved.

Only someone well acquainted with Kane would imagine he feigned his entire interest in all things canine. Davis understood implicitly that with Kane he should accept nothing on face value. And Davis had it from the other man's own voice that he didn't care for dogs. But Davis had begun to learn that allowing Kane to proceed by his own methods, and at his own pace, often drew important rewards. He kept his mouth closed and went along with the farce.

At the far end of the last set of kennels stood an outlying red-bricked building. This building had no windows, stood behind a metal gate, and from the roof a long smoke-stack violated the sky.

"Are there more candidates in there?" Kane pointed.

The woman dropped his arm and took a step away, looking momentarily discomfited.

"Allow me," Kane said, reaching for the handle to the door of that last building.

"You can't go in there," the woman told him shaking her head.

"So I see. It does appear to have the bolt drawn. No more dogs in there?"

She shook her head again. But sounds from within the building contradicted her.

"Those animals are not available for adoption."

"Whyever not?" Kane wanted to know.

She hesitated a moment. "Some of them aren't very friendly. Some are actually vicious. We have strays captured roaming in packs. Others are past their time. In a place like this, with funding the way... well an animal only has a few months here and then..."

Kane looked up and pointed at the smoke-stack.

The woman lowered her head to the floor.

"That must be a terrible job," Kane sympathized.

"I don't know how Teddy can stand it," she admitted. And then, embarrassed at her loss of composure and professional detachment she wiped a single forming tear from an eye and forced a smile back onto her face. "So, did any of our little charges take your fancy?"

Kane made a show of internally debating, glancing at various kennels up and down the rows. "I'm afraid I haven't quite decided."

"Are you looking for a particular breed?" she tried to help.

"I am looking for a certain spark, I think. I will certainly know it when I see it. I know most things when I see them."

She smiled again, still a little baffled but feeling more herself now. "Well we don't close until four. Have a look around. If you come to a decision... I'm in the main building and we can get you started on all the paperwork. You know there is a fee, yes?"

"I saw your chart on the way in. Who would ever suspect it cost hundreds to do a free adoption of a homeless dog?" he quipped lightly. Before the woman could take any offence Kane added, "Must help to offset the cost of cat furniture and pick up where the state leaves off in funding."

Mollified, the woman gave a nod of agreement and returned the way they had come.

After she had vanished Davis turned to the man beside him and asked, "Lazarus? What are we *really* doing here???"

Kane pointed at the locked kennel. "More hot pies!" he sang. And then, "More... hot... pies!"

Davis knew this line; he'd recently seen a movie-version of a play called "Sweeny Todd". But as usual, he could not fathom how this apparently unrelated song-lyric had any bearing on their current situation.

"Mrs. Lovitt? With the mince-pie shop?"

Kane looked delighted, "Just so. Just so."

"What am I not seeing?" Davis demanded quietly.

"I haven't time to compile such a list," Kane retorted. "Did you forget I'm dying? Oh, yes... and the world is going to end. Who has time to enumerate all the things you haven't noticed?"

"Lazarus..." Davis intoned without showing indignation, "are we done here? Have we done... whatever the hell it is you think we had to do here?"

Kane looked about, took a final glance at the locked kennel and admitted, "I'm honestly not completely sure."

Nevertheless Kane spun on his heel in the direction the woman had gone and the two men made their way back through the buildings and exited out into the parking lot. A whistle from Kane unlocked the car and Davis had grown to expect this so he hadn't yet bothered to reach for his keys.

"Now I'm sure," Kane said triumphantly, looking far off to the left at a municipal parking lot filled with animal control vehicles and vans.

Davis tried to follow the other man's gaze and eventually gave up. Whatever Kane saw could be added to the list of things the rookie-detective somehow missed. Davis didn't let it bother him. He knew he should have felt insulted but he tried to put himself into Kane's shoes for a moment. How slow, stupid and boring the world and all the costumed monkeys walking around on it must seem to a man with a mind like Lazarus

Kane's. No wonder Kane adopted so many pretenses and mannerisms and spouted bizarre quotations all the time; he must find the entire planet stultifying and drab beyond belief.

"So... where to?" Davis inquired. He knew better than to ask questions about any of the day's events thusfar; Kane would reveal what he chose when he chose. Davis just wanted to know if the proceedings had come to a halt for the day so he could return to his unpacking.

"Please take me home. I do feel a bit weak from all that walking. Not a word to Carly, mind. But I think I should like a nap before the main event."

"The main event?" Davis parroted half-aloud.

"This evening. Another outing. I shall need you to dress properly for this. You do own a uniform, yes?"

Davis turned to the passenger seat in surprise for a moment, taking his eyes off the road. He quickly returned his attention to driving. He nodded once.

"Good. I should like you to wear it. It will probably prove irrelevant. But if we are overseen during our frolics it might be best if any onlookers believe that the police are already on-scene and have things well in hand..." Kane paused, musing, then asked, "Umm... do the general public still feel comforted when they see an officer handy in a potential crisis? Or do they worry more about the police themselves than the events?"

"Depends what they've been getting up to, I suppose. "

"I have a feeling it might be useful to have you in uniform then," Kane decided. "I need to get home and look into a few matters and then I must sleep. The dread arms of Morpheus do open and descend towards..."

"So, home then," Davis interjected.

"If you'd be so kind. But I will need you back just after dark. At this time of year that's sometime past nine in the evening but it gives me time to complete my research and have a nice long slumber. I might even eat, today."

Davis rolled his eyes.

In the entire time he had spent with Lazarus Kane so far he had failed to see the man consume anything but pudding and iced tea. Davis knew that marijuana promoted overeating by chemically lowering the blood sugar but Kane seemed immune to this side-effect of the drug. Perhaps Kane's own pain and nausea prevented him consuming food most of the time. As far as Davis knew, Lazarus Kane subsisted on his own ego and sense of self.

"It could happen..." Kane protested.

Davis didn't say a word; he just drove. He didn't even reach habitually for the knob on the radio any longer. He drove and actually looked at the terrain. Kane had changed so many of Davis' routines and the young detective had to admit some of those changes proved improvements. Davis no longer saw his car as a vehicle to drag him from one crime-scene to another or a source of endless expense and bother. He began to treat the car as Kane always did... a palanquin of steel to take one to see the wonders and delights the world offered.

Davis almost said something to that effect aloud and stopped himself sharply. He had to remind himself that detectives in big cities don't go around staring at the buildings and landscapes like a yokel. He'd certainly never let a glimmer of his nearly-insubstantial softer side show through with Kane around; he liked the man but no one could deny Kane required a firm hand and discipline.

When he'd put himself back into the mind of a detective, Davis asked, "So really. What was all that about? I mean... if you wouldn't mind sharing?"

"Tonight. If I told you now, you would not believe me. Or you might not come."

"I've seen a few unbelievable things since you landed in my life," Davis pointed out.

"Nevertheless. Tonight." Kane closed his eyes and settled into his seat.

Davis allowed the man his peace. Kane had remained house-bound for some time and today's exertions—mild as they had proved—still amounted to considerably more exercise and activity than the ill

man had engaged in recently. Davis let Kane sleep all the way back to Gilbert and saw him safely in the hands of Carly Ramirez before driving back to Tempe to finish unpacking.

When the last of the light of a dry August evening began to fade, Davis had already covered the route halfway to Kane's residence. The man had not contacted him but Davis felt a sense of anticipatory urgency about the night. Something had occurred, right under his nose, and Davis had missed it. Again. He hated that. If he wanted to have a hope of seeing the truth with his own eyes (before Lazarus Kane did one of his mock-unveilings of the facts) Davis would need to stay on his toes tonight and on-guard at all moments.

Earlier, while outfitting himself, Davis recalled the last little "night outing" that Kane had suggested. That evening had lead to an encounter between Davis and a drunken maniac with a scalding iron; only Kane's grandiose distractions had allowed Davis an opportunity to save the day. So Davis placed a small gun in an ankle-holster just in case. The little scene in the Cox family kitchen might have gone more smoothly if someone had bothered to bring a firearm or two along; this time Davis took no chances. And his uniform had been amongst the very first items he had unpacked so Davis had no trouble retrieving it quickly. He dressed and left with the feeling he had donned a strange costume in anticipation of some party or Masked Ball.

Davis smoothly let his vehicle cover the remaining terrain and found he'd arrived on Kane's street by automatic-pilot and without really thinking. He intended to pull into Kane's driveway when Kane emerged from the bushes in attire that would have made Springheel Jack The Ripper proud or possibly envious.

Kane wore a white satin shirt with a black waistcoat over it and a grey woolen cape over his shoulders trailing halfway down his back. His long hair spread over the cape like an accessory and he had a grey bowler hat on which reminded Davis of something from an old Sherlock Holmes film he'd seen as a child. In Kane's left hand a long cobra-headed cane rang out with the sound of hard steel as it touched ground next to his every step.

"I didn't even see you there," Davis told the man as he got into the car.

"Rather the point, if you stop to think about it."

Davis did. Finally he said, "Not bad, considering how noticeable that outfit should make you."

Kane accepted the compliment. He smiled briefly.

"You look quite dapper in blue," Kane said, taking in the patrolman's uniform.

"It still fits," Davis agreed. "Not that I wear it with the sort of sartorial flair you would..."

Kane smiled again, hearing his own tones in the other man's words. Then a wall seemed to descend on his emotions and he waited for Davis to meet his eyes directly.

The car idled a few hundred feet from Kane's home as the detective awaited a destination.

Davis looked over and saw Kane staring at him. "What?"

"Tonight..."

"Tonight???" Davis prompted.

"Tonight you will face evil," Kane said dramatically.

Davis smiled. But Kane gave him a look and used that "voice" he had... the one that made a person's skin crawl off the bones in search of safer environs.

"Evil. I do not jest about such things. Have you combed your soul? Have you cemented your bowels? Have you steeled your will? Have you eaten??? Because you may wind up losing your dinner before we are done tonight."

Davis tried to make sense of Kane's quick rant.

"Well," he said, "I didn't get a chance to eat yet. Not sure about all the steel and bowels stuff."

"It will have to suffice. Now get us out of here before Detective Ramirez notices I've escaped."

Kane gave the uniformed man a scrap of paper and Davis dutifully plotted the location and got the car underway.

In less than thirty minutes they found themselves in an industrial area of warehouses and train-tracks. Kane selected their parking spot, sized up some buildings, and then made his way in the quiet darkness towards one outlying warehouse with boarded windows and a chain-link fence surrounding the place; he walked right up to the fence as if listening for the hum of electricity.

"It's not likely to be a security fence," Davis pointed out.

"Dogs," Kane said.

A train went slowly by the intersection and then gathered speed and departed. The silence settled, save for a few more trucks passing on the nearby freeway.

"I don't..." Davis tried.

"Quiet!" Kane hissed. Then in a similar whisper he added, "Listen."

Davis craned his head about, tried to tune out the last sounds of the train and the passing vehicles and listened. He almost thought he heard... then he did hear it. Dogs. Several dogs. Not several dogs... many dogs. A pack of dogs. Where? He identified the source of the sound.

He nodded, "In there?"

Producing a pair of wire-cutters from an inside pocket, Lazarus Kane responded, "If you would do the honors, Officer. I would not want to be seen breaking-and-entering by anyone still in the area at this hour."

"But it's okay if I am seen breaking and entering?" Davis asked.

Kane indicated the uniform, "You are the police. Who would stop the police from going about their duties unless they wanted to feel the weight of the law land on them as well? Besides, you have 'probable cause'. I hear cries of distress emanating from that structure. Clearly that warrants investigation."

"They are dogs," Davis insisted.

"I've read the police handbook cover-to-cover. I don't recall seeing any mention of determining the species of those calling out in distress. The statute appears to apply equally to every race, creed and philosophy."

"I'm not sure it can be stretched to include canines..." Davis said dubiously.

"Can you tell me with certainty there is no human cry being drowned out by that racket?" Kane asked seriously.

"No," the other admitted after a pause.

"Then I don't see any other choice but to enter the premises and investigate."

Davis couldn't argue against those points, and he had learned that any attempt would only waste his time. He took the wire-clippers and began snipping an entry in the fence. Taking another appraising look at the long cape Kane sported, he made the opening a bit wider. He doubted Kane would appreciate it if he got snagged by his layers of fabric when he passed through the gap. In a few moments Davis had formed an expert opening in the fence.

"I think you've done that before," Kane commented.

"We were all young once," Davis admitted but he didn't clarify further.

Kane gave a knowing nod. Then he put his finger to his lips and said, "From this point on no talking until I am certain."

"Certain of what?" Davis could not help replying.

"Quiet," Kane said with a finger rising to his lips for emphasis.

Davis nodded assent but the other man dismissed the quick ease of acquiescence.

"I mean it. Not a word. Follow my lead. Stay close to me. Keep close and not a sound."

Davis nodded again, this time with a serious cast to his eyes to confirm his sworn intent.

Kane made his way to the rear of the outlying warehouse and now Davis could clearly hear the dogs barking and clamoring. They sounded vicious. They sounded like they knew two humans were just outside and they sounded hungry. Davis felt out of his depth, but in that comfortable way having Kane around encouraged all mere mortals to feel. So he kept close, and kept silent, and kept his eyes open. And a part of his mind remained focused on the small holster at his ankle.

Kane found a boarded window around the back of the building, out of the line of sight of any approaching cars or the other buildings. He produced a small lever from a pocket and pried without a sound at the lower corners of the wooden board covering the window.

"Titanium," he whispered as he reinserted it into his pocket. "Small, but devilishly strong. Help me get this board down... quietly..." he said in the same near-inaudible whisper.

Davis nodded and helped pry at the corners of the window covering. Once Kane had loosened it somewhat, it began to separate from the building easily. At one point a screech of a nail or screw broke the stillness outside. The dogs began barking with more fervor and intensity. But Kane looked around, verified no one had seen or heard anything they should not, and urged Davis to return to his task. The detective got the wooden board off the façade and set it flat on the ground in a patch of gravel well behind them so they would not step on any protruding nails.

Davis mouthed "What's next?"

Lazarus interlocked his hands in front of the man providing an example. When Davis copied the motion, Kane lifted a foot and stepped into the other man's hands. He used Davis as a stair to climb his way silently into the broken window they had revealed. Kane vanished inside and before Davis could even form a question. Then a door he hadn't noticed, about fifteen feet further into the darkness, opened.

The noise of the dogs became a thundering when the door opened. Davis felt certain someone nearby would discover them in the act of breaking into a warehouse for no readily apparent reason he could explain. Despite Kane's tortured reasoning earlier, Detective Miles Davis knew they lacked reasonable suspicion for the search Kane obviously intended. Legally they remained on very shaky ground—not that Kane seemed to consider such niceties for a single instant.

As Davis saw a Board Of Inquiry assembling in his mind to strip him of rank for his actions, a slender white finger crooked out of the open door beckoning him. Davis dismissed the mental image and followed the finger.

He stepped into an abandoned warehouse of immense size. The ground floor could have accommodated a jumbo jet with plenty of room to spare. The place appeared entirely empty save for dust and cobwebs and broken glass littering the floor. But it didn't sound empty. From above came a sound like a thousand horses gnashing at the bit and stomping in circles. Dogs. Many, many, many dogs. All barking to wake the damned. All slaving and growling and, in some cases, sounding like they tore each other apart in sheer mayhem and ferocity.

A glimmer of dim light came from somewhere around the corner at the top of the long staircase. Kane pointed at it and headed towards the stairs.

As they mounted the staircase, Kane put his finger to his lips again, even though the odds lay firmly against anyone hearing their approach over the racket above. They ascended. Kane let his cobra-headed walking stick stretch out ahead of him like a divining rod and made not a single misstep in the darkness. One step on the staircase he avoided; it appeared to creak slightly when he tried to put weight on it. Davis didn't set foot on that step either. They ascended to the top floor and found a closed metal door with a small glass window. The source of the light lay behind the window.

Lazarus approached the door in a crouch and hugged the floor so any occupants of the lighted room wouldn't detect his presence. Davis followed his example. They both crouched against the door motionless for a few moments and then Kane jumped up like a jack-in-the-box for a quarter-second and then resumed his crouch. He waited a moment and repeated the move.

Kane said in his normal speaking voice, "Okay. No one is at home." He rose and stood directly in front of the light coming from the window as if to emphasize that no one lay beyond the door.

Davis started to rise. "What about the menagerie?"

Kane looked through the window more closely. "All kenneled, it seems. We have to get this door open without it looking like it's been opened," Kane told the other man. He began to rummage around in his pockets for some tool.

Davis tried the handle on the steel door and it swung open on well-oiled hinges.

“Ah. Yes,” Kane covered. “It’s open. I knew that.”

“Of course,” Davis confirmed with a quick grin. Then the air sweeping out from the room when he opened the door hit him full in the face and he nearly vomited. Even Kane’s cloud of patchouli and chamomile could not overpower or contend with such a fetor and it gave up and fled the building of its own accord.

“I suspect you are glad you didn’t have a large supper,” Kane said pointedly. “For myself... on the whole, I’d rather be in Philadelphia.”

Davis thought quickly and managed to gasp, “W.C. Fields???”

Kane reappraised the other man, “You have unsuspected depths, detective.”

Davis looked around the immense second-story. One small light hung near the door and this provided the sole illumination. Much of the floor remained in darkness. The top floor of the warehouse had the same layout as the ground floor. But someone had dragged heavy objects all across the floor and destroyed the tile—the entryway contained more dirt and broken tile than flooring. A small hole off to the left of the doorway might swallow a small child through the floor if one made a misstep in that direction.

Davis didn’t have to look to see what had destroyed the floor. Someone had dragged huge metal enclosures—home-made of beams, and chicken-wire, and other fencing materials—and set them against the interior walls of the building. Each enclosure stood nearly six feet in height and had equal dimension on all sides. And each enclosure contained at least eight or more dogs... all in various states of dilapidation.

The smell of feces arose from the huge mounds in all the cages which no one had seen fit to remove. Other smells lingered including death and decay. In some cages bits of other dogs lay strewn in corners where they had fallen after the pack contained in that cage had torn some unlucky animal to shred for food or dominance. The place contained every odor as the animal shelter, magnified a hundred-fold and with some new and unknown reeks tossed in for good measure. Davis felt embarrassed about sliding his

uniform shirt up over his nose to help filter the stench until he noticed Kane had an ascot wrapped entirely around his mouth and nose.

Kane handed the other man something. Davis looked down and realized he held a similar kerchief. He let his garment fall back to its proper position and wrapped the ascot around his nose in similar fashion.

On closer inspection each of the cages had a large square opening at the top. It lay out of reach of any of the dogs but appeared large enough that new dogs or food might be dropped in from above. Each cage also had a door on the front with a thick but simple sliding-pin and hasp securing them.

Davis completed his survey of the grisly environs and asked, "Now what?"

"Now we wait. We're expecting company. He makes his rounds just before midnight."

"Who does? How do you know any of this? Lazarus, seriously... what the hell is going on here? And if no one is showing up for almost two hours why did we have to get here so early? You just want to sit here and breathe this stuff for the next ninety minutes?"

"We got here early so the dogs could get used to us and quiet down somewhat. I would not want them to alert anyone that we are waiting here. And it was crucial we arrive *first*." Kane fell silent and offered no other explanations.

"You expected the dogs," Davis said, trying to draw the other man out further.

"I did bring two ascots," Kane reminded the other. "As for the smell? Let it make you angry. I mean it; let it make you furious. We may have need of that fury before we have completed our task this evening."

Davis had no idea what to make of that. Cryptic actions followed by cryptic responses followed by cryptic waiting... it reminded him of the day Kane had called him from twenty miles away so that Davis could chauffeur him one thousand feet to a convenience store. Then Davis recalled how the seemingly pointless events of that day had proved quite dire when properly understood. In that context he decided to wait and let the smell of rotting death and shit irritate and enrage him as instructed.

Kane seemed disinclined to elucidate any further so no other course of action remained.

SEVEN

In truth, Kane and Davis didn't have to endure the egregious fug for quite as long as either of them hypothesized. After twenty minutes the dogs adjusted to the new dynamic of strangers in their midst and returned to their quieter snarling and barking. Within an hour, the sound of a truck or van pulled up outside. Kane and Davis had adopted positions in the furthest and darkest corners of the room according to Kane's instructions.

Someone climbed the steps. Even over the sounds of the dogs, both men could hear heavy footfalls approaching as if someone stomped his way through the building demanding notice. The dogs increased their agitation and the noise-level began to rise. By the time the metal door to the second floor opened, the animals had begun to attack each other and barked in lunatic frenzy.

A man entered wearing blue overalls. He dragged a pillowcase behind him as he stepped into the light. A new smell of rot came along with him, different from the existing rot which had permeated the entire building. The man reached into the bag and drew out a few fistfuls of bloody mass. He went to the first enclosure and tossed the dark wet stuff through the opening atop the cage.

Instantly the cage came alive like a school of piranha. Surely at least a few pounds of some flesh had descended from above like Manna from Heaven? But while that amount might have sufficed to feed one hungry dog or even two, the act of division between nearly ten animals made for outright war. The man

who had thrown in the meat began to laugh as one dog clamped its jaws and tore the pointed ear off of an elderly Doberman Pincher.

He walked to the next cage, still dragging the sack, and repeated the process.

“Just rabbits tonight, boys. No special treats tonight...” the man said.

Davis wondered what the man meant by “special treats”. He glanced nervously at the enclosure which hid him and thought for a moment he could see some shreds of fabric scattered on the floor of the cage. Did a few of the bones appear too large to have come from a dog? Davis dismissed the idea and awaited Kane’s play, feeling helpless.

When it came to one of Kane’s little plans, Davis had discovered himself better off doing nothing than attempting to do the *wrong* thing. He held his place and his silence as the tormentor of dogs moved among his acquisitions.

Davis wanted to go for the gun at his ankle. It lay there so tempting, so close, so comforting. But Lazarus hadn’t told him to bring the gun so he kept it hidden. And, other than a massive public health violation, Davis still hadn’t seen anything that would count as criminal activity—other than his own breaking and entering into the warehouse earlier. So he sat in the darkness and breathed the foul stench and waited for events to play out.

The man with the bag bent down and reached inside it and pulled out something shiny and large. He also retrieved something floppy and fluffy. A hand swung the shiny thing down at the fluffy thing and two halves of a rabbit separated neatly as the cleaver dug itself into the floor and vibrated there. The man grabbed one piece, “Just half for you boys. Better give Daddy a good show!”

Obligingly the dogs, over-starved and barely able to move amidst the mass of their fellows, tore first at the rabbit and then each other. Davis felt certain he’d vomit and only his fear kept him in his place. Fear of the unknown gnawed overwhelmingly at his resolve not to puke his guts out. He didn’t feel like an officer of the

law; he felt consumed by too many unknown dangers to list and they childishly reared their heads one at a time.

Fear of being attacked by a pack of rabid dogs. Fear of the oddly laughing figure and the shining meat-ceaver. Behind it all, his mind insisted on adding another fear... the fear that the scraps of clothing he thought he had seen in the kennel might actually exist outside his imagination. Davis endured all in silence and held to his promise to keep still.

The large man with the cleaver kept at his task and Davis held his breath as the figure passed the enclosure beside which Davis knew Lazarus Kane had concealed himself. Davis held his breath but it had nothing to do with the various scents in the air. He waited with dread to see if the man with the cleaver would spot Kane as he passed.

But Kane made no sound and the large man had no suspicions; the man and the sack passed that enclosure and went on to the next as the "feeding ritual" continued untroubled. At one point the huge figure returned to retrieve the sharp cleaver by yanking it out of the floor; then he resumed cutting up and distributing rabbits.

One of the dogs in the enclosure Davis hid near chose that moment to vomit; all the surrounding animals leaped on the new source of food instantly. Davis curled into a ball and tried to keep his gorge from rising. When he looked up he saw Lazarus Kane approaching the stranger from behind, his walking stick raised like a club.

Before Davis could make a move or shout any kind of warning, Kane struck. He landed a resounding blow between the stranger's shoulders with such force that the metal cane flew out of the bony fingers and rolled away into the darkness.

"Uhh?" the man groaned and turned around. He did not fall. He didn't make any other moves. He just stared until he spotted the figure of Kane clearly in the semi-darkness.

"Tonight is your last night on this Earth, Theodore," Kane said in that over-resonant impossibly dark voice.

Davis doubted Kane would actually kill someone—though he couldn't count that a complete certainty—so he imagined that Kane just wanted to scare the man. Davis didn't know precisely why Kane wanted him scared, but looking around at the horrific animal prison the stranger had constructed made Davis more likely to give the benefit of any doubts he had to Kane. He stayed in position.

"I know everything," Kane told the man. Then he repeated, "I know." He stood there glaring at the man in overalls. Davis thought he could detect the corners of Kane's eyes searching for his cobra sword-cane.

"So?" the stranger countered. "What'cha gunna' do 'bout it? No proof. I ain't done nuthin'."

"You like little girls, don't you Teddy?" Kane asked in a voice that Satan would have envied for sheer menace.

The large man shook his head. "You got no proof I done nuthin'. And my babies look like they could use a treat."

Kane started to back away from the man and yet Davis did not see any sign or fear or panic. The man in overalls reached down to the floor and came up with the cleaver. He hefted it and let it catch the dim light.

Davis began to rise. He prepared to throw himself bodily at the large man from behind.

Before Davis achieved a proper stance Kane shouted, "No! Back away from him!"

The large man in overalls turned his head slowly and caught a glimpse of the uniform Davis wore.

"So you brought the fucking cops," he noted without sounding at all disturbed by the idea. He looked out a window for more squad cars. He looked around the upstairs as best he could. "Just the one? Yer gunna' need more than that. My babies are gunna' need more than that."

Turning his back on Kane entirely and dismissing the man as a threat, the arm carrying the cleaver rose and the man wielding it headed in the direction of Miles Davis.

Before he could take three lumbering steps, a voice from behind called, "You will NOT!" Kane suddenly had his arms around the larger man's throat, trying inexplicably to use his frail weight to drag the man

somehow to the floor. The man in overalls tried to swat Kane off him but could not release the hold the smaller man had on him.

Seeming to recall he held a large meat-cleaver the oafish figure turned and quickly broke the hold using his sheer size. Then he spun about and the cleaver descended right at the Kane's caped shoulder in an inexorable motion.

Kane had no time to move, nor did he move. He did seem to shift somehow inside his many layers but, other than a rippling of fabric which went nearly unseen, he did nothing to prevent the cleaver from striking him or elude the blow.

Davis started towards the large man, nearly all thoughts of his concealed pistol lost in the urgency of the moment. Retrieving the pistol would cost him time he could not afford. His training took over. Finally an actual crime he could prevent; assault; attempted murder; felonious assault of a police officer. These things made sense. After an evening of serial *non sequiturs* Davis at last had something to which he could properly react.

But he had waited too long. Davis knew he could not complete any move in time to save Kane. In another moment, the cleaver would cut right through Kane's layers of frippery and right through the man himself from shoulder to sternum at least. And Davis understood implicitly that he could not do a damned thing about it. For a moment, just one small moment, he thought he might manage sufficient speed. But his own body betrayed him: Davis accidentally stepped on the end of the scarf protecting his face and jerked-up short. He ripped the thing from his neck and tossed it to the floor.

In that interval, the large man brought the cleaver down hard.

The scream, when it came, had a sound of surprised stupidity instead of Kane's expected tones. For a moment, Davis stood stunned and completely unable to move. Kane also remained absolutely still. And between the Kane and Davis, a larger man also stood very still like the "monkey-in-the-middle"... except he had a shining metal cleaver buried halfway in his thigh.

The bastard had missed! Yes!

Davis felt his mind race. Somehow Kane had managed to pull his upper body out of the way just in time for the blade to slice through his fine fabrics without touching any part of him. But the force the larger man had used when he swung the blade had nowhere to spend its inertia after slicing cleanly through the wool and silks and satin of Kane's attire. The continued downward motion of the swing had lodged the blade firmly in the upper leg of the man who swung the deadly instrument.

Even that did not make the large man fall or stop his intent. Despite the obvious pain he tried to pry the cleaver out of his leg so he could take another swing with it. He struggled and strained and wiggled the thing and Davis cringed inside imagining how that felt.

"I shouldn't do that, were I you," Kane said, regaining his composure and making a show of inspecting his raiment. "And my best opera cape too... you really are a Philistine."

Davis looked around. Dead and dying dogs. Blood everywhere. Mutilated rabbits. Some insane lummoX with a meat-cleaver buried in his thigh trying to dig it out as blood started to run down his leg and pool on the floor. And Kane wanted to complain about his ruined attire.

The man in the overalls retorted, "I'll do what I please." Then he went back to prying at the blade buried in his thigh.

"Really," Kane cautioned. "I wouldn't..." and a huge spurt of bright blood travelled nearly to the ceiling and interrupted any further admonitions.

With one mighty heave, the cleaver had come loose. It came loose with so much force it flew over the head of the man who held it, over the head of the stunned detective behind him and wound up in the far wall of the warehouse. At the same moment, arterial red painted the room and rose up like a statuary fountain.

The large figure considered the blood escaping his body as if the concept and eventual outcome contained no meaning. His expression didn't change. One of his hands flexed his fingers for a cleaver he

no longer held and the other tried to clamp against the streaming fluid spurting from his leg. In another moment the large man half-fell back to lean against one of the enclosures full of barking and slavering dogs.

"You can come out now," Kane called to Davis.

Davis stepped closer. He kept a wary eye on the large man who held himself up on the wire and wood of the nearest enclosure as his life flowed from him as if anxious to escape the confinement.

"I believe this fellow has done himself a mischief," Kane offered casually.

Recovering from his moment of frozen panic, Davis attempted to sound calm as he replied, "You know? I think you're right. What do you think we should do about it?" His face and nose continued to wrinkle, emphasizing the overwhelming reek of the establishment and indicating his desire to leave as soon as possible.

"The choice. Always the choice..." Kane pondered.

Kane looked around until he found his fallen walking stick and went to retrieve it. The large man remained pressed with his back against a cage as the dogs within clawed at the wire and tried to chew at their tormentor.

"We're going to need an ambulance," Davis suggested.

"Make it a coroner's van," Kane told him profoundly. Then he turned to the oafish figure. "You're dying, you know. Many happy returns of the day."

Even in the dim light, Davis could now recognize the janitor of the animal shelter. The man barely managed to hold himself semi-erect; he'd removed his hands from the wire of the cage before he lost a finger and blood-loss made him weaker by the second. Finally seeming to sense his peril, he had taken his large hands off the makeshift kennel and clamped them against his thigh to restrict the flow of blood.

Davis retrieved the borrowed scarf from the floor and looked at Kane.

"Tourniquet?" Kane hazarded. "If you think there's time."

Davis tried to approach the injured man and tie off his leg but the man began swearing and spitting. Then he removed his hand from his leg, and waved his fist threateningly; the blood began flowing more freely once again.

Davis noticed suddenly that the man's other immense paw lay across the bolt which kept the nearest kennel of frenzied dogs securely caged. Davis didn't take another step towards the injured shelter employee.

"You need this," Davis offered the man the scarf a second time. "If I don't tie this around your leg you are going to die. I don't mean in a day or a week," Davis said hurriedly, "I mean in the next few minutes."

"You're gunna'rest me. Not going back to jail." A light of intent formed in the man's eyes slowly. Admittedly, in that immense head a single idea didn't have much competition so it took root fast and firmly. The large man seemed to notice for the first time that one of his hands lay across the bolt to the kennel upon which he leaned. He smiled a nasty smile which looked worse on his pink babyface.

"If I'm goin' to hell I ain't goin' alone!"

With that, he fumbled the locking-pin aside and started to open the door to the enclosure. Nine large dogs came funneling out through the space and slammed the door open wide into the large man's stomach. At last, the man in the overalls fell to the floor. He laughed weakly, "Yer all dead too. My beauties, my beauties..."

But a miscalculation had occurred and it didn't take all assembled long to perceive the flaw in the large man's plan. The dogs, heightened beyond all frenzy due to the smell of blood spraying liberally all over the immediate vicinity, swarmed over the man in overalls until Davis and Kane lost sight of the man entirely—a neat trick, considering the man's immense scale. Davis tried to shut out the sound but failed.

"We need to get out of here," Davis said with a nervous look at the loosed dogs feeding, "while they are still distracted."

“Nonsense,” Kane replied. He bent to the floor as if to tie a shoelace. When he stood up again he held the small pistol Davis had concealed at his ankle. “We can’t let those brute run loose to terrorize the neighborhood. The rest will escape in quick order if we don’t calm this mob somehow and many of them would survive the drop to the floor if they fell through that hole over there—especially if a cushion of previous escapees cushioned the fall. Listen to the cages; they are coming apart behind us. We have to try something else.”

Davis looked around and for the first time he saw how the other penned animals reacted to the collapse of their captor. They bashed at the wire and chewed at the wood of their cages and pressed together snarling and chomping in search of any opportunity to escape their confinement and participate in the feasting.

Kane debated silently and then fired the small weapon at one of the remaining second-floor windows. It obliged him by shattering suddenly and glass crashed to the floor loudly. The dogs did not interrupt their activities or react in any fashion.

“That should have worked,” Kane announced to an imaginary audience.

“Let’s get out of here. Now,” Davis urged.

Kane edged his way around the pack as they continued to rip and tear at the corpse of their former master. He achieved a position next to Davis and handed the gun back to the other man.

Then he raised his walking stick with his other hand.

Davis said quickly, “If a gun didn’t scare them, a sword isn’t going to do much. Why didn’t you just shoot one of them? Why aren’t we getting the hell out of here?”

“If I shot one of them I’d just be making more food for the rest. And the sound didn’t appear to frighten them from my observations. As for the sword... I fail to see how yet more blood will calm the situation significantly.”

“I could try and shoot them all...” Davis suggested. The pack stood firmly between him and the door and while the dogs consumed their jailer they remained distracted. But Davis felt if he or Kane made a run for

the door they'd be torn to pieces by the pack. And other enclosures had begun to creak under the frenzied impact of dogs inside those pens who wished to come out and join in on the feeding.

"That gun has exactly five shots," Kane reminded the detective, *sotto voce*, "and I've already used one. Are you going to ask them to politely line up in neat rows for you so the remaining four bullets will do the trick?" He gestured quickly at the other enclosures, "And what about the rest of the potential diners?"

"Then... what?" Davis asked, eying the door nervously.

Kane raised the cobra-head walking stick again. Davis still didn't get it. Kane said, "Back up a little. Slowly. No sudden moves. Be ready."

Ready for what? When the dogs finish eating that asshole they are going to be all over us.

Davis just nodded. What choice had he, really?

Kane inched towards one of the largest dogs as it ripped and clawed its way into its former-master's abdomen. With a shout louder than Davis could have imagined coming from those small lungs he gave a mighty primordial "Yawp" and slammed the entire length of the three-foot metal rod against the dog's rump.

The animal screamed and whirled. Without hesitation Kane clouted it on the nose. The animal began to whimper and whine; it took an experimental step towards Kane with its fangs bared and bloody. Kane swung the cane expertly and clipped the dog on both its paws. It retreated back into its hated kennel limping and crying.

Kane screamed again, somehow impossibly louder, and turned on another dog and gave it the same treatment. The pack saw its leaders chased off by a loud demon who flung pain at them when they approached. They began to lose their blood-lust and their instincts turned them to thoughts of self-preservation.

As Kane made a third dog howl, most of the remaining escaped animals abandoned their meal and quickly made their way back to the despicable enclosure they knew best. Kane daintily kicked one of the dead man's hands which hung by fragmented tendons; the appendage came off the arm and flopped inside

the kennel. The dogs inside began fighting over possession of the artifact, their hunger largely assuaged by the sheer mass of the feast they had consumed.

"Now," he told Davis when all but two dogs had retreated, "I need you behind the door."

Davis inched over to it with all caution.

Kane circled around the two remaining dogs. These last two lacked the sense Mother Nature should have given them and appeared fearless.

"I could close the door now and just shoot them," Davis said.

Kane shook his head. "Suddenly taken a passion to killing dogs, have you? Want to end up like Teddy down there... besides, they're evidence."

Davis rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Kane achieved a position directly behind the last two dogs and suddenly emitted a high-pitched ululation unlike any Davis cared to recall or could imagine. Somehow Lazarus Kane's precise and limber vocal chords simulated a sound not dissimilar to two warring car-alarms being set off at the same time. Swinging the stick in all directions Kane advanced on the remaining dogs and half-kicked, half beat them back into their pen with the rest.

"Now you may close the door," Kane told the uniformed man by the cage.

"Way ahead of you." The door had already snicked into place and Davis had locked it.

Kane walked around the room and shouted at all the cages and smacked his metal sword-cane against the bars and roofs and any animal flesh which it could find until the terrorized animals forgot their earlier frenzy and stopped trying to tear their kennels apart.

"We don't need any more strays joining the party," Kane said with inexplicable lightness in his tone.

"Call this a party?" Davis wanted to know.

"A celebration, certainly. We need to get back to your car and use that marvelous phone of yours. We need to call dear Holly. Then we have to inform Carly Ramirez that we just solved the Stansfield case because it has been much on her mind of late."

"We solved the Stansfield case, did we?" Davis asked, not having the first idea about the case itself.

"Oh yes," Kane assured him. "Missing girl, taken right off her own block. Carly will want to know. She won't like it but she will want to know. And she'll want to contact the families—I doubt she would leave it to someone with less empathy."

Davis thought about missing girls. He'd seen one in the paper when he played Pokemon with Ivy.

Before he could voice that thought, Kane confirmed, "Yes we solved that one too."

He led the detective over to a far cage and used the light his elegant silver lighter provided to reveal one corner of a kennel floor. Along with the excrement and littered remains of other animals, remained a small scrap of pink fabric and the broken pieces of a child's wristwatch.

Davis did vomit then. His stomach contained only coffee but his brain tried its best to throw his guts out of his body anyway. Kane took a delicate step backwards. Davis dry-heaved for a minute and then wiped at his mouth with one of his uniform sleeves. He tried to form words. He failed.

"It's a wicked world?" Kane tried softly.

Davis negated that instantly.

"The man was pure living evil," Kane attempted.

"So you said earlier. But this? This is..." Davis ran out of words again. Then he became angry at his own reactions; he'd consistently been of absolutely no use since Kane took the wire-clippers back hours ago. Nothing Davis had done since counted in any way. He let his shock and surprise and finally his own disgust and disbelief overwhelm him.

"Some detective I am," Davis finished with a dismal tone of self-abnegation.

"You have the makings of a fine detective," Kane told him. "One can never manage to prepare for every single eventuality. Life isn't chess and does not have a limited number of moves a player may make."

"I get the reference from Sweeny Todd, now," Davis said.

"I assumed as much when I noticed you vomiting," Kane replied.

"I'm a rookie," Davis declared soberly, "and I panicked like a rookie."

"You simply require some polish," Kane assured the other man. "The first child-raping, cleaver-wielding maniac who feeds pre-teens to packs of wild dogs is always the hardest."

A movement off to the side near the corpse distracted both men and they whirled instantly; Kane raised his now-bent and damaged metal walking stick in preparation for another attack.

On the floor, half in the dark and half in the light lay a large desiccated corpse. And somewhere in the blackness, by what remained of the man's left foot, something moved ever so slightly. The two men drew closer and they saw the foot itself move.

"Jesus! He couldn't still be alive, could he?" Davis wanted to know.

"Not a bit of it. He bled out before the dogs even got to the juicy bits," Kane remarked with a touch of unexpected delight.

Davis always sighed with relief when taking down some major offender but Kane looked like he wanted to perform a careering gavotte of joy on the man's remains. Then again, given the circumstances, Davis wouldn't have objected.

The foot on the corpse moved again and a glimpse of white appeared and then retreated.

Kane approached and lit his lighter again. He stepped around the body and bent to retrieve something. He turned around and showed Davis his prize.

"Jesus!"

Lazarus Kane held in his slender arms a small puppy—certainly not much more than four or five weeks of age—it had a dead man's toe in its mouth and blood frothing its muzzle. Kane approached with the thing and held it out to Davis. Davis took a step back.

"It's only a puppy. I suspect it the rest of the litter became somebody's lunch."

Davis couldn't believe the small matted thing had survived.

"It's a female," Kane confirmed. "They probably spare a few to make more babies for the dinner table.

Very Jonathan Swift."

Davis made no move to touch the tiny animal. He looked about to resume heaving. He pronounced very slowly, "Lazarus. That... is... a man's... toe."

Kane made a show of only just having seen the offending body part.

"Here, give me that," Kane told the puppy as he removed the half-chewed digit out of the animal's mouth.

"Silly girl," he told it.

"Bad dog, I think you meant," Davis corrected somberly.

"Not a bit of it," Kane lilted. He patted the dog on its head.

Then Kane tossed the toe into a nearby cage and once again extended the animal towards Davis.

Davis considered the current state of his uniform; a little more mess added to the vomit and blood already staining the once-pristine outfit could hardly make things any worse. He reached for the animal and took it by the scruff of its neck. He held it at a distance, not desiring to feel a stream of warm urine come out of the animal any time soon. He headed to one of the kennels.

"Don't you dare!" Kane snapped.

Davis looked at the other man querulously.

"She's coming with us."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Kane considered the question as the dog neatly began to groom the blood out of its fur. "She's the one for me," he confirmed. "Come on. Time to call Holly."

Davis shook his head vigorously to the negative on the subject of the puppy. Lazarus Kane continued nodding in the affirmative. Eventually the puppy seemed to join in nodding along with the smaller man. Davis finally gave up. He grabbed at the scarf which had bound his face earlier and swaddled the puppy like an infant.

"I'll be damned if this thing is going to ruin my upholstery."

"She will fall asleep in my lap instantly and remain so for the trip home," Kane said in tones of convinced assurance.

"She had better."

The two men exited through the door leading back to the landing. Somehow in the confusion and panic and insanity they had forgotten all about the foulness of the place; perhaps they simply adjusted to it. But when they hit the outside, fresh oxygen forced out the lingering remnants of the stench and both men finally felt free to actually breathe in the good rich air again.

Kane got into the car and made a clutching motion to Davis. Davis handed the swaddled bundle to Kane and the slender man began cooing, "Mallys... my Mallys."

"You are NOT naming that dog Malice," Davis argued. "It's indecent. The damn thing already has a taste for human flesh, you know."

"M-a-l-l-y-s," Kane spelled out for him.

"I stand corrected," Davis said as he closed the door and entered from the other side. He made his own show of looking unconvinced, hoping he managed the task at least as well as Carly Ramirez.

"Mallys has a middle name too," Kane said with a monstrous grin.

The silence hung in the atmosphere exactly the same way that islands don't. Davis refused to bite and Kane refused to say more without prompting. Davis had played this particular game with Kane before and waited in the stillness until their eyes had locked.

Together both men said, "Aforethought".

Kane looked so pleased with himself that Davis couldn't stand it.

"You're demented," Davis said. Then he reached for the phone he'd left in the automobile's drink-holder and called his captain at home.

After that, the same phone called the emergency animal control number and Davis began making arrangements to have the dogs taken from the warehouse to somewhere more humane; he also arranged to have a forensics team on the site to protect the evidence at the warehouse.

Lazarus hummed and cooed like a new mother while the small bundle in his lap began to snore softly.

"That is a Rottweiler," Davis pointed out.

"I know that," Kane confirmed. Kane looked insulted; hadn't he aptly spotted the breed of every animal they had seen at the shelter? He looked about to say just that.

Davis forestalled any such outburst, "One day that thing is going to weigh about seventy-five pounds and scare the living shit out of people."

"It's not a pure-bred," Kane protested.

"So it will be a little smaller, depending on the breed of the mix."

"A little bigger, I should think," Kane pronounced. "Mallys may appear predominantly Rottie, but the remainder is Alaskan Grey Wolf."

Davis swallowed. "And you plan to keep it???"

"She's adopted me," Kane protested. "What choice do I have? Besides... we did just stop a serial killer and close about half a dozen cases all over the state this evening. And it is quite legal to own wolves here

in the desert wastes and throughout the entire State Of Arizona. Consider this my fee. I've never asked for one before," Kane mused.

You didn't ask this time, either. Or rather you did ask, and ignored the answer. Christ.

"It's going to be an immense blood-thirsty monster," Davis said seriously. As if in confirmation, the puppy continued to suck at the drying drops of reddish-brown staining Kane's fingers even as it slept.

"Sounds like the perfect flat-mate," Kane replied. "I've never cared for alarm-systems in any case and crime does appear to run rampant in the streets these days. What could be smarter than a little home protection? Electricity is the high priest of false security; as our recent trips to the local power stations demonstrated."

Kane fell silent and allowed the sleeping animal to clean his hands for the entire ride home. A call to Carly Ramirez along the way insured a sleeping-basket and food would await the animal when they arrived at Kane's residence.

Fortunately Captain Connor had called the woman after speaking to Davis; she had only just noticed Kane's absence and anger and fear warred within her demanding a satisfactory answer. Connor bore the brunt of her discord because he understood that the woman had more bad news coming and no way existed to soften that blow. So he let her blow off steam for a while so that Kane and Davis wouldn't be greeted by a shrieking madwoman.

"Do you want to tell me exactly what happened tonight?" Davis asked as they drove along the freeway in the darkness.

"I don't have the energy to do it twice," Kane confided.

"Twice? Why would you? Oh, right. Carly. Okay, I can wait. You can tell us both at once."

"Good."

“Oh my goodness! Where did you get this sweet baby!” Carly Ramirez greeted the two men before they could open Kane’s door. “She’s precious!” Ramirez gave Davis a nasty look and said, “Conspiring to steal my patient right under my nose. You are damned lucky the captain called to smooth things over for you.”

She looked them up and down quickly, not wishing to take her attention off the bundle in her arms, “You both look like hell.”

Davis gulped; big sister didn’t look pleased. But she quickly turned her attention back to the puppy and her frown lifted.

The small Rottweiler mix opened her eyes and licked at Carly’s fingers and gnawed gently on one.

“Yeah. Precious,” Davis said with just a slight sneer. He still didn’t care for the idea of Kane bringing home a possibly vicious or even rabid animal. On reflection he had to admit the small creature didn’t appear either rabid or vicious. But in a year or two... who knew?

“We’re going to the vet to get our shots on Monday, aren’t we? That’s a good baby.”

“Mallys,” Kane told her and spelled it again.

“That’s a precious Mallys,” Carly confirmed, taking the puppy and heading off towards Kane’s kitchen.

“I’m believe I have...” Lazarus tried to tell the captivated woman.

“It’ll keep. This baby needs a bath. Yes you do! Yes you do! I’ll put up some coffee. Go play on your computer or something. Be right back.”

Kane stopped her a moment and handed her the bent and now-useless walking stick, “Please put this with the rest of the detritus by the rubbish tin. She grabbed for the item absently and departed.

In fact it took Carly almost twenty minutes to return to the front room. During that interval both men had taken up positions on the sofa but they remained otherwise motionless and silent. Davis replayed the evening’s events in his mind and recounted his failures; Kane seemed content to await the return of his new pet. From the kitchen came the sounds of running water, then the back door opened and closed a few times, then an excited yipping came from the kitchen when Carly left the room for a moment and passed by

the two men in search of towels; she ignored them both times she passed and returned to tending to the small animal's needs.

By the time Carly Ramirez returned again the small creature looked happier, healthier and its fur poofed out nicely to frame its small face like a collar. Davis noted the wolf in the animal then with his own eyes. He gave a despairing look at Kane; Kane continued to beam sheer delight at his new houseguest in a way he never smiled at mere humans.

Carly set the animal next to Kane on the couch, laying the towel down first to protect the couch from the animal's remaining dampness. The little man stroked it absently and looked up towards the ceiling as if thanking an unseen deity or perhaps composing an etude on the events of the evening. Carly went back to the kitchen for a moment and returned with Kane's silver coffee service tray well loaded.

"A little man will be out on Monday to install a pet door in the back," Carly said, taking a cup and a cookie. "She's whip-smart. Already knows to scratch at the door when she wants a tinkle. I thought you didn't like any of the dogs you saw at the shelter?"

"This isn't a shelter adoption," Davis tried to explain. He reached for a cup so he had something to hold in his hands and distract him from the growing realizations his mind dragged up to explain the events he'd witnessed. Davis already knew most of what Kane had to tell the woman and he had deduced a lot more than he cared to recall or repeat.

Fortunately, Kane took the weight of events on himself as always. Like a bulwark against impossibility or any abjurations, Lazarus Kane managed the ironic trick of seeming fragile enough to crumble at any moment, yet contained the inner fortitude to somehow lift and hold the world on his shoulders like Atlas without seeming to noticing the burden. Kane hadn't even vomited when Davis stood heaving uncontrollably. Lazarus Kane remained somehow impervious to everything but his own impending mortality; nothing else frightened or could touch him unless he so chose.

Davis didn't know whether to fear or envy the other man for his perspective and abilities.

"Well it is, and it isn't," Kane corrected.

"It's a shelter adoption but it isn't?" Carly said, attempting to reconcile that a moment.

"That sums it up neatly. Yes. Might I have some tea instead?"

Something about his tone made Davis look at the other man closely. After a moment he could see that Kane didn't care about coffee or tea or any other beverage which might exist in the world. The truth lay elsewhere.

Kane struggled to maintain his offhanded and lightly casual lilt while knowing he had to deliver a crushing blow at any moment. He simply wanted Carly out of the room a bit longer while decided how to explain the truth without any of his usual flourish; a grim business such as this demanded a more serious tone and Kane had no desire to insult or dismay Carly with his usual arrogant approach to summation. Davis had never seen Kane stall to protect a person's feelings before; it startled him until he recognized what he witnessed— perhaps Kane had some sympathy for others after all.

Carly pointed to the cup closest to Kane. She spun it around so the man petting the puppy could see the little tag hanging outside the rim.

"Already prepared, I see," Kane said, receiving the cup from her hand. As their fingers passed he touched one softly and she gave him an odd look. It may have been the first time their hands had ever touched in the years of their acquaintance. Kane did not shake hands like normal people and rarely made physical contact with anyone.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Carly asked, taking a seat in a chair across from Kane.

"Well," Kane hedged slightly.

Davis wondered if Carly made Kane feel like one of her little brothers. Davis knew that sinking feeling all too well.

"It's awful," Davis told her, and then looked back to the milk swirling in his coffee.

Carly looked back at Kane, "Is it as bad as the..."

Kane didn't let her finish. "Worse. Exponentially."

Carly Ramirez tried to recall every case she'd worked or come across since the day Lazarus Kane first arrived in the Gilbert Police Station—complete with a list of unsolved crimes and the perpetrator listed next to each one. Some of the situations they'd encountered over the last few years strained credulity and threatened to break the minds of those who witnessed such events. Not to mention the current situation of unknown parties trying to destroy the world... what could top all of that?

"Tell me."

"You won't be happy I did," Kane counseled.

"That much, I know already. Now I want the rest. Go ahead. Hit me with it." Carly made a momentary show of bracing herself in her chair.

"The Stansfield child is dead, Carly..." Kane began with just the slightest uncertainty in his voice as to how to describe the night and the warehouse and the lunatic and his shining cleaver.

"Dead. I knew that," she admitted.

Seeing her look of insistence, Kane proceeded.

"So is the one who disappeared a few weeks ago. And about four or five others as well—I will need to review recent missing children cases and any evidence which can be recovered from the scene of the crime.

"Holly already mobilized teams of Arizona's finest to cover the location and scour top to bottom for clues..." Kane trailed off.

"All dead," Carly shook her head in regret. "After the first forty-eight hours there's a part of my mind that knows they aren't coming back most of the time. But there's another part that holds out hope." She sighed and repeated, "All dead..." trying to sound professional and detached, and utterly failing.

"Sounds worse to say it aloud," Davis soothed half-heartedly. The evening had begun to settle on Davis like sediment and he felt dirty. Looking down at marks where he'd wiped his vomit-stained uniform earlier

he decided he couldn't stand the physical impression of uncleanliness a moment longer. The young detective looked over at Kane (who wore his tattered and spattered regalia without any seeming discomfiture) and wondered absurdly if they had exchanged their roles in some Grand Universal Equation.

"I'm sorry," Davis interrupted, "I know you're tired Kane. But I have to get out of these things," he pulled at the offending garments.

Ever since Kane's hospital stay, Davis spent more time in Gilbert than at his own apartment. Over the course of weeks Davis had managed to accumulate a small collection of clothing in a drawer without Kane noticing or complaining somehow. Probably the man had discovered the items, but Kane made no mention of having so done.

Davis occasionally suspected all of Kane's efforts to create distance between himself and others a sham; Lazarus Kane might deny it but he had a clear need for other people—if only to demonstrate his own cleverness. While the smaller man might never openly admit it, Davis could sense the immedicable loneliness Kane nursed within.

Kane didn't hesitate to allow Davis to depart; he could handle Carly without his "Man Friday" for emotional support. Kane could handle anything.

"Avail yourself of the upstairs shower, as I have seen you do on other occasions. You already know most of it in any case. You can tuck me into bed later and we'll sort out any remaining questions. Go."

Davis didn't wait for a second invitation. He set down his cup, gave a sad nod to Carly and went upstairs to take a shower.

About an hour later, after Davis has showered, changed, and then gone downstairs and helped Carly recover a little, he experimented with taking Mallys out to the backyard for a pee. He doubted Kane had much experience with animals of a personal nature and realized that as Kane's "keeper" the task would likely to devolve to him more often than not so Davis decided he might as well just get on with establishing

a new routine. Standing in the night air and watching the puppy frolic gave the detective a chance to further collect himself and he felt nearly human again; sometimes the simple joy of a puppy or a child in a sandbox can almost erase the cares of any world-weary soul.

When Davis finally felt composed enough to confront again the evening's events (and inquire more of their import) he re-entered Kane's lodgings. Davis left Carly stroking the puppy and went up to Kane's room.

Before he could knock softly at the door, a voice called out to him; he entered the room. Kane sat, propped up by red paisley pillows in his best dressing gown and still sipping tea.

"I think she's okay," Davis started, referring to his fellow detective on the landing below.

"Mallys? She's an absolute treasure," Kane attempted to deflect.

"Carly," Davis corrected.

Kane nodded. Then he made a negating motion which almost spilled the warm brown liquid onto his blankets. "No. Detective Ramirez is the opposite of okay. But she will mend. Once she has contacted the families of all the abducted girls she will find a way to put this behind her. It will take significant time."

"And you? How do you feel?"

"Unaltered. Unadulterated by time and the elements."

"Lazarus..." Davis protested. He knew damned well no one could go through an evening like the one he'd experienced unscathed.

"You are looking for that soft spot of regret and sympathy. Look within, detective."

Davis bit down on a retort when he saw just how tired and haunted the little man's eyes appeared. Kane put on a good show of impervious implacability but Davis had learned to see beyond that. Kane felt as horrible as Davis; the little man simply refused to allow such feelings to take hold in him... he didn't have the time for such extraneous minutiae as conscience or sorrow.

Dismissing any further remonstrations, Davis went right to the heart of his many questions. "How did you put it together?"

"Well the bodies, for one thing. That sort of made it obvious."

"What bodies?" Davis wanted to know. "From what I heard they never found any bodies."

Kane nodded as if stressing that within those words lay his entire chain of thought.

"Have you ever taken a moment to consider how you might dispose of unwanted human remains?

Especially the remains of a child with an Amber-Alert in full progress? Or perhaps some other luminary or prominent figure likely to draw attention by their absence?"

"Have you???" Davis countered uncomfortably.

"Obviously. Many times. And Arizona is so limiting in that regard. We have no handy bays or oceans into which one might tumble the odd extra corpse. We have no swamps, no crocodiles lingering about for a free lunch. And digging sand is terribly frustrating because the hole tends to fill up as rapidly as one digs.

"From the first I knew this matter turned on a complete absence of any human remains. It is why I asked you to find out about pig farms..."

Davis recalled a Guy Ritchie film he'd seen about gangsters abroad. The meanest of these villains kept his own hog-farm and made a point of telling his victims to never trust anyone who managed such a place. Twenty hogs could strip a man down to bones in less than an hour, and then they would eat the bones as well. Davis grimaced at the recollection.

"And the sand in Arizona isn't right for hogs to wallow," Davis replied.

"As you say. That presented me an unsatisfying mystery and such things tend to nag at my mind. In a place such as this, bodies turn up. Even in places with a coastline, bodies tend to wash up unexpectedly on the shore. So... why no trace of these girls. Even after the authorities performed an extensive state-wide manhunt for months?"

"Someone built a better mouse-trap," Davis said clinically. He did his best to emulate Kane's dispassion although he didn't share the emotion.

“Well said. That is exactly the case. At first I suspected the abductor consumed the children personally. I dismissed that because of the infrequency of the abductions. One a year? For a man with an appetite such as that? Hardly enough meat on young bones; his larder should run dry of even the best-smoked bits in one-third that amount of time. No, I quickly forgot the idea of cannibalism. But I did not dismiss the idea of consumption.

“We have horses here in Arizona; some goats and cows; coyotes in the high desert. But for the life of me I could not think of any predator large enough to drag off and consume entire children.” Kane let his words hang in the stillness as he sipped his tea delicately.

“So you considered the smaller predators, but in larger numbers...” Davis prompted after a moment.

“Just so.”

“How did you find the right shelter?”

“Did you know that a majority of the animal shelters in Arizona are ‘no-kill-shelters’? I was surprised to learn of it. I did extensive research on that marvelous metal box in the living room. In fact the single biggest killers of dogs and cats in the state are P.E.T.A. and the Maricopa Rabies and Animal Control Authority.”

“P.E.T.A.? People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals???”

“The very same. Apparently it is more ethical to kill them than to allow them to run around loose breeding unchecked. They maintain a shelter locally and they have an immense freezer they use for that purpose. The state-run program prefers lethal injection and then the furnace.”

“So you went looking for someone with access to a large group of dogs...”

“And a furnace,” Kane put in. “Handy for leftover bones and the like.”

Davis recalled some large bones among the remains within the kennels in the warehouse. “He got sloppy towards the end.”

“Smug. People like that don’t really cover their tracks. They sweep some dirt along the path half-heartedly and count on everyone to ignore or dismiss them entirely. The man who died at our feet this evening took what he chose, and killed at will for decades, without anyone ever suspecting a thing. Society turns a blind eye. Those who protest such horrors make loud noises and thump their chests, I’ve even seen them performing such spectacles live on that television you enjoy so much, but in reality those dismayed protestors accomplish very little.”

“I called two other shelters which lacked the no-kill policy. One had a female custodian performing the task—I discounted her immediately as too young and too cold to have an interest in the company of biddable children. The other facility gave their dead animals over to a laboratory for medical research... no way to hide a few dozen dogs suddenly disappearing there.

“The third and last shelter provided me just what I sought. A single man in charge of all the animal disposals, in a private building no one else dared to enter. Who would notice if some animals simply disappeared rather than going up in flames? You saw the reaction of the rest of the staff—they didn’t even like to look at the building where those things took place. I doubt any of them would enter it voluntarily.

“That made the attendant at the shelter we visited the most likely suspect. I had partially confirmed his guilt before we arrived. A little research turned up information on his family; they used to run an import and export business of some ineffable sort, likely a front for smuggling from what I pieced together. Their son, the shelter attendant had inherited a large, abandoned warehouse well out of sight of ordinary scrutiny and unsuitable for any purpose save demolition.

“So we had to go take a look at the man himself. I confirmed most of my initial suspicions in less than four seconds. Did you see the square of cloth?”

Davis shook his head in complete confusion about this point.

"The janitor had a small square of cloth, cut from a baby blanket, which he kept in his pocket. He kept reaching in to stroke it. Pink. Surely you noticed? When we first approached him at the Adoption Center he had the thing in his hand and he quickly stuffed it back into his coveralls."

"A dead baby sister?" Davis guessed.

"Exactly where my reasoning led. In fact, I suspect he killed his sister. Possibly his parents as well—I can find no trace of what happened to them after our killer reached adulthood. In this modern world everyone leaves a footprint or records of some kind behind. Even I cannot pass entirely undetected through the omnipresent technological maze of cameras and monitoring equipment which our world has become. I believe our killer disposed of his entire family before taking his little tour on the road.

"He learned his practices experimenting on his younger sibling; and moved onto his sire and dam for good measure when he'd started to perfect his art. Our late abductor, Theodore, clearly did not behave as a good little chipmunk should."

"I don't even know his last name," Davis muttered.

"I can't recall. I'm sure dear Holly will have it in his report. Is it of import?"

"I watched the man die," Davis replied as if that explained everything.

"You had the best seats in the house for the event. I wouldn't have missed it for the world," Kane assured the other man. "As for his name... who cares? Do monsters have a right to be enshrined in memory? Why do people learn the first, middle and last names of assassins but never bother to spend as much time researching the victims?"

Davis puzzled over the question. "John Wilkes Booth," he recited. "He killed Lincoln. But if you asked me Lincoln's middle-name I couldn't tell you." Then he thought a moment and added, "Lee Harvey Oswald supposedly shot John F. Kennedy. But I have no idea what the middle initial represents. You know, I've never really noticed that before."

"People," Kane snorted.

"Motherfuckers," Davis added.

"Yes. Did you doubt this? They are hypnotized by the very horrors they decry and they create wax museums and exhibits so others can revel in the carnage of bygone eras... the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Stations Of The Cross. The same old inevitable cycle of violence and destruction portrayed as heroism or religious fervor.

"If you like blood and gore just read the Greek and Roman legends which form the Judeo-Christian tapestry from which everything else descends-- plenty of death and dismemberment to go around."

Davis had a flash from earlier in the evening when Kane had kicked a dead man's hand clean off its arm and into a kennel of ravenous dogs. He covered his queasiness with another question. Lazarus gave him another response.

When he'd had the entire tale, Davis said without a trace of duplicity or doubt, "No one could have done it but you."

"Obviously," Kane said, and his hand shook slightly as he sipped his tea again. "The parking lot full of white vans outside the shelter helped settle the matter conclusively. Reports of such a vehicle at the scene of one crime made me suspicious."

"What's suspicious about a white van?" Davis asked.

"Are you aware that nearly no one uses them any longer? Some gypsy ice cream vendors, a couple of plumbers, and a few very small shipping outfits make use of them. But about no one else does. And I wondered why, if I confronted a serial killer, did no one else report that vehicle at one of the other crime-scenes? Then I realized the van went unnoticed because no one considered it worthy of mention. That led me initially to my first enquiries into plumbers and dog-catchers."

"I see you're tired... but one more thing?"

"I wouldn't let you kill any of the dogs?" Kane stated, anticipating the query.

Davis wondered if Kane somehow could read his mind or translate the detective's facial expressions into complete sentences. Davis tried not to sound ruffled and replied, "Yes. The dogs. Why didn't you even let me try to reduce their number a bit? It's obvious you aren't a fan. We could have made that nightmare manageable more quickly."

"Do you think so?" Kane snorted. "You aren't much for the psychology of the herd-mentality are you?"

Davis shrugged.

Kane went on, with growing fatigue. His speech lost some of his regular flourish and he replied directly for once, "I fired a pistol into a window, as you saw. Ordinary animals would retreat from such a thing or flee in surprise. When the mob failed to behave as predicted I realized we faced no ordinary pack of feral beasts; captivity and torture had warped them beyond any hope of control. If I shot one, it simply would have created more blood and more frenzy—and the animals in the other kennels would have exploded through the chicken-wire to devour us in an instant.

"Same for the sword. If I so much as cut one of the animals it would create more blood. More frenzy. More hunger and more adrenaline to help the rest of the caged monsters escape. What I had to do was find the pack-leader. But I didn't dare kill it. You have no idea how close a thing it actually was; those other kennels nearly burst open before I could accomplish anything. I am not much on running lately."

Davis ceded that with a nod but made no further mention of Kane's medical condition.

"Besides, I could not be certain to kill anything at all," Kane confided in a weaker but conspiratorial tone. "I don't actually know any swordsmanship other than point and stab," he admitted.

"So I selected the largest animal close at hand and I hurt it but I made certain to draw not a drop of blood. I kept on hurting that one animal. Spreading minor annoyance throughout the group would not serve; I needed to make one animal as uncomfortable as possible. So I kept hurting it. And if it started to think itself safe or in control again, then I hurt it some more.

"A dog dying in an instant makes little sound. But an injured animal whines and keens and makes all sorts of discouraging noises to warn the remainder of the pack to keep well away from the threat.

"You have no idea," Kane told him again, "how badly things might have gone awry. If the animals' keeper had arrived on the scene before us, I assure you the story would have had a very different ending."

Davis quoted something he'd heard once, "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."

"Orson Wells had it quite correct," Kane agreed. "Had we entered that room with the killer already waiting we should not have walked out again I assure you. Things only transpired as they did because of his injury and the smell of blood permeating the air. If not for the man's self-inflicted injury he could have opened all those pens with complete impunity. The dogs knew his smell, and they had a cultivated fear of him from months or years of abuse. They'd have turned on us without thought. After that, what would remain of us? Some ash at the base of the furnace at the shelter."

Davis understood just how lucky an escape they had made and why Kane took the time to utterly destroy his sword-cane beating on cages to quiet the remaining dogs. Still, couldn't they have just dealt with the loosed animals and fled the second-floor and sealed the rest behind the door? What matter if they escaped their kennels, so long as they couldn't leave the building? Then Davis recalled the hole in the floor and that the warehouse now had a wide (and, thanks to his own efforts, un-boarded) window below which would have provided a significant portion of the horde access to the outside world in short order.

"If you didn't exist, someone would have to invent you," Davis ceded finally.

"I would certainly hope so," Kane smiled. His head dropped and his eyes closed. "More hot pies," he sang in a distant tone. Without transition he'd fallen into a deep slumber. Davis left the other man to sleep.

EIGHT

Despite his continued protestations over the presence of Detectives Davis or Ramirez monitoring his life in constant (and occasionally overlapping) shifts, Kane grew to accept these others in his environment. Both officers listened politely to the owner of the residence as he insisted he no longer required “contemptible nurse-maiding” and both continued to report to their captain that Lazarus Kane had not yet recovered and refused to leave the man unattended.

Davis imagined that his boss must have felt he had “lost another one of his squad” to Kane’s domestication. But Captain Connor raised no objections.

Mallys settled into a routine of taking herself out through the newly-installed door which the Gilbert Police Department had installed and wrote off under “surveillance equipment on an asset” in their annual budget.

Continued reports of odd occurrences arrived daily (and hourly via the internet) as Kane began to assemble a coherent picture of all the events which had transpired since his coma.

Kane didn't leave the house much. Davis and Ramirez conspired to keep the man so busy sorting details and researching plots no one else could detect that Kane hardly noticed. But after a few days of this treatment he gleaned the situation and began demanding excursions outside.

Davis didn't want to risk any long trips, considering Kane's tendency to over-do nearly everything task attempted. So they began slowly with short walks to take the excited puppy to the park, quiet evenings in the large backyard talking of Dickens (a favorite of Davis) and Bronte. They even made a trip to see Ivy and played a few hands of the three-handed Pokemon game that Kane and the little girl had devised.

Strange events piled up and eventually became little yellow notes stuck to surfaces all over Kane's living room. Davis read some of them occasionally as he passed:

TOO MANY PIGEONS DOWNTOWN... IS SOMEONE PROVIDING FREE BREAD?

NETFLIX GOES UP AND DOWN LIKE A WHORE'S DRAWERS. DELIBERATE?

ICE CREAM TRUCKS NOW PERMITTED ON STREETS AT DINNERTIME???

Davis saw one sticky note which confirmed that Kane had not only caught up on events during his coma but now knew considerably more about the world and current technology than before:

APPLE KEEPS UPGRADING THE SOFTWARE ON IPHONE/IPAD WEEKLY? IS THIS TO ANNOY OR KEEP PEOPLE OFFLINE WHILE THEIR DEVICES UPDATE AND REBOOT?

If he hadn't known the target of the search, Davis might have missed the commonality which linked all these questions. They all related to minor annoyances designed to raise the overall level of discontent in the general public. Too many pigeons meant piles of pigeon-shit all over and people had to wash their cars and hose down their drives and walkways. Without Netflix many Americans no longer had any concept of what to do with any free time they possessed. And if certain people could get knocked offline at crucial

moments—and if someone could perform that action with precision and timing—nations might come tumbling down.

Imagine a major emergency and no responder can pick up the phone because it's busy rebooting? Shit, shit, shit.

Davis continued sorting reports and spent most of his time at Kane's; given the current mounting city-wide crisis in Phoenix he hadn't received any assignments at all from the department since they'd placed Kane into his hands. So Kane became the young detective's entire life and the remaining boxes in Davis' apartment in Tempe remained unopened.

At odd times, Kane would shout at the sky or the ceiling (or anyone in the room willing to listen) that he needed to speak with Mara. That too many things remained unclear and only her remarkable brain could help him achieve final clarity.

At odd times he also did the "Clop clop" bit. Those around him continued resolutely to fail at understanding these comments.

The next morning brought more odd reports, another walk in the park with Kane's growing pet and, during a moment while Kane researched paddle-boat rentals in Phoenix's Encanto Park, and Davis played with a slot-machine application on his phone, the semi-domestic semi-bliss of Kane's environs shattered suddenly... along with one of the windows in the living room.

It took both men a moment to realize what had occurred. This knowledge came to Kane a second before he detected the baseball come rolling out through the fabric of the long curtains draping the window; it came to Davis a second later.

Davis retrieved the ball and opened the front door for a look around. He quickly saw a guilty-looking child holding a pristine baseball mitt standing out in the street; Davis tossed the ball to the child. He called out, "Try and be more careful."

Davis smiled and waved. The event felt so ordinary and the child appeared so innocent; the detective saw no reason to press the matter further. He utterly failed to notice Kane had risen until that man passed the detective and strode out to speak with the youngster.

“Lazarus?” he called. But Kane and the boy whispered something in the road a moment and then Kane returned and took up his seat in front of the computer. Davis secured the door and, looking over Kane’s shoulder saw listings for the leading glass-replacement companies operating in Phoenix.

“Wouldn’t a close company be faster?”

Kane ignored that. “I have the one I want. Come on. Road trip.”

Davis could not stop his head negating that idea.

“Short one. We just need to see a man about some glass.”

“You can call someone,” Davis said with a sweep of his hand at the shards which had littered the floor at the base of the drapes.

“Not mine. I live in Gilbert. And a closer company will do quite nicely. Would you ask Carly if she minds arranging that while we’re out?”

Davis began to bite his lower lip. After a moment he concluded that he’d learn what Kane had on his corkscrew mind as soon as the little man wanted him to know and not one moment earlier. He made the call.

Kane wrote down the addresses of the top three results for glaziers operating in the Phoenix area and handed that list to Davis on their way to the car. Kane sported a cane with a dog’s head on it which Davis hadn’t seen previously. Davis had to wonder if that was in honor of the Kane family’s latest acquisition or simply because the cobra-headed one lay down its life and further usefulness saving both men’s life.

Some forty minutes later, in a cloud of pot-smoke, the doors to Davis’ car opened and the two men stood in front of the Phoenix headquarters of “Triple-A Glass—established 1952”.

"If Carly is getting your window replaced," Davis finally had to ask after nearly an hour's silence, "then why are we here?"

"I need to see their records."

"I don't have a warrant..." Davis responded, pretending to turn out his pockets in search of such a document.

"Nevertheless."

"Can you think of any reason they are just going to turn all that over to you?" Davis paused a moment, "Or did you need me to provide some sort of distraction or something? You know... these little missions of yours might go more smoothly if you occasionally took me into your confidence."

"You are my *tabula rasa*, dear fellow. And I count on your reactions for their honesty and appropriateness. I know you far better than you can possibly imagine, Detective. And I trust you with my life without hesitation."

Davis gulped guiltily, recalling his own past crime. "That may be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," he admitted. But then he added, "I'm not sure I deserve it."

"So what's your play?" Davis continued, dismissing the darkness of his childhood.

"I'm going to ask to see their records and they will hand them over obligingly."

"How do you plan to manage that?" Davis had to know.

"Don't be ridiculous! I am, after all, the Secretary for the Department of Municipal Safety and Oversight. Can you think of anything more un-safe than broken glass cluttering the floors of this delightful city? They will be glad to cooperate in any fashion I desire."

Since no one had bothered to inform the rest of the state that the Department of Municipal Safety and Oversight encompassed one small (locked) empty utility closet on a floor of the Governor's office, Kane's credentials barely drew notice and he obtained all the information he sought in short order.

After the second trip, Kane had gleaned all he needed and told Davis they could omit the third stop and return to Gilbert. As they walked the steps leading from the second glass company to the parking lot Davis put on his best I-won't-ask-but-do-you-mind-clueing-me-in-real-quick expression and awaited notice.

"Glass," Kane said.

"Yes. It's been on my mind much this morning," Davis admitted.

"Such an ordinary annoyance," Kane prompted.

"Except you and I know that these days ordinary annoyances are anything but..." Davis continued the thought.

"And when we briefly joined the world this morning in participating in an unplanned and ordinary event, a rather nasty thought occurred to me. Ah, thank the forces of coincidence and happenstance for operating in our favor this time. I quickly had a chain of thought in mind before the ball even struck the floor."

Davis thought.

Okay, let's pretend I'm a detective. Let's pretend my mind works as quickly as Kane. What did he see that I missed?

"A baseball. A new baseball," Davis recalled. "And a glove. A new glove."

"Birthday presents for the young boy who violated our peace this morning."

"What did you talk to him about?"

Kane responded, "I wanted to know why he was playing baseball when he didn't have any friends around and he clearly didn't understand the game."

"And?"

"He found the glove sitting with a ball in it, under the bench of the bus-stop where he waits every day for his ride home. He lives in Gilbert but attends a religious school in Phoenix..." Kane trailed off and did not continue his usual exposition but instead allowed Davis to take up the thread.

"People don't just leave new mitts and baseballs laying around at bus-stops," Davis started. "But then, veterans discharged from the service don't usually find free firearms on their doorstep neatly wrapped with a bow.

"Someone is leaving baseball equipment around where children are bound to find it and behave as children will. Do the records of the glass companies we just visited confirm this?"

"Forty percent increase in broken windows due to similar accidents and the glaziers are struggling to schedule all the calls. People are afraid to leave their homes because with a broken window, security systems are useless. They should get a dog," Kane concluded with a nasty smile that made Davis recall what a year or two and a little muscle would make of precious Mallys.

"So... it's that unseen hand at work again. Once again, someone is out there doing something nice for the sole intention of making everyone else miserable. The people with the broken windows get upset; the ones who don't go in to work because they are waiting for a repair-truck make their bosses angry and neglect vital jobs; the glaziers are panicking and over-ordering glass they won't need as soon as this latest wave of events is replaced by the next failure or outage. Chaos."

"My analysis exactly," Kane responded as he rounded the car to take hold of the passenger door.

"I got there in the end," Davis said.

He waited but no agreement came. "Lazarus?"

Davis could not see the man any longer. He stepped around the car and found Kane on the ground, bucking and rolling like a horse, in sharp gravel. Kane's eyes had rolled back in his head and his arms flailed and his spine appeared ready to snap.

"Jesus!" Davis shouted. He kneeled down next to the flailing man and did his best to keep the discombobulation of arms and legs impact the car or break any bones against the hard ground. After a few minutes the seizure subsided and Kane's eyes returned to normal.

“What? What happened???” Kane wore a look of confusion he’d never evinced and his voice sounded like any other confused primate.

“I think you had a seizure, Lazarus,” Davis said seriously. “We need to get you checked out. And I mean right now, so no rolling joints or delaying tactics.”

Davis called for an ambulance and followed it to the hospital. Then he called his captain to insure the best available care would await them upon arrival.

Some few hours, a cat-scan, a pile of blood work and an M.R.I. later, a man in a suit wearing a lovely suit nearly obscured behind a typical white lab-coat appeared in the doorway of Kane’s hospital room. The man had grayish hair and wore spectacles; he also stood so tall he nearly had to hunch to enter the room and his posture demonstrated that his regular stance bent slightly to obscure the glaring nature of his true height.

“I’m Doctor Grace; I’m the consulting neurologist here. Alright if I come in?” the doctor asked.

“Certainly,” Kane said, sounding proprietary as always. Despite his collapse and earlier confusion, his façade of imperviousness had already settled back into place.

“Is he family?” the doctor pointed at Davis.

Without hesitation, Davis produced his detective’s shield and said, “He’s my partner. What’s going on?”

Davis had to stop and wonder when Kane had taken on that role in his life. *Partner? How did that ever happen???*

The doctor seemed to have some lingering doubts about discussing his patient outside of the immediate family.

Kane added a mollifying, “This young fellow is already aware of the grapefruit which has taken up residence in my cranium. Pray proceed.”

“You probably have a terrible headache just now. And I’ll bet you’d like to get some sleep...” the neurologist began.

“Correct on both scores,” Kane confirmed.

“Is it the tumor?” Davis asked.

“Well...” the tall man hesitated as he sought for specificity, “it is, and it isn’t.”

“Life is often so,” Kane said with an indulgent wave. “Do go on...”

“The tumor hasn’t grown any, if that is what you meant. But it swells at times and occludes the flow of blood to the basilar artery—that’s in the anterior cortex of the cerebellum. And Mister Kane threw a small clot.

“That clot proceeded into the sinal region of his brain and has lodged against a wall and become a thrombosis. That’s what caused the Myoclonic seizure. Ordinarily we’d inject the tumor with some alcohol to shrink the size temporarily but because of the location that isn’t an option. We simply need to wait for the swelling to subside, and I have you on anti-seizure medication now...”

“Is that what the young lady stabbed into my stomach?” Kane inquired. “I thought someone had arranged a rabies jab for some reason or other...” Kane gave Davis a bleak look, knowing how the other felt about his new pet.

Davis looked legitimately innocent.

The bent figure returned his attention to the patient in the hospital bed. “In any case we’re going to let you stay here tonight until your vitals settle down. I’d like to start you on Coumadin or another blood-thinner but I don’t think that’s a good idea either. So we’ll send you home with some Levetiracetam—Keppra—for the seizures. And you are going to need to start taking baby aspirin—it thins the blood nicely.”

“As does alcohol,” Kane offered.

“Which I am certain you already know would conflict with the Keppra...” the doctor pointed out without the usual sort of indulgence ordinary mortals seemed to grant Kane. Apparently becoming a neurologist trumped (or at least equaled) Kane’s innate genius.

Kane suffered no more seizures during the night and the hospital discharged him the next day with a pile of instructions. Kane left these on the bedside table, but Davis grabbed at the sheaf of discharge papers and intended to follow the advice contained within to the letter regardless of protests.

As they drove to Kane's home, Davis told him, "You have to stop taking chances with your health. You can do more by reading the newspaper or turning on a computer than any ten people running around this city tracking down leads. Why do you insist on doing everything personally?"

"Not everything," Kane argued, "only the important things. There are some situations I simply cannot trust to the savagery and incompetence of my fellow monkeys." He waived a weak hand in an airy gesture at the crowds they passed as they drove.

Before Davis could protest that assertion, Kane added, "Do you think Detective Ramirez would have delegated the condolence calls to the families of all those missing children? Sometimes to insure a task is performed competently..."

"You have to do it yourself," Davis finished.

"If my brain has chosen this time to swell with its own import then I suspect my actual location at the time did not affect matters much. I should have had the seizure at home or in the bathroom or some other undignified position. And then my neighbors would again be treated to one of your reactions as Emergency Services vehicles invaded and congested all the streets."

"Whatever. Things are going to change, though, Lazarus." And he used the man's name and stressed it to draw extra attention to his serious intentions.

"We shall see," Kane responded as they pulled into his drive.

Things had already changed, although Kane did not discover this for several hours. For one things, Detective Carly Ramirez had moved into one of his spare bedrooms on the second floor. She'd taken care of her grandmother as a child, and still cared for her mother at home; her mother had suffered an accident which left her chair-bound some ten years previously. Carly had no problem nursing and putting up with

the whims and irritation of an invalid; she's actually grown accustomed to such things and spent most of her life caring for someone.

For another thing, the wheelchair had returned to the living room. Mallys lay on the fabric of the seat when Kane and Davis entered. She put up an ear and then opened both her eyes and began making happy growls and panting with excitement.

"Someone is happy to see you," Carly said.

"With malice aforethought," Kane said cryptically. "Good thing I didn't collapse alone in the living room or she might have gobbled me up."

Both Davis and Ramirez found that in terrible taste but said nothing. Mallys didn't seem offended at all; Kane picked the small animal up and took her to the couch and allowed her to melt into his lap. On the coffee table, one of Carly's perfectly-rolled marijuana cigarettes awaited Kane's attention and he wasted no time setting about consuming the ration.

Kane spent the next days recovering from the bruises and abrasions he'd suffered rolling about on gravel and the deeper aches spawned by the convulsions themselves. He disdained the wheelchair when in the house and only used the thing on the few trips outside his handlers permitted him.

So far, Carly and Davis trusted the devious man out of their sight for no more than a dozen minutes and only allowed him outside into his own yard, or for a short push around the surrounding streets. Kane's own sense of embarrassment over being chair-bound (rather than swaggering pompously and swinging a sword-cane in all directions) discouraged too many of these excursions; Kane maintained an overwhelming need to control how other's viewed him that even a terminal illness could not overcome.

At odd times Kane would announce (in the middle of learning some new fact or figure) that he had to consult with the mysterious and never-seen Mara. But neither Davis nor Carly felt the little man up to any long journeys yet and their captain agreed.

"I feel I am developing 'Stockholm Syndrome' at this point," Kane announced to the room one afternoon as Carly and Davis discussed his health and other matters as if all alone. "Hello? Have I become insubstantial? Do my words register? I am overtired of being held hostage! I desire..." his flair for linguistics momentarily departed for a short migration. "I want OUT!" he summed up.

Davis and his fellow detective remained unmoved. Carly went to clear the table from lunch. Davis just played on his phone a few minutes longer.

Finally, seeing Kane's growing irritability, Davis countered, "Where would you go? What would you do that you can't arrange from right here?"

"I need to speak to Mara!!!" Kane insisted. But he refused to say why, or what prevented that worthy from making a personal appearance.

This routine of protest and accumulated yellow post-its and research continued for several days in a routine which would bore any witnesses. A week passed in this fashion. Kane experienced no more seizures; both Carly and Davis made certain the man took all his medications on time. Kane displayed considerable weakness at times and his guardians still refused to let him venture out without the wheelchair—in case he fell again. But overall Kane's health appeared on the mend... if one discounted the mass in Kane's brain which slowly destroyed his body's electrical system.

New thoughts occurred; new notes appeared stuck to surfaces; new thoughts fell into alignment and those spawned ever more lines of inquiry. Trails, where location proved possible, found themselves dutifully investigated. Mallys continued to grow into her loose skin quickly and if showed no signs of any of the trauma she'd suffered before adopting Kane as her owner.

Despite the imminent "End of the World" that Kane insisted swirled around them like the souging of bat's wings, things proceeded quite ordinarily. The Kane household seemed a very normal and quiet sight of domestic tranquility... punctuated by the occasional shouted complaint.

For a third time in as many days Lazarus Kane lifted his head to the ceiling and tried to scream, “I need to speak to Mara!!!”

“So why don’t you just call her?” Davis offered yet again. Kane had ducked that inquiry each time Davis made the suggestion.

Kane looked at his friend dismally and finally elected to answer the question, “She can’t use a telephone.” They sat in the living room in the late afternoon and Kane smoked a thick joint.

Davis snorted—nothing about any of Kane’s friends would surprise him any longer. “Got an O.C.D. or something that prevents her?”

Kane shook his head.

“She’s not crippled is she?” Davis asked, thinking about Ivy and other people Kane might have encountered in hospitals and medical offices.

“No,” Kane admitted as if the entire line of reasoning remained irrelevant. “But she can’t use a phone. That’s a fact. And she hates the way she sounds on a speaker so that’s out too. I’ll call Billy and ask him if Mara can stop by here. She doesn’t like to leave the estate much, but perhaps she will in this case. But you will have to keep Mallys downstairs; Mara cannot be around dogs. The smell alone might prevent her.”

“Allergic?”

Kane considered that and dismissed it as absurd for some reason. “No, she just considers the species beneath her.”

“I don’t understand how she can help with all of this. Do you think she will come if you ask?”

“Am I allowed guests? Under House Arrest as I am, surrounded by armed guards...” he hazarded ironically, lifting his wrists a little and extending them for imaginary handcuffs.

“Don’t be droll, Lazarus,” Davis responded. “You’re hardly a prisoner. You just seem not to have noticed you’re really ill; we thought we’d all hang about and remind you of it...” Davis joked half-heartedly.

The front door opened unexpectedly and a familiar figure entered without preamble.

“Glad to see you haven’t gone completely native, Davis,” Connor said without preamble. He took a seat and asked, “I just stopped in on my way home. So? What do we all think?”

Kane started to say something but Connor interrupted him to say, “Yes, I know what you think, Kane. You’ve made it clear in a series of emails that threaten to overflow my box capacity—damn whoever taught you to send emails to the Hell Of Accountants And Lawyers! I want to hear what the others think.”

“I think he’s right,” Carly answered simply, arriving from the kitchen without other sound.

“About?” Connor returned.

She looked at him as if he had stepped out of a cave, after a thirty year absence from the world, and didn’t understand things actually worked any longer. “Everything.”

Kane nodded slightly with satisfaction as if this was clearly the only answer any sane person could make in the circumstances.

“Maybe I’m worried about the wrong officer after all,” Connor said. “You agree with everything Kane thinks—even the parts you haven’t heard. Is that about it?”

Carly looked at Kane, looked at Connor and realized in that moment that no woman could serve two masters any more than a man could. “That’s about the size of it, sir.”

Davis didn’t wait to be asked, “I think he’s right too, sir. We’re all in a pile of trouble.”

“Great. That much I knew already. I didn’t come all the way out here for that. What the hell are we going to do about any of this???”

“I’m going to go talk to Mara,” Kane said quickly.

“I believe I heard that idea vetoed as I came in,” Connor reminded the man.

“Well then I’m going to make a phone call upstairs so you can all talk about me behind my back properly, instead of continuing this display of exchanges of worried, furtive glances...” and Kane nodded to the rest and slowly climbed his stairs.

When the man had passed up the stairs and out of sight, Connor turned his attention on the two members of his department and said, "So... how is he really?"

"Fine," they both said in unison.

"A little weak still," Carly admitted.

"But that's to be expected," Davis offered.

"And his mind? I don't want to complain but some of his requests are taxing the limits of our department—not to mention the patience of people like Rawlins and Donleavy, who are getting stuck with most of the donkey-work. Right now he's got Baker and Mitchell staking out auto repair places to see if people are being undercharged for brake jobs. I thought that's why I had the two of you here... to take care of all these things.

"It's getting out of hand. What I need to know is that these aren't all wild goose chases. I need to hear that his mind is still sharp and focused, or I am going to have one hell of a lot of explaining to do about these diversions of department resources."

Davis started to protest, defend the magnificent mind he had come to respect so much. Then he thought more analytically and slowly said, "He's distracted. Still a mega-genius of course, but being stuck in this house is limiting him so much that his mind is beginning to wander a bit. He needs to see things himself for some reason; his brain requires the direct stimulation or something."

"What do you think?" Connor turned to Carly and leveled his gaze on her demanding the truth.

Without hesitation she told him, "I think he's been a little random because it's how he gets people's attention-- all his talk about horses and hoof-beats this afternoon for starters—it's just his way of insuring notice. In pajamas and a robe, his sartorial flair goes unnoticed; he can't even wave a walking stick around like Gene Kelly and barely has the strength to smoke his nasty weeds. But I think he's fine up here..." she tapped her own forehead.

Connor nodded. He'd accept one of Carly's assessments over about anyone else in the world. She knew people.

"Well the city isn't in flames just yet, so we have a little time. Let's just hope it doesn't take him too much longer to unravel this mess because I haven't got a clue," Connor told them helplessly. "I wouldn't even have noticed anything going on if Kane hadn't made me see it. Now that I would know... suddenly, I see plots and conspiracies in everything. I swear, if I won the lottery right now I'd be convinced someone had planned it to destroy me."

His subordinates nodded gravely, sharing his dismay.

"I'm not leaving his side until he gets the answer to this," Carly told her superior.

"And Davis isn't going to leave his side because he's adopted the man," Connor put in, before Davis could make any such assurance.

"Well then, I'm going to see what my wife is passing off as dinner," Connor added. "You'll let me know when you have something..."

But a week later, they still had nothing.

Kane's depleted energies semi-recharged under the care of his guardians. Both Carly and Davis fretted about Kane's occasional returning weakness but did their best to hide that from the patient and kept his attention on the task at hand; together they worked to solve the more immense problem of imminent disaster. Three more shootings matching the "Woods Profile" had occurred, but the carnage had been slight: one suicide, two wounded family members but no other deaths.

Information continued to arrive in snippets almost as quickly as Kane could request it, and further patterns had appeared to clarify or muddy their communal efforts. But the moving finger which guided the script remained obscure to them.

It began to look hopeless.

NINE

Lazarus Kane awoke and in a now-practiced motion he used the terminal next to his bed to call for the orderly to return him to the ground floor. He still had trouble at times even lifting his arm from the bed, but he grunted slightly with acceptance at the effort and the dizziness. Kane never stopped to consider that any exertion he made might prove his last.

Davis heard the noise from above, so he quickly straightened up the mess he'd made of the living room. He'd spent most of the night reading through some of the materials Kane had printed out and looking over the results of the various errands and projects that Carly and some of the rest of the department had looked

into for them. Davis had so much information, and could clearly see the pattern in most of it, but still had no clue as to how to determine the reason behind it all.

Weeks had passed since Kane first discovered the situation and yet they seemed no closer to any sort of resolution than they had at the outset. Davis took one last glance at a few notes before stacking them neatly in a folder on the coffee table next to a large-print volume of the complete Dickens. He looked around the room to verify it had the right kind of disarray to please Kane and then walked over to the desk.

On the computer, an episode of Southpark that Carly had downloaded played on at a low volume. Davis always found he concentrated better with noise in the room; people who could just sit and read in total silence made no sense to him. As Eric Cartman and his friends lampooned the nature and origin of Mormonism, the heavy footfalls of the large orderly descended the stairs behind him.

"The wrong choice of religion can kill you," Kane called out cheerily as he descended the stairs.

"It's a very funny show," Davis told him, waving him to come closer and watch with him.

"It's a very vulgar show," Kane contradicted him, "and I've heard quite enough thank you. If you wouldn't mind..."

Davis nodded and clicked the "x" in the corner of the windows media program to end the file. The orderly set Kane into his wheelchair and went into the kitchen to await further need.

Kane tried to shake the sleep from his eyes in an effort that clearly made him dizzy. He sighed a soft curse at his own weakness.

To cover his concerned reaction, Davis grabbed a small stack of letters which had arrived earlier on and set them on Kane's lap so the man didn't have to reach out for them.

He knew Kane would somehow find the strength to open and read them himself when he felt like it; Kane continued to insist on performing some tasks for himself no matter how such efforts depleted his dwindling

strength. When the two men met eyes, Kane nodded slightly at the other man as if in silent agreement with some unspoken thought.

"I've decided to return to the hospital," Kane said softly. "Dismiss Carly for the evening and have her call the captain. Let them know you will be driving me back there."

If Lazarus Kane had suddenly announced he intended to transform into a cockroach he could not have stunned Davis any further than he already had with those words.

Davis thought, *Lazarus Kane coming to his senses? Un-possible. But he looks so weak, so fragile... has he given up fighting? Is this a victory for common sense or Kane's last defeat?*

To mask those inner worries, Davis said lightly, "And what prompts this sudden and inexplicable change of heart? Missing the banana pudding? Still upset about all the strangers tramping over your hardwoods? I kind of thought you liked the system Carly set up for you."

He didn't add "I thought you were getting used to having me around the place."

Kane nodded, "I do; it's a lovely contraption and as elegant as anything in this modern world can manage. I've put a number of troubling situations to rights with it in a relatively short time."

Kane took a breath and added, "And as for the staff I've suddenly acquired... well, I do realize all this activity is on my behalf. I have no complaints about the care I've received. But before this evening is over I will have need of the hospital I think. I have so little energy now and even simple movement is so taxing.

"Can we talk about this upstairs? Then I think I would like to sleep for a bit. Then we can go."

Davis felt more confused by this reasonable and reasoned response; it contained too many elements of uncertainty and the tone which accompanied it sent subtle chills up his spine somehow.

Ostensibly Kane had decided to give in and accept his invalid state. But Kane had also said that before the night ended he would need a hospital. Did he foresee some worsening of his condition? Did he intend something colossally stupid which would further endanger his life somehow?

"Lazarus..." Davis said.

But Kane simply turned and retreated up the stairs.

Davis followed the man without sound or further discussion.

"Close the door," Kane said in a nearly inaudible whisper.

Davis did so. When he turned around to face the other man found him sleeping. He started to leave when a cough made him turn around.

"Sit. We have to talk," Kane insisted with his dwindling reserves. "If I fall asleep just shake me. There will be plenty of time for sleep after we talk."

Davis sat down.

"You've dismissed Carly for the night?"

Davis shook his head in surprise, "When did I have time? You only just now told me. And I still haven't decided that it's the right choice. Maybe you should go to the hospital right now. You don't look good. You seemed to be improving a bit, but now... well look at yourself."

"Right. Sorry, my friend. I am clearly getting ahead of myself. I am still a bit fuzzy. Do send Carly home and thank her and tell her to inform dear Holly I have come to my senses at last and willing to seek proper medical treatment in one of their sterile smoke-free prisons. Do it now..."

"Then come back up here. If I'm asleep wake me. It's important." The last word came out softly in a sibilant hiss as Kane returned to slumber.

Davis recognized the tone. Kane had used that sort of tone when the two of them spied upon a woman they later rescued from brutal torture. So Miles Davis shelved his private cautions and did as instructed.

Carly seemed surprised, suspicious and then arched an eyebrow after Davis conveyed the information. She didn't hide anything she felt, and asked no questions, but commenced packing up almost at once with somewhat less-than-sanguine acceptance. Carly made it clear she didn't much like the idea of getting sent off; she'd promised the captain she would not be parted from Kane until relieved of that duty. And she'd also begun her normal nesting activities and felt nicely settled in.

But Davis assured her Kane had finally seen the need for proper medical supervision in a controlled setting and promised to personally drive the man there and see him ensconced in a comfortable room with round-the-clock care.

They exchanged a mutual sigh of relief. Behind Kane's back they had discussed the notion of Kane returning to the hospital more than a few times and had even tried to find ways to lead the patient to make that choice as subtly as they could. But they hadn't expected any of those efforts to bear fruit; Kane simply didn't react to manipulation or even advice in any predictable way.

"Thank goodness," Carly said, once Davis dispelled some of her concerns by outlining Kane's intent fully and promising to supervise the event.

"I kept hoping he'd get stronger as the days passed and he rested. But he's not," Davis told her finally.

"No. He's not."

"He's taking a nap, resting up for the drive I guess. Don't worry. I'll get him to the hospital and stay with him; I'll see he is settled in properly. I better fill that electronic cigarette and charge it before we go."

Carly bundled her supplies into her rather oversized canvas bag and the Davis helped her out to her car and then departed in his own. Davis once again gave assurances the still-dubious woman that the situation remained entirely under his control.

Davis waved her goodbye and then closed the front door to Kane's dwelling and climbed the stairs. He found Kane propped up in his bed reading over his correspondence.

"Close the door," Kane started, as if nearly twenty minutes had not elapsed since the last time he uttered those words.

Davis pushed it closed quietly and sat in a chair near the bed.

"It may interest you to know..." Kane began.

"Yes?"

"I've inherited a hundred and fifty thousand dollars from a mysterious benefactor in Lubbock, Texas. I have to fly there immediately-- it is a condition of the inheritance that I attend the reading of the Will."

Davis stood up and backed away from the table, smoothed out his face a moment like a cartoon character reacting with shock, and asked, "Is Texas an old stomping ground for you?"

"Never even flew over the place, much less set foot on its hallowed grounds."

"They've done that one before," Davis noted, referring to the unseen hands guiding events around them lately. "They're getting lazy and repeating themselves."

Kane rasped with a soft chuckle, "Sam Weiner got considerably less. I'm flattered they think so much of me that they nearly doubled the amount. But I think it's simply a matter of false security rather than laziness. They cannot realize how much I have deduced about the nature of their efforts.

"It's clear that our villains now know I am interested in their activities, hence the attempt to derail me at this crucial juncture. But they have erred. They have no conception of the sheer number of their secretive threads I have woven together to ensnare them.

"But I am tired and there is something else we must discuss before we sort out the end of the world. You wanted to know about my sister, the other day..." Kane trailed off with thick emotion or weakness. Without any transition he suddenly wore a look of such sadness that Davis wanted to weep for the man.

"It's not important, Lazarus. You'd just woken from a coma and I had a lot of nosy questions. It doesn't matter just at the moment; right now you need to rest."

Kane rose up slightly against the pillows and summoned some of his adamantine will. "You wanted to know about my sister..." he repeated. Then he added, "And I have some questions about yours."

Davis swallowed and paled. Thoughts raced through his head.

My sister? How could he possibly... but then he researched me. He told me so when we met. I was not chosen at random for this assignment; Kane had some theory to test or idea to prove. Is this the moment? Is this how his last partner felt before Kane exposed his hidden secrets?

And then Detective Miles Davis had a sudden and quite unexpected thought: *When did I start thinking of Kane as my partner?*

"Look, it's not important right now," Davis tried.

"Oh, but it is," Kane insisted. "Don't you see? I've solved it. I know. Now I need to understand what kind of man you are. Because tonight is going to depend on many factors and one of those factors is you."

Davis reeled. Too many possibilities collided in his brain to sort. Nothing made any sense.

"You've solved what?"

"It. The big it. I know what's going on. I should have seen it at once but I've been terribly, terribly thick. I missed the sound of clattering hooves."

"Hooves?"

"Clip-clop, clip-clop," Kane said weakly with a very strange near-smile playing about his lips.

Davis worried for a moment that he had made a grave mistake sending off the nurse. Kane seemed about to enter the throes of some new delirium. Carly had mentioned Kane ranted more than once about horses; Davis had to wonder if Captain Connor's concern about Kane's mind didn't seem justified.

Perhaps the tumor had finally grown large enough to incapacitate the man's thought processes irrevocably?

But Kane's eyes remained clear and his gaze held Davis hawk-like, "I'm not insane."

Davis stuttered, "I never said you were, Lazarus. I just think..."

Kane cut him off with such a desperate whispered tone it rang as succinctly as a warning bell, "You wanted to know about my sister."

The other man tried to appear relaxed as he sat back and replied, "Yes. Captain Connor said she had the same illness you have now."

"And... that I watched her die," Kane put in.

Davis nodded grimly.

"You wanted to know how I deal with knowing my own fate after having seen it up close. Well that story of Holly's isn't precisely true. I did see my sister die, but not of the same thing I have.

"My sister Tabitha died of scarlet fever..." Kane trailed off ominously. He gave Davis one of those try-and-pretend-you-are-a-detective looks and fell silent in his lassitude.

When the story didn't resume, Davis began voicing his speculations aloud.

"But surely that's entirely preventable-- or at least curable. Your family was too poor? But you seem quite comfortable with luxury in a way that indicates long familiarity with... why would your parents let it happen?"

Kane said, "The wrong choice of religions can kill you. If I had bothered to consider thinking along those lines weeks ago we should not be in this ridiculous mess today."

Davis tried to think of the name for it. Then he had it, "Christian Scientists!" he ejaculated in a tone so loud he momentarily felt abashed.

"Christian Scientists," Kane pronounced softly, but he made it sound like a curse somehow.

"They let her die?" Davis asked with incredulity. It hadn't occurred to him such archaic practices continued in what he thought of as an advanced culture.

"Of course not," Kane said in barely audible rasps of irony. "They prayed for her assiduously all day and night."

"Madness."

"Yes."

"And you watched. And you knew."

"That prayer would fail? No. If there is a God, it's not my call which prayers are heard and answered and which fall to nothingness. I don't presume to speak for the almighty. But even at age fourteen I had learned enough to know a good antibiotic can make all the difference. People shouldn't die of something like strep throat..."

Davis shook his head, "Insanity."

“Motherfuckers,” Lazarus Kane said in the voice of Calvin Woods.

After a moment he dredged up the strength to continue, “We had a family friend, a doctor named Lefkowitz-- a lovely Jewish man. I recall him fondly. My father had him removed and barred from the house for trying to poison Tabitha—poison her with erythromycin. The doctor even tried to get a court order to force my parents to seek medical care for her but by that time things had progressed too far.

“So she died. Before my eyes she faded. I could do nothing to save her. No one listened to anything I said on the subject and my mother simply advised me to pray harder if I wanted to save my sister’s life. In later times my failure to properly pray for her became a sore point in my family and often drew comment.

“I no longer see or speak with any member of my family. Save Tabitha. Her I speak to often. I wonder if she hears me.”

Kane fell silent again, looking drained by the effort the telling had cost him. Davis had no words. He had no way to sum up or lessen the tragedy and so he just sat there with his hands folded in his lap until an ominously clearing throat reminded him that the exchange of stories had not yet concluded.

“I’ve just told you about the worst night of my life,” Kane prompted, with his eyes fluttering to close against his will. “Now it’s your turn-- you are going to tell me about Cheryl,” Kane concluded. He allowed his head to slump back a bit but he remained awake and waited with a look of inevitability on his sallow features.

“I guess I am,” Davis confirmed. After the effort Kane had just made on his behalf, he could hardly fail to match the man’s courage.

“She was beautiful. Brilliant. Everything I’m not. She had that flicker, you know? The one that gets you noticed? She should have grown up to be a movie star.

“People watched her. They couldn’t help it. Sometimes it even got a little creepy. But I was right there for her... my little sister. I was fifteen and she was eleven and we went to the same school and if some of the boys got a little insistent I’d beat them down. Only took a few times before everyone realized it wasn’t smart to mess with Cheryl.”

Kane barely managed a nod. "Tuesday Wells got into a lot of fights in school..."

Davis went on, "For the longest time everything went great. We had a lovely house and I had my own room, on the second floor down the hall from Cheryl's and across from my parents. I felt safe there and happy. If you could invent a perfect childhood I lived it. Toys and games and friends and I got along with my sister..." he choked in memory.

Softly, ever so softly, Kane suggested, "And then things began to get bad."

Davis cleared his throat and resumed. "I couldn't be everywhere. And I didn't know where the true dangers lay. I was just a kid.

"My dad lost his job. He had to get another one and it was a lot less money. Then my mom began fighting with him all the time and he wouldn't come home at night until late. When he did get home he slept on the couch downstairs more often than not. He was drinking pretty heavily too, although I didn't have a clue at the time how bad it had gotten.

"One night he hit my mom and I saw her run past my bedroom crying. I stayed in my room because I heard the whole thing and I didn't want him to hit me too. I felt frozen.

"For Cheryl I could turn into a tiger and attack without thinking, but for my mom nothing. I couldn't move. I hid. I failed her.

"I failed Cheryl too, ultimately."

"You were a child," Kane said soothingly. "What happened after your father began hitting your mother?"

"She left. She didn't tell anyone—not even her own children. It was a Friday morning. I won't ever forget it.

"I'd heard them fighting the night before. I stayed in my room pretending to do my homework but I listened to every screaming word of it. I had to listen; I don't know why. And I heard him hit her and her footsteps crying past my door.

“And in the morning everything seemed alright again. He went off to work. She made our lunches. Cheryl and I got on the bus and went to school. And when we got home she just wasn’t there any more. All her clothes, her little elephant statues on the mantle, even the smell of her had gone.

“My father flew into a rage when he came home. Then he started laughing a sick laugh and said that she would come home soon enough when she realized no one else would ever want her around for long.

“Then he went out, and left us there.

“I tried to make some dinner for Cheryl and got her upstairs to bed. My father didn’t come home until very late. Crooked out of his mind, he stormed through the front door and when I heard him I shut out my bedroom light and jumped under my covers.

“I didn’t hear anything else for a long time. I thought he went to sleep on the couch in the living room. I hoped he had. But then I heard it. A whimpering, like a squirrel trapped in the walls or a puppy outside my window.

“I went to look outside but didn’t see anything. I heard a sharp intake and a whisper and more little squeaks.

“I went out of my room and down the hall to find the squeaking. It came from my sister’s room so I opened the door. I don’t know what I thought. I still imagined a lost animal of some kind. I thought maybe my father had left the door open when he came home and something had gotten in...”

Davis didn’t want to go on. He’d only told this story once in his life, to a professional trauma counselor, and he’d never intended to relate the details ever again.

“What did you see,” Kane said in a calmly controlled voice.

“My father,” Davis choked out. “On top of her. Whispering. Squeezing her arms. Telling her to be quiet. Telling her to stop struggling...” his breathing became faster now, and his voice cracked with harsh madness.

“And what did you do?” Kane asked.

This is the part of the story where Davis intended to lie. Certainly he had lied to the trauma counselor when she interviewed him. And he had lied to himself every day since, without ever sharing the truth with another soul.

Davis intended to lie. Habit made him want to lie. But confronting Kane's supine and frayed form he found he just could not. He spoke the words and confirmed the act which had shaped his life, left him with unquenchable anger itching to rise through his veneer of civility and spawned his personal investment in the search for justice..

"I beat him to death with a baseball bat."

Kane waited a moment but silence remained thickly in the wake of this recrimination from Davis. "That's surely not all there is to it," Kane interjected.

"That's what it amounts to. I told the police and the shrink that he was chasing us up the stairs to punish us and he slipped and fell and went down the stairs and hit his head. But the truth is I hit him on the head with a baseball bat first."

"Is that all you did?" Kane wanted to know.

Davis just let it all gush out of him in a huge loud burst.

"He was raping her! I didn't even know what rape was but I still knew what he was doing. He was hurting her, so I shouted at him but he wouldn't stop. So I grabbed him. I tried to rip him off her by his shoulders—tried to rip his shoulders off. Pulled his hair. He swung at me and sent me flying into the corner.

"And right there, like God Himself had put them there for me, sat my bat and glove. I don't know how they got there or how long they'd been sitting in that corner. I didn't even notice them until I landed on them. But I grabbed for the bat and I swung it.

"Then my father got up. He came for me with blood running down into his eyes and he looked insane. His pants were down around his ankles and he was so drunk he could hardly stand but he kept coming and I kept swinging.

"I backed out of the room and towards the stairs. I was going to run next door and call the police so he didn't keep hurting Cheryl. I was scared for my life. My heart pounded so fast I could hardly breathe. I tried to run to the stairs but it felt like I moved through molasses. Too slow, too slow!

"He caught up with me at the top of the stairs and grabbed for the bat. He had a good strong grip on it and I got so scared of what he would do that I let go of it.

"We had the same look of surprise on our faces when he went headfirst down the stairs and broke his head open at the bottom."

"You didn't kill him," came a tone of deep solace.

"I did."

"You wanted to. But you didn't. You ran away to save yourself and save your sister. You didn't stay there and beat him to death. His death was his own making."

"I wish I could agree with you."

"Perhaps one day you will," Kane offered, sounding weaker than he had so far.

"No one asked many questions. No charges ever got filed. The police saw a man holding a baseball bat at the bottom of a staircase and two bedraggled and shivering children so they drew their own conclusions about what had happened and closed the file on it."

"The only one who is waiting to accuse you on this, is you," Kane reassured the man.

"You aren't... I mean you don't..."

"I've suspected as much for quite some time. I simply wanted to hear it from your own lips. You don't imagine I intend some betrayal, Miles?"

Davis didn't know what he imagined. Certainly the warning of Detective Rawlins had put him on notice to take care what he revealed to Kane. But Davis hadn't heeded that warning, and now the truth stood revealed it seemed Kane already knew the whole story in any case.

"No, Lazarus. I don't think you are trying to trap me."

"That's good. Because I will have need of you. In a few hours you and I are going..."

"To the hospital," Davis completed the thought.

"On a little errand... to forestall doomsday a little longer for humanity." Kane countered.

"Aren't you being a tad dramatic?"

"I think not. What is it that our esteemed governor and dear Holly are all lathered up over? What forces those humane smiles from Carly's lips when anyone can see she's terrified? What keeps you at my side when sense and pure sanitary considerations should drive you back to your lair post haste? Why the end of the world! Nothing more nor less.

"What lies before us is the deliberate desiccation and destruction of the firmaments; the immanentizing of our little eschaton here. And surely the damage will not remain confined to this one small outcropping of humanity—rot spreads outward inexorably.

"Things fall apart; the center does not hold.

"Tonight we shall take a stand against this, for I choose to call it evil and unendurable."

Davis saw himself absurdly for a moment as Sancho Panza at the deathbed of Alonzo Quijana as the withered ancient swore to arise and squelch all evils which pervaded a wicked world. He tried not to smirk as he asked, "And when exactly are we doing all of this?"

"As soon as I hear back from Mara," Kane said, undaunted by the sarcasm and doubt in the other man's tone. "Did I tell you I saw her earlier this evening?"

Davis looked at Kane oddly, "Did she climb up the ivy to your window while I was downstairs?"

“Don’t be ridiculous; Doctor Crumb has installed a webcam for me. Mara does not leave his estates often, and I could hardly invite her here with Mallys running about. I spoke with her at length but then she rang off abruptly. Mara didn’t care for the experience much, apparently, and said I looked like a ghost. She’s never watched television and didn’t like the computer monitor—though she seemed to enjoy the heat coming from the keyboard.”

“Is everyone you know eccentric,” Davis asked. Then he wondered if that number included Davis as well. Kane ignored the remark, “Mara has a few salient details to sort out, and then you and I will go on a small outing. It should not task you unduly.”

“Task me? I’m not the one standing at death’s door-- lying in front of it. Lazarus, you and I are going to the hospital and nowhere else.”

“Nonsense,” Kane told him with quiet assurance as he snuggled his pillows and moved wearily onto his left side. “I’m going to take a nap for a few hours, and then you and I are going to settle this whole thing.”

“You’re serious?”

Kane hissed, “Deadly. Never more so.”

“And you really know what’s behind all of this, Lazarus? You have the answer?”

“I have an answer. Clip-clop. Clip-clop. In a few hours I hope to learn if it is the correct one. We don’t even have a name for what this all is, and hopefully it will never require a naming by having the decency to never occur again. I do have the threads I feel certain will unwind it all. But I’ve been remarkably stupid up to now.”

“Unusual, for you.”

“Yes. Plodding on like a horse.”

Davis couldn’t help himself; he’d had enough hints. “Lazarus, what is all this nonsense about horses?”

"I need to sleep," Kane said. "But while I do, you may ponder this thought... in whose interest is it to bring about the end of the world? I hear in all these bizarre events the telltale clop-clop of someone's personal hobby horse being ridden."

"I'm taking you to the hospital..."

"Later. First a nap. Then we have to visit a church."

"A church???"

"Laying here at death's door—as you so delightfully summed up—are you really so surprised my thoughts might turn to prayer?"

"Yes."

"Nevertheless," Kane told him. "Now let me sleep."

Davis shook his head. It wasn't that unlikely, but something in Kane's tone made it clear that beseeching an unseen deity for intervention did not figure in his plans for the evening.

TEN

"The Elders will see you now," said a smartly dressed female acolyte.

Davis looked a bit surprised but Kane just smiled wanly as he sank back further into the wheelchair.

She led the way through an anteroom and then down a long corridor. Davis obligingly pushed the chair along briskly but a slight movement of fingers from Kane told him to linger a few steps behind the other woman.

"I didn't think it would be this easy," Davis admitted in a soft tone their guide did not hear.

"I'm expected," Kane said just as softly. "You remember your promise."

Davis nodded.

"Right through here, gentlemen," interrupted the young woman as she opened a pair of wide doors. She did not join the two men but simply waited for them to pass through the arch and closed the doors behind them.

The room looked like a king's audience hall—lots of gold and silver and mirrors and long tables with trophies of sorts lined the walls and cramped the walkway to ensure tunnel-vision directing all attention to the end of the room with the platform.

On that elevated dais sat three very old people seated on high-backed ornately carved wood chairs with velvet cushions. Clad in purple and pink and wearing odd head-garb and many chains of office, they sat on their thrones imperious and impervious to everything but the obvious passage of time.

Three stairs led up to the dais, these covered in plush, blood-red carpeting like the stage itself. To the far left sat the oldest woman Davis had ever seen—the best way to determine her age would involve a formulaic multiplication of her crenelations and wrinkles, or perhaps a macabre snapping off of one of her brittle limbs and counting the rings within. She appeared awake but her eyes did not focus on anything in the room.

To her immediate right, seated in the middle chair, a wizened figure slumped and snored. He had as many lines as the woman beside him—some which splayed out from his eyes like bizarre starfish which seemed to have attached themselves to his face like immense barnacles. His robe he had pulled up around his neck like a blanket.

On the final chair sat someone even older than the first two. Despite the ubiquitous signs of decay all three shared, this last figure proved something entirely other. He watched Davis and Kane enter with pale blue eyes behind steeped fingers and he gave off a feeling of surety and conviction without saying a word—like some prophet or madman; he stared at them with intense scrutiny.

Davis wheeled Kane towards the three ancient figures and the one on the far right waved him to a stop about four feet away from the edge of the carpeted platform.

“Good evening Detective,” he said warmly with a calculating smile of flattery.

“Officer, actually,” Davis corrected.

“I’m sure that’s just an oversight. With the right friends... anything is possible.” The timeworn figure looked to his two co-rulers as if garnering strength from their agreement.

The middle member of the triumvirate continued to snore and he also drooled at times. The woman on the end swatted at an invisible butterfly and mumbled something incoherent about bib lettuce.

“That’s very nice to know,” Davis said pleasantly.

“Thank you for seeing us,” Kane said in a near-whisper.

The Elder waved them forward to the very edge of the dais. Davis could not be certain but it sounded to him like Kane exaggerated his weakness for some reason. Rather than say anything, he allowed Kane to make whatever play he had in mind uninterrupted.

“Oh yes, Mister Kane. We’ve been expecting you for some time now...” again that grand gesture to include his two insensate colleagues as part of his audience or authority.

“You have?” Kane feigned shock, but kept his reaction frail and spoke in sibilants through labored breaths.

“Oh yes.”

“I just came in to pray and seek solace before I face a long journey,” Kane began in weak poetics.

“Probably my last journey...”

“But that is hardly likely,” the old man countered with a smile one gives to a child who is caught lying. “No. You are not one of us, Mister Kane. Not that we close our doors to any seeking the faith, but I think I find this deathbed conversion of yours quite a bit too convenient. Don’t you?”

Davis had to admit silently that the thought of Lazarus Kane joining with the Latter Day Saints didn’t seem an ideal fit at first (or even twenty-ninth) glance. But still he said nothing and let Kane play out whatever scene he’d encompassed—wishing he’d had more of an idea of Kane’s intentions.

Of course, the man hadn’t bothered to tell Davis anything at all about what he had in mind for the evening when he broached the subject—he’d only asked to be given a free hand and made Davis promise to trust him and not interfere.

Davis thought quietly about just how much faith he had in Kane. The day had started out with him trusting the ailing man and dismissing the very sort of people who might have talked Davis out of following any of Kane’s little schemes. Then Davis had demonstrated probably the supreme trust he could show by sharing the details of his worst childhood nightmare with the man.

After that, when Kane had awoken from his nap, he’d called to Davis to have him pack up a few things. While that happened, Kane used the computer next to his bed to retrieve an address Mara had Dr. William Crumb forward to him in an email; this he printed and told Davis to grab before they left.

Kane had Davis dress him carefully in some of his finest silks and velvets. Kane sent him to the spare room to find a special scarf he insisted he had to have, and when Davis came back he found Kane had managed to complete buttoning up his cranberry vest unassisted. He’d wrapped the scarf effete around the slender man’s throat and secured it with a brooch Kane directed him to on the dresser.

He’d asked again, before they left, “Do you really think this is wise, Lazarus?”

And then the simple, exhausted reply came again, “Trust me. Please.”

So he trusted him. And Davis got Kane out of the door and down the steps and into the car.

And so they'd arrived at the First Mormon Tabernacle of Faith some twenty minutes later. Davis had the wheelchair stowed in his trunk and got Kane situated in a relatively short time and they went inside the building. They sat in on a gathering, and had some punch.

About two hours after that, when people began leaving and folding up chairs in the refreshment area, Kane had flagged down someone and said he required a moment with the Elders because he wanted to ask them about a special prayer for healing. Apparently those Elders remained in a private enclosure in the rear of the church and were quite willing to grant him audience.

Now Davis stood quietly as Kane faced the Elders and he knew beyond doubt that his frail comrade had no expectations of miracle cures from the antediluvian trio arrayed before them.

"Then why am I here," Kane inquired in a hiss, sounding mildly irritated despite his debilitated condition.

"To talk us out of our mad design, of course," the man on the dais said with an indulgent smile and a majestic wave. "You believe you can make us see reason, so you have come to argue with us and prevent us completing our great work."

"Oh..." Kane sighed and sank his chin against his chest. "That sounds terribly boring and predictable."

Davis could not tell if this was more play-acting or if Kane's failing supply of will had at last expired. But Kane had told him not to interfere no matter what occurred, and to trust him. Davis could do that much at least, since tonight's performance might eventuate as Kane's very last on this earth.

"Yes," said the speaker again, clearly enamored with the sound of his own voice. "Because... although you have seen, you have not understood. What we do here is holy work—God's Work. This is His Will, and we are merely his vessels." The Elder articulated his words with special inflection to imply capital letters the listeners could not fail to mistake.

The man gazed down at Kane and Davis with a beatific and exalted look on his face and both men could feel the fervor he broadcast—it made Davis uneasy to confront such an obvious fanatic but Kane weakly held his ground from a seated position somehow. The wizened figure whispered something to an unseen

angel for a moment and then reacted as if he'd been asked some question. He turned back to his guests and introduced himself and his fellows ceremoniously as if they'd begged him to do just that.

"I am Elijah Jonas Whiticomb," the ancient man told them grandly, with a carious and unsettling smile.

"This is Joshua Dawson Creighton and Florene Valeta."

"No middle name for her," Davis whispered to Kane.

Kane moved his arm back slightly and elbowed his friend in the thigh with enough force to convince Davis that at least some of the weakness the man in the chair currently displayed was exaggerated to achieve some effect.

Davis bit off a pained gasp and said nothing further.

"And you are Lazarus Kane. The bumbler."

"And how did I acquire that title... is it foretold in Joseph Smith's writings? Did you have to read them out of a fedora?"

Elijah Whiticomb flashed a smile that would have made babies cry and shook his head, "You will not mock me, sir. I am in service to the Lord Almighty and men such as you cannot diminish me."

"Tablecloths!" swore Florene Valeta loudly with an odd contemptuous tone. Next to her the snoring man opened one eye and said, "Wednesday?"

"It's Friday," Whiticomb said firmly but with a tone of charitable acceptance.

Joshua Dawson Creighton happily passed back out. Florene played with her fingers making an imaginary cat's cradle. Whiticomb acknowledged his fellow Elders with a nod as if they had made valuable contributions to the conversation. Then he returned to his speech.

"We are instruments of God. We do His Will on this world. It is His intention to bring about the Final Days as a test of humanity. We aid in that goal and by following scriptures we are succeeding in ways no one would ever have dreamed!"

He continued to say “we” over and over, but clearly Elijah Jonas Whitcomb provided the only sentence for the three-headed creature which lurked in this back chamber within the holy fellowship of the tabernacle.

Davis realized almost at once that if Kane had truly identified the source of the corruption he’d sought then the apocalyptic figure seated before them epitomized the very germ of that infection.

Whitcomb continued on passionately, “It’s all so simple! Pre-ordained! All written down for those clever enough to find it and interpret the meaning. We will triumph. We will wipe away the dross and refine God’s Army to bring the light of faith to the entire world. We will do this, in his Most Holy Name!!!

“And you? You come here to stop us? To thwart the will of the Divine Creator? You? No. You will do nothing, Mister Kane. Nothing but shrivel up and die, as do all enemies of the true God who...”

As he spoke, Whitcomb waved his arms about with increasing excitement until he got to that moment where he realized he sat there taunting a dying man in a wheelchair with his imminent demise. Some frisson stopped him for a moment, as if he only just noticed that he sounded somewhat less than a magnanimous and loving advocate for a just and humane god.

“Frankly, Mister Kane, you don’t look at all well—perhaps you should have taken that trip to Lubbock, Texas and tried to get away from all the stress of this modern city. There’s still time, you know...”

“So you make no pretence of denial, then,” Kane said with a weary shake of his head. But at the last moment he also locked eyes with Davis in a significant glance—the first glance he’d given the man since they came into the temple.

Davis thought what it might mean.

Kane wants me to hear this for some reason; he already knows all this, but he needs me to be sure as well. Why? I’d believe it if Kane told me this asshole is behind all the trouble; I don’t need to hear his confession in full. What is Kane planning? Would I try and stop him if I knew? And why doesn’t he just get on with it already? Shitshitshit. Trust him? What else can I do? Trust him.

Whitcomb missed this silent byplay. He retorted snappishly, "Denial? I do not tell lies to further God's Will."

Kane made a show of raising his head off his chest and stared at the ancient figures on the thrones before him and announced softly to the room, "Why?"

The question hung there for a few seconds, replete with implications.

"Why did we try and buy you off when we so simply could have removed you? And never doubt it, Mister Kane... if we had wanted some harm to come to you it would have befallen with lightning quickness.

"No, God has His Hand on you. He holds you in his palm and you will prosper or thrive at His Will. And we would not do evil in the Lord's name by seeking injury to you. God will take care of you."

Whitcomb gave a wave which encompassed the wheelchair and a smug smile played around his lips which indicated he felt the interview drawing to an end.

But Kane seemed to rouse some strength from his strained flesh and his eyes showed an indomitable will as he repeated his original question, "Why?"

Whitcomb considered again for a moment and then decided on a different answer, "Why did we hurry the ineffable plan? Why accelerate the decline which will bring about the glorious Final Days? Well, consider... could we accomplish such an immense task if that too were not part of the vast and Holy Design? I told you. We are God's agents.

"We have worked for his ends for so long," and he paused wistfully and considered the human debris his fellows on the dais had become, "and we waited in patience. But the Final Days never arrived; Florene began to despair that they ever would. And she slipped into herself a little more each day until she..." he trailed off with pity. For a moment a look came to his face which might have been a reproach to God for the woman's condition. But it quickly passed with a furtive glance as if the notion of even questioning such penury would cast him as a hypocrite.

Whitcomb narrowed his eyes and crushed all the pity out of his voice as he continued on with syrupy persuasion in his tone, "But she also approves these efforts. She agreed and did what she could to aid our plans. So did Joshua in better times."

As if in response to this, Joshua Dawson Creighton let out a reasonably loud crepitation and stirred for a moment in his sleep. But Whitcomb did not allow himself to become distracted; he intended to respond to Kane's question in full until the other man gave in to truth and the rightness of it all.

"And so we go on. We do good works-- in secret, as the bible says-- taking no credit or personal glory. And if we hasten the natural course of decay in so doing??? Well, what doesn't spread ruin on the world these days? And that, too, is God's Will. Not to be scoffed at or thwarted by the likes of you, Mister Kane.

"God sees all and knows all and encompasses all within His plans. And, as I said, before," Whitcomb finished with a mocking tone and an insincere look of sad acceptance for the inevitable, "God will take care of you."

He exuded all the confidence of a man who believes he has God's cellphone number on speed dial in his phone.

"Perhaps he will," Kane said simply, not allowing himself to be goaded. "But in the meantime, he has apparently deputized me to come take care of you."

"A bold statement. God, the Father, can find better messengers to work his ends," and that smug tone included everyone on the dais somehow. "You hardly seem able to move, much less interfere with our plans in any significant way.

"Do not delude yourself; we have allowed you this audience so you would hear the truth and hopefully mend your sinful ways. But if not, it will remain in God's hands to punish you. In either case your attempts to intervene in our design will be of no avail. None.

“So you know who we are and what we are doing. And we know who you are, and what you are doing. Knowledge is power but there are limits, Kane. And you’ve hit yours here. I frankly don’t believe there is any way you can stop us...”

Whitcomb shifted on his throne and tried his best to appear indulgently patriarchal as he offered the two men before him another chance to bask in the light of his personal truth. “If you looked within yourself you would know that we are right and cease your objections.”

Kane snorted, sounding very unlike himself.

“Well, if you must interfere then by all means do your worst. God’s train cannot be derailed so easily and you will never match our sheer numbers. Who in the real world would even take seriously your claims???

“You may have won over a few locals you’ve trained to listen to your voice, but the rest of the world will never believe you until the Grand Design has gone too far along to ever stop us. We have thousands of people working on this all over the country—many thousands. Committed, able, young people all following simple instructions which we issue—all out there doing good works and raising spirits and helping others through charity.”

Put that way, it sounded so reasonable. Davis looked down at Kane but the other man refused to meet his eyes. He shook his head to negate the words and clear his mind of the fog of salesmanship Whitcomb continued to discharge into the room like some diabolic squid and returned his gaze to the ancient orator.

“You could join us, Officer. We need young, able people to spread the word and help in our work.”

“I don’t think so,” Lazarus Kane interjected with a sound of finality that worried Davis. Those four words removed all doubt that Kane had heard enough of the Elders’ plans.

“Let him answer,” Whitcomb prompted.

“Not this time. This one time, I believe he will allow me to answer for him. And I intend to allow Marie to do the talking for me.”

Marie? Shitshitshit. He’s got to be kidding. If I look down right now I am not going to see...

But in Lazarus Kane's right hand (which still rested on his lap) poking out from under the ruffles of his French cuffs, the small five-shot derringer he called "Marie" had appeared. Without making a sound, Kane had cocked it as well and now held it aimed more or less at Whitcomb's chest. The old man on the dais could not see the small weapon but Davis had his eyes fixed on it.

Obviously Kane had taken some pains hours earlier, when Davis had gone to retrieve his scarf or something, to arm himself with the antique pistol. Without hesitation the arm holding the pistol extended a bit so all in the room could see it clearly.

"Violence, Mister Kane? Surely that is the last resort of the incompetent. There are thousands of us... arms and legs and hands spread out all over the world. Do you intend to murder us all?" Whitcomb laughed dryly at the notion and the sheer impossibility.

He waved away the barrel as if it remained inconsequential and his sheer force of being sufficed to divert its deadly force. But while Kane's hand remained weak, and propped up against his thigh, his grip on the derringer did not falter.

"Thousands of arms and legs, but only one brain," Kane pointed out, shifting his aim towards that very location in Whitcomb's skull.

Whitcomb tried another tack, "If we do God's Will and you mean to murder us, then what does that make you? A servant of the evil one, no doubt. Is this truly how you wish to define yourself?" Whitcomb shook his head grimly and added, "Murder is a grave evil."

Davis felt frozen. He wanted to stop Kane and bring him back to reality. But a part of him also wanted to shoot the vile and persuasive creature which sat calmly on his throne; he wanted to wipe that smug and victorious look of conviction off the withered face.

Davis heard Whitcomb address him and shifted his gaze back to the man.

"Come now, you are an officer of the law. Do you intend to just stand there and let him shoot us down in cold blood?"

Davis didn't respond.

"If you think you can make some case against me or any of my fellow Elders, then feel free to contact the tabernacle's attorneys and we will be glad to respond. But I think you'll find that connecting anyone in our organization to any sort of criminal activity will prove quite impossible—we do good works.

"We help people."

Davis listened to the speech with an impassive stare but in his mind he listed all the terrible things and deaths and tragedies that had transpired as a result of the "good works" Whitcomb referenced. The Elder's insistent and convincing tones did not muddy the issue in the least; these people had done something unimaginably horrible in the name of love and compassion—and they performed those actions in hopes of making the world a little worse, day by day, until they could hopefully bring it all down in ruins.

And why had they done all this? Because some quirk in their nature or their interpretation of messages written long ago to inspire love had led them to fall in love with death. Not just death on a personal level, but on a grand scale—the end of the world. They lived their whole lives, probably squirreling away huge caches of water and dry foods in secret bunkers and shelters, waiting only for the Final Days. And when those dark times failed to arrive on schedule, they'd set about trying to hasten the demise of those they should have taken time to love... all because they had a selfish desire to see the end of all their efforts and feared or knew they would not live long enough to achieve that personal vindication.

Clearly Joshua Dawson Creighton and Florene Valeta had long ago passed from sense to senility and lay beyond any justice except possibly that of their own god, should he exist. Davis wasted little thought on them. But Whitcomb was another matter entirely; Davis decided he hated the man pontificating before him.

Listening to the damnable man felt like wading through manure. Though Davis had to concede privately that Whitcomb did have one thing right—proving any of Kane's conjectures and assessing blame or

apportioning justice would lie beyond the reach or imagination of any court. Davis didn't see any way to make the guilty parties pay for their actions.

He thought on that reality dismally. What could he or Kane do if Whiticomb refused to change his mind? How could they derail such a conspiracy when nearly no one in the world would believe it even existed?

Kane could not shoot Whiticomb, of course. Clearly Kane bluffed about that part; he hoped for some advantage gained through fear or confusion. But Davis thought the plan had backfired in some way because Elijah Whiticomb had not blanched or frozen but instead had launched into a series of reasons why Kane could not possibly shoot him.

No, Kane could never shoot anyone, Davis reassured himself silently. He accepted that as an impossibility, based on what he knew of the man and in light of all the logical arguments presented by Elijah Whiticomb. Surely Kane intended to force some actionable confession from the doddering man pontificating before them.

It therefore came as a complete surprise to Detective Miles Davis when Lazarus Kane stood from his chair and took a single step towards the speaking Elder. It wasn't the standing (though that was impressive, given the man's frail state) which surprised the officer as much as what Kane chose to say.

With the end of the world prophesied by a madman directly in front of him, and knowing that the ancient lunatic probably had his facts right on the law and his total immunity from any prosecution, Lazarus Kane asked one of the most ridiculous questions Davis had ever heard.

"Elder Whiticomb? Have you ever seen a James Bond film?" And the sound of that tone again... fuligin. A sound to make demons scamper for places to hide.

For some reason that question stopped the room. Davis had no idea where this latest non sequitur might lead. Even the two senile figures on the dais appeared to stir or react to the tone if not the question Kane posed.

Whitcomb smiled knowingly, “Are you mentally ill, Mister Kane? I ask because it will surely come up at your trial after we have you arrested for soiling this Holy Sanctuary with your threats and tools of evil.”

“They are really boring,” Kane went on undaunted. “They follow a pattern, you see. Patterns are interesting at first but then... alas, they eventually become predictable and then they must come to an end. Do you see a lot of people wearing plaid these days? No? That pattern has almost ended at last.”

Davis tried to follow Kane’s chain of thought with little luck. He maintained his place at the man’s side and waited.

“You see all James Bond films have a recipe: There is a problem. Someone sends in James Bond—who is the world’s best secret agent—and he finds the source of the problem and encounters the villain. The villain renders him helpless and then proceeds to tell James Bond his entire evil plan. Then he leaves Bond in an easily-escapable situation, and is shocked when Bond escapes and returns to foil all his brilliant plans.

“But it’s dull. Terribly predictable. What the writers do not know is that at moments like that, the audience is thinking that the villain should just shoot the hero between the eyes and put an end to it already. What is the point of telling the hero your entire scheme or strapping him to a table with a laser aimed at it or such other nonsense?”

Davis felt another little stir of surprise when he realized that Kane must have actually seen a James Bond film at some point; he described the standard storyline with acute intimacy.

When did Kane watch action films? And why would he bother?

Kane continued, “The whole audience, even those on James Bond’s side, are wishing someone would just pull the trigger and get it over with instead of continuing the movie for another pointless hour of explosions before achieving a predictable outcome.”

“I fail to see...” started the Elder.

"And if we could see this room as a movie-set for a moment... let's cast me as the hero. I showed you my weakness. You told me your entire evil plan. Boring. Do you plan to let me expire on my own or am I to be put in a closet somewhere that I can force open later so I can come back to thwart you?"

Kane turned to Davis and said, "I did say it sounded boring when he started, didn't I?"

Ignoring the reality of their surroundings and possible danger in which they stood, Davis lightly replied, "Yes you did. Rather."

"The reviews are in, Elder Whitcomb. Boring. You may take us as representing a wide range of interests and habits and typical of the American public. And our review is that you are boring. If all this was a book, no one would read another page. Not if you plan to drag us through a Scooby-Doo ending or a series of predictable James Bond encounters."

"I really don't think..." the Elder attempted, trying to sound majestic.

"No, the more I think about it," Kane said, subtly beginning to lean on Davis for unseen support, "I am bored. I can't see any reason why I shouldn't just shoot you through the head and have done with it."

Even though the gun and the man did not waver or move, somehow the Elder felt his danger increase somehow. "Now see here. We have lawyers to deal with this sort of nonsense. You won't get far threatening an organization as large as ours..."

"I'd still like to know why I shouldn't shoot you right here and now," Kane insisted. "I have my readers to consider and they simply won't buy a narrow escape, more destruction and an eventual come-uppance. Why shouldn't I just end this poorly-constructed plot of yours?"

"Because things like that don't just happen in the real world, Lazarus," Davis told the man who held the derringer. "There are lines which men of good conscience simply won't cross."

"Conscience?" Kane tasted the word as if it held unfamiliar concepts to ponder.

"Poorly constructed???" the Elder quaked with indignation. "I have half a mind to..."

"I agree with that last part," Kane said.

Kane agreeing with anything the Elder said also came as a surprise to Detective Miles Davis.

It therefore came as a further surprise to Detective Miles Davis when a small red spot appeared in the center of Elijah Jonas Whiticomb's forehead, just below his sparse white crown of hair.

The red began to trickle, and Davis seemed to hear the muffled retort of the tiny pistol just then. He watched in mute horror as Whiticomb fell backward, toppling his throne, and moved no more.

"Now he really does have half a mind," Kane quipped darkly.

Davis could smell the smoke rising from the pistol. Shock pulled at the young officer's senses and he reached around shakily to grab Kane's hand but "Marie" had already vanished within one of the folds of Kane's weskit.

Kane himself collapsed into his wheelchair and weakly extended his hands in a gesture which said he sat prepared for the cuffs and the reading of his rights.

Davis looked around the room. Everything seemed almost normal, if he ignored the dead man, the woman who pointed at the ceiling and talked in a sing-song voice about pixies, and the occasional somnolent snores and gaseous emissions from the remaining Elder.

Davis remained transfixed in a surreal moment and could not seem to shake himself out of it. Somehow he'd become used to the feeling—like reality somehow slipped away from him in bits and pieces. He'd had that same perception of dissociation from reality since the first moment he'd arrived at the Gilbert Police Station for the first time that Monday morning and smelled marijuana coming from under the door of the Captain's office.

Back then, he'd been full of anger and righteous indignation over the sheer criminality of events. He'd wanted to grab Bill Rawlins by the lapels and demand answers. After that, he'd met Kane and things had descended steadily and more surreally into the realm of the fantastic until reality had become blurred beyond all recollection.

And all that had led Davis by steady declensions to this moment: Here was a crime; this was his business and he knew precisely what to do. Lazarus Kane must be arrested, tried, convicted, executed for pre-meditated murder. So why couldn't Davis move? Why couldn't he even consider that option when he looked at Kane?

What had become of the eager young detective who had to hold himself back from kicking in the police captain's door and busting him for possession?

Christ!

"Time to go now, Miles," Kane whispered softly.

Davis kept waiting for someone from the tabernacle to come check on the disturbance within the Chamber of Elders but apparently no one had heard anything. The long corridor and thick doors probably insulated most of the sound of Kane's small 22 caliber pistol; Davis had barely heard the noise himself and he stood less than a foot away from the thing when it went off.

"Give me the gun, Lazarus. I assume it can't be traced to you."

A soft voice rasped, "Don't be ridiculous. Arizona has lovely gun laws—any private citizen may sell a firearm to another-- with a simple showing of a state I.D., and no written documentation-- at a variety of local gunshows."

"So give it to me," Davis urged.

"I wasn't entirely sure you'd be on board for this," Kane hissed with obvious but subdued relief. "I'm quite prepared for you to arrest me if you feel you need to do so."

"Come on, we haven't got a lot of time."

Kane reached into a cunning fold of his vest and removed the small, five-shot derringer. With a wistful look he handed it to Davis and told him, "I will miss Marie. She never let me down when it counted."

Davis didn't stop to examine the implications of that. Still in shock, he acted on instinct; he had to protect Lazarus Kane at all costs. The man had killed someone, but he hadn't lost his mind or his reason. He had done the right thing and possibly saved thousands upon thousands of lives and averted countless misery.

Moving like a character in a police drama Davis took the gun from Kane, and he also undid the man's scarf. Davis wiped the gun of prints, emptied out the remaining bullets and wiped down the spent shell casing with the scarf. He took the derringer and placed it in Elijah Whitcomb's right hand.

He took the scarf and wiped at Kane's right hand and wrist, and then shook out the fabric of the linen scarf until some of the black powder accumulated on Whitcomb's skeletal hand.

"You have a positive knack for staging a crime-scene, officer," Kane said darkly.

"Shut up," Davis said.

Kane, instead of looking wounded as expected, gave a soft laugh that made his depleted frame tremble.

"Anything you say, Miles. I can hardly keep myself awake at this point. Thy will be done..."

"For someone who is shutting up," Davis pointed out, "you certainly talk a lot."

No one stopped them as they exited the Chamber of Elders. Davis closed the door behind them and wheeled Kane at a relatively fast pace that he tried to make appear leisurely in case anyone noticed them. They encountered no happy smiling faces in the long hallway or the anteroom. No one at all remained within the building to prevent or even witness their departure.

As they crossed the parking lot, a moth-eaten cat clambered out from under the car in which Davis and Kane had arrived. For a moment Davis thought the animal looked oddly familiar but he could not place where he might have seen it before. Scarcely believing their good fortune as regarded possible witnesses, Davis trundled Kane quickly to the white vehicle.

Davis got Kane into the front seat of his car and replaced the wheelchair in the trunk. When he sat down, he noticed Kane had turned on the radio and set it on KNIX country-western.

Lazarus Kane had never displayed anything but contempt for the sound of a radio playing in any car in which he chose to ride. Davis pondered the sounds emanating from his car as he entered and realized quickly that Kane had done this as a gesture to reassure or calm him.

"I'm not in shock," Davis said in an unintended accusatory tone.

"You did seem to be for a few moments."

"I'm fine-- although I think I just saw Doctor Crumb's one-eyed cat under the car a moment ago. But seriously, I'm fine; you don't need to try and placate me."

"Good," Kane said, and switched the radio off again with a stiff movement.

"What you did back there..." Davis began.

Kane waited patiently for the other man to talk it all out inside his own mind and burst forth with the results.

Davis took about a hundred heartbeats to compose his thoughts entirely and completed the statement by saying, "... is something that no one ever needs to know about."

Kane spoke very softly and vaguely, "What's to talk about? Elderly man, confronted with loss of personal dignity, watching his friends wither away before his very eyes, turns to suicide. Too typical to raise a ripple in these modern times, really. And who could ever suspect a man in the hospital, breathing out his last, of having any hand in such ordinary events..."

"Not a soul. Which reminds me-- we'd best get there and get you signed in as quickly as possible." Davis drove the car out of the parking lot.

"Yes. Establish my alibi before someone goes to get their next assignment from the Elders and finds the body of their late overseer. You know, he seemed so certain I wouldn't shoot him."

"So was I."

"Really?"

"Really."

“Really really???” Kane’s tone hinted at incredulity.

“Really. I thought I was going to have to do it myself.”

“Oh.”

“Yah.”

“Well, like you said... best not to dwell further on the matter. Some illnesses need cutting out—no other solution possible. Christian Scientists be damned; prayer just doesn’t cut it sometimes.”

“Motherfuckers,” Davis said with calm acceptance and an echo of Calvin Woods.

Kane nodded crisply with what seemed the last of his physical reserves. His voice went soft and he urged, “You can call Holly in the morning, and have him set our governor’s mind to rest. We’re out of the frying pan for a little bit. With the organizing mind behind the conspiracy gone, the rest of the flock will return to their regular tasks and lives and be none the wiser. The world will not end any time soon.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Lazarus.”

About ten minutes before they reached the hospital, Davis reached into his pocket and retrieved the item he’d grabbed on the way out of Kane’s house earlier that evening. He placed it between his lips and noticed Carly had done her usual professional job rolling it. He looked over at Kane and the man seemed to be sleeping—utterly spent from his earlier exertion.

Davis pressed on the cigarette lighter in the dashboard, but before it could pop back out a thin hand suddenly appeared and extended an elegant silver lighter before his nose.

“So you can still move a little when you need to,” Davis remarked happily.

“When it’s important.”

Detective Miles Davis drew the smoke into his lungs, remembering his childhood in Flint, Michigan and a few youthful indiscretions behind the boy’s gymnasium in junior high school. He passed the joint to Kane and let the other man finish the remainder.

“Don’t look at me like it’s my last one, Miles. I’ve no intention of shuffling off this mortal coil any time soon. I just need a few weeks rest and maybe a few games of pokemon. Oh, and a pumpernickel bagel with some chopped herring.”

“I’ll see if I can’t get Ivy down to visit you tomorrow. And we’ll stop by the deli on the way over.”

“Lovely.”

And it was lovely, too.

PRELUDE: Twenty Years Previously

They all sat around and gabbed-- all of them, the vultures, the bone-pickers. Billy looked around for Mara, but knew the other relatives would never have permitted her to attend no matter what the old man's wishes might have been. Grandpa had been right as usual, Billy concluded with a most adult snort towards his other relatives.

On the platform a man dressed as a priest gave a recitation and spoke with great emotion about the soul of the man being laid to rest. The others-- nieces, nephews, the long-lost relations in search of a possible fortune, the bickering aunts (Clarisse and Clothilde) Billy's parents-- all whispered quietly in low tones.

Billy suspected he was the only one actually listening to the eulogy.

"A man who was loved by all who knew him, who contributed to his community and always put those in need before his own concerns..." Father Dodd continued.

Billy snorted again; it was obvious the priest had never met Grandpa. Grandpa cared for those he loved (a very small number) but always thought the rest of the world could go hang itself. They could have his money when he died, and not a minute sooner.

"He'd have taken it all with him if he could," muttered one of the Aunt's within earshot. To which the other agreed and added, "I wonder who gets that lovely crystal set in the foyer?" These may have been their first words to each other in decades.

Grandpa had been dying for years-- with some of the relatives long past whispering hints and actually demanding to know when the old goat would finally get around to doing it. Billy could not recall a time when it had been different.

It was no great secret how they all felt. Even Grandpa had known it and never missed out on an opportunity to joke about it and make the others uncomfortable. At family dinners once or twice a year the old man would say, "Don't open the chateau-this-or-that, I'm saving it for the hilarity of my wake..." But to Billy there always came that sideways wink; Grandpa knew he had at least one relative who didn't sit around wishing him ill.

Billy had spent nearly all of last summer there with Grandpa, and Mara. His parents had thrown a major fit about it, but let him go in the end. They didn't like Mara, thought she was ugly and couldn't understand why Grandpa continued to keep her around. But in the end they concluded the old man might look more kindly upon them in his Will if he felt more of a connection to them than the other relations and

presumptive-takers. Since no one in the family could actually stand the old man, and Billy seemed so amenable, his parents remained were content to use their child for the purpose of hopefully increasing their purse.

Billy looked around; Grandpa's last words had been that Mara should be present today. No sign of her. Clearly there were limits to how far the old man's instructions would be obeyed once he had died-- even with the lure of money in the offing. Then again, Mara would not have felt welcome here. She would have drawn stares and been the butt of many whispered insults.

Billy had gotten to know Mara very well during that last summer, and he also became the only other member of the Crumb family that Mara would speak to. Mara had nothing but contempt for the rest of the family, and she showed that freely. He didn't hold that against her.

Since his parents only lived a short ways away by bicycle, Billy was a regular guest at Grandpa's nearby estate for dinner and weekends. And Mara always delighted him with tales of adventures in other places he'd never imagined. But on larger occasions when the whole family gathered Mara refused to speak a word or even acknowledge their presence. She would saunter out of the room without a word the moment they arrived and remain absent until the last of them had left. Looking around the room at those gathered, Billy could well understand the way she felt. He might only be eleven, but that did not mean reality somehow eluded him. He knew how many "beans make five" as Grandpa always said. Used to say.

The priest droned on from the stage; Billy's father shifted uncomfortably in his seat; a few rows behind his cousins fussed and kicked each other and giggled. His mother had already entered between the bickering aunts to put her dibs in on the old man's silver tea-service.

Billy caught his mother's eye and she flashed a guilty look at him; he had heard her and she knew it. The body barely cold, not yet laid to earth, and already she was dividing the spoils. Grandpa had not been the only one to predict that; Mara had told Billy as much months ago.

"She judges by appearance, Billy, you know that. That's why she can't even stand to look at me! She knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. With someone like that, too much is never enough."

That made sense to Billy; his mother in a nutshell. Mara always had such a wise perspective always so clear in her meanings. Mara never said things she didn't believe or mean, and never talked over his head as his parents and most adults did. But then Grandpa always said Mara had been alive forever and that she knew just how to talk to a person.

Mara was also right about Billy's mother not being able to look at her. Mara had lost an eye years and years ago, and did not believe in surgery or prosthetics or other new-fangled inventions of man. She saw no reason to cosmetically correct the situation for the comfort of others. Mara accepted herself, Josiah, Billy, the world in fact, as they were; Billy thought she looked cool.

She'd often told Billy, "The only thing you can REALLY change is you. So get on with it..." Grandpa agreed and told Billy that she had often told him that as a child.

As the sois-disant mourners shifted impatiently in their seats, the priest intoned, "A man who devoted himself to providing a better life for his loved ones..." and Billy laughed to see his assembled relatives defining themselves by those words. Those words did not apply to any of them. Himself, yes. Mara, definitely. But the others? No way!

"The thing about getting old," Grandpa told him once, "is that everyone around you suddenly starts to act like you're retarded or something. They speak slowly and repeat themselves. When you close even one eye to blink, they assume you've passed out or gone comatose and start talking like you're not even in the room. But I hear them; I know what they really think of me. I don't miss much..."

Billy remained certain his grandfather hadn't overlooked anything when it came to his grasping relations. Billy also had a private knowledge that would have shocked and dismayed the others in the room-- might have even cleared the room. But he didn't bother to tell them; they'd find out soon enough. Besides, it might spoil Grandpa's joke.

When the service concluded, the supposed mourners went out to the grave-site and waited for the coffin to be conveyed there for burial. Of all, only Billy shed tears. Somewhere, he knew Mara also cried. They, at least, had loved the old scoundrel.

Billy had no idea how much money his grandfather had actually amassed, but he knew only the lure of an immense trove could possibly get his two aunts together in the same room after twenty years. They clearly thought only of the money, and not their spirits—which might have had a chance of reuniting through tragedy. They sniffed the air as if they could smell lucre all around and did not know what to stick into their purses first.

The service by the grave-side ended soon and the others shuffled to their rented limos. Billy's parents had not rented a car and arrived and left in their family wagon. His mother had said, "He's dead already; he won't notice what kind of car we come in so why spend the money?" Billy would have argued that it was a sign of respect, but knew how useless that would be on his mother.

So he said nothing.

When they all arrived at Grandpa's house for the apres he disdained the gathering downstairs and went to comfort Mara. He found her in the attic. She had been crying, and her one good eye looked all red and blurry. He took out the hanky his father always made him carry and which he had never used and wiped at her small facee.

"They are all down there. He wouldn't even want most of them in this house..." she stated dismally.

"Yes."

"He wouldn't have wanted most of them in his house," she repeated as Billy took back the hanky.

"I know. They won't stay long. It's too warm and cozy in the living room for them."

"Then they should get back to their formica and stainless steel as soon as possible because I can smell them from here," she said, attempting a smile. A momentary frown crossed her mouth and she asked, "Any surprises?"

And Billy, who had so bravely kept his tears in check and spent the day trying to pretend sympathy for those who feigned grief around him, finally fell apart in the wake of Mara's own undeniable emotion. He started to cry again for real. Uncontrollable tears flowed and Mara came closer and almost circled herself around him to comfort him.

When he could speak again he told her, "Nope. Grandpa got it just right."

"You knew he would, the old bugger. Never could stand to be wrong," she reminisced.

"Even Aunt Cloe showed up," Billy told her with a sniff, wiping his nose as he always did on his sleeve.

"Clothilde and Clarisse in the same room? That would have tickled him. Wait until they find out it was all for nothing!" She added that last with an uncharacteristic half-smirk.

That made Billy smile too.

"Pity they never paid more attention to me. I did all the investing and made all the decisions. I even do the books. All your grandfather ever did was write down what I told him and sign in the right places. If they really wanted money..."

Billy laughed aloud and then looked around to make sure no one was near. "They would never believe that."

"I know..." she giggled with him, "silly, aren't they?"

"I like Grandpa's word better. Reper... reprer..." he trailed off.

"Oh the public word. Reprehensible is what you're looking for. He had another word, but that was for private," and she arched her back at him.

Billy laughed again; he had heard that *other* one too.

"Reprehensible," he repeated sounding it out carefully, "that's them all right. And greedy, and dumber than dirt."

Mara stopped him there, "They are what they are, and will likely remain so. This is not their day-- though I doubt you could convince them of that. It's your Grandpa's day and you should think about him."

Billy looked like he would cry again and she added, "Though I think you're probably out of water for the moment. You might want to go eat something and have something to drink to replenish your supplies."

Billy nodded. "Besides, they'll come looking for me if I'm gone too long." His parents would not normally trouble themselves to bother; in most situations they barely seemed to notice his presence or absence. But in the case of Billy and Mara spending time together they would certainly find an excuse to alert themselves to his whereabouts.

"Go on down. We'll talk again tomorrow-- you'll come and see me."

He kissed her and gave her a big squeeze and headed downstairs with his head hanging.

Almost as an afterthought she quietly called, "Don't worry. Your grandfather had more than just one surprise up his sleeve. Everything will be all right and you and I will spend lots of time together..."

He turned as if to take a last look at Mara, for he doubted her wisdom this time. His parents would do all they could to keep Mara away from him at all costs.

After the reading of the Will, Billy knew Mara had been right as usual. He composed his features so as not to laugh as his parents stormed out of the lawyer's office without bothering to note whether their young son followed in their wake.

"Nothing!" his father swore getting into the car. "Not a God damned thing! All these years and for what???"

His mother cried bitter tears; Billy had never seen her so upset.

"Pity those tears weren't there for Grandpa," Billy thought with an adult's asperity. And then, also, "Serves her right..."

The other relatives were already filing out of the suite of law offices as Billy's father drove his wife and son out of the parking lot. Not surprising; there will left absolutely nothing anyone could possibly discuss with Grandpa's lawyer.

Some of the relatives (Billy's parents included) were already making plans to get their own lawyers in to try and break the terms of Grandpa's Will. Billy still wanted to laugh at their efforts, even as the thought of the old man's passing brought the occasional moisture to his eyes.

The lawyer had made things clear during the first minute of the reading: the estate (valued at just over three million dollars!) would be sold in its entirety. All properties, items, jewelry, and fixtures would get sold at auction. All monies raised from this liquidation to go to the American Heart Disease Foundation, the American Cancer Society, and the A.I.D.S. Research program in equal thirds with only one small exception. A Trust of one hundred thousand dollars had been established for all living relatives. Any recognized member of the Crumb family could draw up to one hundred dollars a month from that Trust for a grand total of twelve hundred a year.

The Trust did not earn a profit, had no terms for renewal and once drained it would vanish entirely. The lawyer also read the special provision which applied only to Billy's parents.

"To my Grandson William Thomas Crumb I leave sole custody and possession of..." and Billy had laughed aloud when he heard the terms.

His father looked about to strike him and his mother groaned aloud. But if they wanted even a meager stipend from the estate they must abide by the terms of the Trust.

Some months later, after all the hub-bub had died down things seemed to be returning to normal. The family lawyers had not been able to break Grandpa's Will-- but not for lack of ingenuity. Billy almost felt sorry for Grandpa's lawyer.

Mara had long since moved in; the parents were not happy about that either. But no Mara, no money. A final codicil of the Will set aside a small sum for Mara's uptake but conditional upon her living arrangements as specified; if they failed to honor the old man's terms in any particular they'd find themselves entirely cut off from what little money remained.

Grandpa had been nasty to do that, Billy conceded, but then there remained little alternative. If allowed to run things their own way, Billy's parents would have made sure he never saw Mara again.

Thanks to Grandpa's foresight, Mara sat in Billy's room while he played with his new balsa-wood glider. Taking a look around her new abode she asked him, "So what do you know about upgradable software systems?"

"Umm, nothing. What should I know?"

"Hmmm. Well, probably not a lot at your age. But I was thinking it might be a good investment for you. You get your hundred a month like the rest..." she paused, then suddenly asked, "You didn't sign that form your mother wanted you to, did you?"

"Not after you told me what it was," he agreed.

Mara smiled relief, "Good. Then that money's yours to do with as you like. I think we should start with software. After that we'll move on to grain futures-- seems to be a dry-spell heading for the wheat-belt this year-- then after that... well, there's time.

"You don't want to be a millionaire right away, do you? You can wait until you're at least twenty or so, can't you? It's better to take these sorts of things slowly and be certain," Mara told him.

"Hmmm? Yeah, okay, whatever. Sounds good," Billy replied, paying more attention to the glider than to Mara's financial wizardry.

She smiled to see him. Of course he didn't understand it all yet. No reason that he should. Billy didn't even know what a million dollars was yet, nor what it could buy or do for him if used wisely. Plenty of time for that later... all the time in the world it seemed.

Downstairs... things lacked the amity and warmth. Billy's parents sat like two irritable strangers across from each other at the kitchen table. They had just returned from seeing their lawyer for another negative report; in fact, they learned the old man's immense holdings had already started the conversion process

into the coffers of noted charities and that they had little option but to sit back and watch as it happened. After they returned home, the usual argument ensued.

Billy's parents had the same argument about his grandfather every time they saw a lawyer or went to the bank to draw on the Trust. They would probably have the argument until the Trust ran out entirely. But if not for that argument, they probably would have forgotten the old man entirely and his name would never have passed their lips.

Billy's grandpa had known what he did when he posthumously arranged for that as well.

"He's laughing at us from the grave!" Billy's mother said.

"Twelve hundred dollars a year. The old bastard had MILLIONS! And to get even that much we have to keep his moth-eaten old one-eyed cat too!"

"I can't stand that thing. I wish it would just die already," his wife agreed. "I don't like to see Billy playing with it. It's disgusting..."

And they stared at each other long and hard, each knowing the other would never give up something as precious as money for something as frivolous as honor, dignity, or even to preserve their sense of personal choice. Slavery takes many forms and the pursuit of unearned money had come to define their lives.

It might have improved their mood to know that the cat in question presently lectured their son about the varied interest rates of Certificate of Deposit accounts, the latest developments in cryonic superconductors and trends in the "Cattle Futures" market. One day, and not too far off in the future, little Billy would grow up and take his place in the world as William Crumb and an extremely wealthy man. He would have the best education, learn the great philosophies of the world and Mara would honor her promise to see to it that Billy never repeated the errors of most of his kin.

Mara certainly didn't dignify any species stereotype by playing with bits of string or dead mice. She used one delicate paw to click another sort of mouse... this, connected to a keyboard and a computer—the screen of which displayed the Wall Street Journal online stock reports.

Absently, she thought of her days in the Temple of Bast nearly six-thousand years ago, and how the imbecilic but dedicated priests had practiced on her with their charms, and potions and herbs; she briefly wondered what those misguided ascetics would have thought of the result of their efforts to honor long-dead deities.

Mara put aside such thoughts for the thought that shortly Billy would return with her favorite brush and the relaxing feeling of him working though all the matted fur on her belly. At such times the cares of the world vanished utterly and she would purr out all the stress of life and her various upheavals of circumstance.

Sometimes, it felt good just to be a cat.