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1

The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.

"It's not like I'm using," Case heard someone say, as he shouldered his way through the crowd around the door of the Chat. "It's like my body's developed this massive drug deficiency." It was a Sprawl voice and a Sprawl joke. The Chatsubo was a bar for professional expatriates; you could drink there for a week and never hear two words in Japanese.

Ratz was tending bar, his prosthetic arm jerking monotonously as he filled a tray of glasses with draft Kirin. He saw Case and smiled, his teeth a webwork of East European steel and brown decay. Case found a place at the bar, between the unlikely tan on one of Lonny Zone's whores and the crisp naval uniform of a tall African whose cheekbones were ridged with precise rows of tribal scars. "Wage was in here early, with two joeboys," Ratz said, shoving a draft across the bar with his good hand. "Maybe some business with you, Case?"

Case shrugged. The girl to his right giggled and nudged him.

The bartender's smile widened. His ugliness was the stuff of legend. In an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about his lack of it. The antique arm whined as he reached for another mug. It was a Russian military prosthesis, a seven-function force-feedback manipulator, cased in grubby pink plastic. "You are too much the artiste, Herr Case." Ratz grunted; the sound served him as laughter. He scratched his overhang of white-shirted belly with the pink claw. "You are the artiste of the slightly funny deal."

"Sure," Case said, and sipped his beer. "Somebody's gotta be funny around here. Sure the fuck isn't you."

The whore's giggle went up an octave.

"Isn't you either, sister. So you vanish, okay? Zone, he's a close personal friend of mine."

She looked Case in the eye and made the softest possible spitting sound, her lips barely moving. But she left.

"Jesus," Case said, "what kinda creepjoint you running here? Man can't have a drink."

"Ha," Ratz said, swabbing the scarred wood with a rag, "Zone shows a percentage. You I let work here for entertainment value."

As Case was picking up his beer, one of those strange instants of silence descended, as though a hundred unrelated conversations had simultaneously arrived at the same pause. Then the whore's giggle rang out, tinged with a certain hysteria.

Ratz grunted. "An angel passed."

"The Chinese," bellowed a drunken Australian, "Chinese bloody invented nerve-splicing. Give me the mainland for a nerve job any day. Fix you right, mate. . . ."

"Now that," Case said to his glass, all his bitterness suddenly rising in him like bile, "that is *so* much bullshit."

The Japanese had already forgotten more neurosurgery than the Chinese had ever known. The black clinics of Chiba were the cutting edge, whole bodies of technique supplanted monthly, and still they couldn't repair the damage he'd suffered in that Memphis hotel.

A year here and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he'd taken and the corners he'd cut in Night City, and still he'd see the matrix in

his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void. . . . The Sprawl was a long strange way home over the Pacific now, and he was no console man, no cyberspace cowboy. Just another hustler, trying to make it through. But the dreams came on in the Japanese night like livewire voodoo, and he'd cry for it, cry in his sleep, and wake alone in the dark, curled in his capsule in some coffin hotel, his hands clawed into the bedslab, temperfoam bunched between his fingers, trying to reach the console that wasn't there.

"I saw your girl last night," Ratz said, passing Case his second Kirin.

"I don't have one," he said, and drank.

"Miss Linda Lee."

Case shook his head.

"No girl? Nothing? Only biz, friend artiste? Dedication to commerce?" The bartender's small brown eyes were nested deep in wrinkled flesh. "I think I liked you better, with her. You laughed more. Now, some night, you get maybe too artistic; you wind up in the clinic tanks, spare parts."

"You're breaking my heart, Ratz." He finished his beer, paid and left, high narrow shoulders hunched beneath the rain-stained khaki nylon of his windbreaker. Threading his way through the Ninsei crowds, he could smell his own stale sweat.

Case was twenty-four. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the Sprawl. He'd been trained by the best, by McCoy Pauley and Bobby Quine, legends in the biz. He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix. A thief, he'd worked for other, wealthier thieves, employers who provided the exotic software required to penetrate the bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data.

He'd made the classic mistake, the one he'd sworn he'd never make. He stole from his employers. He kept something for himself and tried to move it through a fence in Amsterdam. He still wasn't sure how he'd been discovered, not that it mattered now. He'd expected to die, then, but they only smiled.

Of course he was welcome, they told him, welcome to the money. And he was going to need it. Because—still smiling—they were going to make sure he never worked again.

They damaged his nervous system with a wartime Russian mycotoxin.

Strapped to a bed in a Memphis hotel, his talent burning out micron by micron, he hallucinated for thirty hours.

The damage was minute, subtle, and utterly effective.

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh.

His total assets were quickly converted to New Yen, a fat sheaf of the old paper currency that circulated endlessly through the closed circuit of the world's black markets like the seashells of the Trobriand islanders. It was difficult to transact legitimate business with cash in the Sprawl; in Japan, it was already illegal.

In Japan, he'd known with a clenched and absolute certainty, he'd find his cure. In Chiba. Either in a registered clinic or in the shadowland of black medicine. Synonymous with implants, nerve-splicing, and microbionics, Chiba was a magnet for the Sprawl's techno-criminal subcultures.

In Chiba, he'd watched his New Yen vanish in a two-month round of examinations and consultations. The men in the black clinics, his last hope, had admired the expertise with which he'd been maimed, and then slowly shaken their heads.

Now he slept in the cheapest coffins, the ones nearest the port, beneath the quartz-halogen floods that lit the docks all night like vast stages; where you couldn't see the lights of Tokyo for the glare of the television sky, not even the towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electric Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black expanse where gulls wheeled above drifting shoals of white styrofoam. Behind the port lay the city, factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies. Port and city were divided by a narrow borderland of older streets, an area with no official name. Night City, with Ninsei its heart. By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless,

the neon dead, the holograms inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky.

Two blocks west of the Chat, in a teashop called the Jarre de Thé, Case washed down the night's first pill with a double espresso. It was a flat pink octagon, a potent species of Brazilian dex he bought from one of Zone's girls.

The Jarre was walled with mirrors, each panel framed in red neon.

At first, finding himself alone in Chiba, with little money and less hope of finding a cure, he'd gone into a kind of terminal overdrive, hustling fresh capital with a cold intensity that had seemed to belong to someone else. In the first month, he'd killed two men and a woman over sums that a year before would have seemed ludicrous. Ninsei wore him down until the street itself came to seem the externalization of some death wish, some secret poison he hadn't known he carried.

Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone, with nothing left of you but some vague memory in the mind of a fixture like Ratz, though heart or lungs or kidneys might survive in the service of some stranger with New Yen for the clinic tanks.

Biz here was a constant subliminal hum, and death the accepted punishment for laziness, carelessness, lack of grace, the failure to heed the demands of an intricate protocol.

Alone at a table in the Jarre de Thé, with the octagon coming on, pinheads of sweat starting from his palms, suddenly aware of each tingling hair on his arms and chest, Case knew that at some point he'd started to play a game with himself, a very ancient one that has no name, a final solitaire. He no longer carried a weapon, no longer took the basic precautions. He ran the fastest, loosest deals on the street, and he had a reputation for being able to get whatever you wanted. A part of him knew that the arc of his self-destruction was glaringly obvious to his customers, who grew steadily fewer, but that same part of him basked in the knowledge that it was only a matter of time. And

that was the part of him, smug in its expectation of death, that most hated the thought of Linda Lee.

He'd found her, one rainy night, in an arcade.

Under bright ghosts burning through a blue haze of cigarette smoke, holograms of Wizard's Castle, Tank War Europa, the New York skyline. . . . And now he remembered her that way, her face bathed in restless laser light, features reduced to a code: her cheekbones flaring scarlet as Wizard's Castle burned, forehead drenched with azure when Munich fell to the Tank War, mouth touched with hot gold as a gliding cursor struck sparks from the wall of a skyscraper canyon. He was riding high that night, with a brick of Wage's ketamine on its way to Yokohama and the money already in his pocket. He'd come in out of the warm rain that sizzled across the Nintai pavement and somehow she'd been singled out for him, one face out of the dozens who stood at the consoles, lost in the game she played. The expression on her face, then, had been the one he'd seen, hours later, on her sleeping face in a portside coffin, her upper lip like the line children draw to represent a bird in flight.

Crossing the arcade to stand beside her, high on the deal he'd made, he saw her glance up. Gray eyes rimmed with smudged black paintstick. Eyes of some animal pinned in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle.

Their night together stretching into a morning, into tickets at the hoverport and his first trip across the Bay. The rain kept up, falling along Harajuku, beading on her plastic jacket, the children of Tokyo trooping past the famous boutiques in white oafers and clingwrap capes, until she'd stood with him in the midnight clatter of a pachinko parlor and held his hand like a child.

It took a month for the gestalt of drugs and tension he moved through to turn those perpetually startled eyes into wells of reflexive need. He'd watched her personality fragment, calving like an iceberg, splinters drifting away, and finally he'd seen the raw need, the hungry armature of addiction. He'd watched her track the next hit with a concentration that reminded him of the mantises they sold in stalls along Shiga, beside tanks of blue mutant carp and crickets caged in bamboo.

He stared at the black ring of grounds in his empty cup. It

was vibrating with the speed he'd taken. The brown laminate of the tabletop was dull with a patina of tiny scratches. With the dex mounting through his spine he saw the countless random impacts required to create a surface like that. The Jarre was decorated in a dated, nameless style from the previous century, an uneasy blend of Japanese traditional and pale Milanese plastics, but everything seemed to wear a subtle film, as though the bad nerves of a million customers had somehow attacked the mirrors and the once glossy plastics, leaving each surface fogged with something that could never be wiped away.

"Hey. Case, good buddy. . . ."

He looked up, met gray eyes ringed with paintstick. She was wearing faded French orbital fatigues and new white sneakers.

"I been lookin' for you, man." She took a seat opposite him, her elbows on the table. The sleeves of the blue zipsuit had been ripped out at the shoulders; he automatically checked her arms for signs of derms or the needle. "Want a cigarette?"

She dug a crumpled pack of Yeheyuan filters from an ankle pocket and offered him one. He took it, let her light it with a red plastic tube. "You sleepin' okay, Case? You look tired." Her accent put her south along the Sprawl, toward Atlanta. The skin below her eyes was pale and unhealthy-looking, but the flesh was still smooth and firm. She was twenty. New lines of pain were starting to etch themselves permanently at the corners of her mouth. Her dark hair was drawn back, held by a band of printed silk. The pattern might have represented microcircuits, or a city map.

"Not if I remember to take my pills," he said, as a tangible wave of longing hit him, lust and loneliness riding in on the wavelength of amphetamine. He remembered the smell of her skin in the overheated darkness of a coffin near the port, her fingers locked across the small of his back.

All the meat, he thought, and all it wants.

"Wage," she said, narrowing her eyes. "He wants to see you with a hole in your face." She lit her own cigarette.

"Who says? Ratz? You been talking to Ratz?"

"No. Mona. Her new squeeze is one of Wage's boys."

"I don't owe him enough. He does me, he's out the money anyway." He shrugged.

"Too many people owe him now, Case. Maybe you get to be the example. You seriously better watch it."

"Sure. How about you, Linda? You got anywhere to sleep?"

"Sleep." She shook her head. "Sure, Case." She shivered, hunched forward over the table. Her face was filmed with sweat.

"Here," he said, and dug in the pocket of his windbreaker, coming up with a crumpled fifty. He smoothed it automatically, under the table, folded it in quarters, and passed it to her.

"You need that, honey. You better give it to Wage." There was something in the gray eyes now that he couldn't read, something he'd never seen there before.

"I owe Wage a lot more than that. Take it. I got more coming," he lied, as he watched his New Yen vanish into a zippered pocket.

"You get your money, Case, you find Wage quick."

"I'll see you, Linda," he said, getting up.

"Sure." A millimeter of white showed beneath each of her pupils. Sanpaku. "You watch your back, man."

He nodded, anxious to be gone.

He looked back as the plastic door swung shut behind him, saw her eyes reflected in a cage of red neon.

Friday night on Ninsei.

He passed yakitori stands and massage parlors, a franchised coffee shop called Beautiful Girl, the electronic thunder of an arcade. He stepped out of the way to let a dark-suited sarariman by, spotting the Mitsubishi-Genentech logo tattooed across the back of the man's right hand.

Was it authentic? If that's for real, he thought, he's in for trouble. If it wasn't, served him right. M-G employees above a certain level were implanted with advanced microprocessors that monitored mutagen levels in the bloodstream. Gear like that would get you rolled in Night City, rolled straight into a black clinic.

The sarariman had been Japanese, but the Ninsei crowd was a gaijin crowd. Groups of sailors up from the port, tense solitary tourists hunting pleasures no guidebook listed, Sprawl heavies showing off grafts and implants, and a dozen distinct species

of hustler, all swarming the street in an intricate dance of desire and commerce.

There were countless theories explaining why Chiba City tolerated the Ninsei enclave, but Case tended toward the idea that the Yakuza might be preserving the place as a kind of historical park, a reminder of humble origins. But he also saw a certain sense in the notion that burgeoning technologies require outlaw zones, that Night City wasn't there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself.

Was Linda right, he wondered, staring up at the lights? Would Wage have him killed to make an example? It didn't make much sense, but then Wage dealt primarily in proscribed biologicals, and they said you had to be crazy to do that.

But Linda said Wage wanted him dead. Case's primary insight into the dynamics of street dealing was that neither the buyer nor the seller really needed him. A middleman's business is to make himself a necessary evil. The dubious niche Case had carved for himself in the criminal ecology of Night City had been cut out with lies, scooped out a night at a time with betrayal. Now, sensing that its walls were starting to crumble, he felt the edge of a strange euphoria.

The week before, he'd delayed transfer of a synthetic glandular extract, retailing it for a wider margin than usual. He knew Wage hadn't liked that. Wage was his primary supplier, nine years in Chiba and one of the few gaijin dealers who'd managed to forge links with the rigidly stratified criminal establishment beyond Night City's borders. Genetic materials and hormones trickled down to Ninsei along an intricate ladder of fronts and blinds. Somehow Wage had managed to trace something back, once, and now he enjoyed steady connections in a dozen cities.

Case found himself staring through a shop window. The place sold small bright objects to the sailors. Watches, flickknives, lighters, pocket VTRs, simstim decks, weighted manriki chains, and shuriken. The shuriken had always fascinated him, steel stars with knife-sharp points. Some were chromed, others black, others treated with a rainbow surface like oil on water. But the chrome stars held his gaze. They were mounted

against scarlet ultrasuede with nearly invisible loops of nylon fishline, their centers stamped with dragons or yinyang symbols. They caught the street's neon and twisted it, and it came to Case that these were the stars under which he voyaged, his destiny spelled out in a constellation of cheap chrome.

"Julie," he said to his stars. "Time to see old Julie. He'll know."

Julius Deane was one hundred and thirty-five years old, his metabolism assiduously warped by a weekly fortune in serums and hormones. His primary hedge against aging was a yearly pilgrimage to Tokyo, where genetic surgeons re-set the code of his DNA, a procedure unavailable in Chiba. Then he'd fly to Hongkong and order the year's suits and shirts. Sexless and inhumanly patient, his primary gratification seemed to lie in his devotion to esoteric forms of tailor-worship. Case had never seen him wear the same suit twice, although his wardrobe seemed to consist entirely of meticulous reconstructions of garments of the previous century. He affected prescription lenses, framed in spidery gold, ground from thin slabs of pink synthetic quartz and beveled like the mirrors in a Victorian dollhouse.

His offices were located in a warehouse behind Ninsei, part of which seemed to have been sparsely decorated, years before, with a random collection of European furniture, as though Deane had once intended to use the place as his home. Neo-Aztec bookcases gathered dust against one wall of the room where Case waited. A pair of bulbous Disney-styled table lamps perched awkwardly on a low Kandinsky-look coffee table in scarlet-lacquered steel. A Dali clock hung on the wall between the bookcases, its distorted face sagging to the bare concrete floor. Its hands were holograms that altered to match the convolutions of the face as they rotated, but it never told the correct time. The room was stacked with white fiberglass shipping nodules that gave off the tang of preserved ginger.

"You seem to be clean, old son," said Deane's disembodied voice. "Do come in."

Magnetic bolts thudded out of position around the massive imitation-rosewood door to the left of the bookcases. JULIUS DEANE IMPORT EXPORT was lettered across the plastic in peeling self-adhesive capitals. If the furniture scattered in

Deane's makeshift foyer suggested the end of the past century, the office itself seemed to belong to its start.

Deane's seamless pink face regarded Case from a pool of light cast by an ancient brass lamp with a rectangular shade of dark green glass. The importer was securely fenced behind a vast desk of painted steel, flanked on either side by tall, drawered cabinets made of some sort of pale wood. The sort of thing, Case supposed, that had once been used to store written records of some kind. The desktop was littered with cassettes, scrolls of yellowed printout, and various parts of some sort of clockwork typewriter, a machine Deane never seemed to get around to reassembling.

"What brings you around, boyo?" Deane asked, offering Case a narrow bonbon wrapped in blue-and-white checked paper. "Try one. Ting Ting Djahe, the very best." Case refused the ginger, took a seat in a yawning wooden swivel chair, and ran a thumb down the faded seam of one black jeans-leg. "Julie, I hear Wage wants to kill me."

"Ah. Well then. And where did you hear this, if I may?"

"People."

"People," Deane said, around a ginger bonbon. "What sort of people? Friends?"

Case nodded.

"Not always that easy to know who your friends are, is it?"

"I do owe him a little money, Deane. He say anything to you?"

"Haven't been in touch, of late." Then he sighed. "If I *did* know, of course, I might not be in a position to tell you. Things being what they are, you understand."

"Things?"

"He's an important connection, Case."

"Yeah. He want to kill me, Julie?"

"Not that I know of." Deane shrugged. They might have been discussing the price of ginger. "If it proves to be an unfounded rumor, old son, you come back in a week or so and I'll let you in on a little something out of Singapore."

"Out of the Nan Hai Hotel, Bencoolen Street?"

"Loose lips, old son!" Deane grinned. The steel desk was jammed with a fortune in debugging gear.

"Be seeing you, Julie. I'll say hello to Wage."

Deane's fingers came up to brush the perfect knot in his pale silk tie.

He was less than a block from Deane's office when it hit, the sudden cellular awareness that someone was on his ass, and very close.

The cultivation of a certain tame paranoia was something Case took for granted. The trick lay in not letting it get out of control. But that could be quite a trick, behind a stack of octagons. He fought the adrenaline surge and composed his narrow features in a mask of bored vacancy, pretending to let the crowd carry him along. When he saw a darkened display window, he managed to pause by it. The place was a surgical boutique, closed for renovations. With his hands in the pockets of his jacket, he stared through the glass at a flat lozenge of vatgrown flesh that lay on a carved pedestal of imitation jade. The color of its skin reminded him of Zone's whores; it was tattooed with a luminous digital display wired to a subcutaneous chip. Why bother with the surgery, he found himself thinking, while sweat coursed down his ribs, when you could just carry the thing around in your pocket?

Without moving his head, he raised his eyes and studied the reflection of the passing crowd.

There.

Behind sailors in short-sleeved khaki. Dark hair, mirrored glasses, dark clothing, slender...

And gone.

Then Case was running, bent low, dodging between bodies.

"Rent me a gun, Shin?"

The boy smiled. "Two hour." They stood together in the smell of fresh raw seafood at the rear of a Shiga sushi stall. "You come back, two hour."

"I need one now, man. Got anything right now?"

Shin rummaged behind empty two-liter cans that had once been filled with powdered horseradish. He produced a slender package wrapped in gray plastic. "Taser. One hour, twenty New Yen. Thirty deposit."

"Shit. I don't need that. I need a gun. Like I maybe wanna shoot somebody, understand?"

The waiter shrugged, replacing the taser behind the horse-radish cans. "Two hour."

He went into the shop without bothering to glance at the display of shuriken. He'd never thrown one in his life.

He bought two packs of Yeheyuans with a Mitsubishi Bank chip that gave his name as Charles Derek May. It beat Truman Starr, the best he'd been able to do for a passport.

The Japanese woman behind the terminal looked like she had a few years on old Deane, none of them with the benefit of science. He took his slender roll of New Yen out of his pocket and showed it to her. "I want to buy a weapon."

She gestured in the direction of a case filled with knives. "No," he said, "I don't like knives."

She brought an oblong box from beneath the counter. The lid was yellow cardboard, stamped with a crude image of a coiled cobra with a swollen hood. Inside were eight identical tissue-wrapped cylinders. He watched while mottled brown fingers stripped the paper from one. She held the thing up for him to examine, a dull steel tube with a leather thong at one end and a small bronze pyramid at the other. She gripped the tube with one hand, the pyramid between her other thumb and forefinger, and pulled. Three oiled, telescoping segments of tightly wound coil spring slid out and locked. "Cobra," she said.

Beyond the neon shudder of Ninsei, the sky was that mean shade of gray. The air had gotten worse; it seemed to have teeth tonight, and half the crowd wore filtration masks. Case had spent ten minutes in a urinal, trying to discover a convenient way to conceal his cobra; finally he'd settled for tucking the handle into the waistband of his jeans, with the tube slanting across his stomach. The pyramidal striking tip rode between his ribcage and the lining of his windbreaker. The thing felt like it might clatter to the pavement with his next step, but it made him feel better.

The Chat wasn't really a dealing bar, but on weeknights it attracted a related clientele. Fridays and Saturdays were different. The regulars were still there, most of them, but they faded behind an influx of sailors and the specialists who preyed on them. As Case pushed through the doors, he looked for

Ratz, but the bartender wasn't in sight. Lonny Zone, the bar's resident pimp, was observing with glazed fatherly interest as one of his girls went to work on a young sailor. Zone was addicted to a brand of hypnotic the Japanese called Cloud Dancers. Catching the pimp's eye, Case beckoned him to the bar. Zone came drifting through the crowd in slow motion, his long face slack and placid.

"You seen Wage tonight, Lonny?"

Zone regarded him with his usual calm. He shook his head.

"You sure, man?"

"Maybe in the Namban. Maybe two hours ago."

"Got some joeboys with him? One of 'em thin, dark hair, maybe a black jacket?"

"No," Zone said at last, his smooth forehead creased to indicate the effort it cost him to recall so much pointless detail. "Big boys. Graftees." Zone's eyes showed very little white and less iris; under the drooping lids, his pupils were dilated and enormous. He stared into Case's face for a long time, then lowered his gaze. He saw the bulge of the steel whip. "Cobra," he said, and raised an eyebrow. "You wanna fuck somebody up?"

"See you, Lonny." Case left the bar.

His tail was back. He was sure of it. He felt a stab of elation, the octagons and adrenaline mingling with something else. You're enjoying this, he thought; you're crazy.

Because, in some weird and very approximate way, it was like a run in the matrix. Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialties. Then you could throw yourself into a highspeed drift and skid, totally engaged but set apart from it all, and all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market. . . .

Go it, Case, he told himself. Suck 'em in. Last thing they'll expect. He was half a block from the games arcade where he'd first met Linda Lee.

He bolted across Ninsei, scattering a pack of strolling sail-

ors. One of them screamed after him in Spanish. Then he was through the entrance, the sound crashing over him like surf, subsonics throbbing in the pit of his stomach. Someone scored a ten-megaton hit on Tank War Europa, a simulated airburst drowning the arcade in white sound as a lurid hologram fireball mushroomed overhead. He cut to the right and loped up a flight of unpainted chipboard stairs. He'd come here once with Wage, to discuss a deal in proscribed hormonal triggers with a man called Matsuga. He remembered the hallway, its stained matting, the row of identical doors leading to tiny office cubicles. One door was open now. A Japanese girl in a sleeveless black t-shirt glanced up from a white terminal, behind her head a travel poster of Greece, Aegian blue splashed with streamlined ideograms.

"Get your security up here," Case told her.

Then he sprinted down the corridor, out of her sight. The last two doors were closed and, he assumed, locked. He spun and slammed the sole of his nylon running shoe into the blue-lacquered composition door at the far end. It popped, cheap hardware falling from the splintered frame. Darkness there, the white curve of a terminal housing. Then he was on the door to its right, both hands around the transparent plastic knob, leaning in with everything he had. Something snapped, and he was inside. This was where he and Wage had met with Matsuga, but whatever front company Matsuga had operated was long gone. No terminal, nothing. Light from the alley behind the arcade, filtering in through sootblown plastic. He made out a snakelike loop of fiberoptics protruding from a wall socket, a pile of discarded food containers, and the bladeless nacelle of an electric fan.

The window was a single pane of cheap plastic. He shrugged out of his jacket, bundled it around his right hand, and punched. It split, requiring two more blows to free it from the frame. Over the muted chaos of the games, an alarm began to cycle, triggered either by the broken window or by the girl at the head of the corridor.

Case turned, pulled his jacket on, and flicked the cobra to full extension.

With the door closed, he was counting on his tail to assume

he'd gone through the one he'd kicked half off its hinges. The cobra's bronze pyramid began to bob gently, the spring-steel shaft amplifying his pulse.

Nothing happened. There was only the surging of the alarm, the crashing of the games, his heart hammering. When the fear came, it was like some half-forgotten friend. Not the cold, rapid mechanism of the dex-paranoia, but simple animal fear. He'd lived for so long on a constant edge of anxiety that he'd almost forgotten what real fear was.

This cubicle was the sort of place where people died. He might die here. They might have guns. . . .

A crash, from the far end of the corridor. A man's voice, shouting something in Japanese. A scream, shrill terror. Another crash.

And footsteps, unhurried, coming closer.

Passing his closed door. Pausing for the space of three rapid beats of his heart. And returning. One, two, three. A bootheel scraped the matting.

The last of his octagon-induced bravado collapsed. He snapped the cobra into its handle and scrambled for the window, blind with fear, his nerves screaming. He was up, out, and falling, all before he was conscious of what he'd done. The impact with pavement drove dull rods of pain through his shins.

A narrow wedge of light from a half-open service hatch framed a heap of discarded fiberoptics and the chassis of a junked console. He'd fallen face forward on a slab of soggy chipboard; he rolled over, into the shadow of the console. The cubicle's window was a square of faint light. The alarm still oscillated, louder here, the rear wall dulling the roar of the games.

A head appeared, framed in the window, backlit by the fluorescents in the corridor, then vanished. It returned, but he still couldn't read the features. Glint of silver across the eyes. "Shit," someone said, a woman, in the accent of the northern Sprawl.

The head was gone. Case lay under the console for a long count of twenty, then stood up. The steel cobra was still in his hand, and it took him a few seconds to remember what it was. He limped away down the alley, nursing his left ankle.

* * *

Shin's pistol was a fifty-year-old Vietnamese imitation of a South American copy of a Walther PPK, double-action on the first shot, with a very rough pull. It was chambered for .22 long rifle, and Case would've preferred lead azide explosives to the simple Chinese hollowpoints Shin had sold him. Still, it was a handgun and nine rounds of ammunition, and as he made his way down Shiga from the sushi stall he cradled it in his jacket pocket. The grips were bright red plastic molded in a raised dragon motif, something to run your thumb across in the dark. He'd consigned the cobra to a dump canister on Ninsei and dry-swallowed another octagon.

The pill lit his circuits and he rode the rush down Shiga to Ninsei, then over to Baiitsu. His tail, he'd decided, was gone, and that was fine. He had calls to make, biz to transact, and it wouldn't wait. A block down Baiitsu, toward the port, stood a featureless ten-story office building in ugly yellow brick. Its windows were dark now, but a faint glow from the roof was visible if you craned your neck. An unlit neon sign near the main entrance offered CHEAP HOTEL under a cluster of ideograms. If the place had another name, Case didn't know it; it was always referred to as Cheap Hotel. You reached it through an alley off Baiitsu, where an elevator waited at the foot of a transparent shaft. The elevator, like Cheap Hotel, was an afterthought, lashed to the building with bamboo and epoxy. Case climbed into the plastic cage and used his key, an unmarked length of rigid magnetic tape.

Case had rented a coffin here, on a weekly basis, since he'd arrived in Chiba, but he'd never slept in Cheap Hotel. He slept in cheaper places.

The elevator smelled of perfume and cigarettes; the sides of the cage was scratched and thumb-smudged. As it passed the fifth floor, he saw the lights of Ninsei. He drummed his fingers against the pistolgrip as the cage slowed with a gradual hiss. As always, it came to a full stop with a violent jolt, but he was ready for it. He stepped out into the courtyard that served the place as some combination of lobby and lawn.

Centered in the square carpet of green plastic turf, a Japanese teenager sat behind a C-shaped console, reading a textbook. The white fiberglass coffins were racked in a framework of industrial scaffolding. Six tiers of coffins, ten coffins on a side.

Case nodded in the boy's direction and limped across the plastic grass to the nearest ladder. The compound was roofed with cheap laminated matting that rattled in a strong wind and leaked when it rained, but the coffins were reasonably difficult to open without a key.

The expansion-grate catwalk vibrated with his weight as he edged his way along the third tier to Number 92. The coffins were three meters long, the oval hatches a meter wide and just under a meter and a half tall. He fed his key into the slot and waited for verification from the house computer. Magnetic bolts thudded reassuringly and the hatch rose vertically with a creak of springs. Fluorescents flickered on as he crawled in, pulling the hatch shut behind him and slapping the panel that activated the manual latch.

There was nothing in Number 92 but a standard Hitachi pocket computer and a small white styrofoam cooler chest. The cooler contained the remains of three ten-kilo slabs of dry ice, carefully wrapped in paper to delay evaporation, and a spun aluminum lab flask. Crouching on the brown temperfoam slab that was both floor and bed, Case took Shin's .22 from his pocket and put it on top of the cooler. Then he took off his jacket. The coffin's terminal was molded into one concave wall, opposite a panel listing house rules in seven languages. Case took the pink handset from its cradle and punched a Hongkong number from memory. He let it ring five times, then hung up. His buyer for the three megabytes of hot RAM in the Hitachi wasn't taking calls.

He punched a Tokyo number in Shinjuku.

A woman answered, something in Japanese.

"Snake Man there?"

"Very good to hear from you," said Snake Man, coming in on an extension. "I've been expecting your call."

"I got the music you wanted." Glancing at the cooler.

"I'm very glad to hear that. We have a cash flow problem. Can you front?"

"Oh, man, I really need the money bad. . . ."

Snake Man hung up.

"You shit," Case said to the humming receiver. He stared at the cheap little pistol.

"Iffy," he said, "it's all looking very iffy tonight."

* * *

Case walked into the Chat an hour before dawn, both hands in the pockets of his jacket; one held the rented pistol, the other the aluminum flask.

Ratz was at a rear table, drinking Apollonaris water from a beer pitcher, his hundred and twenty kilos of doughy flesh tilted against the wall on a creaking chair. A Brazilian kid called Kurt was on the bar, tending a thin crowd of mostly silent drunks. Ratz's plastic arm buzzed as he raised the pitcher and drank. His shaven head was filmed with sweat. "You look bad, friend artiste," he said, flashing the wet ruin of his teeth.

"I'm doing just fine," said Case, and grinned like a skull. "Super fine." He sagged into the chair opposite Ratz, hands still in his pockets.

"And you wander back and forth in this portable bombshelter built of booze and ups, sure. Proof against the grosser emotions, yes?"

"Why don't you get off my case, Ratz? You seen Wage?"

"Proof against fear and being alone," the bartender continued. "Listen to the fear. Maybe it's your friend."

"You hear anything about a fight in the arcade tonight, Ratz? Somebody hurt?"

"Crazy cut a security man." He shrugged. "A girl, they say."

"I gotta talk to Wage, Ratz, I . . ."

"Ah." Ratz's mouth narrowed, compressed into a single line. He was looking past Case, toward the entrance. "I think you are about to."

Case had a sudden flash of the shuriken in their window. The speed sang in his head. The pistol in his hand was slippery with sweat.

"Herr Wage," Ratz said, slowly extending his pink manipulator as if he expected it to be shaken. "How great a pleasure. Too seldom do you honor us."

Case turned his head and looked up into Wage's face. It was a tanned and forgettable mask. The eyes were vatgrown sea-green Nikon transplants. Wage wore a suit of gunmetal silk and a simple bracelet of platinum on either wrist. He was flanked by his joeboys, nearly identical young men, their arms and shoulders bulging with grafted muscle.

"How you doing, Case?"

"Gentlemen," said Ratz, picking up the table's heaped ashtray in his pink plastic claw, "I want no trouble here." The ashtray was made of thick, shatterproof plastic, and advertised Tsingtao beer. Ratz crushed it smoothly, butts and shards of green plastic cascading onto the tabletop. "You understand?"

"Hey, sweetheart," said one of the joeboys, "you wanna try that thing on me?"

"Don't bother aiming for the legs, Kurt," Ratz said, his tone conversational. Case glanced across the room and saw the Brazilian standing on the bar, aiming a Smith & Wesson riot gun at the trio. The thing's barrel, made of paper-thin alloy wrapped with a kilometer of glass filament, was wide enough to swallow a fist. The skeletal magazine revealed five fat orange cartridges, subsonic sandbag jellies.

"Technically nonlethal," said Ratz.

"Hey, Ratz," Case said. "I owe you one."

The bartender shrugged. "Nothing, you owe me. These," and he glowered at Wage and the joeboys, "should know better. You don't take anybody off in the Chatsubo."

Wage coughed. "So who's talking about taking anybody off? We just wanna talk business. Case and me, we work together."

Case pulled the .22 out of his pocket and levelled it at Wage's crotch. "I hear you wanna do me." Ratz's pink claw closed around the pistol and Case let his hand go limp.

"Look, Case, you tell me what the fuck is going on with you, you wig or something? What's this shit I'm trying to kill you?" Wage turned to the boy on his left. "You two go back to the Namban. Wait for me."

Case watched as they crossed the bar, which was now entirely deserted except for Kurt and a drunken sailor in khakis, who was curled at the foot of a barstool. The barrel of the Smith & Wesson tracked the two to the door, then swung back to cover Wage. The magazine of Case's pistol clattered on the table. Ratz held the gun in his claw and pumped the round out of the chamber.

"Who told you I was going to hit you, Case?" Wage asked. Linda.

"Who told you, man? Somebody trying to set you up?"

The sailor moaned and vomited explosively.

"Get him out of here," Ratz called to Kurt, who was sitting on the edge of the bar now, the Smith & Wesson across his lap, lighting a cigarette.

Case felt the weight of the night come down on him like a bag of wet sand settling behind his eyes. He took the flask out of his pocket and handed it to Wage. "All I got. Pituitaries. Get you five hundred if you move it fast. Had the rest of my roll in some RAM, but that's gone by now."

"You okay, Case?" The flask had already vanished behind a gunmetal lapel. "I mean, fine, this'll square us, but you look bad. Like hammered shit. You better go somewhere and sleep."

"Yeah." He stood up and felt the Chat sway around him. "Well, I had this fifty, but I gave it to somebody." He giggled. He picked up the .22's magazine and the one loose cartridge and dropped them into one pocket, then put the pistol in the other. "I gotta see Shin, get my deposit back."

"Go home," said Ratz, shifting on the creaking chair with something like embarrassment. "Artiste. Go home."

He felt them watching as he crossed the room and shouldered his way past the plastic doors.

"Bitch," he said to the rose tint over Shiga. Down on Ninsei the holograms were vanishing like ghosts, and most of the neon was already cold and dead. He sipped thick black coffee from a street vendor's foam thimble and watched the sun come up. "You fly away, honey. Towns like this are for people who like the way down." But that wasn't it, really, and he was finding it increasingly hard to maintain the sense of betrayal. She just wanted a ticket home, and the RAM in his Hitachi would buy it for her, if she could find the right fence. And that business with the fifty; she'd almost turned it down, knowing she was about to rip him for the rest of what he had.

When he climbed out of the elevator, the same boy was on the desk. Different textbook. "Good buddy," Case called across the plastic turf, "you don't need to tell me. I know already. Pretty lady came to visit, said she had my key. Nice little tip for you, say fifty New ones?" The boy put down his book.

"Woman," Case said, and drew a line across his forehead with his thumb. "Silk." He smiled broadly. The boy smiled back, nodded. "Thanks, asshole," Case said.

On the catwalk, he had trouble with the lock. She'd messed it up somehow when she'd fiddled it, he thought. Beginner. He knew where to rent a blackbox that would open anything in Cheap Hotel. Fluorescents came on as he crawled in.

"Close the hatch real slow, friend. You still got that Saturday night special you rented from the waiter?"

She sat with her back to the wall, at the far end of the coffin. She had her knees up, resting her wrists on them; the pepperbox muzzle of a flechette pistol emerged from her hands.

"That you in the arcade?" He pulled the hatch down.

"Where's Linda?"

"Hit that latch switch."

He did.

"That your girl? Linda?"

He nodded.

"She's gone. Took your Hitachi. Real nervous kid. What about the gun, man?" She wore mirrored glasses. Her clothes were black, the heels of black boots deep in the temperfoam.

"I took it back to Shin, got my deposit. Sold his bullets back to him for half what I paid. You want the money?"

"No."

"Want some dry ice? All I got, right now."

"What got into you tonight? Why'd you pull that scene at the arcade? I had to mess up this rentacop came after me with nunchucks."

"Linda said you were gonna kill me."

"Linda said? I never saw her before I came up here."

"You aren't with Wage?"

She shook her head. He realized that the glasses were surgically inset, sealing her sockets. The silver lenses seemed to grow from smooth pale skin above her cheekbones, framed by dark hair cut in a rough shag. The fingers curled around the fletcher were slender, white, tipped with polished burgundy. The nails looked artificial. "I think you screwed up, Case. I showed up and you just fit me right into your reality picture."

"So what do you want, lady?" He sagged back against the hatch.

"You. One live body, brains still somewhat intact. Molly, Case. My name's Molly. I'm collecting you for the man I work for. Just wants to talk, is all. Nobody wants to hurt you."

"That's good."

"'Cept I do hurt people sometimes, Case. I guess it's just the way I'm wired." She wore tight black gloveleather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light. "If I put this dartgun away, will you be easy, Case? You look like you like to take stupid chances."

"Hey, I'm very easy. I'm a pushover, no problem."

"That's fine, man." The fletcher vanished into the black jacket. "Because you try to fuck around with me, you'll be taking one of the stupidest chances of your whole life."

She held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four-centimeter scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails.

She smiled. The blades slowly withdrew.