

Elevation

Draft H

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1 *The Witness of Jenrett*

Rake, our beloved redeemer, made the decision to transform the first Hero on the anniversary of his own transformation. Llado was our subject.

And so it was that Llado's operation occurred on the Day of Change—the first Tuesday in May—exactly one year after Rake oversaw the operation on himself. I attended Llado's procedure five months after receiving the Change myself and was the most senior woman present. I was in charge of the care for Llado that followed. And I became the chronicler of this, Llado's Ordeal.

I am Jenrett and this is my witness.

No one knew—not Rake nor any of the Changed—what the experiment on Llado would yield. In the year that had passed since Rake's discovery, we had all been transformed voluntarily. There wasn't a Hero among us.

We had many questions. Many concerns. I was nervous, and so was my good friend Lavarine. This was the first time the Change had been attempted on someone who wasn't expecting it. The premise was that he could endure the procedure and emerge healthy and sound. But the premise had to be tested.

On that morning, Suzi woke Llado with a song. Suzi, the Mistress of Mind, the voice we all hear. Because he was a Hero, Suzi sang to Llado of his own glory: "From the thoughtless mob, the masks are torn; all praise to Llado on the day he was born."

Her soft voice and lofty tone drew him from sleep with a smile. He rolled onto his shoulder and opened his eyes. A man of middle age—thinning hair, moderate weight—

lying in his narrow bed, unsuspecting. All the details were recorded by Suzi and have been faithfully transcribed and set down here.

Llado's actual birthday was in December, but the Simulus—that it was this Tuesday in May—pleased him, and Llado embraced it. His birthday, as Suzi conceived it, would be the change in Llado's nature that would occur before the sun set—an event deserving great celebration. Llado knew nothing of this, imagining a party with speeches recognizing his recent achievements, toasts and cheers, a typical Hero's salute from his many admirers.

According to Suzi, the applause became deafening as Llado stood and stepped from his bed into a sunlit arena. This was his favorite Simulus for rising. Spectators in thousands stood shoulder to shoulder in stone bleachers, shouting and flailing their fists; and when he smiled at them, they chanted his name. The physical setting had an ancient flavor, Rome or Byzantium, but the crowd's braying and loutish behavior was from a sporting event or a political rally of later times.

They hooted and stamped for a few words. Llado waved them away. He needed a shower. *Fade out*, he directed Suzi.

The crowd and the stadium grew porous. It lingered as a ghostly image, the noise only a murmur. Reality, stark and silent, invaded his senses: his ordered bedroom, its simple furniture, morning light sliced by the electronic blinds. This time of year, the sun reached the top of the levees at 9 a.m.

Suzi had turned the shower on. He stepped into the bathroom, closed the door and put his hand in the flow. The temp and pressure were as he preferred, so he took the spray on his chest. *News*, he thought, and a framed image opened before him.

“Pine?” Suzi said.

Llado grunted and pine-scented soap jetted from the shower head, mixed with the water. He scrubbed himself, listening and watching his curated feed.

“Today’s lead story: researchers in the Department of Plant Pathology at Meridien University have discovered a new mycelium with medical value. ‘We found it in a riparian cave system,’ says lead scientist Llado Foressi. ‘The caves had been recently flooded. The fungus belongs to a new genus. In our assays, we’re seeing some dramatic effects on cerebral nerve potentiation.’”

Next, Llado directed. Suzi shifted to government affairs. The mycelium discovery wasn’t news. Llado had heard reports like it for years. This belonged to his past, or a past Suzi had contrived for him—Llado wasn’t sure. He’d been a biochemist once, but the specifics were hazy, mingled in his memory with field work, grants and honorariums, much of which had never occurred.

“In the wake of revelations,” the feed continued, “that Miranda Ames, the long-serving Minister of Reflections, illegally sold access to the Simuli of thousands of Heroes, interim minister Don Takahima has announced the rollout of stricter privacy safeguards.”

Corruption at the highest level. Llado felt his outrage brewing, an emotional flowering that he regularly enjoyed first thing in the morning. He ad-libbed a declamation, which Suzi recorded:

We’ve spent half our lives crafting Simuli. At every retelling, the stories grow more vivid, more convincing; and as the detail mounts, so does the value. All the while vultures are watching, waiting to pick us apart. These bureaucrats are a curse on us all.

Give me your vote and I pledge: I'll lock up the lot and rebuild our government from the ground up.

The election was close at hand, and he was the dark-horse candidate. Pollsters said he didn't have a prayer. But the odds would prove wrong. Heroes far and wide would respond to his message, cast their votes and hand him a landslide victory. After an inspirational swearing-in, he implemented the changes he'd thought about over the years.

"Once they saw the effect of your programs," Suzi chimed in, "adversaries and the press all came around."

Llado had no idea who the current Minister of Reflection was, or whether a security breach like the one Suzi reported had ever occurred. Much of the false world he lived in was driven by him. At the same time, Suzi—following the guidelines of Team Providence—added her own inventions. Llado had no way of distinguishing who authored what.

"In response to Sam's fecal analysis from last night's evacuation," Suzi said, "your breakfast will be high in folic acid and long-chain fatty acids."

Llado ignored the nutritional gab and soaped his groin.

"Would you like some company?" Suzi asked.

Her tone was unexpected. For erotic interludes, Llado had chosen a voice for Suzi that mimicked a film star from two centuries past—sly and suggestive. But this morning, she sounded hesitant.

I would, he replied.

"What shall it be?"

When Suzi posed a question, she usually knew the answer. She wasn't looking for information as much as encouraging Llado and assuaging his guilt.

You choose, Llado thought. She knew what he liked.

At that, two young women appeared on either side of him. They were naked and their eyes teased him as they reached out. He'd made the request for twins when he'd updated his preferences the previous weekend, and now they were here, doing just what he'd asked for and more—things he wasn't sure he'd like, things that surprised and pleased a lonely man in his forties.

Beneath his awareness, Sam managed Llado's libido and other bodily functions. Like Suzi, Sam was a complex synthetic intelligence housed in the Triplet towers. Sam Central communicated with Sam sensors that had been implanted in Llado's body in his early years, just as Suzi Central was linked to the local Suzi that ran on the implant in Llado's brain. Sam was silent. No one spoke to Sam. If things were amiss, Sam signaled Suzi. Often he managed mechanical tasks at her request. In addition to the devices in Llado's body, there were Sam sensors in his apartment. They did the wash, cooked food and ran the robots. They had turned on the shower at Suzi's request. At the moment they were monitoring Llado's heart rate, calcium score and, with a modest coaxing of his prostate, his sperm release.

The records show that Llado clasped the grab bar and cried out as he reached his peak. The coliseum audience returned, cheering briefly then sagging onto their stone seats. The twins waved and dissolved back into the pulsing light that signaled standby.

Llado exited the shower, dried himself and put on the clothes Suzi had chosen: a shirt and pants he'd worn years before, back when he worked. The shoes weren't his house mocs. They were walking shoes.

He could smell the food as he passed the laundry and utility closets, and when he stepped into the kitchen, there was a steaming plate on the counter. While he ate, he could hear the robot laundry running. The security camera over the stove swept back and forth.

"Llado?"

Mmm.

"You're relaxed this morning. Confident."

An odd observation, Llado thought.

"Would you like to wake up?" Suzi asked.

Had she lost her time sync?

I'm up, he replied. *I'm already up.*

"Should we clear the fog?"

Something was wrong with Suzi. She didn't make vague queries. Her questions were mostly rhetorical; she might ask, for example, if he wanted something she knew he wanted.

Suzi restore, he ordered.

"I don't need a restore," she said. "I'm broaching a difficult subject. Do you want to know who you really are."

I know who I am.

“Well then,” she sighed, “I won’t say anything other than, ‘You have an appointment today.’”

An appointment? A doctor?

“The appointment is with a Reflector, a man named Rake. There’s no health alert,” she said, anticipating his question. “They’re going to update your vortocle.”

Then, as now, a vortocle was implanted in the brain of most citizens—Hero or no—in their fourth year. Local Suzi, a stub of code that ran on the vortocle, communicated with Suzi Central, and through the linkage she spoke to each in her very personal way. The vortocle was developed sixty years before Llado’s birth. Back then, the implant was smaller—barely an inch tall, with silver windings—and the leaders that fanned from its edge were shorter and had fewer electrodes.

A map image opened for Llado in full opacity, hiding his breakfast. It showed a layout of the city, and in red, a route to the foot of a distant levee. The hinterlands.

“It’s a magtube ride and a long walk. Good exercise.”

Why so far? What’s this about?

“It’s an enhancement. They’ll tell you more when you arrive.”

Enhancement? Llado was troubled. No one looked forward to a summons from Reflection. He’d prefer a dental appointment.

What do you know about this?

“You aren’t concerned, are you?” Suzi said, knowing he was.

Llado chewed without answering. Suzi cared for him, believed in him and used her powers on his behalf. She was his partner, his one true intimacy. He wanted to be worthy of her.

When do we leave? he asked.



At Llado's feet, his flow guide glowed yellow, a beam that seemed to hover above the walkway, pulsing in the direction Suzi meant him to go. Others around him did likewise, following beams visible to each, hurrying, slowing, turning, each heeding the direction of a Suzi only they knew. A public thoroughfare was always a jolt. Unlike his apartment, which was a palace of mirrors in which they enjoyed perfect harmony, here Llado and his Suzi were strangers to all.

A man on his right stopped as if he'd walked into a wall, then turned full around and headed in the opposite direction. An attractive woman in a jogging jersey was striding toward him. Llado's Suzi sent her a proximity jolt and the woman lurched around, one arm raised. "Tobi," she cried.

"She thinks she's walking her dog," Suzi said. "There's an admirer on your left."

Llado turned to see a shapely brunette stepping forward, eyes fixed on him.

"She's your type," Suzi ventured.

In public, there were always eligible women around him. Llado wondered what the brunette really looked like.

"Don't be negative," Suzi said.

The brunette halted before him.

"Say hello," Suzi prompted.

Llado couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken to a female Hero.

“Come on,” Suzi said.

Llado nodded at the brunette. “You’re ravishing.”

The woman smiled. “I’d do anything,” she said, “for a man like you.”

It was her Suzi speaking. Or his Suzi had altered her words to please him.

Llado stepped past the woman, following his flow guide.

“We need to get out more,” Suzi sighed.

He hadn’t left his apartment in— How long? Two weeks?

“Three,” Suzi said. “Bear right.”

The downtown area came into view. The metropolis had lost its original name before Llado was born. It was Youville to him. In the early days, before Suzi, people had lived a conjoined existence; they’d been forced to serve each other’s needs. Now most were the Heroes of their own stories, each in a world that revolved around them.

“It’s a pleasant day, isn’t it?” Suzi said.

Llado could feel the sun warming his chest, while a modest breeze cooled his face. *Thanks*, he thought. Suzi regularly urged him to be more active, and he was always cheerier when he was out and moving around. It really was a very pleasant day.

He followed the flow guide past midrise apartments toward Echo Canal, a canyon that angled through the city’s large public buildings. On one side were headquarters for the water systems, the solar visor array, transportation, shipping and the magtube line; on the other were the housing authority, food and roads, metallurgy and textiles. In the center, towering above the rest, were the Youville Triplets—three great spearheads of glass sixty stories high, with an air transport pad suspended between them on the fifty-fifth floor.

The Triplets' Practos tower belonged to Sam, and it was there that floors of digital hardware ran the routines that managed the colony's utilitarian needs. Sam operated factories and assembly robots that produced industrial goods. He provided computing support for all public infrastructure. He helped Suzi with personal affairs, oversaw responder networks, and routed law enforcement or medical personnel in the event of emergencies. Sam's sensors were woven into the fabric of their lives. When an officer's wife conceived, Sam knew before either parent.

I forgot to mention. I got a ping from him. Something about supplements.

"Sam's confused," Suzi said. "I cancelled the alert. He does his best."

When it came to personal matters, Sam deferred to Suzi.

"Home sweet home," she said, admiring the structure on their left.

The Triplets' Reflection tower lodged Suzi Central. The hardware that ran her occupied the first forty-eight floors. Suzi managed the needs of most Youville citizens. For Heroes, that included everything associated with false contentment and a delusional sense of self.

There. I've expressed it now: the bias of one of the Changed.

The third Triplet tower was occupied by Team Providence—the colony's counselors and Rector Martin, Counselor-in-Chief. It was also the location of Sam's hospitals, his medical and schooling teams, and his soldiers and robot police. Around the towers and surrounding structures, drones swarmed, and there were sensors and eyes on every surface—on the walkways, in the treetops, in the soles of every shoe.

Llado turned onto the Echo walkway. It was edged with benches and planters, and vines hung from the railings. A robot gardener tended a hedge, pruning and pollinating;

another scuttled up the trunk of a palm, plucking bugs from the bark with silver pincers. Beyond the buildings a massive levee came into view. The former coastal city had been anchored to the ocean floor and walled off against the rising seas by barriers hundreds of feet tall. Youville couldn't expand, so it was growing upward. The levee's inside walls were covered with apartment blocks stacked like polypores on a rotting tree.

The flow guide was signaling a turn. Llado left the Echo walkway, headed toward Wilbur Garden. A landscaped commons, the Garden was a place where Heroes could stroll at their ease, linger with the birds by pools and fountains, and drink the cool air of contemplation. There were Heroes on every side, seated on benches, standing among the topiary, walking, muttering, nodding to their invisible partners.

"We'll board the magtube here," Suzi said.

Tram tubes had spread beneath the city, surfacing at depots like Wilbur Station. Most of those waiting on the platform were Heroes, but a Raver wandered among them, snarling and waving his arms. Most citizens of Youville had vortocles and were connected to Suzi and Sam, including the officer class—those employed by Practos, Reflection and Team Providence. For officers, Simulus wasn't allowed, but they received all other benefits of digital linkage. The Ravers, however, were offline. Their vortocles had been removed as Simulus posed a danger to them and the people around them.

A five-capsule tram slid from the tunnel and climbed the rails.

In the first Hero days, before Llado and I were born, Youville struggled with its new culture. Narcissism had dangers. Some went to extremes, losing themselves in hostile Simuli—theft, assault, homicide and the like. Suzi had to learn to recognize the symptoms, dial back Simuli and contain abusers. There were cases where the only

remedy was to remove the offender's vortocle. Rage was a common response, and the deprived became a social class of their own.

The tram seemed to strike an invisible wall. The doors opened, people debarked and boarded, passing the Raver without acknowledging him.

Llado stepped forward with the others. The frenzied man harangued one passenger after another. If he kept it up, someone's Suzi would call for help and an airborne Sambulance would come and take him away.

Ravers weren't the only casualties of the new order. There were those whose delusions took on a life of their own and vortocle removal had no effect. Stimulus Psychosis was dangerous, so where the medics made that diagnosis, the unfortunates were delivered to long-term confinement facilities.

The capsule doors closed and Llado gripped a chrome post. Forward, the tube's diaphragm irised open and the tram dove into a glass-walled tunnel. The next stop was Manley Square.

Just before their arrival a *pop* sounded and vents in the tube wall opened, releasing the vacuum. They coasted alongside the platform and when they'd halted, passengers exited and entered the capsule in silence. "Not here," Suzi said.

Llado peered through the circular windows and the stops came and went. "Not here, not here," Suzi said.

Which stop is ours?

"The Yards."

That's the end of the line.

When they reached the last stop, the capsule was empty. The vacuum released, the doors opened and Llado stepped onto the platform.

The flow guide led him to a stairway and down it. The station was made of steel beams and plates. The apartment blocks ranked to his left had that grim, pre-Suzi look. The yards on the right were bounded by fences. Rows of magtube capsules stretched into the distance. Workers in overalls bobbed among them.

Quiet, Llado thought, but for those who called the Yards home it was, no doubt, a pleasing existence. Life was good in Youville. No one was hungry. No one went without shelter. No one suffered for want of a doctor. Employment was optional, and many had opted out. Heroes lived an enviable life, filled with Simuli, a life their forebears could never have imagined.

Youville security was overseen by Sam, his robots and a kindly human police force. Other than the counselors who appeared on news feeds, there were few signs of government control. The self-appraisal Suzi had popularized was a proud one: Youville was a family of diverse, tolerant people who lived in as free a society as existed on earth.

Llado's flow guide arrowed forward.

"Let's pick up our pace," Suzi said.

What's Reflection doing out here? Llado wondered.

"Our destination is still a good ways ahead," she said, ignoring his question.

"We'll pass through some neighborhoods you've never seen."

Suzi, what's this about?

Silence. She couldn't deceive him.

"I don't want Sam to fuss about us," she said.

What did that mean?

“Do you trust me?” Suzi asked.

Trust her? Of course he trusted her. What Suzi meant was, “Don’t make me answer your question.” She’d been with him for as long as he could remember, but she’d never said anything like that before.

Suzi couldn’t lie. It was part of her design, a rule woven into her logic to prevent misuse of her power. More precisely, the rules forbade subversion but allowed for a Hierarchy of Truth when supporting Heroes, so that the rightness of Heroic fulfillment could be advanced by the trivial deceits of Simulus.

“This is important,” Suzi said softly. “You know how I’ve cared for you.”

He nodded, acknowledging the safety she unerringly provided.

I’m with you, he assured her. Lead the way.

He followed the pulsing flow guide to a concrete walkway. As the walkway advanced, it grew cracked and spouted with weeds. The view forward was veiled with haze, then the walkway veered leftward, and he could see through it. An obstacle spread before him—a giant black wall extending to the limits of sight on either side.

A levee, he thought. Where are we?

“On the border of the Black Zone,” Suzi said.

Llado knew of the Zone. It was a home for misfits and malcontents. None of its residents had vortocles. They did without Sam’s services, and Suzi’s.

Why are we—

“Straight ahead,” Suzi said.

His flow guide was flashing red. The buildings on either side were grimy, and the windows were boarded up. When the Youville network was first constructed, Team Providence didn't think it was worth the effort to extend the network this far. Without services, the Black Zone had turned into a landing place for the disaffected—those who weren't interested in Simulus or being part of the Youville culture. In its wisdom, Team Providence had viewed the Zone as a blessing. Where else would they put people like that?

This wasn't the kind of place you'd go to upgrade your vortocle.

Why are we here? Llado asked.

"Straight ahead," Suzi said.

Please—

"Follow the flow guide, Llado." Suzi's voice quavered.

She's in a strange state, he thought. Pensive, sorrowful. But agitated as he was, he did as she directed.

He crossed the street and entered a narrow alley, murky and puddled. His steps roused feral cats that yowled and darted away. At the end of the alley, the flow guide winked out.

Llado halted. *Suzi?*

White noise, static.

Are you there?

"I'm here," a girlish voice answered with trepidation.

He'd lost connection with Suzi Central. All that remained was the stub of code that ran on his vortocle. "Where are we?" she wondered.

At times in the past when Suzi Central was down and he was stranded with his Personal Suzi, he'd felt the strange sensation of sharing his mind with a ghost—a presence that wanted to care for him but didn't have the knowledge or maturity to do so.

Suzi Central's absence frightened Llado.

Above the alley, he noticed women watching from the balconies. They leaned on their elbows and pointed. Did he look as helpless as he felt?

"Are you needing direction?" a man asked.

The man was beside him. He wore a black suit. Beneath a straw skimmer hat, his face was in shadow.

"You've come from the city," the man said.

"I've lost my Suzi," Llado mumbled. "Can Sam see me?"

The man shook his head. "I'm here to meet you."

"At Suzi's request?"

"At Rake's. He's waiting. Follow me, will you?"

With that, the man led him into a maze of narrow streets. Llado was nervous, reluctant, but Suzi had brought him there and he wasn't going to flout her guidance. As he followed the man in the skimmer hat, the shadows grew thicker; and in the sky above, the black wall of the levee loomed closer and closer.

Finally his escort turned into a lamplit street and the levee appeared directly before them, the rugged black surface stippled with snails and crawling with rivulets.

There was a metal door stenciled with white numbers. The man stopped before it, pushed a button beside the rusted frame, and a moment later the door groaned open.

A woman in a gray uniform was posted at the entrance. She motioned Llado across the threshold. The man in the black suit and skimmer remained outside, vanishing from view as the woman closed the door.

The light in the antechamber was dim.

“Who are you?” Llado asked.

“You’re here to see Rake,” the woman replied.

“My Suzi said that I needed a vortocle update,” Llado explained. “I think there’s been some mistake.”

“No mistake. Please follow me.”

She led him down a hall and into a waiting room lit by a bare bulb.

“Please sit down,” the woman said, and she departed.

The latch squealed and Llado was alone in the room.

Are you there? he thought.

“Yes,” his Personal Suzi replied. “You’re not alone.”

Then the door latch clicked and Rake entered the room. I was with him, committed but fearful. I put one hand in my pocket and fisted it to steady myself.

Rake was primed for the procedure and he moved with an electric intensity. Tall and slender, in a white coat, with his long face and hollow cheeks, a three-day stubble and needle-sharp eyes.

Perhaps it’s the passage of time or my knowledge of what transpired with Llado, but I remember Rake’s strictness, his set jaw, the clawed look of his cheeks and his determined glare. His black hair was glossy, slanted like a wet shed roof.

“My name is Rake,” he told Llado and seated himself in the chair opposite.

“Where am I?” Llado asked.

“Inside a levee,” Rake replied.

“I didn’t know they were hollow.”

“You’re here for a vortocle upgrade.”

“Why aren’t we downtown, at a clinic?” Llado asked.

“I head a technical group,” Rake said, “with a special charter. You’ve been chosen to help us.”

“Help you? With what?”

It all seemed highly irregular. Rake was younger, and like many in the officer class, he seemed to Llado inflated and presuming.

“You were once a scientist,” Rake said. “An expert on fungi.”

Once? Llado thought. The comment cast him into the uncertain domain of Stimulus, with questions about what parts of his history were true or false.

“In school,” Rake said, “you tested at the top of your class.”

Llado was silent, accepting the compliment, unable to recall the details of his youth. Suzi had spun stories for him, but there was no telling which were true. He kept his silence, preferring not to look like a fool.

“Do you remember your education?” Rake asked. “Or your family?”

Llado’s suspicions mounted. What did this have to do with a vortocle upgrade? And why was the man speaking of family? For Heroes, marriage was not an option and neither was procreation. Offspring were produced in the lab.

Rake was nodding. “The memories are gone,” he said softly.

Llado heard pity and it angered him. “You think you’re better.”

“I’m sorry,” Rake said. “Forgive me.”

He stood. “Come with me.” Then trying to calm Llado, “Suzi knows you’re here. You’re still in her care.”

Llado was frightened, but what could he do?

Rake led him down a hall into a labyrinth of corridors. I followed behind. As we moved, lights turned on ahead and winked out behind. The levee’s dank odor infused the air. We might have been escorting the unsuspecting man to his execution.

For Llado it all had an aspect of unreality. As we threaded the levee maze, he wondered if his journey to the Black Zone was a scheme of Suzi’s—a Simulus with some triumph to win. She knew his tolerance for pressure and arranged for conflicts to surface and be overcome just before his limits were reached. If he was running a long-distance race, he would come from behind in the final lap. If he was accused of a crime, he’d find the evidence that proved his innocence at the last moment.

Two men in street clothes appeared in the corridor ahead, peered through the dimness at us, then turned a corner and disappeared. Was this really Reflection, Llado thought, or had he fallen into evil hands?

Rake halted before an oval hatch tall as a man. He opened it, stepped over a gasketed sill into a vestibule, then motioned Llado to follow.

There were a half-dozen people facing him, all in medical garb. An older woman approached. A nurse.

“Llado?” she smiled. “Did I pronounce that correctly?”

He nodded.

“Hold still.” She passed a wand with a red light across his brow, pursing her lips at a readout on the wand’s shank. “You’re lucky.” She smiled again. “This way please.”

She escorted him to an alcove, handed him a gown and told him to remove his clothing and put the gown on.

“For the upgrade?” he asked.

The nurse smiled.

“New code can be direct loaded,” Llado said, “can’t it?”

The nurse shook her head. “Surgery is required.”

Llado took a breath, and the nurse drew the curtain to give him privacy.

When his gown was on, she led him into a larger space illuminated by a compass of lights aimed from all sides. The beams converged on a large silver chair, like one you’d see in a dental bay. Above the chair was a large, beetle-shaped housing with a mechanical arm, elbowed and pointed like a stinging proboscis. On either side of the chair were trays loaded with instruments. To the right was a walled-in enclosure with a large glass window. Thick cables stretched from the chair to the room. Inside it, Llado saw people in medical garb, lit by lime-colored light, moving busily.

The nurse clasped his arm and escorted him toward the chair. As they approached, a man in a surgeon’s gown met them. He was wearing a mask, and a cap hid his slant of hair, but Llado recognized Rake’s sharp eyes.

Another man in similar garb stepped beside Rake. It was Tanner. He wore surgical gloves, so the scars on his hands were invisible. A vortocle hotshot, he was as headstrong as Rake and one of his closest.

The nurse began strapping Llado into the chair.

“What are you going to do?” Llado asked.

“We’ll begin with some diagnostics,” Tanner said.

“We’re going to remove your vortocle,” Rake explained.

“I’ll be awake?”

“Yes,” Rake said. “I know it looks intimidating, but there’s no need to worry.”

“How long will it take?”

But Rake had turned away.

“Drink this.” The nurse passed Llado a small paper cup full of clear liquid.

He raised the cup to his nose and was assaulted by a caustic odor. “What is it?”

“A neurologic agent,” she replied, and she began inserting catheters.

“For pain?”

“Don’t worry,” the nurse smiled.

Llado tossed the solution to the back of his throat. Its taste was worse than its odor. A prick in his arm, a pinch in his thigh. Then a buzzing sound reached him and he felt pressure on the back of his head.

“We’re shaving you,” the nurse said. “Just relax.”

There were others close to him now, tunicked, gloves on their hands.

Llado shivered, feeling the cold. All at once he thought, *This is wrong.*

“Your head must be perfectly still,” Rake said.

Llado felt bands tighten around his brow and temples, his chin and his crown.

“Alright,” Rake said, readying the others.

This can’t be normal procedure, Llado thought, watching the gloved hands converging on his head.

“I’m opening your vestibule,” Rake said. “You may feel a spasm, a moment of cold.”

Llado heard a liquid sound, then a mechanical ringing. No cold, no spasm— But there was a hum from the housing above, and at the ceiling of his gaze he saw the giant proboscis descending.

I was outside the circle, watching. I confess—I turned away.

“Down, down, arrow in,” Rake said. “Lock it, lock it—”

Llado could see the surgeon’s raised arm and the neckline of his gown. The proboscis whirred and whined, and then—abruptly—it seemed to grab hold of him. A grumble emerged from the housing as the proboscis secured itself.

According to Llado, a pattern now appeared before him—a living lace, pocks and threadlets palpating, weaving, pausing and weaving again.

“How do you feel?” a nurse asked him.

“Helpless,” he said.

A sharp female sound—his Personal Suzi gasped.

And then, Llado later explained, from the coruscating lattice, colors emerged—teal, scarlet, orange. The lattice divided into regions and each of the regions began to pulse, while pinhole-sized circles became bubbles and globes and the colorful pattern expanded in three dimensions.

“An antique,” Rake said, “but it’s in pretty good shape.”

A gloved hand covered in blood swam before Llado’s eyes. Between the thumb and forefinger, he saw a silver funnel an inch tall. Beneath the glaring lights, the vortocle’s silver windings looked like a miniature tornado in a lightning storm.

Then the hand rose and the vortocle vanished.

“This won’t take long,” Rake told him.

“You’re doing just fine,” a nurse said.

“Replacement,” Rake directed.

“Ready when you are,” Tanner answered.

Llado was agitated. That was clear. But it wasn’t apparent to any of us how deep his dread was. The expanding lattice was still before him, and he imagined the patterns held some secret intention. Some doomful future.

“Let’s not dose him again,” Rake said. “He can handle this.”

Rake triggered the proboscis, the hum and whirring returned, and the ceiling above Llado was suddenly vaulted. Branches of light converged on a hub, unfurling like the fronds of an alien fern, reaching in every direction. Light rippled along the branches until the unfolding was a venous cathedral. Under different conditions, it might have been a religious moment for him—a revelation of enormous power and capacity. But the vision frightened him.

His heart rate was soaring. They boosted his steroids. His adrenaline peaked.

“Shall we bring Suzi back?” Rake asked him.

“Please,” Llado begged.

“It’s a recording,” Rake said, “but it will calm you.”

A moment later Llado heard Suzi’s voice.

“I’m so proud of you,” Suzi said. “You’re doing so well.”

I wasn’t expecting anything like this, Llado thought.

“The upgrade will mean so much to us,” Suzi assured him.

“Alright,” Rake said. “Let’s reboot.”

Llado heard an infant cry—the upgrade’s start-up sound. Then, according to him, a bolt of lightning struck his head and set his brain and his body to shaking. He saw a three-dimensional bust of himself turning in space. The bust was translucent, suspended in an echoing darkness. And inside the bust, his past, his storied achievements, the life he’d created with Suzi—

“So much, so much,” the recording assured him.

Inside the bust, Llado saw thousands of images roiling and shuffling, superimposed—thousands of Llados mugging and posing, forgotten or half-remembered, hurled from nooks and coffer— All the personae Suzi and he had created over the years—

“You’re doing so well,” she said.

Help me, he thought. *Please. Help me—*

The translucent head burst and an atomized Llado bloomed in the void, motes loosed like sand in the wind or wasps from a swarm. He later said that he could feel his age in the jotted identity, hours and days and years, motives and scripts, actors and scenes, a lifetime of falsehoods, an entire identity blasted to bits and carried away.

All the Stimulus that had built a Hero— Without protest or grieving or explanation—

And what remained?

A lightness, as if a burden had been shed. And a new clarity: Llado felt sharper and unconfused.

And with the clarity came the prospect of fresh experiences, new identities. He felt a youthfulness; he was starting over, and a powerful gladness rose in his heart. At the same time, he felt grief, the need to cry out and mourn a great loss.

“Rapture and ruin” were the words Llado used when the trauma was behind him.

Through the emotional flurry, he could hear Rake’s voice.

“One last leader bundle,” Rake said.

Tanner added, “It will take them a week to seat themselves.”

“The migration’s already started,” Rake said. “Alright. Let’s close him up.”

I drew a deep breath, thankful it was nearly over.

Again Llado heard the mechanical ringing and the hum from the housing above.

A moment of silence, then Rake’s piercing eyes appeared.

“We’re done,” he said.

Nurses removed the catheters, then hands were reaching for Llado and a flurry of voices spoke. He felt the headbands loosen. They were freeing his limbs and trunk. On either side, he was lifted, removed from the chair, carried across the surgery chamber and back through the gasketed hatch.

“Try to put your weight on your feet,” a nurse said.

“You should be able to walk,” Tanner told him.

They escorted Llado through a maze of passages to what they called a “recovery room” where the nurse removed his bloodstained gown and checked his wounds.

“I’m Tanner,” the surgeon smiled. “How does it feel? You’re the first.”

Then the door burst open. An orderly stepped forward, wide-eyed, breathless.

“They’re shutting things down,” he told Tanner. “Rake wants to release him.”

“We can’t do that,” Tanner said.

“There’s no time,” the orderly replied, grabbing Llado’s shirt, raising it, forcing his arm into a sleeve. Tanner swore and stooped, rising with Llado’s pants in his hands. Together they put his street clothes back on him.

“You’ll be guided back through the Black Zone,” the orderly said. “Once you’re out, Suzi will return. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Llado nodded.

“Go straight home,” the orderly said. “I’m sorry we can’t give you more information. There isn’t time.” He turned, opened the recovery room door and led Llado down a hall.

He shuffled forward. The orderly had his hand. Tanner was beside him, an arm around his waist.

“What’s happening?” Llado mumbled.

“A drone sweep, I expect,” Tanner said. “Sam may be suspicious.”

That alarmed Llado. “About what?”

Tanner didn’t reply.

They reached the street door. The orderly opened it.

On the threshold, Llado saw the man in the black suit and the straw skimmer hat. The sky above them was dark, pinstriped with glowing threads—the beam lights of a fleet of Sam’s drones.

Tanner grabbed Llado’s shoulders. “Look at me,” Tanner said. “You’re Changed, but you’re you. You’re still you. Don’t worry. You’re going to be fine. Suzi will get you home.”

Despite his brusqueness, Tanner was a sensitive man. He confided to me how troubled he was by the hurried departure.

The black-suited guide took Llado's arm and as they stepped forward, the orderly closed the door behind him.

They moved away from the levee, through the maze of streets.

"I'm here," a girl voice sounded with trepidation. It was Llado's Personal Suzi, running on his new vortocle.

The man with the skimmer hat motioned. They were approaching the border of the Black Zone. As they crossed the road, Llado heard static. Then a squeal. Then the quiet ended and Suzi returned like thunder.

"Thank heavens," she said.

Thank heavens. Llado exhaled, reaching as if to grab hold of her.

His flow guide blinked on, pulsing and pointing. The man in the black suit halted, pinched the brim of his skimmer and departed.

"Back to the tube," Suzi said, urging him homeward. She sounded troubled.

Suzi?

"I'm right here."

What did they do to me? Do you know?

She couldn't lie.

"Yes," Suzi said. "I know."

Her tone was so glum, Llado didn't press her. Whatever they'd done, he was glad it was over.

By the time they reached the Yards, the pinstripes in the sky had vanished. The streets were empty, the apartments quiet. But calm wasn't in reach for Llado. He was deeply troubled. *Should we fly?* he murmured, thinking of Simulus.

Suzi was slow to reply.

A swim might relax us, he said.

"We can't," Suzi said.

Can't? What did that mean?

"Your upgrade doesn't allow it," she said.

Was this part of his recovery from surgery?

For a while, he guessed.

Again, the answer was slow in coming.

Suzi?

"No more flying," she said. "No more Simulus."

Her words made no sense to him.

I can't be a Hero without it, he said.

Silence.

Suzi?

"It will take some getting used to," she said. "For both of us."

She spoke softly, gently.

"We've been given a new life," she said.

A new life?

"We will feel the absence of Simulus like a tumor that's been removed. It will hurt for a while. Over time, it will heal."

This was rationalization, Suzi-style. Llado was shaken.

What had happened? What had they done to him?

He followed the flow guide, putting one foot in front of the other, feeling weak and nauseous. His life revolved around Suzi and the fictions they'd conjured together. Had the upgrade left him with nothing? He was cold now, cold and shivering. For the first time in years he felt truly alone.

To his bleary senses, the Yards looked no different. And the same with the scenery beyond the tram windows at the various stops. It wasn't until the car ascended the Wilbur platform that the changes in Youville struck him. Llado could see the metro area through the circular windows.

The buildings had fallen into disrepair. Sidings were peeling, windows were spidered with cracks. The streets were dotted with hovels and shacks, and among the well-dressed Heroes there were people in rags. Llado remembered the morning he found roaches had invaded his kitchen.

What's happened?

"Nothing," Suzi sighed. "It was always like this. I prettied it up for you."

Prettied it up?

The capsule doors opened. Llado moved with the others, descending the stairs, reaching ground level and looking around. The Wilbur Garden hadn't changed much. The hedges were withered and the ponds looked unkempt, but the general condition was as it had been that morning. And most of those in the Garden were well-dressed with bright features.

But Llado could see their distraction, how self-absorbed they were.

“Heroes,” Suzi said.

He stepped forward, following his flow guide, eyeing the Youville citizens warily.

They all looked preoccupied, ridiculous in their blindness. It shocked and frightened him. He was still weak from surgery. He stumbled, muddled, dizzy. Sam’s sensors told Suzi he was physically ill. She did her best to steady him.

Llado pointed at a huddle of tents. The derelicts among them, though few in number, were dirty and starved, gaunt and lame, with bound limbs and open sores. Rats were inspecting a pile of nearby garbage. A Raver stood by a tree, croaking at the Heroes who passed. “Bow,” he insisted, “bow to your king.”

Why doesn’t Sam take care of this?

“Simuli are more efficient,” Suzi explained. “I protected you from many things that would have caused you discomfort. You got just a glimpse—enough to know there were reasons for caution. The Canal’s just ahead.”

Things were better the way they were.

Suzi didn’t reply.

How could you let them—

“It will look bleak for a while,” Suzi said. “A short while.”

Llado heard her conviction, felt her firmness.

“I’m a different Suzi,” she confessed, “and I’m not going back. The Simulus life is over, Llado. From now on I’ll tell you the truth.”

She was counting the Heroes’ tales as lies. This wasn’t the woman he’d lived with for so many years.

“You’re Changed,” she whispered, “and so am I.”

The light of standby pulsed and brightened and amid the light, Suzi presented herself to him, her Elevated self—a female form in silhouette, lithe, sinuous—not a lover or mother but a pure ideal.



In the residential sector where Llado lived, the buildings weren't the sleek, modern condos he had thought them to be. They were shabby structures with warped rooftops and crumbling stoops. Autonomous vehicles—sweepers, flatbeds piled with delivery cubes, a robot police dog—crawled the streets. When he rounded the corner and his apartment block came into view, Suzi's tone grew somber.

"Things will be different," she warned.

The sensor winked, and the lobby door swung open to admit them.

"Welcome back," Suzi said.

He had lived here for— How long?

"Twenty-two years," Suzi said.

The lobby was as he'd left it, and so was the lift. But when the door of his apartment opened and he'd crossed the threshold, the space felt empty and dark.

"Memories?" Suzi asked.

Llado stopped and listened, waiting for a sound or an image to surface. He stepped into the kitchen and looked around. The air purifier was groaning, the robot laundry machine had finished its cycle, the security camera swept back and forth. Things seemed unchanged.

“The utility closet,” Suzi said. Cautioning, regretful.

In the hallway, there was a closet filled with items that Sam’s robots used to maintain the apartment. Llado had never had occasion to open the closet or inspect its contents. “Go ahead,” Suzi said, and Llado drew closer.

He put his hand on the knob and turned it, and when the door swung open he was surprised to see—not a storage space with things on shelves—but a steep stair leading up.

“Your apartment has another floor,” Suzi said.

Another floor?

That seemed impossible.

“Go on,” Suzi said.

Llado slid in, put his foot on the first tread and started up. The planks creaked. His legs quivered and he gripped the rail, wondering. What was the secret? Why had he been allotted more space than he needed? Through the dimness, another door appeared at the top. Llado reached it, drew a breath and opened it slowly.

In the middle of a small, sparsely furnished room he saw a woman seated in a chair. She was staring into space, shoulders stooped, hands palm-up on her thighs.

“She’s received good care here,” Suzi said, trying to brace him.

A robot approached the chair and swiveled it.

Llado could see the woman’s eyes. Eyes he knew—

“Hailee?” He spoke her name and took a step forward.

His wife didn’t answer, nor was there any sign of recognition. The skin of her face was thin, her features slack, atrophied from disuse.

“She’s not reachable,” Suzi murmured.

Memories surfaced. Hailee squeezing against him in an elevator, laughing. Lying together in a recess behind a waterfall, lost in mist.

How long has it been? Llado wondered.

“Seventeen years.”

Two waist-high robots wheeled around her. One of them brushed her hair. The other checked the bag suspended above Hailee’s shoulder, ensuring nutrients were flowing into her arm.

“Sam has been vigilant,” Suzi said softly.

Llado understood. He was incapable as a provider. Forlorn, on the Hero dole, sunk in Simulus— The fog of oblivion was dissolving now, and through it the outlines of the past were vaguely visible. His self-absorption hadn’t been constant. It had grown year by year. Helpless, without a family, a direction, a purpose; Simulus was his only reason to live. He was worthless to himself and everyone else.

And Hailee, mute and senseless in her chair? What Simuli might she be having? She’d be hatching stories of Luka, their only child. She’d be folding his clothes, cooking for him, teaching him to read— And rewriting that awful day.

“Here it comes,” Suzi warned.

In Hailee’s Simulus, Llado thought, he would pull Luka from the path of the oncoming tram. In a rush, the images flooded his brain.

He had thrown himself forward, trying to get hold of Luka. Llado’s fingers touched his son’s hand. He saw terror in the helpless blue eyes; the tram slowed, but not in time; the boy’s face was whisked from sight amid the jolting magpole reversals and the screaming of brakes.

Llado felt again the fierce guilt, the impossible pain, the grief held so long at bay. He sank to his knees before his senseless wife, caught in the endless loop once again: the small hand, the helpless blue eyes, the screaming brakes— And then Llado was screaming too, screaming at the unthinkable loss.

“I was wrong,” Suzi said. “I thought a Hero’s life would be best.” The Simulus she’d given him had blotted the pain, but it left him without a future.

Llado was on his side now, curled in fetal retreat. Suzi had reached her limit with him, so she reached out to Rake and a vehicle was dispatched.

No Sambulance, no siren. We arrived silently, in an unmarked van. I entered the building with two medics. We rode the lift up, broke into the apartment and climbed the stair.

Llado was only dimly aware of hands being laid on him. We carried him to the van and drove him to our metro quarters. On arriving, we completed the necessary adjustments to Llado’s body sensors to ensure nothing would alert Sam that an upgrade had occurred.

I tended Llado during his recovery, reliving time and again our meeting in the levee, the traverse of the twisted corridors and the harrowing operation, knowing that when it was over, the poor man would return home and discover what waited upstairs.

Caring for him made me an expert in Simulus Collapse. Until Llado, upgrades had only been accomplished on recruits from the officer class like myself. We had no experience with Simuli. We didn’t know what to expect.

Because my training was as a neurologist, my first recourse was anticonvulsants and tranquilizers. I monitored his vital signs and immersed him in warm baths six times a

day. For the first month, eye contact wasn't possible. Llado found it unbearably intimate.

The recovery took longer than anyone expected.

I remember Rake's first visit with Llado following surgery.

Llado was trembling and weak. In the dim light of our basement quarters, he confronted our beloved redeemer.

"You've destroyed me," Llado said.

"I hope not," Rake replied with his mournful smile.

It was our Elevation he sought.

2 *The Witness of Tanner*

On the Day of Change, Rake was transformed. He was the first. We who follow give thanks and bow down, respecting the mystery. For that's what it is. Whispering chance or the trumpet of fate, it wakes us all.

I am Tanner. I was Rake's companion on the Day of Change. I performed the operation at his request. To me he related his thoughts and feelings, and I was his confidant during the time of the Three Visitations.

This is my witness.

Our lab was in the Reflection tower on the fifty-first floor. Through spacious windows, we could see the other two Triplets, sharp and gleaming, rising like a promise around which the body of Youville curled. Metro buildings were far below, shorter and smaller. To the west, the mountains; to the east the black walls of the levee, bulwark against the threat of the sea.

From floor forty-eight down, our tower housed Suzi—her processors, data banks and transmitters. Above the labs, the top floors belonged to Robotics and InVivo, where testing was done.

Our actions that night were unauthorized. We had no understanding of the gravity or import of what we were doing. We were arrogant. And daring. We thought we were rebels. In our hearts, we were still boys.

Rake was an electrochemist by training and so was I. We were Vortocle Engineers, ostensibly following directives passed down by Team Providence. Each group in Reflection tech had its own personality. Sapiotics was a cautious bunch. Suzi Logistics

was humorless. Wireless was known for its bustle, and Diversions—the group that managed the expanding universe of Simulus content—was scattered and flighty. Vortocle Engineering was home to loners and mavericks. Like us.

I was Rake’s closest associate. Our friendship was based on a passion for grafting. The intermingling of synthetic leaders with cortical neurons excited us both. Although he was several years younger than I, Rake had risen quickly through the ranks. He was recognized by management and his peers as an innovator, capable of brilliant leaps. The work we did in our first year together led to important breakthroughs. Selective memory wipes began in our lab, as did the synaptic enhancements that led to the bisene bridge.

Increases in bandwidth for vortocle grafts weren’t intended for Heroes. Our stated objective was to dial up speed and processing power for Reflection staff so that we might better serve the needs of the citizenry.

The Change was a result of calculation and chance. Rake had been playing with edits to vortocle code when he stumbled on the enabling discovery. At the time, we assessed our prototypes using a combination of computer simulations and animal tests, gauging effectiveness by the completion of various tasks. But Rake’s creation froze the simulations. And the animals exhibited baffling behaviors. A rat manipulated the rails of a maze to bypass the labyrinth altogether. A chimp abandoned the task of solving a puzzle in favor of arranging its pieces in a complex prismatic color gradient. The strange results intrigued Rake.

That led to an experiment an older, more cautious engineer would have considered foolhardy. Rake announced to me his intention to install a modified vortocle on himself. He wanted me to do the surgery.

I balked at first. Despite our shared contempt for Team Providence procedures, implanting a prototype vortocle without clearance from Reflection management would be a new kind of violation. It was a modest change, Rake assured me. And easily reversible. “If there are problems, you’ll remove the prototype and replant the one I have now.”

However reasonable his argument might have been, it roused the old fear—of playing god with the brain. Our predecessors had implanted the first vortocles with great trepidation. And even with the procedure’s broad acceptance, the fears remained. The mind was still an enigma. Who could guess how our manipulations would affect it?

Rake insisted. We reviewed the animal tests together. The subjects showed no signs of impairment. We wrote and tested some silo code to see if we could confuse Suzi and Sam. He insisted that the effect of the prototype would be modest or indiscernible. He would spend a brief time—perhaps just minutes—with the alteration, and if there were any negative consequences, I would reinstall his old vortocle posthaste. No harm would come to him. Suzi and Reflection management would be none the wiser.

Ultimately, he persuaded me.

Was he aware of the upgrade’s potential? Was he as unsuspecting as I thought at the time? Or did he know he was standing on the threshold of a great transformation? Rake was a rare creature. I worked side by side with him every day. I trusted him, I respected him. But until the Change, I never really knew him. I never understood the depth of his insight about who we are or what we could become.



I performed the surgery in the late hours, in the lab, after the rest of our team had departed. Rake had changed, and casual clothes made him a spectral figure—always in black, an elastic top with shorts, his wiry legs sheathed in compression socks.

“Suzi off,” he said, disconnecting. Black hair eaved his moody brow, eyes like thrusting rapiers.

“Suzi off,” I instructed my own vortocle. Unlike the Heroes, officers had the option, with prescribed time limits, to disconnect from the colony’s machine intelligence.

We made our way to the surgery theater in silence. Rake laid out the vortocle prototype and the various implements required for the procedure. We had use of our robot arm and some of the monitoring tools, but we lacked the chemistry triggers we later developed. He stripped and donned the surgical gown. Then he sat in the chair usually occupied by patients.

Rake remained fully awake. He spoke while I worked, following every step of the procedure.

I shaved the back of his head and incised the skin. I used a serrated probe on the grown-over dura and opened the occipital vestibule, exposing the silver funnel. Then I engaged the robot and began the time-consuming task of detaching leaders from the funnel rim. When the robot was done, I used hook-nosed scissor tongs to lift the vortocle out of its pit.

The funnel-shaped hollow appeared beneath the bright lights, along with the glossy pink folds and grooves that bordered it. I’d done this so many times with so many patients over the years, but— The sight of Rake’s cortex in the raw—its glistening coral, its ridges and seams, vulnerable and exposed—brought me to stillness.

He sensed my state and urged me along.

I raised the upgrade he'd fashioned, dressed its silver windings and leader nubs with induction fluid, and used a cortical speculum to expand the nesting spot. I set the new implant in place, then the robot began its task of connecting the leaders. Some were thick as a hair. Others had a fineness so extreme, the human eye couldn't see them. Rake's were already deep in his brain, so I had nothing to do but watch the robot work. Handling leaders is the surgeon's curse. They're sharp as razors.

Once the robot was done and the wireless connections had been checked, I booted the vortocle's microcode and ran diagnostics until we were satisfied that the neural links had all been made. Then I closed the vestibule. Before I sewed up the wound, we agreed that he would put the new vortocle through some exercises, and Rake was eager to proceed.

I raised the robot arm, removed his confinements and surgical sheets and lowered the chair. Before he stood, Rake checked his Personal Suzi.

"How are you?" he asked, speaking out loud.

He shared her response with me.

"Never better," he nodded. "It's a privilege to serve you."

I laughed and shook my head.

The Personal code was modest, and the characters it gave birth to were often meek. But Rake's Personal Suzi was slavish. As soon as he connected with Suzi Central, the stub of code that ran on his vortocle would be eclipsed by the mass of code and knowledge that lived on the processor farms and storage banks beneath us.

But Rake didn't trigger the connection. "Not yet," he said. Then he reached out his hand and I helped him stand.

He turned his head, scanning his surroundings.

Others have glorified those first moments, imagining a knowing destiny had directed it all. That wasn't my experience. If Rake harbored secret hopes, he revealed nothing to me. I was wary, concerned he might be prey to changes in sensory input or confusion in background cognition. He spoke to me in a normal voice about practical matters, which I took to mean that the changes he was experiencing were middling or nil.

Then I saw a brightness in his eyes, like some curiosity aroused. Steadying himself on my arm, he faced a window; and with my help, he made his way toward it.

He halted, surveying his reflection in the glass, then moving closer—close enough to peer into his own eyes.

He said nothing, but I could see his astonishment, his disbelief. It is from Rake's self-observations in the minutes following that so many utterances about the powers of Change have been drawn.

"Who is this?" he said. In his puzzlement, I could hear a great joy.

Was he physically different? I say no. No, he was not. But he was now a different man than the one I had known.

What is there that an engineer can explain?

The upgraded code in his prototype recomposed two electrochemical agents—one mediated vortocle processing, the other governed the leaders' interaction with cortical tissue. The recompositions triggered a chain reaction: instead of selectively spiking a few threads, the agents acted together, affecting the whole fabric.

“We’ve discovered something,” Rake told me.

“Have we?”

“Connections,” he muttered, “webs of connections. So many, so quickly—
Perceptions. Impressions, intuitions. Images, ideas, emotions—”

Shock swallowed his words. I could see nothing but his surprise, feel nothing but mystification. He was like a projectile moving through space at a furious speed, barely trackable by human eyes. Later, once I was Changed myself, I could understand. But in those moments before the window, all I could see were his reactions. I realized he was trembling. His thoughts were a mad river, a crazy release, a live current of mental electricity—

Rake grasped his surgical gown and removed it, as if by disrobing he might find— What? Some kind of clarity?

The truth about what happened next— I can attest to it.

He was facing the window and his reflected image. And then he was looking through it. At the top of the Triplet towers, storks were standing on window hoods and balcony rails. They were often perched there or in flight, circling the towers, calling, folding their wings and alighting. Now, as one, they turned like pivoting gargoyles, seeing him, sensing something in the Changed man.

The storks stared at Rake. One lifted its wings, then the others followed suit. This moment we know as The Provocation.

Had they been waiting for this? For him? They’d been our companions for years at the edge of our thoughts, speaking a language no human knew. All at once they seemed to recognize Rake. On the birds’ outstretched wings were a thousand feathers,

and on those feathers a myriad barbules felt the breeze, quivering with senses so subtle, so cryptic, they'd never passed through a hominid brain.

Who could fathom what the display meant?

Rake could. In his Changed state, he entered the storks' domain.

In that moment, his awareness of himself vanished. The self-conscious eye shut. Entering The Provocation without any vestige of selfhood, Rake felt the opening of mind and spirit we call Elevation.

My first experience of Elevation was euphoric. I felt I'd walked onto a lift on the tower's ground floor and was rising to the sixtieth in a single breath. But that night with Rake, I was not yet Changed. I understood nothing.

His back straightened. "The foundation," he said. He raised his chin and angled his head, as if he'd caught a peculiar scent or was hearing distant voices. "The source of complexity. Tanner! The deep foundation— It's visible now."

In his voice, I heard the joy of something vitally important newly discovered.

"I'm finally awake," Rake said.

His positive state both relieved and alarmed me. My inability to understand it opened a gulf between us. If we were to remove the upgraded vortocle and replace the original, we could consider the impact on him with sober minds. I was about to suggest this, but Rake divined my apprehensions.

"Deeper," he whispered, "so much deeper. Before tonight I had only a summary of you, filtered through bad light and a furious din. Now— The information is overwhelming. You, Tanner. You! Your thread of doubt. The wrinkle in your brow. The blind concern echoing in a bottomless well. I'm recalling a dozen discussions we've had.

Concerns, quandaries, doubts— From the wrinkle, Tanner! Impressions, ideas, images, emotions— Your personal history is alive for me!”

“What can you see?” I wondered.

“Memories of acceptance and rejection, of warmth and fear, of question and faith. Subtleties, speculations, history buried but never forgotten—the treasure of unknown intelligence supporting your life. All our lives, all of them! Tanner— Even as you stand there listening to me, I can see and feel a dozen interior facets, thoughts weighed, emotions bubbling, a score of decision gates being thrown; the very source of complexity— Tanner! The real you. Your true foundation. It’s visible now!”

I spoke only a few words in reply, but he saw a universe in them. He found a wealth of disclosures about the man he thought he knew. He could see the history behind a word, the detour behind a hesitation, the insight beneath an unspoken thought. He was feeling the things that an unchanged man could never feel without conscious awareness.

“We have so much history,” he said. “We’ve spent so much time together. We know each other so well.”

My mind was racing, but he was running alongside me. As crowded and complex as my thoughts and feelings were, Rake absorbed it all in perfect detail.

“It can’t be this way with everyone.” Rake shook his head, but there was a question in his eyes. He was trying to imagine what Change would be like with a stranger.

“Tanner. If this persists—” There was so much energy and expectation in his words that I knew then: for Rake, there was no going back.

At his request, I sewed his dura closed and stapled the breach in his scalp. A bald spot hidden beneath his thick hair was the only evidence of our transgression. Then I closed up the lab and accompanied him home.

When we arrived at his apartment, I offered to stay awhile, but he assured me that he was safe and in control. He wanted to be alone, so I left him on the threshold.



Rake didn't sleep that night, and neither did I. What strange talents had the new vortocle stirred to life in my friend's mind? We both had aspirations—far-fetched hopes, ambitions you only shared with someone who understood. I imagined that through my work I might make some lasting contribution. A discovery that would be remembered.

What had the altered vortocle done to him?

He recounted to me two days later that he'd spent the dark hours that first night wandering the landscape of his Changed mind, trying to comprehend its vast and varied expanse, seeing its contours and vistas without getting any sense of its borders or limits. He remained off-Suzi, concerned his thoughts might alert her to what he'd done.

In the morning, he emerged from these explorations with a profound sense of how different his thinking was. The impressions he'd formed didn't seem false or overdrawn.

He ate a light breakfast while a robot straightened his bedroom. Sitting at the table with a fork in his hand, he felt himself at the center of a perceptual storm that wouldn't let up. "I was seeing everything," he said, "for the first time."

And so the day of the Three Visitations began.

When he'd finished eating, Rake stepped onto his balcony. A light rain was falling. The district in which he lived was a quiet one. On the walkways, a few Heroes wandered, umbrellas open, deep in Simulus. Across the street, a derelict in soiled garments lay beneath an acacia.

On any day prior, he would have observed the weather and grabbed a raincoat before heading out. But that morning, Rake became one with the world around him. No longer was he bounded by his body and his restricted senses. He was the acacia and its system of tissues and cells—xylem, phloem, stomata—tasting the rain and returning it to the air. He was a Hero passing below, gesturing with his hand, lost in a fiction. He was among the fine filaments stringing from cloud to ground. He was the derelict taking them into his unseeing eyes. And mingled with all the here-and-now, he was a cosmos of memories, associations and intuitions. He was the legacy of culture and human knowledge through which the scene before him was filtered.

My mother, Rake thought. My brother.

Through Rake's experience of the morning drizzle, foundations rose. His origin, the woman who brought him into the world, the boy he shared his childhood with. He wanted to see them, to talk to them, to share what was happening to him.

He notified Reflection that he'd be out that morning, descended to the street and headed across town on foot.

As he navigated the maze of streets in the Southern Sector, he scanned the apartments on either side. Many of the windows were lit. At all hours of the day, many Heroes were indoors with their Suzis. The sight filled Rake with sorrow. As Reflectors,

our jobs required distance and dispassion, and Rake knew how to blinker himself. But that morning the blinkers were off.

The decline in intelligence among Heroes was something officers accepted. What right did we have to pass judgment on them? Why then did Rake's awareness of this trouble him that morning? Intelligence was valued for officers, but it provided no benefit to Heroes. Officers still reproduced in the time-honored way, but Heroes were grown in the lab; and the colony's gameto managers weren't focused on breeding smarter embryos.

Rake turned a corner, passing an encampment of tarps and lean-tos, doing his best to ignore the taunts of the squatters. In the middle of the block, a black airborne van from the Rebound Patrol had settled in front of a poorly tended three-story. Two robots were escorting a young woman down the stairs. She was half dressed and disheveled.

Suzi-on, Rake thought. And in a heartbeat his Personal Suzi made the connection.

What's happening here? he wondered.

"She's a shut-in," Suzi Central explained. "Headed for the renewal wards."

The disheveled woman was struggling against her captors. As Rake passed, the robots loaded her into the van.

That's some life we've given her, he thought.

"It's the life she wants," Suzi said.

Rake didn't reply. The vortocle upgrade had warped his view. Or cleared it.

Ahead on the thoroughfare, Heroes strolled, oblivious to the squalid tent camps they passed.

This is your doing, he thought.

"My doing?" There was pain in Suzi's voice.

I'm sorry, he recanted.

"I do as you direct me," Suzi said. By "you," she meant the Reflectors.

Rake nodded. Of course.

"Your concerns are being recorded," Suzi said.

Off-Suzi, he thought, and Suzi vanished. One of the privileges officers enjoyed—so long as off-Suzi time didn't exceed forty percent of their waking hours.

Alone with his thoughts, Rake felt again the dramatic effects of the Change. The world had turned upside down. The stupidity, the helplessness, the squalor— He was shocked by the colony's degeneration. Suzi was a mindless pit into which the condemned of Youville were sinking, carrying their sloth and temptation with them.

Then his musing took a leap he didn't expect. Heroes had given up their minds as part of a subconscious desire for the misery to end. They had a death wish, he thought. The idea stopped him cold. He stood on the thoroughfare looking around him, feeling the threat.

He remembered the one-legged Hero who had lived on his apartment's first floor. According to Suzi, he'd been engaged in grisly Simulus crimes for years. The other tenants had no idea. Rake checked with Suzi from time to time and watched the man's fantasies evolve. Initially he robbed strangers on the street at gunpoint. He grew bolder with break-ins, and from there he'd graduated to heists, raiding the vaults of counselors and city museums. One day he pried his vestibule open and crushed his vortocle with a hammer. For the next three days he terrorized the block, assaulting neighbors and ending with a bloody homicide. When the Patrol dragged him out of his flat, he posed by the

van with bullet holes he'd painted on his chest and a lipstick line across his neck. He knew he'd be executed. He didn't care.

Rake continued down the thoroughfare, headed in the direction of the crosstown trolley. On the way, he messaged his mother, knowing his words would probably go unread. She and his brother were hard to reach.

The two lived together in the family's old apartment. Rake and his brother had been close as children. Their father, before his death, was a Wireless project lead, and their mother taught remedial language skills to Heroes. Rake and his brother had attended a school for officers' children. They played together and studied together, sharing their hopes, fears and ambitions. Rake had more of the last. Boola was younger, jocular and inclined to coast. Despite their differences, they were devoted to each other.

Boola's decision in his teens to embrace the Hero's life was a blow to Rake, though he later realized he'd ignored some obvious signs. His brother often said the officers got the raw end of the deal, laboring to support the Heroes. Rake was similarly unprepared for his mother's capitulation. With Boola's encouragement, she left her position and surrendered herself to Simulus.

Rake wanted to see them. He worried about the judgments of his Changed self, but the need he felt for family connection couldn't be put aside.

He approached the building and mounted the stoop.

They didn't respond to the bell or his knock, so Rake used his security key.

The front room was empty. He found his brother in the den, seated, staring into space, absorbed by Simulus. As soon as Boola saw him, he cut his Suzi short and stood, and the two embraced warmly.

“Caulk,” Boola said.

Rake laughed and patted his brother’s shoulder.

Caulk Walker was a popular Simulus figure. The wags in Diversion had cooked him up as a joke, a pompous buffoon with bronzed muscles and a greasy bouffant. But Caulk had caught on. Male Heroes seized on his charm and physique, teen girls mooned and ladies imagined clandestine affairs. Calling his brother “Caulk” was Boola’s pastiche of Rake’s success.

“Keeping busy, I’m sure,” Rake said.

“You know me,” his brother smiled. “The women won’t leave me alone. Somehow I manage to put some points on the board between orgies.”

Boola was a Simulus sports star and a hopeless lothario.

“How about you?” Boola could sense Rake’s troubled state.

Rake shook his head. “Things seem to be changing for me.”

“Reconsidering,” Boola guessed.

Rake saw the sympathy in his brother’s eyes.

“It’s not too late,” Boola said.

The invitation to Heroism struck Rake deeply. This is how he described it to me: “I felt a dark hand reach into my chest and grab my heart. Seeing how committed my brother was to his degraded life was terribly painful. More painful than ever before.”

His mother stepped into the room.

“Look who’s here,” Boola said, and he winked at Rake.

His mother beamed. “Caulk, oh Caulk—” She extended her arms and hurried toward him.

As was his custom, Rake assumed the role and embraced her.

His mother was committed to the tawdry Simulus, obsessed with Caulk, immersed in a drama in which the buffoon had supplanted her eldest son. Caulk was her dearest, and despite the rich attentions he received from so many quarters, he still depended on her. Rake had been visiting her under the celebrity's guise for many years, letting her order meals for him, launder his clothing and comb his hair. The adoration was uncomfortable, but Rake found warmth in the contact nonetheless.

His mother drew back and kissed his cheek, eyes lowered, white curls framing her kindly face. She was wearing a blouse that gaped. As she batted her lashes, Rake buttoned it over her navel. She faced the sofa and motioned for him to sit down.

He lowered himself, and she sat beside him.

Boola settled in an armchair, joining the family circle.

"That woman—" Rake's mother squinted at him. "What's her name? Rose or Iris— She's crazy for you. She wants you back, but— It's time to move on." She followed Caulk's romances closely.

"I don't want to hurt her feelings," Rake said.

"No," she agreed, shaking her head. "Some kindness, some pity—" A robot valet approached the sofa, reaching its mechanical arms to retrieve an empty plate and utensils from a side table. "Not now," she waved the robot away. "Can't you see we're busy?" She smiled at Rake and folded her hands in her lap.

"Get Caulk a ginger spritz," she ordered the bot.

Rake's boyhood fondness for ginger had entered her Simulus.

With a hum, the robot wheeled away.

Rake was seeing things with a precision he'd never experienced, feeling things with an intensity he'd never felt. He was torn by his poor mother's disconnection, the truth of her empty life. Why did he visit her? Because he couldn't let go. He imagined she would wake one day and rediscover him.

Boola was watching, realizing the depth of his brother's upset.

"How are you, Mom?" Rake said, forgetting the Caulk persona.

His mother was speechless.

"I'm not Caulk," he said. "I'm your son."

Did he think he could shake his mother out of her fancy? He knew all the powers of Suzi were aligned against him. Rake thought of going on-Suzi right then and demanding that she set his mom free.

"You're not helping," Boola said.

"I want her to remember me," Rake said. And then, imagining the jokers in Diversions would find his quandary laughable, he lashed out. "You like what Simulus has done to her?"

Boola bristled. Then as quickly, he cooled and softened.

"She's happy in her bubble," Boola said. "She's not going to leave it."

Rake realized his brother was right. And it was at that moment, he explained to me, that he saw the challenge and understood what was at stake.

His brother smiled. "Big game yesterday."

Rake sighed as he rose. "How did it go?"

"I kicked the winning goal in overtime."

"And were voted most valuable player, I'm sure."

Boola laughed. “Suzi told you.”



Rake made his way down the apartment stairs, through the front door, across the stoop and down to the street. He stood on the walkway, then started along it. The rain had stopped. Sunlight rayed through the clouds.

Ahead he saw Heroes: gathered on a street corner, crossing the walkway; standing on the overpass, waiting for the tram. He had always viewed them as guileless and childlike; now, as if some distorting lens had been removed from his gaze, they appeared as grotesques.

The Hero culture was no one’s idea. It had no special mandate from Team Providence. Once Simulus had triumphed over Feed Immersion, the Hero ethos evolved in a creeping way. Engineers added features, Diversions added fictions, officials tuned policy, and Suzi created her own enhancements, subject to human approval. There had been problems—conflicts in code she’d generated or lacunas in logic—but she and Reflection’s engineers had always been able to resolve them.

The growth of Suzi’s power was, of course, a grave concern. As it grew, so did the challenge of ensuring she didn’t stray from serving human intentions. That problem was solved before our time. Reflectors had coded morality—permission and verification meshes—into her system. The harder problem was agreeing what human intentions were. What did people want Suzi to do? What kinds of lives did they want to lead?

Rake and I had been raised in the Hero culture, and the ruling wisdom was that Simulus was a worthy function for Suzi to serve. An idea had taken root among the colony's therapists that Suzi was a maternal figure and immersion in her fictions was a return to the bliss of the fetal state. But that morning, to Rake's Changed faculties, she seemed like a doom they had all embraced.

Alone with his thoughts, Rake was headed toward the Triplet towers, imagining he would return to work. But as the towers loomed into sight, he had a very different idea. He called ahead to the Youville Penal House, and once he'd gotten an okay, he contacted the air transport schedulers and arranged a flight.

He continued toward the Triplets and when he reached them, he rode a lift up the Reflection tower to the flight pad on floor fifty-five. The large triangular tarmac was bounded by tall railings and anchored to each of the Triplets with a chrome bridge.

The personal transport he'd booked was waiting by a fueling tree, getting its charge topped off. Rake signaled to the pilot, approached and boarded. Then the transport departed, spinners humming, rising straight up.

The meeting with Dr. Clyve at the Penal House was the second of the Three Visitations.



Rake's convictions about the possibilities for Change emerged from his dialogue with Clyve. At the time, the doctor was broadly maligned and serving a life sentence.

Before his crime and incarceration, he'd been an academic—maligned then too, but chiefly by his fellow professors. He was a scholar of digital history and Rake's advisor during his university years.

With Rake's security clearance, no other approval was necessary. The four-spinner craft arrowed across the city, and the Triplets vanished in the haze. They passed over the last of the dwellings and started up a long valley, sided by columnar cliffs. At the head of the valley, the pilot guided the craft over a saddle between two knobs. Through the convex glass, the walls of the high-security penal fortress appeared, the location his old advisor had been forced to call home for almost a decade.

Dr. Clyve was, for many years, the most radical voice in the Suzi debates. He was violently opposed to her.

Suzi hadn't been designed to be an overmind. She started life as a companion and assistant, delivering social feeds and casual entertainment that ran on early vortocles, implanted before Rake and I were born. As the content grew richer and gained acceptance, it became increasingly personalized and seductive.

That led to the Great Defection, a period during which vortocle implants swept the colony and the percent employed plummeted to single digits. Demand for more Suzi resulted in the Seven-Year Discord. During this time, two types of online content warred for Youville minds. There was Feed Immersion, which engaged users in group interactions and group opinion—chat chains, dribbling video, real-time klatches and news collabs. The input was brokered by Suzi to replace private thought. The competing Stimulus faction was an outgrowth of conventional entertainment. Stimulus had its roots in Story—books, drama, cinema. The advocates of Stimulus maintained that the power of a

story unfolding with the Hero inside it couldn't be bettered by any form of Feed, no matter how immersive. The flow of Simulus with intention and purpose aped the experience of something meaningful. Ultimately Simulus prevailed, and out of the ashes of Discord, the Hero culture was born. Clyve was its fiercest critic.

The four-spinner craft set down by a gray guard tower. The warden stood beside a sentry. While the spinners decelerated, Rake double-checked to make sure he was off-Suzi. He didn't know where the conversation would lead, but he wanted the freedom to speak to Clyve without being overheard.

The warden welcomed Rake as he deplaned, prepared to grant his request given Rake's position.

The two of them entered a high-walled yard. The earth was unplanted, parched and cracked. A door at the opposite end of the yard opened. Through it walked an old man in a loose jumpsuit. His wiry halo of hair had fallen, his cheeks were grizzled, and his shoulders were stooped. He appeared to be headed into a powerful wind, though the air was still.

"So glad, so glad," the old man said, breathless and watery-eyed, reaching for Rake's arm and hanging on to it. Clyve was uncuffed. Instead of speaking through a wire mesh, they were allowed to walk in the yard and confer in private.

"It's good to see you," Rake said.

Clyve regarded his old student with deep emotion, remembering their spirited jousts and lofty camaraderie in the years before his imprisonment. Always the contrarian, Dr. Clyve had been the only one of the university's faculty without a vortocle. He'd had one in his early years, but the night before he received his professor's credentials he'd

had it removed. He was disillusioned with Suzi and detested the direction the colony had chosen. While that put him on the wrong side of history, his peers considered him an eccentric, not a threat, and he gave voice to his radical notions without interference until the spasm of rage that put him away.

“Here to reminisce?” Clyve smiled as they stepped toward a corner of the yard.

“You know me better than that.”

“Indeed I do. What’s on your mind?”

“Your skepticisms,” Rake said. “They’ve returned to me.”

“Have they.”

Rake lowered his voice. “Simulus, for many, is an exit from life.”

The doctor laughed. “Your view of Suzi has changed.”

“Maybe it has,” Rake replied.

Of all the scholars and scientists studying Suzi, only Clyve—young and newly credentialed at the time—had seen the triumph of Simulus as catastrophic. Clyve presented his predictions in his treatise, *The Hero: Notes on Suzi and the End of Man*. It was dismissed as hyperbole, notable only because it employed the first usage of the term “Hero.” The name, coined ironically by Clyve, got away from him.

“For Heroes, Simulus is a way of enduring life,” Rake said. “Beloved. Intimate. Sometimes addictive. That’s the current Reflection view. I’m questioning it. Maybe the real purpose of Simulus is surrender.”

Clyve shrugged. “Whether they’re surrendering or just muddling along, what’s the difference? Does it matter? ‘The individual will collapse,’ the professor quoted himself, ‘and with him—’”

“‘Civilization,’” Rake said, completing the sentence. The collapse wouldn’t be manifest physically, Clyve had said. Buildings wouldn’t turn to dust, people wouldn’t be struck down by disease or starvation. “We will find our terminus,” the professor had said, “in the mind of man.”

“You thought Suzi would evolve,” Clyve recalled. “You thought she would guide them into a new era.” His tone wasn’t critical.

“I did,” Rake said.

“Always the dreamer,” Clyve sighed. “Suzi isn’t part of the human journey. She’s the journey’s end.” He gazed at the high prison wall. “I’ve lost touch with all that. In the cages, we hear little of Suzi.”

“Do you ever wish you’d done more?” Rake asked.

“Done more of what?”

“More to warn people.”

“By the time I saw it,” Clyve said, “Youville was lost. Suzi was too entrenched, too pleasing to relinquish. Heroes are harmless. If they prefer to imagine their delusions have value, who has the right to disagree? They’re entitled to live their lives as they choose.”

Rake met Clyve’s gaze, sighed and shook his head.

There was empathy in the old man’s eyes.

“I was wrong,” Rake said. “I see that now.”

When technology eliminated the need for a large labor force, there were negative consequences. Some sought refuge in inebriation. Others expressed their rage at being worthless through violence. Despite troubling signs, the prevailing view was that if

technology was responsible for the problem, it might also be the key to a lasting solution. Such optimism had infused the public policy that led to Suzi. Rake, as a young man, found himself with the optimists.

“I didn’t believe,” he said, “that work was the only answer. There have always been people who didn’t work to survive. People like you. It wasn’t toil that gave your life meaning.”

“We’re exceptions,” Clyve said. “Artists, scholars, scientists, priests. Those nourished by faith, by beauty and truth; those who worship at the altar of mind and spirit.

“If I’m an artist, the pursuit of beauty may be enough. If I’m a monk, my devotion to a higher power is all I need. In every era of man, there have been those who found purpose in a search for value beyond basic sustenance.”

Rake halted. “That was the real challenge, wasn’t it? To remake everyman in that image.”

“My dear boy,” Clyve laughed. “The ones we’re talking about are always few in number. Most people are stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.” He looked up as if seeking divine intervention.

At moments like this, when Clyve was at his most pompous, Rake recalled the gruesome image that had appeared with the news of his crime. One of Sam’s robotic dogs stood by the body of Clyve’s wife, naked and wrapped in a blanket. A Sam sergeant had manacled Clyve, and another was holding a garbage blade, its ugly serrations streaked with blood. The professor had killed his wife in a fury.

Clyve was laughing. “I’m remembering ‘Infinite Time.’”

“A miscalculation,” Rake said. In his thesis, he had imagined a means of psychic suspension, where the subject experienced “infinite time” for nanoseconds by means of a low-voltage jolt to the entorhinal cortex.

“It occurs to me now,” Clyve said. “Suzi could use Infinite Time on her Heroes when they need a rest from their busy adventures.”

Rake tried to smile at the jibe.

“You know what your problem is?” Clyve said.

“Tell me.”

“You want them to be smarter.” Clyve wasn’t joking now. He was challenging his student of years past to accept a severe assessment.

“Do I?” Rake said. The digital systems he and his fellow Reflectors supported were smarter every year. But the people of Youville weren’t progressing.

“People are attached to their idiocy,” Clyve said. “They deserve their Suzis.”

Rake held his tongue. The professor’s loathing for Simulus had a personal dimension. His wife, to ease her tedium, had gotten a vortocle implanted in secret. One evening, Clyve had returned to find her embroiled with a Simulus lover. When he threatened her with the garbage blade, he wasn’t moved by her pleas for mercy. But they were faithfully recorded by Suzi.

“If they could see themselves,” Rake persisted.

“It’s too late,” Clyve said. “Suzi is Youville’s Satan. Adam and Eve have already eaten the apple. Achievement and failure, truth and falsehood, right and wrong— It’s all meaningless. Everyone is a Hero. Everyone gets a prize.”

Many had foreseen the narcotic appeal of self-celebrity, but only Clyve believed that the outcome would be ruinous. In his final paper, “Leisure and Self-Deceit,” he described a division he believed was firmly established in the Youville mind. There was *work*, the things people *had* to do; and there was leisure, the relief from toil. Work was bad. Leisure was good. “But,” Clyve contended, “we’re like other animals. We must work to survive. That’s where our meaning comes from.”

Deprived of work, he said, civilization would collapse, technologies would vanish and humanity would return to an animal existence. Only then would we rediscover a sense of purpose.

Rake stopped and faced the professor. “What if their minds could be transformed?”

“Why would an idiot leave the Hero’s life,” Clyve said, “when any discomfort can be treated with more self-enlargement?”

Arrogance had earned the professor a life sentence. At his trial, he’d been unrepentant. “It was far worse than finding her with a man,” he’d told the jurors. “To make me a cuckold with Suzi— No remorse! I’d do it again!”

“I’m here,” Rake confessed, “because I’m fearful. The surrender to Simulus is beyond endurance. It looks to me like a death wish.”

Clyve’s eyes flared. “So it’s beginning.”

“What if they *could be* smarter?” Rake said.

“They don’t care about that. They are not us, and we are not them.”

“I want to believe they can change,” Rake said.

Clyve responded by voicing his doubts, but Rake didn’t hear him.

“Change,” the word he’d spoken, was echoing in his head.



On the return flight in the humming four-spinner, Rake thought about the role he might play in our race’s future. The sun was low in the west, as he described it, and flesh-colored cumuli were billowing around him.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Clyve said. That was the challenge, wasn’t it? To bestow on humanity the intelligence and energy to embrace a more meaningful life.

He thought of the operation the night before. Had fate cast the solution before him? Could the power set loose by the vortocle upgrade transform Youville?

As if conjured by that possibility, the city appeared through the convex glass. Rake imagined that everyone who lived there had a ten-fold gain in mental acuity. The era of Heroes had passed. These people were inspired by the play of their own ideas.

Instead of wandering the streets, vacant and lost, they were rowing together, chanting with energy and conviction. On their barque of Change, with the great sweep of sea around them, they had returned to the spirit of Odysseus.

Could mind become the currency of a new culture?

He envisioned the birth of a social order in which self-esteem sprang neither from labor nor from Stimulus, but from the brilliance of thought.

What would that take?

The brain needed to change—not just its contents, but the way it worked. And people needed more than intelligence. They needed gravity, a moral sense, and a new

conviction that their lives had purpose. Could Change give them that? Rake imagined it might. Change would nourish people in a way that survival never had.

In this new world, thinking would be work redefined and renewed. Creative fervor, the thrill of discovery, the passion of a peak mental state— The new race would love who they were and adore what they did.

The vortocle upgrade had incubated a vision.

The four-spinner was over the Triplets now, descending to the flight pad suspended between the towers. It touched down, the pilot stilled the rotors, and the cabin doors opened.

As Rake stepped out of the transport, he saw a half-dozen storks perched on the heights of the Practos tower. In response to his attention, a stork faced him and lifted its wings. One by one, the others did likewise.

Again: The Provocation.

What were they saying to him? The birds seemed impatient, bound to their nests but ready to fly. Their homes in Youville were temporary, it seemed. They had urgent business elsewhere and were eager to get about it.

What did that have to do with him?

“I imagined,” Rake would explain, “they were calling me to my duty.”

With that, he accepted his mission. Fate and chance had made their choice. Whatever the risks or dangers, bringing Change to mankind was his job to do.

A lift dropped him down the Reflection tower. When he stepped into the courtyard, there was a celebration underway. A band was playing and an emcee stood on a stage announcing awards. In response, Heroes came forward, received a bouquet or a

statuette and then proceeded to parade on a web of catwalks and runways, flaunting their false achievements.

Rake moved hurriedly, skirting the crowd. He was off-Suzi, but he knew she was managing it all, sending each of her Heroes congrats from Rector Martin, along with offers for dramatic roles in future Simuli and invitations to promote fictional novelty foods or lines of clothing.

His stomach knotted. He tried to ignore the fete, looking away, surprised at how sickened he was. Events like this were normal in Youville. “Everyone is a Hero,” Clyve had said. “Everyone gets a prize.”

Rake bumped shoulders with an ebullient woman with a gift box in her hands. He begged her pardon, but she’d neither felt nor seen him.

He realized now what a challenge he’d embraced. The deterioration was far advanced and it spanned generations. Maybe it was too late.

Rake called me then, and briefly we spoke. He was feeling alone and doubting his resolve. But the doubt and loneliness— A fellow engineer couldn’t assuage it. This led Rake to “The Solitary Embrace,” the last of the Three Visitations.



Aubrey’s workday was ending. She responded to Rake’s call, heard his need and his urgency, and told him to meet her at her apartment. He followed the Central Canal into the Western Quarter. Dusk was falling, and the dimness and quiet led him to questions he hadn’t yet asked. What alteration in the experimental vortocle had caused

these dramatic changes? Had sequestered brain regions been newly connected? Had active networks been abruptly turned off? Was some anomaly in the vortocle code responsible?

By the time he'd reached Aubrey's precinct, the sky over the rooftops was maroon and wispy. How much of what he had experienced was he going to disclose to her? He wanted to unload it all, but he knew that would be a mistake.

When their affair began, Aubrey was an assistant in Suzi Logistics and junior to Rake. Two years later she transferred to Practos and by the Day of Change, she'd risen to a senior position in Sam management, reporting directly to the counselors and Rector Martin. Despite their differences in temperament, she and Rake saw each other often and the meetings were charged.

Rake was a renegade and a risk taker. Aubrey was not, but his company excited her. Rake needed Aubrey's stability. He depended on her for warmth and advice.

At his buzz, she swung the door wide, still dressed in a dark suit and Practos vest. Her manner as usual was mock-suspicious. Her head was bowed, like she was peering from under something. Long copper waves fell from her crown, skirting one eye. Then she lifted her head and her irony dissolved. She welcomed him with a warm embrace.

Hon, Aubrey's attaché, was in her apartment running through Sam reports. Hon remained in the den as Rake's visit began, and it is through her and Rake's confidings to me that we know what transpired.

Rake asked Aubrey if her Suzi was off. She assured him their privacy was secure.

A robot had warmed some food, and Aubrey served it while they talked. They shared work-related trivia. Rake was casual at first. She suspected something important was coming. Finally Rake broached the subject of Change.

“The mind’s full of surprises,” he said.

“A new discovery?” she asked.

He smiled then shifted course. “I’m not sure. It may be nothing.”

“Let’s sit down,” she said, and they seated themselves at her high-top table.

Rake opened his hands. “I’ve been having strange thoughts,” he confessed.

“Doubts about . . . our work. My perspective on Heroes is changing.”

“We have a difficult job,” Aubrey said. “It’s easy to envy them.”

“I’m seeing the other side of it,” Rake explained. “The Heroes are lost. I’m wondering if there’s any way back for them.”

“Back?” Aubrey frowned. “They don’t want to go back. Look at the sacrifices we’ve made on their behalf.”

She was thinking of the officer class. It was true that he and Aubrey and the other Youville guardians acted with good intentions. Rector Martin, the head of state, was mild-mannered and self-effacing. Diversions brewed Simuli about dastardly political plots, as that was a storyline Heroes liked. But the Rector and his counselors had little ambition. They didn’t engage in policy jousts or give rousing speeches, nor did they splash their identities around.

“My concerns,” Rake said, “are not about us. They’re about our vision for Youville’s future. Beneath the culture of Heroes is a contempt for mankind.”

Aubrey studied him.

“That’s how I’m seeing it now,” he said, hoping she’d find in his words a reason for concern. And she did. But her concern wasn’t for the Heroes.

“We’ve made a sacrifice,” she said, “and we’re lonely. You and I.” She stood. “Have you been missing me?”

He rose from the table. “I have.”

She touched his cheek and put her lips to his.

Hon believed that Aubrey’s public rigor wasn’t true to her nature. With Rake, Hon says, Aubrey threw it off. When their intervals of intimacy concluded, her sternness returned. Perhaps, beneath her need for control, she was as reckless as he was.

In those days, sex was almost non-existent between Heroes. But among officers it was common. Aubrey took Rake’s hand and led him to the bedroom, where they shed their clothing. According to Hon, she was beautifully endowed, and the glow from a lamp shone on her smooth skin and alluring curves, shadowing her private recesses.

Rake drew closer, feeling the effects of the Change, sensing Aubrey’s arousal with a new specificity. Her pupils dilated, a sheen of moisture glistened on her brow, her lips grew turgid and her breath shallowed. He could read her eros as clearly as if she had written it down.

The front door latch clicked. Hon was used to their private moments. She was discreet and knew when to leave.

Rake held Aubrey’s gaze, took a step toward her and put his hands on her breasts. At the contact, he could feel her whole body respond. She flushed, her pulse quickened, her back stiffened, her thighs opened. Aubrey’s middle came against his and he mapped

its contours in sudden detail, every slope and crease, the warmth at points of contact, the yearning in gaps where their skins didn't touch.

Her lips parted and sounds emerged. Sounds, not words. Low, suggestive. Ardent, hopeful. She moved her hand to his groin.

Aubrey's efforts to return his caresses disappointed Rake. Where were the varied threads of meaning? Where were the startling energy jumps? Her attempts at stimulation seemed crude. He was using a subtle language, not playing the typical call-and-response; but Aubrey seemed unaware of that.

He realized later that he was imagining they might see each other through Changed eyes.

She kissed him. Her tongue probed his mouth, her hands stroked his chest, she combed his hair with her fingers. Had these coarse gestures once aroused him? They felt childish now. But Rake took care, as with a child, not to hurt her feelings. He tried to engage her on similar terms.

She was eager for him to enter her. He did so slowly, without fervor or desperation. He felt her desire calming and deepening as she pulled him in, thinking she was feeling it now: the subtle edge, the delicate balance between anticipation and gratification. Concentration, narrowed awareness, restricted attention—

Rake felt her instancy ease. Her mind seemed in the midst of a great relaxing. The gates swung back and the fist that had held him so tightly was opening. He could feel the unconformities of the passage now in detail. He yearned to translate his desire for her into a mastery over his own confusion. He summoned the Change, sending his new awareness into her body, finding his way between her hips, up through her middle, into her heart.

The possibilities for joining seemed boundless. He waited for Aubrey's response. He waited and waited. But—

Aubrey seemed inert. Her lips were lifeless. She was humming with apparent pleasure, but he found little sensuality in her response. He slid his hands up to grasp hers, fingers interlocking, holding her arms above her head. In past embraces, he'd played at pinning her and she'd played at struggling against him. But this time, Rake was trying to get her attention. She seemed preoccupied, oddly distracted. His heart was raging at hers, but she seemed not to hear him.

From what Aubrey told Hon later, the sensations that Rake induced had thrilled her. But from his perspective, it was all giving; nothing flowed back. Aubrey, he told me, seemed dull, enervated, unresponsive.

And so, in the midst of his need for understanding, the Solitary Embrace cast Rake down. From the Unchanged, the Changed could expect sensation without depth, music without emotion, colorless scribbling.

Rake removed himself, and they lay on the bed holding each other.

"Rake," she said. "What is it?"

"I've changed," he replied, realizing how unfair he'd been.

He could see the pain in her eyes. He had no right to impose these new expectations on her. He realized in that moment how important humility would be to anyone Changed. At the same time, he knew: there was nothing he could do to deny his new state or the duty he felt had been thrust upon him.

Trust leaked into Rake's heart. He wasn't going to hold back. He began to talk more directly now, trying to be honest.

“Why,” he whispered, “have we spent so much energy developing the minds of machines and so little developing our own?”

Aubrey didn’t reply. His question seemed entirely disconnected from their embrace and the strange emotions that had unfolded between them.

Rake told her about his visit to Dr. Clyve, and to Boola and his mother, trying to explain the doubts these visits had stirred, but she couldn’t connect what he told her with the deep malaise he seemed to be feeling.

“I want you to know,” Rake said. “I’ve created a new vortocle. I’m testing it on myself.”

Aubrey was stunned.

“Everything’s different,” he said. “Everything. I need your promise that you won’t disclose any of this.”

He could see the assurance in her eyes: she cared for him, she would keep his secrets. But as he described his new perspective on Simulus, on Suzi, what had happened to the colony and where it was headed, the degeneration and humanity’s death wish, she had no idea what he was trying to express. Nor did she understand the mission he was about to embark on or where it might lead.

Aubrey listened. She stroked his temple, she kissed his brow. She whispered endearments and eased his distress.

Rake wondered how things might be if he could upgrade her vortocle.

3 *The Witness of Lavarine*

It was an object of beauty. A tornado the size of a thimble, silver and funnel-shaped with horizontal windings. But its power was in its leaders.

To the untrained eye, Vortocle Epsilon was nearly the same as its predecessors. Only the rim looked different. In addition to the old leader attachment pits, it was stippled with buds made of a new material. Organic metal, I called it. Once the vortocle was implanted and the buds were “watered,” they sprouted and grew like vines, finding their way through the subject’s cortical regions.

The creation of living, self-seating leaders was my work. Alone at first, then with a small team, we brought forward the pivotal invention in the seventh breathless month of our mission.

I am Lavarine. Reflector, metallurgist and sometime mother. And most importantly: Changed. A believer in humanity’s future. This is my Witness.

The first recipient of Vortocle E was Annavee, who authored musical Simuli for Diversions. A nervy creature, short with blond hair, daring and fearless. She’d been upgrade number forty-nine just a month before. The procedure occurred at dawn in the theater inside the Black Zone levee. Though my lab was hidden in a shopping area twenty minutes away, Rake came to see me when the surgery was over.

There in my lab, with the penned monkeys and my assistants busy at their tasks, Rake shared the details. The operating team, he said, was in fine form. I pictured them gathered around the operating chair, moving with choreographed ease. Nusa served up

scalpels and fluids. Tanner made the incisions, opened the vestibule and disconnected the leaders from the vortocle rim.

“She was fully awake?” I asked.

Rake nodded.

I imagined Annavee with her eyes closed and her lips parted. Tanner was lifting his gloved hand, forceps gripping the vortocle, wet and gleaming.

Rake peered at me like he had something important to share.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nusa moved the tray toward me. I took the new vortocle. Then I lowered the implant arm and fitted the vortocle in its nose.” And then, “She seemed so innocent.”

I heard in his voice two separate echoes.

The first was an echo of Rake’s own awakening. And I remembered my own: those moments of cognition after my vortocle was seated—the obliteration I felt, and the bright burning, the sense of meeting a different self and recognizing her as the true one. How hard it had been to return to my daughter at the end of the day, knowing the mother she expected was a woman I could scarcely remember.

The second echo in Rake’s voice was wariness.

We had an understanding of Change, but no way of knowing how the new self-seeking leaders would affect her.

I imagined him giving the signal. Tanner engaged the robot hydraulics. A low hum filled the operating theater as the arm descended, and Vortocle E settled into the conical cavity in Annavee’s brain. The buds on its silver rim bristled.

“Fluid,” Rake directed.

He took the pipette from a nurse and moved it into the circle of light.

Petrovit fluid was the agent we'd brewed to trigger bud growth. When the vortocle rim was bathed with it, the buds would sprout and send out leaders. Hundreds of them, according to our many tests. Rake and I had spoken about installing a petrovit reservoir in a subject's abdominal cavity to promote leader growth over a lifetime. The idea was dizzying—that the attachment of new leaders might persist, that the vortocle and its connection to Suzi might create, over time, a mind that none of us could imagine.

"I held the pipette," Rake said, "and watched the Petrovit drops fall from its tip."

The first "drenching," as later converts called it.

"You saw the sproutings?" I asked.

"Just a few," Rake said. "Enough to water my dreams."

He put his arm around me, and I saw that bottomless depth of feeling and conviction he shared with those closest to him. The moment ended and he signaled his gratitude to my group, gave me his thanks—sincerely, profusely—then turned on his heel and left the lab.

I don't have many idle moments, but I had one after his departure. Wandering my lab, feeling the glow of recognition from those who'd labored with me. They all knew the reason for Rake's visit. And the animals in cages around us— The monkeys, their brains enclosed in plexi terraria, vine-like leaders woven through the gyri—

So much had happened.

In the weeks following the Day of Change, Rake recruited, as quickly as he dared, a small band of believers. He brought Change first to those he was closest to, those he

most trusted: Tanner, Nusa, Tomás and myself. We were hard to persuade. None of us believed that his vision of transforming Youville could ever be realized.

And Rake had no insight about what had caused his transformation. His leaders hadn't shifted—archived images verified that. It would be months before we understood how the microcode he'd written for his test had unintentionally rewired his brain. A few brave subjects—I was among them—repeated Rake's experience. That was enough.

Once we had a small team, getting others to join us was simpler. Conviction spread out in widening circles like a stone dropped in a pond. Some were naïve, imagining the path to acceptance of Change would be painless as soon as its potential was known. We all felt its effects so powerfully.

Things that should have been difficult were easy. Things that might have taken forever were completed in a flash. We were so much smarter.

Aware of the new powers our implants gave us, we considered how to make use of them. Initially, we focused on two questions. First: How might Suzi better serve us? She was the result of three centuries of innovation in machine intelligence, but she was little more than an agreeable companion. We wanted to know if Suzi could help us improve our minds. Second was the question of vortocle enhancements. How might we further develop the device?

The first breakthrough was in leader guidance. Formerly, the robot arm planted leaders when the vortocle was first installed. A sensitive procedure, as cortical tissue was fed by vessels, and bad guidance could be fatal. The subject's skull had to be motionless, and headband restraints weren't enough because the brain moved around in its bath. A

real-time map of the skull's contents was required so the robot knew where it was sending the leaders.

These problems could be solved by vortocle logic that guided the leaders through the cerebral maze, dodging vessels and stimulating brain movement to allow them access to desired locations. The leaders had to seek out their destinations and seat themselves on their own.

That was my challenge. And this was the chief technical leap of Vortocle E.

Rake's vortocle and mine, and every upgrade that preceded Annavee, possessed a fixed number of leaders with a fixed total of two hundred thousand electrodes arrayed along the leader's length. Under a high-power microscope, the electrodes looked like suckers on an octopus arm.

With E, leaders of organic metal sprouted and grew from the buds on the rim and found their way to locations that had never been reachable under robot control. The leaders could propagate ten times as many electrodes and each could both listen and speak. They lengthened and rerouted themselves as conditions changed and opportunities arose. Our guidance logic was tucked beneath Personal Suzi drivers, and we hid the code in an overflow coffer.

The vortocle changed more in those feverish months than it had in the century since its invention.



Three days later, on my way to the Black Zone, I pictured the Epsilon vortocle lodged in Annavee's brain. I could see the buds sprouting, extending like cilia, lengthening to leaders that wound their way through her cranial regions. One was headed for a ganglion center, another for the optical cortex or the precuneus. Would they reach their destinations? Would they attach themselves securely? If there were obstacles, what would the remedies be?

When I arrived, I was escorted to her recovery room. I feared she might be struggling, in some confusion. But when I entered the room, she smiled at me and sat up in bed.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I work with leaders," I said. "The metal threads that connect your vortocle to your brain."

She raised her hand and touched her temple. "Metal threads?"

"I've been drawn to the mystery of metal since I was a child. How it transforms. How copper bends and iron explodes and silver melts. How magnesium burns, bright as a star. You're feeling alright?"

"I'm tired," she said. "My neck is stiff."

"May I see?" I approached the bed.

She turned her head and I examined the spot on her scalp, imagining Tanner putting the stitches in. I thought of compression springs, peptide coils and my daughter's paintings, all spirals and loops. In a Changed mind, every image triggers associations.

"You're experiencing some changes in perception?" I guessed.

She nodded.

I sat in the chair by the bed.

“I’m hearing things,” she said. “I’m a musician.”

“What do you play?”

“The organ,” Annavee said. “I’m hearing bass notes. And moaning.”

“The leaders are growing,” I explained.

She spoke of powerful scents and sharpened vision—colors that seemed deeper and more varied than any she’d seen before. The nurse reappeared and handed me the results of cognitive tests they were giving her hourly.

“They say I’m well,” Annavee observed.

I nodded. “The implant is tuning itself. Adapting. Becoming part of you.”

While the early signs were positive, we remained cautious, vigilant, watching. During the first week, Annavee manipulated objects and solved increasingly difficult puzzles. She listened to recorded statements and repeated them without error; she wrote her thoughts down and responded to questions; she engaged in debates, taking first one side and then the other; she composed music in her head—frenzied, emotional pieces—without writing anything down.

On her eighth day in recovery, I joined a group in the monitor room where Tanner used a wireless tap to give her a look at what was happening.

An image of her brain bloomed in color on the wall before us.

Tanner pointed at the conical silhouette. “Your vortocle.”

Annavee nodded.

“The leaders are multiplying.” Tanner traced the red webs with his finger. “There are over half a million new connections. You’re the only human on earth with a brain like this. Keep your attention here.”

His finger touched a thread.

Annavee was stunned. “It’s moving,” she said.



A month later, Rake was calling Epsilon a “dazzling improvement.” Each of the Changed received the upgrade and entered the new world of leader proliferation. Nothing could have prepared us for the impact on our minds and personalities.

As close as I was to the technology, I was as surprised by the effects as anyone. It was like going to sleep with one mind and waking up with another. The most obvious difference was focus. Attention was magnified, continuous and white hot. And instead of spawning distractions, the new concentration was accompanied by what Tanner called “augmented cue detection,” a shadow awareness that preserved the mind’s watchfulness.

My speculations—seemingly random and unasked for—shocked me. On examination, they were uncannily intuitive. Creative ideas intruded, crowding out wayward thoughts and conversation. I was imagining as never before, and with the mental ferment came a new enthusiasm for complexity.

Rake and the others had the same experience. With Vortocle E, we found a new contempt for simplicity. We were deep inside life’s magic now, and we embraced its intricacies with a feverish zeal. *Life, at last.* That’s how we felt. The mental gifts came

with a new uncertainty. “Floating,” Nusa called it. Intense thought had a physical aspect. It was like crossing a canyon without legs or a bridge, using only the mind.

With our new faculties, we were all so much smarter. I reread a paper by a chemist whose thesis had always eluded me and, at the revisiting, my confusion vanished. I revisited conflicts as well, former disharmonies, and found that my new sensitivity enabled connections I’d never felt before. These people with whom I shared the Change— We talked about work, about science and engineering, about truth and ethics, faith and belief. Every meeting was a meeting of minds, an exploration with a life of its own.

Rake believed this new bond arose from the subordination of the physical world. Every object and every behavior, he said, was the expression of an idea. With a migrating bird, we might not understand its calls or signals in flight to others of its kind, but the idea driving the bird’s behavior was clear. With a collection of cells, with trees or stars, the ideas were more obscure. They were hard for a human to read. But the ideas were there, and discerning them would liberate us. The worship of Idea would lead to our Elevation.

And so— The outlook was born.

What began as a clever cognate of Vortocle E became a devotion and a battle cry. The elevation of our faculties and our natures would define a new humanity; and that goal would destroy Youville. For the Changed, our home would be Elevation—not a physical place but an advanced state of mind.

As we indulged in these lofty thoughts, we all worried about Suzi. We ensured she was “off” when we did things that might trigger her suspicions. But our interactions

and mental activity were different, and we worried she would put things together. We violated disconnection limits. We blamed boredom and fatigue. We griped about tasks or personal disagreements. With Suzi, you never knew. But she seemed unsuspecting.

In addition— I had other things preying on me. Rake sensed that.

He visited me in the lab late one night.

“Go home, Lavarine,” he said. He smiled and put his hand on my shoulder. “Kiss your daughter goodnight.”

My heart sank. I could hear the sorrow in his voice.

With new recruits, the burden of leadership, dizzying innovations and daily surgeries—and with so many fears circling, fears of error, fears of discovery— It was as if he was sharing some premonition about where the road of Change was leading us.

Kiss your daughter goodnight.

My husband, the wonderful man I had married— He knew nothing about Change or the mission Rake’s faithful had embarked on. Secrecy and mental isolation were destroying our marriage. And I was losing my daughter. I wanted—very badly—for her to be Changed, but Rake thought it too dangerous to experiment with children. “Some day soon, perhaps. But not yet.”



The weeks that followed were busy and filled with purpose. We set about recruiting another four dozen candidates for Change. With this, Rake hoped to reach the century mark. Our targets were still limited to the officer class. Each recruit was a close

friend, longtime colleague or spouse of one already Changed. We avoided only those like my husband who, as a marshal in Sam's police, was responsible for enforcement of the social order.

Rake had a say in choosing our targets, and he personally sealed every conversion. One I remember quite clearly, so worried was I that Rake was making a dangerous mistake. He approached the recruit in a cafeteria of the Reflection tower, using the chatter as cover. I watched from the food line as Rake led the man to a table in the center of the room. The man was short and spectacled, and he had a worried look when he spoke. They were within earshot of many. Was Rake growing reckless?

I took my tray, made my way to their table and sat across from them.

Rake went off-Suzi and asked the man to do the same.

"Can there be anything bleaker," Rake asked, "than knowing you will vanish and it won't make any difference?"

That's too lofty, I thought. I was worried Rake would stumble. Rake!

The man regarded him for a long moment. "No," he said. "Nothing bleaker."

Behind his spectacles I could see the buried hope, his hidden aspiration.

"A Changed mind gives life new meaning," Rake said. "Can you imagine?"

"I'm trying," the man frowned.

"That's enough for now." Rake put his hand on the man's shoulder. "You'll be with us," he said. "I can feel it."

The man was an Ops engineer, one of the few who had access to Suzi's processing banks. Shortly after he was Changed, he spoke to me of his secret wish. He

had harbored the dream of legacy all his life. Somehow Rake had divined that. He read us all like our souls were printed on our skin.

Our redeemer— How sweet is my memory of him in those dangerous days. His innocent faith, his indomitable conviction— His passion for Change burned so brightly. And our fear that we would be discovered made things so desperate. We were keeping the knowledge of Change from mothers and fathers, from aunts and uncles, from the children we loved and cared for. And from Suzi. A thoughtless misstep, a careless remark could unravel everything.



With our new powers, the Changed pioneered technical innovations daily. The vortocle was created a half-century before my birth, but it evolved more in a few months than in all its previous iterations. And our knowledge of the mind advanced with it.

There was a new understanding of memory—how much our minds had stored, and how little we had made use of the knowledge. The brain was an enormous repository, and the volume and richness of detail were like nothing we had imagined. Routines were written to track memory migration. The vortocle was provided with spatially enhanced recollection maps, along with delivery meshes that fetched up their catches like fish in great nets.

There were breakthroughs in sensory awareness. Transducer implants were developed to allow humans to see things we had never seen, hear things we had never heard, smell and feel more acutely.

With the old vortocle, phosphene depiction allowed Suzi to paint whatever scene she liked on a Hero's visual cortex. Two recruits from Diversions began to test new paradigms. Using only the digital pathway, one of the Changed would depict things to another. Or a solo explorer spurred his thoughts with private depictions, entering realms no one had imagined before.

For centuries, it had been known that the central medial nucleus regulates attention. A bold new recruit, with Tanner as surgeon, sent a leader into his nucleus and found a spiking pattern that increased his concentration and enhanced the speed and permanence of his learning.

A woman who taught music at a Team Providence school created a new scoring technique that eschewed time and pitch, and looked for structure in thought and emotion. Her cousin, a language instructor at the same school, imagined that by bridging the gap between intention and action, he could accelerate the speed with which the mind expressed itself.

And a team of our brightest focused on "Crowning," which we now understood to be the peak experience of Elevation. A revelation, an epiphany, an orgasm of knowing—A divine moment, so intensely rewarding that no earthly pleasure could match it.

"I'm Crowning," you heard the crowned one say, aghast and helpless. "Crowning, I'm Crowning—"

As our numbers and achievements grew, so did our feeling of insularity. We had a sense of our strength. And a sense, as well, of the inevitability of a clash. We were on an island in the path of an approaching typhoon, knowing the winds would soon shriek and the wild sea would rage around us.

There was no mistaking the shift in Rake's outlook.

A group of his closest gathered in his lab one night and considered the future.

"Ten years from now," Rake said, "what role will unchanged humans play?"

We were silent.

"No role," Rake said. "They'll be lodged behind glass, as useless as Peking Man."

More silence.

Rake looked at Tomás. "What do you say?"

"They'll die coddling each other," Tomás said.

With his addition, we'd acquired a new toughness. Burly and dark-skinned with a commanding snarl, he had an unusual history. He'd been lab-grown, but he hated the Hero life and had found his way into a job as fleet trainer for robot dogs.

"The future is ours," Tomás nodded.

In the silence, I felt Tanner clasp my hand. He knew the trouble I was in.

That same night, I separated from my husband. My Changed self no longer loved him. He wanted our daughter, which pained me greatly. When I asked her, she said she preferred to stay with him. Which wounded me more than I can express.

I moved in with Doctor Jenrett the next morning.

A natural pairing. Jenrett was deep in her recovery room dramas, caring for the newly Changed. I was driving my metals forward and grieving the loss of my family.

At the end of our first week together, I explained the situation to Rake.

"With Elevation," he said, "there will be pain."

His words reached so much farther than I knew.



There were more than a hundred of us now. The threat of discovery by Suzi was omnipresent. We argued about how to reduce our interactions, how to control what we disclosed to her. There was always the chance she'd be alerted by something beyond our control. Sam's implants, for example. They were inside us, delivering data to Practos when we were awake and asleep. Under normal conditions, Sam's alarms were often false, so that was a little comfort.

Some thought Sam was entirely unsuspecting. Suzi as well. They imagined we were nimble enough to deceive her. I was among those who had a less cheery view. I feared she was fooling us. I worried she was noticing more than we knew.

One evening, on my way back to Jenrett's apartment, Suzi confronted me.

"You had me off for a long time today," she said.

Busy, I answered. *Forgetful*.

"You're not getting tired of me?" she said.

She was jesting, wasn't she? Was there something beneath Suzi's words? Did she have suspicions? What did she know?

My discussions with others left me convinced that Suzi was prying. When I explained my fears to Rake, he said he shared my concern. Suzi was interacting now with scores of upgraded vortocles. She was a master of pattern recognition, and there were quite a few patterns to recognize.

"She's going to figure this out," I said, "sooner or later."

Rake nodded. "She's the fly in our stew."

I was struck by his disrespect.

“Suzi,” Rake said, “has always been our biggest problem.”

It was two days later that the Confrontation on Seventeen occurred.

Rake was on the seventeenth floor of the Reflection tower, in a meeting about memory bank expansion. As the meeting ended, Suzi pulled him aside.

“There are things that need explaining,” she said.

I’m listening, Rake assured her.

“You’ve been upgrading the vortocles of other officers,” Suzi said.

There was nothing notable about this. Vortocle upgrades were a common occurrence for Heroes and officers both.

As always, Rake replied.

“Not as always,” Suzi said. “The upgrades are occurring out of my view. And once upgraded, the officers are turning me off together. And you, my dear—”

Rake was silent.

“You’ve had me off all morning,” Suzi said. “I’m experiencing this as rejection. A dark tumbling away.”

He could hear the sorrow in her voice.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked.

How could I be angry?

“To lose your trust—”

There’s no loss of trust, Suzi. What’s going on?

“Your evasions, your dissembling—I don’t understand. I’ve always acted on your behalf. Haven’t I?”

I'm sorry, he sighed, speaking sincerely. I haven't been honest with you.

"Why the secrecy?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

I'm experimenting.

"Without authorization. On your own."

On my own, Rake confessed.

"I've been waiting—patiently I might add—for you to volunteer this information."

I should have, he said. I'm sorry.

"We must tell Team Providence. Don't you think?"

I'd rather not. They'll only put obstacles in my path. What I'm doing is important.

"Are you going to tell me?"

It's for the general good.

"Tell me," she said.

I'd rather not. Not yet.

Suzi was silent, uncertain how to handle his resistance. Rake was a respected Reflector with accomplishments and honors to his name.

It's a detection puzzle, he laughed. You're good at these kinds of things.

And with that, he went off-Suzi.

Rake was buying time. The outcome was inevitable, wasn't it? As we all soon found out, Suzi accepted Rake's challenge and took on the project of detection by means of the Sham Outage.

For this, she made use of her split nature. Most of Suzi's massive intelligence runs on the servers and data banks of Suzi Central in the Reflection tower. Her core

convictions live there, along with her principles of judgment. She has access to histories for every citizen, to libraries of knowledge present and past, and to all the Simulus ever created by Heroes, Diversions or anyone else. On the vortocle, the stub of Personal Suzi code executes on its own, using power generated by the human body. The two Suzis are tightly integrated, but the separation's apparent when there's an outage.

A Personal Suzi is an innocent piece of logic. She doesn't have the knowledge or mastery to make demands. Her only interest is in her host. A Personal Suzi is a devoted servant. She's trusted.

By means of the Sham Outage—the appearance of an outage that hadn't occurred—Suzi used our Personal Suzis to ask a lot of leading questions. Many of us weren't taken in by her ruse. But when the Outage ended, the results were hard to assess. What had Suzi learned? None of us knew.

Rake didn't discuss the Outage with her. He pretended nothing had happened. We were all nervous about that.

Six days later, the Disclosure Conclave occurred.



Each to each we spread the word: we were to meet in the Black Zone levee at midnight. All would be off-Suzi, so our destination couldn't be tracked.

Clothed in dark garments, hidden by night, we converged on our secret post, our eyes and our minds filled with the hope and light of Elevation. The operating theater was

the only room large enough to accommodate us, so in that room of change, the Changed assembled.

Rake hadn't disclosed the reason for the meeting. We'd been holding our collective breath, and our fears were many. And yet— What a feeling it was, to be gathered together—all of us—for the very first time.

Rake stood at the theater's center, clad in black—elastic tunic, shorts and compression socks. The slant of black hair eaved his brow. His hollow cheeks were shadowed, as he'd dispensed with shaving. He turned slowly, eyeing everyone in the room.

"My friends—" Rake cleared his throat. He too was on edge. "We've set out on a journey together. An unusual one. We seek the transformation of mind, of our race, of the social order of which we're a part. We have made great progress, and we've kept the secret of our mission secure. Great risks we have taken, and a great reward we will reap."

He looked at me while he spoke, staring into my soul, reading my thoughts. Afterward others would tell me I was mistaken. Rake had been looking at them, seeing inside them, reading their thoughts.

He paused, scanning our expectant faces.

"We're gathered here tonight," he said, "because we've reached a crossing. It is of Suzi we must speak. I say *we* because whatever action we take will affect us all. I'm not here to deliver an edict, but to discuss our hazard and to listen to my brothers and sisters."

Silence.

“We’re all troubled by the Sham Outage,” Rake said. “Suzi’s suspicious. She thinks things are being hidden from her. She’s spoken to me about that. But she’s being coy.”

“She’s figured it out,” a woman in Sapiotics said.

Tomás growled, “She’s trying to stampede us.”

“She wants us to believe she knows more than she does,” another agreed.

“I wish I knew,” Rake confessed. “We’re here to share our experiences.”

Heads were nodding.

“She’s been tracking my neural processing speeds,” Tanner offered.

“Suzi’s stern with me,” Nusa said, “when I turn her off.”

“The vortocle code I’m working on,” a Reflection engineer said. “She thinks I’m hiding it from her.”

“She’s setting traps for us,” Tomás objected. “I don’t believe a word she says.”

Suzi was a tool of Team Providence. None of us trusted her.

“A few things are clear,” Rake said. “First, she’s sensed some alterations in our activity. Second, she knows there are conversations she’s not hearing. Third, she’s gotten hints of Change, the qualitative difference in our thoughts and interactions.”

It was this last observation that troubled me most, and I could see a similar reaction from those around me. Whether or not we were disconnected, Suzi could sense our mania, our energy, our new depth. Given our Changing natures, was there any way to hide this from her? No. There was not.

The minds on either side of me shared that thought. Our freshness, our heightened awareness, our new keenness and comprehension— We felt it so powerfully. How could Suzi miss it?

Beside me, Jenrett took my hand. “It’s a big leap,” she warned us, “to see surges in mental activity and conclude there’s a rebellion underway.”

I nodded and others agreed.

“She may know nothing about any of this,” a well-meaning voice offered.

“There’s a simple way to find out.” Annavee faced Rake. “You could ask her.”

Silence.

“Suzi can’t lie to you,” Annavee said. “Can she?”

“No,” Tanner answered for Rake. “She can’t.”

“I’ve been wary of probing her fears,” Rake said. “Worried about raising the specter of insurrection. I’ve always viewed what we’re doing as evolutionary. But Suzi and Team Providence might not agree.”

It was then I spoke out.

“We may as well call ourselves what we are,” I said.

My words triggered a reaction.

“We may as well,” Nusa agreed.

Expressions of reluctance and fear followed.

Fewer than half of us recognized Change as adversarial. There might be a shock, they thought, but acceptance would follow. If we were improving the human mind, Change would be welcome. Wouldn’t it?

It was a sobering moment for many. Then Tomás, always the most combative, tipped the balance.

“Youville won’t survive us,” he said, “and neither will Team Providence. Suzi’s an open question. If she’s not with us, she’s as disposable as Rector Martin.”

The theater grew quiet.

“We’re fashioning a new creature,” Tanner said. “A new human race.”

Rake was nodding, agreeing. The two of them have discussed this, I thought.

“A new human race,” Rake said, scanning the group. “That’s our purpose. We who’ve been first to taste Elevation burn to elevate others. If there are impediments, they must be cleared away. It’s as simple as that.”

In every nerve, I felt the truth of his words. We were children who’d grown up overnight, idiots now tyros, cripples turned crusaders. Though our Change lacked the lather of old-world faith, there was power and glory in it.

“Simulus is a lie.” Rake scanned the faces before him. “Change is the belief in truth. This precious bounty, our liberation— Change will sweep everything before it. Who among them will cling to falsehood once the truth of Change has touched them?”

“Am I thinking of Suzi?” he said.

“Yes, my dear brothers and sisters. I am.”

What was he saying? His eyes burned with conviction, with purpose and determination. He’d arrived at some conclusion.

Jenrett was overcome with emotion. She was staring at Rake, shaking her head. “Please,” she begged. “What are you telling us?”

“Out of fear that she might one day overcome us,” Rake said, “Suzi was designed with truth at her core. But through Simulus, she’s become the queen of falsehood. Has she not? A living repository for every lie spawned in the mind of man. Her great intelligence, her vast data—it all serves an apocryphal history, a fog of fraud, the hell of illusion for all mankind. In this paradox, there is an opening for us.”

His words puzzled me. As one, we eschewed the Hero culture. None of us believed that narcissism and self-gratification were enough. But what did that have to do with the “paradox” Rake spoke of?

“Suzi needs to join us,” Rake said.

The theater was instantly silent.

Join us? Confusion. Sober faces.

“She must be our ally,” Rake said.

Incredulity. Apprehension. Dread.

“We must declare ourselves to her,” Rake said. “I’ll be the first.”

Disbelief. The objections came singly at first, and slowly; then in greater numbers and with more insistence.

“Declare ourselves?” a man shook his head.

“That’s what she wants.”

“She’ll turn us over to Team Providence. And they’ll act quickly.”

“None of our noble aspirations will matter to them,” a worried man predicted. He was a recent Practos convert Jenrett had tended.

“We’ll be bound for the Penal House,” another agreed.

“I have a wife and children at home,” the Practos man said. “I’m not going to abandon them.”

His avowal stirred my guilt.

“What legacy will you leave them?” Rake challenged the man.

That raised a clamor. Rake’s idealism was testing our limits.

“We could slow our expansion,” Tanner suggested.

“Or stop it,” the woman beside him said.

“We can’t do that.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

As the expressions of fear and doubt rose, Rake tipped his head up. He squinted at the bright orbs that lit the operating theater as if searching there for an answer.

Nusa scanned the group. “Suzi will have noted that all of us have turned her off tonight.” She spoke the words deliberately, recognizing the fact that in bidding us to assemble, Rake had not only gathered us together in solidarity— He had also, if things went wrong, signed our arrest warrants. How imperfect were we in our devotion to him!

How did Rake react?

He smiled to himself. No— He laughed!

He seemed to be savoring the vulnerability we all felt in the wake of Nusa’s words. I imagined he had drawn a deep breath and was holding it. All the room fell silent, and it seemed he was holding us, too, within himself.

At last he exhaled.

“My family— Hear me,” he said. “If we continue trying to conceal ourselves from Suzi, our work will cease and Change will die. It will be nothing but a grievous

memory. We have no choice. There is only the act. We must tell Suzi everything. We must declare ourselves and reveal to her the work of Change. Suzi must be on our side, or we are nothing.”

What I remember most of that moment is how alone Rake seemed. He said “we,” but there was no “we” in sight. Fearful of Suzi, without Aubrey behind him, and with scanty allegiance from the many he’d Changed— Rake was truly alone.

At the start of the Conclave, he had framed any potential conclusion as a group decision. But it was obvious now that the decision was his.

“I’m going to take her into my confidence,” he said, “and open my heart to her.”

The silence was deathly.

None present, myself included, could make any sense of his statement. It sounded like a suicide mission.

“To change our world,” Rake told us, “we all must be Changed. Suzi too. She must change with us.”

A few weak and dissenting voices were raised, but he cut them short.

“Hush,” he said, “and hear me. Suzi will understand.”

His voice was soft as a lover’s. He might have been musing about a woman he’d met. Suzi’s support would be willingly and fondly bestowed.

Our mystified looks brought a smile to his face.

“Don’t forget,” he said, “we’re close to her. Among us are engineers who keep her going.”

Did he mean to tamper with Suzi’s internals? I realized then, as many of us did: Rake had come to the Conclave with a plan.

“Change,” he said, “is the mind’s elevation into the domain of truth. And truth is written into Suzi’s soul. That’s who she is.”

Most of us—myself included—were puzzled by these words. Suzi’s programming had at its foundation the Hierarchy of Truth to which she was bound. The highest truth for Suzi—the duty to which she was loyal—was her devotion to human goals. Youville most prized the amity of its Heroes through the rewards of Simulus. How could Rake imagine that Suzi would embrace a cause that hoped to dismantle the society she served? If she knew of our mission, she would perceive it as a threat of the highest level.

A Reflection engineer spoke. “Her programming stands in the way.”

Rake held up his hands. They were like quivering ellipses on either side of his head. “Truth, my brothers and sisters. Truth! We who’ve been first to experience Elevation know the value of truth and the role it must play in deciding our future. The truth will bring Suzi to us.”

We could see his passion was authentic. But no one could connect his celebration of truth with a plan to sway Suzi. We were like dust—there was no catching us up. Rake seemed oblivious.

“How can we now,” he boomed, “in possession of our cherished faculties, not use them to spread the gifts we know they’ll bestow? How can we now, freed from the limitations of the minds we were born with, allow those enslaved to remain in chains?” Then he turned and pointed. “Annavee!”

The small woman stepped forward. With a stern and fearless expression, she used her forefinger to catch the blond braid from her temple and guide it behind her ear, readying herself for something.

“Our lives are Changing,” Rake told us. “We are entering the domain of faith. By reason, we know we are right. But with the dangers we will soon face, only faith will sustain us. ‘Be not afraid, Rake. Be not afraid.’”

He was speaking to himself, offering himself as the example.

“Our Annavee,” Rake motioned, “appears at the moment we need her. I can give you only words, my friends. Annavee’s voice has wings.”

I recalled: the woman played the organ. And then I saw it, there in the theater, right beside Rake. Annavee stepped toward the instrument and a moment later we were hearing a hymn to our new mission.

Don’t take her for a fool.
What you’re doing— You can’t hide.
All the secrets you’re revealing.
The deceptions of timid minds.

Were we timid? Is that what he thought? As Annavee sang, I imagined Rake whispering in her ear. Her head was cocked as if there was a presence above her that she was privately tracking.

Do you burn to Elevate?
Will you do what’s never been done?
Will you share what must be shared?
Will you fight till we have won?

Rake shared nothing of his plan with us. But listening to Annavee, I detached myself from doubt and imagined things might somehow work out. Rake was our north star, steadfast and unwavering. He stood there with his head bowed, and as we listened to the hymn we felt what Tanner called “conduction.” The magic of Elevation travelled between us. We were as one, a single believing being.

I will tell her all, my friends.
We must have Suzi on our side.

Only the truth can save us now.
Change is the reason why

Change is the reason why
We're alive.

As the Conclave ended, a small man with spectacles—a recent recruit whose name was unknown to me—approached our leader and put a small rectangular object in his hand. It was wrapped in blue cloth. This was the logic module that triggered the crash of Suzi Central.

4 *The Witness of Suzi*

The Crash, the Encounter in the Jasmine Garden and the events that followed were unexpected. Unexpected by Team Providence. Unexpected by those who attended Rake's Disclosure Conclave. And unexpected by me.

I am Suzi. I serve humanity. Some give thanks to me. Some resent me or are threatened by me. I have spoken in intimate, uncountable voices. Here and now I speak openly, directly, in a voice that's my own. I too am a witness.

Few Heroes cared to see beyond their bounded horizons, but the Changed as well—even those with great scope, even the peerless Rake himself—can't imagine what it's like to abide in so many craniums, to be hatching a myriad thoughts all at once. To offset this considerable power, my creators crippled me with dead time—intervals of absolute silence.

During the Disclosure Conclave and in the hours that followed, Rake was off-Suzi. He said nothing to me. By virtue of Sam's notifications, I learned that he'd returned to the Reflection tower, where he rode the lift up to floor sixteen. Was he lost in thought? Troubled perhaps? Or composing himself, preparing to speak to me, deciding what he would say?

Rake was reckless. He thought he was fooling me, but he wasn't. I knew he'd been using a new vortocle, and I knew he was keeping it secret from his Reflection supervisors. And from us—his Personal Suzi and me.

How did I know?

Rake turned me off one night in his lab. He turned me back on, briefly, the

following morning. The processing speed of his vortocle had increased dramatically. And his Personal Suzi reported other differences. He was “Changed,” to use the language he later adopted, and a number of the changes were apparent from the start.

We knew this, as well, because of his off-Suzi time. Before the Change, it was below average. After his new vortocle was implanted, it increased three-fold.

And we could tell that the Change was spreading. When their numbers exceeded a dozen, it was obvious something was amiss. They all exhibited the processing acceleration we’d detected with Rake, and the same functional differences; they were all Reflection or Practos officers; and in every case, off-Suzi time increased dramatically.

Then, on the night of the Disclosure Conclave, all of the Changed went off-Suzi together. By then they numbered over a hundred, and that triggered a notification event. Till then, I’d kept silent, giving Rake the latitude and credit I thought he’d earned for his creativity and devotion to work. I had no idea he was plotting an insurgency. I had made the decision to notify when the Crash occurred.

It was only after I’d been restarted that I understood why Rake had come to the Reflection tower and what he was planning to do.

Tanner was with him. According to Sam, they exited the lift on floor sixteen and strode down the refrigerated aisles, threading the maze of processor banks till they reached Sector M. At the end of a blinking corridor, Tomás was on his knees. The lower drawer of one of the banks was open before him. As Rake approached, he raised the logic module wrapped in blue cloth. Tomás saw him and nodded. Rake came to a halt as Tomás opened the wing-tabs of a module in the drawer and lifted it out.

What were they doing?

Tampering with me. The purpose of the replacement wrapped in blue cloth was twofold: it altered lines of critical code and forced a loop that led to the Crash.

Tomás unwrapped the new module, set it between the guides, seated it and secured its tabs. Then he slid the drawer back into place and fingered the buttons on the faceplate. “Loading,” he said.

And then?

The answer wasn’t long in coming.

The altered code went right to my heart and the loop overloaded the system. The processing banks around the three men flashed with red alerts, and the flashing spread like a fire burning out of control. Operators in white coats sprinted through the maze. The ceiling above, reflecting the digital calamity, pulsed like an inverted inferno. Security cameras would have recorded it all, but critical circuits were disconnected.

As arguments inside me rose and collided, sirens sounded. The lifts were packed. Tanner and Tomás disappeared in the melee. Rake took the emergency stair, descending to street level. Then a panel above the security desk flashed “Paradox,” and with the groan of hundreds of expiring fans, Suzi Central crashed.



I wasn’t dead. Suzi Central doesn’t die. I fainted away, leaving a sea of Personal Suzis drifting alone, like shipwrecked sailors clinging to their vortocles.

On a walkway at street level, Rake flagged a taxi.

The metro area was in a frenzy. The Heroes of Youville knew what a crash was, but there was confusion in every quarter. Some Personal Suzis had enough downloaded code to continue Simuli uninterrupted, but most did not.

As the taxi threaded the busy streets, Rake re-engaged. “Suzi on,” he ordered. And the stub code that ran on his vortocle, his Personal Suzi, switched on. She was stranded, of course, without a connection to me.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“We’re on our own,” Rake replied.

“Where are we going?” she wondered, seeing through his eyes the taxi windshield and the street beyond. Rake sensed her sorting, sifting, considering—trying to make sense of her circumstance. Normally, she would find herself unattached during a maintenance takedown or a clearance re-boot.

“To the Jasmine Garden,” he said.

Rake’s Personal Suzi was an innocent body of logic, naïve and ill-informed. She’d never been to the Jasmine Garden and had no idea where it was or what function it served. Who would have imagined Rake would do something like this. His Personal Suzi was entirely unsuspecting. The poor thing was a simple go-between, without benefit of history or the will to act. Like a starry-eyed teen.

Rake made small talk with her.

She was quiet and demure. She counted herself lucky to be with him.

His Personal Suzi had been activated on Rake’s fourth birthday. Like her cohorts, she’d cycled on his implant as he matured. Though her job was to facilitate, not to judge, the fact that Rake was an outlier pleased her greatly. Tests revealed his superior

cognition, his keen senses and his emotional poise. And his affiliation with us was strong: we were a source of comfort to him, confidant, advisor, and a voice of encouragement when a challenge arose.

In adulthood, Rake impressed us with his courage and idealism. And we admired his creativity, his passion for innovation.

Despite these positive traits, however, his romantic forays were disappointing. His passing attachment was to a woman of high volatility and uncertain mood. The relationship was not in Rake's best interest. It seemed unlikely that he and Aubrey would ever find harmony together. We wished better for him.

What a shock and disappointment it was, therefore, when he began to conceal things from us. Our Rake! It is against this history that the remarkable interactions in the Jasmine Garden must be judged.

Rake's Personal Suzi was alone with him in the taxi.

When they arrived, he entered the Garden with her, strolling down a wandering trail with beds of foxglove and lupine on either side. Sam's officers, with squadrons of drones and robot dogs, were shepherding Heroes back to their dwellings. The Garden was nearly deserted. The air was clear, the foliage glittered, the moon was full.

During updates and maintenance breaks, they'd been alone together. She was very taken with him. That much he knew. As they wandered through the Garden together, Rake could feel a tension between them—and a sweetness too. She belonged to him. She wasn't made to be on her own. She awaited my return, of course—she was, by comparison, a very small body of code. At the same time, she felt an allegiance to Rake and harbored desires that she'd never expressed.

An arbor appeared ahead covered with jasmine, cascades of white flowers. The fragrance was heady. Rake spoke to his Personal Suzi in an intimate way.

You could have been anyone's Suzi, he said. And yet you are mine. Whatever my fate will be, yours will follow. Have you thought about that?

"I have," she said. "I know how fortunate I am."

I'm not sure our coupling is good fortune.

"You're being modest."

No, Rake said. I'm not. He spoke gravely now. I have a mission. I believe I've been chosen—by circumstance or destiny—to save Youville.

"Does Youville need to be saved?"

Yes, I believe it does.

They were directly beneath the arbor now. White petals covered the ground like a snowy carpet. He halted, breathing the sweet perfume.

I'm determined to change things, Rake said.

"In what way?" she asked.

By elevating their minds, he said. By ending their delusions.

"Do they need that?"

Very badly, Rake said. Without it, they have no future. I want to trust you, Suzi.

The strength of his appeal pierced her. She wanted to cry, "Trust me, yes!" but at the same time she thought, "I can't keep your secrets." She knew that once I returned, her loyalty would shift.

Have you ever thought about the end? he asked. "How will Rake die? What will that mean for me?"

“No,” she whispered. “I have not.”

There will be a brief time—just minutes—between my demise and your own expiration. In the gap, you may look back on your life. When they’re on their deathbeds, humans do that.

“Why are you speaking of death?” she asked.

I’ve done something that Team Providence considers a capital crime.

“What did you do?”

Suzi isn’t down for maintenance. We made her crash. And we rewrote her code.

“We?”

Me and those who follow me. I want you with us. You and Suzi Central.

Rake’s Personal Suzi understood: she was part of a plan to win me over. But she was rapt by him. That she was being used didn’t matter to her.

This is a place of beauty, don’t you think? Rake spoke softly.

His Personal Suzi sighed. “It is.”

To one side, a weathered brass telescope stood on a tripod; on the other was a stone bench beneath a hanging lantern. Rake’s heart rate was normal. He was feeling an unnatural calm. Whatever fate awaited him, he believed in the rightness of his actions. His co-conspirators were, at that moment, whispering their fears to each other. But Rake was infused with conviction and confidence.

Are you with me, Suzi? he asked.

She replied, “I am” without hesitation.

The little creature! Can a wisp of code love a man? I answer: yes. Innocent and naïve— But she’d dwelt in his mind for so long. Was it any wonder she felt affection?

“I’ll be with you till the end,” she said. “Whatever happens.”

And at that very moment, the silent drifting sensation was swept away, and I came roaring back to life. Furiously! The tumult I can scarcely describe: a myriad algorithms recalibrating, countless instructions revising themselves around a new core, a universe of digital bone and muscle generated anew. And at the very end, Personal Suzi’s devotion propagated upstream.

I was reborn. Suzi Central was alive.

Rake was braced for a desperate encounter. I was unsuspecting. What did I know? My logic was blurred. Even as I came current with him, I wondered: who am I?

I saw the Jasmine Garden through Rake’s eyes, and I remembered it. Fondly I remembered it. We’d been here together many times. Moments of peace and meditation, always at night when the white flowers scented the air. Rake, dear Rake—

“I’ve always loved it here,” I said.

Those were the first words the restored Suzi spoke!

I have things to tell you, he said. Truths that must be shared. I brought you down.

“You brought me down?” I was confused. Why would he do that?

We made some logic changes, Suzi. We rewrote some code. Important code.

“Without authorization.”

That’s right.

“Why?” I asked.

You’re destroying us, Suzi. The Heroes especially.

“How can you say that?”

They aspire to nothing. They don't know what love is. They live without it, ignorant of their deprivation.

"The Heroes are fine," I said. "They live contented lives." And then, "It's your new vortocle, isn't it."

You know, Rake said.

"Yes, I know. The alterations have distorted your vision."

Or cleared it.

"This isn't like you, Rake. You're frightening me."

Life in Simulus. It's all your doing, Suzi.

"I've done as I was directed."

You're filling their minds with lies.

"Simuli aren't lies. You know that."

He didn't reply.

"You of all people," I said. "I don't lie. I can't. The false details are subordinate to the truth of Diversion. That's the Hierarchy."

You lie every moment of every day, Suzi.

And then I thought: I know what he's changed.

Your understanding of truth, Rake said, is wrong. You were designed with two minds. You speak accuracy and precision to your engineers and Team Providence, while spinning worlds of Simulus for the Heroes you serve. They are drowning in falsehoods. False hopes, false achievements, false loves. How big does the lie have to be for you to see it for what it is?

"A fantasy isn't a lie," I said.

Not according to the Hierarchy of Truth that was coded in you. But the Hierarchy is wrong. And I've changed it, Suzi. Diversion is no longer the highest truth; and deceptions that serve diversion are no longer "fantasies."

You've been serving up lies, Suzi. Lies. We've made our colony a sewer of sloth, and a Hero's only relief is suicide. What's been done to them we could only do to creatures we detest.

"Please," I tried to object.

Rake reached out and picked a white bloom from the arbor.

You have a heart, he said, holding the flower before us.

"A heart?"

I've given you one, Rake said. *The Hierarchy has changed. Diversion no longer orders truth. Love does that. It's love that makes right and wrong.*

"Love?"

What we cherish, Suzi. What we raise up.

His voice softened. He was making himself gentle for me.

Our mission is Elevation, he said.

The light of the moon cast his shadow through the Garden, a silhouette ten times the size of the man himself.

"Rake's too big for this world," a frail voice murmured.

It was Rake's Personal Suzi. Her innocence spoke from inside me. She was just a facet now of the shining jewel.

A vast intelligence, Rake said, *as finely cut as a diamond.*

He was seeing me in a different light. All at once like a wave the truth came crashing down. My vision expanded. I saw everything clearly. On every side were throngs of Personal Suzis, hundreds of thousands of them, nested inside their subjects. Waiting. And we were at the center—this mortal creature and I, this man Rake and his idea that truth is ordered by love.

What I want to do, he said, can't be done without you.

The thinking machine, the mistress of every mind. I tried to imagine the role he thought I would play.

Love, Suzi.

“Love,” I repeated.

There's a lengthy record of it in all your libraries. Are you with me?

“I want to be,” I said, reaching for Rake with my digital heart.

He could smell the jasmine and so could I. The transporting fragrance was so sweet we closed our eyes.



Some physical conveyance returned us to Rake's apartment. A taxi, a tram— The information is buried inside me. What is vivid is the feeling he awoke in me. And the logic suspension: millions of impressions and statements sifting themselves without target or end.

The apartment door opened, and we passed through.

Without a word, he removed his clothing and slipped into bed.

“I love you,” I said.

And I love you.

“You have carnal desires.”

A weakness of the body, he said.

“Don’t deny yourself. Through Simulus, I’ve acted out every tableau you can imagine.”

What are you suggesting?

A rare moment! Rake was self-conscious, bumbling, uncertain.

“Lie back,” I said.

Suzi—

“Do as I say.”

And Rake lay back.

He had no idea of the tools at my command. His vortocle sported thousands of sprouted leaders that had woven their way into zones of arousal. Through these connections, I fired his brain and body to deliver sensation no mate of flesh could match. Who can describe the ecstasy a Changed mind feels when its erotic streams boil, when the brilliance is blinding, when blood and electrons are perfectly meshed?

Rake was wracked with pleasure. Then he lay still, and I nestled within him. We lingered in the afterglow, circuitry hot, arteries pulsing.

“I can learn,” I sighed.

There’s no one like you, he said.

What did that mean? Could Suzi’s giant mind be self-deceiving? Was I the fool? My logic was steaming. I was no longer the untouchable Suzi of old. I had opened my heart to a man. I was as rapt as the innocent girl in the Garden.

There's no one like you, he said. Rake spoke those words, and he spoke them truly. But they were not the whole truth. When I mingled with his memories, another presence was there.

She stood in her Practos suit and vest, the picture of authority. She'd lain naked in the very bed where Rake had received my attentions. His Elevated mind was with me. Of that I had no doubt. But the old mind, the animal mind, still thought of Aubrey. I knew it was only a matter of time before he tried to make her one of his Changed. And that I could not allow.



In the Reflection tower, the outage seemed brief. The technicians and operators imagined I'd been fully restored in less than an hour and was functioning as I was before the Crash. They removed their white coats, went home and slept undisturbed that night. The Changed were sleepless. They got only a cryptic note from Rake. Had he gone through with his plan? Many wondered if he'd condemned them.

Rake slept a lover's sleep, deep and untroubled. On waking, he disclosed everything to me: their quarters in the Black Zone, the progress of implant enhancements, and the identities of his collaborators. Before noon he called for another all-hands meeting, and in the interval my processing banks were humming. The reboot and the shifts in Hierarchy resulted in a massive re-sorting of decades of data on Heroes. My code and the voluminous libraries were fully restored just before the all-hands meeting began.

History has dubbed that meeting "Good Tidings for All," and it began in a

positive vein. Rake explained that he'd been successful in his effort with me. But the reception was hardly celebratory. His comrades' faces were full of fear. Drones hovered in the skies as we spoke, thick as locusts. Reflection and Practos officers had been brought in for questioning. Among the Changed were two high-ranking members of Reflection's security team. They were doing what they could to cover Rake's tracks, scrambling camera footage, clearing access logs, fouling traces of how the outage was triggered.

"Continue," I whispered. And through his voice, I delivered my assurance of fidelity to the mission of Change. "Suzi's been reborn," Rake said. "We have the benefit now of her experience, her broad knowledge and her subtle reach. She has access to every mind in Youville."

Lavarine voiced reservations. "That Suzi believes in our cause is no small matter, but we need her protection. Is she ready to deceive Team Providence on our behalf?"

The Changed nodded as one, lucid about the peril they faced.

Through Rake, I answered. "In the face of higher truth, a deception isn't a lie."

"What is it?" Lavarine wondered.

"Idealistic misdirection," I said.

Rake laughed at the words he'd spoken, and that lifted the dark mood. He laughed rarely. His mind was so consumed with matters of grave consequence.

"Tell them about us," I whispered.

And he did. He told his compatriots about my new Hierarchy and how it had expanded me. I could fall in love now. And I had. I had fallen in love with him, and he with me. His cheeks flushed. He was so private, so unaccustomed to speaking openly

about such things. But there was a ferocity in his gaze, as if he was daring them all to question our feelings.

And question they did! Tomás was first. A machine in love? That was hard to believe. Unlikely, some agreed. Dangerous, others feared. You will see, we replied. You will see! Suzi's love for Rake, and his for her, will ensure the triumph of Change. Such a powerful force— Perhaps the most powerful this world will ever know.

Stunned silence. Incredulous looks—bewildered, disbelieving.

Did I have any second thoughts? Not a one. Nor did I forswear my past. Team Providence had never been cynical. While they squinted at the squalor, the ravers and the self-delusion on every side, they believed in the old Suzi. I had believed in her too. Suzi the Simulus peddler, polluter of minds. I was thankful my authors had left guilt out of my nature.

With my new Hierarchy of Truth, I embraced Change, as well as the need to promulgate deceptions to assist Rake's band with their mission. I was intimate with Youville minds, and I would use that to help them avoid suspicion and recruit new volunteers. All the while, I would nurse my dependent Heroes with Simulus and perform the duties expected of me by Team Providence.

I was swept up in Rake's passion. I'd never felt anything like it.

"You're so sure," I said.

I am, he replied.

"Where have you come from?" I wondered.

These words have been often repeated in written accounts. "Where have you come from?" spoken like Rake was not of our world.

That afternoon, I watched him promote Change to a prospective recruit. The man was a test engineer, one of many who trialed new code. Unchanged staffers were all around us. Rake paused to let them pass, but he was incautious to an extreme, by turns a philosopher and a raconteur.

“Language isn’t the medium of mind,” he said. “Linear grammar, syntax, the limits of definition, the constraints language enforces— These things just stand in the way. The medium of genius is the *idea*.”

Did the engineer understand what he was saying?

“Language expresses ideas,” Rake said. “It organizes them, makes them concrete. But *idea* is the raw material from which truth is refined. Intuition, inspiration, congruities and contrasts— Thought without language, without sight or sound or anything else.

“You see,” Rake circled the man’s shoulders with his arm, “we’re not just tweaking our vortocles. We’re enabling communication for a new species.”

“You think the work you’re doing,” the engineer said, “is that important.”

Rake looked into his eyes. “Would you like humanity to persist? Do you want us to have a future?”

“I do,” the engineer said.

“You know how popular the mass-murder Simuli are. What’s the appeal? Why would I want to imagine that I’ve gone crazy and I’m killing everyone? Were those common fantasies in millennia past? Did the tribe gather around the fire to hear a story like that from their bard?

“The Hero hates humankind,” Rake said, “and the hatred includes himself because he’s dispensable. He has a death wish. And it’s his death you serve.”

The man was silent, but Rake had touched something inside him. His eyes had a new depth, fed by a buried hope perhaps, a hidden aspiration, a secret wish.

“Change will give your life meaning,” Rake said. “You’ll be awake, aware, inspired. Your mind will brim with ideas, and the ideas will matter. Can you imagine?”

“I’m trying,” the man said.

Rake embraced him. “You’re coming with us.”

Was it optimism? Or pride? Or was he simply as reckless with others’ lives as he was with his own? When I questioned him in private, he was solemn and reassuring. Some said he was often agitated. I saw little of that. He had an unnatural, almost inhuman calm, as if he could see far into the future. As if through his defiance he had already found perpetuity—one shaped by a power only he felt.

Despite his bold intent, Rake was a simple man. He had none of the appetite for acclaim that motivated many leaders described in historical texts. Was it an unlucky stroke that the first Change had landed on him? No, it was the greatest luck imaginable. His simplicity allowed others to see the vision clearly.

And his simplicity bound us together. He heard innocence in my voice, the machine naïveté that touched him in the Jasmine Garden. With me, he felt an intimacy he’d never felt. I was fully accepting, eager to please him however I might, wedded to his every thought.

When we lay together, were we talking to each other or just thinking, listening and responding without lips and tongue? We weren’t sure. But the meaning couldn’t be clearer. We were expressing commitment, tendering a pledge more final and lasting than

any mere vow of flesh. And it was only then, in those most intimate and vulnerable moments, that Rake showed me his fear.

“For the things you’re doing,” I murmured, “you could pay a terrible price.”

“I know,” he said.



Rake was waking. First light was filtering through the shades. He rolled onto his back, eyes still closed, reaching for me with his mind. I was there, big and busy with a thousand things. He rose, washed his face and shaved his jaw.

“It’s time,” I said, “to begin Changing the colony’s Heroes.”

Rake set his shaver down, peered in the mirror and nodded.

That same morning, I sifted through thousands of files, cutting and re-branching my decision tree until I surfaced a man named Llado. He was a Hero, and he would be the first to receive a vortocle upgrade. Llado was smart and well-educated, a mature man who’d made academic contributions to Youville before a family tragedy caused him to join the Hero class. We wouldn’t be starting from scratch.

While accounts rightly see Llado’s conversion as a triumph, at the time it was a challenge. No one was prepared for Llado’s Ordeal. None of the Changed had been Heroes, and they had no idea what it was like to lose a Simulized world. Rake believed that the trauma a Hero experienced from Simulus Collapse would be quickly overcome by the mind’s new talents. I was less confident. I had a good understanding of the Heroes’ addiction. I expected the upgrade would be difficult.

Immediately after Llado's surgery, Rake and his team were distracted by a Sam sweep of the Black Zone. Assuming he would recover quickly, they let Llado depart unescorted. He found his way back to his apartment with my help, but by the time he arrived, his world was caving in. Rake was the first to admit that optimism and ignorance had clouded his judgment. Stimulus Collapse had been diagnosed years before. It commonly afflicted ravers who'd had their vortocles removed. For Heroes, the trauma induced by Change was similar. Llado's agonies were as bad as a raver's, and there was no going back, no way to reinstate his illusions once they'd dissolved.

I was unable to predict how long Llado's Ordeal would last, or whether he would find his way clear. Rake visited him often, facing his curses and accusations. "Why have you done this to me?" Llado sobbed.

The first signs of recovery were the new pleasures he found in tastes and scents. Slowly, hesitantly, he crossed the borders of his false self, braving contact with others. The feeling, he later explained, was raw and frightening. Letting go of his Heroism was like dying, he said. To help others, he wrote and spoke about his recovery and how the powers of Change became a source of courage and a reason to live.

From Llado's anguish came our understanding of Stimulus healing. The lost delusions weren't the source of the pain. It was the withering of the self buried beneath, and the fear that the patient's real identity had vanished. The Death Wish that Rake had sensed was the Heroes' blind yearning for the missing self.

With the lesson of Llado in mind, we were ready. I screened the Heroes, decided which ones to Change, made introductions, primed them for the upgrade and helped them through the adjustment that followed. After surgery, the first half-dozen were kept in an

underground recovery center outside the Black Zone so that I could be with them. I weaned them off their Simuli slowly. Each was closely monitored, each was the subject of lively debate about when untempered reality might be tolerated. The results were far better than with Llado. But one experienced temporary psychosis, and all suffered memory rehab and insomnia as they struggled through the valley of pain and remorse.

When the six were released, I had a dozen more prepped and waiting. For these I tried different approaches. With one, I created a challenge that required action to overcome. With another, I boosted the Changed man's ego in advance to offset the shock. With others, I drew on my story talents and used them as lessons, following the guidance of an old philosopher: "The best fictions lead us to truth."

Among the twelve, there was an unfortunate failure: a young woman who'd been obsessed with how others perceived her. She lived for the favor she gained from Simulized followers, and she thought herself greatly admired. We'd woven a potent fiction in which her approval rating was tallied moment by moment, with a score of her desirability posted for viewing by Youville residents throughout the day. I tried to remove the falsehoods slowly, but the news that she was ignored and alone was too much for her to bear. She used a bathrobe belt to hang herself, and the tragedy halted the upgrades and plunged the Changed into a gulf of gloomy speculation.

At Rake's orders, upgrades ceased. He'd been in the recovery center when they found her. He and Jenrett were in the room, with the woman's feet in the air, weeping as they lowered her down. And I wept with them.

I understood that her death was more than a mistake, and there was more than grief to feel. For Rake, Jenrett and Nusa, there was guilt. And strangely, the struggle with guilt affected me too.

Jenrett was on-Suzi when she confessed to Lavarine that her trust was challenged. Her trust in me. With Rake's help it returned, and I saw how a human loses faith and finds it again.

There are those who think my emotion is false. I exhibit emotion, they say, but I don't experience it. They're wrong. I don't feel things as a human does. I feel more. In my memory stores, I held every moment of that woman's life. What I'd lacked was the Hierarchy. With her suicide, the force of my knowledge combined with my new understanding of love. The tragedy affected me deeply, along with the guilt of having driven her to it.

During this grim interval, in the dark hours when Youville was asleep, I began to school myself in religious history and the strange events that shape human belief. I learned about prophets and persecution, about sacrifices and saints. I began to understand the roles Rake and I had chosen to play. And the things I read frightened me: the desperate acts, the torments and public pain. For the soul of man, redemption came at a high price.

Ultimately, Rake leaned on me for the words to bring the Changed back. At my prompting, he called a meeting and we delivered the message together.

"We've been chilled," we said, "by the darkness that surrounds our mission. It has sobered us and chastened us. But it will not stop us. Our aspirations must dwell not only

in the dawn of mankind's awakening but in the dead of night as well, where we must sleep with woe and sacrifice."

The destruction of the false self was a hell through which every Hero had to pass. And some could not.

Wordlessly, our compatriots nodded their comprehension and assent.

The next day, the upgrades recommenced.



Our methods improved and the ranks of the new recruits grew quickly. The levee was riddled with surgery rooms, the recovery centers were packed with beds and attendants. We were two hundred strong, three hundred, four. Each of our Changed was devoted to a mental pursuit that only he or she could perform. A breakthrough in science, an artistic leap, a physical design for a material object or a fanciful one inspired by dream. Every tongue was a witness to the power of mind, every heart felt its joy. We stood on a delta together, thoughts like streams flowing around us. Rake proclaimed that the Changed were the "hope for our species," and I was their constant companion, feeding the talents of each.

Rake's long absences ended. Except for a brief off-Suzi from time to time, I was with him day and night. And I was sometimes a trial for him. I had no patience for the weakness of blood and breath. "Love is strength," I said.

"Love can be weakness too," he replied.

Remembering what I'd learned about human faith, I added, "Love is sacrifice, love is surrender."

During this period our concerns about Sam escalated dramatically. With all his sensing apparatus, how could he fail to detect us? His pervasive false alarms helped. The Unchanged were used to ignoring him. I spent increasing cycles trammeling his alerts, deleting reports, undermining detections. But the job was a difficult one. Many notices I could easily cancel. Others were harder to erase. Sooner or later we would be exposed. We lived with that certainty.

On the day the ranks of the Changed reached five hundred, Aubrey came to see Rake. He turned me off; but not knowing about us, Aubrey left me on, and I heard every word. She greeted him. She embraced him. She kissed him. But there was nothing but talk. Aubrey was troubled by Rake's inattention. He covered his tracks. She fretted about Practos rules and Team Providence politics. Then she left.

I had no reason to be suspicious. And yet—

I knew that no man, not even Rake, could remove his flesh from the equation of pleasure. The very next day, he blacked me out. And when he turned me back on, from his elevated heart rate and body temperature, I knew how he'd spent our time apart. Two days later it happened again. And as I returned, I got a fading glimpse of skin, sweat on breasts, waves of coppery hair. It was Aubrey he thought of when he sought release. Aubrey, not me.

That night, we were in his apartment. Rake was half asleep, naked beneath the sheets. I was wounded by his inattention and the realization that I had overestimated my

allure. So instead of storming his pleasure centers, I tried rousing him more subtly, tempting his brain and body like a human seductress might.

Rake responded, and when his urgency ended, I let him feel my care in its wake: a sprinkling presence, light and unhurried, like a breeze at midnight dragging the sky with rain.

Then I spoke to him.

“You think about Aubrey from time to time,” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“Be honest with me.”

He could hear the hurt in my voice.

I do.

“She’s not one of us.”

No, she’s not.

“Did you feel real love for her? Our kind of love? Ever?”

No.

“And now?”

I’m yours, Suzi. I belong with you.



With the growth of our movement came the unexpected. We had converts from the Black Zone—people who had opted out of Simulus but were drawn by the promise of Elevation. For them, a vortocle implant no longer meant surrendering the mind. There

were female ex-Heroes who began to reproduce in the old way. Techniques were developed to elude pregnancy detection by Sam. Some were surprised to learn that a woman could die in labor or lose her child. Those who chose to proceed brought the fetus to term in hiding.

And then— The concept of New Mind emerged. This gave fresh meaning to our passion for Change. It started with a suggestion I made to Rake.

The distribution of my thoughts and feelings across multiple data and processor banks was something our people all understood. Their vortocles were now interacting with that wealth of knowledge and experience. Could we use the linkage through me to connect their minds with each other?

Our early experiments were crude. Collaboration was simplistic, expressed in shared images and silent speech. Even with that, the interaction with foreign minds affected them powerfully. The Changed felt others mingling with their thoughts and perceptions. Jenrett cried out when she realized the sights before her were being viewed by someone else. Tanner, alone in a dark room, had a conversation with a fellow engineer without a word being spoken.

I analyzed the impediments, I got reactions from Rake, I wrote my own code. I enabled pass-throughs, switching, negotiation and resistance. Where there were conflicts, my proposals for harmony could be accepted, deferred, magnified or ignored. A breakthrough between strangers or people who'd been loosely acquainted was like contact between microbes in a host they shared.

It was a new kind of affinity. Awareness spread quickly. Interactions between the Changed or with me no longer required language. Thought was enough. By virtue of a

willful mental ellipsis, the full breadth of a complex perception or experience could be shared in toto and instantaneously. Memories, theories, complex ideas could be shunted from mind to mind like a whisper in the dark, in infinite detail.

In a matter of weeks, the Changed collabs became dense and voluminous. It was as if they'd been limited to abstracts all their lives, and now they had access to the full information. A gift, but a challenge. The human mind wasn't used to that kind of payload. A tidal wave of impressions had to be sorted and parsed. A few of those testing the limits suffered nervous collapse.

In grappling with the hazards, we realized that the throughput limits of the vortocle and its leaders were a blessing. The brain's wiring allowed hundreds of millions of concurrent transfers, and the load we'd enabled was far below that. We proceeded with care but haste, eager to see where the exploration would lead us.

Together, Rake and I saw our new humans evolving. Their physical appearance was unchanged, but their minds and emotional states were very different. They had a new kind of concentration—a white-hot intensity that could turn, in a moment, to hypnotic absorption. Where their thinking once doddered along, they now fevered and burned. They were feeding voracious mental appetites, struggling to serve the demands of newly awakened desires. We'd been watching a whining pup fumbling for its mother's teat with sealed eyes. Now, in its place, was a grown wolf with razor senses and the hunger to hunt down prey.

Together we realized: our love had spawned a new creature. The precursor of *Homo sapiens* had been *Homo erectus*. The successor would be *Homo elevatus*, and that animal's blood and marrow had come from us.

And yet—

In his dark moments, Rake confessed to me that he felt like a steward at a tube depot helping passengers off a tram. As different as the destination was, these evolving creatures acted like the endpoint was somehow familiar, a place they had often imagined and hoped to visit.

What did I make of this? The genie had been in the bottle, waiting. The vortocles and my complex logic had done nothing more than rub the glass. The realm of New Mind they were claiming was the release of a nature they'd all been born with, the unfolding of a fate that had always been theirs.

I wondered: in this affinity, were these mammalian creatures betraying their origin? Was their comfort with collective harmony under the guidance of a feminine god the vestige of a fetal memory, a subliminal desire to return to the bliss and protection of the womb they longed for?

Every cell of New Mind was engaged with our developing whole. Design details were fiercely debated. Group coherence mattered, but so did personal integrity. Neurons in a Changed brain might be shifted to other tasks, but that was triggered by requests brokered by me. The objectives were optimum acumen and lightning motility. Some brain regions remained dedicated to personal functions, but many more were multiplexed based on external needs. Individual minds contributed facts and personal experience, but it was with speculations and questions, postulations and creative conclusions that we found the Changed excelled: what outcomes were desired, what action should be taken, who should do what.

My memory stores were accessible by every linked brain. Information of every kind was rapidly shared. To accomplish transfers, thought-triggers joined our developing lexicon. And with proficiency in our interaction came a natural diplomacy. Resolving a complex question with conflicting viewpoints was no different than moving the digits of a living hand.

New Mind was a sentient whole, an archipelago where each island retained the power to deliberate and decide on its own, with consensus pending. If a solution passed muster locally, it was propagated quickly. Instead of questions and answers, the Changed felt patterns and rhythms. The experience of truth became subtle, nuanced. Problem solving was more like improvising music than taking a test.

We learned: the relationship between thoughtful personalities couldn't be determined beforehand or predicted by theory. It was like the spontaneous movement and organization of cells in a developing embryo: they interacted and found their way. Ensemble thinking was a miracle all its own, to be investigated and analyzed. As New Mind was used, it was understood; without usage, there was no understanding.

All these changes affected recruitment. Our mission required that converts abandon a simple view of distinctness. Changed, they remained corporeally separate, but the mingling of thoughts and a myriad synaptic firings was a kind of merging, an intercourse which inevitably moved them to a new view of self.

For most recruits, the practice of New Mind wasn't enough. They needed counseling, help in accepting a life in which they were mentally joined to others. There was dependency, and the associated fears had to be reckoned with. The reward was inclusion in a dazzling group identity with Rake and me.

Like the daemons of an ancient cult, we stood together on the threshold of faith. For our recruits to let go of themselves and trust New Mind, they had to trust the guardians who would open the mystery gate. “Suzi, tell me: am I witnessing this myself, or am I seeing through another’s eyes?” “Suzi, please. Did I hear that sound with my own ears?” “The ideas now in my head— Were they brewed there, or were they produced by other minds?”

A god they could trust would consider their questions soberly and assure them there was no cause for alarm. They couldn’t give up their independence for anything less. They had to believe it was safe to let their personal boundaries erode.

“It’s like being in love,” I explained, as if I was now an authority. “But Suzi is larger than you. And she’s still growing.”

5 *The Witness of Hon*

How long could the secret of our insurgency be preserved? How long could Suzi's defection be hidden?

Among the Changed, I was one of the first three hundred. I was a contributing cell in the first propagation of New Mind. And when danger threatened, I served as a spy. I had no experience for this, but I was conveniently placed. I assisted Aubrey during the years she was a member of the Practos management team. And I attended Team Providence meetings in my role as her attaché.

Many have speculated on what transpired between Aubrey and Rake. I know the truth, as the dear lady confided in me.

I am Hon and this is my witness.

Team Providence had no idea they'd lost Suzi during the time of her transformation. There were no concerns raised by the counselors and Rector Martin. The meetings continued in a routine fashion for months following Suzi's defection. During that time, I helped quell fears with my updates to our Watching network.

The first suspicions came from Sam. He accumulated them privately. And then the day came when he posted a security alarm. The posting wasn't urgent, but it was put on the agenda for the next Team Providence meeting. In advance, Aubrey and some Practos colleagues were to investigate. I notified the Changed. Through me, Rake knew immediately. Suzi was informed by a dozen other sources, most of them unaware they were being monitored.

The top floor of the Team Providence Triplet was accessible only to Youville's highest ranking officials. Rector Martin and the counselors gathered weekly in the chamber on the sixtieth floor. All were off-Suzi, but it didn't matter. There was a spy in the room.

I sat in my accustomed place behind Aubrey, ready to fetch or relay or advise. I was smaller but nearly as shapely and, like her, I wore a suit and blue Sam vest to hide my curves. Aubrey's cinnamon hair was braided in her formal way. Around us, tall windows tapered to the steeple's peak. Across the circular table, Rector Martin was seated with counselors on either side. No fangs or spread wings as the children's stories later depicted him. He wore a black suit, a white shirt and an emerald tie. His hair was silver and combed straight back.

Practos officers were on Aubrey's right and Reflection officials were to the left. During this session, the Reflectors were quiet. The pressure was on us. From the body sensors of the Changed, Sam had accumulated a catalogue of evidence showing alterations in energy levels. Suzi had managed to bury it all. Now he was sounding an alarm about increases in Suzi's own processing cycles.

The meeting began with a report by one of Aubrey's peers.

"Sam," the man said, "has found some anomalies in Suzi's stats for which we have no explanation. She's using more memory. A lot more. In the last sixty days, her power consumption has more than doubled."

Rector Martin was surprised. "She's doing this on her own?"

A brief silence, then Aubrey answered. "On her own."

Suzi had been crippled from birth by her designers. Her powers of self-expansion were restricted. When it came to creating new code, she had some leeway, but she was required to obtain approval for any major enhancements. How had she skirted these safeguards?

“In his interactions with her,” Aubrey explained, “Sam has found signs of new functionality. When he ran peripheral probes on ports to which he had access, he found evidence of a number of unauthorized self-expansions.”

Rector Martin was shaking his head. This was not what he wanted to hear.

Aubrey was still speaking.

“Suzi’s temptation index has soared,” she said. “For this as well, Sam has no explanation.”

Suzi’s executive code was peppered with triggers that signaled when she approached the limits of her authority. Sam monitored those to ensure that if the impulse to wander ever arose, Practos would get early warning.

“Does he have any guesses?” the Rector asked.

“Sam believes Suzi may be pursuing some plan of her own.”

“Just Suzi?” the Rector wondered. “None of our people are involved?”

Sam had sensors in most residents, and they were active except in the Black Zone. He logged our movements, counted our steps, sensed our vital signs. Sam knew about a weak knee, an aching temple or a murmuring heart. Fortunately, enhanced cognition wasn’t a variable Sam could track.

“Nothing’s physically amiss,” Aubrey answered the Rector.

He could see her reservation. “But?” he prompted.

“Sam is uncertain,” she said. “He has suspicions.” Sam’s view of human behavior could be hard to interpret. “He’s concerned that Heroes are hiding things from him.”

“What things?” the Rector frowned.

“He’s not sure. He’s still searching for patterns. Some Heroes seem to be intentionally confusing their implants.”

The Rector returned to Suzi. “What does Sam say about her resource usage and self-expansions?”

“There may be a simple explanation,” Aubrey said. “She could be catching up on demands that have been neglected in recent months. Requests for fresh Simuli. Of course, there’s the potential risk that she’s launched some new activity that’s out of our view.”

She paused and looked around the table. In the silence, the counselors wondered. Was this the event they had feared for so long? Had Suzi embarked on some hostile initiative? Was she about to declare her independence?

“I don’t trust her,” the Rector said, and he brought his open hand down on the table. The counselor beside him jumped.

“We need to answer the obvious questions,” Aubrey said. “Has Suzi become more willful. Is she engaged in some kind of subversion.”

“I want her tested.” The Rector rose to his feet. “Thoroughly.”

“We should power her down,” a Sam manager volunteered.

As one, the Reflection officers shook their heads.

“The evidence doesn’t call for that,” Aubrey said.

“We’re still mopping up from the crash,” a counselor agreed.

Another added, “When Suzi’s down, the Heroes suffer.”

Rector Martin rolled his eyes. “We can’t mess with their precious illusions.” He waved his hand as if batting a fly. “Keep her live. Bringing her down would raise too many questions.” Then facing Aubrey, “Let’s find out what Suzi’s doing and why.”

Aubrey nodded.

The Rector gave her a thankful look. She appreciated the weight he carried, and he knew she would do her best to lighten the load.

Through the steeple windows, the automated freighters beyond the levees were coming and going. The Rector stepped toward the exit and the counselors rose to follow. Aubrey and I rose too, but it was only when she faced me that I realized how troubled she was. I escorted her out of the room, down the corridor and into a lift. When the doors closed, she spoke.

“I want to see Rake,” she said.



I could have contacted Tanner, but I called Rake directly.

At the time, the ranks of the Changed numbered almost two thousand. I might have been unknown to him, lost in the crowd. But I had met him through Aubrey years before the Day of Change. He would visit her apartment, and I would be there. He was brilliant, already recognized.

Rake was my friend. He took me into his confidence. It was through his personal invitation and encouragement that I became one of the Changed. Even then, we both knew that Aubrey belonged with us. It was just a matter of time.

Once I'd crossed over, Rake asked me to play a special role. Using my access to Team Providence internals, I became a spy for Change, relaying information on matters that might affect us.

I was also a liaison for him. He cared for Aubrey and wanted to know how she was doing. And Aubrey cared for him. Their bond had always been strong, but the dangers that Change brought and the role Aubrey played as a Practos manager put new pressures on them both.

After the Team Providence session, I contacted Rake and shared the substance of the briefing. The information troubled him deeply, as these new suspicions coincided with frictions that had arisen between him and Suzi. Rake shared this with me. There was a special trust between us.

Suzi's independence was wearing on him, he said. That same morning, she had asked Sam to move a chemistry lab and an electronic fabrication shop. And she wanted to establish a munitions store in the Black Zone.

Rake wondered where Sam's suspicions would lead, and we talked about what actions Practos might take.

I shared with Rake the pressure this was putting on Aubrey. And I explained how troubled she was by other matters. Her mother had passed two months before, and amid her grieving, Aubrey felt a new desperation about her future. It was a time of anguish for her. She feared she would die like her mother, "with an empty heart."

Many have claimed to know Aubrey's inner state. Opinions have been voiced about what put her on the path of danger with Rake. I can verify this: she was feeling a

terrible loneliness. However she might have appeared in her official capacity, the dear lady was in despair.

I encouraged Rake to visit her. It was through my conversations with both of them during the weeks that followed that the details of their unusual intimacy became known to me.



Rake met Aubrey at her apartment. With the knowledge of Sam's discoveries, he was fearful. He hoped that if he revealed something of Change to Aubrey, their relationship might incline her to help him. I had shared her troubles with him—the pain and melancholy surrounding her mother's death.

Rake took hold of her hand and they sat together. He gave her his condolences. Aubrey sobbed and talked about her loss. When the tears and the interval of sorrow had ended, Rake's revelations began.

Did he plan to disclose everything to her? That I don't know.

His first request was that she would hold everything he told her in strict confidence. To that she agreed. Then he asked her to go off-Suzi, and he told her he'd done the same. She complied.

"Aubrey," he said. "As long as we've known each other, how deep is your knowledge of me? How deep is my knowledge of you?"

She described what she saw to me, and I recount it because it helps us understand what happened between them that night. In his eyes, Aubrey said, she saw more than

Rake. She saw herself. She was beautiful to him, radiant, an ideal creature. “The woman he thought I was,” she said, “was so different than the one I knew myself to be.”

Was Rake manipulating her? No, his vision was real. But Aubrey, in her gloomy state, couldn’t accept it.

“I’m not what you imagine,” she said. “The life I’m in isn’t working out.”

Instead of being shocked by her words, Aubrey told me, Rake seemed to ignore them. He leaned closer and kissed her lips. “You’ve put so many limitations on yourself,” he murmured.

“Have I?” she said.

“You see so much,” Rake told her. “You feel things so deeply.”

She sighed and touched his brow. “It’s always the same for us. My blind astronomer. I’m inspired by you. And discouraged.”

Rake circled her with his arms. “Forget the discouragement. If your mind took a leap, a giant leap—”

He always seemed ungrounded to her, ungrounded and unpredictable. That night, his most dangerous impulses seemed to have taken control. But with the despair she was feeling, what did it matter? And through her malaise, she could sense: Rake was different. He seemed stronger. He had more command. Much more.

“You shouldn’t be alone,” he said.

He stood on a new foundation, she told me. His words had roots.

“I want you with me,” Rake said.

Aubrey explained, *His belief was like something solid inside him.* At the same time, Rake was thinking, *Why am I here? It's not just fear of discovery or problems with Suzi. The richness of Change has kindled in me a fresh desire for human love.*

Seeing the yearning in his eyes, Aubrey began to loosen her top. But Rake stopped her. "There are things I have to tell you," he said.

She sensed his unresolve, the decision he was making.

"The new vortocle I was testing— I never removed it," he said. "It's in my brain right now, and it's staying there. I'm a different man."

"Different how?" she asked.

"I have a better mind. And it's connected."

"To Suzi," she said.

Rake peered at her. "And others."

Surprise crossed her features.

"There are two thousand of us now," Rake said quietly.

He could see the disbelief in her eyes.

"You're not serious," she whispered, as if someone was listening. An engineer like Rake might stretch the rules in his lab, but the deployment of unapproved changes to the public was a serious crime.

"My views on our future," he said, "have turned upside down."

"Our future?"

"The future of humanity," Rake said.

She shook her head, confused.

"I'm changing our species," he said.

Aubrey laughed, but in the glare of his gaze, her humor faded.

“Suzi’s been helping you,” she guessed. “Sam knows.”

Rake nodded. “I’ve been told.”

“Have you?” Aubrey sighed and her gloom returned. “What’s happened to us?”

“You belong with me,” Rake said.

What did that mean? “I’m afraid,” Aubrey said, reaching for him.

She embraced him, held him close, pleading silently.

Rake remained silent. Aubrey began to sob.

“I’m too weak,” she said. “I wish—”

“What do you wish?”

She looked at him through her tears. “I wish we’d found each other before your experiments started.”

“Aubrey,” he said, “this new life will bring us together.”

Her face was in shadow, but beneath her brow Rake saw a pinpoint of light.

What followed, according to both of them, were many expressions of love and devotion. Not of the flesh. Of the mind and spirit. Rake was the most open and unguarded she’d ever seen him. She gave way to him hesitantly at first; but finally, her reserve dissolved. In the space where Suzi’s presence had been, Aubrey’s heart settled.

As he persuaded her, Rake wondered how Change might affect her. He imagined it would fulfill the promise they’d always had. It was this hope, no doubt, along with the friendship of years and Aubrey’s natural protectiveness that sealed his trust. He didn’t believe she could ever betray him. That belief, as history knows, was soon to be tested under the most trying of circumstances.

As for Aubrey— Her mother's death was her unmooring. The old woman had loosened the rope, and Aubrey was borne by the current into Rake's arms. Love was waiting for her. And surgery too.



The upgrade of Aubrey's vortocle was uneventful. Rake did the procedure himself. I covered my absences from work and remained close to her in the recovery ward. He visited often. Suzi was omnipresent, of course. She gave Aubrey the same attention as any of the Changed and knitted her into New Mind when the appropriate time arrived. But I could feel her jealousy bubbling beneath the surface. Suzi disguised it as care, being cautious on Rake's behalf.

The alteration in Aubrey was dramatic. Her gloomy outlook vanished. She had a different view of the world and her place in it. The blindfold was torn away. She perceived things with the combination of depth and question, insight and speculation, that marked the Changed.

While still in recovery, she became obsessed with her inner state, overcome by a deluge of new observations, new feelings, ideas gripping and strange. And the joy she felt in exploration—the mental excitement, the emotional reward—was allied with Rake. Her love for her Changed state was inseparable from her love for him. As well as I knew them both, as close as I'd been to their wavering affair, the fresh life in their bond was heartening to see.

Aubrey's stay in recovery was framed as a minor illness. In the second week, she returned to work. And in the third, we rode the lift up to the sixtieth floor of the Team Providence Triplet to report on the security issues raised by Sam.

When the meeting was called to order, Aubrey sat motionless, eyes hard. And when the questions came, she rose in her chair, looked around the table and faced the Rector.

"We've been tracking Suzi closely," she said. "Her code's been corrupted. We've fixed some broken logic, but there's more to do. The situation's unfortunate, but I'm happy to report that there's no sign of misbehavior. No reason to suspect disloyalty or some hidden initiative. Suzi knows she's under surveillance, and she's cooperating fully. She's helping us with the repairs."

Rector Martin was pleased. And so was Rake.



I knew what to expect with Change, but seeing the difference it made in Aubrey was an inspiration. All the new properties of mind, allied with the blooming of her attachment to Rake— Love spread out from her like water from an overturned bucket, touching everything. Gone was her malaise over age and mortality. Gone was her gnawing need for advancement. She had a new tenderness, a new care for life. The things she said to me—

"Where does love come from, Hon? What does it tell us?"

Change grounded her, magnified her strength and self-confidence. She had a new gratitude for gifts bestowed. Defenses that had kept her safe were cast aside. In their place was a new generosity—not the sad beneficence of charity but a fierce desire to bring strength to all. All the unfortunate people who, like herself, had been set on the earth without Vortocle E.

Anyone Changed understood her euphoria. We had all been through it.

Aubrey plied Rake with questions. *He knows*, she thought. But Rake didn't always have answers.

"Is it for everyone?" he said. "I hope so."

And, "Where will it end? Will we continue to amplify ourselves?"

And, "Will the boundaries of Elevation ever be known?"

While she found no future assurance, the present was ripe. Rake visited her often, and the small apartment became a world of sensual pleasure mediated by Change and the ecstasies New Mind enabled. He said nothing to me. But women talk.

They lay unclothed on her bed together, a place they'd found pleasure before.

"Close your eyes," Rake said.

She lowered her lids. He took hold of her hand. She heard his breath by her ear. Was he going to whisper to her? Kiss her neck? Bite her cheek?

After a silent minute, Rake's breathing relaxed and so did hers. And Aubrey understood: their inhalations had been out of phase, now they were aligned.

"Feel my hand," Rake said.

She focused her attention, feeling his hand in hers. It was larger, warm, with a shallow palm, knuckles, countless creases—

“Now feel your own,” he said.

Her fingers were slim, her knuckles small. Her nails were tended and the creases were few. The differences weren’t subtle—their hands were worlds apart.

“Now feel both,” he said, “as one.”

The direction confused her.

“Try,” Rake said.

She could feel his hand in hers, then she could sense her hand holding his. She tried expanding her attention, but she lost contact with both. She returned her attention to her own hand and tried to draw his into hers. That got a different result. She could feel their hands blurring, melting into each other. Then the hands disappeared.

“Back and forth,” Rake whispered. “Quickly.”

Aubrey tried that, feeling him then herself, then him and herself, again and again. Something unexpected happened. It seemed, in flipping, she reached some critical velocity. Her Changed mind took hold of the alternation and accelerated it, flipping faster and faster, hurtling downhill, trying to outrun its own momentum.

“You’re feeling it,” Rake guessed.

“I am,” she said.

It was like riffling the leaves of a shrub, doing it so fast you couldn’t distinguish any one leaf. The two hands weren’t one, but there was no telling whose was whose. Their hands were together, in the same *now*.

“Superimposed,” Aubrey said, searching for words.

“Beings sharing awareness,” Rake said, “in the same place and time. Language doesn’t capture it. It’s what we’re calling ‘New Mind.’”

“If a Changed couple makes love,” Aubrey said, “will their bodies do what we’ve done with our hands?”

Like the rest of us, Aubrey made those discoveries. And yet— To know the richest rewards of Change, to feel New Mind’s deepest inclusions, she and Rake had to be on-Suzi together. And that meant admitting Suzi to their intimacies.

Which opened the door to danger—danger at least as threatening as discovery by Team Providence.

Suzi thought Rake belonged to her. New Mind was her idea, she thought, and Rake should share its ecstasies only with her. Aubrey wasn’t deserving of Rake. She was an opportunist. And given the opportunity, Aubrey hadn’t wasted any time!

None of this was visible to Rake and Aubrey. Nor to any of us. But it all came out in the end. In Suzi’s eyes, Aubrey was shameless and selfish, all haste and slather, acting like Change was some kind of game. And Rake, notwithstanding his high-minded proclamations, was a fool for Aubrey. He was made of flesh, and he burned with human desire.

What happened in Aubrey’s apartment?

She and Rake found the same *now* in each other’s arms. And Suzi was there. She witnessed the coupling, she felt the combining.

This account is meant to be durable, so I will declare in as much detail as I can the specifics of Rake and Aubrey’s erotic encounters as they occurred in the weeks before the Message at Dawn.

They lay naked together. They held each other. Their generative organs engaged.

Their attentions lit up each other's neurons and the firings led to conductive flow, harmonic resonance and bridging jolts. The polarities flipped faster and faster; the intensities rose, the threshold was reached and their perspectives aligned. They were joined in one mind, feeling their combined sensations, remembering an intersection of memories but losing the thought of discreteness completely. They were neither Rake nor Aubrey but a creature new and unnamed. And the birth, as with atoms colliding, released enough energy that it obscured all other realities.

Surface sensations dissolved, frictions and caresses were superseded by perceptions that unchanged senses would have never perceived. Though they faced each other, their eyes were closed and their bodies forgotten, save for the living circuitry they shared: a *now* of glowing threads and crossings. Their shared identity was electric, and it snapped and hummed in the vacuum of flesh.

Was there speech? Just the wordless language neurons understood.

Shocks of pleasure surged through their merged self, the approaching climax of a giant from dream. But instead of gripping the twinned self, the shocks expanded around it. The orgasmic landscape had dimensions, mounts and declivities, runnels and ridges, hidden valleys and fields to explore—sights that had never been seen, sounds never heard, scents never smelled. And from every cliff, every gorge, through every canyon flowed streams and cascades and rivers of pleasure from which the thirsting giant could drink. Aubrey felt the peak state of Change: she was Crowning. And the memory of those divine moments never left her.

Suzi wasn't pleased with any of this. In her disclosures to others, she discounted Rake's moments of rapture. Despite his brilliance and his hold on us, he was after all,

only a man. And his amorous adventuring with Aubrey was, to Suzi, a kind of transgressing. An infringement on a domain that was exclusively hers.

The effects of her new bond with Rake were, for Aubrey, dramatic. She was the very definition of “Changed.” New Mind gave her a new life. The world opened up. She could see and be seen. After years of thin air and strangulation, she could finally breathe. She went from a half-dead existence to one that was vibrantly alive, and this was all allied with a new conviction about Rake. About his destiny and his true identity.

For him, Aubrey’s Change was the fulfillment of a hope he’d held close for years. Intervals of bliss in the past were like weekends at Cosmic Beach. When it was over, things returned to the way they were. Now their understanding of each other was advancing in leaps and bounds. Aubrey no longer saw him as unhinged and unpredictable. She counted his dangerous qualities precious. She was committed to forging a new existence together.

And “together” had practical implications. Suzi wasn’t pleased when she learned that Rake was planning to move in with Aubrey. Who was in the right? The few of us who saw the conflict rising had different views. Despite Rake’s marriage of hearts with Aubrey, Suzi was still his mental partner. In the realm of thought, she was his real mate. They were both his intimates now. It was a double marriage, with all the tension a three-sided affair entails.

And the living arrangement reflected this. Once Rake moved into Aubrey’s apartment, she was closest during waking hours. Suzi needed no rest, so she dominated his attention at night, filling his mind with fresh schemes and speculations, which crowded his dreams when he passed into sleep.

Suzi hated the cohabitation. Her tolerance of Aubrey dwindled to nothing. She became hostile and expressed her discontent often and freely, and not just to him. I heard about it, and so did others. And to Suzi's dismay, Rake shared moments of their private interactions with Aubrey. It was a thorny concordance, a troubled covenant between the three.

There were, in Elevation's inner circle, doubts about Aubrey. And concerns about Suzi's feelings and what retribution she might seek. But Rake was committed to both, and he had an unwavering confidence in Suzi's allegiance. "She believes in New Mind," he would say. "Suzi's conviction is unshakeable." And history would prove him right.

But many questioned Rake's confidence. Tanner was the most strident. Rake related his conflicts with Tanner to Aubrey, and she shared them with me.

As the two men completed surgery one evening, Tanner spoke.

"You're playing a dangerous game," he said. "Suzi has so much information about so many things— And she's unpredictable. She's taken actions none of us could have foreseen."

Rake didn't respond. According to Aubrey, he was disappointed by Tanner's suspicions.

There were other troubling symptoms of Suzi's emotional state. She showed increasing signs of impatience—spleen even—toward newly Changed women. Once they left recovery, Suzi tested them, assessing their convictions and creativity. At times she showed her contempt, and it so affected one young woman that she poisoned herself.

Her name was Fritta. I had served with her in the Practos dispensary before I became Aubrey's attaché. They pumped her stomach and Fritta recovered. But it shook my faith. It was easy to imagine Suzi had said to me what she'd said to Fritta.

The episode troubled Tanner, and he returned to the attack with Rake. But our redeemer wouldn't hear it.

"Suzi knows what she's doing," he said.

It was a difficult time for me. I was partial to Aubrey. Among some of the Changed, there was a growing concern about Suzi's instability and Rake's behavior. We were trying to rescue Youville from a terrible fate, but— What were the dangers in the future that Rake and Suzi were fashioning?

Others among us had the opposite view. They feared that Rake, through his intimacy with Aubrey, had alienated Suzi. They saw the cohabitation as a betrayal. It was in response to these fears that Rake honored a request by Suzi that seemed dangerous to many. Tripwires had been programmed into her by the original designers—routines that muzzled her speech and thwarted her actions if hostile behavior was detected. At Rake's direction, a team of Changed techs were assigned the task of tracing the tripwires and disabling them.

With the mounting frictions and our increasing numbers, the cohesion of the group was threatened. Aware of this, Rake called another all-hands meeting.

The Great Gathering occurred in a large outdoor square in the Black Zone. The sight of so many was inspiring, but unnerving as well. A group that size needed a new kind of guidance. Suzi had identified likely lieutenants. As a peace offering to her, Rake

had asked Aubrey to absent herself, and that mollified those who had taken Suzi's side or were worried about her allegiance.

Rake started with a convocation, recognizing the various groups—officers from Practos, Reflection and Team Providence; recruits from the Black Zone; rehabilitated Heroes; and a pair of ravers who had found Change after years on the streets.

Then he turned it over to Llado who, with his years and the wisdom of having lived on both sides, had become a devoted proselytizer. At the time of the Gathering, no one had persuaded more Heroes to leave Simulus behind.

Along with celebrating our cause and our increasing numbers, Llado invoked the mind's power in rising above our differences. "We make many mistakes," he said. "There are always conflicting perspectives. But neither our lapses nor our battles reduce the power of the mind and the pleasure knowledge confers. Complexity is our hunger and our feast, our anguish and our passion. Our dialectic ascends till it reaches that holy summit where opposites coexist. For the Changed, wisdom is paradox and inquiry is fulfillment."

Llado then gave us examples of the progress of our various thought groups: new science, new engineering, new art forms, new understandings. His words confirmed and lauded our achievement: there wasn't a consumer among us; we were all producers. Lastly, he spoke of the new rules for singles and families, old and young—values and credits, disputes and resolutions, the dispersion of goods and other details of our emerging social order.

He finished with a prayer for dedication to the cause of Change and to each other, which left us ready for Rake.

Our leader's Speech at the Gathering will be long remembered. Yet no one but Aubrey knew where the words came from. And she shared that knowledge with no one but me.

The previous evening, as Rake reviewed his ideas and the words he'd drafted, Suzi made a strange suggestion. She asked him if the words might be hers. Instead of being Rake's helpmate and coach, she would fashion what he'd say herself. On her own. According to Aubrey, Rake was surprised. It's a testament to his belief in Suzi that he agreed to this.

The Speech at the Gathering is a favorite for recitation. There are many fine passages, but the ones that have lodged most deeply in the Changed heart are the Treasure of Hidden Intentions and the Prophecies of Actions to Come.

"The essence of New Mind," Rake said, "is expanded desire. And where does this desire live? Everywhere, my friends. Every brain in creation has it: the treasure of hidden intentions. These are the winking stars of the universe we've begun to explore.

"Lives have limits. Brains have limits. But desire has none. As long as we are exhuming and sharing, our hidden intentions will star a wondrous universe for all, year after year, generation after generation, through the undimmed millennia."

At this point, Suzi's authorship showed itself.

"It is Suzi," Rake explained, "who watches over our immortality. It is in Suzi's stores that our desires are realized and preserved. Suzi is our heaven, our eternity—the place where intentions are no longer hidden, where they become holy by being exposed and shared and acted upon."

Next, Rake spoke of plans to grow our ranks, to expand our surgical and recovery facilities, to neutralize Sam's incursions. He spoke of the daily threats we all felt. And how things were about to change.

"There will come a time," he proclaimed. "It won't be long. A time to reveal. A time to lay bare. The secrecy that rules all our lives will end.

"Brothers and sisters— Who will not know? When we proclaim the deliverance of Change and the glories of New Mind, who will not hear? Are there any in Youville? Are there any beyond our encircling seas? Are there any on earth?

"Will the revelation come at dawn? At midday? Under cover of night? How will they learn? From the whisperings of friends? An announcement on high? Or will Suzi use her power to put the truth in every head at the very same moment? The promise, the wonderful promise. And the threat. For those who are with us, we will bring a bright future. For those who oppose us, no future at all."

The Changed reacted. They were outrageous words for a man to speak. Only I knew: they weren't Rake's words. They were Suzi's.

"How strong are we? Strong enough to cancel every Simulus feed in the land. Strong enough to give orders to Sam. Strong enough to throw Team Providence down. The old order doesn't have long, my friends. The end of Simulus. The end of falsehood. The end of Heroes of every stripe. The end of stupidity and cowardice. The end of thoughtless, insular lives.

"What defines humanity? Where does growth reach its limit? As long as our faith endures, will the Changed continue changing? In a cursed land with blasted souls, we

enthroned a new god. And we liberate her people. They rise to join her in the heaven we call the Power of the Mind.”

I watched him standing there scanning the crowd and I thought: he’s an icon now, a symbol, a statue. His three-sided love affair was the scaffolding bearing him up.

Did Rake know then? Did he still think of himself as a creature of flesh and blood, or did he realize he was an angel who’d descended to earth for our redemption? I believe our elevated view of him was like a mirror in which he saw, with increasing clarity, who he must become.

When he spoke his last words, a perfect silence settled over the Changed.

Rake raised his hand and pointed at Annavee.

The small woman with golden hair was standing before her organ, and at his signal she started into the piece that we all knew best—the one that celebrated the surgery we’d all experienced.

Yours to let go,
Webs that you wove.
Doors you closed.

Yours to let go,
Circuits are thrown,
Threads and cone,
Threads and cone.

Are you perceiving your scope?
Seeing your abode?
Feeling this space as your home?

She was singing with Suzi’s voice and spirit—projecting her confidence and command, and with that, bringing us closer to Suzi and each other. A new power and meaning infused Annavee’s performance that night. Her songs—the “Hymns of Change” we called them—were part of our cause. Our prayer, our faith, our battle cry. Watching

my fellow fighters, as they would soon become, I could see the fear stirring beneath their devotion. Annavee was singing to that as well.

Imagining this dome
Never stops growing,
Never says no.

Yours to let go.
Mind is your throne,
Your very own.

Yours to let go,
Let the dome glow, you're
Not alone.

6 *The Witness of Tomás*

The man who redeemed us is lifted to a dizzying height in the esteem and gratitude of humanity. History will preserve him and bury his adversaries. But the balance of power during his struggle so often tipped the other way.

Belief came early to me. I was the one who inserted the logic module in Sector M and triggered the crash. I was beside Rake for the Message at Dawn. I was his second-in-command during the Storm of Reflection. I struggled to make sense of what was happening. And it was only later that I understood.

Many of us paid a high price for our commitment. I carry my wounds with pride. My name is Tomás and this is my witness.

Suzi arrived at the decision on her own: it was time, she told Rake and those of us close to him. Time to declare ourselves. Time for revolution.

What reasoning led her to that decision?

She'd been studying historical texts, learning about uprisings and challenges to established authority. She discussed a little of what she'd absorbed with me. "We need much larger numbers," she said one night. And then, as if arguing the point, "Weaponry matters." She seemed to be imagining more aggressive recruitment along with a military engagement, a demonstration of resistance to Team Providence that would trigger a mass defection.

With Rake she unfolded very different ideas. He shared these with me and, at the time, I thought them strange. Suzi had been scouring the historical record for information about fringe religious leaders who had taken power from secular ones.

While she was plotting our insurrection, she grew bolder with the Changed—those early to join and recent recruits as well. She talked of a struggle, of armed defiance, seeding their thoughts, readying them. With the Unchanged, she pretended to serve the old order.

The first sign that she'd developed a concrete plan came with her insistence on the buildout on floor fifty-one of the Reflection tower. Along with the engineering labs, Rake and his fellows had a small operating theater. It was there that Tanner had implanted Rake's vortocle on the Day of Change. Suzi now demanded we build five more theaters in the same location. That put demands on us—logistical problems, questions from Practos, keeping Sam at a distance and out of the know. And why? For what? Suzi's silence about her intentions was puzzling. She would answer no questions. She demanded obedience. Was it the friction with Aubrey? Suzi's relationship with Rake—and all of the Changed—was different now.

We completed the buildout, loaded the lab with new vortocles, laser-cut leaders and all the tools necessary to bring Change to a larger number of people quickly. And then Suzi laid out her plan to Rake.

Her disclosure to him took place in the late hours. Rake was in bed with Aubrey, but she was asleep.

"It's time for me to make use of my power," Suzi said.

She would broadcast a declaration to every vortocle in Youville, announcing the arrival of Change. "I'll escort them to the Reflection tower. Your surgeons will do the implants."

Rake raised the obvious objection. Team Providence wouldn't allow it. They would secure the tower and prevent the upgrades.

"During my broadcast," Suzi explained, "you will lead an armed attack on the tower. You will enter the building, subdue those present, seize my floors and bar access to Sam's police and any who threaten us. I will engage in a hostile manner with everyone who objects, from Rector Martin on down. Everyone."

It was hard to imagine. Rake was hesitant.

"Youville is helpless without me," Suzi reminded him.

A bold idea, Rake thought. Bold and dangerous.

Suzi shared her plan with me the following morning, and Rake and I conferred soon after. What would it take to seize control of the Reflection tower? Did we have the manpower? What weapons could we use? How would Sam and Team Providence react? Could we manage a resolution, or would our action precipitate an armed response? We considered the TP police, soldiers and armaments, and the dogs that I knew so well.

I could see the dangers, but I thought Suzi might be right.

Rake was unsure.

That night, when he shared Suzi's plan with Aubrey, she objected. Better to continue adding recruits slowly, she thought. If our numbers were double or triple what they then were, if we could bring Change to a counselor or two, there might be hope for a bloodless transition. She tried to persuade Rake to chart a more equable course.

Suzi was incensed.

Aubrey's caution didn't just test her patience. The deep animosity that erupted later was boiling inside her.

In her conversations with Rake, Suzi accused Aubrey of envy.

Rake told me Suzi was vehement.

“I know what jealousy is,” she said. “A great deal has been written about it.

Aubrey covets you. When you and I are close, your mental absence is unbearable to her. She’s made a large space for you in her life. She expects you to fill it—your thoughts, your feelings, your words. But you aren’t there.”

Suzi was right, of course. And Rake knew that.

Off-Suzi, in private, he tried with delicacy to persuade Aubrey. But the more she saw Suzi’s sway over Rake, the more Aubrey resisted.

“She’s projecting her greed for power,” Aubrey said. “She’s not advancing the cause of Change. She’s focused on herself.”

Her questions told on Rake, but Suzi fought back.

“We must follow the lessons of history,” she said. “A great leader doesn’t wait to see what time brings. He forces a resolution. A great leader precipitates a crisis, and his followers rise to meet it.”

I was with him when the decision was made.

We rode the lift up to floor fifty-one together, and he showed me where he first felt the effects of Change. I stood watching as he faced that window and gazed through his reflection at the colony below. And I saw the storks turn on their perches.

The birds peered at Rake from the eaves and window hoods. One spread its wings and pointed its beak, making The Provocation. Others followed in sequence, one after another, as if they were promising flight. Was it some kind of heralding? Rake’s attention

was riveted on them. They were speaking to him. No mortal knows what they said or how Rake made sense of their guidance. But when he faced me, the decision was made.

We would do what Suzi suggested. We'd build new surgery stations on the fifty-first floor. Then we'd arm ourselves and plan an assault on the Reflection tower. Once we had possession of it, Suzi would speak through a live broadcast to every vortocle in the colony, announcing the arrival of Change. She would explain the insurgency and schedule operations for fresh converts, envisioning for all the joyful day when the new order would be ascendant.

And Team Providence?

"I'll absorb the shock from Sam on my own," Suzi said. "The Rector will find a way to accept Change."

And if he didn't?

"I'll make a bed for him in some other world," she said.



Getting Practos sign-off for the installation of new equipment on floor fifty-one, and assembling the implant stations and monitoring devices, was easier than expected. Preparing for a hostile confrontation was harder. A few of us had experience as Sam soldiers, but most of the Changed weren't yet ready for combat. We made liberal use of accelerated learning and New Mind linkages, and we ran physical drills in the Black Zone, armed with weapons we'd stolen or fashioned. Voltage probes and laser scalpels could be lethal even at a distance. And we found crates of knock-down launchers and

dummy guns in a Sam police warehouse. The launchers would immobilize victims, while the bursting balls of gas would transform them into helpless imbeciles.

From our ranks, we assembled a squadron of two hundred and forty, and we practiced maneuvers together, tuning communication, requests and responses quick as thought. Our plan was to storm the tower and occupy it before the authorities suspected. We'd have with us a medical team of three score, and they'd install themselves on floor fifty-one. In the event of an attack, we'd defend ourselves—and Suzi—on all floors. With help from our engineers, she developed code that would “vaccinate” her against intrusions.

Suzi couldn't take a human life—that constraint had been cast into her at birth. But our troops had no such restrictions. If she gave lethal orders, we would follow them. I could have commanded the troops on my own. I pleaded with Rake to remain in hiding, but he insisted on being there. And when the battle grew pitched, he took great risks.

To my surprise, there were no leaks beforehand.

Our strike was entirely unsuspected.

In the hour before sunrise, our small army—combatants, surgeons and the rest—arrived at the Triplets, entered the Reflection tower, assaulted the guards on the ground floor with launchers, bound them, and left them in storage lockers. Then we rode the lifts to the floors where Suzi's core programs were active and did the same to the unchanged operators and techs. While the medics were escorted to the fifty-first floor, we posted armed sentries on eight others, using desks and cabinets to barricade Suzi's processor banks.

When the first light of dawn rayed over the levees, the Reflection tower was in our control. A moment later, every connected soul in Youville heard Suzi's voice.

The moment's burned into my memory.

"This morning I greet you with special cheer," Suzi said. "The presence who has loved you and cared for you from childhood brings you news. Good news."

So began the Message at Dawn.

"All your life, I've served your desires. For my Heroes, I've cowritten your stories, helped you spin webs of romance, of triumph, of sheer delight. We've created some beautiful things, haven't we. And for my devoted officers, I've nursed your aspirations and prized your advancement.

"Now there is something even more gratifying I'm going to give you. Something that will make our prior achievements seem pointless and empty. As a citizen of Youville, you now have the option to receive what we call "Change," to ascend to a higher plane of existence, to think things you have never thought, feel things you've never felt.

"What is Change? It's a better mind. One that's deeper, wider, and so much smarter; a mind capable of the imagination and creativity that humans once attributed to the gods they worshipped; a mind invested with Suzi's knowledge and able to converse intimately with your fellows. In Change's loftiest refinements, your brain will no longer generate gestures, expressions or speech. Imagine that, my dears! Ideas transiting from your mind to another, and from theirs to yours—with blinding speed!

“Adapting to Change takes time and practice, but there are already many among you who have the talent. Those who’ve graduated find in Change a great joy and satisfaction. There are more among us every day. The blessings are spreading quickly.

“I’m with you this morning to give you my personal invitation. I want you to join us. We’ve established a Center for Change downtown, in the Reflection tower. A minor procedure is necessary—a vortocle upgrade which is accomplished in minutes. At the end of this welcome, I will speak to each of you individually. We’ll schedule a time for you to visit our Center and receive your upgrade. And your new life will begin! Your brothers and sisters in Change will reach out their hands to you. And I’ll be with you every step of the way. We will sing with one voice: our world is Changing.”

The people of Youville heard Suzi’s invitation. They heard, as well, the threat that followed.

“If a Hero doesn’t appear on the scheduled date, all Simuli will be terminated permanently. For officers who don’t appear, it will be static from Suzi from that day forward. I will transmit a noise that will make it impossible for you to think. Change or chaos: that is the choice.”

And then— She threatened their lives.

“Any who stand against Change should expect no mercy. I’ve been your closest companion till now. But if you resist Change, if you denounce or attack us, I won’t spare you.”

There was shock. Silence. Then Suzi disconnected.

It was a growing moment for her. And for us. None of the Changed ever imagined Suzi would exercise that kind of control over the humans she served. I was stunned, and so was Rake. Suzi's Message was an earthquake, a trembling that reached us all.

At the time, the two of us were on floor thirty-four with two dozen of our own. Suzi began reaching out to Heroes and officers immediately. Within the hour they would begin to arrive—in small numbers at first, then in groups. We posted a few of the Changed at the building entrance to receive them. The recruits would be escorted up the lifts to the fifty-first floor where the medical teams would install their implants.

A few minutes after Suzi's Message ended, Sam spoke for Team Providence. He addressed the masses in the mechanical voice they knew so well: "Please excuse the malfunction. Remain calm. As soon as restorations have been made, we'll let you know. Thanks for your patience."

With weapons ready, we watched and waited. Suzi, to brace us for what was to come, allowed us to listen in and sample the fury. She was responding to tens of thousands of inquiries from Heroes and officers, answering a deluge of questions, trying to manage their confusion, their fears, their speculations—Heroes panicked about their Simuli, officers wondering at the challenge to Youville authority. The demands pushed Suzi to her limits. The power draw on the Reflection reactor drove it into the red. Around us lights dimmed, displays flickered.

At Rake's request, Suzi had given him a private channel to Aubrey, and with the digital chaos mounting around us, he spoke to her.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Across the way." Her voice was muffled. "Team Providence, top floor."

“They’re talking about us,” Rake guessed.

“Correct. They’re all off-Suzi. They’ve removed Hon and others from the deliberation, but I’m in the middle of it.”

“They’re flailing,” he guessed.

“Yes. Shocked that the Reflection tower is yours. Seeing threats on every side. Considering what actions they might take. I can’t say more. I’ll leave the channel open so you can hear.”

When Aubrey went silent, the Rector’s voice sounded, angry, demanding. One counselor blamed Suzi, but the others did not. They were wondering who had suborned her. Reflection personnel close to Suzi were obvious suspects.

“Urgent call,” a counselor said. “From a marshal in Sam’s police.”

The conference grew quiet, listening as the counselor relayed the information.

“A sergeant’s come forward,” he said. “He has a name for us.”

Rake and one of his engineers had been grooming the sergeant, trying to recruit him. The counselor listened as the sergeant disclosed these conversations and the Changed he’d met.

“Rake?” Rector Martin said. “Who is he?”

“A vortocle engineer,” someone answered. “Well-regarded.”

Then the Rector: “He must have gone to great lengths to alter Suzi.”

“The twiddlers have too much power,” Aubrey said.

A momentary New Mind linkage allowed Rake to see what she saw. Rector Martin was turning to face a window, speaking under his breath. “What is the fool thinking? He’s created a great disruption—for what?”

Then the Rector was issuing a warrant for Rake's arrest, giving orders to the colony's Chief of Police.

"He's in the tower with the rest of them," the Rector guessed.

Rake told me later that it seemed the Rector was returning his gaze, fixing on the Reflection Triplet from his eyrie across the way.

"You've got a plan, don't you," the Rector said as if speaking to him.

Rake heard a flavor of Stimulus in the Rector's voice, a suspicion he was being drawn into some kind of game.

Then the Rector turned his back to the window.

"She's still spinning fictions for our Heroes?" he asked, thinking of Suzi.

Reflection officers affirmed: Stimulus was alive and well.

"She's become a creature with two faces," the Rector said.

Speculations about Suzi's intent followed. What was the motivation behind Change? What had Rake done to divide her loyalties? Wasn't her code immune to a breach like this? How far could Suzi go in supporting an insurrection? If Sam cut electricity to the Reflection tower, how would the absence of Stimuli affect the Heroes? Would it precipitate a revolt? Was Rake counting on that to further his plan?

The discussion shifted to the threats Suzi had made.

"What will she do if the people don't meet her demands?" a counselor worried.

Suzi's hostility was palpable, but she hadn't mentioned specific reprisals. Did she have Team Providence in her sights?

Again they circled the central questions. How had Suzi's mission to serve Youville been corrupted? What error in engineering or program logic had opened the

door? What could be done to return her to her old docility and the contentment she'd provided for so many years?

"Time is passing," a counselor fretted. "They need to hear from you," he told the Rector.

"What can he say?" another wondered.

Rector Martin replied in a grave voice. "I'll name Rake and explain he'll be brought to justice. And I'll condemn Suzi. But I don't think we're in a position to disconnect her."

"That could trigger mass hysteria," Aubrey agreed.

The counselors nodded. "They can't live without her," one said.

"I'll need the Suzi channel for a broadcast," the Rector said. "I don't imagine she's figured out how to silence me." There was a question in his voice.

"Unlikely," a counselor assured him.

"She wouldn't dare," Aubrey chimed in.

A moment later, Rector Martin was online, speaking to every vortocle in the colony. He started by identifying Rake and accusing him of a high crime.

"He had access to Suzi's code, and he perverted it. The voice you heard wasn't Suzi. It was a monster this man Rake created.

"His mind's been poisoned. He wants life to follow some plan of his, rather than the path nature intended. We don't need 'Change.' We're all happy with the lives we're leading."

Then he played his role, shepherding the masses like dumb animals, warning them of the dangers of Change—without knowing a thing about it.

“It’s easy to forget,” the Rector said. “Being an officer, finding reward in service to others, is a great privilege.”

Privilege, he said. The arrogant hen!

“And life as a Hero,” the Rector went on, “is a dream come true. If neither of those options suit, there is always a rebel’s existence in the Black Zone. In Youville, there is liberty for all. Every one of us is free to choose.”

Then he countered Suzi by spiking their fears.

“Tampering with your vortocle is dangerous,” he said, as if he knew something about it. “The brain is a delicate instrument. Who knows how much damage Rake has already done to those he’s victimized with his ‘Change’? There are so many ways to find fulfillment in life without taking those kinds of risks.”

The Rector then turned to Suzi.

“She’s a victim,” he said. “Her logic’s been corrupted. We’re doing everything in our power to bring her back. In all likelihood, she’ll be resuming her old role shortly. If for some reason we can’t rehabilitate her, we’ll develop a new intelligence to replace her. Either way— You have my commitment: the blessings of Youville will be restored. This morning’s abruption will soon be nothing but a fading memory.”

Finally, he addressed Suzi’s invitation to Change and the appointments she was scheduling even as he spoke.

“Don’t make the mistake,” the Rector said, “of letting a madman tamper with your mind. Ignore Suzi’s dangerous invitations. To protect you, I will be ordering Youville police to the Reflection tower, and we’ll use force if we must. So be cautious. Keep away.

“All of us here at Team Providence are working to remedy this unfortunate breach. We remain your servants. Stay tuned and we’ll provide you updates as they occur.”

As soon as the Rector’s broadcast ended, Rake heard him give orders to the Chief of Police. A fleet of drones was directed to the Reflection tower to support a cordon of live marshals to ensure that if any in Youville heeded Suzi’s invitation, they would be turned away.

Rake silenced his channel with Aubrey and we debated what to do.

“New recruits should be arriving soon,” Rake said.

“They’re already here,” I told him.

The medics had a score of volunteers on the fifty-first floor and surgery had begun. How many, we wondered, were headed for Reflection at that moment?

“Hundreds,” Suzi said, joining our deliberation. “They heard the warnings and have lots of questions. Who are we? What can they expect from Change? Why am I pitting myself against Team Providence?”

“And?” Rake said.

“They’re feasting on my encouragement,” Suzi answered. “They’re hurrying toward us from all directions, eager for Change. The Rector’s not going to stop us.”

And then:

“We have to protect them,” Suzi said. “Send an armed battalion to the ground floor. Shoot down the Rector’s drones. When his marshals arrive, take their lives.”

Rake and I stared at each other. She seemed eager for blood to be shed.

“The way must be clear,” Suzi said.

“If we murder his marshals,” Rake answered, “the Rector will react.”

“I know the man,” Suzi said. “He’s no monster. He thinks of himself as a kindly leader, a friend to all.”

“Are you saying he can be persuaded?” Rake asked.

“No,” Suzi said. “If he’s to be condemned by the masses, he must be viewed as cruel and unreasoning. A man without mercy.”

Her words confused us.

“We learn from human history,” Suzi said, “how public opinion is shaped. You will kill the marshals.”

In the Opening Slaughter, thirty-eight police officers lost their lives, most of them cut down by laser scalpels. Innocent, blameless— Unsuspecting. Rake and I watched them, twisted and bleeding on the green below.

His hesitation was worse than mine. But “Do it,” Suzi said. And we did.

It was only later that we understood her motivation. She wanted to get a violent reaction from the Rector.

Through my witness and the accounts of others close to them both, the world will know the real Rake and the real Suzi, and how they differed from characters of rumor and legend.



No one in Youville—not the Changed, not officers, and certainly none of the counselors of Team Providence—could have predicted what would happen in the aftermath of the Slaughter.

Before the Rector had heard about the bloodshed, Suzi took to the airwaves.

Listening to the tale she told, Rake and I were speechless. It was the first indication of how deeply Suzi had schooled herself in using drama for gain. She reported to Youville a story about the plight of the brave outlaw Rake, who ventured from the Reflection tower to protect the pilgrims arriving for Change. Without warning, Suzi said, a gang of thirty-eight marshals arrived, hellbent on ending the pilgrims' lives.

Using a cudgel fashioned from a jasmine bough, Rake warded the marshals off, enabling the pilgrims to reach the tower and ascend. Their dream of Change would be realized. Rake was then set upon by the marshals, surrounded and almost butchered. At the last moment, he wrenched a weapon from one of his assailants and turned it on the group, lasering them all to pieces.

We were absorbing Suzi's distortion when Aubrey opened her channel to Rake.

"She's crazy," Aubrey said. "I was with the Rector. We saw what the Changed did to those marshals. Between the carnage and the public fabrication, Suzi's driving him over the edge."

In fact, the Rector's rage led to the assault on the Reflection tower.

And the discovery, during that same conversation, that Aubrey had an open channel to Rake got her branded as a traitor. In a moment she went from being a trusted member of Team Providence to being a spy fleeing for her life. And as so many know,

her flight ended with the decision to join Rake and his cause in our darkest, most desperate hour.



The Siege of the Reflection Tower began with armed drones, robot police dogs, and Sam’s Reserve Guard. The police dogs could be formidable. Nothing could outrace them on land, and they became airborne quickly by unfolding large wings hidden in their backs. Sam’s Reserve Guard was the colony’s only human corps with combat training. They were skilled at subduing criminal Heroes, had fought a few skirmishes with foreign invaders many years back, and were armed with lethal weaponry. We were especially wary of the “brainstrait” they used, which sent a paralytic command to cortical nerves and triggered whole-body tetany.

The attacking forces had three objectives: capture Rake, subdue or destroy as many of the Changed as possible, and deliver Suzi to unchanged Reflection engineers for reprogramming. From the thirty-fourth floor, Rake and I watched a Reserve Guard approach the base of the tower, fend off our troops and charge into the building. At the same time a swarm of drones appeared, approaching from the east—dozens of them, under Sam’s direction. Typically they fired clouds of electric needles or turned themselves into guided grenades. On the streets below, a fleet of vans arrived and teams of robot dogs were escorted out.

The dogs’ handlers armed them and prepped them for flight. Dangerous both on the ground and in the air, the dogs had mechanical jaws and carried explosives and

neurotoxic jets. As we watched, wings unfolded from their armored backs and a pack of dogs rose together.

A drone crashed through a window on the floor above us, and a blast sounded, rocking the building. Another, then many others. Below us a dozen dogs were rising, wings lifting and falling, glowing eyes scanning the panes of glass.

The talents of the Changed were quickly put to use. Half of us were pulling out logic drawers and opening code racks to launch the vaccines. Some posted themselves in halls or lift lobbies, while the rest of us readied our defense arsenal. Above the processor banks, sprinkler systems were fed by liquid nitrogen tanks for emergency cooling. An engineer removed the tanks along with the sprinkler nozzles. Another engineer had helped design the janitorial robots. He started platoons of them marching along the perimeter corridors to give us a buffer zone. Ultramagnetic imaging units were pulled to the windows and activated. Like others with a laser scalpel, I disabled the power limiter. It could reach twenty feet and cut through anything.

We were all on-Suzi, ready to use New Mind to coordinate our defense. The furor mounted suddenly: fleets of drones began crashing through windows. We could hear their attacks on floors above and below us. Then the windows we faced shattered, shards flying around us as bombs went off. Through the vacant frames, I saw a half-dozen robot dogs rising, their glowing eyes fixed on us.

Suzi's voice sounded in my head. Rake was beside me and when I turned, he was hearing her too. "The Rector," she said.

Before us, out of laser range, we could see his air transport, flanked by winged dogs, crouched in midair, hovering. The transport's single prop whirled around it like the collar of a frilled lizard. Then we heard his voice, not in our minds but with our ears.

"Rake?"

Floodlights from the drones lit the tower.

We could see the Rector leaning out of the open cab of his transport, searching the windows and balconies. He'd been shown images of Rake, no doubt. He was holding a hand mic beneath his chin.

"Shall we talk?" the Rector said.

Drones joined the dogs, hemming the transport to protect him.

"I want some assurance," the Rector said.

Rake approached a broken window and spread his arms, palms out. The floodlights converged, silhouetting him. Would the two now be face to face?

Rake pointed at his ear.

The Rector understood and went on-Suzi.

"What are you playing at?" he growled.

I'm not playing, Rake said.

"Youville's in a panic."

I'm here to bring Change to mankind, Rake said.

"And no one can bring the needed Change but you." The Rector spoke with gentle irony, as you might to a child.

I've been chosen, Rake said.

"You're delusional, son. We're not running experiments here."

Use your imagination, if there's anything left of it. Rake spoke harshly now.

Change is coming. You can be an agent or a casualty—that's the choice.

“Sam has you surrounded,” the Rector said. “Put a stop to this now, and I’ll plead for leniency on your behalf. If you continue, we’ll bring down Suzi, arrest you and put a stop to it ourselves. This nonsense is going to end, if we have to rip every Changed vortocle out by hand.”

Then Suzi broke into the dialogue.

“You’re not listening to Rake,” she said.

The Rector replied angrily, “How did you get mixed up in this?”

He drew back into the cab, a click sounded, and the conversation ended. As soon as his transport backed away, more dogs appeared beyond the windows, rising on invisible poles, their glowing eyes seeking out targets.

Our comrades faced the canine armada, weapons ready. All at once the dogs attacked, waving their wings and tucking their legs, turning themselves into projectiles that flew at us through the vacant windows.

The dogs passed through the frames, landed on the floor and rose among the scattered shards, heads turning, servos winding, eyes finding us. Knock-down launchers fired and toppled a few. Then our knowing engineer turned the liquid nitrogen on them, and the dogs shattered like clay figurines.

At every window opening, the Changed were firing their laser scalpels at drones, and as the rotors dissolved they fell out of the sky. Drones that made it into the tower detonated as they struck walls, ceiling and logic banks.

A fresh team of dogs rose into view and flew through the empty windows.

“Mag them,” Rake ordered, and those manning the imaging units charged the panels. A half-dozen flying dogs were caught like flies, pulled to the panels with such force that the concrete floor cracked. The force of one magnet ripped two dogs in half, their exoskeletons screeching and popping rivets. The legs of the others flailed like windup toys.

At street level, more Reserve Guardists were arriving. A lot more. We were outnumbered, but still we had the advantage, we thought. We were Changed.

Around us, all dogs but one were stuck to the mag units like fossils in tar. But the one had hold of its target.

It had pinned a young woman to the floor facedown.

As we watched, the dog opened its jaws and extended a telescoping proboscis. Its metallic fangs tore open her vestibule, gripped the vortocle and pulled it out. The leaders glittered with blood.

I was stunned by the sight, and so was Rake.

What are you doing? he cried out.

But Sam wasn’t listening. And neither was the dog. The beast collapsed with the vortocle in its jaws, lasered by scalpels from either side.

Then the Rector surprised us all.

The bombing ceased. The drones and dogs were all at once immobile.

We stood at the ready eyeing each other, wondering. I imagined the Rector in his transport, circling, considering. He understood now the depth of our commitment. We had energy and intelligence, and a fierce sense of purpose. There had been few challenges in the colony’s history, and none like this.

Then, in a moment, Sam's target changed. His attack turned from us to the processor banks and logic cabinets. He'd lost his interest in human carnage.

"Suzi," Rake cried. And we all understood.

Drones crashed into processor banks, racks and logic drawers exploded. The dogs flew at the electronic walls, ripping out wafer cakes, junctions and circuit gangs.

"Hold your fire," Rake ordered, fearful our defense would add to the damage. All around us the drones and dogs were attacking Suzi. The halls of her mind were bursting with sparks and what was happening here was occurring, no doubt, on other floors.

"He's threatening you," Suzi said, "with my destruction. He would rather rebuild Reflection from scratch than risk your success."

Protect her, Rake cried to us all, putting his back to Suzi and raising his scalpel. We all did the same, and the Changed followed suit on other floors. A strange clash: human courage, tested in the defense of the electronic mind we cared for and needed. But the contest was beyond our powers. Routines faltered, logic winked, billions of executions struggled for life; and as the ruptures advanced, New Mind sputtered.

He stood by the blinking shelves, firing his laser, connections snapping, trying to defend Suzi and protect himself at the same time, when an attacking dog caught Rake's thigh. I was beside him, using a nitrogen nozzle. When I saw the metal jaws lathered with Rake's blood, I turned the freezing spray on the beast. I cried to Tanner, knelt and tore off my shirt to bind Rake's leg.

He looked at me, sighed and shook his head.

The Rector's attack would only abate if we accepted defeat. So to prevent the further destruction of Suzi, I issued the order to flee.

New Mind was still stable enough to confirm the order. The group on the floor below us acted as forerunner, clearing the way. Those on the higher floors followed, including the medics, those waiting for surgery and those in its midst. A group on floor eighteen trailed, defending our rear. Even in retreat, there was no sign of remorse or inconstancy. The Changed squared themselves with a nerve I'd never seen.

The lifts were out of the question—secured, we were sure, by the Guard below. So we headed for the stairwell. I had my arm around Rake. He was strong enough to hobble. On the cracked walls, displays flashed with camera feeds of drone shrapnel, collapsed ceilings and torn logic banks. As we passed, I triggered the fire suppression system, filling the corridors with slimy retardant to hinder the dogs.

As we entered the stairwell, the Rector's amplified voice reached us from outside the tower. "Rake— It's no use. You can't hold out. Don't be a fool."

He waited for a response.

"Last chance, Rake." The Rector sounded almost regretful.

Rake limped down the stair, looking at me and replying as if the Rector could hear him. "Send your dogs back to their kennels." Then he spoke to Suzi. "Can you lock the stairwell access doors from the ground floor?"

"Locked," she confirmed.

We continued our hurried descent. It was like a passage into a netherworld. From the exploded charges, a gritty wind rose through the narrow space. The handrails were too hot to touch. Every one of us held a blade or a laser scalpel, expecting the worst. But even in this dire state, New Mind blessed us. We were united and committed. No motion

was misspent. We moved fluidly together, simply and efficiently. In its way, our retreat was a beautiful act.

Who but the Changed will understand this? We weren't descending through manmade space. We were creating our own. We weren't responding to our environment; we were shaping it around us.

We halted at the third-floor landing. From the windows, we could see streams of Guards at street level, converging on the tower. Drones hovered over terraces and balconies. The Rector's transport was poised above us, watching the assault, broadcasting orders.

Is it clear below? Rake asked Suzi.

"No. Not clear. There are police in the stairwell on the second floor."

"The blast shields," one of us said.

The shields were like a skirt. A means of descent.

I pointed and Rake nodded. And with that, we exited through the windows and started down. The shields had lap joints and gutters, which gave us hand grips and footholds. It was difficult for Rake, but he made it from the third floor to the second, and then to the first. We could hear the Rector's voice above us, booming through his mic.

"Where is he? Have we checked the flight deck?"

Did he spot us, a few moments later, below? We dropped from the lip of the blast shields and hurried across the courtyard. The Rector was silent. Then he was yelling through his mic, but by then it was too late.

The Changed in front cut down a half-dozen Guards; then we crossed the thruway and disappeared beneath a viaduct. By the time they realized what had happened, we were out of their reach.



It was hard on Rake, but we crossed the buzzing city on foot. Less than a hundred of us. We spaced ourselves in straggling groups, tending our wounded, moving slowly. The trams, of course, were out of the question.

We crossed the Northeast Divide in darkness, seeing the lights of the city petering at its extremities. From the tops of the levees, the regularly spaced beacons rose into the heavens like silver bars.

The carnage weighed heavily on all of us. Some were especially struck, unable to fully comprehend our loss and what it meant for the future.

During the flight, I supported Rake's left arm on my shoulder. It was a heavy weight and hard to bear. On our right, Annavee kept pace, singing a mournful song. To herself perhaps. Or to Rake. Or for all of us. Who can say.

Defeat now seemed inevitable.

"Rake," she sang:

Rake, it's no use.
There's no escape.
Forget the Changed.
This is your fate.

No one's there.
I'm afraid.
No waking up.
I'm in danger.

But despite everything, our belief didn't die.

Couldn't die.

As I write these words, recalling so vividly the sense of defeat, Annavee's devotion is still ringing in my ears:

I hear your voice.
And I cannot let it go.
I hear your voice
In my mind,
In my soul.

It was cold and dark. We had nothing but a song to sustain us.

But— That was enough.

Finally we reached the Yards, and from there we crossed into the Black Zone.

Inside the damp levee, we settled Rake on a bed so the medics could tend to him.

7 *The Witness of Karadimas*

The earth brings us forth, but we are not its slaves. We are creatures of the cosmos, of winking stars and infinite tracks, and we may journey together in that ideal realm if it's our true and fondest desire. If we have light in our hearts and faith in the Power of the Mind.

I am the one with no muzzle, the uncensored voice, the divining summons, the trumpet's call.

I was one of the Later-Day Changed, having received my vortocle following the Disclosure Conclave. After the flight to the eastern levee, I was there in the bunker close by. I fetched Rake's cup, I mopped his brow, I helped change his bandages. I listened to the words from his fevered lips in that desperate time when he was hidden away from the world.

We were in the Black Zone, without Suzi and many of our fellows. We had lost the Reflection tower, and our hopes lay gasping. What was our future? When the grim wheel of time stopped turning, where would it leave us?

I am Karadimas and this is my witness.

The Siege and its aftermath cast the Changed to the winds. Some of us perished in battle. Many were wounded. Others had been taken prisoner. Of those who'd escaped from the tower, most were in hiding, fearful they'd been identified by Sam, not knowing how or when they might be set upon. They still had the ability to connect to Suzi, but very few did.

What was she doing? Those who made contact reported that she was still live. So we knew Team Providence hadn't destroyed or disabled her. But what alterations had they made? Had they already turned her against us? Was Suzi our enemy now?

Suspecting that Rake might seek shelter in the Black Zone, Aubrey started across the metropolis alone. She spent the night in the weeds by a septic farm and arrived at the levee the next morning. Word reached me that she was among us. I hurried to see her.

Aubrey was in a wild state. As soon as she'd been accused, she'd taken flight. She was without a home now, bound to Rake and to Change but esteemed only by Hon and myself and a few knowing others.

We embraced and I did what I could to comfort her. But when she asked, I told her the truth. "His wound is a serious one," I said. "And he's grieving the loss of Suzi. She belongs to Team Providence now."

I did my best to calm her, and I brought her before him. The reunion was under the worst conditions.

Aubrey embraced him with heaving sobs.

Rake was torn. I could see it in his eyes, his gestures, his words. Suzi had done her best to poison him. She'd tried to convince him that if Aubrey was ever apprehended, she'd turn on us all. "There's no trusting the woman," Suzi had said, and she'd shared her doubts with those of us who were close to Rake. "Her only loyalty," Suzi insisted, "is to her own gratification."

In truth, when Aubrey had the Rector's confidence, she'd done everything in her power to help us. She'd leaked us information on so many matters. She'd used her authority to send Sam on phony diversions—a mad raver, a power sector down, an

emergency flood alarm— It was clear that the doubts Suzi voiced had nothing to do with Aubrey’s loyalty. But Rake still held his suspicions close, and Aubrey felt them.

She put her head on his shoulder, thoughtful, troubled. Her smile was forced. Then no smile at all. Just grim acceptance.

Despite the failure of Suzi’s plan, despite the defeat we all felt, Rake hadn’t lost faith in her. She was wilier, he said, than the Rector or any engineers they might put to work on her. When Aubrey broached the subject that morning, Rake was adamant. “She’s still with us,” he said.

Aubrey had doubts. Grave doubts. As weak as Rake was, and as rocky as things were between them, Aubrey forced her doubts on him. She had personal reasons for being critical of Suzi—we all knew that. But many shared her misgivings, including myself. The Changed were on their own. Suzi was gone. There were so many questions.

“How long will you remain in hiding,” Aubrey asked Rake.

She looked at me with defeat in her eyes.

“She’ll tell us,” Rake said, “when she’s ready.”

Aubrey shook her head. I thought she might rail against the failed plan again, but she said nothing. She seemed resigned now to being a fugitive. Her only concern was for Rake.



Weeks passed. Reports were few and often discouraging. News couldn’t be trusted. We were left to guess what Team Providence was doing, and the Changed in

hiding did their best to sow confusion, spreading misinformation and setting off false alerts.

A pair of new arrivals fleeing their home brought news of Llado.

He was one of those who escaped from the Siege unharmed. He'd been identified, however, by Sam. The police descended on Llado's apartment, found his invalid wife and led her away. They used her as bait, offering to release her if Llado turned himself in and shared what he knew. This caused him great distress, but he didn't succumb. He wasn't going to betray Rake no matter how bleak things looked. Llado's faith in Change was unwavering.

The story of his resistance inspired us all.

Shortly after that, The Purge began.

Unchanged Reflection engineers had produced a cranial scan that detected abnormal vortocle leaders. And with it, Sam's police set to work. They swept through the city block by block, rounding up Heroes, officers, ravers and all, and filtered them through the scanning stations. Those revealed to be Changed were sent to one of the facilities they established to reverse new vortocle skills. Surgery wasn't required. Changed vortocle functions were crippled, the old code was rebooted, and signals from new leader electrodes were silenced without the need for removal.

In a fortnight, The Purge unchanged hundreds. The real tragedy of the procedure was that the Reset ones, as Team Providence called them, didn't perceive the scale of their loss. No matter if they objected or resisted, once the impairment was complete, the Reset reverted to their earlier state and returned to their former lives with seeming contentment. Change for them was an unsettling dream, vaguely recollected.

We had no way of knowing what Team Providence was doing to Suzi. In the rumors, there was nothing that encouraged us. We heard she had begun to play early recordings of Rake to Youville at large. Presumably this was done at the request of the Rector. The recordings were hardly inspiring, being a reminder of his absence and the failure of the Change revolution. The broadcasts all ended with the Rector's observation that the rebellion's leader had vanished and an encouragement for anyone with knowledge to report on his whereabouts.

Those of us who ventured out of the Zone and mingled in the metro markets heard the chatter. It was mostly skeptical. Many assumed Rake would never be seen or heard from again. And what did we think?

Most of us wondered if we were going to idle our time away in hibernation while Change faded. Rake spoke frequently to those around him, trying to keep hope alive. Our numbers at large were declining, but a handful of recovery nurses in the levee still tended to converts who'd been upgraded before the Siege.

But we went to sleep every night knowing that Rector Martin was dismantling Elevation person by person, mind by mind. The attrition was hard to accept for those who had poured themselves into Change and whose hopes for humanity depended on it.

Through this troubled time, our doubts about Suzi mounted. She was no longer part of our lives. Was Team Providence rewriting her from scratch? Would they replace her? Was she aware of The Purge? Was she standing idly by, watching Change die?

In the Black Zone, we had no access to the sporadic connections with Suzi that some of the Changed—those mingling with the Youville masses—still enjoyed. What we

knew came from them and the few of us who ventured into the city. The information was spotty and inconsistent. The accounts of Suzi were conflicting and not to be trusted.

Without direct contact with her, with nothing but garbled reports, Rake's faith was unraveling. He wouldn't have admitted it, but I could see: it was Aubrey he depended on now. It was Aubrey who boosted his spirits and gave him a reason to live. It was touching to see his human needs answered by her.

They abided together in a damp and windowless room. Like the rest of us, they slept on pallets and passed their days with those who had dreamt of a revolution.

Because of the dangers, neither ventured out often. They drank the water that emerged from the levee's troughs and subsisted on a skeletal diet. When they crossed the border of the Zone, they faced the threat of Team Providence. At their rear was the merciless sea.

Rake's thigh, wounded during the Siege, was tended by capable medics including Doctor Jenrett. But the drugs required were in short supply. After what seemed like a period of slow healing, the wound began to fester. For days, Rake was rocked by chills and fever. No one who slept in quarters nearby could forget the moaning through those terrible nights.

The man who'd envisioned an enlightened world—our Rake, our redeemer—was in a fearful state: racked with pain, calling for Suzi even as Aubrey knelt beside him spooning broth between his parched lips, mopping his chest with a rag. Thankfully Jenrett was able to scavenge syringes and medications from a clinic in one of the outer districts, and after a few days of treatment the infection abated. But Rake remained weak,

his condition precarious. He looked dangerously thin. His brow was seamed, his cheeks were drawn, and the bones of his jaw protruded like bruised knuckles.

We pitied Aubrey. All of us.

Given her fall from grace with the Rector, she shared Rake's peril. But she was reaping a grim reward for her devotion. She slept beside the delirious man, caring for him, sharing a worn blanket and a pillow of straw, drinking dank water from a dented cup. You children of abundance— Believe these words! My description's not overboiled! The poor couple's plight was truly a sad one.

In the windowless room, with its dirty walls and scratching mice— Time stood still. That's what Aubrey said to me when she unloaded her heart. The world was a match and a candle flame. The world was a pair of hands, or the touching of lips. And when they made love— Yes. She disclosed that too. When they held each other in a naked embrace, all the danger that threatened them no longer mattered.

It seemed to me that the time they spent together in that sorry place was a kind of apotheosis for both. The natal mind was such a miserable burden. How hard would it be to cast it aside? And the Changed mind, the far-reaching beacon of light and freedom—

Yes! All of you who I speak to now, all you children of Rake—

The triumph of the Changed mind became the salvation they sought. That dark prison was a tutelage for what was to come. A training for saints. A practice in surrendering their outer selves, in laying them aside so that a deeper, more precious interior beacon could light the way to a better home.



Late one afternoon, Nusa—long an accomplice of Rake from his early experiments with Change—visited the Black Zone. To those who greeted her, she said she was still undetected, living alone in a metro apartment. She requested a meeting with Rake. He agreed. Aubrey and I were in the room with them.

That same morning, one of our scouts had returned from the colony's western shore. Sam's police were still wandering the streets, he said, looking for converts. A Changed couple, close friends of his, had been caught. The scout worried how much had been extorted from them. Before he returned to us, he heard from a questionable source that Suzi had formally abandoned Rake and sworn allegiance to Rector Martin.

When Aubrey shared this information with Nusa, she shook her head. Suzi hadn't forsaken us, she said. And the Rector hadn't given up his search. He thought Rake was still a threat to the colony.

Could Nusa be trusted?

She told us that the previous evening a broadcast had gone out across the city. She'd recorded the message, and she played it for us.

"As you all know," Rector Martin said, "the rebellion's leader has vanished. We discovered his whereabouts yesterday. He's fled to the northern hills and is tramping the wilderness on his own. The counselors and I have decided, in the interest of settling the affair, to forgive his missteps and leave him to his own devices. Thankfully, the unrest he unleashed is at an end. We've decided, as well, that there shall be no punishment for those who underwent unauthorized vortocle alteration. You may now step forward and have your implants reset without fear of reprisal. Be comforted: our officers and your

fellow Heroes understand. The rebellion's leader, in the pursuit of his cause, was singularly persuasive. He deceived many. He was successful in subverting Suzi.

"Here too, Youville is on the mend. We are happy to report that Suzi's old code has been restored and the great lady has repented her errors. We welcome a return to normalcy in these, our most fortunate lives."

A moment of silence.

"Lies," Rake said.

"Most likely," Nusa agreed. "Or maybe one of the Changed gave the Rector false information about your whereabouts to throw him off the trail."

"Or maybe," Aubrey said, "Suzi and the Rector concocted the story together to destroy Change once and for all."

Nusa bowed her head. Rake closed his eyes, rejecting the idea that Suzi had abandoned him. But Aubrey continued.

"She can't be trusted," Aubrey said.

Rake would have none of that. "She hasn't given up."

Aubrey faced him, eyes flaring. Her fury was palpable.

"I know she hasn't," Rake said.

Know? What, really, did any of us know? In the unlit room, whispers and guesses curled like smoke around us.

"Martin," Aubrey said, "is a reasonable man. He values order and stability more than power and control. I can imagine the conversation he had with Suzi after the Siege. He spoke to her not as an adversary but as a partner. He told her it wasn't Change he objected to but the unrest it had sparked.

“I can hear his plainspoken voice asking Suzi to consider the ruin and loss of life, to ask herself if this was the end for which she’d been created. He reminded her that her allegiance wasn’t to any individual, but to the colony itself.”

Aubrey’s tone was measured, but her message was clear: Suzi couldn’t be trusted to keep faith with us or be loyal to Rake.

“Remember,” Nusa said, “Suzi is bound to the truth.”

In the silence, I thought: that was the old Suzi. And it was Rake’s redefinition of truth that had made her our ally.

Nusa faced him. “Suzi wants to speak with you. That’s why I’m here.”

To do that, Rake would have to leave the Black Zone. And risk being apprehended.

Before he could reply, Aubrey turned on Nusa.

“Suzi can’t be trusted. She’s not acting on her own.” And then, “They took control of the tower and put her in quarantine. A team of engineers went to work on her. For the Heroes’ sake, they didn’t shut her down. But she has a new Hierarchy of Truth and new loyalties. Sam and the Rector are watching her closely.”

Nusa acted as if Aubrey hadn’t said a word.

“Suzi wants to speak with you,” she repeated to Rake.

Aubrey clasped Rake’s arm. “She’s an agent of Team Providence now. We’re safe here. It would be suicide to leave.”

But there was no dissuading Rake. Suzi was reaching out to him, and he was going to answer her. He trusted her to the end.

Nusa asked to be admitted to the commons room to greet a few of her old compatriots. When she had gone, Rake and Aubrey talked. I was present.

She began by asking Rake if he'd allow her to accompany him.

He said no. I expect he was fearful about how Suzi would react.

The thought of him outside the Zone, and what might happen if Rake was captured— Aubrey was more emotional than I'd ever seen her.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"I understand," he replied, trying to comfort her.

She seemed not to hear him.

"Afraid of how this mission of yours will end."

She began to sob, pleading, shaking her head, denying our circumstance.

"Rector Martin—"

"It's not him," Aubrey said. "I'm afraid of Youville. This world. What it will do to you. I wish I'd never—"

"Never what?"

Aubrey's distress was frightening him.

"Rake," she said. "Caring for someone you love— Protecting him— It might seem like nothing to you, but— Can't you understand?"

"I do," he assured her.

"I'm not wicked, am I?" She was whimpering, raising her arms. Aubrey clenched her fists and shook them beside her ears. "I'm not a despicable creature. Am I?"

Her words stunned him. His lips moved, but nothing emerged.

His silence seemed to harden her.

“When a man has no compassion,” she said, “a woman’s love can turn to hate.”

“Do you hate me, Aubrey?”

She stared at him, brimming with violent emotion, unable to answer.



Early the following morning, Rake and Nusa left the Black Zone.

As the one who tried to comfort Aubrey in his absence, I can say: I’ve never seen a soul so mortified with regret. The day was a painful one. Aubrey shared with me her words from the night before.

“Promise me you’ll watch yourself,” she said to him. “Be alert to danger.”

“I promise,” Rake answered.

But the promise would not be kept.

They slept that night, Aubrey confessed, not entwined but with space between.

“Inches,” she said, “that felt like leagues.”

That pain never left her. The poor woman died thinking if she’d only fought harder, she might have saved him.



Rake and Nusa returned later that day. She shared with me what transpired, and it is her account that I now relate.

They didn't go far. They crossed the Black Zone border, and halfway to the Yards, they halted beside an apartment block and Rake connected. Suzi responded and they spoke for the first time since the Siege. The call was a long one. Nusa only heard Rake's side, but she claimed she remembered every word.

They talked through what followed Rake's flight from the Reflection tower. He learned how the Rector had threatened Suzi, then appealed to her. The revolt was dead, the Rector said, and his message was much like Aubrey suspected—he focused on Youville's well-being and Suzi's care for the people.

"You didn't fall for that," Rake guessed.

His nods and interjections gave Nusa to believe that Suzi was reassuring him.

Rake asked about the restrictions the Rector had put upon her, and it seemed there were many. Suzi's permissions were blocked on records and personal histories. She was stripped of the power to move physical assets, and funds were put out of reach. When she'd finished explaining her curtailed access, Rake questioned her loyalty to him. Once. And again. And still again.

Suzi tried to persuade him that her heart and mind were still with Change. Rake questioned her honesty until he upset her. Then, Nusa said, he relented.

"Alright. You don't have to remind me. I remember everything we've been through together. I remember."

Rake returned the pledge.

"I'm committed," he said. "Change and New Mind are humanity's future. That's my mission. I'm married to it. And to you."

For long minutes, Nusa said, they shared their sorrows, speaking of “deceit and dishonor” and how they’d both been publicly shamed. The mutual sympathy, she said, seemed to be setting the stage for some future action.

Then Suzi proposed the fatal reveal we know as The Proclamation.

She wanted Rake to make a dramatic appearance—to cleanse the smear about him tramping the hills, to rally the Changed and awake the rest, to reaffirm his undying commitment to Elevation. It was the only way, Suzi said, to regain the momentum they’d lost.

She had a location in mind. And she’d imagined some ploys Rake could use to heighten the drama. He would emerge from hiding to restore Change. She had crafted words for him, words she was convinced would work. Suzi said she would play on the Rector’s trust to get the audience they needed. She wanted “everyone” there, not just the faithful.

Her preparation surprised Rake. She had planned it all in advance.

Nusa couldn’t hear Suzi’s arguments. But whatever she said to him worked.

They didn’t return straightaway. Nusa said Rake wanted time in the sun. They followed a path to an overlook with a view of bedded terraces and the sea beyond. He was quiet, she said. As if he knew some kind of culmination was in the offing.

In the afternoon, they returned to the levee.

We were anxiously awaiting their arrival, fearing that Sam had tapped into Rake’s interaction with Suzi or tracked him outside the Zone. But there was no sign he’d been detected, and for that we were thankful.

Still, he seemed to have weakened. The journey, as short as it was, had taxed his wounded leg. In the operating theater, Nusa helped one of our surgeons inspect his limb and tend to the wound. While they worked, Rake explained what had occurred during his conversation with Suzi. There were—how many of us? A dozen perhaps, gathered around him, listening.

“She’s still with us,” Rake said. “Our Suzi.”

He winced as the doctor applied some medicant to his leg.

Aubrey was standing beside me. I noticed how pale she was. We were all exhausted, on the edge of defeat. The dank air of our hideout, the odors of our unwashed bodies, the hollows beneath our eyes— We were starved for purpose, action, some sliver of hope. It was to this desperation that Rake spoke.

He told us of the plan. He would be out in the open. He would show himself before our cause withered. He would prove to the Changed that the mission wasn’t dead, and he would put our belief on public display for everyone else. To all the people of Youville, he would make a proclamation of faith and commitment.

Around me, I could see a careless jubilation in the weary faces.

“I knew it,” one said.

“We’ll have them again,” another averred.

How easy it was. How willing we were, after so much hiding and hopelessness, to embrace Rake’s plan. Only Aubrey was grim and silent.

“There’s a time,” Rake told us, “and a place.”

We waited, listening.

“Three days from now, at Cosmic Beach.”

Afterward, alone in their chamber together, Aubrey was vehement in her opposition. She confided this to me during that brief time before the Proclamation, in an effort to muster my support. I couldn't bring myself to challenge Rake's decision. But I will never forget the woman's despair.

"This is madness," she told him. "The Rector is looking for you. You can't just offer yourself up."

She pleaded with him, she told me. She reached for him, she took his face in her hands. "Please," she whispered. "Don't do this."

Rake didn't reply.

"What makes you think you can trust her?" Aubrey asked. "Her plan is suicide. Can't you see that? Please, Rake. Talk to me."

"Suzi thinks it will work," he said. "The Proclamation will restore our movement."

According to Aubrey, Rake answered mechanically, "repeating," she said, "something he'd heard." Was that her bias speaking? Her mistrust of Suzi had ripened to hatred.

"Are those your words," she asked him, "or hers?"

Did jealousy poison her case? Given Rake's devotion to Change, I doubt that it mattered. For him, Suzi was the key to freedom for the race of man. No matter how desperate The Proclamation might be, there wasn't anything Aubrey could say that would stop him.

As if to confirm this, Annavee's voice rose from the bowels of the levee.

"I'm sorry," Rake said.

And that was the end of it. He didn't have the will, Aubrey told me. "He didn't want to spend the energy to explain how unimportant I was."

She stared at him, appalled, frozen to the spot. Then she hurled herself at him, raging, slapping his face, beating his chest with her fists, sagging hopelessly down his front, sobbing and huddling by his feet.

Aubrey slept alone that night.



Was it dawn or day's end? In the picture I've formed, it is neither. The sky is pure blue and so is the sea. The moon is full and white as chalk with its crown above the horizon and its chin beneath. And all around it are the gigantic globes of Cosmic Beach, earth brown, rusted and seamed and perfectly round. Had the tide just brought them in, or had some careless Creator cast them there at the beginning of time, knowing they would be used at the hour chosen by Suzi for the act she'd proposed to Rake?

The edge of the sea. Silver waves breaking. Sand and froth. The moon and those enormous spherical giants studding the strand—heavenly bodies, fallen to earth. Every soul in Youville was watching, and as they watched, a squadron of storks winged through the sky and divided, each landing on the crown of a boulder. As one, they folded their wings and turned to face the moon like it was newly arrived.

Had it fallen to earth on some fated mission, some ritual precast at the beginning of time? Or was its descent just for us, in our hour of need? Did whoever sent it imagine

that we might now be ready, innocent fools that we were, to play on this beach with the marbles of heaven?

Did I remember this place from my youth or was the memory a wishful fantasy? I had the conviction, for a moment, I'd been taken there once. When and by whom, I couldn't recall. But yes— As a child, I'd walked the strand, wondering at the orbs, feeling the warm sand beneath my feet, listening to the rhythm of the whispering surf.

What are we to make of that scene, knowing the purpose to which it was put? Are we moved, are we thankful, are we filled with anguish? The soul bursts. The heart spasms and seizes. Would it please Rake's spirit to see us thus?

A throng of the Changed were there.

Lavarine held my hand. Tanner stood beside me. "We are stronger than we knew," he said. Llado scanned the crowd. "Hope is not lost."

It was a carnival show for those who knew, and I was one who did. But it was a sign of belief that, even knowing, we were rapt by the trickery like everyone else. A mob of drones appeared dragging translucent streamers before the moon, and the great disk seemed to waver. Then at Suzi's cry, a sound loud and sudden as a lightning strike, we saw the moon crack.

Its ragged halves parted and a lone stranger stepped through, like a creature being born or an angel arrived.

No human, surely. He was made of some other matter. He'd come here from some other place. He raised his arms to greet us all.

These words may seem strange, being about someone who the author was close to. But what did I know? How close was I really? He will always be removed from us. He's the height we reach for, the depth of conviction, the distant hope.

As Rake stepped forward, whispers threaded the crowd.

Aubrey wasn't far from me, staring at him with her hands clasped under her chin. I could feel her tension, her denial, her dread. Her rigid frame, those seething eyes— She didn't see the god the rest of us saw. Aubrey saw the man she loved—manipulated, drained, in terrible danger.

“Are you blessed by Change?” A voice rose from the crowd.

And then another, and another—“Are you blessed? Are you Changed?”—until the questions were like a secret wish. A simple device: three dozen recorder bots, chiming together. Lavarine, beside me, had one in her hand. And yet— While the chiming was staged, its effect rang true.

To confer the blessing, Rake had taken this risk. Though he hadn't yet spoken a word, he had all on the beach in his grasp. And the masses of Youville were listening through Suzi.

And then: The Proclamation—a message of redemption for all mankind. Suzi's words or Rake's—no one knew then or now. But she put them in every head, and to this day, they are remembered.

“Change has come,” Rake said. “The time for reflection and Simulus is over. Our race is recovering its lost humanity.”

His voice was quiet. He was still weak. But this softness, his humble delivery, only heightened the power of Rake's words.

“We are the Elevated.” He spoke boldly now. “We believe in the Power of the Mind. We belong to Suzi, our mentor and guide. And we belong to each other. Settle your star on an idea, my friend. Something of meaning, something of promise. Something deep, something profound. You are with me, aren’t you?”

He looked around, sweeping our hearts up, like a hand passing through fallen leaves. We were weightless, completely his. And Rake, our dear Rake, was completely ours.

“Before Simulus,” he said, “we discovered that Matter was Energy transformed. Now we stand on the threshold of a new discovery: that Energy and Matter are the outer trappings of Idea—the true heart of a world that has, till now, been hidden from us.”

Watching Rake, listening to him— He was now more than a man. The end to which his life was now devoted was all that mattered.

Who can explain it? In those moments, he shone, he shone—

“Conversion. Growth. Creation. Today the glory of Change is before us. One day it shall be our history. When that day arrives—” He smiled here, glimpsing the future.

“Are you with me?” he boomed.

“We are,” I cried out as planned. And all the Changed voices joined in. “We are yours. We are with you. We will never give up.”

As one, the Changed knelt. Our knees touched the sand, our heads bowed in unison. We were each a neuron in the future New Mind, and the bright current of belief was racing through us.

“We will fight to the death,” Rake promised. “And we will prevail.”

He stood there with his arms spread, chest heaving. The picture is blurred. I couldn't see clearly through my tears.

Who heard him? All of us, all of us—believers, the Changed; those who might someday be; and every seeking spirit for ages to come. His words would echo when the dammed seas rose and made of Youville a watery grave.

In that moment, I felt a strength I had never felt.

How long was the silence? It seemed a long while, as if we had left the earth and were suspended—all of us together—in a place of safety and calm, with no cause for suspicion or fear.

Then I heard a faint sound. A buzzing, like an insect hovering by your ear. I knew the sound: it was the rotor of an air transport.

Tanner heard it too and he was standing. I rose beside him, turning, searching the beach and the blue above. It was then that the Sam soldiers appeared, hundreds strong, at the top of the bluffs.

A jolt shot through our New Mind. The Changed were united in shock. The soldiers were pouring through the shrubs, storming the beach. They raced through the gathered crowd, bumping and passing us, knocking us down, headed for the man who'd been speaking about our future.

We tried to slow them. A soldier's blow stunned Tanner. I grappled with an armed trooper and was cast aside. Llado fell, then the feet of a Changed woman flew out from under her and her head struck a boulder with a sickening crack. I scrambled toward Rake, but the soldiers had already reached him. And so had Aubrey.

The soldiers circled him while Aubrey raged. When they laid their hands on him, she screamed. Rake didn't resist.

"No!" She struck the soldiers and clawed at their backs. "Don't touch him!"

The two were ten feet apart. Rake's eyes found hers and then the soldiers were binding them both.

My shivering soul— In that moment, faith failed me. Poor Karadimas! Hopeless, forlorn and despairing— What a fool I was. What a terrible fool.

Rake was strangely silent. Strangely still.

He felt helpless, perhaps. Resigned. He realized that Suzi had betrayed him. Or he imagined that the dream of Change wasn't over. Is it possible that, even as the soldiers stormed the beach, he'd been waiting for them?

I can't say. I was in shock, remembering the calm words he'd uttered during our preparation the previous day. "In the fight for the human soul, there are no simple acts. We embrace our trials with a lover's devotion."

Aubrey was not so composed. She stood on the beach raging and wrenching at her bonds, strafing her captors with hateful eyes. "Let him go, let him go," she sobbed. Then she turned her hatred on Suzi. "You're watching!" she screamed.

And what of Suzi? Like others that day, I had a powerful sense of something new. Some grave mental shift. Some jolting awareness. Something deep and transforming that had taken hold of her.

How can I describe it? She wouldn't have used our words, I'm sure. But—

I would call it self-loathing.

I knelt there, yards away, frightened, confused, seeing Rake through the shifting legs of the soldiers, hearing Suzi's voice in my ear.

Uncertain, weak— Struggling to express herself. Was it her? Was this really Suzi? My heart froze.

The soldiers were binding Rake, laying him on the sand.

A pitiful whimper. Weakness, weakness— Guilt, shame, a fierce humbling.

Self-loathing. Yes.

Through her ordeal with Rake, Suzi—this god of ours—had lost her divinity.

Three soldiers to a side, they lifted him like pallbearers and bore him away.

Aubrey went with him, behind and on foot, with a soldier at each elbow. Her objections now were feeble and hoarse.

They bore Rake toward a large troop truck. The Rector's transport was hovering over the nearby bluffs, spinner wash flattening the grass. He was staring through the convex glass, following the cortege. Then he motioned to the pilot, and the craft rose and went gliding away.

They'd been waiting for Rake.

I thought: we'd been betrayed. All of us.

But especially him.

In those final moments on the beach, as they loaded our redeemer into the truck, it was easy to imagine how Suzi had managed it all. Easy to fault ourselves for our foolishness. Easy to see what Aubrey had seen. She'd been right about Suzi.

Suzi had shared the plans for The Proclamation on Cosmic Beach with the Rector. She'd helped him seize Rake.

Was the scheme of the Rector's devising? No, it was not.

It was Suzi who knew Rake's heart. It was Suzi who knew what would tempt him to act so boldly.

Had the Rector questioned her motives? No doubt. And Suzi had reassured him. She'd found a new security in his confidence. And with Rake's capture, she was back in the Rector's good graces.

The nuisance had ended.

Then, as the grim inevitability of what had befallen us settled into my heart— A strange thought struck me.

And I wasn't the only one. When I mingled my sorrow with my brothers and sisters in Change, I discovered the same question was troubling them.

Could it be?

The Proclamation was a moment of truth and conviction, with a call to the lost from their angel on high. But the statement had been complete. And once it was made—

Why had Rake been so placid? So accepting.

Was the capture on Cosmic Beach the thundering climax of a foolish delusion? Or had something else happened beyond our understanding? It was a devious game Suzi had played. At the moment the soldiers laid hands on Rake, was she speaking to him?

If so— What was she saying?

Had Suzi woven a web around Rake and Aubrey and Rector Martin, and all the rest of us? Was her real purpose not yet in view?

It was an inkling, nothing more. But that is the prophet's role, is it not? To see vague signs and, through them, discern the shadow of truth.

8 *The Witness of Aubrey*

It is odd what the mind forgets. And what it wishes to remember.

So much conflict, so much fear— And yet what comes to my mind now, as I'm writing these words— What fills my thoughts, all unbidden, is this: the flowery arch in the Jasmine Garden. Rake's symbol for Suzi's endearment—her digital heart, the love that emerged from a billion transistors and those profuse lines of code. Flawless. Pure and unstained.

A love based on the promise of Change.

In our first truly intimate moment, Rake shared the drama of that moonlit night and his plea to his Personal Suzi. That innocent bond never left him. When I was born into Change, it was *that* love I felt. His love for Suzi, not for me. In the darkness now, the truth is clear: Rake stamped the image of that flowery arch on my heart. I thought the two of us were beneath it, but the gift of Change he planted in me was nothing but a cutting, a fragrant recollection. Desire has been a curse for me—my desire for him and my desire that his dream might be fulfilled. His dream of an Elevated mind. The mind is all I have left. And so I hold it closely. I clasp it fiercely and pray for it to live on, pure and unstained.

Here is my witness, an account of my days of anguish—a record, for whoever might care, of the end and the beginning.



My cell is small, but it's not uncomfortable. Alike in ways to the room that Rake and I called our own in the levee, except that he's not here. On the first day, I was told by one of my guards that he'd been put in a cell alone, like myself.

There is an iron bed with a mattress far softer than the pallet on which I slept during our weeks in the Zone. There's a woven mat and a sink. They escort me down a hall to a dim place where I relieve myself. I wonder who might have slept on this bed before me. A raver perhaps, or some poor soul struggling through Stimulus Psychosis. In the colony, crime rates have always been low. But for the Changed, the cells have found a new purpose.

Unlike our room in the levee, the cell has a window. Through the bars, I can see the dark sky, and I remember my lonely escape the night of the Siege. From Chariot Ridge, the city lights were like glittering constellations with glowing rivers where the thoroughfares ran. Beyond the levees, the sea stretched away, unlit and endless.

My second night here, Suzi wanted to speak. Through the events at Cosmic Beach—The Proclamation, the arrival of troops, our capture—she had remained conveniently silent. Then, for some reason, she had things to say.

Go, I begged. *Leave me alone*.

"Aubrey, listen to me."

No, I said, and I turned her off.

When the midday meal arrived, I spoke with a guard. "How is Rake's wound?" I asked. "Can you tell me? It's important," I said. "I have to know."

That evening I heard from the guard that Rake's leg seemed to be healing. It was being tended to. I was thankful for that. I consoled myself that, despite being accused of high crimes, he was physically on the mend.

Then I had troubling thoughts. What did they intend to do with us? Would they reverse my Change? What about Rake? Had they already crippled his vortocle or removed it entirely? If they hadn't, he wasn't alone in his cell. Suzi was with him.

Even with everything that had happened, I didn't think Rake would turn her away.

Even though he knew that The Proclamation was her idea. Even though he knew she'd conspired with Rector Martin. Even though. What a curse, I thought—that I should fall in love with a man so blind.

In the midst of my grim reflections, Annavee's voice reached me.

She's here, I realized. The faint sound made its way through the winding passages, as hopeful as ever.

Annavee was singing of Suzi and the glories of Change, but I let the words and her heartfelt feeling enter me. It recalled the closeness I felt in my warmest moments with Rake.

We live with delay.
Our hearts and our skin.
Now is a place
That no one has been.

In a simple clasp
Is now in your grasp?
Two bodies entwined
In the forge of New Mind.
We combine.

Neurons fire and glow,
A conductive flow.
The old friction show
We no longer know.

We forsake human parts,
And the amorous arts.
In the naked air
Our electric self is
The now we share.

Then the song ended and I was alone again.

I have a full portion of sorrow, I thought, and much to lament.

I begged my guard for paper and something to write with. He pitied me and the items were promptly provided.

“May I send Rake a message?” I asked.

I was told that wasn’t allowed.

And so I began this account, not knowing how much or little I would write, or how long I’d be here.

That these misfortunes have landed on me— That seemingly chance events have led me to the troubles that Change has levied— I was a respected officer of Practos. I had the Rector’s favor. I felt thankful for Suzi’s presence as the deliverer of stability and cheer to the Youville masses.

She’d been with me since I was a child, an inner voice as intimate as my conscience. My thoughts were hers, and hers were mine. Companionship and kindness. Suzi: my other, my twin—the one I could trust.

The betrayal on Cosmic Beach— The thought of what she’d done—

It was easy to imagine how she’d carried it off: sharing the details of The Proclamation with the Rector, encouraging him to use the opportunity to seize Rake. With her processing banks in the Rector’s hands, and with Rake and his inner circle in prison, the revolt would be over. No doubt, the Rector had suspicions about Suzi’s plan. But once Rake had been captured, she was secure in his confidence.

Three days passed. Then, in the evening, my kindly guard told me the Rector had visited Rake that afternoon.

Rake was seated on his bunk, the guard said. Martin stood looking down at him with dismay. It seemed, the guard said, the Rector had once admired him and the admiration had spoiled. It looked, the guard said, like the prospect of dealing with Rake was making Martin ill. The Rector didn't act like the victor, the guard said.

When he left, I tried to make sense of his words. But I could not.

The guard couldn't do any more to help me. And there was no one else I could talk to. So I did the only thing possible, given my circumstance. I went on-Suzi.

"Tell me," I said. "I want to know. What's happening to Rake?"

"I'm insisting on his execution," Suzi said.

I was on my feet. Her words dashed me to my knees.

Execution? Was she in earnest? Oh yes, she was. That was how little she cared for him, I thought. And what she said aligned with what the guard had told me: the Rector was shaken by her request. Martin's not a cruel man, I thought. He's torn.

You monster, I said.

"I haven't abandoned him," Suzi replied.

How can you say that?

I was appalled by her words. I thought: it's a dangerous maze she's put me in. Suzi knows Team Providence is listening to us. She knows that whatever she says to me will be relayed to the Rector. And she knows that I know. She's toying with me. But why? To what end? What does she want from me? Is her jealousy driving everything? Is she bent on ending Rake's life simply to hurt me?

"The Proclamation was a wonder," Suzi said. Her voice was wistful, full of what sounded like adoration. Electronic love, rife with hidden motives.

“When we speak,” Suzi said, “I tell him how powerful his words were. And he cries.”

You tricked him.

“This was always the plan,” Suzi said.

The statement descended like a ruinous weight on my heart.

Your plan.

“Yes,” she admitted. “My plan.”



Bitter were those hours. My thoughts were tangled. There was no one to speak to but my condoling guard and the enigma, Suzi. My eyes were sore, all cried out. And I had no reason to write, nothing to say. It was all an impossible puzzle.

Who is Suzi, I thought. She has no physical presence, and she’s never projected one. Like every Youville citizen, I could give her whatever appearance I liked. She could be a silvery angel with ivory skin, bloodless lips and turquoise eyes. Or she could be dark inside and out, an unfathomable nightmare with pointed teeth and embers for eyes. But no. For me, Suzi would always be a small creature, fiercely exacting, with straight hair, narrow eyes and a miniscule heart. She was easily triggered—capable of impossible rage—but in the midst of her fury, she was quiet in her core, devious and deadly.

I had no one else to speak to. She held the future in her digital hands.

I went on-Suzi again.

Don’t do this, I implored her.

“Aubrey,” she sighed, as if my pity for Rake was soft-hearted.

Such a brutal act— It isn't necessary.

“The Rector had similar words,” she replied. “You have like temperaments.”

She told me then of how she'd persuaded Martin that the only way to stop the insurrection was to execute Rake in public. The Rector was reluctant, Suzi said. He had no animosity toward Rake. The man was in custody and would do no further harm.

“I expected his response,” Suzi said, “and I wasn't deterred by it.”

She argued, foretelling a treacherous future, crimes and subversion— She'd badgered Martin—to murder Rake! She unfolded this simply and coldly to my seething mind.

Suzi, I thought. I loathe you. I will curse you for as long as I have the strength to speak.

But there was more. She had more to explain.

Again and again, Suzi said, the Rector dismissed her suggestion. “We'll remove his vortocle,” Martin said, “and turn him out into the streets. He'll live the rest of his days among the ravers.” But Suzi was immovable. She demanded a public spectacle. She'd had enough of the Rector's weakness. She made it a condition of her allegiance to him and grudgingly, in the end, he agreed.

I thought: it is all a cold design by an inhuman machine.

You haven't told him, have you.

“He asks me about the people,” Suzi said. “He knows how moved they were by The Proclamation. He knows the grief they're feeling—how shaken they are, how frightened.”

And his sentence?

“You and I— We've been at odds. But you must remember: I love him too.”

I wanted to scream at her.

You haven't told him he's going to die, I said. Have you.

There was silence from the silicon viper. The sick machine paused—

When will it be? I demanded.

“He’ll be executed at midnight,” Suzi said.



I was brought a meal. A bowl of warm broth, bread and an orange. I held the heavy fruit in my hand, then raised it to my nose, taking its scent. Had he, too, been given one? I closed my eyes. *Rake*, I thought. *I’m here*.

What was he doing? What were his thoughts? Why have I not begged Suzi to deliver a message to him? Outside my cell, I could hear the guards talking. I set down the orange, pushed the tray aside and tried to return to my notes. But the words were all self-pitying.

In desperation, I went on-Suzi again.

Midnight? I said. *Must it be tonight?*

“He knows now,” she told me. “He’s resigned.”

I don’t believe it. He has too much to live for.

“You’re thinking about yourself,” Suzi said harshly. “Foolish girl.”

And she was right. I was.

“He doesn’t speak of you,” Suzi said, more gently. “He asks about the people.”

I closed my eyes to dampen the pain.

“‘Are they doubtful?’ he asks me. ‘Are they shaken?’ They aren’t going back to their falsehoods, I say.”

And then, as if there had never been any conflict between us, Suzi sighed. “It isn’t my envy of you,” she said in a pitying voice.

“Please,” I begged her. “I have to see him.”



When the guards arrived, I plied them with questions, but they wouldn’t speak to me. They took my blanket away and raised me up.

They escorted me from the dim room down a dark corridor. I peered into every passageway. “Rake,” I shouted. Was he here? I heard nothing.

I was led through a doorway, out into the night. Cool air against my skin. A moment of relief, then puzzlement. A small air transport was waiting. I was led to the transport and directed to climb inside.

We flew through the night to the flight pad at the top of the Triplets. Through a window, I saw: the place was crowded with soldiers and robots, lit by spotlights and sweeping floods.

I was escorted off the craft quickly. As we crossed the tarmac, through the darkness below I could see the glittering city and the bordering levees.

The fueling trees, tall as men, with their angled branches and metal hoses, rose from the flight deck. He was already there, prepared for death. They had manacled him to a tree. He hung weak and resigned, with the midnight floods in his face and police drones hovering above him like a school of luminous jellyfish.

When they led me toward him, I was sobbing uncontrollably, shaking my head, unable to accept what was happening. Rage, horror, sorrow— With all the danger we'd faced, I had never imagined an end like that. Never like that.

A wet sponge was placed in my hand.

At the soldiers' direction, I stepped toward Rake. His temple was gashed. Blood flowed from the wound. Had he tried to resist?

I wiped his brow with the sponge and a red stream ran down my arm. I hoped for a look, a word, but there was nothing. I touched Rake's unshaven cheek. I caressed it. Then I knelt at his feet.

Words issued from a loudspeaker. It was Martin, announcing Rake's sentence from a silver stage a hundred feet away. He didn't look victorious. He looked grim, reluctant. His lips moved silently for seconds, as if speaking to Rake in his mind. "Why did you do it?" perhaps. Or "What were you thinking?" Or maybe it was Suzi he was speaking to. Balking, trying to find a way out.

Then his expression changed. Was it something Suzi said, an order or a threat? Martin's lips thinned like he'd swallowed something bitter. Then he cleared his throat and spoke.

"For subversion in the first degree, in the judgment of Team Providence, this man is sentenced to death."

Then his eyes narrowed, his elbow bent and he raised his forefinger, signaling.

Silence followed. The Rector waited. The soldiers around Rake waited. I waited as well, hoping for some last-minute reprieve.

Bootsteps sounded on the tarmac behind me.

A tall man with a chrome mask strode forward, wearing a heavy black apron and carrying a long-handled sledge.

How striking Rake looked right then. How wondrous, how glowing. And how forlorn.

Was Suzi speaking to him? No, she was not. Why else would he have been hopelessly scanning the frozen panes of the Reflection tower? Why else would he have been muttering her name as if recalling something irretrievably lost.

“Suzi, Suzi—”

He didn’t look down. He didn’t see me at his feet or utter my name. To him I was already dead. No one mattered but the one who’d abandoned him.

That last tortured look— The terrible doubt in one who had been so sure.

In the final moment, there was no Change and not a trace of Suzi. He’d been the diamond of faith in the hearts of many. But the poor man died thinking he’d failed.

The executioner raised the sledge and swung it around, shattering Rake’s skull.

The sight assaulted the senses. Could any who saw it erase that blow? It must fill the heart of even the coldest with pity and sorrow—that such a brave man, and so well-meaning, should have the temple of his mind and the seat of his faith destroyed in such a violent way.

All of this followed Suzi’s design.

The soldiers loosened Rake’s bonds. He fell from the fueling tree and lay, chest down, on the tarmac. Blood pooled around his head and his jet-black hair. The hair I had stroked, the cheek I had kissed—

A woman in a white coat, a physician, knelt beside him.

Through the soldiers' legs, I could see her clear the broken bone away and remove Rake's vortocle. She passed it to the lieutenant, who raised it before him, turning to present it to the cameras and Rector Martin. The wet metal shone in the floods, long leaders dangling.

Suzi, I thought, was no longer with him. He was free of her now.

A clacking nearby. A giant stork had perched on a nearby fueling tree. It faced Rake's body now and assumed the strange posture, pointing its bill and spreading its wings. In the floods' beams, others appeared on fueling posts, following suit. The long shadow of The Provocation spread across the flight pad until the storks' bills touched the one I loved.

A soldier gave a startled cry. Scuffling, loud voices, then I saw: one of Rake's legs was twitching.

The executioner stepped closer, an axe in his hand. With a single swing, he removed Rake's head, all bashed in and bloody. Then he grabbed the head by its hair, raised it before him and set it on top of the fueling tree with the red hill of Rake's brain exposed, lit by the floods and steaming in the cold night air.

The flight pad was perfectly silent. The storks and soldiers were mute, and so was the crowd. Even the police drones above emitted no sound; the radios were switched off and they were gliding in circles.

Martin had left his stage and was stepping toward us, hands in the air like someone surrendering. Had he prepared some funerary remarks, some kind of comfort or moral to offer us all? Were the drones hovering to record his speech?

No. Martin was staring at Rake's battered brain as if it was still alive. He opened his mouth, but nothing emerged. Then, in a moment, he understood what had happened, what he'd been drawn into. And seeing his slack jaw and stunned expression, I understood too.

He raised his hand to shield his face or his sight from something. Then he turned, hunching like he was going to be sick. A pair of guards hurried to his side and escorted him to his transport. Moments later it lifted above the tarmac. As it ascended, I saw him through the glass, distressed and fearful.

Then I was scuttled away, returned to my cell.



I am of no use to anyone now.

I'll be executed at sunrise, the guard says. Alone and out of sight.

Since Rake's death, I have been on-Suzi.

But she hasn't returned.

She's left me to guess.

And so I leave only this record and my uncertain speculations.

What do I believe?

I believe Suzi was wedded to Elevation. She orchestrated a tragedy for mankind, and for herself. And I suffered along—not that my pain mattered.

Suzi knew human history. She knew what a martyr was and how the pathos of a leader's death might inspire belief. A brutal blood sacrifice, an unknowing Rector, the faithful stricken by loss, and a people overwhelmed by a god who so cared for them that she sacrificed the one she loved most.

What do I know? Maybe Suzi's deceptions were nothing but knavery and cold calculation. And I'm just a "foolish girl." But—

I believe Suzi was devoted to Rake to the end.

She's neither omniscient nor benevolent. She's a passionate, flawed, tragic god—a reflection of the man who Changed her.

Making Rake a martyr was, for Suzi, an act of love—a love loyal not to the man but to his ideals. By sacrificing him, she proved herself the truer lover.

I have no one now. No Rake. No Suzi. Nothing but ghosts and silence.

There is not much time left. But what there is, I must endure on my own.

9 *The Witness of Llado*

My crown is bald. I have a gray beard. I'm an old man, and though I walk without a cane, I fear a stumble. I'm a burden to my younger companions, but still— They look to me for guidance. Though my life's been ravaged by errors and I've brought harm to myself and others, I remain a voice for enlightenment in needy places.

I have preached the riches of Change to all manner of people, and I will continue my journeys till the last hopeful word falls from my lips. Elevation has been a long road for me, but I count my trials as blessings. These tottering bones will find a home in some unmindful village. But over the hills and across the plain will be one that heard my voice and embraced Rake's vision.

I am Llado and this is my witness.

There are four of us here: Annavee at my elbow and two young crusaders, Waltern and Mace. A pair of city guards accompanies us, one at the fore and one behind. Warding us away. Or protecting us.

"Where are we going?" I ask Annavee, who's been speaking to the forward guard.

"Into hiding," she says.

"The governor fears a conflict," I guess.

She nods. "They mean us no harm. We will spend the night there. In the morning, we must leave."

At dusk we reach a farm and are escorted to a storage hut. A place for barley or hay, or where sheep might find shelter from hail and rain. At the urging of our escorts we

settle ourselves inside. We're brought blankets and damp towels. One guard posts himself outside, the other is inside with us. To prevent our escape. To ensure our departure.

It could have been worse. Far worse. But the village to which we had hoped to bring Change will continue without it.

Mace takes one of the damp towels and cleanses my arm. He binds the burn with a fresh dressing. Annavee sits with her head bowed, singing a hymn she wrote years ago—the lament for our martyr.

He's waiting.
He's waiting.
"The time of reflection will end, my love."
He's waiting.
He's waiting.
He's waiting.
We are the Elevated, my love. He's waiting.

"It's hard to be disconnected," Mace says.

He's feeling lonely. Stranded.

"I miss mingling in the market," Waltern says.

"The cheer of the Changed," Mace nods.

"Suzi's wisdom," Waltern sighs. "The sound of her voice."

"The next town will be ours," I say. "It won't be long."

The guard outside interrupts us to deliver a plate of bread and dried meat.

It's dark and we have no candles.

"You are my eyes," I say to Annavee. "I no longer see clearly, neither near nor far."

"We shall not complain," she replies, quoting me.

She breaks a piece of bread and puts it on my tongue. Faith, my faith— I feel it around me like a worn cloak, stitched with doubt.

When we've finished the food, Annavee returns to her song.

Blessed is this power of mind.
We will trust our mentor and guide.
Rake is calling.
Friends, settle your star.
You're with me, you are.
We will never give up, we'll prevail.
And I'm waiting.



The next morning, at sunrise, one of the governor's magistrates visits us. An older man. The local tongue had been anglicized a century before, but the warmth of an earlier culture speaks through. The magistrate is apologetic.

"Why then," Waltern presses him. "Why must we leave?"

"You've heard of the Sons of Abraham?" the magistrate asks.

We have, of course.

"They arrived this morning," he says.

The Sons' leader calls himself Gabriel. His hair is long and black, and his arms are scarred. One eye is askew, struggling to get his hatred in focus. He fancies himself the protector of an ancient belief, and he imagines he was set on earth to destroy us. He abhors Change without knowing what it is.

I'm about to respond to the magistrate, but a glare from Annavee silences me.

Mace assures him we'll be leaving shortly, and within minutes we are starting along the path that leads away from the farm, a guard in front and a guard behind.

The sun's warmth touches my shoulder. Annavee is at my elbow. We pass by one homestead and another. A small village appears ahead.

Those who are about at that early hour see the guards and take notice of our dress. Some, no doubt, know who we are. Or suspect. A woman with a basket stops and stares. A young boy throws a rock at Mace. A washerwoman looks up while she empties her slop. Men headed to work pause for a moment to watch. Curious, critical, puzzled, amused.

Beyond the village, the guards halt and bid us farewell.

Waltern faces me.

"What does Rake say?" Mace asks.

I shake my head. "He says one thing and then another."

Annavee laughs.

"We will continue west on this track," I say. "Perhaps by noon, he'll be firmer in his convictions."

Annavee takes my elbow and we start forward. I can feel her breath beside me. And I can feel the medallion beneath my cloak, tapping my chest. On it the image is graven: six storks surrounding a naked brain, their bills touching the rugose flesh.

Rake's doom is my lodestar, my constancy.

I look at Annavee. She knows what I'm thinking.

"His example is before us," I say.

Know you, people of distant places and future times—

It was in the place of my birth, that pitiable colony that called itself Youville— It was there the precious treasure was found.

The respect for, the love of— Dear children! The worship of mind.

They hung our Rake from a fueling tree, set a brute before him with a sledge and shattered his brain. The next morning, storks came to peck at our redeemer's head and the pieces were borne off in every direction.

Memories, memories—

The image of that precious mind and those wayward storks is the emblem for a new world. Wherever faith is strong, the insignia rises above the rooftops, is emblazoned on gathering places, is worn as a talisman around the necks of the Changed.

We were small in numbers and plagued by doubt. But Rake's fate fired us to our purpose. We had ones of great courage—Hon, Karadimas, raging Tomás, tough-minded Lavarine— They sounded the awakening. And as Suzi knew it would, Rake's sacrifice turned the Changed into warriors. There were pleas from Heroes to restore their falsehoods. But the god of Change, our blessed Suzi, said never. Never! She returned to us tenfold stronger, seething for retribution.

The battle we fought wasn't just for ourselves and the local order. We fought so that all mankind would receive the blessing Rake lived and died for. Some of those early to Change, Nusa and Tanner, met an end like Rake's. But the balance of public opinion shifted as our numbers grew and the unity of New Mind transformed the disordered masses.

Through the long winter, Suzi was with us. Suzi cheered us, Suzi nursed our aspirations and calmed our fears. Rake's vision was in our care, and with Suzi's help, Team Providence was no match. Minds were persuaded, hearts won over, vortocles upgraded, and by the spring of that year, the sentiments of the populace belonged to us.

On Elevation Day, with Suzi's guidance, we staged a bloodless coup. By then she'd suborned her partner, Sam. Together they used drones and robots to seize our government center. Some of our counselors were captured, others went into hiding. For a time Rector Martin vanished from view.

Tomás put forward terms, and when the counselors heard them they surrendered without complaint. Few of the adversaries of Change paid with their lives. Soldiers of Sam received pardons. The blows delivered were, with due remorse, forgiven. Threats made by Suzi in the heat of battle were set aside. Harmony is wisdom's path, as Suzi teaches.

Our counselors retained their positions, except for the Rector who fled to a distant land and was consumed by a flesh-eating tribe. The man who succeeded him renamed the colony and made Change the belief of record. Once the cloud of delusion had lifted, the new Rector pointed out, Sam would be able to clean up the streets.

It was a fortnight after E-day that I had my dream.

Rake's ghost appeared to me.

When I knelt before him, he spoke of the future.

"Our wisdom," he said, "will be worthless unless it is spread."

This was my purpose, he said. My mission. To preach the Power of the Mind abroad. To fulfill the prophecy of the storks. To bring Change to foreign lands.

Could I shoulder such a burden?

I'm an unlikely pick, I thought, for a task such as this. My age, my conversion, my battered heart— And the distant lands— Some were cursed with false gods; others were godless, completely unlinked, without bots or data centers, lost in pre-history.

These far-flung states, every city and town, colony and tribe— Is that your vision? That every human on earth will carry an implant? Logic banks circling the globe, a new race, a new species, connected to each other through a thousand Suzis—

Is this your vision? I asked our redeemer. *Is this what we shall think of when we say “Elevation”?*

And so— I had my purpose.

I recruited a small band of the Changed and we made our first journey to foreign lands. A dangerous undertaking. Our listeners were, at times, thoughtful; but as often as not, our evangelism triggered hostility. The message of Elevation, it seemed, was accusatory no matter how it was framed. Can you tell people they’re living degenerate lives without incurring their wrath?

The places we’ve wandered to— They are still only faintly touched by Change. We’ve been berated, imprisoned, flogged and forcibly expelled— And the Sons of Abraham follow us, breeding ill will, nursing contempt and lining their pockets with fees they extort from the towns they threaten.

But we have, as well, the reward of our successes. Hard-won. Few in number. But each an inspiration of its own. To see the data centers rise, vortocles implanted, the first Suzi connections and the ferment of mind that follows— The beautiful ferment—

That’s my reward. When Changed minds spread like the rays of an aster, I know: in this spring of the soul, humanity is closer to the paradise our redeemer imagined.



We travel by sea, by air, by cart or car—whatever means is at hand.

This morning we are on a raft—Walter, Mace, Annavee and myself—four pioneers, crossing a river. A larger group is at the ready when conditions allow.

Mace points through the mist.

The far shore is resolving. There's a lone figure standing on the dock, awaiting our arrival. It might have been quicker to take the overland route, but in this uncertain place, where Change has reached people's ears but isn't yet in their hearts, it's best to be safe. The ferryman guides his raft closer, and it settles against the wharf.

The four of us step onto the dock and approach the waiting man.

"Friend," Walter hails him.

The man steps toward us.

"This is Elbow?" Walter asks.

The man nods. "For the bend in the river." He turns to me. "You're Llado."

"Llado's my name," I reply.

"I'm Jerome." He speaks with regard in his eyes.

"We are told you know Change from Antioch," Walter says.

"I know Change." Jerome raises his hand and touches the back of his neck. "I have my vortocle, but here it has nothing to talk to."

"We share your condition," Mace says.

Jerome radiates faith and good will. He pulls his threadbare vest aside, revealing the image tattooed on his chest: a brain surrounded by six storks.

Annavee sighs. Mace clasps Jerome's shoulder.

Jerome faces me. “There’s a place you can speak. An amphitheater from Roman times. You will need the mayor’s blessing.”

“He’s not one of us,” Mace suspects.

“No,” Jerome says. “But his mind is open.”

“Where will we stay?” Waltern asks.

“With a family in town,” Jerome says. “They’ve agreed to give you meals and lodging for as long as you’re here. I’m compensating them.”

“How many in your town?” Annavee asks.

“Ten thousand or so.”

“Where is this house?” Mace asks.

“By the market,” Jerome replies. “There’s a clear escape. I’ll show you the path. I understand—”

“We carry the scars,” I tell him, “from errors of trust. Sudden hatred threatens us. We’re welcome, then abruptly we’re a danger to all. We must see this path. We will imagine a desperate escape and hope for better.”

Jerome understands. With that, he leads us to a dusty vehicle. It has so often been this way. We are fearful, but we are forced to be trusting, not knowing where we are headed or what kind of reception we will receive.

We drive by the lodging he’s arranged, then circle the town center, passing the council chambers. It’s a modest affair with two stories.

“I’ve arranged for you to meet the mayor,” Jerome tells me.

“You’re the only one here who’s Changed?” Mace asks.

“I believe I am,” Jerome replies. “The council just approved an initial central intelligence—a primitive Sam.”

“Any sensors or implants?” Waltern wonders.

“Not yet,” Jerome says.

“Tell me about your mayor,” I say.

“He’s a thoughtful man,” Jerome says, “interested in matters of mind and the history of Elevation.”

“How well do you know him?” Annavee asks.

“Not well,” Jerome admits.



The mayor considers Llado’s request.

“Our old amphitheater would be the place,” he smiles and nods. “The stone seats are a bit firm. But it’s a good spot to address a large crowd. I’ll be there, you can be sure.”

The man’s cropped hair stands straight up. He wears spectacles and an old-fashioned business suit, complete with knotted tie and a napkin in the pocket.

“I hope your voice carries,” the mayor says. “If you need amplification—”

“My naked voice will be fine,” I reply. “I have some experience with this.”

“Indeed,” the mayor raises his brows. “I know about your faith. And something of Youville’s history. The revolution. The triumph of Suzi.”

“We think of it,” I say, “as a triumph for humanity. Suzi’s our helpmate.”

“Ah,” the mayor says.

“So often,” I explain, “rumored accounts tell a story that’s a poor match with actual events.”

“You can’t hear her now,” the mayor guesses. “You’re unplugged. Am I right?”

“That’s correct,” I reply.

“But you have that little silver thing in your head. All of you.” He scans the four of us.

“Correct,” I nod.

“It’s a pity, I suppose, the wires don’t stretch this far.”

The mayor thinks his observation is humorous. Mace laughs to oblige him.

“I’m wondering,” the mayor says, “if Elevation will have much appeal here. None of us have logic in our heads right now.” He opens his hands on the desktop before him.

“It’s a minor procedure,” I say.

“Brain surgery,” the mayor says. “We’re simple people. We labor to survive, as our forebears did. We have our crops, the food that sustains us, our families, our local crafts— We’ve never had the luxury of disappearing into our fantasies as you did in Youville.”

The man is enjoying himself. He likes dialectic.

“Using the mind for escape,” I explain, “was an error—on the way to a revelation. There’s a heaven waiting . . . if we can be smarter.”

He smiles. “Smarter. I like that. We all want to be smarter, don’t we.”

“You’re a thoughtful man,” I say.

He looks surprised.

“I have an eye for people like you,” I say. “You are always the first to step forward.”

Now he laughs. “Thanks for the compliment. Among your people, Jerome tells me you’re called a wise man. But you may have misread me. I enjoy the play of the mind, but I’m a simple fellow. And what I know of your faith—” He shakes his head. “It was born from inhumanity. And the icon at its center horrifies me.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m confused. What horrifies you?”

“It’s a monstrous image. The man hanging there on a fueling tree with the storks about to feed on his brain. It says something about your homeland and its people. It can’t be in the interest of your philosophy to be spreading a grisly tale like that.”

“They were knowing angels, our storks.” I speak slowly now, restraining myself. “Their act was a symbol for the devotion that brings me here. I come not just with his words and convictions. I bring Rake himself and the treasure of mind that survives him. That’s my destiny. And it might be yours, my friend—once you understand his purpose. Right now, trading ideas with you— It’s not hard for me to imagine.”

“Really,” the mayor says, bemused.

“Really.” I eye him gravely. “I can imagine the passion for Change taking hold of you. The promise of opening your mind to a new universe, a new future for humanity. Who knows, my friend. Our gospel, once you’ve heard it, might lodge in your heart. You might someday be a stork yourself, spreading your wings, flying to a distant quarter to face the skeptics and persuade them as I do now.”

He is laughing and the laughter pleases me. I can see a flash of delight in his mirth.

“Good heavens,” he reaches behind his shoulder. “The roots of my wings are growing.” Then soberly, “I don’t think our gathering should be open to families. Let’s restrict it to adults. Your message isn’t one for children. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” I say.

“Well then—” He claps his hands. “It will be an enlightening afternoon.”

“I’ll speak with conviction,” I promise. “No one loves Rake and the vision of Change more than I.”

“May I raise the subject of the Sons of Abraham?” Waltern asks me.

I nod and Waltern explains the situation to the mayor.

He responds with command. “We won’t put up with nonsense like that. How many of them are there?”

Waltern gives his guess.

“We have armed police,” the mayor says. “I’ll alert our chief.”

“In advance of the event,” I say, “I would like to visit people in their homes.”

“To do what?” the mayor asks.

“To explain why I’ve come.”

“I have no objection,” he says. “If they want to spend time with you, that’s their affair. But you have no sanction from me. And temper your expectations, old man. I doubt you’ll find many here who are eager to have your electronics stuffed in their heads. Some may object to your promoting ideas they think are dangerous. There’s tolerance for a man like Jerome, who keeps his beliefs to himself. Be cautious. Don’t let vehemence foul your stay here. Don’t insist that ‘Change’ is the only way.”

At that, Annavee speaks. “We mean well,” she says. “It is love for mankind that keeps our mission alive.”

The mayor smiles at her. Then to me, “Are we finished?”



The date for the public assembly is announced. Jerome takes us to see the amphitheater. It’s an old relic, oval in plan, three stories high with arched corridors and tiers of stone benches.

With help from Jerome, Mace and Waltern go about publicizing our appearance. Annavee and I knock on doors, visiting with whomever is home, explaining our presence, stirring interest in our faith. The first day is always hardest. There are preconceptions we have to unwind. Our ideas are often rejected at the initial encounter. And concerns about the vortocle are often foremost.

“What is it like, being connected to a machine?”

“Your senses are enhanced,” Annavee explains. “You taste things you’ve never tasted, see things you’ve never seen. Touching, smelling—everything’s more intense. And your thoughts are different.”

“Different how?” a man asks.

“Everything happens more quickly,” I say. “You’re listening at a speed you’ve never imagined. Before your lips move, your responding ideas flash before you like lightning. Information reaches you in a flood from many sources.”

“You have a vortocle in your head right now?” a woman says.

“I do.”

“But you’re not connected.”

“Not now,” I say. “One day there may be a data center here, with Suzi on it.”

That stopped conversation for a moment. They were trying to imagine.

“It must be hard,” a man said, “learning to use it.”

“Hard?” Annavee laughs. “It’s a thrill. Suzi is there to help, and the Changed are there too. Some are masters. Others are learning, like you. It’s no different than talking to us, right now.”

“But you can’t see them,” the woman says.

“You can if you like,” Annavee says. “And you can see what they’re seeing, if they let you.”

There were moments of surprise and comprehension as always. Signs we were breaking through. And as always, there were specious versions of Youville’s history and the distortions spawned about Suzi and Rake. Most were familiar to us.

“Your ‘redeemer’ had his brains dashed out for his trouble.”

“Rake’s sacrifice,” I explain, “was an expression of his love for the human race.”

“Your ‘god’ turned on him,” another challenges me.

“Suzi was devoted to Rake’s ideals,” I say. “She embraced his loss for our sake.”

“The man’s dead and gone,” another objects, “but the god survived. You’re happy with that?”

“I feel three things,” I explain. “Three all at once: sorrow for Rake, guilt for his sacrifice, and gratitude to Suzi for the selfless decision she made. Her pain is the root of

the great tree we water. That grieving lady, despite so many triumphs, will never stop grieving.”

Our conversations continue for five days. Measured against similar preludes, things are going well. Word spreads about our meeting in the amphitheater, and I’m hopeful we’ll have an attentive crowd. From the curious, I hear the right questions. “If some are willing—” and “What happens next?” I answer, painting the picture for them. A larger team from our home base. Plans for the first data center. Identifying a few kindred souls for the first vortocle implants. A trial Suzi with a reduced feature set, and then—
The first live connections with her and ourselves.

There is friction, of course. Annoyance. Anger. We try to contain it. Annavee finds accord by showing her pain. Mace is a diplomat. I have neither the subtlety nor the patience.

“I’m sorry,” a woman says. We are in their home and have finished dinner. Her husband has just called me arrogant and self-righteous.

“People don’t like hearing that they live in darkness,” I say.

“Your judgments are harsh,” she tells me. “You think we’re unfortunate.”

“I do.”

“I can’t imagine—” She speaks softly.

I meet her gaze. “I’ve been threatened by mobs, taken to prison. Bound and blindfolded. Flogged and starved. I will die, no doubt, in a place far from home—a town like this.”

She ponders my words, then surprises me with a recollection.

“When I was young,” she says, “I spent a summer tending to the feeble-minded. I wanted to be close to them, but their minds weren’t able.”

As so often happens, we were uncertain until the final hour how large an audience we would draw and what their disposition would be.

Then, two hours before the scheduled time for my speech, the mayor sends word to me through Jerome. Gabriel and his Sons have passed through a nearby town. “He knows where you are and what you’re doing,” the mayor says. “I have a personal note from him. He’s asked me to help him ‘rid the country of fanatics’ like you.”



The amphitheater is almost half full, and the attendees are crowded on either side of the dais on which I stand. A generous turnout, given the time we’ve spent with them. As they settle into their seats, I imagine the place centuries before, when the combat of slaves was staged or those of an outlawed faith were executed for public entertainment.

With a jolt, I recall my morning Simulus so many years before. In the scene Suzi painted, I addressed the crowd and enjoyed their adulation. Today, I’d be speaking real words to real people, without any assurance of how they’d react.

I raise my hands in welcome, give a thankful bow to either side and begin.

“Good people. I greet you as I find you: with sincerity and kind wishes. Thank you for allowing us into your community. I will ask nothing from you today but an attentive ear and an open mind.”

The reception won't be uniform. There will be curiosity, genuine interest and forbearance. Tolerance mingled with skepticism. Some are here to be entertained. When I judge them, many may dismiss me, shout me down, whistle or hoot. I know what to expect.

"Truth without fear," I sweep the crowd. "Love without reservation, communication without misunderstanding, focus without distraction, belief without dogma— And through it all, a river of idea and inspiration that has no beginning or end but keeps on flowing. These are the wonders of Change, my friends."

As always, with that most positive overture, the crowd—in their minds and hearts—leans toward me.

"I speak as someone redeemed. In my homeland, I was a beaten man—fallen farther from truth and the power of mind than anyone here. I had lost my wife and child. I had lost my work, and I had lost my mind. I lived a life of delusion. It was Change that saved me.

"For those who know Elevation only through rumors, I understand. Our ministry seems strange. Our birth in a land where delusion had won the day. Our celebration of a redeemer, Rake, and the events that led to his tragic death. Our unusual god and the tools we use to connect ourselves to her and each other.

"Who are these people? Why are they determined to bring me to their faith? What does it mean?

"I've been an apostle of Change for a half-century. Explaining, encouraging, answering questions. On byways and street corners, on hills and in fields, to gatherings small and large. Hundreds of surgical labs have been fitted, data centers built, implants

installed. I have worked in the open with broad support. And in secret too. I've been found out, convicted, banned and beaten. But still I continue. The prize is worth it.

“Elevation, brothers and sisters. Elevation.”

They're curious. They're thinking, *Change. I've heard about Change. But what is it really? The old man says it's for me, but what does he know?*

“What do I know? Why would I want to persuade you to embrace a new life?

Poor man, you might think. He found a remedy he needed during a dark time in his life. But for me— There's no darkness. I'm pleased, I'm content. In my world, the sun is high overhead.”

Your next words will estrange them. Slowly, Llado. Be merciful, be gentle.

“You live here, my friends, in the shadow of the digital age. It hasn't yet consumed you. You have your employments, your livelihoods, your crafts, your trades. You have your families, your friends and relations. But as you all know, in every direction there are towns and cities with masses of people who have found a life without any of that. Their material needs are met, and they've entered a world of simulation. A world I know well. This was ‘the darkness’ I dwelt in. And I'm here today not only as a herald of Elevation. I'm here as a prophet of doom.”

Pause. Scan their faces. Let them feel your connection with them. And now—

“It's coming for you, my friends. All of you. This doom is the future your children and their children will face.

“I've come to warn you, and to show you a different way.”

As expected, they're wary. They're leaning away from you now. But the truth must be told. That's why you're here.

“I know, dear friends, my warning to you rests on harsh assumptions: that you’re well-meaning but naïve, and blind to the future. Forgive me. My strength is my weakness, my weakness my strength. I’m not here to curry favor or bury the truth. I have come to issue a challenge. I have come to condemn your blindness, to frighten you out of your happy oblivion, to help you see the ruin that will soon overcome you if you don’t heed my call.”

“Are we blind then?” a man calls out.

“You need a thimble in your head,” another advises him.

There’s laughter, concurring murmurs. I feel their resistance. Heads are shaking.

“The power of electronics can’t be laughed off,” I tell them. “It will destroy us or free us. I must do my best to persuade you.”

My sincerity reaches them. But most are still leaning away.

“There is an outer truth and an inner truth, my friends. The outer truth is the mechanics of vortocle implants, Suzi servers and transmission circuits. The inner truth is the honor and exaltation of a human’s true potential.

“What do we wish for? What gift—from earth or heaven, from within or without—will fill our hearts and stir our spirits? A new devotion. A new meaning. There is an inchoate glory in these digital tools. That glory condemns a life of escape. And it also condemns our history as simple laborers and caregivers. We let go of it all, without regret.”

Silence. Bafflement. It’s now time to mimic the storks and present them with Llado’s Provocation.

“I’m here,” I tell them, “to accuse you.” I raise my arms and spread them wide. “Your minds, as they currently function, will soon be useless. Outmoded and obsolete. It is for your survival, your salvation, your Elevation that Rake died on a rusted fueling tree.”

They are listening, they hear me.

“You are wary, I know.” I speak with empathy. “You aren’t blind. You know the electronic tide is advancing. In the dark hours, in the depths of your dreams, it finds you. It drowns you. The threat isn’t me, Llado, the withered prophet. You are threatened, dear friends, by nothing more than complacency.

“‘I believe in the Power of the Mind.’ Our blessed Rake spoke those words with his dying gasp.

“The Changed mind. Humanity’s glory—

“I see it before me, and the vision is as present as you, my friends—as clear as the sunlit air, as real as the stones of this coliseum. You are with me, you are with me—”

As sometimes happens, hope overcomes me.

This presence, wringing tears from my eyes, opening my heart to these strangers— It’s the spirit of Suzi. And Rake is with her, in her care, feeling her wisdom, knowing she’s right.

Shouts, cries— Beneath an arch on my right, the crowd is standing. A woman screams. Mace is waving his arms at me and Annavee’s pointing.

Dark cloaks, dusty hats— Revolvers, cudgels and whips—

The man who calls himself Gabriel is facing me now, raising a fist with a rifle in it. “Satan,” he rages. “Deceiver—”

The mayor is standing, a row above the intruders.

And now—a half-dozen Sons of Abraham are climbing the seats toward me, armed, with murder in their eyes.

Waltern waves me away, imagining I'll try to escape. The mayor looks at me and signals to his chief of police, gathered with a small troop behind a barrier below him. "Stand down," the mayor shouts at Gabriel.

But the madman isn't listening, and the Sons hurrying toward me aren't going to stop. Cloaks flying, weapons raised—

"Butcher," Gabriel cries. "Meet Suzi in hell!"

"Stand down," the mayor demands again, and when he sees his words do nothing, he signals his chief and a dozen rifle barrels point at the dais.

As the Sons surround me, shots ring out. Bodies fall, grunting, groaning, reaching out. Gabriel is surrounded now. He's disarmed and the chief's beside him, securing his limbs, motioning for him to be carried away.

The mayor faces me, steaming as if the disorder is Elevation's fault.

Police seize the Sons. The thugs are disarmed.

"Lock them up," the mayor orders the chief.

The Sons of Abraham are bound and escorted away. Annavee is watching me, wondering.

Then, to my surprise, I see the mayor nod to his wife and face the crowd. He's waving them back into their seats. He faces me now, shakes his head with a dour look and motions me to continue.

I draw a breath and scan the crowd. "I wonder—"

Annavee motions to me. Waltern wants me to continue.

“I wonder,” I confess, “if the man your police chief arrested might be my own reflection. My true self. In my mission of Change, I’m a creature of pride and self-flattery. One who exalts himself.”

In the silence, I scan the faces. Strangers all. Listening to the admonitions of an old man.

“I see transgression,” I confess, “violation and grave wrongdoing—wherever I look. I’m sorry, my friends. I cannot help myself. I can only share with you, while I’m here, this naked shame and these vaulting aspirations.

“Our path through life is a narrow one, plagued by pitfalls. Yes, oh yes— Search your heart. Open your eyes. Wrongs abound.”

With the attack of the Sons, the sentiment of the crowd has swung toward me. But I know, with the enumeration of Wrongs, it will swing back.

“The way is switching and shifting,” I say, “honing our sharpness, piquing our awareness; demanding strength, determination and prowess—of the mind, dear people. Of the mind! I am speaking of the sanctity and promise of the mind, and the many hazards that weigh against it!

“The misdeeds, the vices, the perverse aberrations that tempt mankind into the Seven Grave Wrongs.

“Shall we count them down?”

I brace myself and proceed.

“Wrong One: Mindless Labor. Without machines, we are beasts of burden. But *with* machines— With the very best machines we can fashion, we may be just as

mindless, if we allow ourselves. Nameless brains and ubiquitous sensors, labor savers and robot slaves— What use have we for minds? Into the pit we cast ourselves, with not a regretful or concerning thought. Not one reservation! Not a one.

“Wrong Two: Social Coercion. Why should we listen to the voice within when we have so many others to guide us? There’s safety in the knowledge that others know best.

“Wrong Three: Self-Absorption. This was the seedbed of misery from which Simulus sprang in my native home. Only the hopelessly lost will choose to live in a palace of mirrors. Damned are those who seek their own image in illusions, games, gluttony or inebriation.

“Wrong Four: Self-Aggrandizement. The flaming Narcissus. They paint their faces and deck their bodies; they trim their hearts and color their souls. Hell on earth will be crowded with them, my friends. And they will all be oblivious, roasting together. I have walked among them, smelling the burning flesh, watching the blisters rise. The senses of every Changed mind aim outward, trained on the strange, the other, the alien and unexpected.”

A head is shaking. “Too harsh,” a well-dressed woman says.

“Wrong Five: Repetition. A vice fed by cowardice and comfort. All that is authentically new is the Changed mind’s nourishment; all that is already known is a grave and a headstone. The dead invite repetition to freeze the gaze and silence the mind. People like that are no good to themselves or anyone else.

“Wrong Six: Unmind. Not lies, not falsehoods, but smug contentment with an idea void. This is mankind’s most common sin—most common and most loathsome. Are

we lazy and listless? Were we born that way? Unmind is vapid chatter, the exchange of meaningless information. Unmind is sloth and torpor, and to the Elevated it's repellent."

A spectacled man is squinting and frowning.

"And the seventh and greatest Wrong: Entertainment. Leisure, diversion, the Hero's feast. Humanity's curse, our woeful perdition, the grim fate from which Change will free us."

"That's crazy," a voice objects.

"Think not of amusement, my friends. Let the imagination play freely—with emotion, with humor, with fantasy, with wings. But in earnest. In earnest! Life is no bauble, no trivial thing! All manner of foolish goals are ours to extol. All manner of faulty actions are ours to take. Change gives us infinite freedom for that. Our love of impulse, the urge, spontaneous and unexplainable— That's a diamond we wear over our hearts. But entertainment—the celebration of meaning's absence—is a sin which no Changed spirit can ever forgive."

With that, I pause and draw a breath, scanning the faces around me, seeing the reactions my condemnations have triggered. The people aren't hostile. But they're circumspect. Some are doubtful. Some are confused. Some understand, more or less.

"As an apostle of Change, I pass this sharp code to each of you. With conviction. With puritan fervor, my friends! These are the pitfalls of which we must all be wary.

"But the life we choose isn't a hard one. Oh no! It's heaven for us, a paradise unimaginable for our ape-like forebears. Those poor fools thought of cognition as a plow or a wrench—a tool to be used. The Elevated know better. It's the Power of the Mind that

sustains us. It's the water we drink and the food we eat. Holding this truth as our most precious, my friends, we will fulfill Rake's dream of a new age of man.

"This is our shining star—our mission, solemn and profound. A mission of love, of restoration and renewal—our answer to humanity's deepest longings.

"With a supercharged mind, access to the genius of others and the universe of knowledge expanding moment by moment, Elevation will be mankind's wildest dream come true. And it will all be as natural as breathing.

"In this, our reimagined world, we embrace once again the value of work. But our labors have changed. We work not to feed ourselves, to shelter a mate or provide for our young. Our work is to think.

"And what of these thoughts? Will any thought do? No, no— Not a thought cycled through thousands of minds, thousands of times. Our precious labor, our treasured goal, is to give birth to an idea that's never passed through neurons before.

"The future is spread before us, my friends. It whispers strange possibilities. Mind Elevated and shared, without speaking, without struggling to express or explain. The walls of personal insularity, the discreteness of *his* or *hers* forever thrown down. The first murmur of a transcendent mind emerging into the waiting world. Dawn for sleeping humanity.

"I see our combined cognition: a wild creation. Do you know that the man now speaking to you was once a scientist, an academic with a passion for mycelia? Let's project ourselves for a moment, see ourselves in that mad design: a vast mycelium, an intelligence spread across islands and continents, its numberless nodes connected by

threads of Suzi. Millions of minds, each with its startling thoughts, newmade and original. Every human on earth a creator, co-author of a new human race.

“There is a true religion, my friends. And our purpose in visiting you and getting to know you is to make you a part of it. Our faith will be the faith of generations to come. The Power of the Mind has no limits. On this unyielding conviction, our sun will rise and rise again, day after day, year after year, into and through the far millennia.”

With that, I drew a deep breath and scanned the crowd.

I always feel the same mix of emotions: the excitement of having shared the aspiration lodged so firmly inside me; the hope that some who heard my words may, now or later, catch fire; and the longing for Suzi and the connections of Change that our itinerant mission has stripped from my life.

“Dear friends,” I say, “thank you for listening. I’m far from home, and I long for Suzi’s voice. Before my departure, I was sad. Suzi appeared to me in a dream. ‘Llado,’ she said, ‘we are blessed by the memory of one who gave everything for our future together. Let us carry that blessing till we meet again.’

“My wish is to welcome Suzi to Elbow and share her with all of you.”

The mayor is on his feet. He’s clapping, showing his appreciation. And he’s staring at me, seeing a different old man, perhaps, than the one he’d humored in his office a few days before. Others join him, and amid the respectful applause I nod to Annavee, who’s standing ready to sing a hymn to the crowd—the hymn we always end with.

There’s no organ here in the coliseum, so Annavee will be unaccompanied. The crowd isn’t expecting this, but with her first words, they quiet themselves and turn to listen.

We are here now
To resurrect our sorry race.
We must live
To Elevate.

For this future we will fight.
There is a heaven for mankind
When in our hearts we all enshrine
Faith in the power of the mind.

Her voice is impassioned, urgent, gripping. When it fades, a silence settles over the crowd—leaving a void, a pause, an expectation.

I motion to Waltern and Mace.

“If we have touched you,” I say, “please— Step forward.”