

THE DISTANCE TO THE COMPETITION

The late afternoon Afghanistan streets were swirling with colors and smells garish enough to taste. The clothing of the Turkistani crowd floated on the breezes, streaming behind each wearer as they walked, bright contrails off the tails of human jets. The harsh cries of the street vendors would have been confusing to tourists, for they were in many dialects and came from all directions.

There were no tourists, however, not on this street. Most foreigners avoided this part of the town, fearing robbery or worse. Even an American businessman would have attracted notice on these particular streets. But Chuzestranyetz was neither American, nor precisely a businessman, regardless of his executive appearance.

He didn't attract attention, either; he moved *with* the crowd rather than *through* it. I still remember, he thought, even after so many years. It was a movement he knew very well, one which had come to him naturally. He had known the dance the first time he had come to the Middle East, even though it has been a good twenty years before. When I was naive, he thought dryly. When I was young.

Not frowning outside, he remembered the last time he had watched his students attempt Arabian streets. Pitiable. They don't feel the crowd's motion even after years of training. Although he was a decade older, he could still flow better than his senior student. They all move like westerners. Like tourists. The great Chuzestranyetz himself could not teach those children. It was with irony he thought this, but he grimaced slightly.

He scanned the doorways he passed, the rooftops, and the windows, whether they were open or closed. His eyes constantly moved. He watched each person who came near -- but carefully, certain not to make eye contact. Then they might remember me. He never slowed, but still seemed to be at leisure.

He was not distracted when the cart of vegetables overturned after running into the foolish pedestrian. Chuzestranyetz kept moving, scanning the crowds to be certain the accident was not a decoy for something more sinister. He thought to himself with disgust how even the best of his students would have been utterly distracted, would have stopped or paused long enough for someone to catch up. Even Nicholai.

He knew that if there had been someone watching, say a potential mugger, the observer would have noticed the big man running the fingers of his left hand through his short black hair each time someone passed close to him. The mugger would certainly have noted the worn gold wedding band, and perhaps the callouses on big hands. Then, reassessing the man's huge frame under an exquisitely tailored suit, the mugger would have decided not to mess with the big man. People who, in spite of his street-ease, had their attention drawn to the businessman would have decided to ignore him.

The big man also knew no observer could have noticed that he brushed his breast pocket with his

forearm each time he touched his hair. Nor could they have known he was carrying a big gun, had used it recently, and was ready to use it again if the computer disk in that pocket was missing after someone had passed too closely. These factors were invisible, not a part of any assessment a potential mugger could have made.

The man rapidly made his path away from the stalls and the carts, following the spaces in the crowd. Or he made his own, like a gentle icebreaker, and without allowing the taffeta-wrapped shoppers to realize they had been moved. Nicholai could not do this, he thought. Nicholai moves like an ox.

Even with their on-the-job experience Chuzestranyetz' students gathered in the European theatre and Americas, even though the other master teachers distributed expertise in all aspects of the tradecraft, Chuzestranyetz was certain none of his pupils, not even Nicholai, were up to the tricks he himself was already losing to age.

The big man strode out of the squalid streets of the market into the richer, more respectable area of town: a place of open cafes and mosques with real gold on their domes, and fools gold in the tourist traps. He sighed inwardly, shrugging his shoulders in the reduced tension he felt. With the increased distance from the pickup point and thinner crowds here, he was *almost* happy. Here the streets were wide enough for small European autos to eke their way painfully between the animals, men and women trodding slowly nowhere. Soon I can find a taxi.

The businessman looked for one, knowing he was still too far from the business district. But next to the shrine he would pass, he noticed a cafe with the universal telephone icon, the AT&T bell in a circle. Coming to a sudden decision, he abruptly began walking towards the cafe to ring up his temporary superior (At least that man was competent!) and confirm the pickup of the computer disk he carried.

A western woman was standing too close to the steps of the shrine, stepping backwards and squinting into her camera. She appeared to be unaware of the stone steps behind her. He stepped quickly when she uttered a small cry, and caught her before she fell to the stones.

Her camera strap broke. She flung her camera high into the night air, causing many people to watch. It landed on the cobblestone, bounced once, and came to rest with the sound of broken glass. A small boy appeared from the milling crowd and swiftly grabbed it. The alarm in the woman's eyes didn't change even when he held the shattered Nikon up for her. The businessman lowered her feet to the cobbles and steadied her. Their eyes did not meet, but she nodded, taking her hand off his shoulder, almost pushing him away. She turned and accepted the camera from the boy.

The big man straightened his hair with his left hand, brushing it unnoticeably against his breast pocket. He turned entirely around to look at the surrounding square. He noted that the western woman seemed to do a double take of him before she lowered her troubled gaze to the boy. It's obviously more than the camera.

The boy stood looking up at her, smiling expectantly even after she had repossessed the Nikon. The big man assessed her clothing and spoke in German. "He wants a tip," The woman remained motionless a moment, staring at the smiling boy. The big man was about to try French when she awkwardly un-snapped her left vest pocket with her right hand and handed to the boy an American coin, a quarter. Almost too much, just for returning a camera. Tonight he'll feed his family on that generosity. The boy grinned widely, showing all his missing front teeth, and disappeared behind the legs of all the rapidly moving adults.

She snapped pockets shut on both sides of her vest, then moved the camera to her right hand so she could unwrap the broken camera strap from her left wrist.

"That's smart," Chuzestranyetz said in English. "Keep those pockets fastened, or your likely to lose everything to pickpockets. These streets are bad for tourists."

She looked back at him finally, and he noted the exquisite color of her eyes: grey, almost the shade of aluminium. He imagined they would be blue under certain skies, in certain light. There was a piercing quality to her gaze, a power that he felt was directed through him, as if he didn't exist, or was insignificant. Who do you see? She turned away, examining the ground for fragments of her Nikon.

He crouched down next to her, sitting on his heels and steadying himself with one hand on the cobblestones. He kept his own eyes off the ground. No one in the crowd was stopping, or even paying more attention than was required to walk around them. She's giving more attention to the crowd than to the pavement.

She wouldn't have stood out in Europe. Somewhat underfed; probably attractive by American standards. She had blonde hair past her shoulders, but not by much. It was somewhat wavy, somewhat disheveled since her fall. She smoothed it with her hand. She's about the same age as my daughter. The thought chilled him, and he stood abruptly.

Her faded jeans were tucked into well worn and genuine leather boots. Her photographer's vest was a sandy brown over a rose colored blouse. Film canisters filled the loops in her vest; four out of six were unopened, he noted.

The walkman headphones which rested on her shoulders emitted static he could hear standing above her. Their cord lead into a vest pocket big enough for a small cassette player. Radio, not tape. No one records static. A long lens case was dangling from a shoulder strap, it bore the initials S.R., embossed rather than a decal. The Nikon's case was matching leather. Expert, perhaps professional gear, he noted.

She gathered the expensive glass fragments into a small pile with the side of her hand, but didn't bother to pick them up. She's still scanning the pedestrian traffic. Who's she looking for? The woman seemed suddenly to notice her benefactor was still there, and stood, brushing the glass from her hands on her jeans. He met her eyes again..

"Thanks," she said in English. "How did you know to change from German?" She blinked and looked aside for a second. "Never mind: the quarter I gave the boy. You knew I'm American." She turned the camera over in her hands until glass trickled to the street. She frowned, more in annoyance than anger, he guessed. She shook the camera until the shining rain ended.

"Let's sit and take a look," he replied. She looked around, scanned the crowd yet another time, as if for an expected companion. He placed his hand in the small of her back and nudged her to the cafe. "I insist. Let me buy you a drink. It's the least you can do after I saved you."

She nodded towards the steps, *twisting* slightly and taking a wide glance around the courtyard. "Saved me! It wasn't that far of a drop."

Her twist was taught specifically by some martial arts instructors in order to avoid being pushed. It allowed one to dodge and come up behind the person who had been pushing, and perhaps attack from behind. Chuzestranyetz knew it was a hard move to counter, unless you know it's coming. He had to look carefully to notice a flash of amusement under her annoyance when she realized his hand hadn't been dislodged.

Someone else might have pushed her back a little harder then, to make a point. Chuzestranyetz smiled, stepped away from her and instead gestured with his arm towards the cafe. He walked to one of the nearly-white tables littering the street outside the cafe. He spoke over his shoulder, confident she would be following.

"I mean from the boy and his gang." On the other side of the square, the boy was now wrestling in the dust with seven or eight other young ruffians, probably for the quarter. They were barely visible behind the foot traffic, the cistern, and myriads of washerwomen. "They could have been unruly if you had stiffed him of the tip." He turned to her and nodded to the boys. Before glancing at them, she scanned the entire town square. Who is it she's expecting?

"Please sit with me. There's been a shooting nearby, and the local police will be seeking witnesses. They often take many days interrogating women, especially western women." As if cued by his words, a half dozen KHAD state security agents rushed past, all six failing to notice them in the cafe.

He had chosen one of the tables away from the other customers. He pushed her chair behind her legs so she had to sit. Frozen faced, she turned her chair towards the street, as did he. Her camera lay untouched on the table. He waved for the waiter.

"So. You're an American photographer, - working for a German magazine? How far off am I, Susan?"

She took her eyes off the street to regard him. She looked at the initial on the camera case and back to him. Her tone came from winter, the way one wolf might turn another aside from its territory. "My name's Sharon."

"Sharon R." He nodded and smiled kindly to her. He spread his hands as if to apologize, but he was thinking: that's one. The waiter arrived, stood by the man until he looked up. Why do I toy with this one?

Chuzestranyetz began to order in Dari-Persian while Sharon was still holding out her arm for one of the menus the waiter carried. "Come here often?" she commented, in the same language. Her humorless smile showed she was hardly impressed.

Sharon withdrew her arm and allowed him to finish without again interrupting. She pressed her lips together. Her face is set just as one who glances at a clock every minute. What am I doing? The businessman watched her eyes until he finished; her gaze was continually covering the streets.

The waiter had nodded his head after each item, like a plastic bird toy that bobs when its beak is placed in a glass of water. After the last dish, the waiter clasped the menus to his chest tightly and replied in painfully over-rehearsed Russian, "*Spacibo Chuzestranyetz,*" and bobbed his head a final time before returning to the kitchen.

Chuzestranyetz saw that her smile had become even more frozen. She was now staring at him, not the pedestrians. He raised his eyebrows until Sharon noticed. She turned her face to the streets, crossed her arms over chest and straightened her legs, leaning back away from him. Her eyes were again directed at the square, but now glazed, not seeing.

He wondered at her change in mood. He knew she saw an elderly gentleman in a well-tailored suit, arms crossed on the table. His temples were greying slightly in the same manner the bourgeoisie called "distinguished". He was fit, proud to be not at all fat, but Chuzestranyetz knew he first seemed *old* to people he met. He was forty-four.

He turned to see if there was someone near which she might mistake as his own backup. "Waiting for someone?" he asked genially, gesturing.

"No. Yes. I mean -" she stuttered. He wondered why she was flustered. *Uncomfortable*, certainly, *he* would be disturbed if the situation was reversed. But she was nearly shaking now. Nearly, but *not*: that was important.

She slowly placed her hands on the table in front of her, but slightly hidden from him by the shattered camera. Good. Her fingers drummed the table once, just long enough for her to realize what she was doing. She then removed a package of American cigarettes from her vest, knocked one out with three quick raps on her other wrist. She lit one swiftly with a matchbook Chuzestranyetz had not noticed. It must have been lying next to the candle on her side when we arrived.

All the while she lit the cigarette, she kept her eyes on her hands, on the streets, away from his face. She held the cigarette deeply between the fingers of her right hand, so that she could keep her fingertips pressed to the table when she was not inhaling from it. Her draws on the cigarette were quick, and finished

before he might notice whether she was trembling. Her other hand was out of sight on her lap.

Chuzestranyetz was pleased, somehow, that she was now concealing her nervousness almost entirely. Nicholai probably wouldn't have discerned any strangeness or change in her behavior since the fall on the steps.

"Hey, come on, I'm not going to mug you." He smiled but she paled visibly. Poor idiom, he decided. Maybe she felt my gun when she fell against me. He moved his chair away from here and put both his hands on the table, in her plain sight. He spoke slowly, patiently, like a misunderstood salesman losing a sale.

"I just want to buy you dinner. I haven't eaten with English table conversation in . . ." He frowned an honest frown, looked high in the air. "Months," he concluded.

"Stop," she whispered. He looked down from the clear evening sky, met her gaze. She glanced to her lap, then to the emptying streets "You're *Chuzestranyetz*."

He nodded, apparently suddenly serious. "I'm Chuzestranyetz and you're Sharon, not Susan." He looked frankly into her face, with a child's utter eagerness to get it right.

"Oh, God," she said softly, her cigarette hand covering her lips, but not like he wasn't supposed to hear. Her eyes roamed the crowds, no longer studying, but seeking an exit. Nicholai just might have noticed something was up by now, Chuzestranyetz decided.

"You were telling me about your photography, for a German magazine, perhaps? You seemed to understand my German. An article on Islamic holy grounds, maybe?" He turned partway around and pointed towards the shrine she had been photographing. He kept her in the corner of his eye, just as she did, no matter where she was looking. She drew long on the cigarette, let it all out in a single extended breath,

"You can't be for real."

"I most certainly am real, my dear, but you're not being real." Is that the right idiom? "Be real kind to an old man." He patted her arm kindly, and smiled genuinely. Suddenly she relaxed all at once, her entire body settling inches deeper into the chair. Chuzestranyetz thought of an expanding balloon on the brink of disaster; she had let the air out before the needle struck.

"I- it's a the Koran." She stopped, sighed deeply. He put on his patient expression, the one I use so often when training my students. He sat back, and she used the motion to break her mood. She looked to the shrine, but now was seeing it. She still keeps me in her view, he noted.

"Mohammed wrote the last book of the Koran here." She turned to him directly. "I'm doing a lay-out on authors of ancient holy words. The men aren't doing interviews any more . . ." she smiled slightly, but she meant it. "So, I have to photograph the sites, instead." She pointed to the shattered camera with her free hand and tapped her cigarette ash onto the ground.

"Good," he said, nodding. "Now tell me who you work for."

Sharon paused longer than necessary, almost looked directly at Chuzestranyetz. She closed her eyes entirely, drew on the cigarette before answering.

"N.S.A.-" she began.

He smacked his palm down on the table, interrupting her.

Sharon didn't even open her eyes right away, but the people at other tables jumped from the violence of his motion. Chuzestranyetz pretended not to notice as the other diners begin to whisper, all of them trying not to look as if they were watching his table. That's two.

The camera had bounced against the heavy candle and rolled onto its side, spilling more mirrored slivers onto the table.

Chuzestranyetz suddenly remembered men he had seen in Viet Nam and here in Afghanistan, the way some had acted the first time they were under enemy fire. Most didn't live, he knew, not frozen in battle. The ones who lived beyond the stage she was in never again froze under stress. As if they had use up all their fear and are left with only caution and a clear head. They universally become the best of soldiers. A pity the best went down without a second chance. A pity.

He leaned way back in his chair, looked up and again consciously relaxed the tight muscles of his shoulders. He rubbed the back of his neck, looked up, spoke to the air.

"No! What *magazine*, damn it!" He pressed his lips tightly together, juttied out his jaw like a terrier waiting for a bone, and then stared brutally, directly at her, with his full attention.

She was studying him now, looking at the folds of his suit. He imagined her *seeing* his gun for the first time, even though he was now certain she had felt it when he had caught her.

Her gaze lingered over the unavoidable disturbance the weapon made in the fall of his suit. Even a private tailor can't make a shoulder holster invisible to eyes that see. She sees!

He watched her ignore the gun, and begin to study his posture. It was purposefully inoffensive; he was leaning away from her, unable to rise as quickly as she, both of his hands in full view. Only his head was inclined forward.

"Our sources said it would be Nicholai," she said.

He hissed at her, a long exhalation before he finally spoke. Leaning his body forward, he was pleased she didn't cringe, but he didn't let it change his anger. His words were silenced machine gun fire across the table.

"I knew already, but if I hadn't, you could be dead, young woman. *Never* admit anything. Haven't you been through the basic tradecraft? You must outlast the other guy, no matter what! The game goes to whoever makes the second to the last mistake . . . But this isn't chess, this is the real thing. This is the real game with real payoffs and real death." He paused only long enough to breathe. "Don't the Amer-

icans teach anything? If you lose your bluff, you still hide your hand, even if the other guy calls, *no matter what!*"

He sighed and leaned back into his chair. He pulled off his tie slowly, and pocketed it. He watched her trying not to be caught studying him. "How old are you?"

She blinked. "Twenty-six." Defiant, with a lot of her original spunk. He almost smiled, but carefully did not.

"Nicholai has five *active* years on you, and still wouldn't have thought of falling in my arms like that. Not that fast. He couldn't have executed it half so well. You barely had time to see me coming, let alone change directions?" She realized it was a question, nodded. "Good job," he added, and she nodded again, almost smiling momentarily. Her cigarette burned on between her fingers, forgotten.

"But Nicholai never told his cover. *Never.* You are a photographer?"

She didn't look certain for a moment whether it was a question. "I was once," she said, finally. She rubbed her eyes shut with her palms. The cigarette waved in the air. She opened her eyes into his. Grey eyes are pretty, he decided. His daughter's were blue.

She remembered the cigarette in her hand, dropped it to the stones and stepped on it. Her hand strayed to her pack, but she put it away without removing another.

"This is crazy. Are you going to sit and talk to me all night?"

He shrugged. "That depends. Where's your backup? I haven't seen one." She began to look wary again, but relaxed quickly, almost before he noticed. She lifted the walkman headphones and let them drop.

"He was run over by a cart just after he told me you weren't Nicholai. And he said what color you're wearing," she added. "He never got to tell me *who* you were. Besides, he's not up on Soviet operatives, especially retired ones." She peered at him keenly. "My turn. What happened to Nicholai?" She sat forward, aggressive, elbows on the table. He grinned, finally recovered. Not bad.

The waiter interrupted with the food: heaping plates that steamed and smelled of strong spices. Chuzestranyetz placed a napkin on his lap as she did also.

"Nicholai broke his leg skiing last week in Sweden." He shrugged. "I haven't left the Soviet Union in eighteen months. I wanted to get out of the house." Is that the right idiom? He looked at her, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Then you really are Chuzestranyetz. Red Slayer of Men, 'The Hand of Death'." He began to frown, but she continued: "Is this part of the scam? Put the other guys at ease, treat them to dinner before-

"-A toast," he interrupted. "To your career. May it last many years . . . more." She blinked, fell silent, and lifted her own glass, eyes on his. I like this American.

They touched rims, drank, began to eat. Chuzestranyetz ate with fork in one hand, knife in the oth-

er, European style. She exchanged hands as she ate, American style. He watched her notice the difference.

She dogged him further. "Why are you doing this? You think I'm so bad that you have to help me out? Sorry, bub, but I was at the top of my class; I don't need your handouts." He chewed for a moment, trying to find an answer for her. "Or is it that I'm a woman?" she added. He chuckled.

"You'd like that to be the case? Explain it away simply?"

"*Is it that simple?*" She insisted, meeting his eye. He saw that she was serious, so he didn't answer right away.

"No." He maintained eye contact, so she would know he spoke truly. "I was . . . curious. It seemed that you felt something *against* me those first instants, before you knew my name, something even beyond my nationality." He paused, spearing a small bite of lamb, holding it an inch from his lips. "Is it that I'm a man? Is it that simple?" He ate, and she looked away, scanned the village square again, examined her food a moment without eating.

"*They* told me at first I couldn't take this job, they said it was because of Nicholai, because of the middle eastern values about women, because NSA is supposed to leave foreign ops to the CIA. But it was *really* because of American values about women."

"My mother called me Pavel," he said abruptly, holding out a plate of dates to her. She stared at the plate almost too long before she took it, but her hand wasn't shaking any longer.

"Susan. My name is Susan." She frowned. "But then, you knew that. You have dossiers, too." He simply smiled.

"Are there women who work with you other than..." She waved her fork, at a loss for words.

"Communist temptresses for American agents?" He shrugged. "We Soviets are less -flexible- than you when it comes to social mores. There is incredible social inertia in the Soviet Union."

She pointed to his wedding band with her fork. "Then your wife is –" He interrupted her immediately.

"-My wife was able to teach our daughter to love her father even though I was away on active duty until she was three." His words were no louder than before, but she now, truly, looked more threatened than any time earlier. She lost the power to move while he spoke. "Her first words to me were 'I love you papa'. Three years old." He spat out his last words: "My wife wanted to be a medical doctor but there are no female physicians in the Soviet Union, unless they are on international political committees."

He stabbed his food violently, stared a moment at the morsel on his fork. That's three, he realized.

He put down his fork without eating the food from it. He breathed deeply, smiling sadly. "I'm sorry. This is not to be your problem. You -I feel- She – she very badly wanted to be a pediatrician."

Susan paused before she nodded, and he picked up his utensils. They ate in silence until the waiter brought the check. Susan coughed in her hand, an attempt to appear off-hand?

"One of my instructors told me you're the top Soviet asset still active. They all said no one ever beat you on a head-on operation, *ever*. You were active in the European theater all through the cold war. Pierce said you couldn't be fooled." Her voice quivered slightly: "Anyone who got in your way died." She concentrated on her plate, cutting and eating as if it was her entire universe.

Chuzestranyetz paused, fork halfway to his mouth. He lowered his silver to the sides of his plate again. He held them there, motionless, staring towards the dwindling number of washerwomen. Susan eventually stopped eating to watch the expressions flash across his face.

Four mistakes, he knew. I should have kept on eating, I know it. I could have, too. A small voice inside then asked "*why didn't you?*" I'm getting too old! If it were anything else, I could have been dead.

"Pierce Bonneville?" he finally managed to say.

She brightened, artfully ignoring his tone. "Yes! He liked to talk of it. He told me that he went against you himself." She looked to him, but he barely noticed; his inner sight was far away.

"Not actually. We were working against the Mainland Chinese, four months side by side, never quite certain of each other, yet together against the Chinamen. It was different in those places, in that time. It's almost an entirely different craft now, run by new people." And as he said it, he knew it was true. I'm not the best any longer. It's someone very much like her. Trained by Pierce? "Pierce is a hell of an asset. Always knew the right moves." He smiled faintly.

"Tell me," she said. He looked back to her, startled. She grinned until he did too.

"He helped me, once. He drove sixteen straight hours to a safe house, him without a Chinese driver's license. He swore at me all the way, saying in broken Russian he'd kill me if he was arrested for that. I was half delirious at the time, riding low in the back seat with a Chinese bullet in my side." Chuzestranyetz trailed off a moment before continuing. "Pierce always knew when it was time to leave. It could just as easily been his bullet." He met her eyes with a renewed grin. "Does he still disappear about eleven in the morning-"

"And come back ten minutes later with gin on his breath?" Susan nodded. They shared a chuckle, but hers ended first.

"He quit last year. They caught him drinking, offered three quarters pension if he'd retire early. I think he sails now – catamarans, in races." Chuzestranyetz lost his grin then. He raised his tableware and resumed eating.

They continued to dine in silence as the sun went down. Bare light bulbs had been strung over the pavilion, strings of tiny white suns keeping back the dark, bringing on the insects. Other customers came and some left the restaurant.

When Chuzestranyetz and Susan were quite finished eating, he reached into his jacket and removed his billfold. He was pleased that she watched without directly staring, and didn't cringe or start. Recov-

ered.

He removed some *afghanis*, paper money, and placed them beneath the wine bottle. She had understood to leave it half full as the tip without him saying anything. Not that either of us would get drunk. He stared into his wallet, then at her face. He caught her looking directly at him, her eyes shining in the bare bulbs. They both grinned. Chuzestranyetz recalled a phrase the resistance fighters used, *az khud-i-ma hasten*, you are one of our own: a bond that made their eyes light up.

"You learned from Pierce, eh?" He removed half of a torn British pound note from his billfold and placed it on the tabletop. I know who I saved it for.

"Take this." She leaned forward to examine it without touching it.

"What is it?" So very cautious!

"There's a man goes by the name of Smith, Lucas Smith, in Boston. He finds passports, visas, identification papers for most countries; also specialty weapons. Most tools of the trade. He's apolitical, non-partisan, but he only serves the best, from the old days. *He's* still the best. Ask Pierce if you can't find him." Who am I fooling? She already knows of him.

"I gave the other half to Luce, decades ago. He told me to send it with my heir, when I retired. Luce will work for *anyone* bearing that half of the note."

I'm too old for this. But it took Pierce to convince me. Chuzestranyetz rubbed his eyes, opened them quickly. Six? She was staring at the note, and hadn't noticed. Six; I'm counting, not her. She picked up the torn paper in both hands, cradled it there and looked to his face. She opened her mouth and closed it twice without saying any words. Her eyes glowed, *az khud-i-ma hasten*.

"I nearly gave it to Nicholai two years ago when I took my desk in Moscow." He sighed. "He's my best student. I picked him out of dozens who wanted to be Chuzestranyetz' protege. But he'll never be good. Enough." It's hard to say it out loud.

"Don't." She touched him on the arm. "Even Chuzestranyetz makes mistakes." He almost laughed, but she was genuinely concerned. He knew she wasn't taunting him, and with that he knew, I'm actually going to let her keep it!

He sighed, and wondered what Pierce had felt, teaching this one. In his heart, he knew, but he wondered what it had been like.

Chuzestranyetz stood and flagged the waiter's attention, pointing to the bills and the bottle. The waiter smiled and bobbed, but was busy with other customers. She watched him without staring, holding the note uncertainly in her hands a moment longer.

He nodded, still standing over her. Then she could place it in the breast pocket of her blouse.

Standing above her, he could barely see her passport in an inside pocket of her vest. He was reminded of the high probability of passport theft in this country. She had hers in the inner pocket of her

vest. It was like frosting on a cake.

"Greatness is defined by the distance to the competition," he began, looking over the courtyard. "Only the best know the difference between greatness and perfection. You'll have to learn your own distance."

She froze with her eyes on his face, but she was thinking, not seeing. He waited, for all his worries, nothing was on his mind but what she would say next.

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?" she asked finally, half seriously. American idiom? He coughed into his hand, shrugged, looked past her to the street.

"I think I'll let you keep the computer disk after all." She paled instantly, visible even in the harsh light, and quite involuntarily she touched her right vest pocket. He grinned broadly again, touching her shoulder.

"Mr. Morris would give to your government the computer program if you want it badly enough, and it soon will be obsolete, regardless. Besides, it would be so hard to take it from you, with your backup so near."

Chuzestranyetz whispered the last words in her ear, leaning down low and pointing. She eased her head over to where he was now staring, taking her eyes from his only at the last moment.

She saw two men from her own team rapidly approaching the cafe from opposite streets. They were dressed like Arabs, from brown silk turbans to goatskin sandals, but . . .

Their skin glowed white in the electric street lights. They rushed towards the cafe. Both were grossly conspicuous in the meandering evening traffic. Like Laurel and Hardy, she thought.

She hated assets like that. Men -no: agents- like them should guard the president on television, not go into the field. She turned back.

Chuzestranyetz was gone. Other than his place setting, there was no sign of him. But she *knew*: the door in back by the phone. She looked entirely around the restaurant and nodded; it was where she would have gone. There was nowhere else.

She felt for the floppy diskette in her vest, the reason for the entire encounter. She then touched the torn British pound note. Both were warm, much warmer than the charged night air. She held her hands out in front of her, but they were not shaking. I'm glad it wasn't Nicholai. She stood and faced the street.

Laurel and Hardy saw her, neither remembering to stay on the street in case of ambush among the cafe tables. Each man had one hand in his garb, obviously on his weapon. They were really bad. She waited patiently for their arrival.

"Did you get it?" one hissed, loud enough for the couple at the next table to look up. She nodded

slightly, suppressing a giggle.

"Why are you late? Was there trouble?" The other scanned the cafe, hand still on his gun. She knew he wouldn't find anything. He didn't even look at the table we were sitting at. They kept moving their heads in circles, like cops in a B movie, or on 'Saturday Night Live.'

She nodded again. "Yeah trouble." She smiled now, until they stopped turning about. They stared, not comprehending. "I'm ok now; I've got it. I'm going to be great."

INFINITE LOOP

When Rikki brought home his computer, none of us knew he was going to kill himself. He never planned it that way, for sure. A time traveller could have come from the future and told Rikki and he still wouldn't have believed it. Sometimes we still don't believe it ourselves.

I was in his garage studio when he brought it home. Nothing special, I'm not his girlfriend or anything. Rikki lets the band use the equipment he's got set up there even when he's not home. There were some bass lines I needed to practice with before our gig that weekend, and I was making a tape to take home. I told a cute guy from work about the band, so I wanted to brush up my solos.

Rikki opened up the garage door and let the summer sun in. His silhouette had glowing blue eyes, just like those tiny Jawa guys in *Star Wars*. After he got the door up, he stooped over a huge box half as tall as he was. I put down Benjy's bass to help, but he picked it up by himself and came into the garage.

"Shit man," I said. "Those are real Revos!" Even though he'd let his blonde hair grow straight past his shoulders, I still sometimes think of him as the geeky keyboard freak he was when I first met him; regular certifiable public accountant material. But not any more, not in the Revos.

"They look good on you," I said quietly as he passed, surprised at myself.

"Wait till you see what else I bought," he said, but his smile got broader under the new sunglasses.

"Didja get a job or something?" I asked, following him. He's usually just as broke as the rest of the band. Broker. We all got day jobs, but he took classes up at the college, even during the summer. If the band ever took off, we'd all quit our jobs. We wondered if Rikki would drop out of music school, but no one ever asked him.

"Student loan," he said.

"No shit," I said, and cleared off the paper cups and beer cans from the table where he was trying to put the box down. Even though we were careful, I knew Roland would get mad when he found out Rikki and I moved his guitar off to the side. "They let you buy a new amp with a student loan?"

"This is a computer."

"No shit. They let you buy computers with student loans?"

"They let you buy anything you need for school," he said. I smiled.

"Sure need those Revos for walking across that bright campus." He grinned absently, carefully slitting the tape on the box with his pocket knife. I thought he would cut himself he was going so fast. I would have ripped it open, but Rikki always keeps the boxes his equipment comes in. He always keeps everything, the manuals, the extra cords, even the twisty wires they use to keep the cords tied. That's why he has to live in a house. He could never fit all his junk in an apartment. He didn't even have room for a roommate. "Gonna write your thesis on a word processor?" I asked.

"Nah," he said, "this is a music processor."

"Riiiiight!" I gave him my patented fool-detector stare, but he was wrapped up trying to pull the computer out of the box. I grabbed the cardboard and pulled gently until the computer came free. Styrofoam peanuts went all over the studio floor, making it look more like a real garage. He put it on the table.

Rikki's computer was like in the comic strip, the one that walks around and talks and everything, but Rikki's didn't have any feet. The TV was built into the main box part, and it had a multicolor apple next to where you plug in the disk.

He ran out to his car and grabbed three more boxes and closed the trunk while I was still looking it over. I never saw him run so fast before. When he did tear open the first of the smaller boxes, I figured I'd let him alone. He was ignoring me by then anyway. I hate it when he gets like that. I went back to taping my bass line.

Within 15 minutes, Rikki was at his keyboards. He's got them stacked up in a circle or a horseshoe, so he can stand in the middle and reach all of them. I suddenly realized where he must have got the money to buy all his synthesizers.

He had the computer facing him from the table three feet away, but the typewriter part of it was within reach, where he used to keep his little Casio. Half a dozen shiny black cords connected the computer to his stack. Half a dozen computer disks were piled up next to the computer.

"Keep playing," he said, so I did.

He joined in a little late, but with the right riff. Of course he knew what I was playing; he wrote most of the band's material. It's catchy stuff, but we do a few covers to start the people dancing.

We got into the groove after his fingers warmed up. I liked it better playing with him than alone. Next to sex, the best thing to do to get really close with someone is to jam. Our band is real close. One of the reasons we get so many paid gigs is we play so well together.

Normally, I play lead guitar, but bass fingering isn't that different once you get the hang of it. Not so many chords. Lots of things in music are the same if you know what you're doing.

Rikki surprised the hell out of me when he stood up and walked away from his stack, and the strings and sax lines he had been playing kept on going. I hesitated but caught up on the next measure. Rikki leaned on the wall of the garage with a shit eating grin on his face, and I smiled back when I was on the beat again.

"Computer controls the tape deck?"

"Computer is the tape deck, babe," he replied. I looked, and saw his reel to reel wasn't moving, and nodded. The sax and strings kept playing after I stopped, sounding just as if Rikki was playing, down to the muffed note on the sax line. He noticed it when I did: one note, a hair too soon, repeating mercilessly exactly wrong every time, every verse. He shut off the music.

"Best thing is," he said. "I can fix that without losing the strings. Watch."

Rikki pressed some keys on the computer, moved the computer's mouse thing, and then started up the sax and strings again. The bad note was gone, but the rest of the part was still there, intact. He played one note on his synthesizer, at just the right time, and it got recorded that way, playing back just as if he had done it right the first time. Perfect strings, perfect sax.

"Wow." He sat there with the expression he gets when he shows us his latest songs. "How'd you learn so fast?" I asked.

"We use these computers up at school."

"Can I hook my guitar into that?" My mind raced. "How about Shane's drum set? Can more than one person hook into your computer?" I could forget Roland; I knew what he'd say. He plays guitar, hates most electronic music, calls it Air Pudding. When he's drunk, Rolly likes to complain that no one listens to acoustic guitar anymore. I was glad Rolly's custom 12 string hadn't been on the table where Rikki wanted to put the computer.

"No," Rikki said, and shook his head. "Most keyboards come with the right connections these days, but you gotta buy special drum machines and guitars to hook them into the computer."

"Oh," I said. Shit. I guess I'd have to keep on practicing.

"Listen," he said. He typed at the computer a moment, and the song we'd been doing came out again. It took me a minute to realize what was different. The strings were playing the sax part, and the sax was playing what the strings had been doing before. Another minute later he had flugel horns and vibes sounds playing the same notes. He hadn't even touched his synthesizer.

"Fucked up!"

"Yeah," he agreed. "You can switch it all around until it's perfect without having to spend time playing the whole thing over and over."

"Then you record the best version on your tape deck."

"Better yet," he said. He plugged in one of his computer disks. "I can save the song with or without the changes so I can listen to it and modify it later on."

"Want to sell your tape deck?" I asked. He ignored me, which was just as well. I probably couldn't have afforded it anyway. He went back to changing the instruments. First the string part, then the sax, then the strings, then the sax. Sometimes it sounded good, but I got tired of listening to it real quick.

"I want to do some more work, Rikki. Can you put on the phones?"

He slipped on his headphones without even looking at me. It was just in time. It was a good tune, but a few more minutes and I'd never want to play that one again. It would be going through my mind all night anyway.

I strummed Benjy's bass to see if it was up too loud, but Rikki's fingers didn't stop in his rhythm

of type and listen, type and listen. Probably drop a bomb and he'd never even notice. I taped my bass line one last time. He was still punching buttons at that silly computer when I left.

He wanted to use the computer at our gig that weekend, but we wouldn't let him.

"What if it fucks up?" Benjy asked. He's got the same brown hair as the dog in the movie, but twice as shaggy. His thick Lennon glasses make his eyes big as quarters, and even with the glasses, he can't read music from a stand. He has to memorize everything, even for practice. He plays good enough to make up for his eyes.

Benjy plays bass, Roland and I do lead guitar, Rikki plays keyboards and Shane is the meanest lady I've ever seen on drums. We all take turns with the vocals, usually doing lead on the songs we write. Benjy never sings lead.

He continued, "What if we're in the middle of the set and the computer gets constipated and stops playing?"

"Worse yet," Roland said, "what if Riff or I are in the middle of a solo and it decides to play the keyboards from the last song?"

Rolly's tall dark and handsome, probably worth fifty percent of our crowds. Even if he didn't play guitar, we'd stick him up front with a mike in his hands. If he didn't sing, we'd prop him up on a stick and tell him to smile.

"But-" Rikki looked like he was going to cry. I didn't want to tell him even once was too much, even for me.

"Vote!" called Shane. Shane's the only other girl in the band besides me. She's kinda the leader of the band, even though she's crazy. Drummers are all crazy, but Shane's a real lady when she's not drumming. When she lets her blonde curls fall halfway down the back of a long dress, she's stunning. If she wasn't stuck behind the drums, she'd bring as many to our shows as Roland does. I kinda hated her at first.

We met as roommates three years back. We got along fine, really. We must have; I don't give my roommates a second chance. She was the first person I lived with who didn't complain when I got up to play guitar at 3 AM. Sometimes, she'd even get up and hit the skins with me. Even today, sometimes she'll call me and come over early in the morning and we'll jam like those first times. Lifestyles of the rich and famous, hah.

Shane and I started the band one night after she got fed up with her computer job. We called it "Infinite Loop" after a program she was blamed for which went on and on and never stopped printing, even after it was done.

"Vote," Shane called. Then she said, "opposed," a moment later, raising her hand. All of us raised

our hands but Rikki.

"Sorry Rik," Shane said. "Plenty of time later, after your know how to use it better." Shane used to sleep with Rikki and still had a way with him. I couldn't figure out how they could stand to play together after they broke up. Drummers are all crazy.

"Yeah," Rolly muttered. "I'll feel better when I know where the fucking off switch is." He put down his axe gently, but almost yanked off the screen door into Rikki's house when he left the garage. He seemed more pissed off than the hot nights usually did to him, even for the last practice before a gig. Shane wouldn't meet my eye, so I followed him myself.

"Want Mic Dark or Bud Light?" Rolly asked when I got to the kitchen. He leaned into the fridge. "Nothing else here, not even a Pepsi."

"Nothing else? I guess I'll take a lite." It was so hot in the house the beer can had water dripping from it by the time I had it open.

"Why can't he turn on the air conditioning? It's eighty degrees in here. He can afford to run the fucking AC now he's got the loan. I bet--"

"Rolly!" I said, more loud than I meant to. He shut up. I couldn't figure out what I had to be pissed about, so I lowered my voice. "You've been on his case all night."

He pressed his lips together and kept his eyes on his beer as he opened it. Even when he took a drink, Rolly just looked at the stupid teddy bear magnets on Rikki's fridge rather than me. He brushed his hair away from his forehead and pressed the can against his skin.

Roland has dark hair the same color and length as mine, but he's got a wave to his and he tans just by thinking of the sun. I'm pale like a vampire even in the summertime. Hours on the beach just make me red a while before I fade to white. The reviewers just talk about Roland and Shane and the music.

"Riff," he began, "you heard the stuff Rik's been writing. He programmed that shit computer to do bass, lead and keyboards. He even got it to do the drums on his arrangement of '*Hijacking the Shuttle*.' Rolly lowered his voice and looked at the screen door to the garage, but when he looked at me finally, his eyes were so hard it still felt like he was yelling. "I wrote that song, Riff, and he and that shitbox have taken it from me!"

"Pianist envy?" I asked, straightfaced. He paused, frowning a moment, but he smiled as we took a pull from our beers.

"Where'd you get that?"

"I'll never tell."

"The point is, He's making us obsolete with that shit computer he's got. We're unnecessary."

"Unnecessary for what?" I asked. "Rolly, you were in "Infinite Loop" before he was. We can always find a new keyboard player if he gets a fat head. Even though he's pushy sometimes, I can't imagine

Rikki ever leaving us."

"What if he does? Can you write music like he does? When was the last time you heard two part harmony in anything on the radio? He's a fucking Music Grad student."

We drank in silence until we heard Benjy playing the bass to a song we use to open the second set. Rolly crushed his can hard and threw it in the garbage. He never does that. I followed him out.

Benjy offered Rolly a joint, and Shane tore into the set as soon as we had our guitar straps over our heads. The computer was turned off, and Rikki played the rest of the night without it.

The gig went great; it was a full house. The guy from my work wasn't there, so I wrote him off forever. Rolly surprised us by playing Rikki's solo for *Hijacking the Shuttle* instead of the one he wrote himself. Rikki played the rest of the set with a half smile, like he'd been drinking too much.

Even so, no one mentioned the computer in practice until Roland brought it up, three days after the gig.

"Where's the **on** button for this fucker?" Roland said, leaning over the machine. Rikki pointed to the black switch on the back, and we all kind of held our breath as Rolly flipped it on.

"I want to hear your power chords for the lead in *Amazon Queen*," he said.

"Ok," Rikki replied, looking startled, and we all began to breath again. He searched through his computer disks. He had a shoebox half full of disks, each one labelled with his exact writing. I liked the way he wrote: precise, just like his keyboard playing. I guess I liked the way he did almost everything.

Benjy spoke up.

"The Examiner took six paragraphs to say we sucked last night, but the Journal gave us a full page with three photos." He was holding the newspaper so close to his face, his joint burned a hole through it. It looked like the photos were one of the whole band, and one close up apiece of Shane and Roland. Benjy quoted: "Infinite Loop could be the next 'New Bohemians' if they cut the heavy guitar solos and brought their drummer up front for all the lead vocals."

The loudest sound in the garage was the hiss from the amplifiers.

"Vote," Rikki said.

"Keep the guitar," I said, raising my hand. Rikki raised his and continued his search through his disks. He had so many that if they hadn't all been labelled, I doubt he would have been able to find anything.

Roland raised his hand. Rikki did a double take when he finally noticed.

"Opposed," Shane said with her drumsticks in the air, and Benjy nodded. They nodded to each other, and shrugged, outvoted 2 to 3.

"Keep the guitar," Shane said, defeated. "But I sit behind the skins or I find a new band. No vote." We all laughed.

"I know good writing," Rolly said, "even when it's not mine. Hey dude, I remembered your solo on 'shuttle' after hearing it only that once."

I could read the disk Rikki picked from across the garage. AMAZON QUEEN VERSIONS 1 to 12. He plugged the disk into his computer. Rikki had moved in the last week it to where he could reach the computer from his keyboard setup. He had it on five milk crates stacked up which each said he'd be prosecuted if he was caught with them. I hoped not. Visiting him in jail would be depressing.

Amazon Queen filled the garage. Rikki had added a fanfare which Shane never would have written herself. The overall sound was different, but I thought it was a good change for a queen: more defiant. No one said a word until it was over, when we all looked at Shane. She nodded right away.

"Those horns say what I meant, Rik. That's exactly what I felt. Keep the lead guitar and bass changes, too. But I'm still staying behind the drums."

"I like the bass too," Benjy added.

"Yeah," Rolly said. "Good stuff for a computer."

Rikki lifted a stack of disks thick as a dictionary.

"Been doing some new writing, too. I'd like you to listen to it, if you want to." Rikki sounded like he didn't think we would.

"Show us what you've been doing on that shit computer," Rolly said easily, and when we agreed, Rikki did.

A week later, Roland came in with a handfull of lyrics.

"I got the words to *Burning Asphalt* and *Roman Roads*, and I'm working on *Pagan Gods* if I ever get to the library to look up some names." Rolly said.

"That bass line on *Pagan Gods* is wicked," Benjy said.

"No shit," I agreed, and he ripped through all eighteen bars about five times faster than I could have, as fast as he used to play before he got stoned every time he came to practice. I leaned closer. He didn't smell high. He surprised me when he pulled a folded piece of loose leaf paper from his pocket instead of a joint.

"I know I never wrote anything before, but I got a verse here for *Burning Asphalt*. I thought it up on the way to work Monday, and . . ." He trailed off, and held out the paper to Rolly. "Couldn't get the fucker out of my mind all day. Kept me from dozing off at the store, thinking of words to fit." Rolly looked at the page and nodded, counting rhythm with bobs of his head.

"Those are good tunes, Rik," Shane said. "Think you can come up with enough new ones for a show?"

We all looked at her. "Another show?" Rikki asked.

"Yes. I have tentatively agreed for us to play at Mister Toad's on the seventh of July," she announced.

"Vote," Benjy called, raising his hand. "I wanna play some new tunes on the seventh. Tired of the old shit."

I waited to see how Rikki would vote. He shook his head.

"No way," he said. "I got the end of my last term coming up and that means work. We can't play the stuff I'm writing these days in a bar without getting our asses kicked out on the street." He coughed. "It's Classical shit."

"What about using the stuff you already got for a new set?" I asked, pointing to his stack of disks. Roland looked up from Benjy's lyrics.

"I can get words for those eleven songs you already gave us last week, by, oh at least by the end of the month, easy," Roland said. Rikki pursed his lips, but nodded.

"New Set," I said, and we each raised a hand.

Rikki looked high the afternoon of July eighth, when I stopped by with the reviews. I left the garage door up. The room was kind stuffy, but it didn't smell like he'd been toking, even though his eyes were kinda glazed, like he would get when Benjy offered him the pipe.

He was sweating a lot. It was 90 outside, and probably 100 in the garage with all the amps turned on.

The first thing I said to him was "Jesus Rikki, I'm turning on your air conditioning."

"What?"

I pulled one of the cups of his headphones away from his ear. "AC," I muttered in my most seductive voice.

"Fine," he said. "Good idea; it's hot." He kept on playing his synthesizer.

I put the thermostat on 75, figuring it would eventually bring the garage down to about 85. I closed his windows and propped open the screen with a window fan to blow the air in from the house.

He still only had beer in the fridge. I grabbed one for him and one for me and then joined him in the studio. God, it was hot in there. Even with the garage door open, there was precious little wind. I aimed the fan in the doorway at Rikki, and sat so I'd get some too.

"We're doing fine in the papers," I yelled.

"What?" he said, not caring.

I opened his beer and set it in front of him on the flattest keyboard he had. When I finished mine, he still hadn't noticed it. I moved his untouched can to the top of his computer, and got another for myself to drink as I reread the reviews.

The Journal said we played "hypnotic, entrancing rhythms that demand the feet to move." The Examiner, as usual, was more conservative, but they said, "their hypnotic music continued to weave its way through the brain long after the songs were over." Both papers thought we would tour soon.

There was no mention of Shane up front or too much guitar work. The Journal thought I rated a photo, even though I shared the mike with Roland in it. Even in black and white, I was noticeably pale next to Rolly's July tan. The Examiner misspelled Rikki's name right under his picture. He was alone in his, with the portable keyboard he dances with in his own solos. He looked good, reminding me of the first day I saw him in his Revos.

Damn, it was hot. I opened my third beer, and looked to Rikki. He was sitting without playing any more. His eyes were closed; if he hadn't been tapping his fingers he could have been dead.

"Rikki?"

I lifted his untouched beer and held it against his cheek. He opened his eyes slowly, a moment later. It took him seconds to recognize me, and again I wondered if he was high.

"You ok?"

He took the phones off slowly and looked around like he was waking up from a dream or something. "I'm fine," he said.

"You don't look fine," I said. I lifted his beer and put it in his hand. His skin was dry. He wasn't sweating any more.

I remembered my uncle.

"You're coming inside right now, bosco!"

I think the tone of my voice moved him as much as my tugging. He followed me quickly into the blessed relative coolness of central air.

I tried to remember the treatment of heatstroke. My uncle didn't realize it until too late, and now he can't walk without a stick. When he smiles, only half of his face moves.

I shoved Rikki in his shower and turned on the cold water. He yelled, which I took as a good sign. When he could stand on his own, I left him adjusting the hot water to go to his kitchen. I heard a feeble "my clothes!" as I left the bathroom.

There was still only beer in the fridge.

I filled a pitcher with cold tap water and took it to him with the last six pack.

"Drink," I ordered, handing him the pitcher over the white glass door.

"I hate water," he said, pouring it down the drain. "And you ruined my shirt."

"Tough shit. You really need to drink," I said. I got the six pack, and handed him all six, one at a time, pretending not to look. Through the frosted glass I made sure he didn't pour them out. In ten minutes he was shitfaced, but shitfaced in stereo, not on one side.

"I'm writing the perfect symphony!" he called out. "A psych major working on E.E.G. Brainwaves with me to see how the mind responds to music."

"No shit."

"No shit, Riff. Music that appeals to your brain. Guaranteed top 40 material. I'm going down in hist, hist, the legends as the greatest composer of the twentieth century."

"You're going down in history, alright, but it'll be with the biggest hangover ever, if you don't drink some water real soon." I heard him adjust the taps and fill the pitcher again. He tipped the pitcher back and began to chug it. "The papers liked the new set," I said, feeling much better.

"Yeah?" He did a one handed chinup on the door until he could see me, but dropped right away. "Good reviews, huh?"

"Yep," I replied. "bought a copy for my parents. I got a picture, finally, even though it was with Rolly." I shrugged. "He always attracts the photographers."

"You never needed Roland to attract me," he said. His voice echoed strangely off the porcelain tiles. He did a second pull up, but used both hands and stayed there for a minute. "There's room in here for two," he said. His arms trembled and he dropped behind the glass.

I suddenly remembered the day I noticed him in the Revo's, and how good he looked in the Journal's photo. Shane had told me a lot about their fling, both good and bad. He'd come along way from a certified accountant.

"What makes you think you can do anything with six beers in you?"

He opened the shower door, and I saw what he thought he could do. I ended up ruining my shirt, too.

They all knew by the end of the next practice, of course. We're too close to hide anything, even if we wanted to. I saw Rolly and Shane exchange a glance or two, and began to wonder about them.

Benjy was still straight. "It's been three weeks since I've partied," he said.

"No shit?" Rikki asked.

"Oh yeah?" Rolly said.

I just gave him my fool detector stare.

"Well, just a few here and there," Benjy admitted. "I got a promotion to assistant manager of the

store."

"Cool," Shane said, and Rolly slapped him on the back, grinning.

"I hope that means you can give yourself a vacation," Rolly said. He pulled an envelope out of his guitar case. He doesn't even keep his picks or cords in there, so we all turned to look. The envelope had a return address with CBS in big letters.

"**We**," he began, sliding the letter from the envelope.

"**Have got**," he continued, opening the folded paper like he was holding his 12 string.

"**A contract!**" He held the letter out to us. I could see where it was signed with a real ballpoint.

Shane smiled like she knew already, and Benjy's eyes glazed over and he began gurgling. Rikki lifted me off the ground in a bear hug and swung me around, careful not to damage the equipment.

"What does it say?" Benjy finally whispered. He sounded like the Godfather in the movie.

Rolly turned the paper around to read it.

". . .invited to fly, all expenses paid, to beautiful Los Angeles, California, for the first week of August, for an audition in our studios."

"Then we don't have a contract," Rikki said, putting me down. I kept his hand in mine.

Rolly held up his palm. "The letter also says 'We expect to offer a substantial advance once you have completed an audition tape which we can use to demonstrate your exceptional talents to members of our corporation who have not yet heard your material.'" Rolly handed the letter to Rikki. "How's that for starters?"

Rikki read it quickly. "Fuck."

"What?"

"What's the problem?"

"I take my orals for my masters next week, the first week in August."

Rolly clenched his fists, and I could tell it wasn't a beer can he was thinking of crushing. I stepped between them. If Rolly hit Rikki, I'd never forgive him.

"He's been trying to get his professors on campus at the same time all summer," I explained. Shane raised her eyes to the roof, but Benjy's face didn't change expression, it was the same since Roland read the letter.

Even under his tan, Roland's face was getting darker. "Can't you--" he began.

"No, I can't." Rikki said. "But the band can take my computer and disks to the audition and play along with them." He pushed me out of the way and faced Roland. "You think you can run a *shit machine* by yourself?"

Rolly slowly nodded and pointed to me. "Riff knows how, too." he said. I nodded. "It better not forget how to turn off for the solos," he said, but it was a joke. They nodded to each other, and my heart

began to slow down.

"Vote," Rikki said, holding up the letter by a corner.

"Fuck that shit," Benjy said. "Sign it and frame it." Shane laughed. Rikki squeezed me again.

"Have a good time," he said.

"Better time if you were there, too."

"I'll still be here when you get back," Rikki whispered.

"What do we play in L.A.?" Benjy asked.

"Here," Rikki said loudly. He broke from me and gathered most of his disks into the shoebox. He had so many it was almost full now. "Take all of them so you aren't stuck playing something you don't feel right about on our big day."

"Cool," Shane said.

When I got back from L.A., I went to his house with the contract even before I unpacked. He wasn't home. I even made certain he wasn't passed out in the garage. The place was empty and his main keyboard was gone, so I figured he'd taken it to the music building at school again.

It's weird being on campus and not being a student. Even in the summer, I felt like an intruder. I hummed one of Rikki's latest songs and held the envelope with Rikki's contract in both hands.

The music building was unlocked. I found an office with a light on and a secretary right away, but she didn't recognize Rikki's name yet. She had a list of students who had signed up for the studios, and that had his name on it. Studio 29 for 8 to 10 AM. It was almost 3 in the afternoon, but the secretary said in the summer there wasn't such a shortage of studio time, and he might still be there.

With directions, studio 29 was easy to find. The big wooden doors had brass numbers on them. I followed the hall until I got to 29 and knocked. Probably soundproof. I turned the knob and let myself in.

Rikki sat at a table with headphones on with his back to the door. He had his keyboard there with him, and there was a computer like his next to it.

I sneaked up on him. His synthesizer was connected to the computer with the special cables, and I could almost hear the music through the headphones. I opened the envelope carefully, and lowered Rikki's copy of our recording contract down in front of his face with my arms around him, and kissed him on the back of his neck.

He didn't move. At first I thought his eyes were closed, but when I got around in front of him, they were opened: glazed, kind of like the day he almost got heatstroke.

"Rikki!"

I took his headphones off, and waved my hand in front of his face. He just stared at the computer

screen. I grabbed his hand; his pulse was strong. His face was slightly damp, even though the studio was air conditioned.

He just stared at the computer screen. I slapped him, but that didn't do anything. he didn't look away or even change expression. I guess that's when I lost control.

I didn't bother with the off switches on any of it. I yanked the headphones out of the keyboard hard enough to pull the plug off the end. I knocked over the computer so he couldn't see the screen any more; I tore the cords away from the synthesizer and the computer. I must have unplugged the computer disk, because I found it in my pocket a few days later. Even when I had all the power cords pulled out of the wall, I thought I could still hear the music coming faintly from the headphones.

That's when I went to get help.

The student loan people repossessed all of Rikki's equipment they could sell, since his parents could barely afford what the nursing home cost them, let alone Rikki's debts. If I had known the details at the time, I could have paid them off and kept his keyboards with my advance on our first contract.

As it stands, the band decided to pay his bills. During the first year, we made a trust fund out of our profits which will keep him in the black for a hundred and one years.

In the black. Shit. I sound like our agent.

All I have left of him is the shit computer and the disks we took to California, each with his careful and exact descriptions. I haven't even thrown out the shoebox; I just tape it up again when it rips. The band let me keep these things, no vote. Like I said, we're close.

We made two albums on the first contract and just signed another paper for three more. Sometimes I can almost get excited about it.

Rikki gets "keyboards and sequences" credits on every album we sell, even if we change them around. Roland and I figure we have enough of Rikki's sequences on disk to make thirty seven albums.

Before I moved to California, I found the grad student in psych who had been working with Rikki. The last time he had seen Rikki was the day before I came home with the contract. Rikki had taken an E.E.G. and a C.A.T. scan of his brain, and was going to study the results.

Apparently Rikki had actually found a way to make a brainwave change to his music. The psych grad wrote his dissertation on it, based solely on the notes from their discussions and his memories of Rikki's theories. I have a copy of it somewhere. Rikki is called "Subject X." No shit.

He says I'm lucky to hear Rikki's brainwave music only when it's quiet. If my own E.E.G. were any more closer to Rikki's, I'd probably be a vegetable too, just from what I heard trickling out of the headphones that day in Studio 29.

I never told anyone, not even the psych grad or the doctors, that I have the disk from that day. No one ever asked. It's labelled, of course, in that precise handwriting: "Rikki +/-."

He's been in the home for three years now. He sits, catatonic, looking at whatever's in front of him, or nothing at all. He doesn't seem to mind. It's all the same to him, the doctors say.

Occasionally, he taps his fingers to some secret rhythm, but I'm told in his case that's not necessarily a sign of recovery. I get the shivers when he does it. The doctors say Rikki may have been listening to his personal song for long enough for it to become like a habit in his brain. He may never stop hearing it.

He doesn't recognize me. The only time I saw Rikki react was when I showed him the disk. Rikki +/- . He closed his eyes.

I've never loaded it into the computer.

Now that I live in California, I don't see him very often. He's got his infinite loop, and I've got mine. Mine's a rock band. You hear us on the radio. Our songs are the ones that stay in your mind for hours.

WHAT YOU LEFT BEHIND

With acknowledgement to Concrete Blonde

Saturday 6/29

Oh, Kim, You can't imagine what it was like to wake up next to you when you were dead. I thought at first you weren't saying anything 'cause you were mad, because last night you blew up when I said I didn't believe you have voices inside your head. I almost knew you were dead right away. You were so cold when I reached out and touched your arm. I never felt anything so cold, not even in the winter.

Your mom was real cool headed. She called the ambulance right off, as soon as she knew you weren't faking. I remember you telling me she was machine lady all through the divorce from your dad, and now I believe it more. Your mom got a lot of blankets to wrap you in and a wet cloth for your head from the bathroom. She was the one who found your empty bottle of sleeping pills. Your mom did everything. I felt like a kid, like Jim and Jess. We just stood around watching.

Everyone in the city with a uniform came to your house. They wanted to talk to your family, and me cause I was sleeping over. Each of us were interviewed in a different room. They sat me down in the dining room, in your dad's captain's chair your mom never lets anyone sit in. She didn't really complain when she noticed, but she looked at me so hard I moved to another chair.

At first the police didn't think you did it on purpose. They asked me if we had been doing drugs together. Me, doing drugs! The cops must think all high school seniors invite their best friend to sleep over just to get high. Imagine the trouble if you had been smoking with your other friends!

The policeman who talked to me had this huge nose with a black hair coming out that moved when he talked. I almost laughed. I wanted to pull it out with tweezers. He wrote everything down. I told him we watched videos, ate pizza and talked. He even wrote down what order we watched the videos.

When I told him we switched off sleeping over every weekend between your house and mine, he had the gall to ask if we also switched off buying the dope each time. He suddenly wanted to haul me to the station to give me a blood test.

About an hour after the cops arrived, one finally opened the empty bottle of sleeping pills and found the note you left rolled up. You think it was bad before? When they read the part about the voices calling you, they gave me the third degree, hauled me down to the station and then made me talk to a shrink! I guess I can understand the cops got on my case because most of the note was talking to me.

The shrink was a tiny guy, shorter than me. I never saw a grown man shorter than me except on television. He wanted to know everything you ever told me about the voices, everything they ever said to you, in perfect detail as if they were my voices. His eyes were huge brown blobs because he had those thick glasses like Sally Jackson's before she had to get contacts cause they didn't make lenses any thicker.

I went ahead and told him all I could remember, which wasn't much. Just what you said about calling you from the edge, and how they made you feel so alone, no matter who you were with, even sometimes when you were with me. I told him that's why you always made so many friends, because the voices made you so lonely, and the more friends you had around you, the less you thought about the voices. In the note, you said they finally called you away. I wonder if you're alone now.

The guy said you needed "sycophants", and I didn't know what that meant until later when I looked it up, so I got mad. I told him your other friends might not be the smartest or care about you like I do, but they weren't psycho. He laughed, and told me he meant you just wanted a bunch of people you could order around, which I guess is true. You did boss most everyone but me. I hate his eyes. It was hours before he was finished asking me questions.

Talking to him I decided to write a diary like you. Since I don't have voices calling me like you did, I'll just write it to you. Did you ever feel the voices looking over your shoulder when you wrote? I don't think I'll carry my diary around, like you did, though, and I don't have as much to say. I'll write at night, just before bed, and I'll use the fuzzy pen I got when you got yours. I wonder what the cops will think about your diary.

Sunday 6/30

Hi Kim. We buried you today. Remember the place where your aunt is? You're real close to her, almost next door. Your mom cried a lot, and so did Jess. I think I saw Jim crying too, but he saw me just then and made a dash into the bathroom of the funeral home. I wish you could have seen that. Sounds crazy doesn't it? I wish you could have been at your funeral. A few girls from school showed up, Becki and Denise. I don't think your mom called your dad in time for him to fly here.

I almost didn't cry. It was strange, I didn't need to at all, but I held onto Jess tight while the priest talked. Jess got my sleeve all wet. I was all scrunched up inside, like I wanted to cry, but I wasn't crying yet. I felt like I was storing up everything somewhere, and until your mom threw the first handful of dirt on your coffin, I was all laminated, like my coin paperweight where you can see every detail of the butterfly, but can't get to it. The plastic cracked when I heard the dirt. Da-dum. It sounded like the coffin was empty, so hollow you couldn't possibly be inside. But I knew you weren't ever coming back then. I can still hear it any time I want, like a song. Da-dum. Da-dum.

I picked up my stuff from your house. Your mom was real shook up. She walked around the house touching things and putting them back. No more machine-lady. Her eyes were red.

She also gave me your diary. She hid it from the cops. Since we were best friends she thought I should get it. She said she never read it, and it was still locked when she gave it to me, so I believe her.

She wanted me to tell her if there were good things about her in it. She looked so bad I'll tell her some nice things. Hope I don't have to make any up.

I got the creeps when I saw your fuzzy red pen stuck in the flap of the lock. I can't remember seeing you use it to write in your diary. I guess I must have, though. We never thought the same way, not like some friends do.

Your mom wouldn't go into your room, so I had a few minutes by myself. My sleeping bag was still there, but the police took yours away. I lay down on top of mine and tried to imagine you dying. You were so close to me I could have touched you, but I don't even know when you left. I bet I could have heard your last breath. If I had been awake, I could have tried to hold my breath, just to keep you with me a little while longer. I hope I was breathing in.

I took your diary keys from where you hid them. I almost went around your whole room straightening it like usual, or touching all your things like your mom was doing downstairs, but I wanted to leave everything like you did. You're not ever going to mess it up again.

When I got home, my mom called the University. Tuition didn't go up, so I'll still be going to college in the spring like I planned. You said hold on, hold out. You're right again. You said I could.

I guess I won't have to worry about leaving you behind any more. Things sure turned around, didn't they? It's like you took off and left me behind.

My job at the theater is still cruddy, but at the end of the summer I'll get promoted to full time when the summer help goes back to school. Instead of cleaning up the seats, I'll get to sell tickets and count the cash. I'm a valuable asset, the boss says. He finally noticed I've been there the longest (except for Frank, who leaves for the navy in the fall). Two years, and I'm an asset. Gee, whiz! I wonder what three years is good for?

Remember when we had a million plans? And we believed them? I told my boss I'd take more hours now. I'm already the one who always takes everyone else's shifts as it is, so I may not get any extra hours. When I told him I wanted more he raised his eyebrows and chewed his cigar, as if he didn't believe I was real. Remember I told you he has a new "see-gar" every night but never lights it?

I never realized until I read your diary what you thought of me. It's like hearing about something you were there for. You know what really happened, but then you listen to someone else tell it. I'm glad I didn't know, almost. It's fun, kind of, but freaky.

I always guessed you thought I was weird. Too straight. I'm the only girl in our class who still goes to church, and believes in God. You always gave me a hard time about not sleeping with Jorie, calling me the only eighteen year old virgin in California. I didn't know you ever noticed me working towards music school every summer since I was sixteen. I never knew you saw all that as being strong. You never acted like that. It makes me feel all funny inside, like I never really knew you, and you were my best friend.

Wednesday 7/3

I forgot to write last night. I got home late. After we closed the late show, Jorie asked me to Perkins for a snack, remember when you'd sneak out after your mom thought you were in bed and we'd sit in Perkins talking and drinking coffee until my curfew? The waiter was this flaming fag, fawning over Jorie's shirt as if he wanted to tear it off his back. Jorie didn't really notice the waiter until I told him.

Jorie drove us. He still has that ancient dark mud-green Buick that gets seven gallons per mile. At least his back seat is big enough for two people. You'd smile. I stuffed the seat belts in behind the back of the seat like you told me so they wouldn't dig into my back. Jorie finally wore the cologne I bought him for his birthday. We necked in his back seat for almost half an hour before he dropped me off. Nothing more, nothing less, just like always. Sorry to disappoint you.

Sunday 7/7

This diary stuff is harder than I thought. I forgot all weekend. Fourth of July with the family. Yay.

All I could do was remember the arguments with dad trying to get him to let you come with us to the "family gathering" this year. Ha- arguments? He should have seen you argue with your mom. Dad would knock my head off if I ever threw anything at him.

Maybe I'll have to carry my diary around just like you just to remember to use it. Probably not a good idea. This isn't a real diary with a lock, it's just one of those books with blank pages. There's no place to clip my pen, and there's nothing to keep it shut. The clip on my pen broke and I almost swore at it, I was so mad. It's like another piece of you broke off. There's no lock.

I hope nobody reads this until after I die.

Guess what? It was weird. This morning before I got up, I heard voices kind of like the ones you heard. They were like over the edge of the world, calling. It made me feel far away from everyone, like the first time mom and dad let me stay home alone all night without a sitter. At first it was great to be alone, but I was so empty by the end of the night. Remember how I called you again and again that night? You were over at Billy's. Your diary said you never wanted me to call you there again, but you never told me.

The voices weren't saying real words, just murmuring. Like a yoga mantra. I wonder if the police shrink would say I'm going crazy.

Monday 7/8

Remember that song writing contest? I won fourth place with the song about Jorie, but without his name in it. The one about walking in the rain, remember? You always told me "You're a hit. If only you'd

just send some of them away . . ." You were right again.

My mom handed me the envelope and waited around to see what was in it. Not snooping, but she didn't open her mail right away, so I knew she was interested. I opened it right there, but I wanted to go to my room, as if it was a secret. Then I made her ask me what it was, and I've never done that before.

The prize was fifty dollars. I broke down and spent it on two blouses. I figured that I don't really need to save everything for college. My mom was more surprised when I brought home the clothes than when I got the letter and the prize. She was more surprised even than when you died. None of my other songs won anything.

I really missed you at the mall. It was the first time I went shopping without you. I kept turning around to tell you something, even though I knew I was alone. I read a story once, where this guy had his arm amputated but he kept reaching up to open doors and scratch his head and do other stuff with it. Sometimes it even itched, even though it wasn't there.

I saw some clothes that reminded me of you. There was this pink leotard like the burgundy one you used to wear under your torn jeans, but they were HOT pink. You would have bought them in a minute. I tried them on but I looked silly.

Oh, Kim. I'd give every song I got in me to bring you back again.

Wednesday 7/10

Jorie and I made love tonight! After the theater closed we went to Perkins like we always do, but this time we went all the way when we parked after. Nothing more, nothing less!

I was so intent, I forgot to push the belts behind the cushions, so they kind of dug in my back. They left marks worse than any hickey. Good thing the bruises are all under my clothes. Dad would definitely ask questions.

Even so, it was better than your stories about Bill. And Jorie wasn't like what you told me about Steve, either. He touched me all over even after we took off our clothes. He was super gentle, and he didn't rush at all. He kept looking in my eyes, straight on, as if he didn't believe what we were doing. I got the feeling he's done it before, but I didn't say anything. He was wearing cologne tonight; I think that helped me decide.

I cried afterwards, for a long time. Hours. Jorie held me, just us two in his back seat. I think he thought it was because he hurt me or I was sorry we had done it or something. That wasn't it at all.

It was weird. I was sad because I knew I couldn't ever tell you about it. I felt alone, even with Jorie holding me. I guess it was like you hearing the voices even when I was right there.

I think Jorie is my best friend now.

Thursday 7/11

I felt like I glowed in the dark all day. My mom guessed, cause she kept asking me about last night, and I couldn't think of anything to tell her. After I told her she asked a lot more questions, but they weren't really prying.

She didn't ask anything gross or who I was with (I guess after seeing Jorie for a year it's obvious). She asked what it was like, how I felt about myself now, and if I would be doing it again. I had never really thought of that. I told her that Jorie had a rubber, and she laughed and told me a funny story about her first time with dad. I told her some of your stories, too. She knew they had to be yours. She seemed glad that I didn't regret it at all, but she wasn't sure if I really didn't feel bad at first. I don't. We went to Planned Parenthood together and I got some birth control pills in a round case like you had. I guess I still don't understand why you never told your mom. It was easy, she didn't get mad. But my mom did tell me not to say anything to dad just yet. You and your mom were a lot like me and my dad.

Friday 7/13

At work, I kept smiling at Jorie. He smiled back for real each time, but he was slightly freaked. He looked as if he wasn't sure if I would still like him. I kept coming close enough to him to smell his cologne, but he didn't like me to touch him when anyone else was looking.

He got better right away when I finally got the chance to talk to him alone. We went to Perkins. I told Jorie he was my best friend. He didn't say anything, but I could tell he was happy. He tipped too much when we left. We had that same waiter again.

Jorie asked a bit about you. He asked me how I was doing now that you were gone. Angry words went through my head, as if you had left me behind on purpose. I never got so mad at you as that minute. It was really scary, Kim. I've never been that mad, even at my dad. Before I could say anything mean about you, Jorie went on talking about how he felt when his brother died in a car accident. I'm ok now.

Sunday 7/14

At confession the priest made me feel like I was damned to hell. It was really hard to go in there and tell him about me and Jorie, even though you never get to see the priest's face through the curtain. I almost picked all the paint off the wall of the confessional before he was done with me. I'll probably be through with college before I finish my penance. And next week I'll have to tell the priest about the angry words I have about him. I can't wait.

Friday 7/19

Jorie and I went to the mall. It wasn't quite like going with you. I explained some of our jokes to him, like the one about the woman at the hot dog stand. He smiled at most of them, but it really isn't funny when you have to explain. I hate saying it, but I guess we had to be there.

I bought some punk stuff like you used to wear: A leather vest with studs in lines all over, a frilly white blouse so soft you almost can't feel it (or see it!), and a pair of jeans with pockets all over, even on the knees. No pink leotards. Jorie doesn't like anything I bought; I could see it in his face, but he kept quiet, watching me try on everything.

The money came from my savings. I hid the new clothes in my closet and dresser. I hope mom doesn't notice. Not that she'd take them away; it's my money. She'd just raise her eyes to heaven and warn me again about trying to be something I'm not. These days she keeps telling me not to try to replace you. I'm not sure anything could do that. It's even worse when she doesn't say anything at all, and just moves her eyes and presses her lips together.

Saturday 7/20

Jorie told me the boss is pissed. Two years I slave away and he's mad about me being late three days in a row. After work at Perkins we talked shop for a long time because it was a bad day. The boss was on my case all night, chewing my butt like it was his cigar.

Jorie said the boss thinks I've changed since I graduated. Then Jorie did something weird. He paused like maybe he agreed, but he didn't actually say anything. It was like Jorie was someone else for a second.

Maybe I'll get a different job this fall. Somewhere they don't complain behind your back. Maybe I'll give up college and spend all two thousand dollars on new clothes.

Sunday 7/21

I didn't go to mass or confession. I told my mom I was sick. She knew I was lying, but she never made me go to church since I was twelve. She pressed her lips together and left the room. I stayed in bed until Jorie called around noon.

Jorie and I made love in the park. It's even better when you're not worried about it being the first time.

We took a blanket and his tape player to Kelpner Park where the six paths cross and took the one that the joggers never take, cause of the mud hole. We went around the turn by the berry bushes and lay

down on the blanket, just smiling, but like someone had turned on a switch and we couldn't find a way to turn the smiles off. I got some berry stuff on the knees of my newest jeans, but I didn't notice then. The blanket will never get clean, I bet.

It was really nice outside. It was hot and we were sweaty, but a breeze came by a lot. The wind was unreal, blowing over us softly, like a caress as we undressed each other. I almost know why you went skinny dipping: to be outside with no clothes on isn't the same as indoors. But you never told me you made love outside. I finally did something you never did.

Monday 7/22

The stuff hit the fan tonight.

After mom went to her women's dinner, dad found my pills when he was looking for a book, he says. We argued for a solid hour until mom got home, me yelling back this time, like I never did before. That shut dad up for a second or two. I almost got mad enough to throw the book at him. But he'd kill me. Your mom would try to throw the book back at you, but my dad wouldn't miss.

When mom got there, dad shut up, finally. Mom told him how she knew already, and how we had talked it out. He believed it from her the first time. He wouldn't say he was sorry for calling me a liar until mom found out he had.

We all sat down and Mom told us more than ever before about what she had to put up with as the oldest daughter in her own family. It was a lot like dad treats me. I never looked at it like that, but I guess I am his first baby, even though I'm grown up now. Dad shut up entirely, like he does with mom when he's lost the same argument more than once.

After we went into my room to talk, mom noticed my new frilly blouse. At first she thought it was yours, but the price tag was still on it. She began harping on me again about how I was trying too hard to be like you, so I walked out. I never did it before. You're right. It works.

I walked around for a while. I almost walked to the cemetery to visit you, but I didn't think of it in time to make it all the way there before the late show at work.

The boss fired me straight off, right in front of the customers. I wasn't really late, so he acted like I always forgot my uniform. I forgot it for the first time! I guess I left home pretty fast. All the while the boss was telling me off, Jorie was standing behind him looking scared.

I waited around the theater all night. I couldn't go home. One guy thought I was trying to be picked up. If I hadn't been so mad, it would have been kinda scary. He was big, but he went away fast when I told him off. He must have got bad vibes from me, kinda like you would give off when you got mad enough.

Jorie wouldn't talk to me after he got off work. He said he couldn't go to Perkins, even after I said

"please." He said he had to get some sleep. He was lying, so I told him off.

Someone waited up until three. It looked like dad, but I'm not sure. I snuck in the house after the lights went out. Tonight I really wish you were still here. Who's my best friend now?

Wednesday 7/24

I heard your voices again this morning, just before I was ready to wake up all the way. They were like soft whispers from a radio next door or a conversation in the apartment upstairs when the windows are open.

I really felt alone. It was really bad when they cried. I've never been so alone, Kim. And there was no reason to get up, to make them stop. There's no easy way out of this one. I'm staying. I wonder why. It may be all I have, but it's mine, it's mine.

At dinner all Dad said was pass the napkins. It was like you told me your house was those last weeks. You said it was no fun living there anymore. I guess I never really understood what you were saying.

Read your diary again. You said they finally called you away, Kim, but they're telling me to stay. You used to say hold on, hold out, cause it's good. You said I know that you can fight. I'm glad someone does. It's so hard now.

Friday 7/26

I got a call from a rock band called Dover Beach. When they called, I was reading the want ads in the paper. My mom answered the phone and handed it to me without a word. She left the room right away.

The band called long distance for me. They've heard the demo tape of the song about Jorie that won the prize. I don't like that song as much any more, but they do. Their manager talked to a judge for the contest and found out I did both the singing and the writing on the tape I sent. Dover Beach wants me to fly to New York to sing some of my songs with them, maybe even sign a contract. I wish I could be excited. Maybe someone should throw dirt on my coffin to wake me up. Da-dum.

Of course, mom didn't want me to go, even though the band pays all expenses. That helped me decide. I told her that I'm eighteen, she can't stop me from going. I think I sounded like you.

Then dad says I better take all my things with me. "If you're an adult then you can support yourself as an adult, because I won't," he said. Dad looked me in the eye when he said that. I thought I was dead already, but I can't find the place I put my heart just then. Worse even than your funeral. Mom told me she felt the same way, and dad looked surprised, right through his angry face, but nothing changed in me.

I guess I'll probably have to spend my college savings on renting an apartment before school starts, unless Dover Beach gives me a contract. You said, It's good, I'm a hit. I hope you're right again. Maybe

I won't need to go to music school.

Neither of my parents would take me the airport. There was no argument. "An adult has to make her own way," mom said. It was hard, but I called Jorie. He was real quiet, but he said yes.

I almost hadn't, but I turned around and ran back and forced myself to put my arms around dad and say goodbye. I've never seen him cry before, but all I could do was watch.

Jorie listened to me all the way to the airport without a word. He wasn't wearing the cologne I gave him. He didn't even try to kiss me goodbye.

He said "good luck" when I got out of the car, and that's all, except for "I don't know who you are anymore." I broke open like a water balloon when he said that, and couldn't stop crying until the plane was in the air for a while. I don't know who you are anymore. Da-dum. Neither do I.

I wonder if any of the members of Dover Beach will be my friend. I really need someone now.

Your voices called you away, but I'm staying. It's my life, not yours. You said hold on, hold out, 'cause it's good. If it's so good. why did you leave? God damn you, Kim. Damn you to hell. I hope you hurt as bad as me.

THE HEART'S LONELINESS

The grey stones of the small footbridge and the sounds of the water beneath it were the first signs that Lubani was home again. Even his walk through the farmlands surrounding his hometown hadn't brought the feeling of home to Lubani. Twenty-eight years had taught him that peasants were always similar, regardless of the town around which they farmed.

Lubani walked to the center of the bridge to Su Ame. He closed his blue eyes, brushed his long brown hair from his ears, and stood listening to the water. He recalled the three tones: low gurgling around the foundation; high bubbling of the water through the stones which had fallen in; and finally the subtle almost inaudible swishing of the current past the long grass hanging over the banks into the water.

When he was eighteen, Lubani had been exiled to the bridge every day for nearly a month until he had been able to describe each of the three sounds to his martial arts teacher, Benedict. Lubani at eighteen had actually spent much of his time trying to break one of the grey stones with a blow from his hand, just as he had once seen Benedict do.

Ben's stone had long been replaced, but Lubani's target stone was still part of the handrail. It was intact, save for the wear caused by the ten years of hands across it since he had last been here. Lubani caressed the smooth stone with his calloused hand, knowing he now could break it easily.

Lu shrugged his slipping pack onto his shoulders and walked on, yielding his bridge to the couple who approached from the city side. Lubani saw their faces and walked on without a break in his stride to reflect the turmoil he suddenly felt. Why should I be surprised to see Khannish? In the four years since they won the war, they've had plenty of time to emigrate to Su Ame.

Another voice responded, you mean: In the four years since YOU LOST THE WAR. It was a familiar voice, one which Lubani had long ago come to ignore. After three years of fighting, General Benedict had been killed. Even with his star pupil Lubani leading, two years later the Atreans lost the coastline to the invading Khannish. Lubani heard Benedict reminding him '*Nirvana insight into present mortal sufferings allows the Lohan to overcome all passions or temptations.*' Like pain, despair, regret, eh Ben? Are you beyond all passions and temptations, Ben? Lubani sighed.

Four years after the war it should have been no surprise to see dark Khannish hair and eyes on coastal farmers, but Lubani had spent most of the last decade far inland with the kin of his blonde and blue-eyed Atrean wife. Karmen! Lubani shut his eyes and pressed them with his fingers, as if the road dust caused his sudden tears. He blinked until they cleared, walking the mile between the bridge and the city limits, carefully thinking of nothing in particular.

The Su Ame streets were packed with people of both races. Lubani frowned as he walked, counted backwards on his fingers, then again more slowly. Ten years ago, open street market had been held on

Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Although he had been on the road alone for over a fortnight, Lubani was certain it was only Wednesday morning. Wednesday market must be the Khannish way.

Lubani strode deep into the crowds before he noticed how quiet the streets were. Used to the solitude of travelling alone, it didn't strike him at first that none of the vendors were crying for attention, and none of the shoppers were haggling out loud. Only the animals were crying. Barter was a pantomime play with gestures instead of offers, and much head shaking. Only the Atrean merchants were speaking, always in hushed tones, and only to Atrean customers. When he noticed, Lubani wanted to shake his head. Khannish way . . .

Six blocks further on, and about halfway to his destination, Lubani found the old street signs had been removed entirely. There weren't even any new ones to replace them! He clenched his teeth tightly and turned his sight inwards to memory. Left maybe a block and a half to the alley between Hammer and Vine . . . Don't the Khannish get lost? Up the alley to what used to be Pearl . . .

Lubani found the home of his friend Necrodemus without any real problem. He had a good idea of the city from before the war, and he knew pretty close where Nec lived.

Nec had stopped training under Benedict a year before the war, when it was becoming a liability to have Khannish coloring in Su Ame. About then Nec had taken up with a witch who was an Atrean half-breed too. He had begun cloistered study of the Wicca with her. Nec's witch had died, leaving the building to Nec, Karmen had said. She had stayed with him when she came to Su Ame to learn ritual magic with Piscator, the new Archmage since the war. Here's his door. Only Nec would post an Atrean luck sigill these days. Nec. or Karmen...

Lubani scrunched his eyes shut and imagined Nec as he last saw him. He lifted his fist, picturing the small dark boy with an extra decade. The door sounded strange and gave slightly when he knocked. Lubani opened his eyes, and saw Necrodemus peering under the book he held up for Lubani to knock on. Nec must have come out just as I closed my eyes. Lubani opened his mouth, but blanked. He just stood, looking at his friend.

"Hello Lu. I've got more inside. I remember how you always knocked books in favor of physical training." Necrodemus' eyes sparkled, but his mouth was serious. His hair was still black as soot.

"Hi. Nec, How are you? It's been a long time," Lubani whispered. Necrodemus stared into space for a moment.

"Two thousand, eight hundred and forty two days." Necrodemus smiled to himself smugly. He then reached out to hug Lubani, who was only and instant behind in the embrace.

"What?" Lubani said, puzzled.

"You said 'it's been so long,' and I said 'two thousand, eight hundred and forty-two days,'" Necrodemus repeated. "Since I saw you with Karmen during the war," he added. Lubani's face froze, and Necro-

demus tone softened. "I know. We trained together. A wizard's bindings are true; I felt her go... Lu, her accident was a year ago. Are you grieving still?"

Lubani's whisper was barely above the wind. "Yes."

Necrodemus pulled Lubani in by the sleeve, saying, "That's not the Lubani I knew, nor is it the one she married. Nor does it sound like 'the Hero of Saint Benedict' you've become." Nec stared hard into his friend's eyes. "You were the strongest of us all," Nec said.

"That was Benedict's emptyhand training, and popular folk tales, not real life."

"For the three years of our training, Old Ben said that his training was real life." Lubani said nothing, so Necrodemus made his eyes like ebony spears, and knocked Lu on the shoulder. "What's got into you, man? You were the best of us."

"I am nothing," Lubani whispered, dropping his pack and sinking into one of Necrodemus' chairs. "Nothing without her."

"A spell to do what?" Necrodemus came through the bolts of cloth hanging across his huge one-room home, bringing the smells of smoke and simmering meat with him. The last third of Necrodemus' apartment was partitioned by intricate tapestries into cooking and sleeping places. Taran silk. He must be making good money with the guild.

Lubani was lying out in the main partition across a few floor cushions, sucking the mouthpiece of Nec's water pipe. He lay in a square of sunlight with one arm across his eyes, shielding himself from the brightness coming through the open window frame. Necrodemus waited with his head through the divider while Lubani finished his toke.

"'Relieve the heart's loneliness,' she said." Lubani inhaled again. Necrodemus could hear bubbling from the pipe.

"What makes you think it can be done? What made Karmen think so?" Nec inquired with a single eyebrow raised.

He sniffed the smoke Lubani exhaled. "The good stuff's in the covered chalice on the table," he said pointing to a silver cup on only large furnishing in the room, a massive oak table. "I've got some White Lotus." Lubani lifted his arm until he could see Necrodemus' face.

"You know I don't abide by artificial stimulants," Lubani admonished. "Never even tried any. I do remember some of what Benedict labored to teach us all those years!" Lubani changed his voice to match his memory of Benedict. "*Inner strength is all that's required to meet life's trials, as well as the trials of combat. All weapons, whether made of hate or steel, can be overcome by the spirit.*" Lubani let

his arm fall back over his face. "Insight into the mortal conditions of self and others.' Lesson number twenty-eight. So there," he mumbled not caring if Nec heard.

"And Nirvana insight overcomes all passions and temptations. Why do you need a spell to cure your broken heart?" Necrodemus let scorn bite into his voice. "Thousands do it every day without magic-

Lubani sat up very fast, pointing an accusing finger. "You know as well as I, that thousands don't have what Karmen and I shared." Necrodemus pinched his lips tightly, and the corners of his mouth turned down. Lubani reminded him, "Even the witch of Endor couldn't charm me away from Karmen," He dropped his finger.

"The witch of Endor was putz," Nec said, frowning.

"She fetched you up against the wall and held you there nicely until Karmen distracted her. Her power's legendary: why you almost-"

"The sausages are burning," Nec said. He ran behind the tapestries, almost hiding his burst of red-face from Lubani.

"Something sure is." Lu mumbled, falling back on the cushions. He lifted the pipe's mouthpiece to his lips, but let it drop to the floor without inhaling. He raised his voice. "I brought Karmen's two books. She once told me-"

Nec stuck his head through the divider. "Her *spell* books?" he asked incredulously. Lubani's nodded. Nec blinked twice, an exaggerated gesture. Khannish dismay from Nec? He's been here a long time. Lu felt a minor loss. Nec continued.

"She's got spells I never saw. How do you know they're her spellbooks?" He withdrew behind his genuine silk tapestries, dubiously calling, "I've been told only a wizard can read spells."

"Of course, silly," Lubani admonished. "Even a stupid warrior knows that. I know what they are because they're the only books she brought into the house which I couldn't learn to read." Lubani paused for Necrodemus to comment on his new literacy, but only kitchen sounds came from beyond the wall of cloth. He sighed. "You asked what makes me believe such a spell exists? Karmen is the reason. Early in Benedict's war, I'd be away from Karmen sometimes a month or more. Later on, after Ben got killed, I had to be away from her half a year or more at a time."

Lubani then fell silent so long that Necrodemus stuck his head through to see if Lu was drugged or had fallen asleep. Lubani was just moving his hand in the light from a window and watching his fingers. He looked up to Necrodemus and back at his hand again before he continued.

"Karmen said she was so lonely that she would conjure little creatures while I was away so she wouldn't have to be alone." Lu sighed, sat on his hands. "I saw some of them once, when I came home unexpectedly. They were strangely formed, little black chicks with paddles for feet, red kittens with no claws or teeth, brown frogs with big eyes that made odd noises unless you held them in your hands. They

disturbed me, so I asked her not to summon such things. She told me she began to work on a spell that would ease the loneliness she felt." Lubani looked up at Necrodemus, and he felt no older than the child he was when they had first been introduced. "Will you look in her books for me, Nec?" Lu whispered.

"Sure, Lu. I'll take a look," Nec replied, because there was no other answer possible. Then he gestured towards his low table and commanded, "Siddown for now. Breakfast is served. But gird thy loins: I am no culinary mage." He disappeared a last time and returned with a plate of sausages, a stack of pancakes, and a plate of brown junk that looked quite similar to eggs. Lubani took the bowl of brown stuff as Nec put out silverware. "Sorry," Nec apologized. "They're brown because I cooked the sausage in the same pan. Forgot to wash the pan before I scrambled the eggs."

Lubani smiled and shrugged and took a heap of brown eggs on his plate. His voice stayed admirably solid as he regarded them, adding "Karmen cooked about as well as you. I'll make our dinner tonight, if you don't mind."

"Actually I was hoping you'd offer," Nec grinned. "I remember your cooking from the old days."

Lubani smiled. "While Ben was still alive, the men said they'd rather have me be cook than an officer."

"Everything you do, you do well," Necrodemus said. "No wonder they liked you."

"Nah. More like the younger days before the war, when nobody really cared enough to learn – Except Michelle! She could cook as well as she fought. She's the one who did everything right, staying through until training was over. Haven't heard of her in a while. Probably should get in touch. Know anything about her?" Lu asked.

Nec widened his eyes and made galumphing noises around the forkfull of pancake he had just put in his mouth. Lubani imitated him accurately, making Nec laugh and choke a bit. He waited for Nec to chew and swallow.

"She's back in town here," Nec finally said, sipping some milk. "She moved here when her dad died. Inherited enough to buy a pub. Decent clientele; only about three fights on a weekend night. She trains her own bouncers, of course." He smiled. "She's still one of the best warriors Benedict every trained. She still teaches. I hear she even takes on Khannish students. She's in peak shape, all right." Nec patted his belly. "Unlike us anti-Lohans."

Nec took the time to drink the glass and pour himself another. Lubani ate silently, looking at the teenage blonde girl in his mind. She's as old as me. Michelle at twenty-eight, now that's a thought! Necrodemus broke in.

"She stayed with Benedict after you got married, you know. Finished his entire training sequence, unlike any of us, even you. Funny. Karmen, Michelle, and I used to think you would be the one of us, if any, to stick it out."

"Plans change," Lubani mumbled, shrugging, and shoving a broken sausage link into his already full mouth. "She was quite something. She ever marry?"

Necrodemus froze suddenly, blinking. "Didn't you know?"

"Know- what?" Lubani asked. He drowned a single pancake in waves and waves of corn syrup, filling his plate to the rim until the cake was entirely immersed.

"She's had a big thing for you all along. Didn't you know?" Nec stared as Lubani cut away at the pancake with the side of his fork and stabbed, then whirled a forkload of cake until the syrup almost overflowed onto the table.

Ten years ago She was always interested in working out with me, listening to my stories, helping me test my katas. "No," Lu said carefully, "What kind of thing?"

"You know, she liked you, and quite a bit." They ate in silence for a moment. Suddenly Nec said, "Still does, I imagine," while watching his fork intently.

"No," Lubani said, watching the past on the far wall. She always had time for me. I must have been blind. "I never realized until now." And she even stayed friends with Karmen

"I wondered," Necrodemus nodded, and they finished their food in silence.

Lubani went to visit Michelle rather than stay in Nec's flat as Necrodemus went delving into Karmen's books. Michelle's pub stood alone in a paved square, one of the few paved areas in the town. Lubani recalled it from his youth as a good place to incite drunken Khannish sailors into brawling. He pleased himself by finding his way to the pub easily, despite the lack of street markers.

Even without the sign reading *Shelly's*, he was certain it was the right place. Teenagers practiced emptyhand katas and maneuvers with wooden weapons on all four sides of the building. More a training ground than a pub! Lubani walked all the way around, watching the youngsters work out. None of the students was over fifteen years old.

Most of them were good, much better than they had any right to be at their age. Martial training required a dedication beyond what anyone under twenty was capable of giving without a war. Or a very patient master teacher to give the lessons! Then, my team lost to these people, Lubani forced himself to recall, the only time I've failed in combat. Brushing hair out of his eyes, he returned to his study of Michelle's students.

Gravel moved behind Lubani. A held breath was almost lost: someone trying for stealth. Lubani whirled around and stiffened his fingers on both hands making them like small shovels. Seven children who were sneaking up jumped him with hands and wooden knives. They closed swiftly as they saw he

noticed them.

Lubani's reflexes were trained for killing in the battlefield; against children he had to calculate each blow, pull his strikes and slashes to prevent them from maiming, or worse. If they were trying to kill me instead of dump me on my ass, they might have the chance, Lubani realized. I haven't had to think out each blow since the training grounds – almost a decade ago! Slow: Palm strike instead of knifehand. She almost got my kidney with that kick! Low to block the fist- damnation! A wooden knife approached his left eye in slow motion. Lubani deflected it, but felt the wrist which held it snap. Double damnation!

Two punches landed on his back while he was distracted, but they were the last two; he spun, swept the last attacker's feet, and then all seven were flat on the pavement. The leader didn't know what was going on; she had not attacked.

"Pub's closed!" she said. "No one supposed to enter the training grounds until pub opens at dusk." When she saw Lubani rise smoothly, she backed up a step, having mistaken Lubani's crouch for a knocked down sprawl. Her eyes narrowed. "You a new teacher?" She asked Lubani.

He ignored her, moving directly from his crouch to attend the wrist he had broken. The little boy was about eleven, sitting on the ground staring at the odd angle his hand formed with his arm.

"What's your name?" Lubani asked, kneeling next to the boy.

"Wasei. You're real fast!" Wasei didn't seem to be in pain.

"Let me fix your arm." Lubani described to the wide eyed Wasei each step of what he was going to do and why, so the child wouldn't be as afraid. Lubani then formed a makeshift splint from the wooden dagger and the hem of his own shirt. Wasei just nodded and watched, remaining quiet even after he started to bite his lip from the pain. Khannish way.

The other children had risen from their real sprawls and stood a respectful distance from Lubani and his patient. "He's like the wind," Lubani heard one whisper. He was grateful none of the others seemed hurt. The children practicing across the yard were stopped, looking at Wasei, trying to discover what had happened. The child leader stepped close to Lubani and repeated, "Are you a new teacher?"

A yellow haired woman about thirty stepped silently from nowhere, then cleared her throat, surprising the children enough to make them jump. Lubani was almost started himself, she had been so silent. "No Jian, he's not a teacher. I've not seen him bef-"

Lubani rose to face her. He met her eyes, level with his own. Green, like real glass marbles or a cat's eyes when a light shines in them. Her hair was in a braid, an inch thick all the way down to her waist, where it looped around her belt twice to keep the braid from swinging free. "Lu? Is it you?" she whispered. Her hands fluttered momentarily like small birds.

His mouth moved, but it was the third try before he heard himself say "Yes." He reached out his left hand to hers and his right hand rose. He stopped himself before he touched the side of her face. She

turned to the children.

"Back to you practice, Jian. Wasei, go have healer look at your hand and give me the charge." Michelle ordered.

The children ran. They went to the side of the pub, chattering just loud enough to make themselves think the adults cared if they were the subject of the gossip.

"Karmen," Lu said, pulling his hands away.

"I heard about you and her." Michelle grasped both his hands in hers, squeezed them tightly. "Nec's in town. Have you seen him?" Lubani nodded. He did not release his grasp when she did.

"Same dark sense of humor. He short sheeted the bed yesterday after I arrived, then asked if I wanted to sleep at his place. He's still in the witch's den, but he doesn't have to keep off the streets any more." Lubani let her hands go when Michelle shrugged.

"It's a different city than when we grew up. Khannish ways are different," she said.

"Nec never really followed Khannish ways." Lu said.

"Nec was never one of them. His father was a man with your coloring," Michelle reminded, meeting his gaze again.

"How are you?" Lubani asked. She shrugged, turned away and began walking the square around her pub. Lubani followed, not certain whether she wanted him to follow. They walked around the building watching her students.

Michelle corrected the forms of the boys and girls as she passed. Lubani noticed the toughening of the skin on her face since they last met, age marks, lines that were the same each time she smiled or frowned. I can't remember her seventeen year old face any more.

Michelle stopped two girls that were sparring with bamboo swords. Michelle took a practice weapon and mask to demonstrate proper technique. Then the other girl had a question, so Michelle motioned for Lubani to take up the other mask and sword. Lubani frowned, but took the mask from the other girl. I have no right to teach these people.

After the mask was in place, he smiled, remembering the smell from the masks at Benedict's place in another time. The little girl handed him the practice sword. It was lighter than the metal swords he used in Ben's war, and even without an edge on it, Lubani knew ways he could kill with it.

"Moeru?" Michelle asked.

Moeru? What was that? Oh yes. Moeru was one of the attack forms Benedict taught them eight years before. He thought through the official responses for the first time in nearly a decade.

"Hai," Lubani cried, and she was on him.

Michelle strove forward with her sword, faster than Lubani had seen anyone move since his days with Benedict. Her rapid strikes at his head demanded immediate defense with no thought for attack.

Shortly he was using reflexes from his life in the field, without holding back. Lubani allowed his instincts to run, ignoring his recollections of moeru. He was forced back ten paces before he recovered from her intensity. He then didn't bother to pull his attacks, she was too fast.

For three minutes Lubani strove to regain the ground he had lost. He was sweating profusely by the time he stood where the first blow was struck. On the occasions he actually took to the battlefield, few opponents had ever stood against Lubani for more than a minute or two, and this, a mere practice! had lasted four, five minutes. Under the mask, Lu began to smile, all teeth, like a predator.

He couldn't gain another step in the next two minutes.

Suddenly, Michelle backed up and raised her hand to end the exercise. Once he understood, Lubani grasped the mask behind his neck and pulled it free up over his head. He couldn't remember playing so hard in years, and he couldn't stop grinning at her.

"You let me-" Lubani began.

Applause washed over them from all sides, rising in volume until there was no other sound and beyond, until the thunder was just harsh noise, like a deafening seashell.

Every student in the square had paused to watch Michelle and Lubani spar. Children were lined up, balancing on the pub's ledges to get a better view. Khannish house-husbands and -wives, people who saw practice outside their windows every day, they too were leaning from second story windows clapping their dark hands at the performance. Lubani got a dose of redface as he received their appreciation. Michelle was staring at him strangely, her lips pressed tightly together.

The children who has been dumped by Lubani approached close enough for him to hear their individual claps. Their leader was now nodding as she applauded, as if she understood something which had escaped her before.

There were broad smiles on every face but Michelle's. Hers had become stone. She shook her head from side to side once, and turned, striding into her building. She slammed the door behind her and the applause began to ebb.

The children huddled close to Lubani. The leader of the seven who had attacked Lubani spoke. "You're pretty good," she said. There was a general chuckle, but some of the younger ones nodded with wide eyes, while many of the older ones looked on silently, eager for any word. "Are you as good as General Lubani is?" The leader asked, making Lu look involuntarily to the pub door.

"Tell me about Lubani," he asked, kneeling beside her, looking to the closed door of the pub. Another student, a little boy, spoke.

"Michelle says he's the best fighter ever trained by Saint Benedict. And he won all those battles in the war. He's a Lohan!"

The boy's tone became dubious. "But Shell said Lubani never finished training under Benedict like

she did. She says Lubani went off to get married and never fights any more. But, except he fought in the war." Lubani stared hard at the closed door of the pub, seeing the woman behind it in his mind. Michelle says . . .

"Lubani still fights sometimes," he said to the children. "But not for his life very often," he said. "Not in big wars any more."

A small girl, no more than ten put her head through the space between two taller girls. She had a long braid like Michelle's, but in miniature, and she had dark hair. "Were you in the war?" she asked.

Lubani sighed. "Yeah. I was there." I killed your fathers and mothers. "It was-" and he searched carefully. "It wasn't very fun."

The child nodded sagely, as if he had given her a sacred recipe for pie she had always wanted and needed to quickly memorize it.

"Are you Lubani?" she asked. He started involuntarily. She was one of the Khannish, the enemy, yet it was with wonder and awe rather than fear that she spoke, less than two years since the last fighting. Lubani heard Necrodemus' voice suddenly: Thousands do it every day without magic.

"I'm not sure any more," he said, giving her the bamboo sword and face mask. Lubani walked towards the pub. The students parted before him and most were back to their own practice before he reached the door.

The door was unlocked. Lubani didn't know whether to be surprised.

It wasn't at all how Lubani recalled the pub from ten years ago; Michelle had remodeled it entirely. The inside of the pub was lit by many brass lamps along each wall. Although a lamp was on each table, none of those were lit. The place'll be plenty bright enough to read when they're all lit, Lubani guessed.

Thirty tables covered the floor, in a perfect six by five array. The bar made up the difference to fill the square room. No one was in sight, although there was noise behind a door next to the bar. Lubani guessed it went to a storeroom or kitchen.

The table legs appeared to run into the floor, and Lubani couldn't move the table when he pushed against it. Tables can't be overturned. Far enough apart to have private conversation, yet close enough for larger parties. He nodded when he found he couldn't lift the lamp from the center of the table. Saves on risk of fire if the lamps can't tip. The chairs were bolted down also. Just firm enough that a bouncer could get you before you pulled one up. Well planned. *She's the one who did everything right,* he heard himself tell Nec.

Michelle came from the storeroom with Wasei. His hand was professionally splinted. She stopped dead after one step, but Wasei peered around the gloom for nearly four seconds before he saw Lubani. Wasei looked uncertainly back and forth and then stuttered to Michelle before retreating to the storeroom once again.

They stared at each other a full minute in silence before they spoke simultaneously.

"That was low-" she began.

"I'm sorry, Shelly-" he had said.

They each waited for the other to go on. Lubani took a step to her, and then two. She said nothing until he was next to her. They leaned on the bar, both facing the empty room. Michelle crossed her arms in front of her.

"Where do you get off insinuating I would *let* you recover when I *had* you? In front of my students! You sure have gall, Lu. This is *my* practice ground! Remember training rules. I would like you to show me the same respect-"

A smile broke free on her stern face, but she fought it, although she turned slightly to Lubani before continuing: "*More* respect than you showed Benedict, if you plan to stay here any time at all."

"Yes, Michelle."

"I would never, in any case *allow* you to recover. War is never a game. Do you remember the lessons?"

"Yes, Michelle." She turned to him.

"What's this 'yes, Michelle' buttwind?"

"I want to follow all your lessons so I can be famous like Lubani and be the best fighter Saint Benedict ever trained. He's a Lohan!" Michelle frowned at the tone he used.

"Where did you get that?" She asked from the corner of her mouth, still looking at him sideways.

"From one of your students. Small girl, about so high." He held out his hand, making her look.

"Oh." She blinked twice, making Lu feel foreign.

"All's fair," Lubani said. Michelle turned to him, puzzled. "You may have withdrawn to trap me," he said. "Why should I imagine you retreated as a favor instead?" She remained silent with her arms crossed, unmoving, apparently unmovable. Lu continued, "Do you still feel the same way about me after eight years?"

Michelle didn't move at first, but she got redface as the words came to her. She turned to him, pointing her finger. "You bastard. If you knew, how come you sent me the only wedding invitation? Not Ben, not Nec, but *me*. Rubbing salt in old sores?"

Lubani stepped away from her outburst. His lips parted, and he smiled a bit. "You never used to get mad out loud. You were always the shy one."

"Damn you, mister! Answer my question!"

"I didn't know until this morning, Michelle. Nec had to tell me." She stopped, paused, crossed her arms and faced the empty room again. He took a step forward and lifted her chin until she met his gaze; there was moisture in her eyes, but her cheeks were dry. "Nec had to tell me," Lubani repeated. He didn't

know her well enough to read the faces that flew across her then, and that hurt inside.

"So you came to pay tribute to the spinster?" Michelle went on bitterly. "Well, when you get back, give regards to Karmen for me. I'll--"

Lubani paled and inhaled loudly, withdrawing his hand.

Michelle grasped her error instantly, if not fully its nature. She turned supernaturally fast and grabbed one of his outstretched hands in both of hers.

"What? Lu, what?" She moved her eyes from side to side across his face, like a cat trying to find motionless toy. "What's wrong with Karmen?"

"Karmen *died* last year, Michelle. I thought Nec told you. Her heart stopped while she was in Ritual, that's all. Her heart just stopped." Lubani leaned slowly into her, put his chin on her shoulder and clasped his hands behind her back, crying for the first time since it happened.

Michelle hugged him back, grateful he couldn't see her thoughts. Behind the sudden sorrow for her friend Karmen, there was an observer inside, commenting: Her heart stopped and mine won't . . . aren't you in a sorry spot, Lubani.

"So what happened to '*Nirvana insight into present mortal sufferings allowing the Lohan to overcome all passions and temptations?*'" Michelle asked, choosing a hardroll from the array of food. "Why does he need a spell?"

"I don't know," Necrodemus replied impatiently. He waved his hand over his lunch table. "I had the argument with him here, at this table yesterday morning before breakfast, and then last night after dinner, and again today, this morning, before he left to babysit your students."

"Well, you never teach them. I need the time off. I rarely get a day off, since you never offer to teach," Michelle said pointedly. Then, more softly, "Other than Lu and me, now that Karmen's gone, you're the only one qualified to teach Ben's way."

"I'm a wizard now," Necrodemus said through full mouth and patting his belly. "Well, almost a wizard. I need to do my 'Great Work' first; whatever that is." Nec sighed. "I'll be a wizard some day, not a *Lohan*. We made our choices years ago, Karmen and I. Even the third and fourth best disciples of Saint Benedict can decide to be wizards, eh? C'mon. Teachers teach--"

"And soothsayers say sooth?" Michelle finished. She giggled. "So swhat's the swooth with Karmen's spellbooks? Lu won't talk about it with me."

"I never said nothing, if he asks," Nec said with his mouth still full. Michelle nodded. Nec kept pushing more food in. "He thinks Karmen began a spell against loneliness in her books, and he wants me

to finish it and cast it on him."

"So it's not just *any* spell against loneliness he needs, he wants Karmen's spell. Oh..." Michelle nodded to herself.

"So how are *you* doing, Shelly?" Nec asked, raising his voice as if changing the subject." Michelle shrugged, smiling faintly.

"He's here, Nec. That's all for now. It's more than I ever hoped for. I'm going over to watch him with my students this afternoon. He's never taught in a peacetime environment. I've convinced him to begin learning to tend bar tonight." She shrugged, finishing her sandwich through her speech. "I'm wise enough to take what I can get of him while he's here."

"He may not stay?" Nec blinked. "Where would he go?" Michelle shrugged.

"He had a home with Karmen and her people. It sounds like he just up and left it though, so he may need to return soon to straighten things out with her family." Michelle smiled a lopsided grin, lifted her hands. "Maybe not. They're generous folks; they'll wait for him. And you know how loose he is with possessions," Michelle said.

"He's the same way with most people," Nec observed.

Michelle looked both ways and leaned forward to whisper, even in the privacy of Nec's flat. "You know his pack only had her books in it? He travelled almost five hundred miles in a fortnight! We had more survival gear and less distance to cover on our killer hikes with Ben!"

Necrodemus agreed with a snort and a nod, his own mouth full again. "He must have earned his food and shelter on the way," Nec said.

"More likely he went without," Michelle countered. "Sorrow goes a long way."

"Fills an empty stomach sometimes as well as an empty head." Necrodemus motioned towards the sandwiches on his table. "More?" he asked.

"No thanks," Michelle rose from her chair. "I'm not hungry. I need to get back to my place."

"Take one with you," he said. "You may get hungry if he doesn't leave today." She stood frowning a moment. Then Michelle's grin widened until it couldn't contain her teeth. She dutifully wrapped a sandwich in a napkin to take with her. They hugged tightly before she left.

The Archmage Piscator stood only as tall as Lubani's shoulders, but seemed very arrogant. Lubani felt presence in the old man before him. It wasn't magic, or even age, although the old man could have been anywhere from sixty to ninety. He had the aura. Power was carried in the stance, in the eyes, and in the heart. Lubani felt like he had when he first spent time with Ben, but refused to back down. How

come I don't like you?

As the last Atrean General and the newest Khannish Archmage faced off, Nec bustled around the room, doing nothing apparently constructive.

"You are Lubani, the pupil of Benedict the Atrean?" Piscator said, in a deeper voice than Lubani expected.

"Yes," Lubani answered. The Archmage waited, as if expecting more. Finally:

"You lead the Atrean army after he died?"

"Yes," Lubani answered. Another pause.

"You then were the tactician who held off our army with a third of our numbers for half a year." His tone indicated a question more than his words did.

"Yes," answered Lubani. "Eighteen thousand Khansmen against four thousand Atreans, but it was only five months before I surrendered." "Why were you allowed to live?"

Ask me if I killed the Archmage Greystaff. Ask me if I was the one who promoted you. Lubani didn't want to char Nec's chance at becoming a Wizard, so he kept his peace.

"I demanded a conditional surrender. No Atreans were to be declared war criminals for defending their own land."

"Why did the Council permit conditional surrender?"

"It was thirty-one hundred Atreans to twelve thousand Khansmen by then." Lubani said. Six thousand Khannish died in those months, including Greystaff. And we buried nine hundred of my own men. It was time for peace.

The Archmage exhaled, and retreated to a corner of the room, crossing his arms, holding his elbows in his hands.

Did I say the right thing? Lu pondered, biting his cheek. Will I hinder Nec's chances? Looking to Nec, he thought Necrodemus the Untitled seemed suddenly preternaturally calm, remarkably unshaken for one who was planning to take the rank of Wizard by the end of the day.

Necrodemus was wearing a red robe of satin, tailored with black trim: ruffles within ruffles to out-do the Archmage himself. Actually, the Archmage seemed underdressed; he wore a simple blue cotton shirt and dark trousers. He wasn't performing any magic today and didn't need ceremonial robes. Piscator sat, became a dark motionless form in the corner.

Every time Nec moved, he rustled like a man searching for something in a crowded closet. Nec wore no jewelry but a pendant of blue crystal which Lu knew was one of the only gifts Karmen had ever given to him. Lubani wore his travelling clothes, recently cleaned by one of Michelle's students.

"Well?" Piscator intoned. His low voice filled Necrodemus' flat without echoing off the walls. Necrodemus had removed the curtain dividing the room, and used it instead to cover the window opening.

Earlier that morning they had moved the heavy table to the sides, clearing the center of the room for a blue seven-pointed star newly chalked onto the floor. There were seven candles of black wax, like the kind Karmen had used frequently, and even an incense burner like hers was spewing a jasmine smell Lubani nearly recognized. Piscator cleared his throat, although his voice had been perfectly clear and resonant before.

"Necrodemus has indicated that he has a certain familiarity with the spellbook of your wife, General Lubani. Both the Khannish Council and the Mage's Council speak highly of her powers; she could have claimed the title Wizard three times by our standards. Necrodemus needs to perform but one work to become an initiate wizard."

Lubani shifted from one foot to another, uncomfortable for his friend in the growing tensions. Necrodemus again looked uncertain. The Archmage continued speaking from his dark corner.

"We each know what he is attempting, but I want to tell you I have never heard of any spell of this nature with a significant record of success. Be this as it may, the Khannish Council has deemed your ongoing happiness a matter of some concern to them." Piscator paused, as if he wasn't in agreement with his fellows on the Council. "If your friend Necrodemus should succeed helping you gain a measure of peace in your heart, and if you are indeed choosing wisely in this thing, Khannish Ways state this would be a Great Work for Necrodemus."

Lu had strong doubts Piscator was convinced he had chosen wisely. The Archmage continued.

"I must bear witness to your willingness in this matter. You are no doubt aware of the legal and moral restrictions placed upon charms and their reverses: any spell that affects the will of the recipient permanently?" Piscator suddenly sounded as if he were speaking from a set speech, and gazed at Lubani as if he needed a reply. Lubani nodded.

"Yes. I know of charms somewhat from an encounter with the Witch of Eldor."

"Indeed," the Archmage said. He made a noise in his throat. "The Witch of Eldor is a formidable enchantress, and not known to be sociable. I have heard rumors Necrodemus – met – her also."

"I now need you within the heptagram," Nec said suddenly, nearly interrupting. He pointed to the blue star, not looking at the Archmage at all. "Lie with your head that way. Don't move your hands until I have all the candles lit." Necrodemus began muttering a chant as he lit the candles at each of the seven points of the blue star. "Relax," he whispered, bending low for a moment near Lu's ear to light the top candle.

Lu was suddenly tired. The incense burner was near his head; jasmine filled his nostrils, reminding him of Nec's pipe. I wonder if it would ruin the spell if I fell asleep.

"Just relax and breathe deeply." Nec finished with the candles and started a chant which seemed familiar. Lubani felt kind of high, rather like he had felt watching the customers at Michelle's Pub near

closing time. Although he hadn't had alcohol in years, it had been as if he was drunk, watching her patrons caper and fall. Barkeep's daze, Michelle had called it.

Piscator moved a stool, then crossed his legs and sat in the corner, but Nec didn't seem to notice the motion. Lubani could see only glints from the candles in Piscator's eyes, glittering like obsidian.

Lubani suddenly focused on Nec's pendant, the blue one Karmen gave to him when she had begun her studies in sorcery. Nec had it dangling above his face, back and forth and back and forth. Benedict taught me how to resist hypnosis, so I'm not entranced at all. Not at all. Nec couldn't possibly hypnotize me . . .

Lubani was certain he wasn't entranced until he felt pulsing in one of his hands. He didn't know how anything could have gotten there. He couldn't move his head, so he lifted his hand almost to his nose to find what he held.

The droning he heard was the purring of a brown frog the size of a grapefruit.

Lubani remembered it. Karmen used to make these. He heard Nec's voice say, "Tell it goodbye and let it go." Lubani muttered goodbye into what he hoped was the frog's ear, and let it hop towards Necrodemus. Nec banished it with the same gesture Karmen had used to make them go away from her.

It was easier to tell the red kitten to go away, since it didn't make any noises, but the black chicks peeped so sadly, Lubani held one up to Nec and said through his fog "Can't I keep just one?"

Necrodemus frowned and cast an arm forward, like he was tossing something to Lubani. Lu tried to block the silver dust Nec threw, but he seemed to be moving awfully slowly. His hand was empty. For a moment, Necrodemus' eyes also looked like black stones, like Piscator's, even though Lu knew they were blue. Nec didn't raise his voice to make the animals vanish, although he looked rather angry. I hope I'm not making Nec angry too, but I feel so strange. I can't stay awake much longer. Then a hand shook Lubani, and he realized he did actually doze off. The candles weren't any lower, so it isn't too much later.

Necrodemus helped Lubani to stand while the Archmage glowered silently from the corner. Nec put a blanket around Lu to stop his shivering.

"How do you feel?" Necrodemus looked into Lubani's face, lifted his own eyebrows wide, felt Lubani's pulse. His eyes were blue again.

"Ok, I guess." Lubani frowned. "How should I feel?"

"Fine. Relax. You're ok." Lubani shook his head.

"I'm not certain I feel any different," Lubani said hugging the blanket about himself. I'm cold. I'm dizzy.

"Nothing?" Nec asked. He frowned. "No difference at all?"

"Empty maybe. Missing something." Nec pressed his lips together a moment, then nodded.

"Go see Michelle, and we'll talk some tomorrow." Necrodemus looked to Piscator an instant, but

immediately his eyes came back to Lubani's. Nec needs to talk about something in private with the Archmage. Wizard's stuff.

Lubani nodded, folded the blanket and placed it on a chair, then lifted it again. He stood there a moment in confusion. What's different?

"Go!" Necrodemus commanded. Lubani nodded, and dropped the blanket. He donned his jacket and left the apartment.

Necrodemus stood still, carefully not looking at the Archmage. He busied himself by gathering the candles and other components of the summonings. It was two minutes after Lubani left before Piscator spoke.

"What was that?" The Archmage spoke cleanly, as if he was at an official function before hundreds of his colleagues.

"I lit some incense and a mild intoxicant: a depressant. Then I cast three minor summonings, for creatures invented by the sorceress Karmen. You saw the animals." The Archmage seemed deep in thought for a moment. He then hefted the spellbook he had taken in his lap earlier and had been paging through.

"Necrodemus, I have been through this, the private spellbook of the Atrean's late wife, twice now. I have found a few lesser summonings, many deft alterations, and some astutely developed abjurations. But in all its pages, for all its depth, I have found not even one minor charm in this. If I am wrong, if I have overlooked some subtle charm you have cast today, pray, child, point it out to me." Nec froze. Piscator stood and faced his student directly when Nec remained still. The Archmage's voice rose a fraction. "Do you two toy with me? Am I supposed to make you an initiate for three paltry summonings?"

"No sir, there is no conspiracy; he doesn't know what spells I cast." Nec shuffled from foot to foot.

"YOU CHARMED A GENERAL OF THE ENEMY AGAINST HIS WILL?" Piscator's voice silenced the people on the streets outside.

"No sir! I have never cast a charm on Lubani in my life!"

The words hung in the silent room for a while. Nec fancied he heard two echoes. The Archmage licked his lips in the darkness of the corner, considering. Nec held his breath. He heard the people on the streets outside. After a minute, Piscator cleared his throat.

"He goes now to the woman, your friend, this Michelle you have spoken of?"

Nec nodded, afraid to speak. The Archmage paused and closed Karmen's book, placed it on the stool he had used.

"They are happy together?" he asked. Nec again nodded, still holding his breath. Piscator nodded slowly. "Perhaps you have, then, done a Great Work, Necrodemus. Let us retire and speak not of this for a time." The Archmage chuckled deep within the darkness and Necrodemus sighed.