

TITANIUM NOIR

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Giles Gratton, sick as a dog from nineteen years spent sleeping in the off hours between bloody murder rooms and the aldermen's bullshit, doesn't knock.

"Get your coat," he says.

"Hi, Captain."

"Yeah, all that."

I get my coat and hold the door for him.

"Hi, Cal," Gratton says.

We go down the stairs together. No need to waste a perfectly good bit of bad news with conversation.

We're in the wrong part of town for something in my line. Not that it's nasty, it's just not perfect. The people I deal with are up there, not down here. Gratton drops me at the building but doesn't come in.

"I've already seen it."

"You got any idea?"

He shakes his head. "Just that it's your thing."

"Confirmed?"

"No, but if you get in there and you think I'm wrong, you can keep the money and go back to bed."

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I walk through the lobby and take the stairs up to the third floor. Every single step is shiny clean and smells of off-brand Limonene.

Inside the apartment, the dead nerd lies on the floor. There's a hole in his head, small and smudged with grey ash and a light burn. A close-range shooting: an execution or a suicide. There's some blood, blowback from the moment of impact, but the round must still be inside him. Small calibre, low power. Just enough to do the job.

Down by his feet, Musgrave the city doctor is fussing with a tablet: the police network is achingly slow. Other than that there's not a lot going on. Murder rooms are like train stations at midnight, not much left to do before the last departure.

The nerd looks about forty-five with no habits. He's got dark hair cut nerd style, he's wearing a nerd shirt, button-down, with little hooks for a clip-tie stitched under the collar. Nerd slacks too high at the waist and too short at the ankle, and nerd shoes from an artisan place in the market, with orthotic inserts. The thick soles complete the anti-chic vibe. This was how he lived, wardrobe like an old guy and no mind to be anything else.

There's a lounge chair in front of the big window. I figure he sat there and looked out, so I go and do that too. I can feel the ghost of him in the cushions, pressed down and permanently shaped by his weight. Forensics have come and gone ages ago, but still the other three twitch slightly as I sit because they're not allowed to, not allowed so deep they can't imagine that anyone would.

"You want to get a snack while you're at it?" Detective Felton, standing by the door, doesn't love my way of being in the world. We got nothing to discuss, so I don't.

Outside, the city spreads east and west along the lake. The Chersenesos district juts out into the deep water from midtown, a dog's muzzle lapping from a massive bowl. Behind the skyscrapers the mountains rise up from the farthest shore. Othrys is topographically an alpine lake: the line from the peak to the trench is smooth, and the water is as deep as the mountains are high. Anything you throw in falls for a clear four thousand metres to a

cold darkness that keeps its secrets well and never lets them go. Anything, or anyone.

“Oh bloody fucking fuck,” Musgrave growls at her tablet. It’s not true what they say: good workmen do indeed blame their tools, at least when they have to use what the department can afford. Felton and his uniform buddy can’t even be bothered to laugh. Just two of them: there’s a serious incident in the Heights. There always is when you need one. Gratton giving me space—or maybe rope.

I go back to the desk and run my hand along the flat surface. It’s clean and cold. There’s a university terminal, a block of cartridge paper by the printer. The drawers have bamboo dividers to keep everything in its proper place: one cubby for staples, one for rubber bands, one for pens. There is nothing, but nothing, out of place in this room, in this entire apartment, except for the nerd who owns it, dead between the display case and the fish tank.

Koi carp, two, one orange, and one orange and white.

I shuffle all the way back on the dead man’s office chair until my feet come off the floor and then I push off with my right hand so that I’m spinning slowly around. The chair is a science chair, translucent and nasty. They take a seed from your ear cartilage and grow it and then you sit in it because something something immune response something biota. Supposedly it’s good for you, but who knows? High-ticket item. Round and round I go in the dead nerd’s chair, which I guess is technically part of the corpse.

“Hey, Musgrave, you gonna autopsy this chair?”

“Nope.”

“Because you know—”

“Yes I do. Technically it’s still alive so it would be a vivisection, but let me say again: no, I do not at this time propose to vivisect the chair, because I have an annual budget and it’s fucking ridiculous.”

“Just figure it’s made of his body. If he was maybe poisoned—”

“He was shot in the head,” Musgrave says, like she doesn’t really want to talk about it any more.

There are no family pictures around the terminal, or on the mantel, or in the display case. There are none in the living room

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with its view of the harbour, thirty-six storeys down. There are none in the bathrooms. There is a box in the lumber room full of bric-a-brac, and no doubt he intended, one day, to go through it and set some of those things out. Or perhaps he just didn't give a damn. Sometimes you keep things because you don't have time to throw them away.

Alastair Rodney Tebbit, went by Roddy. This address plus a teaching room on campus. Not married, at least for the present. Manicure his only obvious vanity, and a bullet somewhere in his skull: one shot between the ear and the temple, right through the stem and bounced off the concave bone on the far side. The gun is the one he bought yesterday morning, smaller than my palm. The credit card slip is still on the side table where he dropped his keys. Swiss made, with no digital parts. It comes with a spring holster: you twitch your wrist in a particular way and the gun pops into your hand. Another high-ticket item, and fine, he had the cash and not a lot to spend it on, but most of the stuff here is ordinary. Only the chair, the shoes, and the gun are expensive. Roddy Tebbit did not impulse buy, and he did not bother with needless things. He spent money on stuff that mattered, and the gun mattered.

Still spinning in the chair. Look up, look down, look around. There is no part of the crime scene that is not interesting. Cobwebs on the ceiling, but they're new. I can see the spider working. No dirt anywhere else except the tiny blush of ejecta on the carpet where he died, and the diffuse grime that settles wherever humans live, the little tracks of a thousand daily journeys from kitchen to lounge chair to bathroom to bedroom that Roddy Tebbit will not be making ever again.

roll the chair back and open the drawers. There are two on top of each other, one shallow and one deep. The first one is full of things to write with. Pencils, hard. Pencils, soft. One box of a half dozen in solid graphite. Then pens. Pens, blue. Pens, black. Pens,

red. Trifecta. Sharpies, indigo, and only indigo. Personal quirk. The notes on the cartridge paper are in indigo. Nice colour.

Paperclips, one size only. Staples, for stapler, adjoining cubby.

Next drawer. Tape, various colours and sizes. Solder kit. Protective goggles, protective gloves. Lightweight gear for making new charging cables. Solder, different metals. Cable offcuts, cable clips. Latex glue, in date. One empty cubby, no indication of what it held. Maybe it was open: a place for the unexpected. I close the drawer.

And there, on the floor at the spot where the rug folds by the foot of the desk: a tiny piece of shaped metal, yellow and warm. Two loops like a roller coaster track, not more than a couple of millimetres across, a hole through the middle. The butterfly piece from an earring.

“Hey, Musgrave.”

“Yes?”

“Got a bag?”

She doesn’t say “of course.” Musgrave’s self-image is anchored deep in the flesh of forensic pathology, and she doesn’t need to remind anyone how good she is. You don’t work with her even once and not notice. She comes over, curious. There shouldn’t be anything. Scene of crime should have seen this, but they missed it, probably because they were eyeballing the corpse. Even here, that’s not something you see every day. “Where?” she asks.

I point and she takes a picture almost reflexively. Then I go into my pocket, where I keep a folding corkscrew someone gave me a long time ago. It’s a little silver item with a slide-out pin that you’re supposed to use to pierce the wax seals you get on some bottles. Great for picnics, and for evidence. I reach down and lift up the butterfly, let it rest on the tip of the pin. Musgrave makes a noise like “hht” then leans over and drops it into an evidence bag, passes it off to the uniform.

“His ears aren’t pierced.”

You wouldn’t expect them to be, or any other part of him, but she’ll check, anyway.

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I straighten up and look around.

Roddy was a quiet, boring guy who lived for his work. He fed his fish regularly, he shopped local, and he rode a bicycle to campus. He did not, at least in so far as anyone knows at this early stage, run off with other people's wives, gamble in dens of vice or haul drugs over the border in the secret compartment of a Maserati. He had no debts, no known enemies and no obvious worries. Yesterday morning he bought a gun and yesterday night that gun was fired into his head. An accident, a suicide or a murder. And none of these things would be my problem, except for the other bit.

Roddy Tebbit, if he was standing straight without a .22 derringer shell spiralled through what I have to assume was top grade brain matter, would have been seven feet, eight and some inches tall. Two hundred and thirty-six centimetres.

And according to his driving license, he was ninety-one years old.

Roddy Tebbit was a Titan.

Gratton was right. This is my thing.

You maybe could get a seventy-year-old former Olympic basketball player who looks like forty-five. I mean theoretically. In reality your serious sports people pick up injuries, and the longer they stay in, the worse those tend to be. They get cardio problems, craquelure fractures, crumbling joints, hamstring, anterior cruciate ligament, rotator cuff. They might end up with a foot problem, wear orthotic shoes.

What you do not get is a man in his tenth decade looking like his fifth. That is not within the bounds of the normal human healthspan. The only way you get from there to here is T7 therapy, so even if Roddy is in the wrong part of town, in the wrong kind of apartment and wearing the wrong clothes—even if he's so very much not gossip magazines and sturgeon sushi and private

planes—he is what he is. Going by age and size it's just one dose, but in policing terms it doesn't make much difference. This is an entire rain of shit for the department. Titan cases by definition involve frightened rich people calling the politicians they socialise with, who call the police chief, who then wants to know everything before the cops themselves do until it's like two guys running in clown shoes, except that when they fall over one of them gets to fire the other.

Meanwhile the Titans think the cops don't really give a shit if they die, which is somewhat true. They think every tabloid hack in the world wants a photograph of a naked Titan with a knife between her ribs, which is entirely true.

I don't hate Titans, cops or journalists. I also don't love Titans, cops or journalists.

I do what I do and I try to do it right.

I poke around some more, open the box of bric-a-brac and find . . . stuff. Old train tickets; a branded baseball cap from a diner somewhere in flyover country; work gloves and a tool belt, but no tools. Receipts from everywhere, a pair of hiking boots and a bag of moss. I give the moss to Musgrave, who says thank you, she has always wanted some. I tell her I thought maybe it was important.

But I didn't, really. Roddy didn't think any of this was important enough to do anything with, and for that matter nor did his killer, assuming there was one, who had plenty of time if they wanted his box of things he couldn't bring himself to throw away.

Figure maybe that was all it was: stuff in a holding pattern between being useless and being refuse. Old people get like that, and Titans are old even if they look young. They also get fragmentary amnesia sometimes, if the dosing process was particularly traumatic, if there was a lot of pain. The brain puts itself back together, but not always completely, and it's not unknown for Titans to have little files of the details they can't quite remember,

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or a desk drawer filled with things that ought to matter, but they don't know why. The cost of immortality is losing part of who you were, and perhaps that's not a bad bargain anyway.

After twenty minutes it's clear the gold butterfly fixture is all I'm getting from the apartment unless I want to question the fish. I do not, so I tell Musgrave I'll see her later at the morgue, and she looks like that is an offer she can take or leave.

I go out between Felton and the uniform into the hall. There's a bag of takeout from last night dumped by the apartment door. The label says it was ordered at seven fifty, but Roddy Tebbit never took it inside. Receipt printout is eight fifteen.

When you stand in the hallway and smell the cold food, you realise you've been breathing death in the apartment. It's not a stink of blood or bowel, but any dying leaves a trace in the air. I feel it as a kind of thinness, like the flavour of a bone broth taken off the cooker before it's time, or the empty pages of a new colouring book.

Apartment 363 where Roddy Tebbit lived is the corner, with big picture windows. 362 is a mid-floor and 364 is pretty much the whole of the other side of the hall, although the building on that side is stepped like a pyramid, so in terms of your square meters it isn't any bigger than the other two, but it probably has a hell of a terrace. I go along to 362. There's a bucket outside. I knock. When no one answers, I ring the bell, and then knock again. Finally the door opens and a guy in a janitor coat looks out. He has greasy hair and muttonchop sideburns and no beard, and he wears a badge which says his name is Rufus. I say hi to Rufus.

"Hi," Rufus says. "You part of—" He waves at the cops.

"External contractor." Meaning I don't care about whatever his hustle is. You got to know a guy like Rufus has a hustle. "These nice people?" Gesturing to the apartment behind him.

He shrugs. "Moved out last week. Going to the west coast."

"I hear it's cold as hell."

"Well, they sure didn't leave anything behind." He sighs. Figure some people leave stuff he can sell on.

“You ever see the nerd next door?”

“The doctor guy?” He raises his hand up way over his head. Not everyone that big is a Titan. In fact right around one in every one million people is naturally over seven feet tall, for a global total of maybe eight thousand; the number of Titans in the world is a quarter of that, even if a lot of them are here, in Chersensos. But it’s not really about the numbers: Titans are red carpet, VIP lounge and champagne. They wear perfect clothes and shoes without orthotics. They’re hard money walking. So, sure, maybe Roddy Tebbit was not “that Titan guy” to Rufus. He was tall, and he was a doctor.

“Yeah,” I say.

Rufus shrugs. “Sure. You can’t miss him.”

To be honest I have been wondering if anyone will.

“He okay?” I ask. “Decent fella?”

Rufus nods. “Sure. Just some guy. Shy maybe.”

“He date?”

Rufus shrugs. “There was a girl sometimes. A lady, I guess.”

“He social with anyone?”

“No.” His eyes flick across and down at the floor, but his body twitches a little towards 364. “I mean just neighbourly. Maybe chips and dips. He’s a quiet guy.”

“Any visitors? Loud music? Like that?”

Rufus laughs. “I think one time some of his students came round and they played him something modern. Three of them. Said they were going to teach him to live a little. It didn’t take.”

“You recognise them if I showed you a picture?”

“It was a while ago. One of the girls had long brown hair, down to her legs.”

“Like brown brown or—” I don’t know what the fuck else brown. I was going to use the hair to make him describe the girl, but Rufus gets a look. It’s the look people get when they want to ask me how much I’m not a cop. Like am I not a cop so I don’t care about jaywalking? Or am I not a cop so yeah, you know, this one time in Vegas—?

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I look Rufus in the eye and I offer him cash. Rufus says it happens he is having a particularly bad month owing to some poor financial investments in the field of canine athletics. I help out with this shortfall.

Rufus ambles away to a closet and I watch him go. He has a weird gait, like Chaplin playing a sailor. I ask myself if he has smashed-up hips. I had a cousin who moved that way after a horse walked over him. I wonder whether he might have hated Roddy Tebbit for being a Titan, because Titans don't have injuries like that any more, not after they get dosed, but no one was going to give Rufus a shot at that.

Rufus comes back and he's holding a piece of brown string. When he gives it to me and I realise what it is.

"You took some of her hair?"

"Humans shed hair all the time," Rufus says. "You got long hair like that, more of it. It catches on doors, plants, on a sweater. Then it goes on the floor. This girl, she brushed her hair outside the apartment. To look smart for class, I guess."

"And you just pick it up because it's neater that way."

"I gather it," Rufus says, pious and clean. "I keep it all and I colour-grade it, and at the end of the year I sell it on."

Always something new. I think about how that works and make a mental note not to search Rufus's place unless I absolutely, positively, have no other fucking leads in the world.

"To who?"

"Embalmers. Mostly for touch-up. Sometimes a corpse will lose hair. If they can't use it outside, sometimes stuffing."

"Well," I say, "life is the process of learning shit that you never ever wanted to hear."

Rufus does not like my tone. "Well, that's her hair, anyway," he says, and he's thinking about going.

"He seem different recently? Roddy Tebbit?"

Shaking his head. "Not that I saw."

"And not yesterday, specifically? This week in general?"

“No. Hey—” People always start to get it when you ask that.
 “Hey, what happened?”

“Fire drill,” I tell him. “Excuse me.”

Whoever lives in 364 was waiting for the knock but doesn't want me to know it. I hear footsteps, rapid and nervous, and then there's a pause while they stand on the other side of the door and count silently. I count too. People count to ten because that's what they think you do. I get to nine and fix my expression, respectful neutral, and the door opens.

She's long and narrow. She has her hair shaved to the notch at the back of the skull and cut to the line of her mouth at the front, and the jacket dress she wears has a deep collar designed to drag your eye downwards from her face. I fix my eyes on a patch of air a few inches in front of her nose and look as official as I can.

“Good afternoon,” I say. “My name's Cal Sounder. I'm working with the police on a serious crime. You mind if I come in?” I badge her, properly, so she has time to read the fine print. She doesn't.

“Of course,” she says, “come in.”

She sounds sad, but there's something in her eyes like gunpowder and white alcohol.

The apartment is all-over rugs and brass jugs: Mesopotamia chic was in last year. It smells of coffee and vetiver, and in between peacock feathers there's some hardwood modern furniture, as if the Sultan always had a thing for Charlie Eames. The woman's name is Layla Catchpole. She's divorced. It wasn't a good divorce, but it's over now. Her ex-husband lives in Maui with his new wife.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Sounder?”

I play dull on instinct.

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"There's been a problem in the building, the official police are investigating, but they've asked me to step in and advise on some technical issues. I need to ask you a few background questions."

"What kind of a problem?"

"I'm a specialist in socio-medical criminal investigations."

Which sounds very white-collar, pushes everyone to think of liability and doctors making side money selling oxy, and they get happy and forthcoming. That is not what happens if you say there is a corpse on the other side of the hall. "You've been here the last four weeks?"

She has.

"Can you recall whether you were here in March last year?"

A sigh as the conversation moves further and further into the abstract. She checks her diary. She was.

"Were you sleeping with Roddy Tebbit?"

She thinks about it.

"When?"

"Whenever."

"Yes. Once."

"When?"

"When he moved in. Just after the divorce. That's quite a personal question."

"It's just routine."

"Is it now? All right. 'Socio-medical crime.' What does that mean, exactly?"

"It's a portfolio."

"That's not much to go on."

"It's the truth."

"I'll trade you answers for answers."

"Why not just tell me?"

"Because I'm bored and you're not flirting. Shall we do that instead?"

Gunpowder and white alcohol.

"Violence, sometimes. Murder."

“That’s almost rude, Mr. Sounder. You’d rather talk about death than flirt with me. What happened in my building last night?”

“Someone discharged a firearm.”

“And when this someone discharged this firearm, were they aiming it at another someone?”

“My turn, Mrs. Catchpole. You know Roddy Tebbit well?”

“Apart from the sex, no. He’s a sweet old man. You know he’s old, right?”

“I do. I was wondering whether you did.”

“Why did you ask if I was sleeping with him?”

“He’s a Titan and you’re pretty.”

“Why, thank you.”

“Just the one time. No follow-up? Never again?” She sighs and doesn’t say anything. It dawns on me that she’s in the waiting space before crying, the place people go when they’re ready, but need something to choke on, to make it begin.

“Just the one time. It was fine. Clumsy. I think he was . . . trying himself out. I think it had been a long time for him.”

“Mrs. Catchpole, would you turn your head to the side. Please.”

She does, looking to her left. A rounded earlobe peeps out under the line of hair, unpierced.

“Now the other way.”

She does.

“You don’t wear earrings.”

“Who tipped you off about me and Roddy? Rufus, I imagine.”

“You think Rufus has a thing for you?”

“I think he has a thing for women in general. I don’t think it’s a very nice thing. ‘Socio-medical crime’—that’s what you mean, isn’t it? Crime involving Titans and the drug. What’s it called?”

“You know what it’s called.”

“I do. Titanium 7.”

“What else do you know?”

“What I read in magazines. It’s a rejuvenation treatment given by infusion. It turns the body’s clock back to pre-puberty, then

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runs you through it at speed. It's also used to stimulate regeneration of severely damaged organs and limbs. It really does make you young again, but since it starts with an adult body, it also makes you bigger, hence the name. Oh, and it's so expensive almost no one has it. Strictly for the speciation rich. Did I miss anything out?"

"No, I'd say you're dead-on. The first use leaves you around twenty percent bigger. It's cumulative. I figure Roddy was a first-doser."

"What do you know about Roddy?"

I know he's leaving now, in a bag, because I can hear the gurney in the hallway. "He was a nerd. He liked fish, and work, and now you."

"Well, as you said, Mr. Sounder, he was a Titan and I'm pretty. It was a curiosity to me: a Titan, like you see in the gossip sheets, but also a little, sweet old man reborn in the body of a tennis pro. A nerd, a romantic, and a widower."

"He was married before?"

"Yes, but she died. I wondered if he spent all their money on his dose and not hers. That would be very wicked, wouldn't it?"

It would. I don't like it much, but it could be a motive for someone.

Layla Catchpole shrugs. "It was just once, as I said. For him to see what it was to be with a woman again after all that time, and for me to see if I could make him smile."

I rate her odds as good.

"And last night?"

"What about last night?"

"Did you hear anything from across the hall?"

"No."

"Not even the gunshot?"

She turns her head away.

"Maybe. There was a pop. I thought he was opening champagne."

"Alone?"

"He hasn't been entirely alone for a while."

"And you?"

“I wasn’t alone either.”

I wait, and she leans across to a table and finds a business card in her purse: thick stock, matte finish. A music industry type from out of town.

“He caught a flight this morning. Call him, if you like. It’s not going anywhere.”

“Thank you.”

“Were you alone last night?”

“Yes.”

“But I bet you don’t date witnesses. Not even after.”

“No.”

“Then I don’t want to be rude, Mr. Sounder, but I’m sure you have other things to do, and I’ve just found out someone I was fond of is dead. I don’t really want to talk right now.”

We shake hands, and I make my way to the door. When I get there, I realise I want to ask her straight if she killed him, but when I turn she’s gone. I look around and find her outside next to a sun chair, the jacket dress crumpled on the floor, her arms wide and her head all the way back so she can stare up into the sky. There are clouds up there, up above the delivery drones, and a bright winter sun that she seems to be reaching for.

I was right. It really is a hell of a terrace.

In the lobby on the way out I talk to Jerelyn the commissionaire. Jerelyn likes to talk and she’s about as tall as my shoulder. Her grandson is studying to be a doctor, she’s a Virgo, and behind the desk she keeps a hunk of pool cue. She was born in Nairobi. She grew up there. She knows how to instill respect in the rowdy. There’s a gun safe in the back room for emergencies, and her contract requires that she shoot three hundred rounds per month. She does six, and the company pays. She is not a crack shot, but she is a good one. Would I like to see her targets? Well, thank you, she is quite proud. Yes, a few weeks back she had to deal with a situation, two angry drunks trying to follow a resident into the

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building; never even went for the pool cue, just sent them home with her voice.

I ask Jerelyn if Layla Catchpole was screwing Roddy Tebbit on the regular, but I make it sound respectable.

“Mr. Sounder.”

“Call me Cal.”

“I’m not calling you anything but Mr. Sounder if you’re asking me things like that.”

“It’s my job.”

“I will not be informing anyone as to the social activities of the ladies of this building. Us girls got to stick together. Also the owner’s policy is that we do not notice comings and goings. That is my job, Mr. Sounder.”

“It’s a murder investigation.” But she shrugs.

There’s no point pretending to Jerelyn that Roddy Tebbit isn’t dead. The scene cleanup team needed her key to get the gurney into the freight elevator.

I ask her what he was like. She says Roddy Tebbit was quiet, no trouble ever. From the day he moved in he always got her name right even though he was a white guy. No, there’s no other door except the fire doors, and those are alarmed, and if you open them you’ve got about twenty seconds before the whole floor gets flooded in water from the roof tank. Oh, well, yes, and there’s a freight entrance, which she controls from here. Yes, there’s a security camera record, but the camera is over there, so it doesn’t show faces of guests as they come in. Yes, that’s a policy decision of the owner. Privacy matters here. The freight entrance is different, the camera there has a zoom function and night vision, so you can make sure there is no monkey business. Or watch the foxes. No, she doesn’t recall Roddy Tebbit having a visitor that night, but the commuter hours are busy and she’s not required to check every single entry during that time. So if someone came in at six thirty and left in the morning, she wouldn’t know. If they left before nine in the evening, really, she wouldn’t know. She is paid to keep an eye on things, but also, as she has already said, to *not*. Yes, Layla

Catchpole did come in with someone, a glossy older fellow Jerelyn took to be up to no good.

I ask her about the takeout delivery. Roddy got meals from a takeout place around the corner sometimes. Yes, he got one last night. Oh, dear, that means he did have a visitor, after all. She meant no one social. Yes, she buzzed the kid in. She uses the same place sometimes, it's not expensive. It's mostly Goan food but the chef is Hungarian. The combination works. Go figure. The kid's sweet, it's good to see a young person working with their parents. Education is a fine aspiration but there's such a thing as a family business. We need both in the world. If I go over there, tell his mother that Jerelyn says hi.

I look around for the security camera. Too high and too far away, and like she says, intended to give everyone a little privacy. Perfect for compliance and liability, not so great for an actual investigation. Gratton's people can do the hard labour, matching entry and exit to residents. That's what uniforms are for.

I give Jerelyn my card and tell her to call me if she thinks of anything she doesn't want to tell the police, and I walk out into the winter. I can smell snow between the mist and lake water, and the heat from the cars.

The Goan-Hungarian place is called Bela's but the chef's name is Atilla, pronounced like oh-tah-loh. His wife, Mâri, runs the business and she's the brains. Oh, Jerelyn from over there? That's a good woman. And yes, Mâri says, she knows Roddy. Occasionally he comes and sits in. He always orders the same things, very particular. He doesn't drink much. Always used to come in by himself. No, never with Mrs. Catchpole—Mâri does not love Mrs. Catchpole—but there was a girl, a pale, pretty girl, she looked tiny next to him but she was about the same height as Mâri. Atilla says she was a singer. How does he know she was a singer? She told him so. And when was he talking to the pretty singer, exactly? When he brought the sorpotel and the paprika feijoada. Well, he

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should keep his eyes on his cooking, then, and not disturb the female guests. I was going to ask whether the singer wore earrings, but I figure I'm not getting an answer to that now.

Atilla goes back to the kitchen, and when a kid comes through the main door with a skateboard Mâri immediately brings him over and sits him down.

"This is Andor. He made the delivery last night. Tell him, Andor."

The kid says he made the delivery last night. "But the guy never came to the door. No tip."

"Andor!"

"Sorry, Mom."

"You're not supposed to leave food. If they don't come to the door we bring it back. Keep it warm."

"But he called out to leave it."

That's interesting. "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure. I knocked, he didn't answer. I knocked again and he said to leave the food."

"Him or someone else?"

"I . . . guess it could have been either."

"Andor!"

"No, he's right, Mrs.—" What did she say the name was? "Adami. Through a door, one sentence like that, he can't know whose voice. Not to be sure. That's important. Thank you, Andor."

"S'okay." He gets up to go.

I lay a couple of bills on the table. "Since you didn't get a tip." Leave my finger on the top one. "You think there was someone else in there? Or was he by himself?"

"Someone else. I figured it was his girlfriend. I thought there was, uh," a glance at his mother, "kinda heavy breathing. Like if someone had been, uh, getting a lot of exercise."

She scowls, and he takes flight. "Do your chores!"

"Yes, Mom."

The kitchen door closes.

"Good kid."

She smiles then, like sunrise. I go outside and think about

Roddy Tebbit ordering food before killing himself, and Roddy Tebbit sitting in his chair overlooking the city, and Roddy Tebbit dead on the carpet, and I think about someone breathing heavy enough to be heard outside by a kid who had other things on his mind.

Musgrave's office is on the first floor, with the mortuary right alongside. The entire south wall is made of white smoked glass so the autopsy room can use natural light. The other wall is the cadaver bank, row upon row of square doors with corpses stored behind them one on top of the other like a library of grief.

I put my head round the door and say: "Hi, Musgrave."

"No DNA on your earring," Musgrave says.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"If you wait, I'll give you my first impressions."

"Hey, Tidbo, does she talk to you like you're a real person?"

Tidbo, the chain of evidence sergeant, looks up from his magazine and says: "Oh, shit, no."

"Hi, Felton."

Detective Felton raises his middle finger. It's like he's toMAHto and I'm toMAYto.

"Fuck you doing here?" Felton says.

"Roddy Tebbit."

"The suicide?" Tidbo says.

"Okay, if you like. But he's a Titan, so here I am."

"What makes you think he's not just a big guy?"

"He's ninety years old, Felton, so yeah, he's a big guy because someone jacked him up with T7 sometime."

"Fuck the Titans and fuck you."

"That is the general consensus."

"Take your general and consensually shove it—"

"Oh Jesus, shut up!" Musgrave says. "Felton, he was a Titan. One dose, for services rendered. Contractual perk, for God's sake. I never saw that before. Sounder, stop being an asshole."

"Fuck we need him for?" Felton says.

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“So you can blame someone when you fuck it up,” I tell him, and apparently that’s just too far. Felton raises his fist like he’s showing it to me, then turns away like he’s done. Then he actually goes for it. It’s a good punch and I don’t know if I’d slip it, because I really wasn’t expecting things to get physical, but it doesn’t matter because Musgrave, without looking, reaches back and tases him.

I’m serious. With her off hand she sticks a Taser into his backside and fires it, what they call a shunt tap: the barest contact. Felton jerks once, the strong muscles in his stomach crunching him forwards. He yells and falls over, gets his hands in front of his face so that he doesn’t break the nose, but still catches himself a good one.

“You’re welcome,” Musgrave says. “Now you’re not gonna punch a civilian consultant during an autopsy, spoil the trace evidence, and get fired and sued and all that shit.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Felton yells at her.

“You’re bleeding, detective,” Musgrave says, because there’s a little red line coming out of his nose now. “That’s a big no-no in my space.” She tosses him a bottle of aspirin. “Get him out of here, Tidbo. And you,” she adds to me, “don’t imagine for one second I don’t blame you for that shit.”

“Fuck did I do?”

“Just don’t do it any more.”

Tidbo rolls his eyes and helps Felton out to clean up. I don’t argue with Musgrave. I just sit there and wait for her to be ready, and eventually she is. She tosses me a mask and starts to cut.

Autopsies aren’t as bad as people make out. There’s a stink, for sure. In fact there’s all kinds of stink from all kinds of different places, and there’s wet stuff. But mostly what there is is a wonderful, broken thing. Most times the interior landscape is hidden, and we only get to see it when it goes wrong, but there’s an astonishing beauty beneath the skin. We are remarkable.

Musgrave is gentle as she works, and she’s not afraid to touch

the dead, even to embrace them so she can reach what she needs to tell their story. In her hands, a corpse is like one of those old Bibles chained up in a dusty room, not only the printed text and the rich colours of the pictures, but the records of marriages and births and deaths in the back pages, the history of a town. It's a shame we don't think of ourselves that way more often.

Musgrave sees me watching and puts a thermometer spike directly into Roddy Tebbit's liver.

"Time of death was mid-late evening. Call it eight p.m." She takes the liver and puts it in the scales. She makes a note and transfers it to an icebox.

"He listed himself as a donor," she tells me, before I can ask. "Livers regenerate, don't worry about the hole."

"I wasn't. You mean he's a standard organ donor?"

"Looks like."

"Would that even work?"

"Sure. Cut it in half, even, two for the price of one."

"But with the T7?"

She shrugs. "It's supposed to clear the system. Once it's done, Titan blood and cells are just blood and cells. Whether that's true . . . Search me. Not an expert."

A Titan and a donor. I've never heard of that happening before. But then, I've never heard of a Titan living by himself with a couple of koi carp, teaching and reading books. And for sure I've never heard of anybody getting T7 as a perk.

Add it to the motive list. I can already feel this case ballooning, the sheer number of possibilities getting beyond the headache stage and into migraine by end of day. Unless he really did shoot himself in the head. Then we can all go home.

"He was murdered," Musgrave says.

Of course, he was.

According to Musgrave, Roddy Tebbit was probably conscious when someone held his hand like a lover and put the gun to

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his head, then pulled the trigger. There's a void on the skin of his fingers where the burn residue was blocked. You can trace the outline of someone else's thumb: a slim hand but large—it would have to be, to go around Roddy Tebbit's. There's some bruising too, mapping the palm and little finger of that other person on his skin.

Musgrave tells me to draw the blind. When I do she flicks the UV lamp on and you can see the lines of pressure on Roddy's flesh, the ghost of an embrace. Someone overpowered Roddy Tebbit. There wasn't much of a fight about it.

Musgrave leans down close to the hand, tracing the shadow on the skin with a marker: cartoon fingers like sausages. A big man or a big woman; a smaller person wearing gloves. Maybe just a magnifying effect, a puff of wind at the crucial moment. Maybe the skin pinched by the grip so the shadow looks bigger than it was.

But probably—and this is where the ceiling falls in—most probably a human hand as big as, or bigger than, Roddy's.

Which would mean another Titan.

Bang.

Musgrave still has plenty of cutting to do, and I leave her to it. I take the waterbus across town and step out at the Reddington jetty, smelling mud and water freight, and something down by the bank that died. From one corpse stink to another, and this one's cleaner.

In my pocket there's an address written down on paper, the organ service Roddy Tebbit was signed up to. The building is a square redbrick, a converted customs barn from fifty years gone, and likely a smuggler's den or a shooting gallery a decade later. Now it's commercial, owned by a company in Nassau, so exactly that much has changed. There's a main door on the front but the one I want is round the side, the loading dock where the drones are lined up with cooler boxes, and the pilots—kids, mostly, and one or two old lags from the Afghan Raptor crews—are vaping bubblegum flavours and telling one another stories about that time when: Once I saw a woman naked on a rooftop, or a man.

Once I crashed a movie star's pool party. Once I flew a MOP bomb right into the mouth of a bunker and you better believe no one got out. Once I was a hero, or a joker. Once I was a pilot. Now I'm here.

I walk through them without stopping. They don't try to stop me. It's not clear who cares less.

I hop up onto the concrete dock and walk in. The stuff on the floor only looks like sawdust. It's a synthetic. They sweep it up at the end of each day and wash it, then lay it out again. When it gets wet, it leaks menthol, so the place smells cold and crisp, not bloody. There's a mixed production line: robot arms packing and despatching, sorting and passing to the drones. The actual harvesting—I'm sure they don't call it that—is done by humans, because however efficient the hardware is, nobody wants to imagine themselves, however deceased, being xystered and guillotined by a thing with a hundred tiny mechanical hands and empty silver eyes like a bead of mercury. I read where they bring cadavers here from all over. One of the many things the city is good at: the upcycling of the dead.

I raise my voice to call out. "Doug Krechmer?"

A man in red scrubs puts down something with a rotating blade and says: "How did you get in here?"

"Yeah, it's a regular fortress."

I point back to the loading dock. He comes out from behind the operating table so I can't see what's on it. Fine by me. I like to keep my dismembered bodies to one per afternoon, and even then, only if they're professionally relevant. "Need to talk to you."

"We don't allow—"

"I can come back later—"

"You can come back with an appointment, sir—"

"—with a dozen cops and a warrant."

Magic words. Everything human gets quiet. The parcelling machine keeps going, wrapping one little spool of nerve tissue after another in cold foil and passing it to flight control. There's a national database now, running a sophisticated placement system. Day-to-day non-specific items like nerves get put into a

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transit pattern so that wherever your hospital is there's always a package within a couple of hours' travel. The rare stuff goes to the medical spine depots and sits in a pulsatile-perfusion system getting fed nutrient soup and staying viable until needed. Life after death, unevenly distributed.

Krechmer leads the way to a spic-and-span little alcove with pictures of smiling dead people and the smiling living people whose lives they have prolonged. There are smiling relatives too, in all directions. I think it's supposed to be uplifting. It's probably not.

"What's this about? Who are you?"

I tell him my name and what this is about. It doesn't make him any happier.

"Murdered?"

People always say that like it's shocking. Murder? In this postal area? Write to your representative. Demand better service—but the truth is it happens all over.

I'm tired of telling Krechmer things I've told lots of other people today, so now I just sit and wait for him to run out of steam and tell me I can have whatever I need. It doesn't take very long.

"Did you run any assays on Roddy Tebbit before taking him on as a donor?"

"We prefer—"

"I don't care. Did you?"

"The standard tests, yes. No blood-borne infectious disease. No problematic organ damage, no addictions. He was in wonderful shape. Hardly surprising, at his age."

If he knows he's got a Titan on his books, he's remarkably relaxed about it. A murdered Titan. I don't think he does. I have no idea what effect it would have if you implanted organs from a T7 body into a normal human one. Assuming they fitted—not all of them would. I'm pretty sure it's not covered by his insurance.

"Do you have any facility for allowing a donor—" Krechmer twitches again, he really doesn't like that word—"what the fuck do you say instead?"

"Benevolent."

"You say benevolent every time you mean donor?"

"Yes."

"It's honestly amazing you get any work done at all. Do you have a facility for allowing a donor to specify the recipient?"

"Of course. Some have very particular requirements, others broad generalities. Some just want to be useful. It's a little like adoption. Though we absolutely do not accept criteria based on race."

"Did Roddy Tebbit specify?"

"Yes. He left his organs to the storage bank of a private clinic, in fact. The Travis. It's quite well regarded."

Depending who you talk to.

I tell Krechmer he's to treat the information he holds as evidence in a criminal trial. He's to lock it down, and hand over the access rights and any physical detail to Captain Gratton personally, or to me. Anything he would maybe prefer did not trouble the police, directly to me, without delay.

"If anyone asks," I say, as I'm leaving, "I came to see about making my own donation. All that badge stuff was just me jumping the line."

"And . . . what did you decide?"

"You didn't like my tone and you threw me out. You can yell at me while I'm leaving. It'll impress your boys."

I open the door and after a minute, he does. He's terrible at it, but I don't turn around, and him being completely unpersuasive makes it look pretty real.

The lake smells like must and geosmin all the way back to the office, and the air is thick and cold. The sun sets behind the mountains, snatches the day away and puts it to bed.

I climb the stairs thinking how much they don't smell like Limonene, the way the ones in Roddy Tebbit's building do. Not that my building is a dump. It's a good building with good people, and on the second landing there's a bunch of flowers in a vase that

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Mrs. Khan puts out on her little table, the one the superintendent says is a fire risk but never actually removes because he's a human being too.

It's cold in the stairwell, and the skylight at the very top is letting in a blue steel light: winter nighttime and mountains. I can see my breath curling away towards the roof.

When I go in there's someone sitting in the chair in my office. Sitting behind my desk. Not searching through my things, not holding a gun on me. Just sitting in the dark.

I know it's her. There's just something in the silence. Perhaps, at the edge of my hearing, I'm registering the sound of her heart. Perhaps it's the air moving in and out of her lungs. I used to listen to her sleep. Even changed, I know her in the dark.

Athena.

Although most everyone else in the city calls her "Ms. Tonfamecasca" these days, or just "ma'am."

"When were you going to call me?"

"I didn't want to bother you."

I hear a rumble somewhere, and it takes me a moment to realise that she's just growled, deep inside her chest like a hunting cat. "We've been through this."

"Yes, we have."

"And you promised to call."

"You promised I'd call. I didn't say anything."

When we first met, she'd put her hands on her hips like Superman in one of the old comics you see in museums now. Action number 9, World's Finest number 2.

Instead, she leans forward into the light and I see her face. So very nearly her as she was. You could look at her now and see a woman built from birth on a grand scale, the daughter of Finnish giants, a cheerleader the size of a quarterback, but more than that: it isn't just scale she has, it's density, as if the ordinary world has to make space for her, and does. You can see the challenge, the wit behind the smile, the sorrow behind the wit.

"Come on. What can I do to help?"

I sit down in the client chair and look at her.

"There's nothing yet. I don't know anything."

"You know he was murdered."

"That's not public."

She snorts, racehorse deep. "Sure it's not."

Not public, but everyone who matters knows. Of course they do.

I say: "What have you got?"

"Not much. Less than we should have."

"I hear he was dosed as a contractual perk."

"So it seems."

"You ever hear of that before?"

"It's . . . generous."

"A fucking house in Malibu is generous. I don't think there's a word for what this is. What was he doing for Stefan?"

"Something research-based, obviously. He was part of a team, but it was years ago and Stefan doesn't remember."

"Sure, why should he?"

"Yeah, like you remember client details from last week."

"I'm paid to forget those."

"And Stefan has people to remember things for him."

"So you ask Elaine? Or Maurice?"

"I don't talk to Maurice unless I have to."

Which means she talks to him in the office, but not otherwise, and as often as possible through assistants and subordinates. Maurice, Stefan's sister's son, is a human lifetime older than Athena, but roughly the same time out after his first dose. He wears his collateral status heavy and has dreams of the top floor office: years of service, deep working knowledge of the company, blah. When Athena came back into the fold—my fault—she took his job and his promotion ladder. In fairness he was only ever keeping it warm for someone else, and everyone except Maurice knew that. He wants to turn back the clock, and on some level he must know he never will. Athena meanwhile can't stand Maurice, but that's less professional rivalry and more because Maurice has a crush on her mother and Elaine lets him hang around.

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Family's never easy, but it gets nastier if everyone's rich and lives basically forever.

Athena carries on. "Stefan doesn't like this thing of my mother being the company historian. He says she should just get on with her life."

"They're divorced. It's not his business."

"Cal, it is literally his business."

"I think he's just squeamish because Maurice is his nephew and is dating his ex."

"They're not dating."

"They're not related like related. And age-appropriate isn't really an issue either."

"You think?"

"I figure anyone over eighty can legitimately date anyone else over eighty. And hey, if they actually got married, that would make him look all kinds of legitimate. Maybe he could even steal his job back."

She shakes her head. "Just none of what you said is happening."

"Sure, it's platonic. There was a great picture of them dancing platonically in the *Post*."

"You read terrible newspapers."

"It's my job."

"That's the other thing. Stefan's pissed you didn't call right off."

"How is he?"

"He doesn't change, Cal."

I don't think that's true. Stefan Tonfamecasca is a four-dose Titan. In some sense, changing is the essence of what he does, even as he remains the same ruthless bastard he's always been. The cumulative increase in height and mass takes him beyond the merely human into some new territory I don't understand. No one understands. Not even Athena, his youngest and best beloved daughter, and probably the last natural child he will ever have.

I say: "Nor do you."

She looks away, leaning back into the dark. The chair creaks. Athena was five feet five and twenty-nine years old when she was

crushed under a collapsing wall. She lay in hospital in a coma for two weeks, something like seventy of the bones in her body broken into more than one fragment, most of her organs on the brink of shutting down. She and Stefan weren't talking. He'd cut her off and she'd told him where to shove it. She was living a normal life.

With me.

I sat with her every hour of that coma, and the doctors came every day and told me it was never going to change.

So I called Stefan, and he came.

Now she's just over seven feet tall, and weighs in excess of one hundred and thirty kilos. She is the notional heir to the Tonfamecasca family company—not that Stefan ever proposes to step down.

But what she isn't, any more, is mine. And though I try to take care of her, the truth is she doesn't need it, and I do need her help.

So I swallow my pride and I ask her again what Roddy Tebbit was doing for Tonfamecasca.

"We honestly don't know," Athena says. "Stefan can't find him anywhere. He just appeared out of the air."

"Would he tell you?"

"He tells me everything."

"I hope that isn't true."

Huge eyes look into mine across the desk. She finally has a body big enough for the soul within.

"I'll call you, Cal, if I get anything more. Say you'll do the same."

"I'll do the same."

"Now mean it."

"I'll do the same."

The floor creaks as she leaves, huge hand trailing across my shoulder for just an instant, soft like snow.

I'm calling it, or maybe my bed is calling me. My apartment is tucked away next to the office; most people think the plain little door just alongside the one with my name stencilled on it is

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a closet, but it's a nice, cosy space: a galley kitchen dining, and a bedroom with a glass roof section like a little greenhouse that looks straight up into the sky. I can lie down and watch the storms as they roll off the mountains and pass overhead. In summer I have to pull the blind across or the sunrise wakes me almost before I've gone to sleep. Tonight I can sit there with my hands around a hot mug and stare into the stars, thinking of the great cloud of possibilities and motivations, things that might have happened or might not, roads and crossroads and snarls and tangles. I can fall asleep with no idea and wake up with less of one.

That's what I'm doing when Bill Styles calls and asks me if I'd like a drink at the university.

"Not really, Bill. It's been a long day."

"Come on, Cal, you need to get out more. Let's chat."

Sure, Bill.

The university is a twenty-minute ride this time of day. The bus goes over the Tappeny Bridge and along the water. The campus looks towards Chersenesos, like a message to the student body: this is your goal. If you do well; if you thrive; if you excel; one of those offices will be yours, and all that goes with it. Everything in the city looks towards Chersenesos, one way or another.

Right now the moon is rising behind the ridgeline and the campus streetlamps are lit, each casting an X of shadows over the central path. I walk through the gates and find a guy standing by himself in the middle of the court. He's short, a little plump, and he wears waistcoats and corduroy so hard you have to think he's making a statement. Oddly flat lenses in round spectacles, so they catch the light and flicker when he turns his head. I guess he has a certain image to maintain. After all, he's the Dean.

"Hi, Cal."

"Hi, Bill."

"Let's walk."

"Sure." But we're not heading for his office, so I guess I'm not getting that drink just yet a while.

A university is a small, fractious mini-state all its own, and it

has heroes and villains and victims of circumstance and it is not always easy to tell them apart when you're in the top chair. On the other hand, if you are just some guy, you might be able to go somewhere and ignore certain things that you see, and escort a talented young person home from what might otherwise be a bad place for them and their sparkling future. If you're in the top chair and you're a little devious—which is kind of a basic qualification for the job—you might seek out such a person so as to know who to call if ever the need arose, and if you were that kind of person, you might make it your business to let that be known, so that your name comes up at the right time.

Nine times, actually, in six years.

"It's so good to see you, Cal. And look: the winter honeysuckle is very fine this year. And the quince."

"I'm a sucker for quince, Bill. How did you know?"

Bill Styles used to be a moderate teacher of history, but he has the politics and the administration skills to run a place like this, and so these days he does. Bill is not some sort of holy educator. He's not even a particularly nice person. But he does take care of his own, like a goddamn lioness.

"I have an instinct about my friends. Horticulturally speaking."

"Is that what we are today? Friends?"

"I like to think that's always what we are, Cal."

"I can go with that, unless you shot someone in the head last night."

He laughs, white teeth almost as bright as those flat lenses in the streetlamp light. "If I did, it must have slipped my mind."

"You'd be amazed how often it does."

Bill leads the way down another little avenue of trees: Autumn Higan cherry, but I'm at least a week too late for the blossom. The bark is slick and black on either side of the path.

"You should have seen them in October, Cal."

"I'm sure it was lovely."

And then, at last: "I gather I'm short a professor tomorrow."

"Yes, you are. You know him?"

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“Not well.”

“Tell me. Off the top of your head.”

“Absurdly tall, of course. Young, talented, shy to the point of rude. Marine biologist by training, synthetic biologist by career. Something something freshwater algae something. Very annoying, very fussy, but he publishes occasionally, teaches adequately, and doesn’t seduce the seniors. Or the staff. I do like the absence of emotional drama from my common rooms. Should I be concerned?”

“You’re already concerned. That’s why we’re walking around with bats overhead rather than having coffee in your office tomorrow. I don’t have anything for you, Bill.”

“But it’s nothing torrid? It’s just him dead, not him and a call girl, say?”

“Was that his thing?”

“Christ, I hope not. Not that I know of. And not that I’d know.”

“No call girl. Although there is a woman in the picture. Two, actually, but one says it was over and I buy her denials for now.”

“Good god. He hardly seems the type.”

“What type did he seem?”

“Brilliant, anti-social asshole. The boring kind.”

“How’d he come to work here?”

“Direct from the University of Burfleet. Achingly well credentialed, but to be honest he was foisted on us by the board—family connections, I suspected at the time. No doubt there’s a library somewhere that I wouldn’t have without him. And as I say, so long as I don’t actually have to deal with him, he’s a perfectly acceptable addition. A good one, even. And now I’ll have a hell of a time replacing him, I suppose.”

“I’m going to need to see his office. All his correspondence. I need to know what he was working on and with whom. I’ll have to talk to anyone he was close to. There’s a student, a group of them, who visited his place. I need them as well.”

Bill shakes his head. “I can get you into his room, of course. You’ll be discreet about any confidential research?”

"Sure. Figure the black market for synthetic algae patents is a little slow this winter anyway."

"You'd be surprised. Slime sells. As for the students . . . that's a red line, as far as the university is concerned. They are the fragile minds of tomorrow's great possibility blah blah blah. So unless you're looking for something very specific—no, actually, especially if you're looking for something very specific—"

He stops because I've stopped walking, and when he turns around he has to squint because I'm standing between him and one of the lamps. I wait for him to look uncomfortable and lift a hand to shade his eyes.

"Bill, I'm sorry, I'm sure you've got a terrific speech about why you can't help me, and I'd love to hear it, but I'm really tired and you've got this upside down. The regular police are holding off for now. Giles Gratton wants this done quiet and I'm the soft option. If you give me everything, you might get away with a pro forma visit. Otherwise my case won't hold water, and the cops'll come through here like a plague of ants. They'll be in everything. They'll catch all kinds of shit they don't care about, but once it's there in front of them they'll have to run with it. Maybe the football team is juicing, maybe someone's printing MDMA in the chem lab. Maybe the head of the business school lied on her tax return. For sure there's weed growing in a closet somewhere because there is always weed in a closet, and I guaran-fucking-tee some of your students are engaged in blameless but illegal sex work to pay tuition. The cops will find all of it, some of your kids will have to be expelled, the news people will have a field day."

Bill sours behind the hand. "Are you putting the screws into me, Cal?"

"I'm throwing you a lifeline, Bill. I can help, and what I need is what you need me to do, but if you can't go there, then you can't. This is why you got me up here, remember? I was going to bed."

"I figured you'd help me calm it all down, not turn my school inside out."

"That is what I'm doing."

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“Sure doesn’t feel like it.” But he lowers the hand and we go back to walking. “What the hell is going on? Tebbit, for Christ’s sake? What’s he into? Was he a serial killer? A spy? A drug trafficker?”

“He was a Titan, Bill. It’s on his driver’s licence, he was ninety years old and change.”

Another moment for him to put that together and then he drops his head into his hands. “Fucking private limited personal health disclosure. It’s university policy, Cal. I’m not allowed to ask questions about medical status unless they are directly relevant to an acute situation. That covers his birthday, even.”

I’d feel sorry for him if I didn’t know they made that rule a few years back so that Bill’s predecessor didn’t have to trace embarrassing infections transmitted through her senior staff.

“Sleep on it. Let me know in the morning. I was going to swing by about nine, so call me any time before then.”

“You put a strain on friendship, Cal, you surely do.”

I leave him to his general sense of the sky falling and I go home, again. As I open the door the stupid part of me expects Athena to be there, the way she never is any more, asleep on the sofa or curled up in the bed. I lie down where she isn’t and listen to the sound of the wind. Up above the city there are high clouds, like a second ceiling, and the sky is orange and purple with deep spaces giving onto the endless black. Every so often a helicopter or a drone flies over. Every so often a smattering of rain comes down. When the traffic stops there’s a silence that goes on for miles.

I don’t know when I fall asleep, but when I wake it hasn’t been enough, or maybe it’s too much and I can’t tell the difference.