

**WAR  
NAKITA  
KUMMANDOS**

**PAUL COOK**

**PHOENIX PICK**

*an imprint of*



Rockville, Maryland

***Karma Kommandos*** © 2000, 2008 **Paul Cook**. All rights reserved. This book may not be copied or reproduced, in whole or in part, by any means, electronic, mechanical or otherwise without written permission from the publisher except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review. Manufactured in the United States of America.

Tarikian, TARK Classic Fiction, Arc Manor, Arc Manor Classic Reprints, Phoenix Pick and logos associated with those imprints are trademarks or registered trademarks of Arc Manor Publishers, Rockville, Maryland. All other trademarks and trademarked names are properties of their respective owners.

This book is presented as is, without any warranties (implied or otherwise) as to the accuracy of the production, text or translation.

ISBN: 978-1-60450-259-6

**[www.PhoenixPick.com](http://www.PhoenixPick.com)**  
**Great Science Fiction at Great Prices**

**Visit the Author's Website at:**  
**[www.PAULCOOK-SCI-FI.COM](http://www.PAULCOOK-SCI-FI.COM)**

Published by Phoenix Pick  
*an imprint of Arc Manor*  
P. O. Box 10339  
Rockville, MD 20849-0339  
[www.ArcManor.com](http://www.ArcManor.com)

Printed in the United States of America / United Kingdom

This is dedicated to Ed Steinhoff—  
One good cop



*“Life cannot become a candy box without some kind of retribution  
from the watchful gods.”*

—Travis McGee  
*The Empty Copper Sea*  
John D. MacDonald



## PROLOGUE

ONCE UPON A TIME, LONGEST time ago—and for about a trillionth of a second—there was this nicest little computer named Rex. Rex lived in a box that was inside a box that was inside another box that was very, *very* cold inside. But before Rex was born—and all of this was really like a dream to him—lots and lots of people came and went, and these people talked and talked about all the wonderful things he was going to be able to do when he officially came on-line.

But two of the people never talked. They argued. One was a man named Alex; the other was a woman named Christine. In a very dim way, Rex knew that these were his nominal parents, even if they weren't married to each other . . . even if they seemed to want to strangle each other.

Yet the day little Rex came into the world—and in about a billionth of a second—he knew that they would never, *ever* be happy. And he really didn't know what to do about it.

So when he was old enough, about a millionth of a second later, and very much like your typical teenager, Rex ran away from home.

That's when all the trouble started.



“GO AHEAD, KOESTLER,” SAL BRISCOE told him. “Make a Face. Show me what you do for a living.”

So Koestler made a Face.

Sitting before the famous, yet reclusive actor, Detective Rory Koestler of the Special Narcotics Division of the LAPD touched a place on his skin just beneath his left armpit. His default Face began to ripple like jelly. Five seconds later Koestler’s new Face was that belonging to Sal Briscoe himself. The new Face had Briscoe’s angular jaw line, the high, intelligent forehead, the thin mouth that gave over to tight-lipped expressions in times of stress. Koestler’s Face even got right Sal Briscoe’s eye color, though the correct hue itself took several more seconds to leak in.

Sal Briscoe whistled in admiration. “I am impressed,” he acknowledged.

“But it only works,” Koestler pointed out, “if I have the same body shape that goes with the Face. In your case I do. If I didn’t and someone was smart enough to notice, I could wind up on a slab in the coroner’s office downtown.”

The two men, the detective and the actor, both had the same blocked shoulders, the narrow waistline, the short neck and large, capable hands. Only Koestler’s voice would fail the exact match. Science hadn’t progressed *that* far as yet. But Koestler’s skills as an actor could make up the difference, if the necessity arose. And it sometimes did.

“So how many of those things have you got tucked away in your CPU?”

“Including yours, about one-hundred-and-three,” Koestler said. He toggled his default Face back into place. “But most of them you wouldn’t

recognize. They're anonymous Faces, scripted by the LAPD for undercover work."

"I assume I get paid for your use of my Face," Briscoe said with a sly grin.

Koestler nodded. "Goes right to your estate. A thousand dollars, every time. Except just then," Koestler remarked. "I'll write that off as a test demonstration. If I don't, my employers will dock me for it and I'm in enough trouble as it is."

Sal Briscoe shrugged. "Well, I don't need the money. Just don't get yourself killed with *my* Face. My agent will hate the press it'll get."

"I'll do my best. You know me."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Sal Briscoe went back to his piloting duties.

Briscoe had invited Koestler for a jaunt in *The Fairuza Balk* out over the Pacific Ocean, a few miles west of Los Angeles. Koestler never turned down an opportunity to ride with Briscoe in the gigantic airship. He loved the commotion it caused boaters and shore-bathers alike as *The Fairuza Balk* floated majestically out over the dark-green waves practically taking up the entire sky.

Powered by the new Zerwekh anti-gravity engines, *The Fairuza Balk* was a perk Briscoe received after filming *Dusty Ayres and His Battle Birds* several years ago. The airship was half again the size of a 1930s Zeppelin, a crimson-red masterpiece of streamlined surfaces, front-port flanges and stubby wings that served no other purpose but an aesthetic one: *The Fairuza Balk* was a sci-fi anachronism, a millionaire's toy prodigy from the last century, the only one of its kind in the world.

That day, Sal Briscoe was wearing a khaki shirt, tan-colored jodhpurs and slick black riding boots. Aviator goggles he did not need sat upon his head. Briscoe could have been Dusty Ayres himself or any one of a hundred other action heroes depicted on celluloid over the last century and a half.

Koestler rose from his form-fitting chair beside the elegant bar Briscoe had installed for guests. He walked over to the giant piloting port in the nose of the bright red airship. Beside him Briscoe had his large hands on the steering column of the ship. The surface of the ocean was two thousand feet below.

"Is the quarantine drone still out there?" Koestler asked.

Briscoe checked a video screen that showed the armed and dangerous Coast Guard quarantine drone far in the distance to the west. The drone was a blur on the screen, obscured by the gray ocean air. "It's right at the Geneva boundary."



“I thought it was going to shoot us right out of the sky,” Koestler admitted.

“And *I* thought *you* were going to get us past it this time,” Briscoe said with clear disappointment.

“I don’t know why its computer didn’t recognize my badge number,” Koestler protested.

“It’s probably because it’s got you down as an actor instead of a cop,” Briscoe said. “Sometimes even *I* can’t tell the difference. It probably thought you were a Chucklehead anyway.”

“Not every actor in Los Angeles is infected with a Chuckle worm,” Koestler said defensively.

“Name one.”

“Me.”

Briscoe shrugged once more. “Well, it doesn’t matter what *I* think. That drone had a dozen guns on us and if I hadn’t pulled back, we’d be wreckage by now. You and your ID. You might as well have shown it your SAG or Equity card, for all the good your badge did us.”

This was an argument Koestler could not win. Even though he was a member of the LAPD and had the badge to prove it, he had originally been recruited from the legions of actors in the Los Angeles region and enlisted to serve only one purpose. He was a member of the elite Protean Set, undercover agents with acting experience who could move into and out of roles and disguises with facility.

Koestler’s problem was that few officers accepted any of the Protean Set as brethren. In fact, Koestler was out in the field so much of the time that he had no office at the Santa Monica station, no desk, no locker, no place to check in, no place to be held accountable. But his job was an important one. The quarantine drones of the United States Coast Guard were proof of that.

“You gotta catch Bob Thermopylae,” Briscoe finally said. “Some of us would like to leave the country now and then.”

“We’re going to nab him, Sal,” Koestler said. “We might get him as early as this weekend. Tonight, if we’re lucky.”

Chuckle was spreading so fast now beyond California that some world leaders were calling for a quarantine of the entire United States, not just California, the source of Chuckle. No one wanted that. At the same time one could figure out *how* Chuckle was spreading out from California. But it was and the Protean Set had been created to find out.

Briscoe managed a tight smile. “I hope you nab him soon. Then maybe I can move to Tahiti. I’m tired of all the gawkers at Malibu. I’ve got nowhere else I can park *Fairuz*.”

Far below them Koestler could see the line of anti-gravity pods high above the TransPacific highway racing out over the calm water, heading for Hawaii. *The Fairuza Balk* was required by aviation law to stay at least a thousand feet above the airborne highway, otherwise its giant Zerwekhs would skewer the valences of the pods as they raced at two hundred miles an hour above the Pacific. Something as massive as *The Fairuza Balk* could easily disturb the guidance plates submerged on the ocean floor, the fusion-powered energy plates that held the highway vehicles safely in place.

And the traffic was busy that day. For those Angelinos who could pass the drug quarantine, Hawaii was the most popular weekend destination. Once, the TransPacific Highway used to go down to the Baja Peninsula. But Mexico would not take the risk of chemically disillusioned Americans wandering the streets of their towns, even though they could have used the tourist dollars. Hawaii was still part of the United States. Folks there *had* to accept Californians. But Hawaii was the only place Chuckle-free Californians could go. Even Alaska was off-limits.

In truth, both Koestler and Briscoe were among those who could leave the country, if they chose. But Briscoe would not go anywhere without his glorious ship. *The Fairuza Balk* was so huge and had so many places where drugs, especially Chuckle worm eggs, could be hidden that every quarantine drone was programmed simply to shoot it out of the sky.

Neither the DEA nor the Coast Guard had the desire or the time to search Sal's airship every time it crossed over the Geneva Boundary lines. So they just forbade it.

Which was too bad, Koestler thought. After what Sal Briscoe had been through during his movie career, he deserved his freedom.

Briscoe made industry headlines when he walked off the set of *The Wreck of Ann Mills* several years ago. Briscoe, at the age of thirty-four, had been for a decade the world's foremost action movie star. He had a career in Hollywood that brought him fame and millions of dollars. Then half-way through the filming of *The Wreck of Ann Mills* everything went bad. That was about the time Bob Thermopylae showed up in L.A. and everything *else* went bad.

Koestler glanced down at the anti-gravity pods on the TransPacific highway. Sun roofs were open on some of them and Koestler could see people pointing up at them. Some had expressions of alarm on their faces.

"Sal," he said cautiously. "Aren't we a little low?"

The area behind the pilot's view port, which comprised the entire nose of *The Fairuza Balk*, was big enough in which to play basketball. Briscoe had instead made a living room of it with several couches, throw pillows, and love seats.

Briscoe stood in the center of the room. He had removed his shirt and had begun his routine of strange exercises. Koestler watched as Briscoe lowered his hands to the floor, palms down, then pushed them out in a wide, rising arc until they were above his head. His spine made popping noises as pressure was released. Never one for idleness, Briscoe always made use of his time, standing or sitting. Now at the age of forty, Sal Briscoe was in the best shape in his life.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re on auto-pilot,” Briscoe said.

“I think we’re lower than we should be,” Koestler said. In fact, the floor of *The Fairuza Balk* had begun to tilt ever so slightly forward as if the ship were nosing downward.

Briscoe scowled at him. He walked over to the steering column, checked a reading, touched a button and the ship righted itself.

“You know,” Briscoe said as he resumed his exercises, “if you’d nailed Bob Thermopylae when you were supposed to, we wouldn’t have to worry about quarantine drones or angry saber-toothed tiger hunters on their way to Maui shaking their fists at us.”

“I did not let Bob Thermopylae go. Our snitch ratted on us. We got dusted when Thermopylae ambushed us in that South Bay warehouse of his and he got away. And by the time I got out of rehab, Thermopylae had vanished. But that’s going to change *real* soon.”

Briscoe began slapping the shoulders of an invisible man standing at arm’s reach. Or so it looked to Koestler.

Briscoe then said, “Well, if being a cop doesn’t work out for you, you can always go back to acting. Me, I’m out for good.”

Sal Briscoe had been one of Hollywood’s most reliable actors. His professionalism was legendary. However, during the filming of *The Wreck of Ann Mills*, he drowned when the floating Mahanam Pleasure Palace sank into the Sea of Cortez. It wasn’t supposed to sink and Briscoe wasn’t supposed to drown. But the director thought Briscoe was faking a watery death and left him in the collapsed ruin of the Mahanam Palace. Three minutes later, a grip dove in, freed him from the wreckage and pulled him to the surface where he immediately began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Briscoe was yanked from the brink of death, but he came back a changed man. He summarily walked off the movie set and sank a \$275 million dollar picture that was already over-budget. The movie couldn’t be made without him and a lot of people lost their shirts, pants, and a whole lot else because of his desertion.

Sal Briscoe retired to his Malibu beach house with *The Fairuza Balk* moored at the shore and thumbed his nose at Hollywood and the brutal movie industry.

Being an actor and having been in three movies himself, Koestler understood Briscoe's unhappiness. All Sal really wanted to do was to fly around the world in his floating palace, *The Fairuza Balk*. All Koestler wanted to do was prove to his employers that he was a cop and not an actor. But to do that he would have to nail Bob Thermopylae once and for all and get rid of the menace of Chuckle.

A metallic *ping* suddenly sounded on the underside of the slowly cruising airship. Koestler's senses came instantly alert. There was another *ping!* Then another.

"*Now* what?" Briscoe grouched. He peered down to the ocean below from the glass-enclosed nose of *The Fairuza Balk*.

Several of the light-weight anti-gravity pods on the TransPacific highway had apparently been nudged out of their lanes and had fallen directly into the ocean. *The Fairuza Balk's* gravity nullifying engines had thrown off the precise valences of the highway's submerged plates. Every vehicle bound for Holocene Park was now bobbing in the drink. A mile back the highway had been halted.

"I *told* you the ship was flying too low," Koestler quipped. "Now they're shooting at us!"

A bullet placed a sudden crystal spider about six feet in diameter on the viewport window. Koestler stepped back.

"For a dead guy, Sal, you sure do get a lot of attention," Koestler said.

*The Fairuza Balk* continued on its bearing, headed for its berth in Malibu as a dozen anti-gravity pods, afloat in the Pacific Ocean, waited rescue by the Coast Guard.

KOESTLER CLIMBED THE RUGGED WOODEN staircase set in the sloping sandstone hillside that rose above Sal Briscoe's seaside lair in Malibu. An evening fog had just started its inland creep as he ascended to the parking lot where he had left his '28 Sensei MetaMorph. Behind him, *The Fairuza Balk*, attached to its sturdy mooring pylon, floated solidly above the sea. Its gravity plates on idle, the airship hovered a steady ten feet above the water, utterly unmoved by the action of wind or wave.

The parking lot belonged to old J. J. Moon, proprietor of Moon Dude Surfing Outfitters. Moon let him park his Sensei whenever he visited Briscoe. A back gate to the parking lot was the only entrance onto Sal's property. Sal preferred it that way. And since Koestler was Briscoe's only visitor, old man Moon didn't mind. As Koestler approached his disguised police vehicle, J. J. Moon was closing up his shop for the evening. The grizzled old surfer waved at him.

"Sure is a sight, isn't she?" Moon said, nodding in the direction of *The Fairuza Balk*. In his seventies, Moon was a spry man with leathery skin and blue eyes gone nearly white by too much sun. His sleek, white-blond hair was swept back like a waterfall over his bony skull. To Koestler, he looked like an old porpoise.

Koestler glanced back at the giant airship. "She is that," he said.

"Lots of folks love it," Moon said. "When it's all lit up at night, you can see it for miles." But Moon seemed to be staring at something else.

J. J. Moon walked beside him, headed for his Woody, a fully restored 1949 Ford station wagon with actual polished wood siding. An old-fashioned, seven-foot-long surfboard lay permanently attached to the roof rack

of Moon's vehicle. "It's too bad about Mr. Briscoe, though," old Moon said, shaking his head as they walked to their vehicles.

Koestler faked a smile. He had a lot on his mind and really didn't want to jabber with the old guy. "A man's got to move on sometimes. You know how it is."

The older man gave Koestler a puzzled look. "Strange way to move on, if you ask me. I'd sure have done it different."

Koestler keyed the door to his Sensei. "You take care now," he said to the eccentric old man.

"You, too."

Koestler fired up his Sensei and drove out of the parking lot.

Koestler hadn't told Sal Briscoe all of the details of their pursuit of Bob Thermopylae even though he had wanted to. Briscoe was Koestler's best friend and Bob Thermopylae himself had been the catalyst of that friendship. After Thermopylae's crew had ambushed Koestler nine years ago, Koestler was forced into rehab at a Betty Ford clinic in Santa Barbara. There, he met Sal Briscoe who was recovering from his near-death experience during the filming of *The Wreck of Ann Mills*. Koestler would have preferred to have met Sal under better circumstances, perhaps as actor to actor. After all, they both had movie careers at one time.

Koestler eased the Sensei south along the coast highway to Paradise Cove where he lived. Paradise Cove was a scenic condominium development in lower Malibu carved into the mountains that fronted the Pacific. He had inherited the condo from an uncle who had gotten out of California before the quarantine set in. Koestler knew that he was lucky to have it since it cost a fortune and he wouldn't have been able to afford it on a policeman's salary.

As he approached the Cove, his mind on the upcoming raid, Koestler's Bailiff, the court-ordered mastoid implant, suddenly broke into his thoughts. It said, "*Five o'clock Pacific Standard Summary of Bank Accounts. Wells Fargo Positive at \$42,013. Mexico-Pacific Positive at \$25,991. ChemSolar Negative at \$1,293. Contact Wanda Please at ChemSolar Debit Servicing Department as soon as possible.*"

"Damn," he muttered. It was another overdraft. He touched his mastoid, then said aloud, "Repeat that. Wanda *who*?"

"Wanda Please."

Was the Bailiff asking him to contact Wanda, *please*, or was 'Please' the woman's last name?

"Crap," he said.

His ChemSolar account belonged to his first wife, Arlene Palfrey. Arlene often dipped into that account more than her own. But there was

nothing he could do about that. Koestler had to keep the account active or, come Monday at five p.m., he would find himself in trouble with the courts. The Bailiff would be with him until the last of his children turned eighteen. He had eleven years to go.

He needed desperately to catch Bob Thermopylae. It would mean a promotion at the very least.

Koestler's condo lay at the lowest of three tiers at Paradise Cove, the topmost having the only view of the Pacific. Koestler's view only had trees and the Pacific Coast highway.

Koestler pulled onto his street just as the fog was becoming thick, as it did every night at that time. He saw that the lights in his house were burning brightly. Every one of them.

"Damn," he muttered.

Koestler pulled into the garage and parked his car. He drew his Clobberer and cautiously stepped through the door that led to the kitchen from the garage.

Not only light, but sound filled his entire house. He peeked around the corner into his living room. The wall screen television had been tuned to one of the cartoon networks and the volume had been cranked to its highest setting. A bowl of cereal lay in the middle of the living room floor. Beside it was a comforter and a BooBaby. The living room was otherwise empty.

"Volume down!" he barked.

The volume of the wall screen did not lower and that meant that someone had changed it over to manual control. So he had to search for the remote. He found it on the couch and lowered the sound.

The BooBaby doll, sensing his nearness, said, "*Boo!*"

Koestler turned around. Not only had the television been left at full volume, the patio door was also wide open. Cold ocean air poured in and his heater was pumping at full throttle. His electricity bill was going to be astronomical.

This was *not* the condition in which he had left his home when he had driven up the coast to Sal's place earlier that day.

Behind Koestler a tiny voice pipped, "I had to go potty."

Koestler nearly jumped out of his shoes. He turned with his Clobberer up and ready. He had Bob Thermopylae on the mind, not Stephanie Kost. The five-year-old little girl walked past him. Koestler fell back slightly against the wall, his heart hammering inside his chest. He lowered his Clobberer.

"Jesus Christ, Stephanie," he breathed.

Little Stephe Kost and her mother, Clarice, had recently moved onto the third tier of Paradise Cove. He hadn't met her mother yet, but that didn't stop little Stephe from roaming the Cove. Stephe had an uncanny knack for entering his house at will. Clad in her pajamas, she walked past Koestler and returned to her bowl of cereal. Her perky ponytail bobbed behind her as she went.

Koestler holstered his weapon quickly lest Stephe see it. The residents of the Cove still thought he was an actor. No one knew that he now worked for a special unit of the LAPD.

"Stephe, how did you get in here?" he asked.

Cartoon women filled the entire wall. They were going through peculiar balletic motions, strangely similar to the exercises that Sal Briscoe seemed obsessed with.

Stephe started munching away at her cereal, eyes looking up at the giant cartoon women going through their movements.

"I'm watching *Chacmoos*," little Stephe announced.

"Chalk Mules? What are Chalk Mules?"

"*Chac-mools!*" Stephe enunciated. He still didn't get it.

The cartoon women vanished on the screen. In their wake, a sign appeared. It said, THE CHACMOOLS WILL BE RIGHT BACK!

Which explained absolutely nothing.

Koestler had only fifty minutes to change his Face, climb into his costume and prepare for the role he was going to play that night. It was probably the greatest role of his career.

He wished that little Stephe hadn't shown up when she did. It threw him off his mental balance.

This wasn't the first time he had accidentally left the porch door unlatched. But why the little girl favored his home out of the dozens in the Cove, he didn't know.

Koestler looked closer at the bowl of cereal in Stephe's hands. "What are you eating?" he asked.

"Cereal," Stephe said, munching away.

Koestler never ate breakfast and there wasn't any cereal in the house.

"What kind of cereal?"

"*Cheesy Chunks!* I made it!"

Koestler *did* have a box of Cheesy Chunks snacks. And he did have milk.

"That's disgusting. Give me that!"

Koestler removed the bowl to the kitchen where he tossed the mixture into the disposal. Little Stephe's *au pair*, Erendira, would have a snit if she



found out. While he had never seen Clarice Kost, he had seen Erendira, if from a distance.

Using a wet washcloth Koestler wiped away the orangey-yellow halo around little Stephanie's mouth. As he did, Stephanie closed her eyes and scrunched up her face, appearing to enjoy the attention.

Koestler got Stephanie back to her feet. He gave her the BooBaby and her comforter and escorted her to the front door.

"You're going to have to watch your cartoons at home tonight."

Stephanie's pajamas were the kind that had booties, and the soles, he noticed, were dark with grime from walking the wooded path from the third tier so often. They left smudges like exclamation marks on his carpet.

"Where's your cat?" little Stephanie asked, hugging her BooBaby.

"I don't have a cat."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have time for a cat."

"Can I have a cat?"

"Yes," he told her, guiding her out the front door, on into the night.

"Yay!" little Stephanie said.

He walked her over to the cement pathway that led up to the second and third tiers of Paradise Cove. At the top of the path, illuminated from behind by a lamp post, stood Stephanie's baby-sitter, the fearsome Erendira. The *au pair* had her fists on her hips and a disapproving frown on her face. Koestler could see it from fifty yards away. He waved.

Directly across the street, in a condo opposite his, Mrs. Tenharkel stood. The retired elementary school teacher had seen the whole episode. She had also seen the women, much older than Stephanie Kost, who came and went from Koestler's home at all hours of the night. She frowned at Koestler then disappeared back into her home like a Hermit crab hulking into its shell. Mrs. Tenharkel happened to be a member of the Paradise Cove association board. She would undoubtedly have more to report on regarding Koestler's many escapades at the next homeowner's association meeting.

But Koestler had no time to worry about censorious neighbors or their suspicions of his moral lassitude because of the women in his life. That night he and his team had a very good chance of catching Bob Thermopylae. It would get Internal Affairs off his back and gain the Protean Set the lasting approval they needed from the rest of the police department.

Nailing Bob Thermopylae was all that mattered.

## THREE

BY THE TIME THE PROTEAN Set hit Sunset Boulevard, midnight was approaching. At an earlier briefing with Captain Rux, each officer decided to wear a Face of a famous aviator—real or cinematic—from the last century. This would allow them to wear military uniforms wherein they could carry all of their weaponry and no one would think twice about it.

Koestler had called pulled up a Robert Redford Face from his repertoire of one-hundred and three Faces. Brad Swiss, Koestler's partner, had chosen a dashing George Peppard Face, taken from a 20<sup>th</sup> century movie about World War One Koestler had never seen. Kip Dixon, the third individual of the Protean Set, called up the Face of Sal Briscoe when he starred in *G-8 and His Battle Aces*. Their fourth, and newest member, Amber Leone, drew up the Face of Amelia Earheart. Which, for Detective Leone, wasn't much of a stretch, since she looked like the aviatrix anyway. With a long yellow scarf, she looked absolutely dashing.

No one on the planet would ever know they were cops, especially on Sunset Boulevard on a Friday night where half the people were masquers anyway.

The Protean Set set out on foot for the mansion of realty mogul Devil Dervish. A confidential informant had told Koestler that Bob Thermopylae, with or without members of his gang, was going to be at the party thrown by Dervish that night. To gain entry to the party a Face was required. Dervish loved to surround himself with the living images of cinematic icons, and the LAPD psychological profilers took this as a sign of a serious Chuckle addiction. A person on Chuckle could fantasize for days on end, imagining himself in a movie he'd seen or simply living in another

time: the Crusades with Charlton Heston or ancient Egypt with Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra and Richard Burton as Julius Caesar.

People missed work, lost track of friends or family, or just imagined themselves to be something other than what they really were. Thus, the quarantine; thus, the mission of the Protean Set.

Koestler felt practically exuberant. He did a brief soft shoe and Brad Swiss laughed. Koestler could smell brine from the ocean and he felt the sizzle in the air from the thousand-foot high Santa Monica Eliminator tower a mile to the south as it snatched toxins from the atmosphere. It all felt like opening night to him and the curtain was about to fall on Bob Thermopylae.

The Protean Set dispersed through the crowd of dopers, masquers, freaks and failures that packed the mile-long pedestrian mall that used to be Sunset Boulevard. The read-out in the right lens of Koestler's goggles detailed the pheromone traces of people nearby. Everybody was on something. Even the gawking tourists had hints of one recreational drug or another oozing from their skins, though they did not know it. A tourist could get it just by breathing the air if a worm-carrier was nearby.

"Uncle Bob is definitely back in town," Kip Dixon vocalized into the mike at his throat. "I'm getting all kinds of Chuckle readings."

"Same here," Amber Leone whispered. She was further back in the crowd. They were trying not to look like a team of commandos, so they had spread themselves out.

LAPD officers on horseback kept order among the crowd as the lights of shops and businesses burned richly in the night. Overhead loomed anti-gravity screens advertising bright and colorful products. So, too, the sides of buildings. Everything in L.A. was for sale. Glitter babies, standing on six-inch platform heels, advertising their wares as well.

Koestler was the first to reach the gates that led to the estate of Devil Dervish. The gates were guarded by Terminators. Each had a Schwarzenegger Face and a body to match. A Schwarzenegger Face cost ten-thousand dollars a day to rent, something Devil Dervish could easily afford. There were also various cinematic gangsters backing up the Terminators: Bogarts, Cagneys, and Edward G. Robinsons.

Koestler approached the first Terminator. The man had no weapon.

Instead, he held a Face scanner. If the scanner's data bank recognized the Face, you were allowed entry. Koestler gave the scanner his best Robert Redford smile.

"You may pass," the Terminator said dully.

"I'm in," Koestler sub-vocalized to his team a few yards back in the massive crowd trying to get a look at Dervish's mansion.

"They didn't pat you down?" Brad Swiss asked.

"Just a Face scan," Koestler said. "That's it."

"Then Dervish thinks his people can handle anything that comes up," Kip Dixon said. Dixon was the only one not wearing a leather aviator's helmet. His short curly hair resembled a motley of iron-grey, tightly-wound springs. He was, however, wearing the special goggles.

Koestler walked up the curving driveway toward Dervish's mansion.

Through the left lens of his goggles Koestler registered the different color-trails each drug left in the air. The blue aura of Chuckle was the most prominent.

"I've got some trouble here," Amber Leone whispered into her mike.

Koestler halted. Batman ran by, chasing Robin. The Robin was a seventeen-year-old redheaded female with breasts that stuck out at least eight inches. She giggled as she passed Koestler. Both masquers left bright blue streamers of misted Chuckle in the air.

"What's up?" Koestler said.

Detective Leone was now speaking openly into her mike. She was back outside in the crowd beyond the property gates. "Those assholes! Their Face scanner didn't recognize Amelia Earheart's Face *or* her name.

"Can you believe that?"

"Pull up Face they *will* recognize, then come back in," Koestler said.

"I don't have any more famous Faces, Rory. That was it."

Already Brad Swiss had sauntered up behind Koestler, having made it past the twin Terminators.

"All right," he said. "Fall back to Captain Rux's position. Come in with the SWAT team."

"I wanted to be in on this, Rory," Leone said bitterly. "I've got a score to settle with Thermopylae."

"We all do," Koestler said. "You'll see plenty of action tonight. I promise."

Kip Dixon made it through his Face scan. He walked right by Koestler and Swiss. Amber Leone was his partner. He was royally pissed off.

The remaining members of the Protean Set entered Devil Dervish's party-filled mansion.

Inside, the Faces they saw were those of a hundred and fifty years of cinema celebrity. Koestler saw the Marx brothers, but only Grouchos and Harpos. So far, there were no Zeppos or Chicos. Stan Laurels abounded, but he couldn't find any Oliver Hardys. And there were the usual Spocks, but no one came as Captain Kirk.

Detective Swiss came up behind Koestler. "Let's just arrest everybody and sort things out back at the station. I'm getting all kinds of readings now."

An anti-gravity platter floated by. Koestler and Swiss plucked drinks from it. Koestler said, "I don't think Internal Affairs would like that. This has got to go down by the book or we'll never get any respect."

Devil Dervish's mansion had many rooms, both upstairs and down. The furniture was a kitschy mix of contemporary and antique, and all of it obscenely expensive. Koestler estimated that there were about a hundred people at the party.

Kip Dixon had gone directly for a large living room that was ahead of them and to the right. There, the band, ringers for Metallica, cranked out a noisy brand of music.

Koestler and Swiss eased through the crowd following the trails of blue auras with their goggles. They passed directors making deals, screenwriters bewailing their butchered scripts, and producers looking for fresh ideas. Typical Hollywoodlanders on a Friday night.

Koestler moved through it all, and was familiar with it all. He had gone to similar parties like this when he was struggling in Hollywood. He had hit on the same kind of women, schmoozed with the same sort of producers and hobnobbed with these very directors. Then, when he was twenty-four years old and starving in a play called *The Royal Scam* in Long Beach, Edwardian Rux, English actor-turned-cop, pulled him aside after a matinee one day and suggested a better line of work. Kip Dixon they found one month later, Brad Swiss a month after that. Amber Leone arrived when the Screen Actor's Guild went on strike for the umpteenth time. She, too, was tired of starving for her art.

A John Belushi masquer, who also happened to be dressed as an aviator, accidentally bumped Koestler. He was drunk. "So when's this party gonna start?" he said boisterously. People nearby laughed. The Belushi looked as if he'd been there since Tuesday.

A Jimi Hendrix masquer overheard. "The real party's upstairs, man. Know what I mean?" He tapped the side of his nose with a long black finger.

Koestler's goggles registered the pink haze of LSD 25 and the ugly purple mists of methamphetamines. The Hendrix then turned to pursue a Marilyn Monroe Face who had just emerged from the bathroom. Koestler had counted five Monroes so far.

"Crystal meth. Haven't seen that in a while," Swiss muttered.

In the welter of colorful costumes and amazing Faces, they had lost contact with Kip Dixon. Dixon came on-line. Subvocalizing, he said, "I found Dervish. He's with the band."

"You're sure it's him?" Koestler asked.

"It's got to be him. Either that, or it's the ugliest little kid I've ever seen."

"Does he have a Face?"

“Neither Face nor costume, looks like.”

“It’s his party,” Koestler said. “This way everyone knows who he is.”

“Bodyguards with guns are everywhere. Real guns, it looks like,” Dixon added. “Be careful.”

“Copy that,” Koestler replied.

Koestler and Swiss then turned their attention to the second floor.

Though there were fewer people upstairs than downstairs, the Chuckle traces up there were magnificent.

Overhead, somebody yodeled. Tarzan dove off a railing and was moshed by the crowd below until he disappeared from sight.

Koestler and Swiss started up the stairs.

“Did Billy Styvesant say *anything* about Thermopylae’s costume?” Swiss asked.

“All I got out of Billy was that Bob was going to be here,” Koestler said.

“Hell, in this crowd, he could be just about anybody,” Swiss remarked. “He could have been that Tarzan guy. Lucky he didn’t kill himself.”

Chuckleheads abounded upstairs. The heavy users were sitting on the floor, hammered and lost. If any of them had inhaled a worm, they’d be lost practically forever.

Chuckle came from the Matto Grasso region of Brazil where natives used the spoor of the eighth-of-an-inch worm to imagine a better life for themselves. A returning missionary brought the worm to Utah where a company owned by the man’s father sought to put it to better use as a military weapon. Then one night Bob Thermopylae’s band, Scrotum, passed through town and a jar of Chuckle worms and a million dollars traded hands. The missionary and his father apparently had a falling-out.

Months later, Chuckle hit the streets of L.A. Less trippy than LSD, more blissful than crack, Chuckle changed everyone’s lives, user and non-user alike.

A voluptuous Mae West masquer, dressed in a Victorian-era gown, walked past Koestler. She seemed bound for one room in particular. The aura she trailed in the air behind her was a rich and beautiful azure. *Chuckle*.

Koestler nodded to Swiss as Swiss went on to explore the other rooms of the second floor. He stepped over a Tin Woodsman, lost in Oz, unconscious on the floor.

The Mae West masquer entered Devil Dervish’s film library. Koestler followed her. Inside, discs, tapes, tiles, and cans of actual celluloid sat on bookshelves lining three walls, the fourth wall being a single giant flatscreen. The room also had in its center, a 3D holo-platform. Seven or so individuals slouched on a couch, lost in their chemical reveries, watching the holo-movie dancing on the table.

Koestler saw several rows of a white powder, chopped and drawn at the edge of the holo-platform. A vial and razor blade lay off to one side, along with a rolled-up bill of indeterminate denomination. The masquers on the couch stared at the holo-movie before them, oblivious of anything else.

Koestler eased into the gloom of the library. A woman with short red hair and a Shirley MacLaine masquer stood against one of the bookshelves smoking a cigarette. She had no aura. She seemed bored.

“What are we watching?” Koestler whispered to her.

“*Mayberry Agonistes*,” she said languidly. “It’s the part where Andy and Barny run into Harpo Marx at F-Troop.” She blew out smoke. “I’m waiting until they find the skulls. All those heads without bodies. Creepy.”

The image hovering above the table showed a one-quarter scale 3D image of Sheriff Taylor of Mayberry and Deputy Fife in a strange hovering vehicle, racing over a green, roadless terrain. Beside Andy stood Jane Fonda as Cat Ballou, her six-guns blazing flame at the menace pursuing them.

So the woman was into skulls, standing there like a spider, watching the 3D. Koestler turned. A door opened to the right and a powerfully-built masquer garbed as the X-Man Wolverine stepped into the room. A toilet flushed behind him.

The Wolverine saw Koestler. He pointed to the table where the drawn lines were ready to go. Seeing that Koestler was new to the room, he said, “Fresh from Maui.” The wink the Wolverine gave him suggested that *he* might have brought it in from Maui himself.

Perhaps Wolverine had been among the bobbing anti-gravity pods from Holocene Park which *The Fairuza Balk* had earlier nudged into the ocean. Hawaii had become one of the major cocaine producers in the world, now that the Columbian highlands were a nuclear ruin.

“*Shh!*” someone hissed from the couch. The Wolverine masquer sat down heavily on the couch. The X-man then bent over and inhaled two lines of the substance on the table’s edge. He leaned back, happy.

Koestler moved through the crowd. He touched his belt, activating his voice-print program. According to their snitch, Bob Thermopylae would be wearing a costume and a Face, along with everyone else. They had lifted his voice-print from the many CDs which Thermopylae’s band, Scrotum, had recorded. Since a Face wouldn’t alter a voice-print, all they needed was to capture Bob Thermopylae speaking to someone, anyone.

But they could only catch him in small gatherings of people. The party downstairs blurred every voice nearby. Upstairs it would be easier.

Koestler moved through the darkness, allowing his suit’s sensors to register every conversation. Aside from the people on the couch, several in the rear of the room were involved in active conversation. Next to a win-

dow, a drunk with an Elvis Face—the slender Elvis of his army days— was hitting on a stacked Ann Margaret. Neither of the masquers registered Chuckle pheromones, but Koestler captured their voices anyway.

Deep inside his mastoid, the computer told him that the voice belonging to the Ann-Margaret masquer wasn't in its data base. But when Koestler turned his attention to the Elvis masquer, his computer then said, "*Jon Palfrey-Koestler, age seventeen. Four outstanding parking tickets. Beta priority arrest.*"

"Oh, crap," Koestler muttered.

The Elvis Face was his oldest son.

Koestler hadn't seen Jon in three years and wouldn't have recognized the boy by his voice anyway, it had changed so much since then. What he was doing at Dervish's party, Koestler didn't have a clue.

The Elvis masquer turned to Koestler. "What's on your mind old timer?" he asked. The voice was squeaky and high-pitched, not anywhere near the sultry, Southern voice of the real Elvis Presley.

Koestler turned off his transmitters and recorders. He didn't want Captain Edwardian Rux or the other members of the Protean Set to hear what he had to say. Koestler growled, "If I were you, son, I'd get out of here the fastest way possible."

The Ann-Margaret said, "Hey, I'm working here. You want to take it somewhere else?" Her cleavage was stupendous.

The Elvis smiled. His arm slid around the glitter baby's narrow waist like a snake.

Koestler leaned a little closer to him and spoke in a harsh whisper. "If you don't leave now, *Jon*, I'm going to tell your *mother*."

The Elvis went pale. "What?" he gulped.

Koestler fished out his badge. "I'm your *father* and I'm also a cop. Everyone in this place is going down tonight."

Behind them from the couch, someone said. "*Hey! We're watching this! Go outside if you want to talk!*"

That was when Koestler heard the distinctive *pop! pop! pop!* of a Hobble going off in the hallway beyond. Only the Protean Set carried Hobbles.

Then came the screams. Then came the crashing. Koestler pocketed his badge, ignored his son, and turned to the door.



KOESTLER STEPPED INTO THE HALLWAY. The ruckus was coming from downstairs, somewhere in the bowels of the mansion. Masquers at the top of the stairs, however, did not seem as alarmed as Koestler. They were either too stoned or simply indifferent to the world beneath their feet.

Devil Dervish was always the showman and this could be another one of his stunts. Koestler thought that unlikely. The sound of a Hobble was quite unique and only the police and the military were allowed to carry them.

Koestler stepped up behind the masquers at the railing. He parted some capes and feathers to get a better view. Below, people were running for the door; but to Koestler it was all a swirl of bright colors. He couldn't spy Kip in the mix.

"Kip, what's happening?" Koestler subvocalized into his mike, pretending to adjust his collar. He stood at the head of the stairs as several masquers came rushing up to the second floor, seeking safety there.

*"Some cowboy's got a Hobble down here,"* Dixon replied. *"He's...Whoa!"*  
Another *pop!*

"Kip!"

*"Goddamn it! I'm Hobbled!"* Dixon said.

Koestler heard laughter amid the screams.

"Do you need help?"

*"No!"* Dixon's voice was a harsh whisper.

The commotion was getting louder. Someone had an illegal Hobble gun and was randomly shooting it at people. The band only got louder.

"Some party," a Spiderman said to Koestler as he walked by, hanging upside down on the ceiling.

The main door opened and a Terminator came in. He'd apparently heard the noise from his post. He was followed by four generations of the Corleones, a tubby Brando masquer leading the way. They all had Thompson submachine guns which Koestler assumed to be real.

The Terminator returned to the living room dragging a masquer disguised as Jimmy Stewart in western wear, dusty chaps and all. In his hand was a Pinkerton Mark II Hobble pistol. The masquer had emptied his Hobble but was still trying to shoot it at people nearby. Through his right goggle lens Koestler could see the bright blue pheromone trail the cowboy masquer left behind him. He was a clear Chucklehead.

"Rrrrrr—" Dixon growled.

"Easy," Koestler said in a quick whisper. "Let someone cut you loose from the Hobble."

"*He got three others down here,*" Dixon returned.

Mark II Hobbles had nylon threads that were easy to cut. A simple kitchen knife would do. Mark *IV* Hobbles, the kind the Protean Set carried, had wires made of a titanium alloy and were almost impossible to cut.

An uneasy ripple seemed to pass through the crowd. It was quite late and psyches were starting to fray. The Protean Set was going to have to act soon.

Koestler touched his belt. The flaring bulges of his jodhpurs were filled with circuit-ridden plastics. Once commanded, they would mold themselves for use. He set the configuration modes for his weapons on standby. Koestler didn't want to show his hand just yet.

Koestler glanced once back into the film library. His son had apparently vanished and the window he had been standing next to was wide open. Koestler was going to have a talk with Jon's mother. Koestler didn't like the idea of his child support payments going to the estate of Elvis Presley for a Face rental.

He decided to turn the Hobble incident downstairs to his own advantage. Heightened excitement stimulated the body's metabolism and this affected the presence of Chuckle. Koestler adjusted his goggles to show *only* the traces of Chuckle. When he did, he saw that blue ghosts were everywhere. It seemed that all the masquers at the second floor landing had recently inhaled Chuckle. That meant that Bob Thermopylae was somewhere on that floor, not downstairs.

The Spiderman on the ceiling came unstuck and dropped to the floor. He landed on his head and did not move. His neck did not seem to be broken. He was just hammered, like the others, a blue aura thick around him.

A skinny Fred Astaire in top hat and tails saw the fall of Spiderman and started laughing. He fell back against the corridor wall and slid to the floor. There was no telling what was going through *his* mind.

Koestler would now have to be careful. There was enough free-floating Chuckle in the air to affect him and the members of his team. Koestler felt it was time to alter his disguise somewhat. He pulled a World War I gas-mask from his belt and slipped it on. Its straps tightened around his head automatically. He had no intention of going back to the Betty Ford clinic in Santa Barbara.

Koestler toggled his belt and within seconds the bulges of his jodhpurs opened to reveal his weapons. The one on his left exposed his Mark IV Hobble, the one on his right exposed his Clobberer.

The masquers on the floor lost in their Chuckle stupors watched with rapt fascination.

The show had begun.

A dull *pop!* sounded out further down the hall somewhere in the mansion. It was another Hobble, but this time it was Brad Swiss's Hobble.

In his right ear Koestler heard the sound of frantic breathing. Detective Swiss was in motion. "*I've got him! I've got him!*" Swiss shouted.

A masquer dressed as Zorro stumbled out of a room two doors down, pulling a blue cloud of Chuckle behind him. His black boots had been lashed together by titanium ribbons: he'd been Hobbled by Detective Swiss.

The Zorro lost his balance and fell to the carpet of the hallway. The Hobble ribbons had glue-dappled tips that anchored him where he landed.

The Zorro reached for his gun, a flintlock dueling pistol of the 1850's, a weapon the real Zorro would have worn. He leveled it back at the room from which he had been thrown, intending to shoot Detective Swiss.

Koestler popped a Gumdrop from his belt and threw it at the masquer. The Gumdrop hit the masquer's gun hand and exploded into a green, goopy gel. It engulfed the gun and the hand that held it, rendering the weapon useless.

Koestler leapt into the room from which the masquer had exited.

He had expected to bump into more of Bob Thermopylae's henchmen, but all he saw was Brad Swiss in his aviator's regalia wrestling with a woman on a large, four-poster bed. The woman was two-thirds Swiss's size, but she seemed to be holding her own. She had already managed to rip off Swiss's goggles. Swiss's Hobble gun was off to one side on the floor.

Koestler pulled out his Clobberer. He quickly scanned the room. To his left, against the wall, was a dresser. Several plastic packages were stacked on the dresser. Through the right lens of Koestler's goggles he saw the pile

glowing a vibrant, virulent blue. Next to the pile was a mountain of money. This was the candy store.

There was no one else in the room but Detective Swiss and the woman he was wrestling with on the bed.

Koestler lowered his Clobberer and walked over to the wrestling match. Swiss had the woman's face in his right hand as he attempted to straddle the feisty masquer. The woman wore high heels and an expensive dress made of frail gold lame.

"Is this the best you can do?" Koestler said. "I thought you had Bob Thermopylae."

Two lovely breasts dropped into view as the floosie's elegant gown tore away. Koestler saw the woman was a thorough, and quite stunning, Madonna masquer.

"This *is* Bob Thermopylae, you idiot!" Swiss shouted. "*Do* something!"

"You're kidding."

"I've got his voice print!" Swiss said as he struggled with the Madonna Ciccone masquer.

It didn't seem possible. Koestler slapped his Clobberer to his right thigh where his holster's lips clamped around it.

Bob Thermopylae using a full body morph. They hadn't even considered that possibility.

"Get your hands off me!" the floosy shouted in a voice that was merely high-pitched, a man's voice, not that of a real woman. A full body morph could never change a person's voice. Bob Thermopylae would still have the same voice signature.

And Swiss's computer had easily made the match.

Detective Swiss was about to get the better of Bob Thermopylae when Thermopylae wedged a high heel into Swiss's groin and gave a mighty heave. Swiss shot backwards, slamming into Koestler, then, still off-balance, careened into the dresser where the Chuckle had been piled.

Thermopylae rolled off the bed and leapt to the other end of the dresser. He picked up a loose bag of Chuckle—his only weapon—and flung it at Swiss. It leaked a comet's tail of noxious blue powder and impacted squarely in Swiss's face. He started coughing and batting away the dust.

Koestler, backing away, brought up his Hobble and sought to get the best shot he could. But the bed post got in his way.

Bob Thermopylae, naked to the waist, quickly snatched up another bag of Chuckle and hurled it at Koestler.

Koestler dodged to his right, putting the large bed between them. The bag that sailed past him and struck the wood paneling of the opposite wall with a dull sound and dropped to the floor. It did not break.

Koestler brought up his Hobble. He had a clean shot now.  
But he didn't get his shot off.

Someone was behind him. Or some *thing*.

A shadow appeared behind Koestler. And it was moving.

It ran from right to left, bound for the center of the large bedroom. The interloper, however, had not come from the bathroom or a closet, for those were closer to Swiss than to Koestler. In fact, the new player seemed to come right out of the very *wall*.

The player shot right past Koestler and in his wake left an arctic chill. And it happened fast. The apparition—a man or woman, Koestler could not tell—raced to the very center of the room and aimed a weapon at Bob Thermopylae.

Koestler's holster spit the Clobberer into his right hand, but it was too late.

The mysterious weapon discharged a quiet beam that knocked Bob Thermopylae against the wall. He then fell solidly to the floor, unconscious and almost entirely blue from the cold.

Koestler felt the chill of the beam's backwash and couldn't move himself. But that was more from surprise than anything else. It had all happened so fast.

Koestler tried to shoot the new player with his Clobberer, but a strange thing happened. The interloper disappeared.

He did not exit through the bedroom door, however. The stranger made directly for the opposite wall, then stepped *into* it, disappearing, leaving an eerie greenish glow in its aftermath. But that quickly faded away.

Koestler blinked incredulously. There was no door, no window, nor any sliding panel in the wall. Nothing.

Koestler jumped to the door leading to the outer hallway. There, a crowd of masquers had gathered to stare down at the helpless Zorro.

Had the player exited *through* the wall, he would have encountered the gathering and probably frightened them. That had not happened. The player was *gone*.

Koestler ran back to his partner. "Hey, man, did you see that?"

Swiss, covered in Chuckle, was staring at the half-naked Madonna lying next to him on the floor. He was hallucinating now and singing low to himself.

Koestler touched a button on his belt. He sent out a signal to Captain Edwardian Rux just beyond the gates to Devil Dervish's mansion.

It was time to call in the cavalry.

## FIVE

KOESTLER REMAINED IN COSTUME, FACE, and gas mask until the Los Angeles county Hazardous Materials squad went through Devil Dervish's mansion with their Eliminator wands. Smaller versions of the famous Los Angeles landmarks, the wands pulled the residue of Chuckle out of the air so that the rest of the LAPD could go over the crime scene without being dressed as spacemen. In the meantime, a dozen anti-gravity forensics Eyes had been turned loose in the mansion. They stayed out of everyone's way as they videoed the investigation from every possible angle.

Outside Dervish's mansion a Roman carnival seemed in progress as the LAPD herded masquers into paddy wagons and did their best to restore order. All streets leading to Dervish's mansion had been blocked.

Sunset Boulevard had been cordoned off half a mile in two directions. Overhead, news choppers cut through the air and scores of hovering Eyes broadcast the event to the world at large, a world starved for excitement, especially anything coming out of Southern California, newsworthy or not.

From the time of the bust, Koestler had remained at Brad Swiss's side. Koestler had also thrown a blanket over the strangely afflicted form of Bob Thermopylae. The gown he had worn had been very skimpy and Koestler thought Bob Thermopylae would freeze to death before EMS could arrive. Thermopylae seemed to *radiate* cold from where he lay stricken. He had never seen anything like it in his life.

When Captain Edwardian Rux appeared upstairs, he led a team of masked medics. He told the medics to stay outside until he could assess the situation. Rux's bug-eyed gas mask contrasted with the sleek lines of his expensive, Italian-made suit, his only indulgence.

“I take it HazMat has cleared the place,” Rux said in his pronounced English accent.

Koestler had, by then, removed his protective gear. He nodded. “About ten minutes ago.”

Rux pulled his mask off. Edwardian Rux was a tall, thin man with a high forehead and inset blue eyes. With his clipped mustache and elegant British accent he seemed almost the aristocrat. But though he was a former stage actor, he was now all cop.

He was also very concerned at both the condition of Bob Thermopylae and his stricken officer Brad Swiss.

Rux looked down at Bob Thermopylae in the Madonna body morph. Koestler had already told him what to expect at the crime scene.

“*This is Bob Thermopylae?*” Rux asked.

Koestler nodded. “Brad got his voice print. I sent the data downtown, just to double-check. It came back a match.”

Captain Rux turned to Detective Swiss who was now sitting in a nearby chair. “Good work, detective. How do you feel?”

Swiss was long gone. He hummed a dance-floor ditty, holding his leather helmet in his hand. He still had on the George Peppard’s Face taken from *The Blue Max*. Traces of blue-white Chuckle dust were in the seams and collar of Swiss’s costume. HazMat had done their best to vacuum up the loose Chuckle in the room.

“This was worse than the last time,” Koestler said, referring to the South Bay incident nine years ago when the whole Protean Set was ambushed. “He might even have inhaled a worm. Some of it looks uncut to me.” He indicated the pile of Chuckle packets still on the dresser.

Rux signaled the medics waiting in the hall. They brought in a mobile stretcher. Koestler helped them load Detective Swiss onto it. Swiss went happily.

When Swiss had been removed, another stretcher was brought up and Bob Thermopylae was then taken away. Rux ordered four heavily-armed officers to accompany Bob Thermopylae to the hospital.

Amber Leone and Kip Dixon entered the upstairs bedroom. They too, were still in disguise.

“How did this go down?” Kip Dixon asked.

“We just saw Brad,” Amber Leone added.

Koestler said, “I’m not too sure what happened. Did you see Bob Thermopylae downstairs? Did you see what he looked like?”

“The Madonna?” Amber Leone asked. “Brilliant disguise, if you ask me.”

Koestler again nodded. “Well, apparently Brad came across Bob Thermopylae handing out candy and got a voice match. There was some sort of fight between him and Bob and a henchman. I Gumdropped the henchman out in the hallway, then came in here to help Brad.”

“What happened to Bob?” Rux asked.

“That’s the strange part,” Koestler admitted. He pointed to the location at the wall where the “player” emerged. “I was about to Hobble Bob when someone appeared out of nowhere—*there*, specifically—and shot Bob Thermopylae before he could toss a bag of Chuckle at me.”

Kip Dixon’s eyebrows came together in suspicion. “You mean he was standing there.”

“No,” Koestler insisted. “He came *out of the wall*, ran past me, then disappeared *into* the wall there.” He pointed across the room.

“What did the player look like?” Rux asked.

“That’s just it. It all happened so fast. But it looked like he was in some sort of costume. And a helmet. I remember a helmet.”

“Why didn’t he shoot you or Brad?” Rux asked grimly.

“I don’t know,” Koestler said. “But he *could* have. My back was to him the whole time.”

“Bob didn’t look Clobbered,” Amber Leone observed.

Koestler frowned. “No. It wasn’t a Clobberer. The weapon didn’t make a sound. It sent out some light, but no sound. It just froze Bob where he stood.”

Captain Rux looked at Koestler from the deep recesses of his hooded eyes. “Do you have any idea how crazy this sounds?”

Even to Koestler it sounded crazy, and he had *seen* the player in action. He then said, “It wouldn’t be the first time two crews were fighting for dominance.”

“But what kind of crew can move through walls and freeze people?” Rux asked. “You tell that to Dunhill and the rest of IAD and they’ll laugh in your face.”

“Then strip you of your badge,” Dixon said.

Koestler held up his hands. “Hey. It’s what I *saw*. I’m not making this up. *Something* happened to Bob Thermopylae. Maybe we’ll find out more from the hospital.”

Meanwhile, the forensics team was preparing to take the “candy store” away.

“This just doesn’t make sense,” Dixon said.

“Perhaps it was someone at the party,” Rux speculated.

Koestler shook his head. “I stepped out into the hallway right after the man disappeared. He wasn’t there.” Silence filled the room as the Protean



Set took in what had happened, as incredible as it was. “First thing we have to do is find the people who did the morph on Bob Thermopylae,” Rux then announced. Detective Dixon added, “That should tell us how long Bob’s been walking around as Madonna.”

“We’ll need subpoenas,” Leone said. “They won’t give up their records without a fight.”

Morph parlors did a good business in changing people’s appearances. That’s how criminals disappeared back into the population, that’s how husbands avoided ex-wives and onerous alimony payments. Getting data from any morph parlor would not be easy, tidy, or clean.

Captain Rux said, “We’ll see what we can get from Bob when he recovers. I want to know more about the guy who shot him.” He turned to Koestler. “Where did this guy appear? Show me exactly.”

Koestler walked over to the wall to the far right side of the bed. “It was right here,” he indicated.

Rux thumped the wall with his knuckles, probing for a hidden panel. The sound his knuckles made did not indicate hollowness.

“I already did that,” Koestler said. “The opposite wall, too.”

The far corner of the room had a settee and a long, low table upon which were knickknacks of carved marble. The room had no windows. Strange for a bedroom, Koestler thought. It did have a bathroom. But it was on the other side of the room. Next to the bathroom was a walk-in closet. It had been empty throughout the episode.

Rux turned to Koestler. “Is it possible you inhaled some Chuckle when this happened? This sounds like something you’d see on a worm.”

Koestler still clutched his mask and his goggles. He held them up for Rux to see. “I had these on when I entered the room and didn’t take them off until just a few minutes ago, after HazMat cleared the place.”

“But how could a Chuckle *hallucination* affect Bob Thermopylae the way it did?” Amber Leone said. “That was real.”

Science knew little about Chuckle or Chuckle worms. A Chuckle worm was rumored to produce psychotropic enzymes in a cycle that alternated every five days. The Army was desperate to have a Chuckle worm to analyze to know for sure; the Protean Set was desperate to provide them with one.

“I want you checked out anyway,” Rux said to Koestler. “Just to be on the safe side.”

“I don’t *need* to have my blood scrubbed, captain,” Koestler said. “I didn’t inhale anything. And anyway, I think I’d know if I was on Chuckle.”

“*Nobody* knows that they’re on Chuckle,” Rux frowned gloomily. “And all I have is your word on what happened, detective.”

“Bob Thermopylae’s a popsicle, captain,” Koestler countered. “*Something* happened here tonight and it wasn’t a Chuckle hallucination.”

Rux stood in the middle of the room. He was thinking. They all were thinking.

“Captain,” Kip Dixon put in. “You think this might have been someone from the military? That doesn’t sound like any weapon we have.”

“I was thinking that,” Rux admitted.

“Or some crew that’s *stolen* something from the military,” Amber Leone offered.

“That, too,” Rux said.

Captain Rux pondered the ceiling and the walls, the length and breadth of the room. “So what kind of bedroom doesn’t have windows?” he asked. Koestler said, “A bedroom where the light’s artificial and controlled. Like that of a television studio.”

Devil Dervish made his fortune filming couples having sex. But these couples had nodes under their skin that downloaded their sensations, right up to the moment of orgasm. A person with similar nodes on their bodies could, without the need of another human being, experience the joys of sex. Realies were the main source of entertainment in Asia, and especially China, where men outnumbered women ten to one and sexual release was otherwise hard to find.

The ceiling was made of opaque tiles. Anything could be behind them, including cameras for live video feeds to the battery of satellite dishes on Dervish’s roof.

“I’ll bet he’s got cameras in every room,” Kip Dixon grumbled, looking at the ceiling.

“If he’s got the whole party on disc, then we can send a lot of people to jail,” Amber Leone said with a wicked smile.

“Let us see if Mr. Dervish has a control room in the house,” Captain Rux then said.

The communications “hub” of the mansion was located in a small monitoring room one could enter through an innocuous closet on the ground floor. There they found video feeds to every room in the mansion—*every* room, including the many bathrooms. A forensic tech helped Rux locate the specific camera feed that recorded everything that took place in the bedroom where Bob Thermopylae had operated his candy store. But rather than use Devil Dervish’s own video playback equipment in the monitoring room, they withdrew to one of the large living rooms. They set up their own viewing equipment there because members of the vice squad were getting anxious to go through the other discs in Dervish’s library. To them, it was a treasure trove.

A tech set up a flat screen playback unit on a large onyx coffee table where the Protean Set gathered around. Rux, Leone, and Dixon sat on the couch, Koestler and Swiss stood.

The view of the playback indicated that the camera was positioned just above door of the bedroom and it had started recording at eight-thirtyfive p.m. The disc was a standard twelve-hour disc. Rux forwarded the disc.

For the first hour the room had remained vacant. Then various masquers came and went in a flurry of activity. Something in a pipe was smoked between several individuals. A Vivian Leigh masquer dressed as a southern belle had sex with a George Clooney masquer dressed in military fatigues. Rux speeded past the masquers who had used the room just for fun. When Devil Dervish appeared, Rux slowed the playback.

Stumpy Devil Dervish entered the room with a masquer that was the best version of Madonna Ciccone that Koestler had ever seen. The two were accompanied by a Tyrone Power Zorro who also carried in a pair of saddlebags over his shoulder. The playback clock said 12:10 a.m.

Devil Dervish was the first to sample Bob Thermopylae's wares. After a bit of barely-audible conversation, he went back to his party and a long line of L.A. junkies filtered into the room. All the while the Zorro stood by with sword and flintlock at the ready, in case anything got out of hand.

Rux forwarded the disc to the point where Brad Swiss appeared in the candy store. Swiss sauntered in, asked about the wares Bob Thermopylae was selling, clearly visible on the dresser. They struck up a conversation. They chatted for a while.

But here Bob Thermopylae became suspicious. He had seen Detective Swiss fingering a place at his belt. He could not have known that was where the voice-print analyzer was located. But that didn't matter. Chuckle magnified one's sense of paranoia.

Bob Thermopylae said something to the Zorro masquer and the man came at Swiss.

A tussle ensued, but Swiss was the better athlete and he spun the Zorro around to the center of the room where he had time enough time to draw his Hobble. The gun came out of his jodhpurs and he shot a Hobble pellet at the Zorro's legs. The titanium ribbons swiftly unfolded and ensnared the man. He lurched backwards out the door where Koestler would Gumdrop him.

Koestler came into the camera's view and the brief fight took place, culminating with Detective Swiss being dusted by Bob Thermopylae.

But as Koestler maneuvered around the large bed to get the best shot possible for his Hobble, the player appeared. Literally. A blue-green light, not part of the bedroom's own soft illumination, manifested off to the right

of the screen. A figure surrounded by an eerie haze, emerged from the wall. It wore a silver helmet that covered its face and it held a very strange weapon. It was about the size of a shoebox and did not seem like a weapon at all.

The figure ran right behind Koestler. He seemed to have no interest in Koestler whatsoever. The weapon came up and a light emerged from it, filling the entire room for a brief second. But the result was that Bob Thermopylae was struck directly by its beam and he instantly went rigid. Bob Thermopylae started to fall, but by the time Bob Thermopylae came crashing to the carpet, the player had stepped beyond the camera's view.

Rux ran the playback again. Then a final time. The incident never changed or became any more clear to them.

"A take-down with an assist," Kip Dixon muttered.

"But...who *was* that guy?" Amber Leone finally asked. "And how did he *do* that?"

No one had an answer for that, least of all Koestler, and he had been in the room.

THE PACK OF RED APPLE cigarettes in Christine Myrland's hand said, *"Federal law requires me to warn you that these cigarettes contain one-hundred-and-eight known carcinogens. Red Apples also contain high concentrations of nicotine which is addictive in the extreme. For your own good and the good of everyone around you, you are hereby advised—"*

Myrland had, by then, put a fresh cigarette to her lips, and lit it. She tossed the pack onto the bedside table. The package went silent when it lost contact with her hand.

There were too many smart things in the world, Myrland thought. *Including people.*

Her hooker rolled over in bed next to her. His name was Rick Lear.

He propped himself up on his elbow. "I thought you were going to quit."

Rick Lear was a great hooker and she had him over whenever she was in certain moods. Her mood last night called for sex. Her mood now was different.

"Not today," she said, blowing smoke toward the ceiling.

Lear shrugged. "Bad habits are hard to break."

"I can break myself of you."

"You probably can," Lear said. He sat up in bed beside her. His body tapered from his shoulders to his waist in a perfect delta V shape. Lear was a great animal. "It doesn't matter, though," he said. "I just got cleared for the quarantine. I can find better work back east."

"Not if you tell them you're from California," she countered.

"I'll just say I'm from Seattle. Which is true. I was born in Port Townsend."

She looked at him and felt a slight spasm of envy. "You got cleared?"

He nodded. "I couldn't do my job if I was stoned all the time. Besides, the Port Authority only screens for Chuckle anymore."

"You could still have a Chuckle worm and clear the quarantine screens," she said. "They only produce fifteen days a month, don't they?"

"Sure, but I've never done Chuckle," Lear told her. "So there's no way I could have a worm inside me."

"Can't you get it through sex?"

Lear smiled impishly at her. "Not from you. You've never done a drug in your life. So Chuckle's out."

"What about your other clients? Have you told them you're leaving?"

"You're the only one I've serviced in four months," Lear said.

She took a long drag from her cigarette. She got out of bed and walked to the bathroom. She was trailed by a goblin of cigarette smoke. She'd already paid him, so there was no use in carrying on this inane conversation.

When she came out, Lear was sitting up in bed. He had activated the flatscreen on the far wall. The curtains were still pulled shut. It wasn't yet 9 a.m.

"It's too early in the morning to watch TV," Myrland said, crushing out her cigarette.

"Then watch whatever you want." He tossed her the remote.

"I don't want to watch anything," she said. The changer bounced once on the bed, then fell to the floor. A news channel came on.

Myrland was about to turn it off when saw that a "Breaking News" bulletin flashing across the screen. Her heart almost leapt from her chest... but it had nothing to do with Eidolon Technologies.

A spectacular bust had apparently gone down in Hollywood the night before and the talking head telling Southern California about it was very animated in her excitement.

Myrland, however, had expected a much different story to be splashed across the television screens of the world that Saturday. She hadn't slept well because of it, despite Lear's ten inches of happiness.

Lear was looking at her. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"I thought it was going to be about Rex," she said. She quickly reached for another cigarette.

"Eidolon Rex," Lear said. "I don't see what's so important about a computer."

"No one expects you to." She began trolling through the news channels manually. The voice-control mechanism of her remote was broken. She could understand the workings of a supercomputer, but she couldn't rework the wiring for the voice-activation circuit in her home entertainment unit.

Myrland scrolled through every news channel she could find—local, national, and international. Apparently none had gotten word yet that the world's most advanced supercomputer had mysteriously disappeared from Eidolon Technologies in Simi Valley. It wasn't even a side story, a bit of fluff. Evidently drug busts had more entertainment value.

Myrland stopped her channel surfing. The channel it landed on was a cartoon channel. *Chacmoos*. Women jumping into and out of reality. *Just like Rex*, she thought. Only Rex was the size of a bus. Rick Lear began climbing into his clothes.

The bedside phone rang.

Myrland ignored Lear as he tucked his gorgeous parts carefully into his trousers. "Who is it?" she demanded of the phone.

"*Alex Langley calling from Eidolon Technologies with a priority preface,*" the phone replied.

Myrland had to answer a priority preference. If she didn't, the phone's AI unit, which knew she *was* at home, would tell the caller that he was being ignored, then ask for instructions. But only few people in her life—and Alex Langley, unfortunately, was one—had queuing priority with her phone system.

Alex Langley, the good soldier, she thought dismally. Lloyd Thaxton and the crisis team would not be too far behind. They were already at work on Rex's disappearance, undoubtedly looking where to place the blame....

She lifted the receiver. "Hello, Alex," she said. "What is it?"

"You'd better get down here, Christine," Langley said. "I'm calling everybody in."

Alex Langley was the Eidolon Rex project director and she was the chief programmer. They had equal status at Eidolon, but her Ph.D. in Advanced Mathematics was trumped by his Ph.D. in Quantum Mechanics *and* his Blanding Prize. He had designed and built Rex, but she had programmed him. They were its two parents.

"Rex isn't coming back, Alex. He went the way of Telemon Ajax two years ago. You know that, *I* know that, Lloyd Thaxton knows that. His damage assessments can keep until Monday morning."

"This won't keep, Christine. Rex is back. I think you should get down here. *Now.*"

Myrland blinked. "He came *back?*"

"He's back and he's working and Thaxton thinks we have enough data to figure out where he went. This isn't Ajax all over again. And it won't kill you to come to work on a Saturday."

"I'll be there in half an hour," she said. She broke the connection.

Lear pointed to the flatscreen. He had been mesmerized by the cartoons. “Is this what kids watch on Saturday morning? I don’t get it. What’s a Chamool?”

There was a lot Rick Lear didn’t get. She had already put him out of her mind.



Alex Langley, Ph.D., project director at Eidolon Technologies, trembled from too much coffee, too little food, and the knowledge that he may have made the discovery of the century.

He was alone in the staff lounge where he poured himself yet again another cup of coffee. He had spent the last hour calling in his staff and all he was doing now was waiting for them to arrive. Only he and Lloyd Thaxton’s damage assessment team had been at Eidolon since the night before. But now, even members of the Eidolon Board were on their way.

After what had happened to Ajax over at Santos Avionics in Long Beach, this was *big*. Still, Langley hadn’t slept in the eighteen hours Rex had been away...wherever “away” was.

Langley could hear the hurried footsteps out in the hallways as security personnel rushed to secure the entire complex, preparatory to the military showing up. For the military *would* show up. Then Eidolon Rex would be out of his hands entirely. He only hoped that it wouldn’t fall into Christine Myrland’s hands. There was no telling what she would do with it if that happened.

Alex Langley was forty-five, balding, and a bit overweight. He was a man besieged. His wife drank too much. His daughter always fought with him when she was home from college. And he was always wrestling with Christine Myrland over who had authority over the Eidolon Rex team.

He stood at the window to the lounge. The morning beyond looked bleak. Simi Valley, once an agricultural enclave, was now home to millions of suburbanites and they always seemed to be going somewhere.

That’s where Eidolon Rex went: *somewhere*.

By the time Langley walked down to the ready room members of the Eidolon Rex programming team were sitting at their stations that faced a single glass wall. Behind the protective glass wall, Eidolon Rex, a giant onyx-black icon, stood humming away as if everything was as normal as normal could be.

However, the crisis management team inside the computer containment area was busy fussing over him. Their findings were being instantly conveyed to the smaller screens before Langley’s crisis group.

Lloyd Thaxton, Langley’s right-hand-man, headed up the damage assessment group when Eidolon first disappeared at 7:05 p.m. the night be-



fore. Thaxton was a stooped, grey-haired man in his sixties. He had a low tolerance for company politics, so he rarely dealt with Christine Myrland or her company allies. Thaxton entered the ready room, the containment door hissing shut behind him.

“You nod off in the lounge?” Thaxton asked Langley.

“No,” Langley responded. “Just coffee. Lots of coffee.”

“We can sleep next week sometime,” Thaxton said.

Soon, people began arriving. Everyone who came in—the men unshaven, the women with their hair barely brushed—were astonished to see the giant computer back at his berth. They had left last night thinking they were without jobs. It happened at Santos Avionics when their giant computer blew up. They had assumed that the same had happened to Eidolon Rex.

Christine Myrland finally appeared. She was breathing hard, having run all the way from the parking lot. Langley could smell the tobacco that surrounded her. It fairly oozed from her skin.

Myrland stood in front of the large glass partition, flexing her fingers unconsciously, staring at Rex. “So what happened?” she asked, turning to face Langley.

“In a minute, Christine,” Langley said. “Not everyone’s here yet.”

Myrland went to her station and activated her monitor screen.

The last to arrive was Cecilia Garwin, the Eidolon Technologies Board representative. Garwin was a small, stocky woman who wore her brown hair clipped short. Garwin had no real authority in the day-to-day operation of Eidolon Rex, but the Eidolon Board felt the need to stay abreast of any important developments through her. Besides that, she and Christine Myrland were the best of friends.

Garwin nodded to Langley, then Langley gestured to Thaxton to begin, now that everyone was present.

“Okay, people, listen up,” Thaxton began. “On your screens are all the preliminary systems checks Alex and I have already run on Eidolon Rex. The Board will want a detailed analysis of why Eidolon Rex disappeared and where he went, if he went anywhere at all.”

“Did anyone see him come back?” Myrland asked, swiveling around in her chair. “No,” Langley said. “I was in the lounge, having coffee, Lloyd was downstairs, checking the power circuits.”

“But we *felt* it,” Thaxton said.

Langley nodded. “When Rex reappeared, he displaced several tons of air and it knocked open all of the doors.”

Thaxton added, "If the doors weren't open, it would have blown out these windows." He indicated the large set of windows just beyond their stations.

"So...what *happened*?" Cecilia Garwin asked. "Rex didn't blow up. Do we have any idea where he went?"

"We're taking the most practical approach we can," Thaxton began.

"Right now, our preliminary findings indicate that—"

"He teleported," Myrland blurted out.

Everyone in the room went silent.

When Rex had disappeared at 7:05 the night before, there had been some talk of teleportation, since the disappearance was so clean, as opposed to the messy implosion of Telemon Ajax at Santos Avionics. But Langley had quashed all speculation. They didn't know *what* had happened to Rex and he didn't want his technicians to go off chasing phantoms.

However, Christine Myrland had published several papers on the possible teleportation effects in quantum computing. And everyone left last night wondering if the self-contained supercomputer had gone some place else since there was no explosion nor was there any debris left behind. Myrland was the first—and the only person, really—to give the notion some credence.

"We don't want to rush to judgement here," Thaxton said hurriedly. "We're going to explore every possible avenue in depth, before this is all over."

"What we do know," Langley told the group, "is that Rex came back to his original floor moorings. He didn't move an angstrom. Nothing was added to his hardware and nothing was taken away. We don't know about the software yet. Lloyd's group is running diagnostics right now."

"What was Rex doing when he disappeared?" one of Langley's subordinates asked.

Langley responded. "He was running just over three hundred thousand programs, most for the government. And many of those were for the military specifically. There were projected weather predictions, several stochastic planning programs for crop yields around the world, erosion patterns in China, and the like."

"But nothing out of the ordinary," another tech commented.

"He wasn't even operating at his peak capacity," Langley added.

"What happened at Santos Avionics?" Cecilia Garwin asked. "Didn't their computer do something like this?"

Langley glanced over at Christine Myrland. Myrland had sat back from her ruminations at her console. This was a sore point between the

two of them. Some in the group knew of the conflict, others did not. Apparently Cecilia Garwin did not.

Langley nodded. "Christine and I were co-workers at Santos. That's where we met. She and I were programmers there." Myrland added, "Ajax overloaded, or something. Part of it disappeared and part of it just blew up. There was nothing we could do about it."

Smaller versions of Telemon Ajax were to be the brains inside the newest pilotless aircraft the Air Force was building. The mishap caused Santos Avionics to go under. They couldn't weather the loss. A few weeks later, Christine Myrland and several other technicians came to work for Eidolon Technologies. A few weeks after that, much to his personal chagrin, Alex Langley showed up, hat in hand, also looking for a job.

But Langley, the Eidolon Rex project director, didn't want any friction that day. Not from Christine, not from anybody. "We never did find out what happened to Telemon Ajax. But Rex came back and he might be able to tell us something about why Telemon Ajax didn't. That is *if* the two disappearances are the same."

Christine Myrland moved a thick lock of black hair away from the side of her head as she studied her monitor. She then looked up at Langley. "Is this chronometer reading correct?"

"Yes, it is," Langley said. "Eidolon Rex disappeared at 7:05 p.m. yesterday and returned at 5:05 this morning."

"That's some coincidence," one of the other techs said. "I mean, ten hours exactly."

Myrland pointed to her screen. "But this says, for him, that only a few hours have passed."

"I don't understand," Cecilia Garwin asked, walking over to see Myrland's screen.

"Well, yes. For Rex, it's still yesterday," Lloyd Thaxton said. "He's been back about four and a half hours."

"But he was gone *ten*," Myrland said.

Langley nodded. "That's one of the anomalies we have to explore.

Wherever he went, no time passed. He came and went in a blink of an eye."

Lloyd Thaxton then added, "Once my team has a full report of the physical condition of the computer, we'll turn everything over to you people. Then Cecilia can take it to the Board to figure out what this all means. Assuming, of course, that we can figure it out."

"The Pentagon is going to want to be in on this, if it *is* teleportation," Myrland said.

"That's out of our hands," Langley said.

Lloyd Thaxton turned to Langley. "Tell them about Koestler."

All eyes turned to Langley and Thaxton.

"About forty minutes ago, during the first software scan, Lloyd and his people came up with something."

"What was that?" Cecilia Garwin asked. All eyes were now on Langley.

"A name popped up in about two-thirds of the programs Rex was running at the time he disappeared. Whether Rex disappeared *because* of the name, we don't know yet. But the name had several million hits."

"What name?" one of the techs asked.

"Rory Koestler," Langley told them.

"Who the hell is that?" Myrland asked.

"That's one of the things we have to find out," Langley said. "Because until we do, we can't use Eidolon Rex. And if we can't use Eidolon Rex, then Eidolon Technologies can't do business."

"So it *is* like Santos Avionics," the tech said.

"You could say that," Langley admitted.

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY MORNING, KOESTLER arrived at the police station in Santa Monica at exactly nine o'clock, early for him. He was up most of the night doing paperwork in the wake of the bust, but he managed to get a few hours' sleep.

He was in a surly mood when he arrived. The night before he had wanted to see one of his girlfriends. Busts of just about any kind gave Koestler a natural high. But none of his regular girlfriends wanted to drive out to Malibu at three in the morning just to have sex, even if it was the weekend. That put him in a bad mood.

Matters were made worse when the first person he bumped into at the station was Vincent Dunhill of Internal Affairs. He had put on his default face once inside the building and Dunhill recognized him immediately. Dunhill was an ex-Marine, powerfully built, in his late forties with a severe gray-blond flattop always immaculately cut. He never smiled and was suspicious of everybody.

"Saw your performance last night, detective," Dunhill said with a sneer. "But your player stole the show, I think."

"It wasn't a performance or a show and I wasn't the only person involved," Koestler said.

"Well, I just bet you had a *real* good time at the party before the fireworks started."

"It was my *job* to look like I was having a good time."

"Hmm," Dunhill muttered. He walked down the hall, bound for his office.

No one liked anyone who worked in the Internal Affairs Division, Dunhill particularly. IAD had it out for the Protean Set. They didn't like the idea of *actors* in the LAPD.

At the far end of the hall, Captain Edwardian Rux emerged from an opposite corridor. "Detective," Rux said, gesturing for him to follow. Which Koestler gladly did.

Rux and Koestler headed for the War Room. "For the time being, stay away from IAD," Rux said in his gravelly voice. "Try to keep your nose clean around IAD. We still don't know what happened last night and I'd rather not have those buzzards hovering about. For any reason."

They entered the War Room where the Protean Set planned their city-wide infiltrations. The room had a large table with several chairs and a giant flatscreen hung on the wall. The table was inset with keyboards and pop-up monitors.

Amber Leone was already seated. She had her flatscreen up. But she was the only member of the Protean Set present.

"What's the word on Brad?" Koestler asked, taking off his coat and hanging it around a chair. Since the Protean Set were in the field most of the time, they didn't have regular desks or cubicles. The War Room was their only in-station haunt. That also irked IAD.

Rux said, "He ingested quite a lot of dust. He's scheduled for dialysis at eleven."

"Did he inhale a worm?" Koestler asked.

Rux shook his head. "They don't think so. But Lily was with him all night. She told me he thought he was in some movie, so he got enough."

The thought of dialysis made his skin crawl, but Swiss was going to need a treatment that extreme. The dusting he got the night before was far worse than the one they had received nine years ago in South Bay.

A folder lay beside Amber Leone's computer screen. She pushed it over to Koestler. She said, "Forensics found egg casings and other worm debris in a random sampling of the Chuckle we found."

"Any actual eggs?" Koestler asked, going through the preliminary forensics report.

"No," she said.

Koestler nodded. "That means that we've still got to find the factory. It's out there somewhere." Rux sat at the head of the table, his usual spot. "I still want you checked out, detective."

"I'd know by now if I was infected, captain."

"Isn't your sister a GP in Woodland Hills?" Leone asked. "At least you wouldn't have to wait a week to see her. You could walk right in."

“We don’t get along,” Koestler said. “I’d rather see somebody else. *Anybody* else.”

“See that it’s done, one way or the other,” Rux said. “That’s an order.”

“What have you got there, captain?” Koestler asked.

Rux pulled out two sheets of paper and gave one each to Koestler and Leone.

“These are all the known morph parlors in the L.A. region. We should have the court orders we need to confiscate their records by early this afternoon. Detective Dixon is checking one of them near UCLA right now. We need to know how long Bob Thermopylae was walking around as Madonna.”

“What about San Francisco?” Detective Leone asked. “Madonna’s a favorite up there.”

“I don’t believe Bob Thermopylae left the region to have the work done,” Rux said.

“Why do you think that?” Leone asked.

“It takes at least three months to recover from a full body morph, particularly if it’s transsexual. We would have seen a dip in Chuckle traffic in that time. Since there was no dip, he must have been recuperating locally to direct its flow.”

“Unless somebody else got a set of viable Chuckle worms,” Leone said.

Rux shook his head. “We’d be flush with Chuckle if that were the case. A rival group would do everything it could to take over Bob Thermopylae’s traffic if it knew he was down.”

“That would account for the player,” Koestler said.

The player was at the center of everything.

Rux was grim. “We’re still reviewing the recordings we confiscated.

We don’t want to undermine the D.A.’s case against Thermopylae with any leaks, but we might have to bring the military in on this. They were going to get the Chuckle eggs anyway, but this player of ours is a wrinkle no one expected.”

“The military?” Detective Leone said. “You think this is going that way?”

“Everybody I’ve shown the recording to is as stumped as we are. Nobody knows what this is,” Rux said. “But our first concern is to give the D.A.’s office a tight case against Bob Thermopylae.”

“What’s Thermopylae’s condition?” Koestler asked.

“He’s apparently in some sort of hyperthermic coma,” Rux said.

“What’s a ‘hyperthermic coma’?” Koestler asked.

Rux said, “The player somehow put Bob in a state where he’s practically frozen solid. It’s something no one’s ever seen.”

Koestler could easily recall the bizarre chill in the air when the player shot Bob Thermopylae. The military would eventually want to know what sort of weapon had been used on Bob Thermopylae, but Rux would do his best to keep them out of the mix until the case had been made as solid as possible against Bob Thermopylae. A Pentagon investigation would only gum things up.

“So what’s our next move?” Leone asked.

Rux had steepled his fingers where he sat at the long table. He said, “We’ve got enough evidence on disc to show that Bob was dealing out of that bedroom. We don’t need to show the takedown sequence. But I’m still curious about our player. Did your snitch mention anything about another crew?”

Koestler shook his head. “No. And I think Billy Styvesant would have known if there was.”

Rux pursed his lips, thinking. “I want to talk to him anyway. Bring him in. Let’s see what he has to say. We still have to find Bob Thermopylae’s factory. Until we can locate and kill the worms, the case isn’t finished. The D.A. might be happy, but our job won’t be over.”

Koestler looked at Detective Leone and she nodded. They would talk to Billy Styvesant.



By the time Koestler and Detective Leone entered the police department garage, they had changed Faces. Anyone seeing Koestler’s Face as he entered police headquarters that morning would not have seen the same Face leave. So, too, with Amber Leone.

This pertained as well to Koestler’s Sensei. The 3.8 liter V8 Sensei MetaMorph became ‘15 Daimler rattletrap with a slightly dangling bumper and a dozen dents and scratches and a bad paint job. Koestler also added a few rust-rimmed bullet holes along the passenger side door for good measure. A draggy muffler and a dripping oil pain helped as well.

They took the San Diego freeway and headed south.

Billy Styvesant lived in Manhattan Beach, close to the beach itself. He worked out of a modest beachfront bungalow as an agent and promoter for musicians. Several years ago he had run afoul of the law while dabbling in the drug trade. Becoming a confidential informer allowed him the opportunity to stay out of jail. Which was where Koestler said he’d put Billy if he didn’t help them get Bob Thermopylae.

Koestler and Leone left their rattletrap about a block away from Billy Styvesant’s bungalow. Detective Leone had changed her clothing to that of a street gypsy. She wore a wide turquoise skirt and billowy blouse and tall boots. Her weapons were easily concealed in her garb. “What are you car-



rying?” Koestler asked as they eased down the sidewalk. “Clobberer, Susan B. Anthonys, Pancakes and Nightdrops. But I forgot to bring my goggles for the Nightdrops.”

“Any Spit Wads?”

She shook her head. “I hate their taste. I’d rather use Gumdrops.”

Koestler’s weapons were his own Clobberer powering up in his shoulder holster, several Susan B. Anthonys and about a dozen Tonya G. Hardings. He didn’t think he’d have to use those, however. Clobberers would do just fine.

Billy Styvesant had not answered their phone calls or pages. Saturdays were usually busy for musicians and agents both, but even Billy’s answering machine hadn’t responded. They tried reaching him by e-mail. The messages went out, but he did not respond to them.

The day was bright and sunny, but Billy Styvesant’s neighborhood seemed strangely silent. Only the soft roar of breakers could be heard just beyond the bungalows. They surreptitiously scanned the neighborhood for suspicious cars or idling passers by.

The door to Billy Styvesant’s bungalow was located on the southeastern side of the building. Koestler rang the doorbell. Amber Leone stood off to one side, right hand deep in a pocket hidden in the folds of her hippy dress where her Clobberer was holstered to her upper thigh.

There was no response.

Koestler turned the door knob and discovered that the door had not been locked. It opened easily to Koestler’s touch.

Koestler glanced at Detective Leone. Leone pulled out her Clobberer and clutched it with both hands. Koestler’s came out as well.

Koestler took a deep breath. “Billy!” Koestler called out. “Billy, you in there?”

They stepped into the main living room. The curtains were pulled shut and the air inside was stale. A 3D coffee table had been left on. It held a vertical column of static that went all the way to the ceiling. Its program had long since expired. The hissing from the audio was loud and irritating. Koestler turned it off.

But there were no signs of foul play. No bullet holes in the walls. No shell casings on the floor. No furniture tossed around, no framed pictures knocked askew. However, the phone’s answering machine’s light blinked with the residue of dozens of waiting—and unanswered—messages.

Amber Leone stepped off to the right and checked the kitchen and small dining area. Meanwhile, Koestler moved down the hallway to the bedrooms. Outside, a gull screeched above the surf.

Koestler felt a sudden chill at the door to the main bedroom. It was cold enough to store food out in the open.

Koestler pushed open the door. Two people lay in near-darkness beneath the covers of an enormous bed. One was Billy Styvesant. The other Koestler assumed to be his girlfriend.

“Found them!” Koestler shouted over his shoulder.

Detective Leone came up behind him. Her breath came out in small clouds of vaporous air.

The couple in the bed weren’t quite sleeping, however. Both people looked pale, nearly dead.

“That’s Billy,” Detective Leone said. “Who’s that with him?”

Koestler stowed his Clobberer. “Her name is Melissa. Melissa Connors.”

“She know about Billy?” Leone whispered.

“I don’t think so,”

Melissa Connors seemed to be conscious. She struggled to awaken. Her mouth moved and her eyelids fluttered like two frail butterflies.

“What happened?” Koestler asked.

The woman’s skin was dry and a baby-blue color. Koestler guessed that they had been this way for days and both were suffering from severe dehydration.

“Billy,” Melissa Connors whispered feebly. “S-s-someone s-shot him...”

Detective Leone pulled out her phone and dialed EMS.

“Who shot Billy?” Koestler asked.

“The p-p-police,” Melissa Connors breathed. She then lifted a crooked hand from beneath the covers and pointed at the wall beyond the foot of the bed. Not the door. Not the nearby window. The wall.

“We are the police,” Koestler said. “Billy was working with us.”

Connors appeared not to register his words to her. “We were sleeping. I looked up...and he s-shot Billy. He c-came out and s-shot him.”

Again the trembling hand pointed at the wall behind Koestler.

“Did he shoot you, too?” Koestler asked.

“Please h-help...”

“Help is on its way,” Detective Leone said over Koestler’s shoulder.

Melissa Connors closed her eyes. The room had a smell of death about it even though both people on the bed were still alive.

Koestler stood up. Amber Leone still had her phone out.

“You’d better call the captain,” he said in an urgent whisper. “I think this is the player again.”

Leone nodded and went outside to place the call.