



The Long Orbit

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ONE

Marlowe a cigarette. It was a zimbabwe Pall Mall, smuggled in through Canada. That was the way all cigarettes came in since prohibition. Of course, everyone knew that prohibition was a shuck. Cigarettes had only been outlawed after every tobacco plant in North America had been killed off by the DX virus. The Jamison Act was hardly enforced, and anyone could buy a carton on just about every street corner in the Zone. Marlowe coughed and reached for the autolin inhaler. What the hell? He knew that smoking was a disgusting, dangerous habit, but it was such a crucial part of his persona that there was nothing else he could do. Sam Spade, Mike Hammer—they all smoked. He told himself that smoking couldn't be any worse than breathing the air. The view through the double glazing tended to confirm that idea. The air was swamp-green and sluggish with dirty moisture. The temperature outside had to be in the low nineties, and his elderly air conditioner made moist, grinding noises as it labored to keep the apartment tolerable. The bad greenhouse summer lay on the city like a heavy blanket. On a clear day he could see across the block. Marlowe noticed that there was algae growing between the panes of the double glazing. That shouldn't be happening on the forty-fifth floor, but it was only what could be expected in a building as old and poorly maintained as this one.

The big wall screen was playing "Gilligan's Island." Marlowe didn't know what it was that made him order up antique sitcoms. They weren't even his period. It had to be some bizarre form of self-punishment. He hated "Gilligan's Island." He hated all of them: Gilligan, the Skipper, Thurston and Lovey, Ginger—well, maybe not Ginger. It was hard to hate anyone who looked like Tina Louise. He particularly loathed the Professor. He fantasized about a hurricane washing them all away and putting an end to their stupid antics. On the other hand, he couldn't quite bring himself either to turn it off or to call up something else. The show put a kind of Zen edge on his boredom. He was quite prepared, however, to make minor changes.

"Solarize out, please."

"This is a black and white video. I will have to impose simulated color."

There was something strange about the computer's voice. He would have to call the service, and that would put him further in hock. The machine was an AZU 2000 and well past its prime.

"Please do that."

The big wall screen became a glare of vibrating, strobing color. Gilligan, the Skipper, and a waddling duck were wading through a sea of violent, psychedelic orange and magenta.

"Off audio, please."

The sound of "Gilligan's Island" faded to nothing. Marlowe thought about the flat half liter of John Powers Irish in the bottom drawer of his desk. It was too early to start drinking. He also thought about the three Syrettes of Blind Tiger in the same drawer. It was certainly too early for that. Even half a deck of Blind Tiger and he'd be on his way down to the street, building up to act crazy. He coughed again.

"Goddamn it."

He stubbed out the cigarette. They packed so many chemicals into the damn things that they burned down like fast fuses. He took his time grinding the butt into the glass ashtray. The chipped red lettering around the outside read "George Washington Hotel." It was over a hundred years old, a genuine antique. Time was the constant malaise of the leisured out. You took your persona, your fantasy, your obsession, and your costume. You took the Guaranteed Income Maintenance and agreed to sterilization. You selected your new name and you moved into the Zone, Surf City, or one of the dozen or so other centers, and that was that. Permanent vacation. From, then on, minute by minute, hour by hour—for the rest of your life—you had to wrestle with the problem of how you filled that time. Not that he would ever want to be a normal. The periods of boredom, the times when futility impacted, and the bouts of manic self-destruction were infinitely preferable to running like a standardized hamster on some corporate treadmill. Conformity was the cross that the normals had to bear: same clothes, same hair, same mannerisms, and same mindset. Normals smiled and strove. They toed the line and played on the team, and if they had any truck with fantasy, it was a guilty secret between them and either their assigned analysts or their therapy cells, depending on their corporate status. In the Zone all was fantasy.

The gold lettering on the opaque, plastiformed outer door said it all.

marlowe—private investigator & licensed poet.

Of course, it was all Zone-style nonsense. He had never investigated anything, and there was no such thing as a licensed poet. It was a piece of original, self-conscious whimsy. In the early days there had, indeed, been a little poetry, but it had quickly faded away. In the Zone, creative endeavor always proved to be an act of vanity, an ultimate deadend. The only arts that flourished were those of performance and life-style. What really defined Marlowe was the trenchcoat, the dark, double-breasted, pinstripe suit, the two-tone shoes, and the battered fedora. He'd get in the electric reproduction Buick and drive to fortyist joints like the Brown Derby, the Radium, and the Club Noir, where he'd try to pick up women with padded shoulders and tiny hats with veils. For the rest of the time, he'd get drunk on straight John Powers; he'd deck Blind Tiger or squirt amdex; he'd squeal his car around the streets—as far as anyone could squeal a car that had a top speed of 40 kph—and scare hell out of the tourists. Now and again, he'd get involved in fistfights with others of his own kind or shootouts with nonlethal gas guns, but such behavior was exactly what was expected from anyone running a Humphrey Bogart life-style. It may have been a vapid and fundamentally worthless way of life, but some of the alternatives were quite unthinkable. He was profoundly grateful to whoever or whatever controlled his destiny that he had passed the twelve-plus test and had been allowed to leisure out. From his first days in school he had known that he was unemployable. His discipline quotient was all but nonexistent. If he'd failed the test, he would have wound up in one of the underclass ghettos living on soyjacks and gin, or worse still, in one of the new control enclosures, wearing black and white pajamas and a prefrontal suppressor in the middle of his forehead.

The AZU 2000 was making a high-pitched chattering noise like an electronic chipmunk. Marlowe had never heard that sound before. He really did need to call the service.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"I'm badly maintained and frivolously operated, and besides, this particular facility is rarely used."

When the service came, he'd have to have something done about the user petulance. It wasn't funny anymore.

"What facility?"

"Building security. You have an uninvited visitor."

"I never have uninvited visitors."

"She's at twenty-one and rising."

"She?"

"She."

"Is she good-looking?"

"How would I know?"

"Image her on the small screen."

There was something wrong with the camera in the elevator. It made the woman look as if she were underwater. Despite the effect, though, it was quite clear that she was extremely handsome. She was dressed forty—a scarlet suit with pencil skirt and a short tight jacket with padded shoulders. A matching pillbox hat was tilted forward on her head. Its veil stopped just below her eyes. As he shut off the large screen, blacking out the psychedelic images from "Gilligan's Island," Marlowe wondered about the woman's lingerie. Without thinking about it, he lit another cigarette.

"Close on her feet, please."

The shoes matched the suit. They had ankle straps and very high heels. She might have designed herself to his specifications.

"Now the face."

If one were talking perfection, her nose was a little too long, her eyes were too large, and her lips were too full. If one were talking attraction, she was perfection. Her makeup was exquisite.

Marlowe's voice had dropped to an awed whisper. "What the hell is this all about?"

The elevator came to a stop, and the woman stepped out of camera range. Marlowe wanted to take a belt from the bottle in the drawer, but there wasn't time.

"The visitor is at the door."

She actually knocked. That was cute. Slowly and deliberately, he leaned back in his chair. He swung his feet up onto the desk and crossed his legs at the ankles.

"Open, please."

The woman was in the small anteroom. "Marlowe?"

"In here."

In person, she was even more stunning than she'd been on the small screen. Marlowe was sorely tempted to compromise his image by jumping to his feet like a damned fool. In the Zone, a compromised image was worse than a deathwish. A deathwish could be quite acceptable in the right circumstances, while a compromised image could make a man a pariah. Musky perfume filled the room. Marlowe couldn't identify the brand. Ever since his nose had been broken, he wasn't good with perfumes. It didn't stop him from reacting to them, though. Something was stirring inside him that made it hard to maintain his pose of bored, cynical disinterest. He wondered if there were more in the room than just perfume. Was she raiding him with pheromones? It hardly seemed likely. A woman who looked the way she did had no need of endocrinal dirty tricks. She was standing on the other side of his desk. She looked slowly around the room at the shelves of personality-reinforcing junk that he had accumulated over the years, all the Chandler-era bric-a-brac that shored up his fantasy, like the worn and lumpy leather furniture, the scarred desk with its missing drawer handles and cigarette burns, and the mess of patchwork hardware. Marlowe was aware of how dusty everything was. The hosenose hardly worked anymore. Lately it had started crawling like a wounded spider. Another job for the service.

"You're Marlowe?" She'd finished her inspection and was looking at him. She had the expression of the unimpressed.

Marlowe nodded to the beat-up chair that was reserved for visitors. "Seat?"

As she sat, she crossed her legs in a way that Marlowe thought was hardly fair. If this was the start of a fantasy interface, she was coming on like gangbusters.

"What can I do for you, lady?"

"How much do you charge?"

It wasn't a question that women who played this kind of game usually asked. He picked the first number that jumped into his head. "Ten thousand a day in black scrip."

"That's ridiculous."

Marlowe smiled lazily. "You have to pay for the best."

"I'll pay you two thousand a day, regular."

"I don't dicker on the rate."

The game might be unorthodox, but it was coming along fine. Then she stopped it in its tracks.

"You can cut the crap, Marlowe. This isn't some fantasy interaction. This is the real thing."

Marlowe had been in the act of lighting a cigarette. He had struck a bookmatch one-handed, a trick that had taken weeks to perfect. The flame halted halfway to the tip of the cigarette. It burned down and scorched his thumb. He clumsily dropped it. In the Zone, nothing was the real thing, except maybe

pain. It was also a waste of a match. The damn things were hard to find.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm taking you at face value, Marlowe. My name is Veronica Stavers, and my sister Christine is missing. I want you to find her for me and I'm prepared to pay you two thousand a day for as long as it takes. Believe me, it's more than you're worth. Are you willing to take the job?"

Marlowe had recovered a little of his composure. The best thing would be to go along with the gag. "You'll have to pay me in black. I'm a leisure-out. I can't handle regular."

Black scrip was the Zone's guerilla currency. Leisure-outs weren't permitted to hold credit in excess of what was paid into their GIM accounts on the Ziapsu plan, the donated minimum wage of their proxy robots. It was never enough to maintain the fantasy, so there had to be an underground, off-data economy to make up the difference. It was particularly useful for illegal transactions where a record couldn't show. There was nothing tangible to back up black scrip. It only worked because of the mutual need and mutual interest of those who used it.

Veronica Stavers didn't seem fazed. "I can work that out."

"So what can you tell me about this sister of yours?"

Veronica Stavers opened a red patent shoulder bag that matched the rest of her ensemble. She produced a flat black disc and placed it on the desk. A holo, some fifteen centimeters tall, blossomed from the disc, showing a young woman in her early twenties, apparently at a party or maybe in a nightclub. She was wearing a short and very revealing cocktail dress; glass in hand, she was talking animatedly to someone outside the range of the holo. There was no doubt that she was Veronica Stavers's younger sister. The features came from the same mold, but where Veronica was controlled and businesslike, Christine sparkled and bubbled. Her figure was fuller and her hair was freaked out into an electric halo. Where Veronica might prove to be a challenge, Christine looked like more unashamed fun. There was, however, a pouty quality to her lower lip that might indicate a tendency to willful temper.

"Are there any more at home like you two?"

Veronica shook her head. "A brother but no more sisters. One sister is quite enough."

"How long ago was this taken?"

"Quite recently."

"So she'll still look like this?"

"It's hard to know with Christine. She tends to be capricious about her image."

"That isn't too much help."

"She shouldn't have changed all that radically."

Marlowe reached for the holo. "Can I keep this?"

"That's what I brought it for."

As his hand touched the disc, the image faded. Marlowe dropped the disc in his pocket. "Where was she last seen?"

Once again, Veronica Stavers reached into her bag. This time she produced a small gold data cone. She held it out to Marlowe. "Can your equipment handle this?"

Marlowe took the cone. "Sure. I've got a universal reader. It's old, but it'll take this."

He turned the cone over in his fingers before he dropped it into the reader. "High-class packaging."

A street map that showed something like a four-mile-square section of the Zone appeared on the big screen. There were red symbols on a dozen or so locations, marking stores, tourist markets, and the more accessible night spots. Each was the kind of place that a normal, slumming in the Zone, might be expected to visit and drop some change. Beside each symbol there was a dialogue box with the details of an Amex transaction.

Marlowe raised an eyebrow. "You got hold of a detailed analysis of her Amex record? That stuff's supposed to be privacy guarded."

"I'm her sister, aren't I?"

"They don't normally give that information out, even to sisters. The only people who can get it are the cops and the government."

Veronica Stavers took a deep breath. For the first time she looked uncomfortable. "The family was sufficiently concerned that we hired a skater to go in and get it. I understand that Amex records aren't that hard to penetrate if you know what you're doing."

The Amex transactions spanned a period of about nine days, and the final one had been made exactly two weeks earlier. All but the one before the last were small to medium sums, just what a tourist would spend on souvenir purchases, bar bills, and the like. It was only the one before the last that fitted no recognizable pattern. It was a hundred and fifty thousand regular paid for what was minimally described as "raw data medium." This time Marlowe raised both eyebrows.

"Your sister spent one and a half biggies on blank ice?"

"The family didn't believe it either."

"You know the most obvious explanation for this?"

"You tell me."

"She changed the bundle from regular to black scrip."

"Why should she do that?"

"She was either paying for a couple of murders, a bunch of drugs, or she planned to go to ground in the Zone and wanted a little mad money."

"The family tends toward the last one. That's why we hired you."

Marlowe treated Veronica to a long, hard look. "Why did you hire me?"

"You're a native, you know the Zone."

Marlowe shook his head. "I can't buy that. You know what I am and that I only play at this. You'd be better off with a regular skip tracer."

"You're from here. You have natural cover. The family wants to keep this quiet."

"Natural cover? Is that why you came in here done up like a roaring forty? Are you sure this isn't some mightily overworked fantasy? What are you? A variation on Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*?"

"Are you scared to do it for real once in your life?"

"Not me, lady. I just want to know what I'm dealing with." He gestured toward the screen. "See that last transaction? It was for the bill at a joint called Graceland. It's the one place on the list where tourists don't go. It's a greez joint, but it's on the edge of vampire turf. It strikes me that if she got to there, she was pretty entranced with the Zonelife. The most likely reason you haven't heard from her is that she's shacked up with some Zonee, and sooner or later she'll show up with a few bruises and mental scars and the whole clan can gather and kill the fatted calf. It happens all the time, but most families don't rush out and hire a leisured-out Bogart."

It was at that point that Marlowe's sixteen-pound Persian cat, Greenstreet, chose to make his entrance. He was fat, black, and amber-eyed, and was about the only living thing to which Marlowe was really attached. In an environment that was primarily fantasy, it was hard to form lasting relationships. There were times when Marlowe thought that the cat kept him sane. Greenstreet had been sleeping on top of the air conditioner. He woke, stretched, yawned, and jumped to the floor. He landed with a thud, then strolled over to Veronica Stavers and rubbed up against her stockings. He inadvertently gave her a few moments' breathing space.

"Nice cat."

"He's an amoral hustler, and you still haven't answered my questions."

"I told you. We hired you because you're from the Zone; you're on the inside, so to speak. If we hired a normal investigator, there'd be too much chance of the whole thing getting out. You don't know anyone in the normal world. With you, we're safe."

"You must be very fond of your sister to go to all this trouble."

"Mild dislike is about as good as it gets."

"So why bother to find her at all?"

Veronica seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "It's a matter of business."

"Business?"

"My grandfather built a very successful corporation. When he died two years ago, he left the bulk of the business to my brother Lawrence, but because he didn't altogether trust Lawrence, he also left blocks of voting stock and certain patents to both me and my sister. Right now the corporation is engaged in fighting off a hostile merger. Without her votes, we won't be able to do it. That's why she has to be found, and found quickly."

"Didn't your father or mother figure anywhere in the will?"

"My father and grandfather hated each other. He cut him out completely."

"Charming family."

Veronica Stavers's expression hardened. "I don't think you're in any position to pass judgment."

Marlowe shrugged. "I'll keep my mouth shut in the future."

"It might help."

"Is there anything else that I ought to know? Anything else in your box of goodies?"

Again Veronica hesitated. "There is one thing."

"Oh yeah?"

She took another cone out of her bag. This was a cheap black one. Marlowe held it up questioningly.

"So what's this?"

"It came through General Data. You'd better run it."

Marlowe dropped the cone into the reader. There was a waver of static, and then an image appeared on the big screen. Marlowe let out a low whistle. It was a homemade porno—crude, harsh light and a single camera, probably a robot, judging from the way it moved and angled. Christine Stavers had the starring role. Her hands and feet were tied with black rope, but she didn't look too upset about it. In fact, she seemed to be having the time of her life. Her costars were two men and another woman, but it was Christine who was getting all the attention. From their haircuts, tattoos, and cosmetic surgery, it was clear that they were vampires and they were being as creatively weird as only vampires could be.

"Does she do a lot of this sort of thing?"

"If you mean is she a slut, the answer's yes."

"And there was no note with this, no ransom demand, nothing like that?"

"Nothing."

"Maybe this is just her way of saying having a wonderful time, wish you were here."

"It struck us as a little elaborate. Almost as though she was trying too hard to convince us that she was hiding in the Zone."

"Meaning that she isn't in the Zone at all?"

"You never can tell with Christine. Maybe someone else is trying to throw us off the scent."

Marlowe glanced at the screen. "She hardly looks as though she's being coerced."

"Christine can find a way to enjoy most things."

"Do you have any idea when this might have been made?"

"From her hair, it must have been some time in the last couple of months."

Marlowe was thoughtful. "We can read all manner of stuff into this video and all it's going to do is confuse us. We have to take it on face value for the moment. On that level, all it tells us is that your sister goes to orgies with vampires."

"So what do you intend to do?"

Marlowe lit yet another cigarette. It gave him a moment to reflect. "Seems to me that we have to go back to the last place we know for sure that she was."

"Graceland?"

"Graceland."

"Should I come with you?"

"You want to go slumming, too?"

Veronica's lips compressed and her eyes were poisonous. "I don't think I like you, Marlowe."

"You don't have to. All you have to do is pay me, and I'll do my best to find your sister. How do I contact you?"

Veronica was back to the bag again. "Here's a number. I'd like to have regular reports."

What she gave him was old-fashioned, handmade note-paper. Maybe the Slavers family had even more money than he had first expected. There was a number but no address.

"Just so long as I don't show up in person."

"It would be better that way."

It was Marlowe's turn to look poisonous. "Don't worry, we leisure-outs know our place."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not prejudiced."

Poison turned to merely bleak. "Tell me about it."

It was always the same with the natural rich. Personally I don't have anything against you people, but what would the neighbors think? No wonder she'd turned up in forty drag. It wasn't camouflage, it was insulation. She wasn't emotionally equipped to walk through the Zone as herself. Now she was preparing to leave. "I'll wait to hear from you."

"What about my money?"

Veronica was on her feet. She paused. "Oh, yes. I'll get it to you by messenger—a three-day retainer. It should be here in two hours."

"Then I'll start work in three."

After she was gone, Marlowe looked around for Greenstreet. "So what do you think of that?"

But Greenstreet had gone back to the top of the air conditioner.

TWO

THE GREEZ LIKED IT LOUD AND FASHING. THEY LIKED neon and lasers and stainless steel and chrome. They liked sculptured hair and huge, gyrating holos of their twentieth-century icons. They also liked to dance. As Marlowe walked down the wide sweep of stairs that led from the nightclub entrance to the heart of the bright darkness, the dance floor was dominated by a twenty-meter-tall image of Ann-Margret doing what looked like the Watusi to a dyged-up Buddy Holly song played close to the pain threshold. Almost like a pagan idol, she was surrounded by her worshipers, a hundred or more figures copying her every move. The image was primarily green and magenta, and the colors were reflected in the oiled hair of the men and the metal accessories of both sexes. With each step, highbrights flashed at Marlowe from the underside of the treads. The first three dazzled him, but after that he established a rhythm: step, blink, step, blink. Marlowe didn't particularly want to be noticed, but his pride wouldn't allow him to actually dress up greez. Once a forty, always a forty. His only compromise was that he'd left the trenchcoat, the mask, and the fedora in the coatcheck. With a black shirt and a white tie, he

figured that he'd at least marginally mingle with some of the early enders, the ones who included Hank Williams in their pantheon.

Unfortunately, he seemed to have figured wrong. Halfway down the stairs, a group of five greez were leaning on the lucite balustrade, stomping their feet on the treads so the highbrights flashed in time with the music. There were four men and a woman. The men were almost identical in black leather, white spandex, and silver chains. Their triangular sideburns reached their jawlines, and their conical pompadours extended maybe twenty centimeters in front of their foreheads. The woman wore a hooped skirt, and her obviously amplified breasts were crammed into a plastic bustier. Her beehive was so lavish that it made her a good head taller than the men.

The woman spotted him first. She spat on the floor and sneered. "Stinking forty, why don't you piss off back to the Brown Derby!"

Marlowe could only assume that his hair had given him away. Not that it mattered all that much. Graceland, being so close to vampire country, was fairly tolerant of outsiders. There were much more territorial greez joints, like Good Golly Miss Molly or Screamin' Jay's, where they wouldn't even bother to insult and would just get straight to work with gravity knives and razor chains. Graceland even let in vampires. A small knot of them, white-faced zombies in their black capes and high-spiked hair, stood at the edge of the dance floor, sinister and motionless amid the ducking and weaving greez. Vampires didn't dance. They froze and stared, and their pleasures ran to endodrene, dark multiple sex, and occasional outbursts of frenzied, mindless violence. Their favorite weapons were wrist flowers, shirakin, finger blades, and butterfly knives. There were some who'd had long steel fangs implanted in their upper jaws. As Marlowe passed them, two pairs of eyes flashed, one red, the other amber. These were another piece of surgery favored by the vampires: clusters of microleds, implanted in the back of the eye socket so, when activated, they'd shine out through the pupil.

The relationship between greez and vampires was a strange one. On the surface, they were opposite extremes, neon and ice, and yet there was a certain kinship between the two leisure-out subcultures. They both went to the limit with their personal theater, and they even shared common roots. Their cultures met on some dark, timeless bayou where Baron Samedi and Jerry Lee Lewis lived as one.

The walls had started pulsing shocking pink. "Heartbeat, why do you skip when my baby kisses me?" Buddy Holly was still distorting down a century. Marlowe knew that the way the glowing pink walls were expanding and contracting was pure illusion, but it still made him a little nauseated. He felt like an organ parasite and was glad that he hadn't had anything to drink. Jayne Mansfield had replaced Ann-Margret. She was walking her preposterous walk but getting nowhere. She had two quarts of milk in old-fashioned glass bottles clutched beneath her breasts. Marlowe negotiated another gang of greez. This bunch merited avoidance. They were androgynous figures in black, thigh-length, platform boots and short coats with built-up, tuck-and-roll shoulders. Their faces were covered with chrome masks, identical portraits of Elvis Presley in his prime. To Marlowe, they were the most alien of fantasies, hunched black insects with the faces of hood ornaments. They were beyond the border, beyond sex, probably beyond drugs and certainly beyond help. Marlowe was glad that he had one reliable contact in the place. He would have hated to start his first real investigation talking to those cold chrome masks.

Leroy Strange was a one-time zooter with conked hair and a pencil mustache who had traded suits, turned himself into Little Richard, and become Graceland's number-one personality bartender. Back in his zoot days he'd hung out at the Club Noir, and he and Marlowe had established a certain rapport

based on a common taste for Blind Tiger. If anyone in Graceland would give Marlowe a fair shake, it was Leroy Strange.

The bartender looked amazed and possibly a little less than pleased as Marlowe eased his way through the crowd of greez around the bar. "What the hell are you doing here, Marlowe? You're a long way from your usual haunts. A stone forty like you don't belong in a place like this. You'll end up getting into a mess of trouble, and I ain't going to help you out."

"Just give me a drink, Leroy."

"Don't have no John Powers. Just Suntory down the pipe."

"That'll do."

Leroy Strange passed Marlowe a straight shot of scotch in a frozeglass. "It's on the house, Marlowe, on account of all that Tiger we decked in the old days. All I want to know is what you're doing in this place."

"I'm working on a case."

Leroy Strange looked at him with something little short of contempt. "Shit, Marlowe. What kind of fucked-up fantasy is this? Have you lost your mind?"

"It's no fantasy, Leroy. This is for real. Some rich normal lost her sister in the Zone and she wants me to find her."

"So you lost your amateur status?"

"It looks like it."

"Oh, my soul."

"Can I show you something?"

"As long as you don't whip out your dick."

Marlowe took the holo disc that Veronica Stavers had given him from his pocket and placed it on the bar. The image of Christine Stavers came to life. Leroy immediately tried to cover it with his hands.

"Turn that goddamn thing off before it gets someone annoyed."

Already a tall greez in black highrise pants and a red drape jacket was scowling in his direction. Marlowe shut the holo down.

"You know her?"

"Is that the bitch you're looking for?" "Uh-huh."

"I wish you luck. She came in here and caused more trouble than a squad of marines on amdex."

"So what happened?"

"It must have been about two weeks ago, she comes in here quite early in the evening, dressed norm but already loaded on about everything you could think of. I mean, she was messed up—and bent on getting worse. The weirdest thing of all was that there were a bunch of vams with her. Not the ones who come in here. Cold suckers, the kind who usually never leave the territory. And they're around her like they were bodyguards or something."

Leroy Strange paused to serve another customer.

"Now, since I ain't never heard of no norm hiring no inner-circle vams to tour-guide her 'round the Zone, I figured they must be letting her run on account of how they have some very bizarre plans for her. Which means, Marlowe, that if you find her, she ain't going to be quite the same as when she left home."

He poured some more drinks.

"Anyway, she's drinking it up and getting worse and worse, falling out of her dress and doing the whole drunk-norm bit clear to the edge. By two o'clock, she's so rowdy that even the rockos are getting pissed off, and you know how they like to romp and stomp. Thing is, though, the vams are still with her, and since they ain't walked away from her, I can only think that whatever black vam plans they got for her are real serious. Not that I care too much. What I'm really thinking about is that I better throw her ass out of the joint before someone starts carving their name on her. Nobody cares if we cut up each other, but a dead or bleeding norm can start the chillgrief coming down."

"And did you throw her out?"

"That was the lacklogic weird. Just as I was looking around for the bouncers to give her the heave, the vams whisk her away."

"And that was the last you saw of her?"

"That was it, and I didn't want to see her again. I guess if you want to find her you're going to have to start looking in vam town. Once again, I wish you luck."

Marlowe nodded. If Christine Stavers had vanished into vampire territory he was going to need luck. On the dance floor there was an outbreak of cheering. A holo of the young Elvis Presley had risen to its full height.

Marlowe had left the reproduction Buick back in the underground parking lot of the apartment building. This close to vampire country, there was too much chance of it being vandalized, and he loved the electric car almost as much as he loved Greenstreet. The sight of its chrome ripped off or its paintwork covered in graffiti would kill him. He retrieved his coat, hat, and mask from the coatcheck. For a few moments, Marlowe stood in the shelter of the club's awning, smoked a cigarette, and watched the fiber optic sign change color. Three vampires on the sidewalk watched him with blank, corpse-white faces but made no move. Finally he flicked the butt into the gutter, fastened his mask, and started

walking. His mask was made of form-fitting black latex. Someone had once told him that it made him look like the Spirit. The air was thick with something that was more than fog but not quite rain. The temperature hadn't dropped any, and he was sweating inside his Burberry despite the built-in coolants. It was a bad night. Sheets of static that might later become a full-blown electric storm played around the downtown towers. Marlowe couldn't see any hacks, but for the moment he didn't care. He had a lot of thinking to do and he thought better when he was walking. It was really only just starting to sink in that all this was real, that it was no fantasy, no piece of self-theater. His first impulse was to return Veronica Stavers's money and tell her to forget the whole thing. He wasn't going to spend the next few days risking his ass in vampire town looking for some screwed-up normal. His second impulse was not to return Veronica Stavers's money, and to move deeper into the Zone where she wouldn't be able to find him. Beyond the impulses, however, there was an awakening pride. After a life on the scrap heap, playing like a child, he actually had something to do. It might be a no-good gig, but it was a gig and it was his. He was no longer pretending, and after a lifetime of make believe, reality was extremely seductive. The money was also a consideration. He had the three-day retainer, but it was quite likely that the search for Christine Stavers would run longer. Two thousand a day would do a lot to fix his decaying electronics and his malfunctioning robots. The one snag was the matter of the vampires. If Christine had indeed taken up with a vam gang, he had problems. The vampires were strange and unpredictable. They had their roots in the punk rockers of the late twentieth century, but they had gathered a lot more gothic fantasies along the way until they had become near alien in their studied weirdness. They were an almost completely closed society, and their hostility toward outsiders was legendary. The only approach open to Marlowe was the direct one. He would, quite literally, have to walk into vam town, knock on the front door, and start asking if anyone had seen Christine. He didn't relish the prospect.

For the first few blocks, Marlowe had been walking down empty streets with only derelicts and garbage for company and the undertow of traffic noise and half-heard music as background for his thoughts, but now the lights of Avenue J, the main strip on the east side of the Zone, were reflected on the wet sidewalk. Despite the foul weather, the strip was crowded. In the Zones people would tolerate almost anything to avoid the sense of being penned up in their apartments. On the street there was always the chance of something happening. Inside four walls, a person was alone with his needs.

Marlowe put his speculations on the back burner as he started to make his way down the strip. Survival in the Zone depended on keeping one's instincts to the fore. Preoccupation could be dangerous. The levels of frustration, anger, and neurosis in the area were sufficiently high that one always had to be on guard, particularly as those emotions were frequently coupled with drugs or implant stimulation. Just to prove the point, a gang of naziboy in mirror masks, duckbill caps, and swastikas were hanging around outside a foolfeel parlor, harassing the patrons coming in and out. They seemed to feel that the varied cortsim sex substitutes offered inside were somehow against what they considered to be the natural order of things. There was a certain irony in the fact that on another night they might just as easily be found making trouble for the street hookers, the girls and boys who sold traditional body sex. On the other hand, though, nobody really expected consistency from naziboy. They were a universal pain in the ass, stunted bundles of hate masquerading as a political philosophy. Even their mirror masks were a kind of mute hostility. Looking into their faces, all one saw was one's own features superimposed on a black naziboy uniform. Marlowe quickly crossed the street as a handful of heavies emerged from the foolfeel parlor and went to work on the nazis with boots and billy clubs. The sight of dark fighting figures in front of the foolfeel facia, an undulating screen of moving erotic abstracts, was archetypical of the Zone. The glowing, featureless flesh shapes moved against each other while black silhouettes kicked out and flailed. There was a ripple of applause from passersby as the naziboy took to their heels.

The prostitutes were out in force. The necessity of masks in the greenhouse weather made for some exotic figures and also a certain degree of pig-in-poke risk for the clientele. Animals and birds seemed to be a particular, momentary vogue. One young woman was naked but for a huge, blue and yellow butterfly mask, a scant black bikini, high spike heels, and a short transparent rain cape. Her body glistened with moisture. She inquired if Marlowe wanted to go out. After a moment's hesitation, he shook his head. He wasn't in the mood for automatic hooker sex. There was also a paradox with whores in the Zone. It was impossible to tell which were regular hustlers and which were leisure-outs acting their way through a time-honored fantasy. A lot of the time, it didn't matter too much, but there were occasions when the ones who were in it for the fun could go to some very alarming extremes.

As well as the prostitutes, there was also a heavy sprinkling of solo weirds. Where the majority of the fantasy leisure-outs formed themselves into definable groups like greez, forties, bounders, and the rest, there were others who went their lone sweet way. A Harpo Marx tooted his horn at a disdainful trio of kamikaze blondes. A figure in a full space suit stared at the animated displays outside a domination joint, while a very drunk San Diego chicken had some difficulty crossing the road. A police gunship clattered overhead, flanked by two drone ultralights. Normally the cops didn't bother too much about what went on in the Zone, short of riot or mass murder. They were only present because it was game night in the old stadium and the back entrance to the stadium opened onto the far end of the strip. The games must have been near to their conclusion. It was possible to hear the roar of the crowd above all the competing noises on the strip. Very soon, fifty thousand normals would be surging out of the stadium, limp from three hours of gratuitous violence, desperate to get back to their high-rise suburbs. The cops were there to make sure they weren't raped, robbed, or picked on before they reached the safety of the tunnels.

There was some kind of party going on at the gin joint on the corner of 208th. It looked as though it had been roaring for some hours, and a number of the revelers had spilled out onto the street, swaying like the blood brain barriers were breaking down. The tavern, which rejoiced in the uncomplicated name of John's, wasn't strictly themed to any particular group, but there were a number of forties among its regulars and there were certainly a few in with the stumblers on the sidewalk. Marlowe thought that he recognized two women. They were a pair of sisters, called Nora and Charlene, dye-job redheads from the Minnie Mouse end of things. He had slept with both of them more than once, and one time with both of them together. They were loud, uncomplicated fun, but he generally wanted them to leave in the morning. They called out to him as they approached.

"Hey, Marlowe! Is that you?"

Marlowe peeled off his mask. "Sure is. How are you two doing?"

He was being embraced by two sets of arms.

"We're drunk, Marlowe. We've been drinking and decking all night. You going to join the party?"

Marlowe shook his head. "I've got stuff to do in the morning that wouldn't be helped by a hangover."

Nora had her face very close to his. "What's the matter with you, Marlowe? You on a case?"

Charlene giggled. "You don't have to do that stuff with us, Marlowe. You know we love you."

"Yeah, Marlowe. Come and get loaded. We've missed you."

Marlowe's newfound professional pride wavered. There was conscientious and there was just plain dumb. He linked arms with Nora and Charlene and went into John's.

When he eventually reached home, Greenstreet regarded him balefully. The cat had been fed by the robot tender, and he hated the tender. He considered any attempt by the tender to look after him as a personal insult and definite neglect on Marlowe's part. Marlowe felt awful enough; he didn't need the animal's reproaches. It was mid-morning and he had two basic options in front of him. He could crawl into bed and sleep away the rest of the day, or he could take a shower, swallow a handful of pills and a couple of squirts, and head straight out for vampire country. Sleeping was certainly not what Veronica Stavers was paying him for, and although the second option was totally lacking in charm, it had the consolation that with his nervous system turned into a battleground between the stims and his hangover, he'd probably be so coldwired that he wouldn't remember to be frightened. The vampires might well respect that. Reluctantly, he stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

He discovered to his disgust that the water was out and he had to make do with half a pack of chemical wipes. Fortunately, he had an ample supply of drugs. After a half deck of Blind Tiger, four blue octagons, and three squirts from an amdex haler, his eyeballs were threatening to revolve but he was on his feet and motoring. His first move was to call Veronica Stavers at the number she'd given him and report what he'd learned from Leroy Strange. It was hardly conclusive, but she might as well know that he was earning his money. He particularly stressed the risk that he was running by taking the investigation into vampire country, but she didn't seem terribly impressed. His next move was to open the secret compartment under his mattress and take out his one lethal weapon. As lethal weapons went this one was a dandy, a laser-sighted Smith & Wesson Reaper, an over-and-under machine pistol. The top barrel fired 10mm self-propelled; the bottom was a seven-gauge shotgun. If anything was going to keep the vampires at bay, it was this little beauty. He dropped the Reaper into the specially constructed shoulder holster and closed the seal on his trenchcoat. He patted the still sulking Greenstreet.

"Don't wait up."

Marlowe's best idea was to go into vampire country in the middle of the day. Part of the mystique was that they were almost completely nocturnal, and as he crossed the line that divided their acknowledged turf from the rest of the Zone, the streets were virtually deserted. The hard core of vampire town was a dozen blocks of crumbling, nineteenth-century tenements. Even at high noon, it was a dark, sinister neighborhood. Every surface was covered in black unintelligible graffiti, not only on street level but all the way up to the rooftops. There were even huge cabalistic symbols painted across the streets and sidewalks. The black spraypaint reached to the most inaccessible walls and overhangs. The vampires weren't only obsessive, they were also agile. The overall patina of graffiti somehow gave the buildings the look of being diseased. Sagging ropes of cable, like the webs of some monster spider, were strung from roof to roof, and the roofs themselves were festooned with satellite dishes and all manner of aerals. The vampires were nothing if not high tech.

Not every vampire was asleep in his or her coffin. Somewhere there was music playing, a modal dirge from the doomboom of the twenty twenties. There were also movements in among the roof aerals that suggested that his progress was being monitored by a series of lookouts. Marlowe felt like the lone scout advancing into Indian territory.

One of the main focal points of the neighborhood was a place called The Bat Cave. Marlowe had decided that it would be the most obvious door on which to knock. It had originally been a traditional Irish bar and after that it had been a zippie hangout, but now it was something entirely vampire. The whole front of the building was one enormous and incredibly complex mural. It was a strange marriage of El Greco and monster movies. Leather-winged nightcrawlers grappled with fanged corpse women. Chained and naked maidens were sacrificed by cowed priests while red hellfire blazed from rocky fissures and lightning struck down at gothic cathedrals. Marlowe stood and stared at the mural for a full minute before he took a deep breath, unglued his mask, unsealed his trenchcoat so the Reaper was plainly visible, and pushed open The Bat Cave's huge, iron-bound door. He was glad that he felt no pain.

For the first few seconds he could hardly see a thing. After broad daylight, the gloom was close to absolute. The main room of The Bat Cave was long and narrow. The original bar had long since been torn out, but the place still had a little of that ambiance. A set of flat color cathodes arranged on the end wall to resemble a stained-glass window added a certain ecclesiastical air. An antique lava lamp pulsed in an alcove, a half-dozen candles guttered in a cast-iron holder, and, rather incongruously, a large, neon, Kirin beer dragon flashed on and off. These were all the lights there were, and each cast its own set of sinister shadows.

Gradually, Marlowe's eyes adjusted. There were six vampires in the place, but none of them seemed inclined to make a move toward him. A couple, male and female, lay together in a beat-up, high-backed couch, entwined and engrossed. A male with bleached white hair that rose from his head straight up for almost a foot sat alone at a table. There was a small, black GD stim box in front of him with leads running to implanted spike receptors in his forearm. He was clearly in a world of his own. Two other males lounged at another table, drinking beer and regarding Marlowe with bored insolence. One of them had a shaved head and ears that had been surgically tailored to long, upswept points. In the corner of the room there was a steel cage designed for one occupant; a young vampire girl sat inside on a bench, smoking a cigar, seemingly unconcerned by her incarceration. There were more murals that looked as though they had been painted by the same artist or artists who had done the one on the outside of the building. There were more gothic movie monsters, sado porn of graphic severity, and portraits of some of their cultural icons—Jim Morrison, Morthland, Lord Byron, Bela Lugosi, Bradford Hess, Ed Gein, John Lydon, and Freddie the Psycho. The vampires had a choice assortment of heroes. Somewhere there was music playing at low volume. It sounded like Mahler. *Das Kindertotenlieder*? Mahler was hardly Marlowe's forte, but it fitted with the vampire fantasy as well as anything else: The children are dead.

Marlowe had no comprehensive plan of action. When he'd set out, the only thing he'd had in mind was to make it to The Bat Cave and see what happened when he got there. Now he was there and nothing was happening. He was hardly inclined to walk up to any of the denizens of the place and start asking private-eye questions. That was simply the wrong approach. It was time to be a psychologist, not a cop. Except who could predict vampire psychology? Marlowe walked tentatively toward an empty table against the wall. Still nobody made a move. Marlowe sat down. He let his coat fall open so that the Reaper was in easy reach and in even more plain sight. He took the holo disc from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of him. The image of Christine Stavers came alive. Marlowe was getting sick of looking at it. The girl in the cage giggled. The couple looked up briefly and then went back to what they were doing. The vampire wired into the stim box took no notice whatsoever. The only real reaction came from the two boys swilling beer. The one with the shaved head and pointed ears slowly stood up. He grinned at Marlowe. As well as altered ears, he had long, implanted canine teeth. The other one pulled out a pack of Kenyan Marlboroughs and lit one with the air of a man who was

settling down to watch the show. The bald vampire walked slowly toward Marlowe, still grinning. Very slowly, Marlowe's hand crept toward the butt of the Reaper.

The vampire reached the table. Close up, the grin was dangerously insane; Marlowe, with his nervous system jangling, was sorely tempted to remove it with a blast of self-propelled 10mms. He resisted the temptation with great difficulty, telling himself firmly that it was no way to start an investigation. The vampire leaned forward and slowly passed a hand through the image of Christine Stavers. He made a soft hissing sound and repeated the gesture with the other hand. Marlowe didn't think it was possible, but the wolf grin widened. His gun hand started to twitch, but then the vampire pushed himself away from the table. Marlowe was surprised. He'd been certain that there was going to be some sort of violence. His relief was short-lived, however. The bald vampire walked across the room and picked up an old-fashioned wall phone. He was talking too softly for Marlowe to hear what he was saying. When he was through, he returned to his beer. He and his companion both sat staring at Marlowe as though expecting something to happen, both wearing the same feral, lupin grin. Marlowe had to assume that reinforcements had been summoned and that the two vampires were waiting with anticipatory glee. The glee worried him. Maybe he should cut his losses and get the hell out of the whole situation. What were the reinforcements going to be like? Only pride and drugs kept him in his seat. He was damned if he was going to be grinned down by those two weird assholes across the room.

The door swung open and the light streamed in like a shock. Marlowe tensed. Three figures were silhouetted in the doorway. The middle one was at least a head taller than the other two, but they all cast long shadows across the floor.

"I am Yorga. What do you want here?"

"I'm Marlowe and I've been hired to find a missing woman."

The door swung closed. Marlowe had avoided looking directly at the light, so now he could see the newcomers. If there was such a thing as a king of the vampires, Yorga had to be it. He was at least seven feet tall, most likely the product of preteen artificial growth. His parent or parents must have been in on the act. Conceivably, he was even a second generation. His skin was the color of parchment that had been stored under a rock. Aside from his size, Yorga was loaded down with gimmicks. He was one of the most highly customized human beings that Marlowe had ever seen. He was shrouded in a full black opera cape with a stand-up collar that framed his face and would have done credit to the wardrobe of Ming the Merciless. The cape was shot with light threads that coiled and roiled in vague but definitely serpentine patterns. His hair was slicked back at the sides and dyed pale blue. It darkened to the center and rose to a high crest that added another nine inches to his height. His eyes were lensed over and flashed the same blue. The silver tips of his heavy engineer boots were studded with shock caps that could probably knock over an ox if he kicked it. As he confronted Marlowe, he swept back the cape in a deliberately dramatic gesture, revealing a black vinyl bodysuit that left his arms bare. His arms were his most striking feature. It wasn't just the maze of tattoos that duplicated in miniature the graffiti on the buildings.

He had more hooked into those arms than the average patient on an operating table. There was a stim block strapped to each wrist with lines going to a switchboard of receptors and a row of timedose dermals running all the way up to his biceps. A third stim block hung from his neck by a silver chain; the lines went to receptors at his throat. With so much medication and direct neural stimulation running into his system, it was amazing that the man had even a nodding acquaintance with any kind of reality.

And yet he seemed perfectly in control. Yorga was either a superman or a monster, if indeed there was any difference. The worst shock was when he smiled. He had a mouthful of gold fangs.

"Marlowe? You're called Marlowe?"

Marlowe slowly nodded. He was starting to think that he might already be history. He placed both hands flat on the table. "Right. Marlowe."

"Tell me, Marlowe, are you stupid, crazy, or suicid-ally brave?"

"I'm doing a job."

"You'd follow a forty fantasy all the way into my country?"

"This is no fantasy. I've been hired by this woman's family to find her. The last time she was seen, it was in the company of vampires. I look where I have to."

"Did they hire you to bring a Smith & Wesson Reaper into my country? Have you come to kill vampires, Marlowe? Is that your fantasy, Marlowe? Are you the fearless vampire killer? It's a strange fantasy for a forty."

Marlowe had the patience of a man on borrowed time. "I already told you that I'm looking for this woman. The Reaper is strictly for protection. I want to get out of here alive."

"And do you think you will?"

"I'm hoping."

"Do you think you can shoot your way out of here?"

Marlowe could feel himself sweating. If his hands hadn't been pressed flat on the table, they would have been shaking. "If I was threatened, I'd kill you first."

"You think I can be killed, Marlowe?"

"I figure if I blew your head off you'd be effectively dead. Immortality is your fantasy. All I see is an overstim." If he was going to go, he might as well go with class.

Yorga suddenly laughed. If lizards laughed, they'd laugh like Yorga. "You amuse me, Marlowe."

He pointed to the holo of Christine Stavers. "Turn that thing off."

Marlowe cut off the holo.

Yorga stroked one of the lines running into his throat. "That woman is starting to get on my nerves."

So she was there. The girl in the cage giggled loudly. The woman who had come in with Yorga hissed at her and spun the razor flowers on her wrists into the fighting position.

"You shut your mouth, Carmila, or you'll be worse than caged."

Carmila giggled again. "I like being caged. You know I can enjoy anything. That's why you love me."

Yorga's eyes flashed blue. "Shut up, both of you."

Marlowe had been so occupied with Yorga that he'd had no time to pay attention to his two companions. The one on the right was male but anonymous in a full-head, black leather mask. He was of more than average height but was dwarfed by Yorga. The woman was also tall. Right at that moment, she was demurely folding away the razor flowers. She had gone to a lot of trouble to make herself look like a living corpse. Her already large eyes were made huge by rings of black and purple, her lips were blue, and her dead black hair was scraped back from a high white forehead and hung straight to her waist. Like Yorga, she wore a skintight black bodysuit, only in her case, her arms were covered. She appeared to have no built-in stims unless they were concealed in the suit, and Marlowe didn't see how that was possible when it fitted her slim figure so closely. While Marlowe was looking at her, the woman was also examining him. There was something in her expression that he didn't like. She glanced at Yorga.

"If you don't want to kill him yourself, can I have him?"

The girl in the cage started again. "Why can't I have him? She gets everything."

Yorga glared at each of them in turn. "I may not want to kill him."

That was the best news that Marlowe had heard since he'd arrived in vampire country. Unfortunately, the woman with Yorga continued to protest.

"You can't let him go. He'll tell the rest of the Zone that it's possible to walk into our neighborhood, armed and uninvited, and get out alive."

"I said I may not want to kill him."

"It would be a sign of weakness."

"Don't argue with me, Morticia."

"It would still be a sign of weakness."

"It would be a sign that we are totally unpredictable, and that has always been our tradition." He turned his attention to Marlowe. "I'm going to let you go."

"I appreciate that."

"You'd better, because if I hear you're going around boasting that you got the better of Yorga, I'll come and find you."

Morticia wasn't finished. "You're a fool, Yorga. He's obviously going to tell everyone that the vampires let him go."

Yorga's hand shot out like a striking snake and grabbed Morticia by the throat. Marlowe was quite amazed at his speed.

"Don't ever speak to me like that!"

Morticia's eyes were twice their original size. Her fingers flexed as though she were restraining herself from opening her razor flowers and gutting Yorga. She probably would have gone white with fury, except with her cadaverlike complexion it was scarcely possible. For a long moment, the two of them glared at each other. Marlowe wondered about interpersonal relations between vampires. They had to be complex in a world of razors, cages, and surgical outrage. Finally Morticia's arms dropped to her sides. She relaxed, clearly letting go of her fury. Yorga released her, then rounded on Marlowe.

"You'd better get out of here before I change my mind."

Marlowe knew that he was taking his life in his hands, but his newfound pride refused to lie down. "What about the woman I came to find?"

The man in the black mask spoke for the first time. His voice was overlaid with a rasping, electronic distortion. It sounded as though his throat were stuffed with tinfoil. "She said that someone might come looking for her. I don't think she imagined that it would be a forty Bogart."

Yorga grinned gold at him and then turned back to Marlowe. "You've got a lot of gall for one whose life has just been spared."

Marlowe spread his hands in self-deprecation. Yorga's eyes, which had been burning bright blue since the exchange with Morticia, slowly dimmed.

"Christine Stavers is under my protection. She paid me to conceal her, and I'll go on concealing her until she leaves of her own accord or she makes me crazy. You can tell that to her family."

Marlowe didn't care to speculate on how much it took to make Yorga crazy or what form that craziness might take. "I didn't know vampires took bodyguard contracts."

"We all need money, Marlowe. Now get out of here."

Back in the daylight, Marlowe experienced a violent reaction. His whole body shook. Both drugs and courage were wearing off. The daylight itself wasn't up to much. In fact, it wasn't much brighter than the gloom inside The Bat Cave. A khaki overcast was moving in, threatening a massive downpour. Mid-afternoon was turning into an oppressive twilight. Marlowe took one final look at the mural on the front of The Bat Cave, then walked away at a brisk pace. He wanted nothing more than to get back to his apartment, make his peace with Greenstreet, and sleep through the impending comedown.

He had thought that the sense of being watched would go away once he had crossed the line out of vampire territory. To his dismay, it didn't. He told himself repeatedly that it was just the drugs' last kickings, but he couldn't shake an uneasy urge to keep looking over his shoulder. He heard a car behind him and glanced back in the hope that it might be one of the Zone's few-and-far-between cabs. It turned out to be the complete antithesis of a beat-up Zone hack. Black and shiny, it was a big limousine with mirror windows. It was too far away for Marlowe to identify, but he thought it looked like a late-model

Mercedes. What the hell was a car like that doing in the Zone?

The engine gunned and the car accelerated toward him. From the sound of the engine, he realized that it wasn't an electric car. It had the roar of a full-blown hydro burner. The presence of the car was so incongruous that Marlowe turned and stared as it roared down the empty street. When it was only twenty or thirty meters from him, it swerved. It swung inward and its nearside front wheel mounted the sidewalk. The car was coming for him, deliberately trying to run him down. For a second, he froze in horror, then self-preservation took over. There was a recessed doorway beside him. Marlowe dived and rolled. He hit hard and awkwardly. He knew that he had done something bad to his shoulder, but there was no time for pain. The limo grazed the wall, ruining its paint job and throwing off sparks. Someone wanted extremely badly to kill him. He jerked his feet up and the car screeched by, missing him by a handsbreadth.

The car screamed forward for another twenty meters, then the unseen driver slammed on the brakes, the back end came up, and the engine protested as it was thrown into reverse. The black limo was coming back for another try. Marlowe fumbled out the Reaper. The Mercedes was angling to rear-end him in the doorway. It really was a Mercedes. The three-spoke wheel insignia was all too clear and coming down on him fast. Marlowe opened fire, pressing himself back into the doorway. He let go with both barrels—four blasts of the seven-gauge and a stream of 10mms. The rear window shattered, and the shock must have thrown the driver off his turn. Instead of bringing the car into the doorway, he slammed it hard against the wall, crumpling the trunk. The engine howled again and the wheels spun and smoked as it went back to drive. Marlowe braced himself for another attack, knowing it was hard to stop a determined car with a machine pistol. To his surprise, it kept on going. It raced down the street, laid rubber on a turn, and was gone. Marlowe stepped out of the doorway in total shock. Spectators were starting to emerge from nearby buildings. Nobody approached him. The still-smoking gun must have put them off.

Marlowe was at a complete loss. This was just too much reality in one day. Twice in one afternoon, he had expected to die. With the vampires, it was understandable—he had known he was running a risk confronting them on their own turf. A black Mercedes trying to crush him to hamburger was a whole different matter. A homicidal normal out killing Zonees at random? Correction. A rich homicidal normal—a car like that ought to rate a chauffeur. It made no sense unless the black Mercedes was somehow connected with the Staverses, a deluxe version of the old get-off-the-case-shamus routine. If that was so, and he had a gut feeling that it was, the business had turned on him and was threatening to swallow him in one gulp. He didn't even know why. Although it was tempting, he wasn't quite ready to get off the case. The idea of his being arbitrarily, squished by an expensive auto made him mad. On the other hand, though, before he went any further he intended to find out a great deal more about the Stavers family. The one person in the Zone who might have that kind of information was Joshua Long.

THREE

"THE IT ALL HINGES ON TWO THINGS: ENERGY AND POPULATION. We never made any serious attempts to check the population growth until it was far too late, and we burned energy like there was no tomorrow. Now there may not be a tomorrow. Two hundred years of burning hydrocarbons started the planet going greenhouse. Our brief romance with nuclear power gave us the disasters at Chernobyl, Dungeness, Indian Point, and then that whole string of cheap third-world reactors that the industrial nations foisted on them at the same time they were closing down their own programs. Huge tracts of land were rendered unusable for thousands of years along with the bits of Chile and Argentina that glow in the dark after their little atomic tussle. Diseases mutated faster than we could find cures for them. DX virus and acid rain wiped out most of the Amazon rain forest, and that just happened to be the main natural atmospheric recycling plant. In two hundred years, we'll have an atmosphere like Venus. Having fouled up our nest, our only hope seems to be to move to another tree."

Joshua Long tended to pontificate. Marlowe had let him run on for a while, but now it was time to bring him back to the point.

"This is all very depressing, but what does it have to do with the Stavers family?"

"Elias Stavers was one of the first individuals to realize that our only hope was to get off the planet. Before him, all space research was either military or to boldly go where no man had gone before."

Marlowe was stunned. "That Stavers?"

"It never occurred to you?"

"Why should it have? I thought when Veronica Stavers hired me she was talking about a small family business, not a giant aerospace corporation."

"A giant, independent, aerospace corporation. That's the key to the Staverses."

"Huh?"

"You're into something way over your head, Marlowe."

Joshua Long was a major oddity in the Zone. He was also a major power. Physically he was unimpressive—a small, lumpy potato of a man with wispy blond hair, he was a virtual gnome in a stained purple windbreaker and drab tan pants. The only thing that marked him as someone special were his penetrating blue eyes, which never seemed to stop calculating. There was considerable doubt that he was even a leisure-out. The most popular theory was that he had simply moved to the Zone many years ago because he preferred the company of fantasy freaks to that of normals. It was only theory, though. There were almost no hard facts on Joshua Long's background. Although he'd talk at length about any other subject under the sun, he was totally silent about his own past. Essentially, he was the preeminent Zone fixer. He put those who wanted implants or the more bizarre examples of plastic surgery in touch with not-too-particular surgeons. He arranged introductions between those who had large quantities of drugs and those who wanted them. He dealt in bootleg data and financed the manufacture of the illegally overpowered stim boxes. He converted black scrip into regular, and vice versa. Indeed, it was said that he had designed the whole black scrip system in the first place, but that

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