

Freeman / Peregrine 1

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The Peregrine

by
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-- Chapter One --

The pigeon exploded. A faint, high-pitched death scream and a final flutter of falling wings sounded thinly, as its shattered body all but tore apart, high above the empty plaza. Clumps of broken primaries and tufts of fraying down sifted momentarily toward the monotonous bare checkerboard of scratched paving blocks. Then the vicious wind took them, sent them swirling out across the improbable, choppy whitecaps in the dirty reflecting pool, and on into the street. There they dispersed and dissipated in the last rush of evening commute, scattering and dodging around dented bumpers, grime-stained fenders, and speeding, spotted windshields. One more moment and the separating cluster of plumage was gone for good, lost forever, its components fragile and indistinguishable among the blowing filth and tumbling loose debris strewn by the winds of October, far and away, far across San Francisco, into the fall of night.

The assassin turned to follow its victim down, crying triumph as the broken, gyrating corpse plummeted to dusty black granite and worn gray cement. The hunter banked tightly into the screaming blast of air that swept around the stolid corners of the building, zoomed to lose airspeed, and descended almost

vertically. Slender, pointed wings folded part way and slanted upward. A long tail fanned and flicked delicately, as the bird rode the buffeting gusts with grace and precision. It landed feet first upon the quarry, glaring fiercely at its catch with wide golden eyes. Dark feathers capped its head, and extended in a dark, wide, stripe downward across each cheek, like the bold smear of a shaman's ceremonial paint, like the leather ear flap of an antique aviator's helmet. The contrast lent brooding intensity to the slayer's predatory gaze. It repositioned its powerful talons, gripped the limp body firmly, then raised head and wings and caught the wind. The raptor lifted instantly, driven upward by great beats of long, tapering pinions, rate of climb increasing as it ascended and felt the unfettered force of the cloudless autumn gale. Dinner in tow, it flew the long length of the sullen monolith, curved breathtakingly around the far end, and disappeared into dusky evening, lost in shadowed halls of air.

At the corner where it had vanished, pitiless dark exterior glass and thin strips of oxidized aluminum threw back the western heavens, an infinite depth of pellucid midnight blue crossed with the luminous memory of sunset, warm and rich in copper, in yellow, and in gold. The reflection came obliquely, cast at a shallow, grazing angle, with such perfection and purity that the edge of the wall merged indistinguishably into the air, as if the work of humankind had for one brief twilight moment attained the celestial, and married with the sky itself.

"A peregrine falcon!" The girl in black spoke in a hushed whisper, uttered unconsciously, for her ears alone.

"It's pronounced 'peregrine', I believe." The unexpected response came in cool, almost scholarly tones, from somewhere disturbingly nearby.

She whirled, taken by surprise and suddenly, unreasonably, afraid. Long ringlets of unbound black hair whipped in the wind, and cheap silvery bangles and bracelets tinkled at her wrists. The band of fringe at the hem of her short black woolen cape danced chaotically as the loose-knit fabric swirled in a semicircle. No one was there. A few oscillating strands of hair clung to the wet corner of her mouth, a stark contrast against heavy lipstick the color of old blood.

"The Linnean name is Falco peregrinus. 'Peregrine' means 'wanderer'. They hunt alone."

Her face had paled beyond its chalk-white makeup. Blue eyes peered urgently past black mascara and ruddy eye liner, into the gloom, searching. She held very still and listened alertly, trying to hear past the quickened tremble of her own heart. Something lurked in the doorway. There! A dark vertical patch stood motionless, deep in the corner where the shop window met the jamb. A tall figure slowly resolved itself, outline broken up and concealed amid the glitter of city lights mirrored in window glass, shape obscured by the confusing silver streaks of smoothly reflective burglar-alarm foil. Where had he come from? Could he have been there all along? Something wide, shining, and metallic glinted at his neck. She stepped back nervously, almost to the edge of the sidewalk.

"E'scuse me," she squeaked. "I dint see you there."

"I know." The voice continued, low, quiet, and confident. He

was very tall. The speaker stood a full head above her, maybe a head and a half. "You were watching the falcon. Weren't you." It was not a question.

The wind rippled the cape away from her slight frame. It teased the voluminous pleated skirt of her Edwardian gown into undulating black waves that streamed out behind her calves and thighs. The creases of the cloth snapped sharply against one another, like a flag, like reluctant applause, like the tremulous, frightened beat of pigeon's wings. The fullness of the billowing garment only emphasized the narrow legs and angular hips of its wearer. A poet, a lover, or a parent might have called her gamine, but reality was far harsher. She was thin -- an ectomorph, almost scrawny.

"Yes. Yes I was." She lifted a white hand toward her mouth but stopped short, and pressed it instead against the delicate hollow where her collarbones nearly met, just below the soft curve of her throat. She nervously fingered the wide swath of see-through black chiffon that covered her from neck to neckline, then toyed with the thick strand of dull crimson and silver beads that hung nearly to the top of her bodice. The pendant that weighted its center was a pewter bat, wings stretched wide, undecided whether to capture, flee, or embrace. Another necklace lay under the sheer fabric, a thin chain of bright silver dangling toward the artificial cleavage between her small, pushed-up breasts. It carried a smooth, polished oval of clear agate, with a central infusion of colored substance that mimicked the hue, shape, and texture of a perfect, blooming rose.

"I was looking at the perg... the peregrine." Her eyes could not quite fathom what mysteries lay obscured in the entryway. "I dint see you there at all." The remark came out as querulous; she was too anxious to be accusing.

High above, a street lamp flickered into wakefulness, its unfocused yellow sodium light bleary and tinged with red. The sickly pallor of stark, monochrome illumination cast the alcove where the stranger stood even more deeply into shadow.

She glanced momentarily aside. The sun was indeed gone, but a good deal of sky glow yet remained. A few isolated figures still roamed the streets, inhabitants of neither day or night, temporary dwellers in an ephemeral land between, a place detectable by human senses only at the time of evening. At the far side of the plaza, a hard-jawed woman in a smart fawn business suit glanced sharply in her direction and raised a critical eyebrow. High heels clipped the pavement in strident rhythm as she bestowed a condescending smile and hastened away. A fleeting, ghostly face leered from the window of a limousine, speeding past in the curb lane, interior darkened by smoky black glass and lit from below, like a crypt. The meaty thump of tires on trolley tracks marked the lumbering passage of a police car across the intersection. Its red light flashed angrily, in pursuit of no one; the officer had forgotten to turn it off.

Comforted by the presence of humanity in all its familiar forms, the girl lifted her chin a little too much, and spoke more strongly.

"It's my favorite animal -- I mean, bird."

He took a half step out of the doorway. His garments were

also entirely black -- a kindred spirit, perhaps? A close-fitting double-breasted coat fell well past his knees and scarcely moved before the wind. A broad-brimmed hat with curled-up rim and low crown sat squarely atop his head. Shadow still concealed his face, but already she could tell that his hair was very pale. It fell in wide waves almost to the tops of his shoulders. The shine at his throat was some kind of sash or kerchief, made of metallic cloth so fine and flexible as to seem fluid, like mercury, as it shifted with his motions and quivered unexpectedly in the breeze.

"I see." The voice held something a little too hard for humor, barely soft enough not to be a threat. "And why is that?"

She tugged the wayward lock away from her lips, withdrawing it carefully so as not to smear the makeup, and tucked the wisps of hair back behind her ear. They caught again on an earring, a lacy silver web bearing a long-legged spider cast in darker alloy. A crudely dyed garnet flashed deep red from the underside of the arachnid's ripe abdomen. Below her other ear a Sheila-na-Gig danced obscenely, swinging back and forth in a Celtic circle of intertwining silver bands.

"Well... 'cause it flies, it's free. 'Cause it can go anywhere they like, and look at everything. They mix up with death every day but they're so alive. I think it's beautiful. I wish --" she hesitated for a moment, "I wish I could fly, too. I wish I could be just like that."

He took another step forward, and now a gaunt face emerged into the sallow glare of brightening streetlights. Slightly sunken cheeks emphasized strong cheekbones and a wide, clean-

shaven jaw. The mouth had strength and width to match, and its extreme corners had turned up in the faintest hint of a smile. In one small corner of her mind that remained quiet and considering, she noticed that he was not bad looking at all. In fact, he was rather handsome.

"I do see," he said, more softly, and inclined his head, offering a half bow in honor or acknowledgement. She could not tell what color his eyes were. Pale blue? Mist green? Light gray? The illumination only hinted at the hue; it did not suffice, not quite, to reveal its exact identity.

"A good answer," he continued smoothly. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen..." Her automatic, practiced response came much too quickly.

Something in the muscles of his face hinted that an eyebrow might have been about to lift. The neck-cloth rippled and flowed like a thing alive.

"... almost." she added hastily. His skin was pale, too, but it didn't look like makeup. "How 'bout you?" And that was silly, you weren't supposed to ask guys how old they were. But it didn't matter, he wasn't going to answer. He just stared silently, for a long, predatory moment, then replied with a different question.

"What is your name?"

Alarm bells rang deep in her mind, a clamor rooted in childhood folklore and in the unsought advice of unattractive grown-up relatives, bidding her remember that names had power, that anonymity conferred invisibility and invulnerability, that these were gifts to be treasured and defended, not carelessly

lost or foolishly thrown away. Yet she was too frightened to dodge or to construct a complete fabrication, so she told an obsolete half-truth instead.

"Sometimes my friends used t' call me 'Wind'.

Actually, it had been "Windy", but not since fourth grade, when an early spurt of not yet expected growth had given her height and reach enough to beat the stuffing out of anyone who dared use the forbidden nickname.

"Well, Wind," he continued, seeming not to notice the lie, "you are in good company this evening." He took a step toward her, but the abruptness, the proximity, and the veiled hint of possession were too much for her jangled nerves. As she recoiled backward, the edge of the blocky heel on one high black dancing boot jammed against a crack in the sidewalk. She stumbled and almost fell. He stopped and watched curiously, standing noiseless for the moment it took her to regain balance, if not self-possession. She stared back at him, head inclined slightly toward one side, embarrassed, frightened, and above all, uncertain.

"I only meant," he said calmly, "that it is windy." The metallic neckerchief rippled noisily, in unambiguous agreement.

She did not know what to make of the strange apparition that stood before her, speaking quietly but firmly. Her fright was not quite enough to overcome a touch of fascination, and make her run. Forgetting her makeup, she lifted a hand to her mouth and gnawed thoughtfully on a silver ring. It comprised three interlocked human shapes, tiny naked mannequins grotesquely frozen in an improbable sex act, contorted to fit her digit as

if it were a stereotype. More figured jewelry covered her other fingers, all in silver: an owl caught falling on some unseen victim, the powerful and dignified face of a mountain lion, a pentacle wrapped with snakes, a diminutive dragon circling a glowing red carnelian, a heraldic griffin rampant, a grinning death's head. The final ring carried a bas-relief of a fleet wolf, bounding endlessly around her right index finger. All its lithe speed and swift agility were not enough to break the spell of the sorcerous metal band that held it prisoner.

Determined to be bold, she faced him squarely and countered. "Do you have a one, yourself? I mean, like a name?"

"Why, no," he laughed at once, "I do not. Perhaps you will give me one." Once again mental klaxons sounded, but before she could think how to respond, the distant cry of a falcon turned her swiftly about and drew her eyes to the rapidly darkening heavens. Yet all that greeted her eager gaze were the first torn wisps of nighttime fog, blowing over the rooftops from the sea, chasing a bright satellite eastward across the purple sky. She watched intently as the tenuous opaque cloak spread and covered the unfathomable vault above her head, drawing ever nearer in its pursuit, surely about to close with its target. But as the amorphous gray tendrils merged and locked together with finality, the tiny, speeding spacecraft dwindled and vanished into the Earth's shadow, to cheat destiny and make good an escape.

Presently she remembered to turn and look at her companion, only to find that he, too, had disappeared. Startled, she swiftly turned full circle, but found no one in sight, not

anywhere, and the empty street and grated store fronts offered no hiding places for a long distance.

Well, actually, there was one. She took a few cautious steps toward the alcove from which the strange being had originally emerged. She leaned a little past the edge of its opening, and peered within. Yes! A tall form and a high hint of something silver stood where she had first seen them. She started back with a hiss of inhalation, but the illusion did not hold, it evaporated as she recoiled. A head-high galvanized chain and stainless-steel padlock glinted through the blackened iron bars of the glass door. The man-like shape revealed itself as a deceptive trick of illumination and contrast, a collusion of the steep fall of light from the sodium lamp and the irregular layer of thick dust that coated the tenebrous crevice where window met wall. There was no one there. The stranger had gone. He had left only his shadow behind him.

-- Chapter Two --

"Moira..."

The girl who had called herself Wind blinked and frowned at the interruption of her private reverie by her given name.

"Moira?"

She lifted her gaze and started to turn, but the edging of black lace at one wrist caught the worn handle of a plain metal dinner knife and sent it tumbling into her lap. She retrieved the utensil and set it precisely in place, then carefully pushed the long, clinging sleeves of her gown part way up her forearms, well clear of the scattered constellation of stale muffin and cracker crumbs strewn across the dog-eared paper place mat. She reached absentmindedly for her cup.

"Mo-i--ra!" The voice had almost become a whine.

"What is it, Jo?" Her assailant stared wide-eyed from the other side of the booth. "E'scuse me, I just was thinking." Moira -- for that name was indeed the one most of her acquaintances knew her by -- slurped lukewarm burnt coffee from the cracked restaurant mug, pursed her lips, and frowned more deeply.

"I've been talking to you almost five minutes, and you

haven't heard a thing. Are you on something? Haven't I just, Jemmy?" Jo's wide brown eyes flicked left toward her seat mate, who slouched in disarray against the wall end of the booth. He chuckled inarticulately and muttered an inaudible response. A few unshaven blond hairs on his upper lip lent an unkempt appearance to his clumsy smile. Moira wondered if he were trying to grow a moustache, but did not quite dare to ask, for fear the answer might be "yes". The black lapel of his inexpertly dyed second-hand blazer had begun to rub dusky smudges of pigment onto the white vest beneath it.

"No," Moira repeated, "I just was thinking." She tore open another envelope of sugar and dumped it into the offending beverage. The mug had once been cream-colored, but now the dark band of stain around the inside surface merged almost indistinguishably with the coffee itself. Jo drew a breath and opened her mouth, clearly about to probe further, but Moira knew better than to let her get started.

"I saw a perg-, a peregrine falcon, over by the Civic Center." She had not been thinking about the falcon, but about the stranger who had accompanied it.

"You did? Aren't they sort of rare? Gosh, isn't it kinda windy for birds." Jo lifted a covered hand and reflexively smoothed back her lustrous waves of ash-blond hair. Eighteen-button gloves wrapped well above her elbows, exposing a scant two fingers' breadth of round white upper arm, just below the puffy short sleeves of her dress. The style of the garment would have been Victorian but for the neckline, which plunged straight down from the points of her bare shoulders and swooped daringly

across the full width of the bodice. The entire outfit was coal-black, provocative, and revealing, but not quite simple enough to be elegant.

Moira swirled the coffee cup in her hand, watching the opaque surface of the thick, syrupy liquid. The sugar had vanished without a trace, like the sweet memory of a dream before the bitter harshness of wakefulness.

"I thought a falcon was some kind of old car." Jemmy laughed self-consciously, his sudden blush showing along the irregular border of natural color at the top of his forehead, where poorly-applied makeup did not quite reach his hairline. Moira ignored the comment. With Jemmy, all too often, you couldn't tell stupid jokes from mere stupidity. Moira wondered if he planned it that way.

"Yes," she answered, "there was a lot of wind." She tasted the coffee once more, and grimaced. Its strong, stale odor overcame even Jo's pervasive perfume. *Wind*, she mused. A spooky and ethereal nickname, but not nearly as spooky and ethereal as the figure who had prompted her to use it. She poured two more sugar packets into the thick-walled crockery mug, slowly stirred it with her dirty spoon, and bravely chugged down the dregs of the vile liquid. Here with friends, in the shabby nonchalance and the too-humid warmth of a brightly-lit diner, the encounter had grown vague and imprecise in her memory. It might never have happened, the stranger had seemed so unnatural and unreal. Why had she been frightened? On a broad, open sidewalk, with twilight remaining and people around, what could there possibly be to be afraid of? Yet even as she speculated, an abrupt

sensation of being watched tickled between her shoulder blades and sent rippling shivers scurrying down the length of her spine. *Wind*.

Moira twisted uneasily in her seat, to stare at the bright, false image of the restaurant interior, mirrored in the window behind the booth. She tried to focus her vision through it and beyond, out into the underlying dark reality of night, but reflected motion distracted her again and again. Only with difficulty could her eyes pierce the veil of illusion that floated in the thin glass. She knitted her brows and concentrated, attempting to see beyond it, into the night. In the far distance, the three slender support trusses of Sutro Tower stretched downward to the hilltops, dimly illuminated by city glow. The open steel framework that supported the great mechanical tripod loomed ominously above the skyline, a half-seen alien threat, like the disembodied articulating legs of a Martian war machine from the fantasy world of H. G. Wells. An intermittent glow from the aircraft-warning lights atop the structure reddened the low-lying clouds from within, but thick, obscuring vapor completely hid the top platform and its symmetric vertical growth of pointed antennae.

She lowered her eyes and carefully examined the nearby street and sidewalks, peering around and between the confusing reflections. No figure moved. She could see no one outside, no one at all. The cafe images jiggled slightly, their very existence jeopardized as the transparent pane vibrated before the buffeting wind. *Wind*, again. The word felt a lot different from "Windy". Maybe it was time for a change. She had never

liked her first name -- she had been calling herself "Moira" for so long that not even her few close friends knew it for her second name. Maybe no one would dredge up the original if she started using something like it. At any rate, it was better than her third name. Anything would be better than her third name.

Moira started suddenly, as a dark male silhouette appeared without warning in the glass in front of her, but it came reflected from within the building, it was not real. She turned back to the table, to find a tall, dark-faced waiter standing next to the booth. Jo had lifted her chin and leaned unnecessarily toward him, smiling and showcasing her breasts as she fingered her coffee cup and spoke with innocent charm. He stared down at her for a long moment, pretending not to leer but convincing no one, then hastened away. Jo beamed at him mechanically till he vanished around the corner into the kitchen, then faced the other two occupants and lowered her voice conspiratorially.

"Well, if you're not, I've got something that will fix that." For a few seconds, Moira -- or maybe it was Wind -- had no idea what she was talking about.

"I got this from Eddie." She fumbled in her purse, then thought better of it and did not take anything out. "He gave it to me for nothing. We can share."

"Oh." Moira flushed with understanding. Jo meant drugs. "That was nice of him." After a second, she flushed again, realizing that it probably hadn't quite been for nothing. Jo's eagerness was as legendary as her figure, and almost as visible, and she was always willing to barter and trade.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but he said it was good, and it didn't last too long. I haven't tried any yet. We can go out in Jemmy's van."

Jemmy's ancient, gutted camper had tinted glass and curtains, and an irregular, brushed-on coat of gloss black paint that covered but did not entirely hide a wilted crop of stick-on flowers, historical curiosities, leftovers from an era long gone by. It even had a mattress on the floor. Jemmy had his uses.

Jo pushed. "Do you want to go out? Did you bring your stuff?"

Moira/Wind thought quickly. She had her own needle, and the last time she had used it, her little shampoo bottle of cleansing bleach had still smelled of chlorine. But that was a while ago, quite a while ago, and she hadn't changed it since. So... maybe not, maybe not.

"I don't think so. I gotta do something with this makeup before we get t' the club, and I have t' put in my fangs." She fumbled within her purse, and drew out a black velvet ribbon with a thin silver pocket watch dangling from the end. She opened it, and stared briefly at the twisting thread of inscribed filigree that circled the bezel, and at the crisp, fine serifs of black Roman numerals on the ivory-colored faceplate. The curved edge of the thick crystal distorted the tips of the delicately wrought hands where they stretched to the perimeter of the dial.

She snorted in forceful frustration; the watch had stopped again. No matter, a cheap electric wall clock hung above the cashier, skewed slightly away from the vertical, and it buzzed

and whirred with monotonous electric reliability.

"It's past eleven." Wind looked at her companions, then back at the clock. The second hand hopped surreptitiously from marking to marking, as if it dared move only when it thought no one was looking.

"Spoilsport," Jo sniffed, then inquired hopefully, "Maybe later? I don't like to be alone when I do it."

Jemmy guffawed at the double-entendre, or perhaps he was just expressing cheap male contempt for her weakness.

The waiter returned with a fresh pot of coffee. He served Jo with an attentive, elegant flourish that provided ample time for his eyes to linger on the exposed curves of her upper body. Then, in an embarrassed afterthought, he sloshed a refill into the other cups as well. Moira poured spillage from her saucer back into the stained mug, and sipped cautiously. The brew was richly-scented, thick-bodied, and hot -- *Just like Jo*, she thought with a smothered giggle -- and it didn't need any sugar at all. *That too*. She giggled again. Jo looked meaningfully at Moira and ostentatiously hitched the bodice of her gown an inch higher, but of course it didn't stay up, it wasn't supposed to. The blond girl glanced briefly at Moira's much flatter chest, then caught her eye and simpered mercilessly.

Wind. Definitely, *Wind*. Maybe it was time to change some other things, too.

Wind.

Diffuse white spotlights and narrow green laser beams flicked across the cavernous darkened room. Wind stared dizzily upward, watching the lights twist and dart off tiny, tiled mirrors cemented to the beach-ball sized spinning globes that dangled from the high ceiling. The fast-moving rays skimmed across *Immortal Night's* main dance floor, here and there picking out a face, a costume, or a gesture, capturing a candid view for subliminal consideration after the burst of illumination had sped onward. The dancers moved fluidly to the rhythms of an intense, active instrumental by *Dead Can Dance*. They still had plenty of room; the hour had scarcely advanced past one, so the club yet remained relatively empty. Wind pirouetted slowly, dancing by herself, following the motions of the thin crowd.

The music came to a crescendo and faded away. She glanced toward the mirror-glass window in the sound booth beside the stage. The pane tilted sharply outward, so that its half-silvered surface cast back dizzying reflections from the open area below. The dim figure of Tim, the long-haired disc jockey, moved purposefully behind the sparkling images of dancing lights, as he swiftly shuffled tapes and CDs in preparation for the next set. The sound warbled up again, a cut from an early *Siouxsie and the Banshees* recording. She could not quite remember which album it came from.

Wind felt the insistent pressure of a hand at her sleeve. She halted in place and turned, still shifting her torso from side to side and moving her arms in rhythm with the music. It was Jo, mouth open and lips forming words that were barely audible.

"I can't hear you!" Wind half shouted. She brought her

movements nearly to a standstill, bent toward the other girl and cupped a hand to her own ear.

"I said," Jo repeated more loudly, "I'm going out for a while. This is Robert." She beamed up at her companion. Robert was dark and muscular, and obviously well started on becoming smitten with Jo, a process that rarely took long. Wind remembered him vaguely from previous evenings at *Immortal Night*. She probably knew half the people in the room, at least by face. She curved her hand around her mouth, bent her neck a bit further, and spoke loudly into Jo's perfumed ear.

"Okay. I be f-fine." As she spoke, her tongue stumbled across the long, protruding points of her upper canine teeth.

"Jemmy went upstairs to listen to industrial. He gave me his key. I'll be back in half an hour."

"Be careful," Wind warned, but the other girl had already left. "Out" might mean drugs, sex, or even just alcohol -- Jo was too young to drink legally in *Immortal Night's* carefully carded bar. *Half an hour*, Wind thought. *Probably something to drink*. It wouldn't take nearly that long to do most drugs, but for some, she probably wouldn't come in till the effects had worn off. Besides, it wasn't like Jo to take drugs alone with a near stranger, even a new boyfriend. Sex could be brief, but Jo would want to spend more than half an hour just getting her clothes straightened up and her makeup in shape afterward.

Wind cautiously ran the end of her tongue across the sharp tips of her three-quarter-inch fangs. They were almost brand new, and the best she could get, made by a moonlighting health-care clinician from some kind of material used for real dental

work. Each one of the matched pair had been custom-molded to fit the canine tooth it covered. She wiggled her jaw back and forth, muttering repetitiously to herself in low tones, trying to figure out how to speak clearly even with her upper lip pushed away from its natural shape. No wonder the actors in all the old vampire movies put on those weird accents. They didn't have much choice.

Now the disc jockey set up a fade into a much slower, quieter piece: The music made a smooth transition to a clear-voiced, spooky vocal by Loreena McKennitt. Wind picked up the subtler beat, moving less frenetically, gradually half-circling one of the large black columns at the edge of the dance floor, but as she came around the far side, her sense of rhythm all at once failed her completely. She froze, eyes fastened on the tall figure standing adjacent to the next pillar toward the stage, close by the side away from the lights. Even though the lean male shape all but merged into the shadows that dwelt there, she could neither miss or mistake the wide-brimmed hat and the strange, glistening ripples of the silver neckerchief.

Fortunately, he was looking in the opposite direction, head tilted slightly upward, apparently oblivious to all human presence. Wind took a cautious breath and prepared to back up, aiming to place the comfortable mass and opacity of the pillar between herself and the stranger. She wanted to collect her thoughts and consider what to do next. She wanted not to have to think at all, until she got her wits about her.

It was not to be. As Wind gathered herself to withdraw, the figure deliberately lifted one arm across its chest and

stretched it above the opposite shoulder. The slender hand twisted palm toward her, then the long fingers bent slightly and wiggled, in a coy wave of almost feminine delicacy. Yet his head and torso had not moved; he still continued to face the opposite way. The stranger -- whoever or whatever he was -- had detected her presence as if by some uncanny power, as if by a sense or perception inaccessible and unknown to ordinary mortals, as if he in truth did have eyes in the back of his head. Wind took a half step backward, biting her lip and firmly telling herself that she must be seeing things, but as she sought shelter and concealment, he slowly turned and caught her eye with a knowing and sardonic gaze.

-- Chapter Three --

Wind's legs twitched like frightened snakes beneath her, but nevertheless she swallowed nervously, gathered her courage, and willed herself into forward motion. As she advanced slowly across the long space between the pillars, a dancer backed unnoticed into her from the side, colliding with a solid thump that nearly knocked both of them to the floor. Wind swore hastily, excused herself, and continued. The stranger seemed not even to breath. Only his eyes moved, rolling downward ever so slightly, serenely meeting her own, gazing at her steadily until she finally approached within arm's length.

"So how'd you know I was there? Have you got eyes in the back of your head or something?" She stared upward into the calm face, a little angry and fast becoming even more frightened, in spite of all the familiar faces swirling past her in the crowd.

He doffed his hat and placed it against his chest, just about at her own eye level. "The Lady Wind, I believe..." He bowed from the waist, gravely and gracefully. Taken aback, Wind retreated a pace, hands on hips, mouth open but not certain what to say next.

His stare flicked downward for a moment. He had noticed her

fangs.

"...who is a vampire, I presume," he continued, as his gaze lifted and once again held hers steadily. "I am honored to make your acquaintance a second time." His eyes were green, the palest shade of green imaginable.

"How'd you know?" she insisted. "I mean, how'd you know I was there?"

He stepped beside her and turned slowly half way around, so that they stood shoulder to shoulder, facing in the same direction. *More like shoulder to elbow*, she thought, for he towered over her. Not willing to lose the advantage of confrontation, she pivoted to face him squarely, but he did not look at her. He merely continued to stare upward across the room, and spoke again.

"I saw your reflection." He glanced briefly aside at her, then gestured with an open palm in the direction he had been looking. His hands were large and a little bony, with prominent knuckles and joints, but he held and moved them with a fluid, easy grace. His nails were clean, whole, and uniformly trimmed. "They say that only the most powerful of vampires can have a reflection."

She twisted her neck to follow his gaze for a moment, then swiftly flushed, and averted her eyes in embarrassment. Sure enough, the tilted mirror glass of the sound booth cast back the image of the dance floor near the pillar where she had been standing. To cover her relief and discomfiture, she lifted a hand and waved through the window at Tim, who appeared lost in thought behind the metallic film, totally intent on an array of

nameless, lumpy boxes of electronics bolted into a tall nineteen-inch rack set obliquely to the pane of glass. Their matte-finish front panels abutted edge to edge in a continuous flat surface, giving the stack the appearance of an ancient, weathered menhir, an old tombstone, or a tall rectangular monolith, geometrically hewn from a granite of unearthly blackness. A little to her surprise, Tim saw her gesture, smiled, and waved back. She barely knew Tim, but it was clear that he didn't miss much.

Recovering from her confusion, Wind returned her attention to the figure looming silently over her.

"I never seen you here before," she accused.

"I have never been here before. And even if I had, people tend not to remember me."

Not very likely, Wind thought, *not with you half a head taller than anyone else in the room.* She studied the lines of his face. *He must be at least thirty.*

"Why'd you come tonight?"

"I wanted to hear more about why you liked the peregrine falcon. I like listening to stories. Sometimes I feel out of touch with the world, and listening to other peoples' stories helps. Everybody has one. I want to hear more of yours."

Wind's skin prickled. She drew back a half step and tilted her head suspiciously. "So, who said I was going t'be here?"

"You did." She must have shown surprise or challenge, for he lifted an eyebrow and nodded slightly before continuing. "You told me by the clothes you wore." He glanced down the slender length of her. Wind blushed. "You were so well and beautifully

dressed that I concluded you must be out for a fancy evening. There are only a few places in the city where there might be others with sufficiently refined taste to appreciate you." She flushed again. "This club is the nearest one. If you had not been here, I would have tried the others."

"Well then, I mean, why dint you just stay and talk to me over by the pool?" The compliments had disconcerted her. She wasn't used to them.

"I had frightened you. I thought it better to slip away while you were looking for the falcon again." The voice was very smooth and very convincing. The silver handkerchief clung to his neck and collar, so fine that she could not see any trace of weave within it. Her fingers itched to reach out and fondle it, but she didn't dare, not nearly, not yet.

"Well, you certainly seceded." It almost sounded okay, but something about his explanation rang false. She couldn't put her finger on what it was. "And you dint even tell me your name before you went."

"I meant it when I asked if you would give me one. I have heard that some people here choose private names, just for use in particular places -- such as this one -- or among friends of similar inclination. Is that really so?" He stopped speaking for the briefest moment, and lifted an eyebrow at her. Wind opened her mouth, then shut it again. He couldn't know, he couldn't possibly know she had just taken a new nickname that evening.

"I was going to pick a special name for myself," he continued, "but I am new here, and I haven't thought of one I like yet. Perhaps you have a suggestion?"

Wind was becoming seriously flustered. "Yes. No. I mean, yes, people do that. No I don't have one. And it ought to be your pick, not somebody else's. Just let me know when you get one, okay? And what do I call you now?"

"Well, there's only one of me, so you don't really need a name, do you?" Faint creases at the sides of his mouth hinted at humor. His eyes watched her lightly, but without moving.

"Ah... No, I guess so." She was still fishing through her thoughts for something dimly sensed, something that was bothering her about what he had said. "How 'bout your real name?"

"It is uncommon here. You would find it hard to pronounce."

Wind stared at his features, trying to guess where he might be from. Scandinavia? Eastern Europe? A real foreigner -- she shivered deliciously at the thought. There was no way to tell from his accent, his English was perfect, probably a lot better than hers.

Yet a more dangerous possibility occurred to her, with sudden dismay. Maybe he was trying to hide something. What could it be? Maybe he was in some kind of trouble, a fugitive, running away. Disturbed by the thought, Wind nibbled absentmindedly at her lip as he continued to speak.

"And I must apologize for startling you on the street earlier this evening. I was ready for a night out myself, and when I saw someone else dressed the same way, it seemed entirely natural to try to strike up a conversation. I did not mean to take you by surprise. I hope you will forgive me."

"Okay," she replied suspiciously, "just don't do it again."

"I will certainly be much more careful in the future. And excuse me, but I believe you have bitten your lip."

"Oh, damn!" Wind fished through her purse, found a smeared paper napkin, and dabbed spasmodically at her mouth. Her left fang had torn a small, unnoticed cut in the tissues below it. She glanced at the reddening napkin, and hastily wadded it up so the golden arches symbol wouldn't show. "I guess I have t'take these out now." She wiggled the sharp appendages off and tucked them into their plastic case. She blotted her lip again, carefully, wondering what the blood had done to her makeup.

"If I had known you were thirsty, I would have mentioned the bar sooner..." he suggested.

She looked up at him carefully. *Handsome. Older. A little scary. But wow, what nice manners. Really handsome. Wow.* And so what if he was hiding something? A lot of people had a past. Wind wistfully hoped that she herself might someday acquire one.

Her gaze wandered briefly across the room. A newly-arrived couple smiled and waved cheerfully as they strode onto the dance floor. That was Mark and Elizabeth. Someone else she recognized moved sedately with the beat, all by himself in the nearest corner of the room. *What's his name? Todd, that's it.* His Adam's apple stuck out ridiculously as he slowly rocked his lifted head in time to the music. He caught her eye and winked. Wind felt herself among friends.

"I can't drink liquor here," she warned. She had some pretty good fake ID, but at this club, too many people knew her too well for her to get away with using it. "I'm not old enough," she continued, aware that she was talking too much but not quite

able to stop. "Next week's my birthday. A week from today." She took a fearful breath, afraid for a moment he would ask which birthday, but no, he merely cocked his head and looked very bemused.

"Really..." he said thoughtfully, looking at her half sidelong. "What an extraordinary coincidence. That is my... birthday... my birthday, too." Something in his expression changed, as if to show that he found the coincidence, or perhaps the whole subject of birthdays, to be vastly entertaining, but Wind had put her fists to her mouth, flustered and embarrassed at the unexpected shared intimacy of having an important date in common, and so had no inclination further to explore the nature of his amusement.

He seemed to sense her discomfiture. "But in any case," he said, changing the subject smoothly, "I would not expect you to to drink spirits that were merely chemical. I'm sure you'd prefer something redder and more vital. More hearty. Something appropriate for an immortal." Wind giggled. The music dropped and came up again on something old with a calypso beat, something funny about zombies in a cemetery.

"So, are you an immortal too?" she challenged.

He lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly. "An immortal lives forever, and I fear I lack the requisite number of birthdays. So I should have to say no, I am not an immortal -- at least, not yet." Wind laughed again, more loudly, even though the joke was old. As he spoke, she could see his own teeth, straight, white and even. *No fangs*, she thought in whimsy. *Drat*.

Still giggling under her breath, Wind permitted herself to be

escorted across the floor and into the nethermost regions of *Immortal Night*. Yet even as he steered her between gyrating couples and oscillating laser beams, she figured out what was bothering her, what was causing a persistent, nagging uncertainty even though everything seemed to make perfect sense, even though her strange companion had answers for every doubt and fear. The problem was, it wasn't like the world to have answers for every doubt and fear. The world just wasn't that reasonable a place. So really, things didn't make sense after all.

But the guiding hand at her elbow warmed and tingled her skin most disturbingly, even through the sleeve of her gown, and its confident, gentle pressure promised security and a sense of direction. So Wind made up her mind not to be too scared.

-- Chapter Four --

"... so she was my favorite animal of all time ever, when I was growing up." Face flushed with happy animation, Wind sat in a dark corner of the bar. She leaned forward with her fists doubled against her chin and her arms propped on the table top, caught up in rapt conversation with her near-silent acquaintance. "She was all shaggy, and big enough for us t' ride on. That was before my folks got divorced." She sipped at her drink, a squat glass of thick substance whose livid reddish-black hue suggested bloody fluid drawn from an old bruise. It was only lemon and tomato juice, but the bartender had dyed it a more acceptable shade with a few drops of a prepared mixture of food coloring.

Her companion prompted her subtly. "A Newfoundland, you said?" He toyed with his own drink, but appeared to have no more than sipped it. Wind remembered his sudden wry amusement at being carded by the bartender. She had not quite been able to crane her neck fast enough to read the name on the ID he had showed.

"That's right. The neighbors all thought how it was kinda weird we had a dog bigger than all three of us kids put

together, but I felt so safe when she was around. I thought she was going t'last forever, and keep taking care of me." Her eyes clouded suddenly. "But she dint..."

"Few things do..." He reached one hand diagonally across the table top and pressed the side of his fist lightly, almost lingeringly, against her elbow. Her eyes stared silently into the distance, looking at a place that only she could see. After a moment he continued gently. "Did you get another dog?"

"Yes, eventually," she sighed, and touched his hand gently, experimentally, with her own.

"But it wasn't the same."

"No." Her eyes were still misty. Then from somewhere came a shy smile and unexpected peace. "How could it be the same? They're all different, ev'ry one of them. One less makes space for one more." She mused silently for a moment, then shifted position and looked at him directly. "Do you ever have any pets or things like that, yourself?"

Something in his face hinted for a moment that he found the question somewhere between entertaining and disturbing, but when she looked more closely, the half-formed expression had fled. "Not for a long time. I started a, a -- 'terrarium' would be the proper word -- once, but it was more like a hobby. I did not think of myself as having pets."

Wind's face flashed visibly puzzled for a moment. She recovered quickly, and tried to hide her ignorance, but he had already noticed, guessed the cause of her uncertainty, and begun to provide an explanation.

"'Terrarium'... It's like a fish bowl, only for things that

live on the land, too."

She frowned again, briefly, then brightened and replied. "Oh, yeah! I know what you mean. I had an ant farm once, with some ants in it, but they got out and took over the house. I didnt want my mom to clean them up because they were my ants." She giggled. "I felt responsible for them."

His expression turned wry. "I had the same problem with mine. Little creatures do that sometimes, even the tiniest and simplest ones." He nodded solemnly, and looked past her shoulder for a moment. "They do have a way of making you feel responsible, even when they make a mess of things. I have often wondered how that happens."

Wind pulled out her watch and stared at it, suddenly worried.

"Oh damn, it's stopped again! Jo's been a lot longer than she said..." Her voice trailed off as she realized that her companion presumably had no idea who Jo was or what she had said of her plans. She looked toward the bar, trying to make out the clock on the counter by the cash register.

"Is it broken? Let me see. Sometimes I can fix things." He held out one hand. Still trying to peer over the bar, Wind passed the watch over. He picked it up by the ribbon and held it close before his eyes for a moment, then gathered a few folds of the metallic kerchief with the other hand and lowered the timepiece into it. The shimmer and glow of the shiny fabric once again fascinated Wind's eye, and she watched with increasing curiosity as he leisurely rubbed the cloth against the thin silver wafer.

"It used t'be a pretty good watch, I think," she apologized.

"Yes, it did. I can tell." He continued stroking the metal. The silvery cloth rippled slowly across it, clinging as if by static electricity.

Curiosity overcame her. "What is that?" she asked, gesturing at the handkerchief.

"It's an old friend and companion," he replied with dry humor. "I've had this for a long time." But he did not offer the garment for closer examination; he kept rubbing the surface of the timepiece.

Presently he passed the watch back to her.

"Wow, you sure polished it up pretty good." The metal glistened. Multicolored reflections of the flickering house lights danced in the shining silver body, and sparkled and twinkled in the bright, clear curves of the crystal. "And hey, it's ticking again!"

"Now it won't break for a while. I guarantee it." The neckerchief seemed to flow back into place around his collar.

"Well, that'll be the day. But thanks." Wind stifled a chuckle as she smiled in reply. The watch stopped and started ten times a week. Sometimes it seemed like looking at it cross-eyed was enough to make it misbehave.

"You are quite welcome." He lifted his eyes and glanced at the door. "But seeing your watch has reminded me," he continued, getting up. "I regret that I have to say it, but it is time that I must leave."

Damn! Wind opened her mouth and shut it again. She didn't know what to say, or how to say it. But he hadn't finished speaking.

"It has been a pleasure meeting you." He bowed and took her hand. "I hope that I may see you again," he said with an interrogative lift of his eyebrows.

"Well, okay, sure, but..." Wind stopped again, hesitating.

"Then you may be sure that I shall be looking forward to it." He bent his head in an elegant, courtly gesture and briefly kissed the back of her hand, then straightened and put on his hat. He turned and headed toward the hall, leaving Wind thoroughly speechless, dazzled and flustered.

Almost as he disappeared, Jo entered the bar, looking flushed and happy. Her hair and makeup were acceptable, but Wind could tell that they had been recently adjusted. She had Jemmy and Tim in tow -- Tim was probably on break -- but there was no sign of Robert.

"What's the matter, did you wear him out?" Wind took the conversational initiative with a confused grin. Her hand, clutched reflexively closed, was still tingling.

Jo laughed and blushed a little, but answered only obliquely. "Well, aren't you the cheerful one?" she replied. "Anybody might wonder what you've been up to, yourself?" She peered discerningly at her friend.

Wind realized vaguely that he had not actually touched her with his lips, instead he had kissed the back of his own thumb as his fingers grasped her palm. "Hey, I met a neat guy. Dint you see him going out as you came in? Real tall, blond, and like, thirtyish? In a long black coat and a wide hat? Even taller than me?"

Jo just looked puzzled. "No, we came down the hall from the

stair end, and there was nobody in sight. It was empty. I didn't see a soul. Did you?" She addressed the latter remark to Tim and Jemmy. Tim frowned thoughtfully and nodded no, and Jemmy just looked blank. "Was he going outside?" she asked.

What a beautiful and courteous gesture that had been — a clear expression of interest, that took nothing not offered and did not even hint that she should offer anything. And then he went and left! *Men!* Wind swore briefly under her breath, then spoke aloud to her friends.

"I think so, but gosh, he just went out the door. Tim, are you sure you dint see him? He was the guy standing by me when I waved up at you tonight. Real tall."

Unlike most of the clientele, Tim was alert, wide awake, and not under the influence of anything stronger than multiple espressos. "I remember you waving," he said immediately. "That was right at the end of *The Old Ways*, just before I put on *Zombie Jamboree*. But I don't recall seeing anyone with you. If you hadn't just said something different, I would have been pretty sure you were alone."

Wind looked sharply at the two of them. *Too weird.* It wasn't like Jo not to notice a handsome male, not in a million years, and Tim rarely missed a thing. Then her brows narrowed and dipped, as she recalled his words from earlier in the evening. "*People tend not to remember me,*" he had said. She looked vacantly past her companions for a moment, wondering if there was somehow a connection. Surely, there couldn't be. Her consternation must have shown in her face, for Tim spoke again after a brief pause. "Hey, not to worry about it, it's dark in

here. Anything can happen."

Wind realized suddenly that her clenched fist had something inside it. The stranger had placed something into her palm as his fingers guided her hand to be kissed.

"I guess it can," she said, slowly and thoughtfully, thinking a little too eagerly that she would feel much happier, a whole lot happier, if he did come back, and the sooner the better. "I guess it can."

Yet the stranger did not return. And she didn't even know his name. But when she surreptitiously opened her hand to see what lay within, she found a folded piece of paper. On it, precisely written with black ink in a hand so precise as almost to be mechanical, was a telephone number.

* * *

When they left *Immortal Night* two hours later, Jo was a little drunk -- she had been going outside regularly to drink liquor with anybody who had it -- and Jemmy was staggering with lack of sleep. Wind had turned depressed and moody, not believing in the least that she had been hallucinating, surely not for more than an hour, but frustrated in the extreme that no one else had noticed her companion well enough to remember him. "*People tend not to remember me.*" Indeed! It was all much too strange.

Their footsteps echoed hollowly from the cavernous, vaulted spaces above the club's open parking lot, tucked in under the massive concrete apron of an elevated freeway. They continued

slowly along the sidewalk, crowding together in an unconscious need for human warmth in the small, cold hours of late night.

Something scurried in the gutter. Wind turned to look, and saw the sleek, pointed face of a wary rat, staring back at her. Its intelligent eyes glowed with a hint of metallic silver in the wan reflection of streetlights.

"Ewww!" Jo exclaimed, following her gaze.

Wind kept looking at the rodent. "Takes guts to make a living as a rat," she said softly, half in admonishment and half in admiration. Sensing scrutiny and fearing danger, the little creature turned and scampered off down a storm drain.

"Ew!" Jo repeated, and teetered uneasily onward, clinging to Jemmy for balance.

"I think you better drive," said the latter, with uncommon good sense. He turned to hand Wind his keys. The van was parked just past the next narrow side street, a few dozen paces away.

"All right," she yawned back at him.

"What time is it anyway?" Jo wanted to know.

Seeking an answer, Wind fumbled in her purse for her watch. Thus her head was down, Jemmy was yawning, and Jo was looking dazedly in the wrong direction as they passed the building at the corner and stepped off the curb. A soft squeak from the drain made Wind half stop and turn to face the darkness. She sensed sudden movement, far up the alley, even before the too-late warning blare of a horn and the shrieking crescendo of dodging tires. "Look out!" Wind yelled as she jumped back, trying to pull her friends with her. Jo overbalanced, and sat down hard on the sidewalk just inside the curb. Jemmy swiveled

in place, and the fender of the speeding vehicle clipped the swirling cloth of his unbuttoned blazer as he turned. Brief metallic crunching noises lifted from the pavement as stout tires scattered and demolished the spilled contents of Wind's opened handbag.

"Damn it!" she shouted angrily, shaking her fist after the departing vehicle. "Damn it all!" It did not slow or stop, just upshifted out of the corner, skidded slightly, and accelerated down the street. After half a block, the driver remembered to turn on the headlights. "God damn it all to hell!" Muttering under her breath, she bent to pick up the mess. One of her lipsticks had shattered. Its black waxy content, flattened and spread by tires, now merged indistinguishably with the paler darkness of the asphalt. An old tortoise-shell comb, a favorite, had smashed into scores of fragments, and her address book lay folded nearly in two with its cover torn off. Wind thought for a moment that that was the extent of the damage, then swore again and bent toward another item.

"Gosh, what a good thing it didn't get your watch," said Jemmy, talking much too fast and loudly. Wind stooped and picked up the round of silver.

"It's okay, isn't it?" Jemmy was trembling and breathing hard, visibly shaken but not wanting to show it.

Wind stared hard at the timepiece, looked away and back once more, then finally began haphazardly to rub it with the ball of her thumb. "It's okay, it's fine. Now let's go -- come on, Jo, get up. Come on! Jo!"

The watch was indeed okay, but it had the serrated pattern of

a tire tread printed in dirt all across the back, and a clump of irregular, granular asphalt particles had stuck to the center of the bulging lens, pressed on so tightly that they might have been welded in place. She glanced down at the street again. Sure enough, the pavement bore a faint dished impression of the crystal. Yet not only was the watch intact, but also it did not even look scratched. What's more, it was still ticking. She worked at the adhesive paving material with a thumbnail. It was full of sharp-cornered bits, but the crystal was not even scratched. She pulled out the knob and moved the hands back and forth, then pushed it in and worked the winder. Everything was fine. *"Now it won't break for a while,"* he had said with assurance, *"I guarantee it."* She remembered the words with incredulity. But a car had run over it, so what in the world? A whole car! What could anybody possibly do to a watch so it would take that kind of punishment? Whatever in the world?

Wind shivered under her woolen wrap. She stuffed the undamaged timepiece back into her purse, suddenly reluctant even to look at it. She double-checked that the folded bit of paper with its tempting string of numbers still lay safely in her wallet, yet even as she found it secure, she felt compelled to push it further into the folds of leather, as if putting it out of sight could drive it out of mind as well.

Jemmy helped Jo stagger to her feet. "I'm fine," Wind said unconvincingly. "You're fine. Everybody's fine. Now please, let's just go." Clutching Jemmy's keys thrust out in front of her like a ward, like a talisman, like a protective amulet, she strode unsteadily toward the van. "Pretty please, I want to go

home now. I just want to go home."

Behind her, the rat peered furtively around the stained, irregular grate of its hiding place, alert eyes fixed intently on the slender, black-on-black outline of Wind's departing figure. Grooming its whiskers and cleansing its lustrous fur thoughtfully, it chattered momentarily to itself, almost inaudibly, alone in the darkness of night.

-- Chapter Five --

Heart thick in her throat, Wind stared around the empty plaza for the hundredth time, scanning the entire open area as she toyed nervously with the silver frogs that clasped the neck of her black military cape. No trace of breeze blew. Moist and humid air chilled her cheeks and made her neck and throat clammy. Exhaled breath condensed in thick clouds of vapor, refusing to dissipate as it drifted slowly away. Her long fall of dark hair refused to lie straight; it cascaded erratically over the cast-back hood and fell almost to her waist, clinging languidly to the thick nap of the woolen fabric.

Thick cloud obscured not only Sutro Tower, but also most of the hilltop that bore it. Lowering gray fog had begun to shroud the tops of the higher buildings of the financial district, still visible amid gathering darkness, in the distance to the left. The smooth surface of the reflecting pool undulated shallowly, with long, flat ripples, like old window glass, and cast back subtly distorted reflections of the buildings above. Infrequently some larger motion of the surface brought forth faint, wet purling noises from the edge of the water, as it lapped lazily at the boundaries of its confining concrete basin.

Wind sat on the raised border of the pool, well into the plaza from the street, on the side of the building entrance away from most of the parking lots. Thus neither transient pedestrians nor late-working employees leaving for the night passed close to her, or at least, not often, and Wind never looked at them when they did.

She twisted her head and shoulders to peer behind her. Wind's nervous gaze skimmed the dark exterior surface of the wall, then met the cold and professionally distrustful basilisk stare of a uniformed security guard, staring back at her from the lobby within. Wind smiled gratuitously and deliberately lifted her eyes away from him, silently daring him to make an issue of somebody sitting minding her own business in a public place. She let her vision roam up the face of the building and into the lowering sky beyond. The peregrine was nowhere to be seen.

She straightened around and froze, thoughts of guard and confrontation forgotten. A lean, familiar, black-clad figure, topped by a wide-brimmed hat, stood on the sidewalk at the far edge of the pool. The reflection of the silver neckerchief in the water's surface caught her eye. It wriggled with odd activity in the slowly moving glassy surface, but when she looked directly at the garment, it seemed much more nearly motionless.

Wind lifted her gaze to his face, and found him staring back. She felt instinctively that already he had been looking at her for some time, remaining unseen not from shyness, but from some desire to observe in secrecy, as a predator waits while studying prey. Yet there was nothing in his countenance or bearing to

give substance to her intuition. She blinked and scrutinized him carefully. The strong lines of his face were composed and calm; he looked glad to see her. Wind lifted a gloved hand part way, half to acknowledge and half to beckon. She watched cautiously as he nodded and drew nearer.

"I received your call," he said. "I trust I have not kept you waiting. I am anxious to talk with you again." His slender figure loomed over her as she remained seated. His head seemed to reach half way to the sky. Black gloves covered his hands. The faint scent of well-maintained, supple leather reached her nostrils, not quite animal and not quite cosmetic, neither astringent nor erotic, yet hinting of all. Where in the world had he come from, and how long had he been watching her?

"No," she lied. She had arrived an hour ahead of time. "I didn't see you walking up just now."

"I had promised not to frighten you again. I thought I should stand at a distance until you saw me."

He had not quite answered the question she had not quite asked. Unsure of herself and not quite knowing how to pursue the issue, she altered course. "Well, thank you. You know, you might've called me back."

"You did not leave a telephone number."

Wind gasped, abruptly covered her eyes with a hand, and blushed furiously. "Oh, damn!" she exclaimed, and then sighed. "Oh, damn. I guess you wouldn't say I'm not real organized, wouldn't you." Thoroughly embarrassed, she peered up through the fingers of her glove, and continued, firmly apologetic.

"I called a couple times trying to get you in. I finally

thought I had to leave a message, and I guess I was so nervous if it was a good thing to do I messed up instead. I'm sorry."

"I quite understand. I am rather haphazard myself, now and then." Wind wasn't quite sure what "haphazard" meant, but maybe things were going to be okay. She put her hand down, took a breath, and let it out again, looking up at him furtively through nervously flickering lashes.

He sat beside her. Turning to look at him, Wind noticed with puzzlement that the security guard indoors now had his head down, busy with papers. Or perhaps he had found some task to perform with his computer terminal; she could see the faint flicker of reds and purples from the color screen of the monitor, reflecting from the front surfaces of his eyeglasses, altering perspective irregularly with the changing tilt of his head. He not only remained completely oblivious to the newcomer, but also, to all appearances, had forgotten Wind herself. *How odd*, she thought. In most places, guards kept their eyes open.

She stared down over her knees toward her feet, collecting her thoughts. The straight, uncuffed legs of her black denims dropped almost to the insteps of her pixie boots. She lifted one big toe and watched the suede top surface of the upper dimple toward her.

Wind gathered herself and decided to take the initiative. "I have a name for you," she said mildly, carefully not lifting her eyes.

"Really?" He lifted an eyebrow slightly. "I am gladdened. May I enquire what it is?"

Drat! He was so polite and courteous it wasn't even going to

be fun teasing him by not telling.

"I'm going to call you Kieran," she said, looking at him sidelong.

"That's from the Celtic. It means 'mysterious', or 'dark'," he replied without hesitation. Wind's jaw dropped as she turned to look at him, but he continued speaking.

"That's fair enough; I accept it. 'Kieran'..." He tilted his head and tasted the word again, speculatively. "'Kieran'." He nodded slowly, with satisfaction.

Wind could not contain herself. "How'd you know that? Is that your real name? How'd you just know what it meant so soon?" she stared at him in disbelief.

No word or gesture acknowledged her surprise. "I suppose I must have read it somewhere. Didn't you? That's a good name." He looked at her for a moment. "But I will still venture that you won't use it very much. People do not use names when they are talking to just one other person."

"I'll need it for when I introduce you to my friends!" she countered.

"True. You would need a name to do that." He nodded again, more sagely. Wind frowned, a little flustered. Not only had he not actually met any of her friends yet, but also, none of her friends had even seen him, even the ones who were in a place where they should have. Wind lifted one shoulder of her cape away from her shoulder. Twisting her head to get her hand all the way behind her neck, she pulled her long tresses inside the woolen fabric, and put up the hood. The thick mass of fog--damp hair pressed suddenly against her back and sent cold chills

running up and down her spine, even through the black fabric of her sweater. She shivered and drew the folds of the cape more tightly around her.

He must have noticed, for he made as if to get up, and spoke with a note of concern in his voice.

"It's getting cold. Perhaps you would stay warmer if we walked?"

Wind took an uneasy breath and gathered her legs under her. The security guard still had not looked at them, and there seemed to be a lull in city traffic, for no one else was in sight, not even any cars. She gulped uncertainly. *Make up your mind!* she thought, suddenly angry at her own fears and hesitation.

"Right. Sure!" She forced vitality into her reply. "Let's go!"

Kieran -- or whatever his name really was -- stood and offered his hand. She took it, wishing in spite of the cold that neither of them were wearing gloves. She arose, letting him support her weight to a greater extent than she truly needed, holding the contact a little longer than strictly necessary. Yet he did not notice or complain then, or even immediately afterward, when she contrived to wrap her hand around his elbow and lay it on top of his forearm, just like a character in an old romance movie. Wind half smiled and chuckled, a little giddy and smugly pleased with herself. Her companion was smiling too, with an expression more subtle and perhaps a little more knowing, as they walked away from the plaza and disappeared in thickening fog, into the true beginning of darkness.

-- Chapter --

"Tim...? Tim! Can I come in?" Wind tapped hastily at the half-open entry to *Immortal Night's* sound booth. "They let me in at the door, the guy recognized me and I said I knew you. Are you busy? I need to talk to someone. They said you were setting up." She peeked cautiously around the edge of the jamb.

"Tim?"

The subject of her search looked up from a thick wooden workbench whose top might once have been a wide, ornate door. The paraphernalia of electronics gone insane littered its upper face. Garlands of thin copper wire, jacketed in brightly--colored teflon insulation, spiraled across the horizontal surface in dizzying loops, and hung from the edges in limp, erratic coils. Loose handfuls of chrome-plated nuts, screws, bolts, washers, stand-offs and fittings of more obscure nature sought hiding places under and behind circuit boards, between the pages of manuals, and within the folds scraps of paper, scraps that bore arcane hand-written inscriptions in the incomprehensible glyphs and runes of technological esoterica. A motley collection of bizarre pliers brooded as they rested, spring-loaded jaws held wide agape, eager to bite one another

but unable to do so, so baroque were the shapes into which their metal gripping surfaces had been formed. Each might have been designed by a separate madman; no plier was like any other, and every one had handles covered with its own peculiar shade of technicolor plastic coating.

"Hi, Moira. Sure." Tim primly tossed long hair back from his face with one hand. "No, I'm not busy. Come on in. What's the matter? Have a seat." His other hand held a pencil-thin soldering iron that sent up a thin wisp of acrid smoke as flux and rosin burned on its surface, a ritual offering of incense to the gods of voltage, amperage and the successful closure of circuits.

Wind pulled the door nearly shut and edged cautiously into the room, letting her eyes adjust to the low level of illumination. Tim had a spot lamp on his work, but all of the painted surfaces in the sound booth were black, and the convolutions and textured surfaces of panels and cables drew in what light there was and absorbed it. The main dance floor itself lay darkly beyond the half-silvered glass windows, completely invisible except where a ray of bright sun glanced from one of the glassed-in poster displays in the front lobby and fell in a thin yellow streak across the dusty floor.

Tim carefully inserted the hot soldering iron into its wire holder, leaned back, and regarded her with expectation. She drew up a chair and sat beside the table. An opened thermos and the half-filled cup beside it smelled of rich coffee carefully prepared, French Roast with a dash of Irish cream flavor. A hot plate squatted close by one of his elbows, with a bent aluminum

saucepan slightly askew on the burner. The handle of a fork protruded straight up from within. A half-eaten lumpy glutinous mass firmly gripped the tines of the utensil, holding it vertical with no other support. To Wind's dismay, on close inspection the congealed reddish substance resembled nothing she remotely recognized as food. She looked hastily away, no longer quite sure how to start the conversation, and improvised.

"I'm trying t'give myself a new name. Do you suppose you could call me 'Wind' instead of 'Moirira'?"

"Okay... Wind," Tim said thoughtfully, staring at her with careful consideration. "That's nice. It suits you -- free, dynamic. Not tied down. Real nice." He nodded again, then sat up and suddenly noticed her staring at the saucepan and thermos. He looked at her quizzically. "Do you want some coffee? Would you like something else?"

"Thanks. No, no! I mean, thanks about the name."

"I didn't mean my oatmeal. Most people don't like it with ketchup on it. Wait, I've got a cache of pretty good stuff somewhere in here." He bent to the side and slid a drawer open to the limit of its runners. Balancing the edge on his knees, he rummaged for a moment under a sheaf of stapled papers. "Aha!" One hand emerged with a bunch of irregular, expensive, tiny shapes wrapped in foil. "I was going to have some of this instead of dessert, but there's lots of extra." The other hand covered up the stash, then lifted and shut the drawer, wiggling it methodically as it jammed kitty-corner, part way closed.

"Well..." Wind looked coyly at Tim's outstretched palm. "Maybe... Thanks." She took up a wrapper, unfolded it, and delicately

applied her tongue to the revealed contents, trying not to think about Tim's main course, using preoccupation with the aesthetics of vice as an excuse to bide time and gather her thoughts. For a long minute Tim maintained respectful silence, as his guest sat with eyes partly closed and a blissful expression on her face, occasionally murmuring half-audibly in pleasure. Finally she licked the last half-liquid remains of rich, dark, chocolate off her fingers, opened her eyes and began conversation in earnest.

"You remember that guy I met here a couple days ago? The one nobody saw?" As Tim nodded, she continued hastily. "Well, I met him last night, over by the Civic Center, and we went for a walk, and... Damn, I don't know how to say this!" She lifted and shook half-closed hands in frustration.

Tim was methodically sensible. "One sentence at a time. If you don't get it right, back up and try again. I'll let you know if I don't understand."

Wind sighed and took a breath. "Okay. Okay. I met him, and we started for a walk. And we walked for a while, you know, talking."

Tim nodded again.

"I mean, I kinda liked him. Okay?"

"Sure."

She started to get up, then sat back down, bit her lip, and pressed her fisted hands firmly between her knees, as if to hold them in place.

"And then I dint remember a thing till I woke up this morning."

Tim raised a speculative eyebrow. Flustered, Wind continued.

"I mean, it's not like it was anything funny had happened! I was in my apartment, in my own bed, wearing... wearing what I usually sleep in. And my door was locked from inside, like I usually do it." Her hands had found their way out from between her knees, and had begun to gesture expressively, almost wildly. "And the alarm clock was turned on, even. That's what woke me up. It's like I did it myself."

"But I dint remember any of it." She sighed, and her shoulders slumped forward. She stared at Tim in bewilderment. "Not a thing."

"Hmn." Tim had propped his lean face on one slender hand. As Wind watched, the arch of his eyebrow slowly descended to its normal level. "Could you have been drinking?" he asked thoughtfully. "Or on something?"

"Well, I thought of that. But when I get drunk I usually get a hangover with a real bad headache. And I can taste stale booze in my mouth. Though it depends what it was. Anyway, I felt fine and my mouth tasted clean. And there was no buzz, and no leftover trip, so I don't think it was drugs, either."

Tim shrugged, "Hey, there are a lot of drugs, maybe he slipped you a new one."

"Maybe," she replied tonelessly, with the attitude of one unsuccessfully wishing to be convinced.

"Look, do you remember anything at all?"

Wind leaned forward, propped her elbows on the surface of the table, and cradled her face in her hands.

"Maybe." Her voice carried only a little more conviction. "It's kinda vague, though. I..." The words trailed off into

nothing. She took a breath and started again.

"I remember walking a lot. My feet hurt the next morning, I had blisters and my shins were sore, like we'd been going up and down the hills, so I guess that makes sense."

Tim nodded.

"But... that's only part of the time. Mostly I remember... I remember... just talking." As Wind pursed her lips and frowned, Tim asked questions quietly.

"You or him? Talking, I mean. And, do you remember what about?"

"Me, mostly... I remember he'd ask a question now and then, and I'd answer it. But I don't remember what he asked about. It's like I can hear the sound of my voice in my head when I remember it, but I can't tell the words. And I was all eager to see him, it's not like I'd just forget because it wasn't important."

Tim scratched the tip of his nose. "Do you remember how you felt when you were talking? I mean, was it something that upset you or anything?"

Wind stared thoughtfully into space before answering. "No," she replied, a little speculatively, then proceeded with more certainty. "No. I was very relaxed and... trusting. I felt like I was very comfortable and easy. I felt like it was okay to trust him. But I don't remember a thing about what we said."

"Well, if nothing bad happened to you, maybe you were right. Do you remember anything about where you were, what it looked like?"

"No," she shook her head, "not a thing."

"Were you sitting or standing?"

"Sitting. On something cold. And damp and hard."

"Probably outdoors."

"Yes! That's right! I had my cape on, and I had it pulled tight around me, and the hood was up. It was cold enough I could see my breath."

"Aha!" Tim was gleeful. "And, what was beyond your breath when you were looking at it?"

"I..." Wind stopped, perplexed. "Nothing. Gray. I don't remember. It's like I can see my breath hanging there and..."

"And beyond it?"

"Nothing."

Tim pushed. "What color nothing?"

"Just... nothing."

He tried a different tack. "When you were walking, did any people pass by you? Did anyone bump into you or jostle you, or anything like that?"

"I... remember some people going past us, yes, I do."

"What did they look like?"

She shook her head. "I don't remember. It was like they couldn't see us, they went past us without looking, as if we weren't really there." She frowned suddenly. "Tim, it's not like I'm super pretty or anything. but when I'm all in black with my makeup on, people look at me, that's half the fun. You know. Most people glance, and lots do a real double-take. But nobody was looking. Nobody at all. That's weird."

Tim had gotten up and was rummaging in another drawer. "I agree." He turned and stared at her solemnly. "I've got something I'd like to show you," he said, and held up a video

recording cassette with no label on it.

"What's that? What for?" Wind asked curiously.

"Well." Tim had turned to one rack of equipment, that had a cheap video recorder bolted in near the bottom. He pushed a button, stared thoughtfully, reached half way into the rack and did something Wind couldn't see, then pushed the button again. The recorder opened.

"We don't make a big deal about it, but there is a security camera up near the ceiling just outside the booth." He slipped the cassette into the recorder, and tapped it closed. "It's aimed to get both the main entrance and the door into the bar, just in case there's a robbery or something." He paused again, reached well back into an open space in the rack, and slid something forward, a small black and white television set. "It was running last week, when you were here with your friend." Tim turned the television on and fiddled with more buttons on the recorder. "I was puzzled that I couldn't remember him, when you said you waved. So, I dug out the tape and looked at it. Now, let me see..."

<material missing here>

-- Chapter --

"Turn around." He spoke with a voice of authority, not hasty and not urgent, but nonetheless in tones admitting no possibility that she would hesitate or disobey. "We have less than a minute."

"Huh? A minute for what?" The distant drone of a solitary approaching automobile sounded from the elevated freeway, high above the back parking lot.

He seized her shoulders gently but firmly, spun her half way about, and stopped her squarely in place. The sound of the speeding vehicle drew nearer. Wind felt his hands groping at the small of her back, performing some manipulation on the stout leather and stiff stays of the fetish corset. An expansion joint in the highway surface thunked metallically as the car swished past overhead. The whine of its departing tires declined in pitch, quickly faded below the threshold of audibility, and merged into the soft subliminal susurrus of the sleeping city.

"Hey! What's going on? Tell me!" Her voice echoed hollowly from the cavernous black spaces beneath the freeway. As he let go, she rotated to face him, backing up a half step, flexing her shoulders to settle the garment back in place. She could not see

his eyes, lost in the dark shadow under the broad, level brim of his hat. On his lower face a streak of wide, pale mouth stood out, colorless and indistinctly bounded in the distant glow of street lights. His thin lips pressed serenely together, corners turned ever so slightly upward. He unknotted the strange band of silver cloth from his throat, and held it in both hands. The spill of fabric rippled and flowed as if blown by the wind, casting back the chromatic glow of untended neon signs that dwelt in darkened windows across the street. Ethereal bands of reflected color danced erratically on wrinkled asphalt pavement and massive concrete pillars nearby, punctuated by the hypnotic, regular pulse of traffic signals. Their mindless blinking cried forever wolf, flashed needless alarm, and nattered incessantly of caution, high above the empty turn lanes and vacant crosswalks further down the block. The scarf, if it truly was a scarf, increased its agitation until it shook and vibrated like a thing alive, and how strange and mystifying a behavior, for not the faintest whisper of breeze moved through the night.

"What are you doing?" she said with alarm. "I want to get out of here! I trusted you!"

"Yes." He crumpled the fluid material between his palms. "Many would call it foolish, but you did," he said with finality, and drew back his hands. "You were overbold. Yet I promise you, I shall keep faith with that trust, and reciprocate it. And I must tell you, I respect and envy your innocence a great deal more than you understand. Truly, I do."

Then he threw the scarf directly toward her face. It shimmered and dissolved completely as it came, turning into a

fast-moving spray of glittering sparkle, a shower of fairy dust, a swirl of silver talcum powder, a swarm of tiny foil fragments that had mystifyingly escaped from the liquid-filled bubble of a child's shake-up toy. Automatically, she lifted her arms in defense, trying to block the approach of the roiling cloud of tenuous substance, but it passed them by without deviating and wrapped itself around her head and shoulders. She shook her long hair and beat at the particles frantically with her hands, but the stuff ignored her motions and the ensuing stir of air. The ethereal wraith of silver contracted and settled immediately upon her. She stopped breathing and squeezed her eyes tightly closed, but realized in a moment that it was already too late. Yet no strange smell filled her nostrils, and nothing particulate tickled her sinuses and throat, or irritated her eyes. The shining dust seemed to have a mind of its own. It simply had not entered any of those places.

"What in the world!" she shrieked, not knowing whether to feel anger, fear, or simple astonishment. He had taken off his hat. He did not reply, he merely glanced at her, eyes bland and unrevealing, eyebrows quizzically raised. They stood in tableau for a heartbeat, she wide-mouthed and speechless, hands lifted and fingers crooked to clench, he solemn and intense, staring at her, patiently awaiting the approach of something relentless and inevitable. Then, ever so quickly, he lifted his hand and chastely touched his lips to the hollow of his palm.

"Bon voyage," he said, and blew her a kiss, but before Wind could utter another word, or show any expression beyond surprise and bewilderment, a tremendous and overpowering force seized her

between the shoulder blades and lifted her, gasping and gathering breath for a scream, lifted her straight up off the pavement, lifted her into the sky.

* * *

Jo and Jemmy left the club less than five minutes behind Wind, but the street outside stood silent and empty. "Moira!" Jo called, "Moira, where are you? Moira!" She looked around nervously, but saw no sign of anyone, anywhere.

"Damn it," she swore softly. "Where is that girl? That's not like her, not here, not at this hour. Moira!" She swiveled her head left and right, staring into the darkness. "Moira!"

"'Wind'," Jemmy interjected. "She's been saying to call her 'Wind'. Try that."

"Moiii-raaa!" Jo ignored him. "Moira, don't try to frighten us. This is no time to play games. Where are you? Moira!" She glanced uncertainly at her friend. Moira didn't play games, and they both knew it.

"Come with me," she said with sudden resolve. Tugging Jemmy by the sleeve, Jo drew him to the left, along the facade of the building, till they could peer around the corner into the narrow side street. Yet it, too was bare and empty.

"Moira! Where are you?" No one answered, but from somewhere behind them came a noise that might have been a shout, or even the start of a scream.

* * *

Wind gasped in terror and kicked frantically at empty air as she shot aloft. Her head and limbs sagged with unexpected heaviness, as if she had started a rapid ascent in a high-speed elevator, but the sensation did not diminish, the weight of muscle and bone continued to drag down the rest of her body as her velocity steadily increased. She had a fraction of a second's view of the parking lot stretching out before her, with the treacherous dark figure of the stranger staring upward with something powerful and unreadable in his face. Then a guano-streaked concrete support platform for the elevated freeway flashed before her eyes, appallingly close. For a moment she faced startled roosting pigeons, awakened by her half-uttered scream to fluff with sudden consternation, scarcely more than an arm's length away. Then she rose above the level of the roadbed and the heavy metal safety rails that bordered it, and looked out on bare pavement, empty of cars, and at the tranquil nocturnal skyline of the sleeping city beyond.

She twisted her head and tried to reach behind her neck and shoulders, to identify and grapple with whatever demonic thing had hold of her. Her groping arms encountered nothing more solid than the strengthening whip of the wind, yet their efforts met fluid but tenacious resistance, and an unfocused translucent mantle of something silvery slowly descended across her vision. It was the dust, the shining dust. The powder had lifted itself partly clear of her body and somehow coalesced and acquired form; it had become a flexible, continuous sheet of substance that stood clear of her torso and began to take on a shape of

its own. Gently but firmly it pushed her questing hands away. She could not overcome it. Trying to peer over her shoulder, she contorted her neck, tucked her chin against one collarbone, and rolled her eyes into the corners of their sockets, but there was no sign of her captor, whatever it might be. It was as if there was nothing there at all.

Perspectives in her view changed quickly as her rate of ascent increased. Already she had been pulled higher than the tops of all the nearby buildings, and had come nearly abreast of the uppermost stories of the downtown skyscrapers in the middle distance. One flailing leg extended out beyond the perimeter of the mysterious gossamer substance that now half cloaked her, and felt a stiff and chilling rush of air. Her ears popped thickly. As the pressure declined, air forced its way out of her stomach, and she belched uncontrollably. Her intestines gurgled and swelled. The temperature fell as the whipping wind sent fingers of cold night air around her limbs and through her garments.

Her foot had met the slipstream at an angle that set her twisting helplessly about. Whatever had her in its grasp, held her at a single point, with an unconstrained swiveling grip that did nothing to prevent her body from turning and spinning. Now she could look straight down past the edge of the dwindling freeway, past the tar and gravel roof of the building where Immortal Night leased space, and into the asphalt parking lot she had just left. Panic and vertigo struck with renewed intensity. She had time for one more strangled cry, then thick mist abruptly surrounded her.

The thin silvery caul had elongated down the length of her

body, so that it nearly wrapped around her, like half of a huge, incomplete, unsymmetrical bubble, as if she were being swallowed and eaten by a giant jellyfish. A swirl of pearlescent vapor lapped around its bottom edge and rose wetly to meet her, but she had scarcely begun to feel the cold dampness and fine water droplets that it brought before she punched upward through the top of the low overcast. The knotted white surface receded beneath her with dizzying speed. Tenuous ripples and lushly swelling lobes of mist shone with warm luminosity from the city lights beneath them, glowing brightly where they lay atop the concentrated illumination of downtown, radiating more serenely over the residential sections, and fading into darkness above undeveloped hilltops and the wide, wild Pacific that lay in the west. As Wind catapulted upward, the billowing, sculptured cloud forms shrank and diminished visibly behind her, like the last thin sheet of suds left in the bottom of a bathtub, converging toward an unseen drain. Here and there a pastel flash of colored neon blinked momentarily through a break in the layer, or glared diffusely through a diminution of its thickness. She swallowed again, to clear the pressure in her ears. Her entire torso felt swollen and bloated.

Her body twisted again, shaken by the buffeting of the slipstream and helpless before the roar of the passing wind, and now she was looking well down at the top of Sutro Tower, standing above the low nighttime clouds like a giant robot wading in a wash of surf, trailing great swirling eddies of mist and vapor downwind of its ironwork legs. Beyond it and to the left, a few bright aircraft landing lights delineated the

approach course into San Francisco Airport. They shifted apparent position with easily perceptible speed as she rose. She had lifted above some of them, and could sense from the swift change in perspective that the bright ones were near and low, the faint ones farther off and higher up, yet they all were lined up like glowing pearls on a necklace, tracing a straight, slowly-moving line down from the sky toward the end of the runway.

Her ears popped again and again, but the pressure was falling too fast for them to clear themselves. She forced her hands upward against the increasing pull of acceleration and pounded at the sides of her head, but to no avail. The fullness within them increased rapidly and turned suddenly to blistering pain, a pain that swiftly rose to an unbearable crescendo. For a moment it seemed as if the sides of her skull would burst, and then with sudden dark stabs of agony, as if red-hot poker had been thrust into the chambers of her ears, first one eardrum ruptured, and then the other. Blood trickled down her earlobes and dribbled free, and the droplets disappeared below her with unnatural speed, left far behind by the rush of continuing acceleration.

The sound of the slipstream had increased to a deep bellowing thunder. Her ears no longer functioned, but below their dull agony she could hear the roar of the wind through the bones of her head, and feel it juddering powerfully in the unsettled, rumbling depths of her gut. Her vision blurred as her head vibrated back and forth. The mantle of tenuous substance that all but enclosed her shifted and danced with the buffeting, but

she could tell that it did not merely respond passively; no, it actively steered, its flexing served to dampen and ameliorate the shudders and jerks. The pitch of the bellow changed abruptly, as did the character of the motion. She rolled her head back and stared upward. The forward tip of the enveloping membrane changed shape even as she watched. It was becoming conical and sharply pointed, and something ephemeral and fleeting danced in the atmosphere beyond, casting tenuous, fluttering shadows over and around the outside of its surface.

Now a new sensation began to intrude upon her consciousness. The back of her neck prickled and stung sharply, and as it did so a peculiar numbness began to manifest itself in her limbs and torso. The torture diminished in her torn and bleeding ears. Everywhere below her neck, her whole body began to feel the familiar tickle of pins and needles, as if its circulation had been lost or cut off. A gleam of light at a low corner of her vision caught her attention. She tucked her head in and rolled her eyes downward to see what it might be, and found that a wide band of the protecting silvery material had crept down her neck and seemed to merge with the exposed skin of her bare shoulders. She tried to lift a hand and brush the substance away, but her though her muscles still worked, her arms felt thick and heavy. They moved clumsily, and her fingers would not close at all. As lack of sensation crept over her body, she batted ineffectually at the top of her collarbone, with beating fists driven as much by the snapping oscillations of the ride itself as by any conscious volition. Finally, no control of her arms remained at all; they fell limply in trail beside her ribs and hips. Dimly

she could feel her fingers and the sides of her hands, as they dangled and beat helplessly, not of her own will, against her thighs. Yet something kept her head up. Something not quite voluntary held her spine stiff, and it was well that it did, for the acceleration had continued to increase. Wind's tongue had grown heavy in her mouth, like a viscous plastic mass of half-congealed lead. The sockets of her eyes felt the roundness and oppressive weight of the eyeballs within them. She realized that without the unseen assistance, she might have had neither strength or coordination to keep her head upright and her neck uninjured.

She looked down now from an impossible height. The cloud bank extended a thick, groping pseudopod almost all the way to Berkeley, but for the most part it ended at the middle of the Bay. The city of Oakland, the suburbs along the shoreline, and San Jose beyond to the south, all lay spread out before her like a map or a diorama. Her line of sight to them pointed distinctly down, not sideways. A few lights still gave themselves away as inbound aircraft, identifiable by slow shifts in perspective and position, but now all the planes flew well below her. The scope of her vision extended far over the East Bay Hills. The isolated peak of Mount Diablo stood like a solitary anthill, a small, dark promontory thrust upward into the sky, lapped at the edge by the diffuse illumination of bedroom communities. Stockton, Sacramento and a hundred smaller cities and towns filled the Great Valley beyond with broad warm swathes of a uniform yellow glow. Seen thus in darkness, from great height and distance, the squalor and ugliness of human habitation might never have been.

The cities lay like sheets and pools of pure light upon the surface of the world, as distant and unreal as fairyland, lending a glittering, unearthly beauty to the Earth itself.

Wind discerned that the path of her flight had begun to arc to the east. The line of her spine had tilted noticeably away from the vertical. The sheet of material around her had straightened from its complex curve, and now formed an acute pointed cone whose apex must lie well above her head. The sides of the cone flexed and danced with blinding speed, at a tempo that matched the buffeting and the muted sound that still echoed through her skull. She could not roll her eyes far enough up to see its point, nor far enough down to tell whether it closed at the bottom, but lashes of moving air now and then whipped past her face, so perhaps it did not. And it had begun to shine with a light of its own, or -- no -- the thin skin of the substance itself remained unchanged; it had somehow acquired an ethereal, external envelope of pale, translucent glow. She could sense the warmth of it on her skin.

She could not tell whether the air itself was hot or cold, for her face was growing numb as well. Her jaw gaped limply open. Her lips and cheeks felt scratchy and dry, as did her tongue and the membranes inside her mouth and throat. Her sinuses stung. Her eyelids had stiffened, but her eyes continued to function. She could roll them, slowly and viscously, and she could see, and her increasing inability to blink bothered her not at all. With her body so numb, she felt a stab of panic as the thought that she might not be able to inhale and exhale, an emotion that swiftly grew as it occurred to her that she hadn't

breathed in a long time, far too long for any shred of reasonable explanation. Yet something half horror and half awe replaced fear as she realized that lack of breath did not bother her any more than lack of blinking; something had happened, something had changed, something had been done to her to make breathing no longer necessary.

A perturbation in her motion rolled her to the right, facing her for long seconds toward the glow of the South Bay cities, a wide band of brightness near the horizon, topped by darker skies where stars glowed steadily. Then her body turned back face downward, and for a moment disorientation overcame her. Everything looked unfamiliar. The shape of the hills was wrong, and where were the bridges and islands? A moment later, realization dawned of how far and how fast her ascent had progressed: The Bay itself now lay well out of view in her faintly luminescent wake, and the lighted cities before her belonged to the Great Valley. The ridges far below were not the Oakland and Berkeley hills, but the tall linear mountain crests of the high Sierra, and the dark hole beyond them could only be the unlit open desert of Nevada and the Great Basin. The distant lights to the right had marked cities in the southern part of the Great Valley. They were Fresno and Bakersfield, backstopped by the glow of Los Angeles, looming up hundreds of miles away, beyond the Tehachapi Mountains.

I'm up above the air, she thought in fear and wonder, vocal chords and lips unable to move to make sound, even if the tenuous remaining wisps of atmosphere had sufficed to carry it, even if she had unbroken ears to hear with. *I'm up so high*,

there isn't any air. But I'm alive... so what have they done? She wailed to herself inside her head, trying to cry out in despair and desolation, but all that moved was the occasional flutter of the near-transparent conical shield that surrounded and protected her, and the matching flicker of the enclosing layer of hot gas, a sheath formed as the last remaining dregs of atmosphere flared white-hot and ionized before the friction and heat of her passage. *What have they done to me?* she screamed silently within her mind. *Nothing can live up here, nothing that's human, so what have they done, what have they done to me? Nothing human can live up here, so what's happening, what am I? What am I? What have I become?*

* * *

"Jeeze, do you suppose she went back inside? Maybe she went to the bathroom?" With hasty footsteps echoing hollowly from across the street, Jemmy and Jo returned swiftly to the closed door of *Immortal Night*.

"She was just in the bathroom, and look, the gate's been closed ten minutes already." Jo pointed through the decorated lobby window. "They aren't letting anybody through any more."

Jo bit her lip and peered from side to side. "That noise came from over in the side lot, where your van is. Maybe that's where she went. Let's go look."

"Shouldn't we call police? Jo, it's awfully dark back there. Shouldn't we stay here in case she comes back?"

"No! We have to look. I don't want to be alone back there at

night. Come with me! We'll come right back if she's not there. Come on!" Clutching Jemmy's arm and again walking unnaturally fast, Jo dragged the two of them around the other front corner of the building and into the parking area. "Moirira!" she cried, then stopped and looked hesitantly about her.

"Moirira, where are you!"

"Moirira!" Jo's voice grew fainter.

"Wind...?"

* * *

Wind stared down in silence at the distant silver and yellow glow of settlements, sparsely strewn across the vastness of the great American desert. She could see the Earth only as a pool of inky blackness, barely made evident as a surface by the extended, two-dimensional character of the splotches of light that marked larger towns. Seen obliquely near the horizon, the glimmering patches appeared closer together, enough so to give some sense of contour and outline to the dark, unseen loom of the land below, and they showed that the horizon was curved. Underneath the tenuous strip of sky glow that clung to the surface of the world, the Earth was round.

The shaped protective membrane had vanished entirely; perhaps it had only served to shield her from the friction and buffet of passage through the atmosphere. She no longer received any sensations from her own body beyond vision. She might have been a disembodied spirit, an island of thought on its way to nirvana, a soul untangled from mortal coils and constraints,

contemplating the world with detachment and tranquility as it made the final ascent to the threshold of forever. All that obstructed her vision now was a thin lock of her own black hair, only a few strands, that hung down, too near to focus on, close before her eyes, and so great was the terrible acceleration of her passage that its gentle waves had been pulled out nearly straight.

Now as she watched, the band of atmosphere in the east brightened visibly. A long flat arc turned first purple, then blue and azure, yellowing at the midpoint to a shining gather of pastel salmon with a central core of purest, intense rose. An emerald dazzle, rich with half-seen blue and indigo, flashed eagerly from beyond the bright border of the world, chased by an incandescent hot lip of Sun that kissed the horizon from beneath and rounded swiftly above it. The shallow glow of morning cast a transparent wash of color and hints of relief and contrast across the broad surface of land at the edge of the planet. The ethereal detail diminished with distance to the left and right, until it merged into the bright cusps of the thin, illuminated crescent Earth that stretched vast and wide before her, filling half the sky, as far as her eyes could see. And still her upward rush continued.

* * *

"I guess she blew away," Jemmy said quietly, as they completed a second search of the parking area. The night, the lot, and the shroud of fog above were all equally forlorn and

equally empty of anything human. No animate sound reached their ears but the dismay and concern of uneasy pigeons, mysteriously aroused from sleep, muttering softly down from hidden cement roosting places high under the silent freeway. Yet if the canny birds knew any secrets that lurked in the small dark hours before the dawn, they kept their counsel to themselves, they did not choose to hint or to tell.

"Jemmy, Jemmy," Jo moaned, "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

From a greater distance came the rasping call of a falcon disturbed in its rest. The raptor dreamed, or planned, or reminisced of chases and kills in another time and place. Or perhaps it had somehow become aware that another kind of being roamed the darkness, that something else hunted in the skies of Earth tonight, something apart and different, a thing as entirely alien in shape, in needs, and in desires, as if it had come from another plane of existence entirely, as if it had come from another world.

"She blew away," Jemmy repeated with somber finality. "She just blew away."

* * *

Wind floated free, all but devoid of rational thought. The relentless pull of acceleration had ended. The lock of hair before her face now regained its shallow wave and drifted up out of sight, to be replaced by her pennant bat, still fastened around her neck, flying lazily before her eyes on its slack and

curving string of beads, shining bright in the intense radiance of the naked white sun. Its unblinking wide eyes and open mouth seemed full of astonishment, as if it thought but dared not believe that its own rigid pewter wings had borne it so high, had carried it to this strange place, where the black sky of eternal night mingled inextricably and confusingly with the dazzling glare of endless day.

As Wind twisted slowly, the gibbous Earth crossed her field of view again and again, diminishing almost visibly and growing farther away with every rotation of her body. The serene round orb of the planet shone with royal blue oceans and dazzling white cloud masses, underlain here and there by irregular streaks in varying shades of warmer brown, streaks that must be continents.

It's beautiful, she thought. I dint know it was beautiful like that. And it looks so fragile.

From time to time a flicker of silvery sheen at the corner of her eye gave notice that the bizarre substance that had surrounded and protected her was still present, and still up to some mysterious activity of its own. She stared at the reflection in the polished wings and belly of her drifting bat, trying to see more of the mysterious stuff, but it was too tenuous to distinguish from the background glow caused by imperfections in the metallic surfaces. Yet as she stared curiously, it seemed that the image of own her eyes bore an unnatural silver tinge, that glowed with an inner light, as if the strange material had somehow pervaded or suffused them.

Once, as she twisted, a chance combination of sun angle and

direction of gaze provided a hint of what had lifted and towed her such an unbelievable distance. An impossibly thin strand of gossamer momentarily crossed the inky black sky, reflecting no more light than the tiniest thread of silk cast by a wind-borne spider, less substantial than a sleek on polished crystal. The fiber emanated from somewhere behind her back and vanished into the colossal depth ahead of her.

As she contemplated the departure of Earth and the approach of infinity, another shape slowly emerged from the distant void. It was tiny at first, scarcely distinguishable from a star, yet it moved slowly among the true stars, and varied slightly in brightness as it drew ever nearer. Slowly it acquired an outline and the appearance of solidity. The form did not look metallic; it was dark colored and varyingly textured. It had none of the geometric regularity of mechanical contrivance. The object bore long, flat extended appendages, like the great outstretched wings of some enormous bird, yet it resembled no living creature she had ever imagined or ever thought to imagine. It took the longest time for her to figure out what it was. The organic contours, so unexpected and surreal in such a place, at first deceived her as to its nature. Yet after a time, Wind became of its certain identification. There was something it had to be. Deep in the recesses of her mind, she knew there could be but one possible explanation for what had come to gather her in.

-- Chapter --

Wind awoke in a soft bed, soothed by the wholesome scent of freshly-laundered white cotton sheets, wrapped in a pink nightgown of fuzzy cotton flannel. She yawned deliciously, stretching the muscles of her face for a great, ecstatic inhalation before she finally opened her eyes. Clear yellow sun poured through white gauze curtains drawn across the many panes of the big picture window, and fell in pools too bright to look at on the clean pastel walls. Yet the light seemed weaker than it should be, as if it had somehow been diluted.

As the room came into focus and full consciousness returned, she sat up in abrupt alarm, clutching her knees to her chest, twisting her head to look in every direction, first cowering in fear and suspicion, and then slowly beginning to become angry. Her own sheets, her real ones, were black. Her blankets and pillowcase were black. The walls of her room were black. She slept with shades and shutters tightly drawn, and she hadn't slept in a pink flannel nightie since she was old enough to practice her tantrums and have them well rehearsed. Wherever she was, no matter who had put this stuff here, it was a complete fake.

Then unbelievable recent memories came flooding back, and she

shifted the focus of her attention to her own body. She pulled up her sleeves and stared at her arms. She poked, prodded and pinched herself. She slid the flesh of her cheeks between the fingers and thumbs of her hands. There was no mirror in sight -- her real room had an ornate antique one, with a repeating pattern of rosebuds etched frostily into the edges of the glass, and a rococo carved wooden frame, stained ebony and carefully covered with false patinae to look old. At any rate, she could tell that her makeup was gone; her skin felt clean, healthy and recently well-scrubbed. Her hair was down, not even braided or tucked into a pony tail, but it was in good shape, not snarled or messed as it surely would have been if she had been sleeping on it. Remembering the tearing pain in her ears, she snapped her fingers by the side of her head, then rubbed thumb against forefinger, listening quietly for the delicate rustle as the ridges and convolutions of flesh slid past one another. Her hearing seemed fine. How very strange. It looked as if she was all here, whole and intact.

Wind examined her memories carefully. They had none of the evanescence of a dream. She did not feel hung-over, and no hint of buzz or any other lingering aftereffect of drugs lingered in her mind. She pinched herself, and it hurt. She blinked her eyes and stretched them wide open, and felt none of the lingering distant heaviness that might have indicated that her real body was slowly responding to conscious direction and trying to awaken from sleep. It did not feel like she was having a dream. This was not a place she had ever dreamed about, or would have wished to dream about.

There was a knock on the door.

Wind pulled the blanket tighter about her knees, and settled a pillow in behind the small of her back. *Good grief*. Fluffy pink embroidered sheep danced at the edges of the pillow case. She glared at the offending pattern in dismay. The sheep smiled back at her from densely-stitched baby-blue eyes half hidden beneath long, delicately curling eyelashes, each composed of a single strand of zig-zagging yellow thread.

The knock repeated.

She turned back to the door, stared at it with a worried expression for a heartbeat, then finally shrugged.

"Come in." she said, a little louder than necessary. With a soul-satisfying creak, the door swung slowly open.

"Good morning," said the only voice she could possibly have expected. Wind settled her chin over the bony roundness of her knees and hugged her long legs tightly. Only her eyes moved, following Kieran expressionlessly as he entered the room and crossed to the window. "A little too bright, perhaps?" He pushed the drapes aside and drew the shade, an old-fashioned one of thin, coated cloth with torn, curling sides. A ring-shaped, thread-wrapped pull dangled by a brown piece of string, from the middle of the narrow batten that stiffened the bottom edge. She couldn't quite see outside the window. The silver neckerchief was back in its accustomed place, and it rippled and moved like a struggling fish as it lay around his neck and across his throat. She eyed it distrustfully, with gathering anger.

"That should be better." He turned to face her. "How do you feel?"

To her continuing surprise, Wind felt fine, but she wasn't going to let him know it. She continued to stare at him with silent intensity. He started to approach the bed, but she must have flinched, for he stopped and stepped back.

"I have no plans to hurt you." Her disbelief surely showed in her face, for he elaborated. "If I had, I would have done so already." Wind took a deep breath and let it out nervously, trying to think what to say.

"I trust you enjoyed your flight. Only two dozen of you have done anything remotely like it, and none of them got this far from home."

'*This far*'? Wind thought incredulously. She tossed back the covers, swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and moved quickly to the window. '*This far*'? She swept back the drapes, tugged on the pull of the shade, and let go. With its spring released from tension, the window covering flew upward. A furious white sun stood suspended amid inky black sky, but something was very wrong, for the solar disc was noticeably smaller than usual. There were no stars, but with the glare of the sun full in her face, Wind doubted that she could have seen any.

"It looks smaller from farther away," he said, as if reading her mind.

"What in the world..." she muttered softly, in awe. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him looking sidelong at her, steadily. "Well, maybe not." She pressed her face against the glass, trying to look in every direction. Except for the diamond-white disc of the sun, all was black, all was

featureless.

"It's real," she said softly, shaking her head in wonder.

"It's really real."

"That all depends on what reality you believe in."

"Stop talking in riddles. What the hell is going on here?"

Wind turned sideways to face him. '*Two dozen of... you*'? She leaned uneasily against the framing of the window. It flexed and bowed outward disconcertingly.

"I wasn't." He answered her first question. "And..."

"Isn't that kinda thin?" Wind interrupted, pointing at the wooden lathes separating the panes of the window from one another. Each one of them was only a little broader than the width of her thumb.

"Don't worry about it."

She drew back her hand, made a fist and slammed it full force against the juncture where a horizontal strip of wood intersected a vertical one. The entire window flexed outward briefly and then rebounded, driving her fist painfully before it.

"Ow!" She rubbed bruised knuckles.

"We could just open the window, if you prefer."

"Um. No... I guess not. Where's home?" The blow and sudden pain had relieved her of anger.

Something distant hovered in the corners of his eyes. "I assume you mean Earth. Over there." He pointed. "You can probably see it if you move out of the sunlight." She stepped into the shadow of the wall and peered obliquely into the void, holding out her hands to block the glare reflecting from sill

and sash. Yes, there was something there.

"It looks like the Evening Star, but it's blue," she said, squinting and tilting her head. "Is that the Moon beside it?" A pale white spark gleamed in the darkness, less than her little finger's breadth away from the turquoise ember. "How far away are we?"

"Yes. You have good eyes. About forty million miles."

"It's so tiny and perfect..." She stared into the abyss.

"Life-bearing planets are quite rare. It helps to have a big moon to pull away most of the original atmosphere, and it takes a lot of luck to get one just so. Either luck, or a good billiard player, in the right place, at the right time, with a stout cue and plenty of patience."

She wasn't listening. "... so tiny ..."

Wind stared for a long moment, as if hypnotized, then abruptly shook herself. She took a nervous breath, let it out, and turned to face him.

"You know, if it's sex you're after, my place woulda been closer." Her eyes drifted back to the bedding. "And no pink sheep." She frowned and glared at the flat pastel animals.

Again, he almost smiled. "I hate to say it, but I must. You are not quite my type."

"I'm legal now, you know." She stared up at him coolly, remembering. "Happy birthday. I'm eighteen today."

"Thank you." He nodded graciously. "Truly, it has been a long time..." he paused for a thoughtful moment, a hint of distance in his eyes, and then continued, "...a remarkably long time since anyone wished me a happy birthday."

Something in his expression and in the meditative tone of his voice made Wind go weak with fear. Her knees folded involuntarily. She groped hastily for the bed behind her, and collapsed clumsily onto the edge of it, bracing her arms to the side to keep herself upright, sheep forgotten entirely.

"How..." she tried to swallow, and failed. "How old are you?"

"And I must wish a happy birthday to you, as well," he continued solemnly, then stared at her for a moment. "I am seven billion, five hundred forty-five million, six hundred fifty-two thousand, six hundred sixty-four years old. Today."

"What?" She heard her own voice quietly, as if from a great distance. "What did you say?"

"I am seven billion, five hundred forty-five million..."

"Never mind," she interrupted, "I heard you." Her mind reeled. *Later*, she thought frantically. Not now. Think about it later. But she could not drive awareness away. "You're not kidding, are you." She was not asking a question. "This..." She looked around her, helplessly. "How...?" He stared back in silence. "I mean, how could you be, there weren't even people? Isn't that like... as old as when there were dinosaurs, and stuff like that?"

He nodded. "Well... No. Not quite. It is a good deal older. I am half again as old as your planet or your star. I am older than most of the heavier atoms in your body."

"You, you can't mean that, you've gotta be kid..." Wind's voice trailed off as she looked around her once more, and at the black abyss that yawned beyond the window. She swallowed and started over.

"But how...? How...?"

He raised an eyebrow slightly. "As you may suppose, it is a long story." Then he added, a little more gently, "I might have thought you would like to meet an immortal."

She was shaking. "Yes, but I dint mean that immortal." She took a deep breath, lifted her chin and set her jaw. "Besides, you said so yourself, you aren't immortal yet... Remember?"

"Yes." He nodded, and his lips curved whimsically. "I do remember. You are quite right, I stand corrected. I am not an immortal. But on the other hand, I have been working on it. I have been working on it for a quite a while."

"Well I'm glad I dint try to buy candles..." she said, mostly to herself. Then she stood cautiously, wobbled to the window, and looked out once more at the distant Earth. "And I'm not your type because... because..." She stared at him out of the corners of her eyes, biting at her lower lip. *Two dozen of us. Us... us humans...*

"...because -- well, among other things, you're a tetrapod," he finished, then noticed her blank stare and explained. "Your species has only four limbs."

Wind steadied herself carefully, bracing one hand on the sill and the other against the inside of the sash. She didn't want to faint, truly she didn't.

What are you? she thought, but could not quite bring herself to ask. *What in the world --* she began chuckling giddily at the realization of how wrong that common expression must be. *What are you?* She turned slowly and faced him.

"What's that made of, anyway?" She gestured at the folds of

silver fabric that rippled about his neck.

"It's billions of robots the size of bacteria, all holding hands to stay together."

"Hands?" Wind squeaked, almost grateful for a simple puzzle, fearful of deeper and more threatening mysteries.

"Well... Close enough."

-- Chapter --

Text goes here.

-- Chapter --

"But... wouldn't I be noticed long before that happens? You said that a human would be too obvious, especially someone with extra abilities."

"Yes, but no. There is a way." He held her eyes with his own, but her cautious stare showed no hint of understanding. After a moment she exhaled and relaxed, accepting uncertainty, waiting for him to tell her, when it was time.

"All right." She took a breath and looked squarely at him, chin lifting slightly, not in suspicion but with honest curiosity. "Only, tell me why you are doing this."

"Let's just say, that... you remind me of someone I knew once... a long, long, time ago." And for the first time, she saw him truly smile.

* * *

The unborn sun slowly uncurled tenuous fingers of rose and salmon upward over the cerulean blues and vanishing purples of incipient dawn. Bright Venus and pale Spica hung in the southeastern sky, lonely beacons, a brilliant luminary rear-

guard set against the approach of day. A solitary couple, arisen early to welcome the winter solstice, trod softly past the contrasting textured greens of pickleweed and salt grass at the edge of the bay shore marshland. The thick soles of their boots made all but inaudible scuffing noises on the damp, irregular surface of the brown dirt path. Somewhere, a roosting pigeon muttered distrustfully in its sleep.

High on the gray, corrosion-dusted girders of a skeletal metal tower, a lean raptorial shape came to full wakefulness, fluffing its coverts against the cold, listening to the faint voice of the wind as it whispered past the parallel descending catenaries of power lines. The bird twisted its neck back and forth, flicked long tail feathers to straighten and settle them, then briefly stretched great, graceful pinions that tapered gradually and elegantly to slender, pointed tips. Beside the wide black vertical band that striped its cheek, its discerning eye flashed briefly silver, as if in reflection of something unearthly, as if in memory or expectation of wonder.

The human couple passed by, intent on their own future, unaware, unseeing.

The peregrine took wing and flew with purpose and direction, straight into the break of day, on to meet the morning.

Jay Reynolds Freeman