

“I doubt if anyone ever touches the limits at either end of his personality. We are not our own light.” —Flannery O’Connor, private letter, 1962

I.

“It’s a long way to fall, Zack.”

Zack scowled up at Anne, wishing she would go away. Bad enough to be lying on this damn hospital bed in a thin cotton dress that left his ass bare. Bad enough to be going into surgery for something wrong in his brain. Bad enough to not understand what that something was, not even after one of all those doctors had explained it, just the same way he’d never understood that kind of intellectual crap his whole stupid life. But having his sister loom over him, upright when he was down—well, wasn’t that just the icing on this particular shit cake?

“I’m fine,” he said shortly.

“Of course you’ll be fine,” Anne said.

“So go back to work. I don’t need you here.”

“I’m on break anyway,” Anne said. She wore her nurse’s scrubs, her brown curls tied back. She, or the curtained cubicle, smelled of disinfectant trying to smell like pine trees. “I just wanted to remind you that when they put you under the anesthetic, it can feel like a long way to—”

“I got it, I got it already! Now go away!”

Behind her, Gail—and who invited *her* to be here, anyway?—said, “Knock it off, Murphy. She’s just trying to be nice .”

“Nobody asked you!”

“If anything happens to you in there, do you really want your last words to Anne to be ‘go away’?”

Gail was right, the bitch. Gail was right, Anne was right, the doctors were right—only Zack was wrong. Like he’d been wrong his whole life. But if they’d just leave him alone for five fucking minutes to think, he couldn’t *think* with both of them jabbering at him And it wasn’t like Gail cared what happened to him in surgery. She might love Anne, she might have married Anne in a state where they could do that, but Zack was just so much spoiled meat to Gail. Always had been, ever since she and Anne got together. Gail, lean and muscled and as welcome here as a bad uppercut to the chin.

A second later, the other too-familiar feeling swamped him: regret that he hadn’t been nicer to Anne. Why was that always so hard to do?

“Please,” Anne said in her soft, pleading voice. “Please don’t fight again, you two.”

“I’m sorry, Anne,” Gail said.

“Sorry,” Zack muttered. Sorry, sorry, sorry. He was always apologizing to Anne.

“I know you didn’t mean it,” Anne said.

Another, older nurse came into the curtained cubicle and glanced quizzically at Anne, who began explaining that she was a relative, Zack’s next of kin, not a member of the surgical team.

The other nurse nodded, not interested. “Ready, Mr. Murphy?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait—what’s that black eye? Does Dr. Singh know about this?”

How should Zack know what Dr. Singh did or didn’t know? Zack wasn’t a damn mind reader. He said, “I box. We get hit. We get black eyes.” It came out nastier than he intended. So,

all right, maybe he was nervous about this operation. It was on his *brain*, after all. Maybe his brain wasn't much, but it was the only one he had.

His sister, the brainy one, launched into a history of all the doctors Zack had seen in the last week, what they'd said about the tumor in Zack's head, the concussion he'd gotten in the fight against DeShawn Jeffers, a bunch of other medical bullshit. Finally—finally!—the women finished talking and an orderly wheeled him into the operating room. Almost a relief. Anne, Gail—it was too much sometimes. And Jazzy not there only because he'd forbidden her to come. She hadn't liked that, but he'd been firm. Three months of seeing each other, even with great sex, didn't mean she could invade every corner of his life.

The last thing he saw before the OR doors closed was Gail, her arm around Anne, staring fixedly at Zack like she could erase him from the Earth. He wanted to give her the finger, but he didn't get his arms free of the blanket in time.

He transferred himself from the gurney to a table, someone holding his IV tubes out of the way. The room was full of masked people, only their eyes visible. A bright light overhead like a mirrored UFO with a handle sticking out of it. Humming machinery. One nurse lifted Zack's wrist to read his name band; another assisted a doctor with gloves.

A third doctor sat on a stool beside Zack's head while something was injected into his IV. "Relax, Mr. Murphy," she said. "You're just going to take a little nap. Now, count backwards from a hundred."

Don't tell me what to do. He counted forward instead, picturing Jeffers lying there in the ring, that was it, Zack should have won that fight, *one two three four . . .*

A weird drifting took him. What the . . . he wasn't . . . this . . .

It's a long way to fall, Zack.

He woke in a cubicle with a curtain around it and a bedside table holding a barf bowl shaped like a fancy swimming pool. Plastic tubing ran all over him. From somewhere came the smell of coffee. Everything seemed fuzzy. Someone—not Anne, not Jazzy—fussed with machines. Zack tried to say something and couldn't.

“Rest,” the someone said. He slept.

But the next time he woke, he was in a different room, and it was full of people. Scrubs, white coats, two men in suits. None of them were looking at him. They clustered around a screen, looking at something Zack couldn't see.

“Not possible,” someone said.

“It has to be possible because there it is,” someone else said, irritated and impressed and scared.

How do I know all that from looking at his back? Zack thought drowsily, and slept again.

The third time, he came fully awake. The plastic tubing was all gone. The room had pale blue curtains and a view of the parking lot. Only Anne, wearing an off-duty skirt and top, sat beside his bed, her head bent over a magazine. Unexpectedly, gladness at seeing her flooded him.

“Hey,” Zack said. It came out a croak.

Anne looked up. Instantly, Zack thought: *She's scared. Really scared.*

“You're awake!”

“Yeah. What's wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t lie to me, Anne! Something’s wrong and it’s, like, major. Am I . . . am I dying?”

Her hand shot out to rest on his. “Oh, no, Zack, nothing like that! You came through the surgery just fine. Nothing’s wrong.”

“I said don’t lie to me!” He could feel her fear—no, wait, what did that mean? But it was true.

He knew she was afraid, and wary of him, and at the same time . . . curious, her mind open and searching for answers How could Zack know all that? He was no mind reader. No, he knew it from the way Anne held her head, the way her eyebrows shifted, the set of her mouth He simply *knew*. Just like he knew a second before she stood up that was what she’d do next.

“I have to get Dr. Jakowski,” she said. “I told him I’d send for him as soon as you woke up.”

“Who’s Dr. Jakowski?” Hadn’t his surgeon had some Indian name, not a Polack one?

Anne didn’t answer. She left, and Zack lay in the bed testing his hands and arms and legs. Everything seemed to work all right. He made a fist, two fists, sat up. Still in that damn bare-ass cotton dress. A man in a white coat strode into the room ahead of Anne.

Eager as a rookie before his first fight. Thinks he’s way better than anybody else. Looks at me like a lab rat. He’s going to ask me a lot of questions but tell me nothing.

“You’re quite an interesting phenomenon, Mr. Murphy. I’m going to ask you some questions now.”

“No, you’re not,” Zack snapped. *The man is going to hold up his left hand. Cold slid down Zack’s spine, icing his bones. How do I know what he’s going to do before he does it?*

Jakowski held up his left hand. “Purely routine, Mr. Murphy. Now, when you—”

“It’s not routine and you know it, you bastard.”

“Zack!” Anne said. She turned to the doctor. “I apologize on behalf of my brother, doctor. He—”

“Don’t apologize for me, Anne. You’ve done it my whole fucking life. I’ll talk to somebody, but somebody who isn’t a high-and-mighty prick.”

The doctor mottled maroon. Another man in a white coat entered the room. “Mr. Murphy is awake?”

As eager as the other one, but this guy’s human. Hasn’t got a stick up his ass. Quiet but not timid, he’d go the distance in a fight, featherweight maybe, good shoulders . . . He’s going to reach out his right hand, ask me how I’m doing . . .

“How are you feeling? I’m Dr. John Norwood, a neurologist.” He held out his right hand to shake hands with Zack.

Zack shook and nodded, all at once too confused to speak.

Anne said, “Zack, does your head hurt?”

“No.” Something easy, something he could answer. Zack clung to it like a life raft in a choppy sea.

“Good,” Norwood said. “I’d like to ask you some questions, if that’s all right with you. May I sit down?”

“Sure. But Dr. King-of-the-World there, he goes.”

Anne looked startled. Jakowski stalked out. Norwood sat and smiled, so slightly that no one could have seen the tiny movement of his lips, too brief for interpretation.

He thinks Jakowski’s a prick, too.

He’s going to lean forward, shift his weight to the left . . .

Norwood leaned forward and shifted his weight to the left. “All your vital signs look excellent, Mr. Murphy. But I’d like to hear from you how you’re feeling. Does anything ache, even a little?”

“No.”

“Does your vision seem altered in any way?”

“No.”

“Hearing?”

“No.”

“The feel of that blanket?”

“No.”

“We’re going to do formal tests, now that you’re awake, but I wanted to get your initial impressions before we told you that there was something to explain. Does anything about you seem different from before the operation?”

“Well, my ass wasn’t hanging out before I came in here.”

Anne laughed, a high startled sound that held relief and fascination and fear all at once. Norwood smiled. Zack didn’t look at his sister. He said, “Doc, you tell me right now what all this is about, or nothing else gets talked about at all. You hear me?”

“Certainly. Mr. Murphy, the meningioma was successfully removed. As you were told before, it wasn’t malignant and there’s no reason to think it will return. Everything connected to the surgery was routine. But something connected to the anesthetic was not. Is not. You had some kind of allergic reaction, your pressure dropped, and we couldn’t ventilate you. We thought we were going to lose you. But you responded to a steroid bolus, fortunately.”

“Yeah?” His last, confused memory was of counting down DeShawn Jeffers, a memory somehow connected to Anne *It’s a long way to fall, Zack.*

“During surgery we use a machine called a CRI—for ‘consciousness registration index’—to measure how far you’ve gone under the anesthetic. What the machine does, basically, is bombard your brain with electromagnetic waves, then record how your brain reacts. Through something called—”

“Wait, wait,” Zack said. “You shoot electricity at my brain?”

“Not electricity, no.” Norwood paused, and Zack saw him—felt him, *knew* him—thinking how to explain clearly and simply, just like people had been trying to explain things clearly and simply to Zack all his stupid life. This time, though, Zack didn’t resent it. He was too confused.

Norwood said, “A human brain operates in electrochemical waves. You know those measurements they take when you get a concussion, using an EEG? It shows your brain waves in patterns. Have you seen that?”

“Yeah. On a computer screen.”

“Precisely. Well, a measure of how conscious you are uses those patterns. Specifically, it shows two things: how complex the patterns are, and how much the different parts of the brain are communicating with each other. ‘Integration,’ we call it. The less integration—the less that different parts of the brain are sending information to each other—the more unconscious you are. The entire underlying concept is called ‘integrated information theory’ and it’s only a few decades old. Am I being clear, Mr. Murphy?”

“Yeah,” Zack said, although he was struggling to keep up. Too much like school. *Dummy, dummy . . . Why don’t you work harder . . . Your sister had no trouble with history or math . . .*

“The reason we measure consciousness during an operation is to make sure patients are out deeply enough so that they won’t wake up while the operation is in progress.”

“That can happen?” Christ, it would be worse than a kick in the nuts. Knives tearing at your flesh while you’re strapped down and helpless . . . *He’s going to lean forward and say something important now . . .*

Norwood leaned forward. “It can happen, but almost it almost never does since CRI came into wide use. Your post-operative CRI shows patterns we’ve never seen before. Not so much in wave complexity as in integration. Various parts of your brain are sending information to each other at an unprecedented rate.”

“What parts?” *He’s going to raise his right hand to his head . . . He’s excited and confused . . .*

Norwood raised his hand and ran it through his thinning hair. “Many different structures are involved, Mr. Murphy, because the brain is, after all, an integrated whole. But mainly, your sensory input areas are working overtime—sight and sound and touch and smell—sending the signals they receive to places where those signals are processed and interpreted. Do you understand?”

“No.” Zack hesitated. “But I kind of know what you’re going to do before you do it. And I know what . . . what you think. No, I don’t mean any mind-reading bullshit. I mean . . . fuck, I don’t know. What you feel. Like, right now you’re surprised and not surprised at the same time. You believe me, but you wish I was smarter so I could tell you more. And you don’t want to embarrass me by saying that.”

It had all just blurted out of him, and immediately Zack wished it hadn’t. You didn’t give away your guts like that, he’d known that since he was ten, so what the hell had all that been . . .

. Well, it wouldn't happen again. Give away your guts and you were a sitting target for people to use.

“Mr. Murphy—”

“When do I get out of here?”

Anne said, “Zack, you can't—”

“Don't tell me what I can or can't do!” Anger was the familiar armor, welcome as an unprotected opening on your opponent in the ring. Immediately the regret followed. Anne was not the opponent here. He scowled at Norwood. “When do I go home?”

Norwood said, “You can leave at the end of the week if there are no complications and if you so choose, but we're hoping you'll stay to let us—”

“Let you study me? I'm no lab rat, doc. No way. Now, you should leave and let me rest. I'm supposed to rest, right?”

He doesn't want to go . . . Looking for something to say to convince me . . . Coming up empty. Resolve to try again later. Bye, bye, doc.

Norwood stood. “Perhaps you should rest. I'll stop by later, if I may.”

“Don't bother,” Zack said.

But when Norwood had gone, Zack turned to Anne for one more question. “What do they say caused all this?”

She was staring at him, biting her lip. *Scared, interested* . . . He was a lab rat to her, too. But also her brother, and she came closer to Zack's bed and took his hand. His fingers tightened on hers.

Anne said, “They don't know. Some weird combination of the CRI action, your recent concussion, and the way the tumor pressed on tissue and maybe altered it before they removed

the mass, or maybe released some unknown enzymes. Or maybe your age—at twenty the brain isn't even done growing. But you're integrating sensory input more fully than most people. Maybe reading body language and minute facial expressions and tones of voice and processing them into . . . I don't know, Zack. Everybody does that, but you're doing it to an unprecedented degree. Maybe."

Okay, one *more* question. "Is it going to last or go away?"

She spread her hands wide, palms up, and any idiot could have read her. "How should I know? Your consciousness has reached an unknown level of integration. Nobody knows anything about it! Which is why you should let Dr. Norwood and the neurological team—"

"Thanks," Zack said, and turned his face to the wall, away from all the sensory-whatever she was putting out.

The voices started the day he left the hospital.

They weren't really voices, just faint, whispery swishings in his head, no louder than a breeze in trees or the hum of hospital machinery, although not as monotonous. Zack found them easy to ignore. He had too much else on his mind.

For four days, he had resisted being interviewed or tested or anything else by any doctors. Suspicious even of the nurses, he'd objected when they changed his IV, gave him pills to swallow, or even brought him meals. How could he tell what was in the food? He'd seen movies and TV shows with truth drugs and shit like that, and what if the doctors were ordering him stuff the nurses didn't even understand? He ate as little as he could. The nurses' exasperation came through in every movement they made. The only one he liked was a dumpy middle-aged woman

from whom he picked up complete indifference to him and everyone else. She was just doing her job, and she didn't need anybody to say "Atta girl" to her. Zack approved.

Anne said, "At least let a nurse wash you, Zack."

"Yeah, you stink to high hell," Gail said, because of course she was with Anne, horning in. Gail carried her yellow hard hat from whatever construction site she was engineer on this month. Flaunting her job. *She's going to turn her back on me, look out the window, pat Anne's back, give me the finger behind it . . .* Whatever Anne had told her about his "condition," Gail wasn't impressed. It didn't make Zack like her any better.

"I'll shower when I get home this afternoon."

Anne frowned. "You can't, not without—"

"I checked myself out."

"Against medical advice?" On the last word her voice scaled upward like she'd been goosed. Zack held his temper. She meant good, and even bossy and a pain in the ass, she was his sister. Christ, she'd practically raised him after their parents bought it. He had a sudden memory, sharp and sweet as a lemon drop on the tongue, of walking with Anne to some candy store, his small hand in hers, her head bent protectively toward him. "The only person you've ever loved, and only on your terms," Gail had once said to him. Screw that. Gail should keep her nose out of Zack's business.

"They're doing the paperwork now. Annie, I'm fine. Really. That shit they gave me made all the brain swelling go down. I'm fine and I'm going home."

But not before he had two more visitors, neither of whom he wanted to see.

Jerry, at least, had no idea of Zack's "condition of integrated consciousness" and wouldn't have cared if he did. Huge, shambling, a former heavyweight gone to fat, Jerry's tattoos had

expanded with his fat until the naked girl on his forearm looked as bloated as he did. Nothing in Jerry's life had quite worked: not the brief boxing career, not the even briefer mob involvement that earned him five-to-ten in federal prison, not the seedy gym, always on the verge of going under, where Jerry trained and matched boxers who were never going anywhere bigger. For the past six months, ever since Zack had started fighting for Jerry on Saturday nights, he had thought: *I'm not going to end up like you.* He just hadn't known how to avoid it.

Until now.

"So, champ, how you doing?" Jerry called all his fighters "champ." None of them ever were. Jerry stared at the side of Zack's head, shaved around the bandages.

"Going home."

"Yeah? When you coming back to the gym?"

"Real soon," Zack said, glad that Anne wasn't there. Jerry said nothing. *He's got more to say, something he needs to ask but doesn't want to, he's going to scratch his head first . . .*

Jerry scratched his head, his flabby arm coming up like a hydraulic lift. "Champ, I hate to ask this, but I got a problem. Week from Saturday, Bobby Marks was on the slate to fight Tom Cawkins. Not at the gym—at a real venue. Magnolia Gardens. But Bobby, stupid kid, got himself nabbed for possession, won't be out in time. Cawkins's manager's trying to pull him out of the fight 'cause ever since Cawkins beat C. P. James, manager thinks he's bigger shit than he'll ever really be. I don't have a fighter to put against him week from Saturday, contract's void and I gotta C&R."

Cancel and Refund—the bogeyman that chased Jerry every struggling accounting period. Zack knew that Jerry needed every scheduled fight to make expenses, even though the fights were mostly lame and the customers, neighborhood punks and old guys who remembered better,

only filled half the seats. Jerry especially needed this fight; he'd hoped it might move his gym up a notch. Personally, Zack doubted it.

Jerry went on, looking everywhere but at Zack's bandages. "So—you think you'll be well enough to be slotted in? Bandages off and all?"

Zack said, "Sure. Why not?"

Jerry blinked. *He's really afraid I'll get hurt . . . why, the sentimental fat old bastard! He's going to go all sappy . . .*

"Look, champ, I don't want you to do nothing that'll interfere with getting better. You're a good kid even if you are so mouthy. You want to wait to fight, we'll wait. I can get DeShawn, maybe, though he—"

"I'll do it," Zack said, and watched Jerry go through a complicated series of emotions during which Jerry kept a poker face.

"Well, if you're sure, then good. Prize money ain't great, but—"

"I said I'll do it."

Jerry knew when a deal was closed. A rare smile quirked his lips, drowned in his usual anticipation of the worst, and propelled him shambling out the door.

Zack poked gently at the bandages on his head and stared at the ceiling.

His last, most unwelcome visitor was Jasmine.

He was out of bed, dressed in his own clothes again, a little headachy but upright. Five more minutes and he could have escaped. He should have known better—you couldn't outrun women. Anne, Jazzy, even fucking Gail. And a part of him was glad to see Jazzy, or at least might have been glad if she hadn't looked mad enough to chew his head off.

“Why did you tell the nurses to not let me in? Huh, Zack? *Why?*”

“Didn’t want to upset you.”

“Like I’m not upset now?”

Damn, she looked good. She had on the tight jeans he liked and a low-cut top with some sort of creamy ruffles that shimmered against her chocolate breasts. Body like a porn star, big dark eyes, seventeen years old and no slut. She kept her nights for Zack, her days for finishing high school (more than he had done), and next year’s eye on a training school in medical technology. Jazzy had plans. She didn’t want a baby daddy and a welfare check, she wanted a job and an apartment she could pay for herself. Zack had been afraid since they started hanging out together that she also wanted him in that future apartment, tethered and leashed. So he’d tried a few other hookups, but nobody else had Jazzy’s pull on him.

Also—and this was the surprising thing—they had fun together even out of bed. They went to movies, laughed, took walks together just to walk, not to get someplace. She was funny and she got him, got who he was. He *liked* her. But even so—

“Look, Jazzy, I didn’t want you here because I didn’t want any big scene. Bad enough I got Anne wringing her hands over me. She works here, so I was stuck. But I just wanted to rest and get better and go home. Is that so hard to understand, huh? Is it?”

“Don’t get all huffy with me, Zack Murphy. Don’t you dare. I know you needed rest. I wouldn’t have made a scene.”

She was telling the truth. Zack felt it from her. But, given the scene she’d made when they were last together (“Who was that slutty girl? When are you going to give up fighting and get your shit together? You need a real job and a real future!”), he’d been sure that she would keep it

up in the hospital. But clearly he'd been wrong. Concern for him poured off her—Zack could see it, feel it, almost taste it.

He hated it. It was a rope, tying him down.

“I gotta go, Jazzy. Anthony's picking me up.”

“I can drive you home.”

“I already called Anthony.”

Anger, held in check. Concern that he was all right. The gentleness he'd glimpsed once or twice underneath her fierceness; each time he'd hated that gentleness. Another rope. She was going to cross the floor, hug him gently

He brushed past her. “Call you later, baby, okay?” In the hallway, he regretted his rudeness—how many people did he actually like? Fewer than corners in a boxing ring. Nonetheless, he strode as quickly as his aching head would allow to get to the elevator, to the outside, to the welcome indifference of Anthony, one of his two roommates in the apartment filled with beer and sagging couches and pizza boxes and freedom from women.

Zack, the voices said. *Zack* . . .

No, they didn't. Lying awake three days before his fight with Cawkins, Zack knew perfectly well that the voices were the thrumming of the music coming through the thin walls of the apartment. The breeze from the open window, wafting the faint scent of garbage cans in the alley. That ringing in your ears that everybody got sometimes. They weren't even voices, they were all in his imagination, and he damn well better stifle it and get some sleep. But it was only midnight, and he wasn't anywhere near sleepy.

“You leaving the party so early?” Anthony had said. But the truth was, Zack had been leaving early all the time. Leaving parties at night, leaving Pizza Hut at dinner, even leaving the goddamn 7-Eleven before he found the Cheerios on the shelves. Too many people, all flinging emotions at him in the way their bodies moved, the way their mouths worked, the tones of their voices. *I’m scared, I’m so happy, I’m disgusted, I’m starting something that might not work, I’m going to talk to that guy over there or boost that nail polish or give that bum a dollar or find somebody to fight with or brush against that babe’s tits or buy these roses even though I can’t afford it...* Stop!

But they never did. All the information about everybody just kept coming, and Zack didn’t even know how he knew any of it.

He had to get it under control. Now.

Heaving himself up from his mattress on the floor, Zack put his clothes back on. Outside, the non-voices seemed even more persistent, like the sweet spring night gave them more to work with. Well, screw that. Zack was having enough trouble with live people without dealing with imaginary ones.

People spilled out from the bars and clubs on Belmont Street. Zack leaned against a lamp post, lit one of the twenty or so cigarettes he allowed himself every month, and pretended to be absorbed in it while a couple walked past, holding hands and talking softly.

He loves her, she doesn’t love him, she wants out and he doesn’t know it yet *How do I know?*

Forget that. It didn’t matter how. Concentrate on not seeing them, not noticing all the “sensory information” that Anne said he was getting and “integrating.” Concentrate . . .

It didn't work. Zack was aware of everything the couple didn't know they were telling him, until they turned the corner and disappeared.

He tried next with three high school kids who got off a bus and peered into a bar where, of course, they knew they wouldn't be allowed in. *Anger, envy, thinking that if only they could get in they'd show up everybody there but not even believing it themselves, horny as hell . . . The redhead is going say something full of bullshit . . .*

The redhead said, "Couldn't I just give that babe there a thick foot of happiness!" His buddies jeered.

Zack tried to both see and not see them. He didn't turn his back, but he concentrated on his cigarette: how it felt, smelled, looked as the ash lengthened and fell to the sidewalk. The boys walked past him, arguing. Concentrate on the cigarette . . .

The information about the boys was still there, but now it felt more like rap playing in the house next door. You could hear it, but you could also sort of block it out. The cigarette mattered, the information from the boys didn't.

He practiced for a few more hours, sitting in the corner of a bar. He didn't always succeed; sometimes the only way he could break the overwhelming flow of information was to close his eyes. Even then, it seemed like he could *smell* attitudes around him. But as the night wore on, he got better at it.

The next day, better still.

He could control it.

The day before the fight, Friday, Jazzy showed up in his bedroom before Zack was even out of bed.

“How’d you get in?” Zack said, sitting up woozily on his mattress and glancing at the glowing red numbers on the clock sitting on the floor. 12:00. Midnight? No, noon.

“Anthony or Lou didn’t lock the door,” Jazzy said. Zack had nailed a blanket over the window and light from the living room silhouetted her. He couldn’t see her face. He didn’t need to.

“Why . . . why aren’t you in school?”

“Because this is more important.”

Alarm bells sounded in Zack’s head. When Jasmine thought something was more important than school, it meant trouble.

She put her hands on her hips. “I’m only going to ask you once, Zack, and I want an honest answer. Are you done with me? Are we over?”

Were they? Peering at her, Zack didn’t want them to be over. On the other hand, he’d been avoiding her for days. Quick phone calls full of bogus excuses: doctor’s appointment for my head, Anne’s got a situation I got to see to, Jerry’s got a situation, Anthony’s got a situation, I need to rest, baby, I’m just so tired since the operation—

She was serious. He got that from every line in her back-lit body: a whole lot of inner conflict, but she was dead serious. If he said it was over, this time it would be. He could be free,

She looked so damn good. And when they had good times, they were really good times. The sweet way she’d looked at him that time he’d bought her those earrings for no holiday or birthday, just because the earrings reminded him of her . . .

But he could be free.

“We’re not over,” he said slowly, wondering if he meant it, “but I need some time. Some space.”

“Some space I’m not in.” Now her arms were crossed across her chest, which he knew she was going to do before she did it.

“Jazzy . . .” All at once he felt tears prickle his eyes. What the fuck! He hadn’t cried since the last time his father beat him, when Zack was nine, just before the bastard died. Zack blinked hard to dash away the tears. He didn’t want Jazzy to see.

Maybe she did, maybe she didn’t. But all at once she was kneeling beside him on the mattress, and then he was kissing her, and then clothes were coming off and she was the one with tears on her face and . . .

He *felt* her. Not just near him, taking him in, like normally in sex. No, he knew what she was going to move before she moved it, knew what she wanted without her whispering anything, knew when his touch wasn’t getting it done and when he was exactly in the right place, doing the right thing, for how long she wanted it done. It was like he was her as well as himself, and when he exploded, right after she did, he cried out, something he never did.

He hated every second of it.

Jazzy lay face down, jeans still circling one ankle, tee shirt up over her ears. She gasped, “That was . . . incredible.”

When he had control of his voice, he said, “No.”

She twisted to look at him. “What?”

“You KO’d me. I don’t like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You . . . *erased* me.”

“I—”

“It’s over, Jazzy. Go away.” He snatched up his clothes and stalked into the bathroom, locking the door before she could say anything more, before he could take in any “sensory input” and know what she was going to do next, what she was feeling, where he ended and she began.

He spent the afternoon in the public library, a place he hadn’t been since the third grade, trying to find things on the Internet that would explain what was happening to him. He googled the words he remembered Dr. Norwood or Anne using: “sensory input,” “consciousness,” “brain patterns,” “CRI.” CRI got him “Carpet and Rug Institute,” “color rendering index,” and “Community Rowing, Inc.” Googling “consciousness” resulted in 88,000,000 hits, “brain patterns” almost as many. He tried to read some of them but the terminology was too hard and anyway none of it seemed to apply to his problem. Which was what? Norwood said that Zack had some sort of new level of consciousness. If so, why was he still too stupid to find out what was happening to him?

He wasn’t going to call Norwood or Anne. His cell had two calls from the doctor, six from his sister. He wasn’t going to go crawling to either one of them for information he’d rejected when they offered it before. He texted Anne—**I’m fine stop worrying**—and left the library to go get drunk instead.

Dusk bathed downtown in a pink glow, neon through light fog. The air smelled sweet. Zack picked a bar he never went to, where nobody would find him. He sat at the bar and practiced shutting out everybody except the bartender, a young guy who might have made a welterweight: long legs and arms, heavy sloping shoulders, thick neck. Zack knew when the bartender was going to sweep his eyes around everyone’s drinks to offer refills, when he was irked by the almost-but-not-quite-falling-down drunk on the end stool, when he was going to flirt with the middle-aged brunette sitting alone. Zack knew it all before the bartender did it, maybe even

before the guy himself knew he was going to do anything. Just as important, Zack was able to not let the other people in the bar distract him from this one guy.

And after three drinks, the non-voices in his head went away.

When the bartender shot him a glance that said: *You're looking at me too much, wrong team, no luck here, buddy*, Zack paid his tab and left. He wasn't as drunk as he wanted to be, but drunk enough. On to the next test.

The hooker wasn't all that young, and she wasn't all that pretty, which meant she was cheap. Zack followed her to her room and undressed. She did the same, not bothering to look at him. Zack pulled her down onto the bed.

And the thing happened again. Even through the alcohol, Zack knew what would make her happy. Not at first, because she was so sullen that nothing would make her happy. But when he picked up on faint movements and expressions she probably didn't even know she was making, and then he followed through, the thing happened again. He could anticipate every one of her secret needs, hidden desires. Another minute and he would be her.

"Hey," she said softly, the word carrying a world of surprise and shock.

He got up, threw her money on the bed, and left, more furious than he'd ever been in his life. To ruin sex! If Norwood had been in that room, on that steep flight of stairs, beside that sidewalk stained with somebody's vomit, Zack would have torn the doc's balls off and stuffed them down his throat. And enjoyed it.

The fight against Cawkins was at Magnolia Gardens, a small and dingy arena on the edge of the industrial district. Despite what Jerry had said, Zack knew it wasn't an important fight and Cawkins wasn't an important fighter. Nothing Jerry arranged was important in the world of

boxing, a world that started with clubs like Jerry's and rose upward to dizzying heights like Madison Square Garden and title fights and TV movies about Ali or Tyson. Those were places Zack had never even thought about. Until now.

He got to the Gardens an hour ahead of fight time, only slightly hung over. There, sitting on the pavement by the alley door as if they'd been there for hours, were Anne and Gail. *Shit.* Anne jumped up when she saw Zack. Gail got to her feet more slowly, her eyes on Zack's face. He didn't need any new level of consciousness to know what his sister would say.

"You can't fight today! The doctor said—"

"Let me go by, Anne. How did you even know about the fight?"

"It was in the paper. *Zack—*"

Of course it was, but who knew Anne would look at the sports section? No, she hadn't— Gail had, the interfering bitch. Gently, Zack took hold of Anne's hands. Fear poured off her like tarry oil. "Don't worry, Annie. Really. I got it covered."

She's going to make that sister-mouth and hug me.

Anne did. "You can't get this 'covered' by wish-fulfillment, Zack! Your head isn't healed yet, you can't risk getting hit, you—"

Gail said, "Give it up, Anne. I told you. Anyway, he won't get hit, will you, Zack? Nobody'll even lay a glove on him."

Zack shot her a glance, trying to remember how much he'd said to Anne, to anybody, when Gail was around. Whatever it was, Gail understood. She knew. Her contempt for him was still there, in spades, but now it was mixed with an uneasy wariness. Behind Anne's back, Zack shot her the finger.

He peeled Anne off him, went inside, and shut the door firmly. Jerry waited in a tiny dressing room with fist-sized holes in its peeling walls. One look and Zack knew that Jerry not only expected Zack to lose this fight, but also that Jerry had bet against him.

Think again, old man.

The rest of the hour before the fight, as he got dressed and warmed up and heard the crowd fill the Garden, Zack focused on not focusing on anyone. He kept his head down—although even the stance and shifts of people’s *feet* told him more than he wanted to know about them. Then he was walking, head down, along the aisle to climb into the ring. The corner man, who was also the cut man because Jerry was too cheap to pay for both, spread a thin layer of petroleum jelly over Zack’s face to help control cuts that Zack wasn’t planning on getting.

“In this corner, weight 171, Zack Murphy!”

Zack raised his glove.

“In this corner, weight 173, Thomas Cawkins!”

Cawkins was taller than Zack, with a longer reach. A dancer, moving in and out, jabbing at the air for effect even before he left his corner. A shit-eating grin.

He’s going to move in suddenly and fast.

Cawkins did, counting on his longer reach to punch at Zack’s head. But Zack was already inside, under the jab. Surprise jerked on Cawkins’s face.

He’s going to step back and bring up his right in an uppercut.

Zack circled away.

He’s going to bring up his right—no, it’s a feint, he’s going for a left hook—

It grazed Zack but only a graze, and now Zack was sure he would know Cawkins’s every move a fraction of a second before he made it. Zack began to attack.

The crowd was screaming but Zack barely heard it. Rather, he did hear it, but only distantly, like waves crashing on rocks. The ref was there, circling and hovering, but he barely registered on Zack. Only Cawkins filled his senses. Cawkins couldn't get near Zack, but his defenses were still good, and it took a while for Zack to land a punch. The crowd noise died down: nobody was pounding anybody. A few boos arose.

Then Zack saw it: the opening he needed. He went in low, looping a left to Cawkins's side, following it with a right to the head. The fighters closed and Zack held Cawkins tight and began to batter. This had always been Zack's ace: he was incredibly strong. Cawkins had reach and speed instead of strength, and now both were neutralized. Zack hit him again and again. The watchers screamed.

When the ref made them separate, Cawkins fell to his knees. He got up, and Zack felt elation lift him onto the balls of his feet. He had the son-of-a-bitch. The bell rang.

In the next round he played with Cawkins, anticipating his every move, putting on a show for the crowd, enjoying himself immensely. When Zack finally went in for the big hit, Cawkins was bloody and exhausted. Zack didn't have a mark on him. The medic rushed over to Cawkins. The announcer was screaming what any idiot could see, that Zack had won.

He walked back down the aisle, savoring the shouts of "Mur-phy! Mur-phy!" In his dressing room, Jerry looked dazed.

Zack said, "Don't let my sister in here. And don't you ever bet against me again."

To Zack's surprise, Anne didn't try to see him again. But she sent him texts every day. He read them, because she was his sister, because she had practically raised him after Mom took a powder and the old man bought it, because he owed her. But he only read each of them once.

Like all of Anne's texts, they were long and written in good English, which irritated Zack. Who texted like that? Only Anne.

I want to explain this to you, Zack, at least as much as I understand it. Think of a brain like a city. Part of it has houses, part has shops, part of it factories, part of it is a newspaper printing office. Now think of your consciousness like police. The part of the city that has houses doesn't know every minute what's going on in the part that has the factories, but the cops can go to any part of the city. Even if they can't get into the factories or the houses.

Not without a warrant, Zack thought.

Somehow, your brain is different. The police *DO* know what's going on in the news office. News comes in all the time, huge amounts of it, and you know consciously what it is. The news comes through your senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste. The news is about other people—their body language and facial expressions and so on. Everybody reads other people's sensory signals, but you do it in a more integrated way than other people do: the input sensory signals and your conscious ability to use them to predict. Does this sound like what's happening to you?

Zack didn't reply.

You never answer my texts. I just want to know you're reading them!

Zack had another beer in a bar on Third Avenue, with older fighters who'd never given him the time of day before now.

I talked again to Dr. Norwood and there is such a thing as "acquired savantism," where some kinds of brain damage actually bring out talents in patients that they didn't

have before. It's even been demonstrated in controlled experiments. Dr. Norwood wants to see you again. Please answer me!

Zack was surprised by how much he missed Jazzy. One night, he picked up a girl who had seen him fight the night before. He didn't even have to pay for it. If he was drunk enough, he found, he didn't get her "sensory signals" and didn't have to become her. Sex was just sex again.

Zack, do you understand what I'm telling you? Please answer!

Zack understood, all right. He understood that Anne was dumbing down everything she told him, trying to make it fit into his slow, stupid, little-brother brain.

Zack, here's my last text on this subject. Just think about it, please. Integrated consciousness—a part of the city knowing what other places are doing—might involve other sections of the brain, too. Are you experiencing that? Is anything else happening in your brain besides your being able to predict how people are going to move and feel?

The non-voices.

Most of the time Zack had learned to ignore them, just as he'd learned to ignore "sensory input" from people he didn't want to focus on. Once he'd seen a horse with blinders on so it wouldn't be spooked by traffic on either side of it. This was like that. He didn't even like to think about the non-voices, until Anne's texts made him. Were they another part of his brain trying to get in touch with his police?

Christ, if he kept on thinking like this, he'd end up as loopy as his sister. No, that wasn't fair—Anne wasn't the one going loopy. Frustrated, guilty, overwhelmed—he *should* answer her texts!—Zack ordered another drink.

He won more fights, all spring and all summer, each time against fighters rated a lot higher than he was. Going up the ladder. The last fight was even picked up for re-showing by ESPN. For the first time in his life, he had a bank account rather than using the blood-sucking check-cashing joints. There was even money in the account. Jerry was exultant, talking about title fights. In one fight, Zack got hit in the head, which made him afraid that he might lose his “integrated consciousness,” but nothing happened except a blinding headache. Well, it hadn’t been that hard of a hit. The path upward looked dazzling, and Zack was loving every minute of it: the attention, the parties, the girls (after enough booze). He stayed away from the offers of drugs, though. That shit was always the beginning of the end. Zack wasn’t going to have an end.

Then he saw the dog.

There weren’t many dogs in this part of this city, just dirty feral cats that lived on rats and garbage and hissed at any human fool enough to approach them. This dog looked out of place. Big, the color of dead leaves, short hair—Zack didn’t know anything about dog breeds. It wore a leather collar with tags and looked well cared for, its fur glossy as it sat in the middle of the sidewalk in front of Jerry’s office building. The animal blocked the crumbling cement steps up to the front door.

“Move,” Zack said. He didn’t like dogs, especially large dogs. One had bitten him badly when he was four, a monster belonging to a neighbor when he and Anne still lived on Tremaine Street with drunken old Dad, who had only taken Zack to the ER when Anne, eleven, got hysterical.

The dog stood up and growled at Zack. It didn’t like him, either.

Zack froze. Was it going to attack? No. How did he know that? He just did. This dog was scared, not mad. Despite himself, Zack took a step forward. It felt like his body moved itself. Weight shifted, spine straight, shoulders squared, breathing even and steady, eyes on the mutt.

The dog lay down on its belly and put its head on its paws.

What the fuck? How did he know how to make the dog do that? The mutt was acting like Zack was God, or at least leader of the pack. What pack? What part of Zack's brain city was integrating with his cruising head cops to produce this behavior?

Unnerved, Zack stepped over the prostrate dog and went into the building. "Jerry, there's a damn dog outside and—"

Jerry wasn't alone. Two men sat in the soiled armchairs of Jerry's tiny office; both rose when Zack entered. They wore expensive suits. Jerry wore a dazed look.

"Zack, this is Mr. Donovan and, um—"

"Jim Solkonov, Mr. Murphy. May I call you Zack?"

He's going to hold out his hand and smile. He's intensely interested in me. He has something he wants to offer.

Jerry blurted, "They're from TV!"

"USNAF," Solkonov said. "United Sports Network for America's Fans. We're fairly new, committed to bringing America more, and more interesting, choices in sports. Maybe you already watch us. Zack,"—he paused, brought up his hand, smiled widely—"have you ever watched any bouts of ultimate fighting?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then you know how the sport has been watered down. Twenty-five years ago they started with 'No rules!' Then they added in more and more rules until now a fighter can hardly do

anything: no headbutting, no elbow strikes, only approved kinds of kicks. Foot stomping out, foot stomping in, gotta wear gloves—it might as well be a dance recital! We want to start something new, a genuinely exciting sport.”

“Yeah? Like what?” Zack wasn’t sure he liked Solkonov, but the guy was going to offer him something big. It showed in every line of him.

“We’re calling it ‘level fighting.’ Matches will take place on a stage, not a ring or octagon, with four different levels at varying heights, and no rules at all. I saw you fight, Zack, and you’re uncanny—it’s almost like you can read your opponent’s mind and know what he’s going to do. In that last fight, Saladino never touched you, not even once. You’d be a natural for level fighting.”

Jerry blurted, “No rules at all? You’ll never get it through. Authorities will shut you down.”

“Not if the matches take place in another country. We already have an island country that wants us.”

If that was true, it meant big money was involved. Well, duh—these guys had a *TV network*. But Zack kept his face neutral. “I’m not a martial arts fighter. Those ultimate fighting guys all have years of training in that stuff.”

“Yes, we know. But we’re not looking for fancy moves. We want this to feel primitive, like guys in a jungle. The basic aggressive primate.”

Donavan said, “We’re thinking of animal-skin costumes.”

“No,” Solkonov said irritably, “we’re not. Nothing gimmicky. This is going to be raw and basic. We think there’ll be a huge worldwide audience.”

“No rules?” Jerry said. *He’s going to scratch his head the way he does when he’s worried, he’s going to lean forward, he’s going to lift his chin . . .*

“Well, two,” Solkonov said. “No drugs of any kind, and we’re serious about that. Major, state-of-the-art testing. And no killing. But that’s it.”

Zack said, “What if someone dies by mistake?”

Donavan said, “Like that never happens in boxing?”

Zack said nothing, knowing as well as anybody the list of men who had died shortly after matches, from head trauma or internal bleeding. Sisnorio, Alcázar, Flores, Johnson, Sanchez. More. Jerry shifted his hams on his chair; he was going to ask about money.

“What kind of cash are we talking about here, gentlemen? And prize money with or without signing sweeteners and bonuses?”

“All the good things, Jerry,” Solkonov said, pulling a paper from his pocket. “Here’s our offer.”

Jerry took the paper, which had printing large enough for Zack to read it over Jerry’s shoulder. Zack felt his mouth fall open.

“Listen,” Solkonov said earnestly, “we know that our potential fighters are taking enormous risks. We’re looking for risk takers, because those are the guys who don’t surrender, not even when the situation is dangerous. Those are the guys with courage and balls, am I right? Those are the guys we want, and our backer knows that to get them, he’s got to pay well.”

Jerry managed to get out, “Who is the backer?”

“I’m not at liberty to tell you that. All I can say is that he’s not American, he’s a fan of true courage, and he thinks it should be adequately rewarded.”

Bullshit. But the money wasn’t. Zack tried to stop his mind from racing ahead to the life he could have with that kind of money. My God, the life he could have

Jerry said, “We need to talk it over, of course. Where can we reach you?”

“The Plantagenet Hotel. Our number’s on the bottom of the offer, which of course is not a contract—that comes from our lawyer. But we need to know by tonight, gentlemen. We’re talking to other fighters who are close to signing.”

He wasn’t lying, Zack knew. There were other candidates. Zack was not at the top of their list.

Jerry said, “We’ll call by tonight.”

“Great.”

When they’d left, Jerry turned to Zack. Jerry said nothing; he didn’t have to. His old, paunchy body had become a young kid’s yearning toward a pony.

Zack said, “I don’t know yet. Don’t crowd me. I need to think.”

“About what?”

Zack didn’t answer. He went out, tossing over his shoulder, “Back by six o’clock. Plenty of time.”

“Zack—”

“Six o’clock.”

On the sidewalk, the dog was gone.

The non-voices were stronger now. His own mind, warning him about self-preservation? His ancestors, doing the same damn thing? That explanation was one of the crackpot hits he’d gotten when he’d googled “voices in the head.” Another was “schizophrenia.” Zack stopped googling.

He headed to the nearest bar, a blessedly dim Irish pub. Three men sat at the bar, spaced well away from each other, drinking away their troubles at two in the afternoon. Zack downed

three double Scotches in quick succession, which shut up the non-voices. Then he took out his phone and played with it while he tried to think.

Good money—really good—just for signing. And if he won fights, more money than he'd ever dreamed of.

No rules, with all the viciousness that implied.

His Gift—that was how he thought of it now—which would always tell him what his opponents were about to do.

Going against fighters who were trained in mixed martial arts, because Solkonov had been lying when he'd said the owners weren't "looking for fancy moves."

More money than he'd ever dreamed of.

No rules.

All at once he wanted to talk this over with somebody. Not Jerry, who always followed the money. Not Anne, who would be horrified and would lecture. Not Anthony or Lou, who both had started acting so jealous and huffy that Zack had moved into his own place. His fingers moved almost by themselves to call Jazzy.

The call went straight to voice mail. He left a message. "Hi, it's Zack. Will you call me?" And then the thing that, he'd learned as young as fifteen, always worked with women: "I really need you."

"You can't," Jazzy said. "It's way too dangerous."

They sat on either side of a campfire somewhere way the hell up in the mountains. Jazzy was at an off-season ski lodge with, of all things, a bunch of middle-school kids, some sort of

volunteer work in a community center. Jazzy did that kind of do-good shit. When Zack had been in middle school, nobody had ever organized a weekend field trip to any damn ski lodge.

But he'd been able to persuade Jazzy to leave her charges with the other counselors for a few hours. He'd called Jerry and said he'd give him an answer by eight o'clock. He'd borrowed Anthony's wheezy old Chevy and followed Jazzy's directions up winding roads, through dark woods that crowded each side of the road, to the ass-end of the world, and then he'd let her lead him away from the lighted lodge to this clearing where they'd have some privacy. He had muck on his shoes and damp on his ass from sitting on the ground, and his side closest to Jazzy's fire was too hot while his other side was too cold, and after all that, Jazzy said the same thing Anne would have. Although without Anne's nurse-list of injuries he could get plus all the reasons he didn't want them.

But damn, Jazzy looked good, hugging her knees in tight jeans, the firelight playing on her warm brown skin. He'd been startled by the intensity of his pleasure at seeing her again.

He said, "It's a lot of money, Jazzy."

"You only got one body. Which already gets pounded enough as it is."

He stayed quiet. Right now, he didn't have to do anything. Every line of her, every movement, said she wanted him, no matter how grim she tried to keep her face. His erection was so hard it hurt. And he'd been practicing on controlling the Gift, so if he shut out everything but the sex the way he did with hookers, the way he shut out the non-voices If only he'd had a few drinks! But he hadn't brought anything, and anyway, only a moron would drive down those dark mountain roads half-sloshed. So if he just focused on the sex . . .

She's going to move toward me.

She moved toward him, and her lips were as soft and sweet as he remembered. His arms went around her and then he'd eased her onto the ground and it didn't matter which side of him was by the hot fire because he was hot all over, they both were, and—

It happened again. He anticipated what she wanted and he gave it to her, and then he *was* her but he couldn't stop, his own need was too great, and when it was over she lay purring in his arms and he lay wanting to be somewhere else, anywhere else, away from her and the fucking perversion that turned fucking into something that fucked him over by robbing him of himself.

"I love you," Jazzy murmured, and there it was, the golden rope. Just like always. Women!

This time she was the one who sensed what he was feeling. She sat up. "Zack?"

"This was a mistake."

"Why?"

"I don't want this!" It came out harsher than he intended, out of his own anger and bewilderment and fear. She was going to jump up and leave—

"Fuck you," Jazzy said, and stalked off. Zack didn't try to stop her, didn't even watch her as she disappeared into the trees. But there was a big black hole when she'd gone.

He kicked dirt onto the fire and started back toward the lodge, where he'd left Anthony's car. Five minutes into the woods and he was lost.

"Jazzy!" he called. "Jazzy! Hey, anybody? I'm lost!"

An owl hooted someplace.

There was a moon but under the trees it was still dim. His cell phone flashed NO SERVICE—he was too far from a tower, or blocked by the hills, or something. Zack stumbled on. Nothing looked familiar—all the damn trees looked like trees!

Eventually he came to a place he knew he hadn't been before, a sort of mini-meadow, thick with weeds and brush but at least moonlight could shine down. The air was growing colder, and he shivered. Where the hell was he? And what if he couldn't find his way back? People died lost in the mountains, didn't they? But maybe not in September. He hoped not in September.

A shape stepped out of the woods into the moonlight.

A city boy, Zack could nonetheless recognize a wolf. Dimly, he remembered Anne saying something about a pack having come down from Canada and killing chickens or sheep or something. Did wolves attack people? Zack had no idea, but his hands curled into fists. Which probably wouldn't be of any use anyway—

He and the wolf stared at each other.

All at once an idea came into Zack's head, from wherever ideas started. A wolf was just a kind of dog, right? Zack took a step toward the wolf and moved his body, without thinking about it, the way he had with the dog on the sidewalk. Commanding. In charge.

The wolf snarled softly.

Zack kept staring, in challenge.

The wolf hesitated, then lay down on the brush and lowered its head.

My God, I can dominate a wolf.

Not that he really wanted to. After a long, wholly satisfying moment, Zack turned and walked away. Twenty minutes later he glimpsed light through the woods and came to the lodge. His cell phone worked again. He got into the car and started the engine and the heater. It was two minutes to nine.

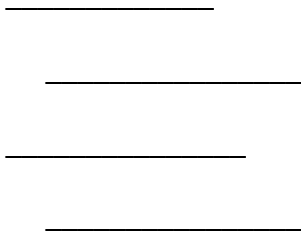
“Jerry? Call Solkonov. I'm in.”

II.

Zack stepped out onto the fourth, highest level of the huge stage. Immediately, the crowd shouted and stamped. Zack couldn't see them; everything beyond the stage was in darkness. But the stage itself was bright, and he easily spotted the other three fighters, one on each level, where they couldn't get at each other until the bell rang. Zack looked past the edge of the rough wooden board at the three men arrayed near the front edges of the levels below.

It's a long way to fall, Zack.

He pushed Anne's voice out of his head and concentrated. The stage, covered in canvas printed with a pattern of rocks, was supposed to look like some sort of cliff with four staggered ledges that overlapped in the center:



At the overlap, the ledges were only three and a half feet above each other, which meant not only that you had to crouch if you were idiot enough to move up or down that way, but also that you could jump, or throw a man, from levels four to two or three to one. Each ledge was set back a few feet from the one above. At each of the ends were fake palm trees of concrete with green plastic fronds; in the middle of each ledge was a hole. Zack wore shorts printed in leopard (Donavan had won on that), with a jockstrap but no cup. Ramon Romero had zebra, Julian Browne tiger, Serge Luchenko, who spoke almost no English, snakeskin. Nobody wore shoes or gloves. Everybody had shaved their heads.

The announcer introduced the fighters and spent a few minutes excitedly explaining what everyone there already knew: No rules! Raw and primitive! A brand new sport! The first match ever! Zack took deep breaths and looked down at Romero, on the broad and deep level one. All four fighters were welterweights, but Romero had the long, muscled legs of a jumper. Zack had checked them all out on the Internet, and he hadn't liked what he'd read. Romero had almost qualified for the Olympics in gymnastics. Browne was a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. Luchenko, who Solkonov had dug up somewhere in Russia, was a mystery, with almost no web presence. But he had more muscles than Zack had known it was possible to pack onto a human body. If the blond Russian caught you in any kind of grip, you wouldn't leave conscious, or possibly alive. Zack was insane to be here.

The bell rang.

The men on the lower three levels faded back under the ledges above, to avoid being jumped on. Zack moved back, too, and waited. At the highest level, drawn by lottery, he had the advantage. Seconds passed, which seemed like hours. Then shouts erupted from the audience and grunts from below Zack, on the left edge of the stage.

He ran to the center and leapt onto the third level, far enough out that if anyone were crouching there to grab his feet, they wouldn't get him. No one crouched. The third level was empty, and Zack peered through its hole to the first. Luchenko advanced on Romero while Browne rushed toward them from the other side. Zack caught the quick glance between Romero and Browne.

They had formed an alliance. *No rules*. Together take down Luchenko, then Zack, and only then fight each other.

Luchenko is going to feint left and trip Romero, but Romero's already seen it . . .

Browne is going to come at Luchenko with some fancy martial-arts move that throws him .

..

Another second and the Russian was on the ground. Romero and Browne began kicking him and then dancing away. Luchenko wasn't as fast as they were. He put up his arms to protect his head, but not soon enough. Still, he got one good grab, which Zack anticipated, and caught Romero's ankle. Browne bent and elbow-jabbed Luchenko in his now exposed face. The Russian couldn't handle them both at once and he was too vulnerable on the ground. A few more vicious kicks and murderous jabs, and he went still.

Half the crowd shouted, the other half booed at how quickly one fighter was out.

Browne had a clear shot at Romero while Romero was freeing his ankle, *but he's not going to take it*. They were still in alliance, and Zack knew the moment before that they were going to turn toward him.

He shimmied up the palm tree to level three. Romero, the jumper, leapt easily onto recessed level two and then three, but by that time Zack had dropped back through the level-three hole to level one, jumping down the seven feet to face Browne, whom Zack had known was going to move back under the overhang of level two.

This was risky. Browne was the one trained in martial arts, and Zack had only seconds before Romero leapt back down to join his ally. But if Zack let them corner him on a higher level, Browne could fancy-move throw him off a ledge, which might break his back. Zack had to face him here, and fast.

He rushed Browne, who sidestepped easily . . . but Zack had known he was going to. He counter-feinted, grabbed Browne in a choke hold, and began to batter him in the head. Browne shifted his weight to try for advantage, but Zack sensed every move he would make and counter-

shifted—clumsily, maybe, but Browne didn't get out of the hold. He was trained in graceful kicks and chops, not brutal battering. In a few moments he screamed and stopped trying to fight. Zack didn't know if the scream was a feint, too, so he kept punching at the face, head, chin. It felt terrible, but Zack was afraid for his life, and that made him afraid to stop. Fear fueled rage—he hated feeling afraid!—and he kept on punching as his knuckles bled and throbbed. Browne went slack in his arms.

Romero rushed up. Zack threw Browne's body on him and climbed to the third level.

For three minutes, they chased each other up and down and around. Romero was more agile but Zack more tireless; he'd spent months training to build up his stamina. In a proper boxing match, the bout would have ended at five minutes, with a one-minute rest between bouts. Not here. Zack caught Romero's puzzlement; he couldn't understand how Zack kept escaping him. Zack knew every move Romero would make.

The crowd loved it. They roared wordlessly, a beast without language. *My non-voices have no words either and they're not beasts—*

The thought distracted him for a fraction of a second, and Romero caught him.

But the jumper was tired. Zack broke away with less trouble than he'd expected and climbed a palm tree. It had real coconuts wired to its plastic fronds. Zack tore one free; it was surprisingly heavy. He hurled it at Romero. *Put on a show.* The coconut missed, but now the crowd screamed a real word: Murphy! Murphy! Murphy! Zack threw more coconuts.

It took him another two minutes to confuse Romero enough for Romero to lose track of him. Zack dropped through the fourth-level hole, on top of Romero, and started punching. The man's training in boxing was minimal. He fell to his knees. Zack let him get up and then crashed a left hook to his head. Romero went down and stayed down.

Zack stepped to the edge of the second level and held up his arms. All at once they felt too light without gloves. Blood streamed into one eye; he'd been hit in the head. His left knee, which he hadn't even noticed before, was ready to buckle. His hands were scraped raw.

“Murphy! Murphy! Murphy!”

“And the winner is . . . Zack Murphy!”

His corner man—or at least that's what he would have been if this stage had corners—brought Zack a robe and led him away. Pretty girls wearing almost nothing lined up across the front of level one to dance to raucous music. Men with mops appeared behind them to clean the stage of blood and pick up the shattered coconuts. A doctor bent over Romero, said, “Okay,” then moved swiftly to Browne. As Zack and the corner man passed by them, Zack just caught the doctor's words over the music and the crowd:

“This one's dead.”

Julian Browne had been beaten so badly around the head and neck that he had choked on blood and broken teeth and other assorted body bits. That had taken five or six minutes. If the doctor had gotten to him—had been permitted to interrupt the drama on stage—while Zack was throwing coconuts at Romero, Browne might have lived.

The prize money, a percentage of the gate plus the broadcast pay-per-view plus a variable bonus, was supposed to be substantial. Zack didn't ask if it was. He walked past Jerry, past the backstage reporters, past the doctor and his dressing room. No fans stood by the back entrance, not yet: There were two more fights to go tonight.

“Zack! Zack! Where are you going? You can't just leave, kid!” Jerry, sputtering and worried. Zack didn't answer.

“You feeling dizzy? Wait, I’ll get the doc!”

Zack didn’t wait. In his leopard-printed shorts and bare chest he raised his hand, bloody still, and a cab stopped. It never would have stopped in the States. He was not in the States. He was on a tropical island someplace—he didn’t even know which island—and he had just killed a man.

“Yeah, mon?” the cabbie said.

Zack mumbled the name of the hotel and the cabbie drove through the warm, flower-scented tropical night. Zack had no money with him. The cabbie went with him through the lobby, where guests turned and stared, up to Zack’s room. Zack paid him. Then he stood under a shower as hot as he could get it, which wasn’t very hot, for as long as the water held out, which wasn’t very long. His phone buzzed insistently. As soon as it stopped, pounding started on his door.

“Go away, Jerry,” Zack said. “That’s it. I’m not fighting anymore. Break the contract.”

“Zack—”

“Go away.”

Jerry didn’t. He began his spiel about all the fighters—boxers, ultimate fighters, anybody he could think of—who’d happened to die in the ring or shortly after a bout. It was the risk you took, the risk Browne had known he was taking, it was nobody’s fault, it wasn’t such a—

Zack called hotel security and had the old man removed. When he accessed his bank account on his phone, the prize money from the first fight—the only fight!—was already there. Zack bought a ticket for a 6:00 a.m. flight home, bandaged his fists as well as he could with washcloths from the hotel, and packed. The airport bar stayed open all night. Zack had two

double Scotches, and then he couldn't hear the voices anymore. By 5:30 a.m. he was on a plane headed Stateside.

Fighters take risks in the ring. Browne knew the risks. Not anybody's fault.

He couldn't make himself believe it.

And it easily could have been him. A fraction of a second slower in reading the other fighters' signals, in "integrating sensory data" with his "acquired savantism," and it would have been him.

He slept until 4:00 p.m. in his one-bedroom apartment. It had an actual bed, but nearly nothing else. Somehow Zack had never gotten around to shopping for furniture. The walls were the pristine white of snow before stumbling drunks, urinating kids, or car exhaust got at it. Zack's cheap Walmart clock sat on the floor. He peered at it, sat up, and gazed at the blood from his cuts, which had stained his new sheets before he'd properly, if awkwardly, bandaged his hands. On each, fingers stuck out of a thick wad of padding.

He had killed Julian Browne.

He punched at his phone, grimacing at the screen as if it were toxic. "Gail? It's Zack."

"Well, well. A call from On High."

Zack gritted his teeth. But what else did he expect? "I need to ask a favor."

Surprise colored Gail's voice, even as she pressed her attack. "Yes, I'm fine, thank you for asking, and so is Anne. Who has been out of her mind with worry about you."

"I'm going to call her."

“Really? Then why call me at work, where you knew she wouldn’t be able to wrench the phone from me so she could talk to her worthless brother?”

“Never mind. Forget the whole thing!”

“No, wait, don’t hang up—Anne really is worried about you. Let me at least tell her you’re all right. Are you all right?”

Yes. No. I don’t know any more what “all right” even means. “I’m fine.”

“Where are you? Still on St. Aimo?”

A horrible idea took Zack. “You mean Anne watched the fight?”

“Of course Anne watched the fight! Did you think it escaped Google? She cried all night afterward.”

Zack closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Wow, there’s something I never thought I’d hear from you.”

“I’m not going to fight again. Ever.”

Gail’s silence was more shocked than words would have been. Zack took his temporary advantage. “I need to borrow your camping stuff.”

“My what?”

“Your tent and shit. Maybe a little stove thing. Whatever I need for a week in the mountains.”

“*Why?*”

“I want to spend a week in the mountains.”

Silence. Then, “Is this really Zack I’m talking to?”

“Stuff it, Gail. Can I borrow the things or not? I’m asking because if I went to a store and bought all that stuff, I still wouldn’t know what the fuck to do with it. I need you to show me.”

“So you can spend a week in the mountains.”

“Yes.”

“Alone.”

“Yes.”

“In late October.”

“Yes!”

“Too risky, Zack. They already have snow in the passes. A neophyte could easily get himself killed.”

“Forget it. I’ll buy the stuff and figure it out.”

“As if. Anne would never forgive me if you froze to death or got attacked by a bear or fell off a cliff. You’ll never last a week, but you could maybe do a few days. I’ll bring the stuff tonight. Give me an address. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You’re bat-shit crazy, Zack.”

Like I didn’t already know that.

He had the rest of the afternoon to kill. His apartment was above a sports bar—very convenient. But all at once Zack didn’t want to go there. It was the kind of place where men and a few women watched extreme sports; he might be recognized, especially with his bandaged hands. He pulled his cap low over his face, stuck his hands in his pockets, and found a bar so dark that entire stables of fighters could have gone unnoticed. He gulped two Scotches and then nursed a third, trying to not see Julian Browne choking on his own blood on level one of the First Ever Level Fighting Match.

At six o'clock he started home on dark streets that had half their street lamps broken. It was cold; he turned up the collar of his jacket. Occasionally he passed little sidewalk altars, pictures painted or glued onto building walls of people who had been killed in gang-war violence, with clumps of dead flowers on the cracked cement beneath them.

In an alley, three punks about eleven or twelve were throwing stones at a little dog.

They had it backed up, cowering and whimpering, between two overflowing garbage cans. The stones were heavy; the bastards meant business. A gash had opened in the dog's side.

"Hey! Knock it off!"

Their heads snapped around, peering through the darkness. When they saw it was only one man, their postures eased a little. When they saw his bandaged hands, Zack knew they were going to start something.

"Yeah? Who says so? You, old man?"

The leader. That he called Zack the same name that Zack called Jerry—that didn't help. The boy's lieutenant half-turned, making sure Zack was watching, and hurled another stone at the dog. It hit and the animal yelped.

Zack rushed them. It was no contest, of course, not even when the head punk drew a knife. Zack knew what clumsy move each untrained kid was going to make, and he was fueled by a rage he didn't even try to understand. At the same time, he didn't want to really hurt them. So he pulled his punches, tripped but didn't kick, only waved the knife when he'd captured it, which took about ten seconds. Another ten and they were all running away, one limping but nothing serious. Not crippling them had taken every inch of self-control Zack hadn't even known he possessed.

"Okay, mutt, scram. Go home."

The dog didn't move. Maybe it was hurt too bad?

But when Zack approached warily—he didn't want to get bit, not even by a mutt this small—the dog got to its feet all right.

“I said go home!”

The dog lay down again, this time on its belly, and looked up at Zack.

What the—he hadn't been trying to dominate the animal. Actually, it didn't look dominated. It looked adoring. The dog crept forward and licked his shoe.

“Stop that. You know what shit can be on shoes?”

The dog went on licking.

Gingerly, Zack squatted beside the dog. It didn't bite. How did you tell how bad a dog was hurt? He had no idea. Maybe he could take it to a shelter. Were there shelters for dogs? Would the shelter people think he had hurt it?

“I gotta go,” he told the dog, and did. When he looked over his shoulder, it was following him. Under a street lamp that actually worked, he saw how thin and scruffy it looked, its fur coming out in patches. This wasn't a dog with a home to go to.

“Damn it to fucking hell,” Zack said to the dog. It wagged its tail.

In his apartment, he washed the little dog's wound and tied a thick bandage around its middle. The dog, a neutered male, let him. It seemed to be of no breed—not that Zack would know otherwise—and a middling sort of animal: middle-long fur, middle-brownish color, middle-thick tail. Zack gave it half a pizza and some water in the plastic tray from a frozen TV dinner. By the time he finished, Gail was at the door. She wasn't carrying anything. She looked around the apartment and snorted.

Zack said, “Where's the camping stuff?”

“You’ll get it in the morning. We’re not driving up until it’s light in the morning.”

““We’? No way.”

“Oh, yeah, and believe me, I don’t like it any better than you do. But you’re ignorant about camping and you’re not the deepest carrot in the garden anyway. I took tomorrow off. I’ll drive up with you, set up the tent, show you how to keep your food in a hang-bag, basic survival stuff, and leave. Wear warm clothing and bring a parka, hat, gloves, changes of wool socks, and boots, no matter how warm it seems in the city. We’ll need two cars.”

“I don’t want you there.”

“That makes two of us. But I’m doing it. Not for you—for Anne.”

“Does she know about this?”

“No. She’d have a cow. Hey, I didn’t know you have a dog!” Before Zack could say “I don’t,” Gail added, “What’s wrong with his side?”

“He got into a fight.”

“Males,” Gail said. “Is he going with us?”

Zack looked at the dog. It gazed back at him with an adoration he never got, not from boxing fans, not from Anne or Jazzy, and certainly not from Gail. “Yeah. I guess he is.”

“What’s his name?”

From a deep place inside that Zack instantly hated but could not control, he said, “Browne. His name is Browne.”

They took both cars, the secondhand Ford Focus Zack had just bought and Gail’s four-wheel-drive Jeep. Their only conversation occurred in the street before they left the city. Gail said, “You’re really not going to do that maximum fighting crap anymore?”

“Yeah. I’m done.”

“Why?”

“I just am.”

She didn’t answer. Zack felt her curiosity: about his decision, about this trip, even about the dog, who had jumped happily onto the passenger seat of Zack’s Ford. Zack disliked Gail as much as ever, but he’d give her this: unlike Anne or Jazzy, she didn’t crowd him.

Jazzy. The last time he’d gone up to the mountains, they’d done it. Her luscious body warm in the firelight . . . but it hadn’t been any good, not for him. He’d had to get way too far inside her skin. The price was too high. Still . . .

He was astonished to realize that right now he didn’t want to fuck Jazzy as much as he wanted to talk to her. Well, that wasn’t happening. Another price too high.

He followed Gail’s car. After a few hours of ascent, they reached a small parking lot. Below them spread hills of red and gold trees dotted with dark-green firs. Beyond that, the city lay hazy and unreal. A sign with an arrow said AMBER NATURE TRAIL, followed by a lot of small print that Zack didn’t read. Browne leapt happily from the car.

Gail said, “This is as far as we can drive. Now we pack it in. Do you know where you want to camp?”

Zack shook his head and Gail rolled her eyes, an action repeated when she saw the Safeway brown bag of groceries on the passenger seat. “You really thought you could just carry that stuff in?”

“It’s food,” he said, lamely. He filled his pockets with two bananas and handfuls of dog kibble before she handed him things from the trunk to carry, including a big jug of water with

straps that slung over his back. She put on a backpack that rose far above her head, and they set off along the trail.

In half an hour he felt as if he'd just gone three bouts in the ring. Gail strode on, tireless. Zack said, "This spot looks good."

Gail snorted, led him off the trail, and kept hiking. It was even harder here, rougher ground and branches all over the place. Eventually she stopped in a clearing. "Okay, this has good drainage, a place for the hang-bag, wood for the fire. Now pay attention. There are bears around here, and you need to do this right."

Bears? That wasn't the animal Zack was hoping for.

Gail put up the tent. She showed him how to keep his food in a hang-bag when he wasn't eating it and how to reconstitute and cook the dried stuff when he was. The hang-bag was suspended high aboveground from a line stretching between two trees. She built him a fire and showed him how to start another one with the nanoSTRIKER, a device he hadn't even known existed. She found wood and told him to keep the woodpile replenished during daylight. She gave him a GPS, a powerful flashlight, a hunting knife, a miniature first aid kit, and a sleeping bag "good to ten below zero, and it won't get anywhere near that. I always bring a handgun up here but I can't loan it to you—you're not licensed to carry."

"I can take care of myself without a gun."

She snorted. "Does your phone work up here?"

It didn't. Gail looked around the camp she'd made, shrugged, and disappeared into the trees. "Thank you, Gail," he called after her retreating form, but she didn't look back.

He couldn't sleep. He sat very late by the fire, feeding it from Gail's woodpile. Browne lay beside him, and Julian Browne filled Zack's thoughts. The non-voices whispered in his head. The forest made strange sounds. By firelight he read the only book he'd brought, a secondhand paperback titled *Wolves and Their Ways*.

“Within the genus *Canis*, the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) represents a more specialized and progressive form than either *Canis latrans* or *Canis aureus*, as can be seen from its morphological adaptations to hunting larger prey—” Christ! Why couldn't they write in English?

He did learn that wolves traveled in packs, were constantly in search of prey, were smart, and covered nine percent of their territory daily, about fifteen miles. So what were the odds of a pack, or even a single wolf, strolling into Zack's camp? Also, wouldn't they avoid the fire or maybe even a flashlight? But if doused the fire and turned off the flashlight, he couldn't see any wolves if they did come. And he'd be sitting alone in the dark, which was deeper here than he could have imagined. Bottom-of-a-cave dark, Devil's-soul dark. There wasn't even a moon.

It did rise, eventually, a little after midnight, an almost-full globe that flooded the clearing with silver. But no wolves. The non-voices swirled and hummed in his head. Zack gave up and went to bed.

The next day he was profoundly bored. What the hell was a person supposed to do up here? He emptied his pocket flask of Scotch, cooked his mushy meals, and rehung the food bag. He read as much of *Wolves and Their Ways* as he could stand. He threw a stick for Browne. The dog brought it back. Zack experimented, teaching the mutt to shake paws, to “stay” on command. It was easy; Zack knew everything Browne would do before he did it, just by watching the animal's movements, and somehow Zack also knew what movements he himself should make to control the dog. When Zack said “No,” Browne obeyed instantly.

Zack was still bored. This had been a stupid idea, in a life of stupid ideas. Give it one more night, then pack up Gail's stuff and go home. The drinking water was almost gone, anyway.

No wolf pack that night, either.

Sometime after midnight, Browne barked sharply and Zack awoke. There was someone outside the tent.

He picked up the hunting knife and turned on the flashlight, briefly regretting the lack of Gail's gun. Fully dressed except for boots, he unzipped the tent and jumped out, to take the intruder by surprise. It was a bear, up one of the trees that anchored the line holding his hang-bag of food.

"Holy shit," Zack said. Browne, zipped inside the tent, barked hysterically.

The bear is going to climb down the tree.

It did, faster than Zack thought anything could move. At the bottom it stared at him. *It's uncertain . . . It's going to take a step toward me . . .*

It did, and through his panic and fear, Gail's advice rushed into his head: *If you encounter a bear, make all the noise you can and wave your arms. It will probably go away, unless you're between a she-bear and her cubs or you have the supreme bad luck to encounter a grizzly in a bad mood. Then you're dead.*

Was this a grizzly? Zack didn't know one bear from another. He shouted and waved his arms, and his shouts came out high-pitched and shrill. "Go away, leave me alone, I didn't ask for this, *shut the hell up!*"

Dimly, he wondered who he was screaming at.

But the bear didn't respond to him as Browne had, or the wolf last summer. It tried again to grab the hang-bag, failed, and eventually ambled off into the woods. Zack went back into his

tent, knife still clutched so tight in his damaged fist that the blood had left his knuckles. Browne was still barking. Zack picked up the dog and held him tight. The bear didn't return. Zack knew this because he stayed awake the rest of the night. In the morning he took down the tent, carrying it in his arms when he couldn't figure how to fold it enough to fit into the backpack along with the sleeping bag and everything else. He left the hang-bag with its remaining food and the water jug with straps. He'd pay Gail for them.

On the drive back to the city, Zack realized that he'd gotten what he'd come for, after all. Just not in the way he'd expected. But he had it. The information had been not in the woods, not in the bear, but in a stray, almost irrelevant sentence in the book about wolves.

For the first time since he'd killed Julian Browne, Zack smiled.

III.

The MGM Grand Arena in Las Vegas was filled to capacity. From his dressing room Zack could hear the noise of sixteen thousand people. All waiting for him.

"Ready?" Jerry said.

"Ready." For the hundredth time, Zack wondered why he kept Jerry on as his manager. There were better people to manage the new career Zack had pursued for over two years now. Much better people, more knowledgeable about the field and more used to the big time. But Zack owed Jerry, from back in the day. And he trusted Jerry, which was more than you could say for the usual eye-gouging Vegas promoter.

Just as Zack was making sure his headdress didn't wobble, Marissa pushed her way into the dressing room. Zack shot Jerry a glance that said: *You're supposed to keep her out before a fight.* Zack didn't need the Gift to read Jerry's shrug: *Didn't want another scene.* Browne, who

loved everybody, barked happily and licked the silver-painted toes showcased by Marissa's four-inch high heels.

"I just thought I'd give you a big ol' sloppy kiss for luck," Marissa said. "Ugh, your breath reeks of liquor."

Marissa, unusual for a showgirl, didn't drink. She ate only organic, carefully nourishing that spectacular body. She wasn't that great of a dancer, but for her erotic act at After Hours Vegas, she didn't have to be. Not with the way she looked.

Jerry, radiating fearful worry, made a face at Zack. But if Zack didn't drink, the non-voices got distracting. It was a fine line: enough Scotch to tamp them down but not so much he got muddled. The hell with Jerry.

"Gotta go, honey."

"Break a leg!"

He could never get her to stop the stupid show-business clichés.

When Zack walked onto the runway, the crowd noise rose to a crescendo. *Focus, focus.* There was no room for distraction, or error. Not here.

He focused. There was nothing but the cage door, not even Karoly as he unlocked it. Karoly and his brothers resented Zack tremendously. All three of them had spent their lives at this, raising and training and working with the animals, and then Zack waltzed into Las Vegas and did what none of them could do, for bigger audiences and a lot more money.

Not exactly. Not Karoly, Anton, or Henryk Bajek—not even Jerry—knew anything of the year in Florida, before Zack had returned to Jerry's stable. Zack had started with the rinky-dink, semi-illegal carnivals that spring up in the South like mushrooms after rain. Those were the only places that had what he looked for, and were willing to let him be killed facing it. The Bajek

brothers knew nothing of Zack's struggles to banish the fear that ruined his phrasing, to learn what phrasing even was, to achieve the right state of mind from which his Gift could do this. The first time Henryk had seen the scar down Zack's left arm, without a thick covering of makeup, Henryk's eyes had widened.

"From an alligator," Zack lied. He had never tried alligators, not since reading that one sentence in the wolf book.

"Of the *Felidae*, only lions exhibit, and to an astonishing degree considering the morphological and evolutionary differences, many of the same social needs and pack behaviors as *Canis lupus*."

He stepped into the cage and faced the big cats.

Four lions: three females and a young male. They were a pack, the females all related to each other. Thin bars of unbreakable steel separated the audience from the cats, the lingering legacy of an onstage tiger mauling twenty years ago. Entirely different, as far as Zack was concerned. Roy Horn had not had Zack's Gift. But the crowd remembered, and at least half of them hoped Zack wouldn't emerge alive. Cell phones stood ready to record the gore. A robo-cam, somehow smuggled through Security, hovered overhead. The Arena's drone captured it silently and flew off with it.

Goldie, the young male lion, got to his feet. For a few weeks now, he'd been getting ready to challenge Zack. Probably the announcer was putting that into his excited spiel, along with the facts that the lions had been given no tranquilizers, Zack was unarmed, some ancient pharaoh had taken a lion into battle with him as a mascot. This last was the reason Zack was wearing an elaborately wrapped white loincloth, gladiator sandals, and a towering fake-gold headdress.

He didn't listen to the announcer's garbage. He took a step toward Goldie.

Goldie, Fluffy, Fuzzball, Lulu. The Bajek brothers hated the cutesy names Zack had given the lions and called them by more “dignified” names. But Zack had chosen these to minimize the beasts’ power in his own mind. It wasn’t like the lions responded to their names. They weren’t dogs.

Fluffy, who’d given birth a few months ago and didn’t like having her cub left behind backstage, opened her cavernous mouth and roared.

Zack held no chair, no clicking spoons, none of the other gizmos that lion tamers used to distract the animals and break up their concentration. Except that the MGM Grand insisted, Zack wouldn’t even have allowed Anton or Henryk to stand behind the barred shield, a cage within a cage, with canisters of CO₂ to blast any lion that attacked. No lion was going to attack. Nor did Zack carry a whip. He carried himself.

His legs were straight under his torso, shoulders squared, gait leisurely, facial muscles relaxed and breathing calm and regular. Everything about his phrasing, the critical combination of posture and gesture, said *I am powerful and in charge. You cannot hurt me.* The lions must believe this. Even a quarter of an inch off in the angle of Zack’s head, the set of his body, the position of his fingers, would have sent a different message, but Zack didn’t have to think about any of that; the sensory signals that Zack sent were fully integrated with those he received. Had lions’ intense social needs resembled those of tigers or cheetahs or house cats, instead of wolves, what Zack did would have been impossible. Lions were the only big cats with dog-like pack behavior.

But they were still lions. Goldie had just turned two years old. The pride, run by the females, was getting ready to drive Goldie out, since he was no longer a cub and the pride now had Zack as leader. The females might still mate with Goldie, but soon they wouldn’t share food

with him or let him into their “territory.” From deep instinct, Goldie knew this. He didn’t want it. The only way to stay in the pack was to kill Zack and take over.

Goldie, well fed, was big for his age, with a black mane designed to intimidate other males from a distance. He snarled and flashed his claws at Zack. Goldie had omitted the stilted walk that would signal to another cub that this was a mock fight. Goldie was serious.

Zack took another step forward.

Fluffy got to her feet. Her tail lashed back and forth.

Goldie took a step forward.

Zack stopped, but without altering his posture or expression. He had reached what the Bajeks called “the office,” that invisible line the animal must not be allowed to cross or it would believe it held the power. But Zack could cross it, and did.

Goldie roared a challenge.

Every atom of Zack’s being concentrated on the lions. There was no crowd, no Arena, no steel bars. Only the lions, and they were faster, stronger, bloodier than he would ever be. But his integrated consciousness, receiving and processing and sending out sensory information as no human ever had before, knew what each of them would do, would feel. He almost *was* the lions, controlling them from inside. Almost, but not quite. Goldie responded to his own inner signal to challenge or be ousted from the pack that was his life.

Zack moved to Fluffy, the new mother, and laid a hand on her head.

Fuzzball and Lulu got to their feet.

Zack knew the second before Goldie would attack. He dodged behind Fluffy, moving fluidly, with no jerks or other indications of stress. Female lions ordinarily didn’t interfere with challenge fights between males, but Fluffy’s cub was not Goldie’s and changes in pack males

were traumatic for any pride because the new male typically killed all cubs to make way for his own. Also, the cage, although not cramped, was a far more restricted environment than the savannah, or even the animals' off-stage habitat, and Fluffy felt the tension of limited space for two leaders. She launched herself at Goldie.

Zack walked calmly to Lulu, the most placid of the lionesses, and put his hand on her head. Henryk and Karoly rushed forward with blasts of CO₂ to break up Goldie and Fluffy, a fight that didn't need breaking up because Fluffy had backed off, gashed, and Goldie had again turned his attention to Zack. Zack put his other hand on Fuzzball, the aging but far-from-toothless matriarch, who snarled at Goldie.

With Zack gazing at him from between two lionesses, a hand on each one's head, Goldie backed away.

Zack stared at him steadily, a clear challenge: Fight or submit.

Goldie roared, feebly. Then he lay on his belly and put his head on the ground.

And Zack played with Lulu and Fuzzball while Fluffy, not badly hurt, licked her bloody side. He played ball with them. He had Lulu jump through the traditional hoop. He played peek-a-boo with Fuzzball and a chain-mail blanket. Finally he walked to the cage door with the two lionesses, patting them both on their heads as if they'd been kittens. Leisurely he unlocked the cage door, stepped outside, and smiled at Anton, who did not smile back. Only then did Zack look at the sixteen thousand people on their feet, screaming themselves hoarse. Only then did he become aware again of the non-voices, stronger than ever, tugging at the inside of his head.

In the newly refurbished Skyline Terrace Suite of the MGM Grand, Anne, Gail, and Marissa sat on the veranda, twenty-six stories in the air and almost as big as the suite itself. The terrace was

furnished with a sofa, a dining table, and a huge TV. The TV played the Torres-Lucito boxing match at The Wynn, on mute. Below and around the terrace, the Strip glittered and twinkled and shone. From the roller coaster on top of New York-New York came screams of delight.

“It’s something, isn’t it?” Marissa said, stirring her club soda with a celery stick.

“Something,” Anne said. Zack knew that his sister hated Vegas. She’d come to see him, and he’d tried to show her a good time. They’d taken a plane tour to the Grand Canyon, gone to see Cirque du Soleil, eaten lunch at places where the slot machines stayed in discreet alcoves. Gail, meanwhile, had spent all her time in the casinos. She radiated the quiet, non-dazed satisfaction of someone who’d won but not really big.

Anne was going to say something Zack didn’t want to hear.

“I went to your show tonight.”

He drained his drink. “I asked you not to.”

“Why ever not!” Marissa cried. “It was wonderful! He’s so brave, the way he just goes in there with all those big ol’ cats!”

Gail’s lean, quick body said: *So your girlfriend doesn’t know about you. Still the same old Zack.*

“I know you asked me not to go,” Anne said, “but I needed to see it. It was . . . impressive.”

“Thanks.” She disapproved, and there was no way she could hide it, even though she was trying. As if she knew what he was thinking, she said, “I’m sorry.”

Marissa said, puzzled, “What for?”

No one answered her. Instead, Anne finished her drink, some awful vodka thing loaded with fruit, and blurted, “There’s so much else you could have put your . . . talent to. Aiding law enforcement. Some kind of business office, interpreting people. Even playing poker!”

Marissa looked at Zack. “I didn’t know you like poker, honey.”

“I don’t,” Zack said. “Anne, I have a suspended-sentence conviction, remember? No law enforcement. And I’d hate any office job. I’d hate any *office*. I need to move, get physical.”

Gail said dryly, “Well, lions are certainly physical. Zack, you’ve got something on your mind. Why don’t you just spit it out?”

Zack looked at her in surprise. It always startled him when someone else, someone normal, knew what he intended. He said, “Marissa, will you leave us alone for a few minutes? Family stuff.”

Marissa stuck out her bottom lip. Before she could protest, Gail stood. “Show me the rest of this place, Marissa, will you? It’s so big I think I’d get lost by myself.”

Marissa looked mutinous, but eagerness to play hostess won out. “Well, the master suite is this way”

On the TV screen, Jose Torres hit Wayne Luciter a wicked uppercut to the chin.

Zack said, “You remember that doctor who wanted to give me an MRI way back when I was in your hospital, three and a half years ago? Nor-something? Well, I want it now.”

Anne said quietly, “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. Nothing. Something. It’s like I . . . I’m not sure. But I think there’s more of that integration stuff going on.”

“Why do you think that? Because you can control those lions so well?”

“I’m not controlling them. They’re . . . well, okay, maybe I am. Indirectly. But it’s not that.”

“What then?”

Zack grimaced. Anne was prepared to wait all night for a good answer, but Zack didn't have all night. Marissa and Gail passed by the open doorway to the terrace, Marissa saying condescendingly, "And of course we have a whirlpool and—"

All at once Zack was sick of Marissa. She had a nasty temper, she was interested mainly in his money, and he could only fuck her if he was drunk. Before he knew he was going to, he blurted out, "How is Jazzy?"

Anne looked startled. Even before she spoke, he knew what she was going to say, and how. "She's married, Zack. A year after you . . . nearly two years ago. Last I heard, she was expecting a child."

And then, in response to what must have been on his face, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it's fine," he rasped. "I don't care, I was just curious, is all."

"She—"

"It doesn't matter!" He didn't need Jazzy, he didn't need anybody. There was a little silence.

Anne said gently, "You wanted to tell me about the 'more integration stuff' going on."

All at once, he didn't want to. And yet this was why he'd paid to bring Anne and Gail out here, wasn't it? "Nah. Changed my mind."

"I don't think so," Anne said, but Marissa and Gail had finished their tour and sat back down. Anne—submissive Anne!—said firmly, "Marissa, it was lovely meeting you, but Zack and I need to talk some more. Gail will get you a cab."

"Hey!" Marissa said. "Who the hell do you think you are to—"

"Go, Marissa," Zack said.

"Listen, *sweetheart*, don't think you can order me around like some—"

Gail took her elbow, lifted her from her chair, and dragged her off the terrace. Marissa began to shout protests and then obscenities. Gail paid no attention whatsoever, tossing Marissa over her shoulder, “Night, Annie. See you much later.”

“Wow,” Zack said, caught somewhere between admiration and resentment. But if *he’d* tried to manhandle Marissa, it would have had an entirely different meaning. All of a sudden you would have had domestic abuse.

Anne said, “Talk to me, Zack.”

Even in the sudden calm, it was harder than he’d anticipated. His throat seemed to close up, and for a second he was afraid of strangling.

Anne’s body and face said: *Trust me.*

When was the last time Zack had trusted someone to hear his fears? He’d never trusted anyone like that, not even Anne. Not even Jazzy. But Anne was the only person who’d been there for him his whole life. She’d been the big sister set above him, the brainy bar he could never reach, the sparring partner he could never touch—but she’d been there.

“I hear voices,” he said, and after that, it was easier. Anne shifted suddenly and Zack added, “No, not like that, not crazy stuff. I mean, it *is* crazy, but they aren’t voices telling me to kill myself or anything. Actually, they aren’t voices at all. They’re a sort of . . . Christ, this is going to sound so stupid . . . they’re like something big. Inside my mind.”

The alarm rising off her like an odor didn’t let up. “What kind of something big?”

“How the fuck should I know? I just know it’s there, and it’s getting stronger, and I don’t like it! Maybe an MRI can tell what it is and the doctors can get rid of the damn thing.”

“Is it . . . does it feel like a religious presence?”

“Religious? You mean, like God or spirits or demons? No.”

“What does it feel like?”

“I told you. Something really big. Oh, Christ, Anne, forget it. I don’t need an MRI. I’m doing fine. I mean, look at all this!” He waved his hand vaguely at the terrace, the vaulted ceilings of the suite beyond, Las Vegas. “I’m making more money than you would believe!”

But she wasn’t impressed, he could tell. Damn it, he’d wanted her to be impressed! That was, he realized, the true reason why he’d brought her out here. To finally impress Anne.

“I can arrange for an MRI, Zack, and I will. For as soon as possible.” She smiled painfully and put her hand over his. She really cared. So why was what he heard in his brain Anne’s voice from over two years ago, saying, “It’s a long way to fall, Zack.” Why?

He looked over the terrace railing at the Strip, twenty-six stories below. Down there on a huge marquee his name flashed in gaudy lights. On the TV, Luciter had Torres on the mat, and Torres didn’t get up.

For the MRI, he had to fly home. Norwood had arranged for time on some sort of super-scanner that, Zack figured, was probably like arranging sparring time at an elite gym. This super scanner, some under-doctor-type told him, paired “functional MRI with connectome imaging, through high-angular diffusion and diffusion spectrum imaging combined with neurocognitive tests.” Show-off prick. Norwood just said they were going to take pictures of how and when different parts of his brain worked, including how it was wired to other parts.

Zack couldn’t be drunk, he couldn’t be on any junk, he couldn’t be anything but himself and whatever else was inhabiting his head. Zack clenched his fists as the exam table slid into the machine like a slab into a drawer in the morgue.

“Try to relax,” a tech said from somewhere outside. Yeah, right. Stupid bastard.

His head was held immobile by a brace. The brace wasn't painful but he hated it anyway, just for the way it cut his freedom. He wore goggles that could project images in front of his eyes.

"Ready, Zack?" the tech said. "Please tap your right thumb against each of the fingers on your right hand."

Zack did, followed by a lot of other dumb little tasks. Each time, the coils in the machine thumped softly. His head felt slightly warm. Eventually an image flashed on the screen.

"What do you see, Zack?"

"A kid's ball. Red."

"Fine. Now what?"

A house, a campfire, an ice-cream cone, a dog, a car. Zack felt like he was back in kindergarten: C is for car, D is for dog. Zack had brought Browne with him to Anne's place. A computer, a church, a tree, a table, the seashore. When he'd been eleven, Zack, who couldn't swim, had nearly drowned in rough surf. A rocket ship, a rose, a book, a refrigerator.

A boxing ring.

Now they're getting to it.

A cloud, a rosary, a Star of David, a pencil.

A lion.

Two lions.

A statue of Jesus, a sailboat, a pyramid, a starry sky.

The images started to include videos of people doing things: eating, dancing, singing, praying, walking along the beach, kissing, driving a car, boxing. Animals ran and hunted and

slept. Zack waited to see them either humping or tearing apart prey, but there were no images like that. He smiled.

“What’s funny, Zack?” the tech said, and Zack told him. The tech didn’t reply.

A building blew up. A speeder was arrested. Two children pushed at each other, their faces angry. Something else blew up, Zack wasn’t exactly sure what. A fire raged in a building. A firefighter carried out a little girl, unhurt. A minister led a congregation in prayer.

“Hey,” Zack said, “are we almost done?”

“Just a little longer.”

It was a lot longer. Anne had told him that the typical imaging lasted about forty-five minutes, but this took hours. By the end, Zack was thoroughly bored. What did describing yet another tree (“Do you know what kind of tree it is, Zack?”) have to do with his non-voices? This was stupid.

When they finally let him out, he went straight to the nearest bar and got drunk. He thought of looking up Jazzy’s address on his phone and taking a cab to her house, just to see where she lived now, but even drunk, he realized how dumb that was. Instead he took a cab to Anne’s. She’d been waiting up and looked worried, but all she said was, “I walked Browne just fifteen minutes ago, so you don’t have to do that before you go to bed.”

He thanked her, torn between gratitude and the wish that she didn’t always do everything so fucking *right*. In bed, with the dog curled against his back, he dreamed that he held Jazzy again, before she pulled away and went into the arms of a dead, bleeding Julian Browne.

In Dr. Norwood’s office sat Zack, Anne, Norwood, and a Dr. Keller, who looked too young, pretty, and blonde to be what she was. Zack couldn’t remember the term, but it meant a doctor

who analyzed and interpreted the scanner results. She looked a little dazed. The room was small, chaotic with computers, piles of printouts, and a lot of equipment Zack couldn't identify, all interspersed with used coffee cups. One of these was growing greenish mold, which couldn't be good. Weren't doctors supposed to be super clean?

Norwood is going to lean forward, going to clasp his hands on his lap, going to speak—

“Mr. Murphy, the results of your scan are very interesting. Let me start by telling you what we thought we might see but didn't, and then what we didn't expect to see but did.”

“Okay,” said Zack, unable to think of any other response. The non-voices had been pummeled into silence by two double Scotches.

“Often when people report sensing a ‘presence’ in their mind, we see increased activity in the temporal lobe, and more than usual wiring to that area of the brain. That correlates with certain kinds of religious experiences, including mysticism and meditation and out-of-body sensations. Neither your responses to religious imagery nor your scan show that.”

“You mean it isn't God in my voices. Well, I told you *that*.”

Norwood smiled. “So you did. The other usual source of hearing voices is schizophrenia, which doesn't feature brain-structure abnormalities but does include certain patterns of neural wiring. Your scans don't show those, either.”

“So I'm not nuts.”

“You are not schizophrenic.”

“They aren't really voices anyway,” Zack said. “I told you that. They don't have words. I just call them that . . . because.” Because there wasn't anything else to call them. He really wanted this conference over, even though he was the one who'd asked for it.

Dr. Keller spoke for the first time. “What do they seem like, Zack, if not voices?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Presences, like Anne said. Or maybe one really big presence. Only not really. It’s like . . . it’s like *everything* is there. In my head.”

Anne said, “Everything? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what I mean! That’s what they’re supposed to tell me! Christ!”

Norwood said soothingly, “Let’s go on to what your scan *does* show. We expected to see greater integration among the sensory input areas, the motor areas, and a section of the brain associated with interpreting and responding to people and animals, including the fear centers. We saw that integration, which is what lets you so effectively work with the lions.”

And with you, Zack didn’t say aloud. The signals coming from everyone practically shouted at him: Norwood’s excited interest, that he was trying and failing to mask; the blonde’s dazed fearfulness; Anne’s concern so strong it was almost despair. Christ, she should lighten up. But none of them were all that different from the big cats. Which was depressing to think about, so he didn’t.

“Some of your neural profile matches that of highly creative people. Stronger—”

“Creative? You mean like painters and writers and all them? I don’t create anything.”

Norwood went on, “Stronger, and more surprising, are other results of the scan. Mr. Murphy, you present a neural profile remarkably like a person who is asleep and dreaming, with—”

“What the hell! I wasn’t asleep inside that machine!”

“I know you weren’t. But your connectome and functional data show the pattern of dreams: heightened activity in the oldest parts of the brain, in memory, and in emotion, along with decreased activity in areas governing reason and decision-making. The biggest surprise was how much the scan reflects a dreamlike state usually associated with dealing with internal situations,

not external ones. In other words, whatever is going on, and it includes some very unusual neural pathways, you are connecting with something that is inside your mind, like dreams are. But not anything we can name.”

Anne said, “The unconscious?”

“In part. But much more than the usual patterns that tap subconscious responses. Somehow the areas of the brain that respond to other people are heavily involved, even when Mr. Murphy is reacting to imagery like trees or rocks or stars.”

Anne said, “A . . . I almost can’t say this . . . a collective unconscious?”

The blonde said primly, “That lies outside our purview, Ms. Murphy.”

Zack demanded, “What is collective unconscious?”

Norwood smiled. “That’s a good question, Mr. Murphy. But we don’t know the answer, any more than we know what consciousness is. We’re all conscious, we experience the world as ‘I, me,’ but nobody knows how the brain gives rise to that consciousness. It’s the great mystery of neuroscience: What are we experiencing when we think, ‘Cogito ergo sum’?”

Think what? All at once Zack had enough of this. Talk, talk, talk, that’s all they could offer him. He glared at them, even Anne. “So what does it mean? Can you cure me?”

Norwood said, “You’re not ill, Mr. Murphy.”

Dr. Keller said, “The brain’s incredible plasticity—”

Anne said, “Maybe meds to completely disrupt everything the—”

“No drugs to completely disrupt everything!” Zack shouted. He didn’t even know why he was so furious. “I only wanted the voices to stop! You want to take away what I can do? How I make my living? What’s wrong with you people? We’re done here!”

Anne grabbed his arm. Zack shook her off and stalked out of the room.

On the plane back to Vegas, he paid for in-flight wi-fi. The flight attendant had already brought him two Scotches. He Googled “collective unconscious” and got “Psychology: in Jungian psychological theory, a part of the unconscious mind incorporating patterns of memories, instincts, and experiences common to all mankind. These patterns are inherited, may be arranged into archetypes, and are observable through their effects on dreams, behavior, etc.”

Bullshit. If there was one thing his non-voices were not, it was “common to all mankind.” He was the only sap blessed, or cursed, with the Gift. Which even after two drinks and at thirty thousand feet, was growing stronger and stronger. It was like it was trying to take him over, like he could take over the lions. And the doctors had been no help at all.

He ordered a double.

All the next day, the thing in his head grew. He had a show that night and didn’t want to risk drinking. He refused to see Jerry, ignored messages from Marissa and Anne, spent the day sitting on the huge terrace of his Las Vegas suite, holding Browne on his lap. The dog was the only thing that made sense to him. Browne didn’t even squirm, only giving one polite bark when he needed to use the poo-pad in the corner. Zack ate nothing all day. His head felt as if it could explode.

No, not explode. Expand, to take in whatever else was in there. Expand as big as the universe. Almost it seemed to Zack that he could feel—what had Norwood called them?—“neural pathways” multiplying like rabbits in his brain. Ridiculous, but . . . Christ, his head *hurt*.

It still ached when he went on stage at 8:00 p.m., but he gave the best show ever, effortlessly controlling even Goldie. He had Fuzzball and Lulu jump over each other, Fluffy fetch a spangled baton and drop it at his feet as if she were Browne. And all the while Zack felt

that he was only partly there, or only partly himself. Power flowed through him—but from where? Whose?

The consciousness of the universe itself.

The words formed in his mind, scaring him so badly that he ended the show ten minutes early and walked out of the cage. The audience, on its feet and roaring his name, didn't mind. Even Henryk, the least resentful of the Bajek brothers, glanced at Zack with something like awe. Zack didn't answer whatever Henryk said to him. He had to get out of there, or his head would explode.

He took a car right to the MGM Grand and bolted to his suite, locking the door behind him. He hardly knew what he was doing, or why. He put his hands to his head and groaned.

Everything *was* there, in his head—everything that had ever existed, or would exist, and he was both its observer and a part of it: the entire universe laid bare in a second. He felt possessed, taken over, even though he knew he wasn't. But it was too much, the pressure—the pressure!—of *everything*! It was going to crush him, to burst him apart like a balloon filled with too much air, a wine bottle left too long in the freezer until the wine expanded and shattered . . .

Browne, bounding forward to greet him, stopped so short that his feet slid on the marble floor. The dog whimpered.

“Hey, Brownie, good dog . . .”

Browne backed away from Zack, tail between his legs.

It was the last insult to his autonomy, to him, to Zack Murphy, his own person. He didn't want to be everything, he didn't want the consciousness of the universe woven through and into his mind. Norwood had said that Zack's brain had the same cells in it as anybody else's, just arranged differently and doing different things—did that mean that anybody could be what he

was becoming? Well, let them have it! He didn't want to be everything, he didn't want to be anything but himself, alone and independent the way he'd always been . . . Zack screamed in rage, in frustration, in fear. His gaze fell on the foyer table, marble and wrought iron.

And he *saw* it. Saw the table so vividly it almost burned his eyeballs, every curve and line of it. He saw the pattern in the marble as if etched into his brain. He felt the flow of the arched iron legs. He saw the table as it was now, and as it had been when new, and as it would be in a few years' time when someone had scratched it and someone else had stained the top and one leg was bent. He knew what the table would become, just as he knew when Goldie would raise a paw and bat at him. The table was part of him because the same force inhabited it as inhabited him, and in that force, time was an illusion. The past and present and future of the table were simultaneous and they were now, in Zack's head.

With the past and present and future of the floor.

And the vase.

And the stars in the sky above the terrace.

And Browne, who cowered before Zack and who was a mewling puppy, a full-grown mutt, an old dog barely able to move his paralyzed hind legs, a small inert corpse, a fresh bit of soil in a grave, even as he continued to romp and play in puppyhood. Time itself possessed Zack, and everything in his head, which was everything that existed, was one thing.

Just One.

He screamed and rushed onto the terrace. Above him the stars glittered and below the lights of Vegas glittered, and there was no difference, nor any difference between all that and himself. It was too much, it was intolerable, he would not have it . . . He threw one leg over the railing.

It's a long way to fall, Zack.

“No! No! No! Not me! You got the wrong guy! Go away!”

Everything, with its past and present and future, filled his head. Zack clung to the railing. Behind him, on the wall of the terrace, a mirror exploded, sending shards of glass flying twenty feet. In that instant, Zack knew he could explode the terrace, explode the MGM Grand, explode Las Vegas. And what else? *What else?*

“Mr. Murphy? Mr. Murphy!” Pounding on the locked door.

“No,” Zack whispered. “Please, no. *I don’t want it.*”

He never remembered what happened next. Everything went black. When he came to, the hotel manager and Security were prying his fingers off the railing. Mirror glass had cut his chest, his arms. “A . . . accident,” he gasped. “Go . . . away.”

They did, or maybe they didn’t. But when Zack woke again, in his bed, it wasn’t the hotel manager with him. It was Jerry, shaking his shoulder and saying, “Hey, champ. Wake up. That must have been some bender last night. You got any idea what time it is?”

Zack looked at the clock beside the bed: 7:00 p.m. He had been asleep, or passed out, or dead, for twenty hours.

“You got a show in an hour, kid.”

“I—”

“Come on, get dressed!”

He was wearing clean pajamas. There were bandages over the cuts on his chest. He remembered almost nothing of the night before. There had been a mirror . . . hadn’t there? Moving heavily, feeling as if the air were damp cotton wool, Zack let Jerry get him dressed, get him downstairs, get him into the waiting car. In his dressing room, Jerry got him into costume,

the Egyptian pharaoh headdress and the gladiator sandals and ridiculous white loincloth. Zack walked out during the announcer's spiel, crossing the catwalk to the cage. Goldie roared.

Anton, on duty, sullenly unlocked the cage door.

Karoly stood inside, behind the barred shield, holding the CO₂ canister.

The crowd stopped screaming Zack's name and quieted, waiting.

Zack looked at the lions, Goldie and Lulu and Fluffy and Fuzzball. No: at Rex, Majesty, Artemis, Lilith. He looked at Anton, holding open the cage door. Zack had no idea what gesture or expression Anton would make next. Zack looked at Karoly, who stared back at him.

Karoly is going to . . .

Is going to . . .

He didn't know what Karoly was going to do.

There were no non-voices, no presences in his head.

Zack looked again at the big cats, at their huge teeth and sleek long muscles and claw tips like ice picks. He looked at Rex's intent eyes and dark mane, at Artemis's lashing tail, at Majesty's poised stillness. He turned and walked back down the catwalk away from the cage, head tipped so far down that his headdress, sloppily fastened, fell off and lay in a heap of shining imitation gold.

IV.

Winter came swiftly in the mountains. At first snowfall, Zack looked for a shovel to dig out the car. Not that he was going anywhere; he hadn't gone anywhere in the nearly two months he'd been here. But there ought to be a shovel. It irritated him, and he phoned Loffman.

"Where's the snow shovel kept?"

“It should be in the laundry room, in the cupboard with the other maintenance stuff,”

Loffman said.

“It’s not.”

“Well, maybe—”

“Loffman, when I rent an entire mountain lodge, ten rooms, for three months right in the ski season, I expect there to be a goddamn snow shovel!”

“I know, but—”

“No buts, get one up here!”

Loffman sighed. Zack could picture his whole, tall, stooping, incredibly thin figure shaking with the sigh. Loffman always looked insubstantial as fog.

“Yes, Mr. Murphy. Oh, and somebody called looking for you. A woman.”

“What did you say to her? Part of our agreement was that you tell nobody I’m here, that’s what I’m paying your bloodsucking rent for—”

“I said nothing, I swear. I said I never even heard of you. And someone will bring a shovel today.”

“They better.”

The minute he broke the connection with Loffman, the stupidity of the entire exchange hit Zack. He didn’t want a snow shovel. He didn’t want anyone bringing him one. He didn’t want to see anybody, talk to anyone.

Or had he called Loffman just to hear a human voice?

That was stupid, too. He’d come up to *not* hear any voices—not on the TV or the radio or even his cell phone. This third-rate lodge, the same one where Jazzy had once taken her middle-school charges, had no cable, no DIRECTV, no Internet, and cell coverage only in the immediate

vicinity of the lodge. Zack was alone, free of anything but himself and Browne, just as he wanted.

Except for in his head.

There was no presence, no non-voices. But every time he got out of bed, made a cup of coffee, put on his parka, and went out into the woods, Jazzy's image was there. Was this, the biggest apartment in the lodge, the same one that the adults had used on that field trip three years ago? Had Jazzy slept in this bed? Opened this refrigerator door? Sat on this chair, staring at this gas fireplace?

He hated it. He didn't want to think about her. Certainly not think about her more than when they'd actually been sleeping together. Jazzy's naked body, creamy chocolate and dark whorly hair

He was horny, was all! But he wasn't going down the mountain to find a hooker. No place he might be recognized, no act that required anyone else. Fuck that. Besides, he didn't have a snow shovel.

"Come on, Browne!"

The dog leapt off the rug by the fireplace and trotted after Zack. Every morning they went for a walk in the woods together. Every afternoon Zack went again, alone. That's all it was, a walk. Nothing else. No matter what he saw.

That afternoon, it was a deer. Zack had sat very still for a long time beside a deadfall at the edge of a clearing, cold eventually seeping through even his parka, waiting for whatever came along. The deer stepped hesitantly into the far edge of the clearing, downwind.

It's going to move left . . .

The deer moved right, stepping daintily on delicate hooves.

It's going to push aside some snow and look for grass the way they do . . .

The deer lifted its head and sniffed the air.

It's going to run away, I know it, it's getting ready to run . . .

The deer stayed in the clearing another three minutes, until Zack jumped up and cursed the stupid thing and it fled, silent and swift as thought.

Zack stomped home, slammed the door, and got drunk.

He was acting crazy, and when he was sober he knew it, and when he was sober he got drunk so that he didn't care that he was acting crazy.

He built a wall of snow, using the shovel delivered by a sullen teenage boy driving an SUV, and lay down on top of the wall until he passed from shivering to drowsing. His lips were blue, he could barely walk on his frozen feet, and he understood that if he'd stayed there five more minutes, he might have died.

He lured a chipmunk to the porch with stale Sara Lee and failed to predict when it would scamper off.

He drew pictures of Jazzy, despite the fact that he couldn't draw, and burned each one in the gas fireplace, first prying off its glass cover. That created acrid odors that made Browne move away indignantly.

He boxed with a tree, an oak at least fifty years old, whose dry, sere leaves rattled with his blows while Zack's knuckles ended up bloody and his left thumb got broken.

In the woods he came across an animal he couldn't identify, something brown and furry the size of a large wastebasket. It rose on its hind legs and snarled at him. Zack took one step closer, knowing that it would attack. It didn't, dropping to all fours and lumbering off over the snow.

He buried his cell phone under a pile of snow-damp leaves, as deeply and carefully as if conducting a funeral for a beloved child.

He woke at night from dreams he couldn't remember, with tears that shamed him so much that he raged at himself and rammed his broken fist into the unforgiving wall.

Then he found the wolves.

It was morning, which meant Browne was with him, which meant there should have been no animals around because Browne's joyous barking usually scared them all away. Snow had just started to fall in cold, gray flakes. Zack, with a long thick oak branch as a walking stick, trudged behind the lodge. He turned the corner and there, just before the tree line and the bottom of the idle ski lift, a pack of wolves dotted bloody snow. They had brought down a fawn and were tearing it apart.

One looked up and saw Zack and Browne.

They stared at each other—was this the same wolf he'd seen years before? How long did wolves live? Zack began to back away. The fawn's empty black eyes gazed at him. Its exposed entrails twisted like greasy ropes.

Then a small wolf—young?—jumped forward and raced at Browne.

The dog yelped and ran in circles, terrified. The rest of the wolf pack stayed motionless, watching its murderous whelp, watching Zack. The young wolf's jaws closed on Browne's tail.

Browne's cry of surprised pain galvanized Zack. He leapt at Browne, hitting out at the wolf with his oak branch. The branch connected, hard, and the wolf gave a single sharp yelp and fell on its side.

The pack left the fawn and moved forward, snarling.

Zack tried to grab Browne and failed. The little dog was too terrified. Two wolves slipped between Zack and the lodge.

"Wolves don't attack people," Loffman had told Zack. "They're scarer of you, boy, than you are of them." But that wasn't the way it looked now.

He concentrated, his heart gonging faster than it ever had in the ring, trying to anticipate what the pack would do. They weren't attacking—score one for Loffman—but they were watching him intently, and he was surrounded. So was Browne, who chose that moment to streak toward Zack.

Instantly, the young wolf was in pursuit. He caught Browne in his jaws. Browne shrieked, a sound Zack had not known a dog could make, and Zack threw himself on both of them, trying to tear Browne free.

"Let go, you fucker, let go—"

A claw raked his cheek, and the pack moved forward.

He was going to be torn apart by wolves, he and Browne both, "wolves don't attack people, boy," *but I faced lions* . . . He was Browne, the fighter not the dog, and he was being murdered by himself in the ring.

The smell of wolf filled his nostrils, gamey and primitive. Jaws snapped close to Zack's flailing hands. A shot pierced the cold winter air.

The wolves scattered; the whelp dropping Browne. Zack picked him up. The dog still shrieked like something human. Gail ran from the lodge, her nine millimeter in her hand.

“What the fuck!” she shouted, and to Zack it sounded like a prayer.

In the animal-hospital waiting room, after Gail had driven her Jeep down the mountain like she or it was possessed, they finally spoke. The vet had rushed Browne into surgery. Gail looked at Zack and said, “What did you do to your hand?”

“Broke the thumb.” After a silence he added, “Boxing with a tree.”

“Huh,” Gail said.

“Why were you there at the lodge?”

“The same reason I always come—to check on you for Anne. I didn’t tell her I’d located you, because she would have wanted to come and I thought you might refuse to talk to her, or be even crazier than you are, or be dead.”

“How did you find me?”

“It wasn’t that hard. I know people, still.” And after another long silence she said, “Did Anne ever tell you how we met?”

What? Zack didn’t care how Gail and Anne had met. He cared about Browne, and about nothing else except being so tired. Why was he so tired? It was only morning.

Gail said, “I had a shitty life. I know you think you did, too, with your parents and all, but you aren’t nearly the badass you think you are. Weird, yes, but not a genuine badass. I was on crack, and in jail, and turning tricks to survive. Then I OD’d. Anne was my nurse in the hospital and all I wanted was for her to leave me alone so I could get back out on the street and do more crack. But then I assaulted a cop, never a good idea, and so I was back in the can. And Anne came to see me. Once, twice, a lot. It didn’t happen all at once. Or maybe it did, but I didn’t want

to see it. Committing to Anne, to a drug-free life, to normalcy—it was a long way for me to fall. Into trust. I had to fall into trust, and into needing somebody, and it felt like such a long way to fall.”

“I’m not interested in your lame story,” Zack said coldly.

“Sure you are. You just don’t know it yet.”

Zack said nothing, staring at his boots. They had on them snow, dead leaves, muck, blood.

Gail said, “I’m going home now. I’m not telling Anne about this, although I will tell her you’re all right even if you’re cruel enough to not return her calls. You got your credit card? Good. You can get a cab back up the mountain, if you want to spend more of your undeserved fortune, or to someplace down here, I don’t care which. Where’s your phone?”

“Six feet underground.”

Gail didn’t even blink. She stood and stretched leisurely, and Zack saw the bulge of the nine millimeter at her waist. She walked away. Over her shoulder she said, “Jazzy’s husband left her. He was no good in the first place. She and the baby are at her mother’s.”

Zack sat there another hour. He didn’t touch the cell phone that Gail had left on her plastic seat. Eventually the vet emerged, dressed in scrubs and a paper hat, just like a doctor for people.

“Your dog will be fine, Mr. Murphy. He needs to stay here a few days. The receptionist will tell you when you can take him home, and she’ll give you discharge instructions when you do. What happened to your hand?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s not nothing. You should go to an ER and have that looked at.”

“Okay,” Zack lied.

His hand hurt, but not much. The vet had not recognized him. Neither had the receptionist, nor the old lady holding a cat, nor the child and its mother with a rabbit restless in a red carrier. There was a whole world of people who didn't know what Zack had been able to do—any of the things he'd been able to do—and didn't care. Normal people, in a normal world.

Trust, Gail had said.

Zack picked up her phone and took it out to the parking lot. It was winter here, too, but not the snowy freezing winter of the mountains. Rain spat at him from an overcast sky. He stood between the animal hospital and a Dodge Caravan, and keyed in a number. With his left thumb broken and his right hand bloody, it was awkward. It should have been Anne first, Zack knew that; Anne had earned the right to be first. But that wasn't the way it worked, because about one thing at least, Gail had been wrong.

You didn't fall a long way. Falling wasn't enough. You had to *leap*.

He waited through the ringing, the answer, the normal voice saying, "Hello?"

"Jazzy," he said. "Please don't hang up. It's me, just me. It's Zack."

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