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About 8,000 words

RESTORATION

by David J. Sakmyster

*"He never is crowned
With immortality, who fears to follow
Where airy voices lead"*

-John Keats, Endymion

ONE

April 12, 2289

On the streets of New Delhi, the protests raged. A frenzied sea of bodies thrashed against a makeshift barrier, and armored guards stood eight rows deep as the next line of defense. Fires swept through the eastern quadrant and explosions echoed through the alleys like hollow thunderclaps. Seven stories above it all, Martin Templane could just make out the sound of heli-floaters somewhere in the thick, listless

haze.

Behind him, a door creaked and then slammed, drumming through the oak paneling and sending tremors through the finely-woven red carpet.

A somber female voice called: "It's time."

Martin pressed his forehead against the cold windowpane, expecting to feel the heat from the distant fires. He imagined he could see every one of the faces in the crowd leering up at him with the inflamed hatred of caged beasts.

"Are you coming with me?" he asked, turning to face her.

Camilla Serran's eyes were two pools of darkness, and Martin had the sense that they were leaking shadows over the front of her vest, darkening the green velvet. She cleared her throat. "If it's all the same to you, I'll wait here."

"I understand," Martin replied softly, and looked away from her penetrating stare.

"Do you?"

He adjusted his turquoise jacket and silver tie, and stood up straight. He wanted to look his best for when he escorted the prisoner out over the mob. "No, I suppose I don't," he said at last. Camilla was his fellow administrator, and the closest thing he had to a friend, but she had always been one to question everything he had thought fundamentally unquestionable.

"He's just a mortal," said Camilla. "Someone who will be dead in a few years anyway. Let him be."

Martin shook his head and pointed at the window. "Maybe you haven't been keeping up with current events. There's a few

thousand people extremely upset about what we did two centuries ago, and they look to this man and his reincarnation ideas as their salvation."

"He's still just a man."

"And so am I. Now, if you don't have anything more persuasive to say, I'd like to have this business finished for good. The other Regional Administrators are growing concerned about our lack of closure."

Camilla backed aside with an exaggerated bow. "Then go ahead, Martin. But remember, what you do now is irreversible."

He froze. Those were the words first spoken to him two hundred years ago when he was first inoculated. Irreversible? The X-Plague had taken all his friends. Brothers and sisters fell ill, along with millions, indiscriminately, each day, taking months to die, and in such incredible and humiliating agony. The cure, a serum that initiated a subtle genetic re-sequencing and created a defensive self-sustaining force, changed all that and so much more, unshackling humanity at once from its susceptibility to such horrors.

Irreversible? Just fine with him. So what if the cure, and its subsequent consequence—the installation of worldwide immortality, had the unintended side effect of complete female sterility? Yes, nature had substituted a little personal-interest clause into medicine's breakthrough: sure, have your immortality, but the balance will be preserved.

We dodged that bullet too, thought Martin. With Project Failsafe. Of course the Eternists were not going to leave to

chance the prospect of killing off the whole race due to lack of foresight. Natural disasters, wars and even just plain species-annihilating asteroids were still lurking out there. Unless precautions were taken, the possibility remained that the current population, however immortal, might be eradicated without a chance to replenish the race.

Fertile eggs were harvested from thousands of women before their inoculation. Stored in several secure underground labs, known only to the top administrators, these eggs waited for a day and a purpose that hopefully would never materialize. It was done quietly, under the guise of various research studies, without alerting the population that there might exist an alternative to infertility.

It was a gamble, and it worked: now the only ones still angered about the tradeoff for immortality were those fools who believed in reincarnation. The rest of the population, in time, got past the whole childbearing instinct when the benefits of eternal life were fully realized.

"Time to finish this," Martin said, striding past Camilla to his office doors. He let his fingertips linger ever so slightly against the ingrained wood, then pushed through into the cool hallway leading to the confinement cells, where he would confront the last mortal human on the planet.

#

As he took Rajib, still in wrist-cuffs, to the elevator, he eyed the man closely. So this is what we're all afraid of. The bald man seemed so plain in his white frock and his tattered

sandals. Martin stood there, waiting silently for the elevator, thinking about the nine years he had spent in the pursuit of this man. The serum had been pumped into the well water and reservoirs, and literally overnight, those who survived the X-Plague had joined the rest of the Eternists in immortality. When word had come back that this man had escaped to the mountains before conversion, Martin hadn't been too concerned—until two years later when Rajib resurfaced in India and began his ministry of reform. Until his capture Rajib and his followers sabotaged the administration at every turn. Every month it was another protest, a doctor threatened, a laboratory targeted. Transmissions were regularly interrupted with anti-Eternist propaganda.

As if there was anything they could do. But that was the fear, wasn't it? No one could take the chance that they might do something. That they might even find out about Project Failsafe. Until the moral and psychological roadblocks were completely cleared, Administrators in every geographic section had full autonomy and military backup to assure a smooth transition to the new order.

The doors opened into a shadowy cube, and Rajib reluctantly followed Martin inside the lift. As the doors closed, Martin's throat croaked, and he formed the question that had been on his lips for the past decade. "Why do you want to die?"

Rajib slowly pulled his head out of the shadows, and the darkness seemed to melt off his face in spiderweb trickles. His eyes were haunted, full of immense sadness and a touch of

acceptance. "You do not understand."

"Then tell me. This elevator is slow, and we have some time."

Rajib sighed. "Eternal life... it has always been ours. Reincarnation—the cycle of rebirth—it was what our souls chose in the beginning. This world of death and pain, suffering and sadness—material and sensory pleasure unlike anything we could experience in other realms. These things were needed for the evolution of our souls."

Martin blinked at him. Using Rajib's logic, Martin could see that what they had done was a violation, a gross interruption of the sacred process. But he was still confused. "If this is true and there was some kind of overall Plan, then why did the serum get created in the first place? Since you were born too late, I'll fill you in on a nasty little disease of the twenty-first century called the X-Plague."

"I know all about it."

"Do you?" Martin's voice raised a notch. "You weren't there when a thousand fell dead every day, when the night filled with screams of inflicted, when painkillers could be sold to the highest bidder..." He thought of that other life, ages ago. How he had been solicited right out of MIT by Centuristic Pharmaceuticals to be the major supplier for the sub-continent. Memories flooded his mind, images of withered, blistered hands reaching out over the barricades. "How can our souls experience anything when all the 'receptacles', as you would call them, are in danger of being eradicated every few centuries?"

"That is part of the plan."

"Why was it then that most of our scientists and leaders did not have your doubts about mass conversion?"

Rajib lowered his head. "We all forget. It is necessary—we forget what we are when we are born again. If not, then the experiences, the pain, the pleasures, would all be meaningless."

"Then why do you remember?"

"I do not. Not really. I... just believe." Rajib turned, walked to the corner and stared at the smooth wall with an expression Martin couldn't quite make out. "Let me die," he said in a whisper. "Maybe there is a chance..."

A chance? What could he possibly mean? Martin still couldn't figure out why he would choose death. He paused the elevator just as they reached the Atrium level. "Wait. What happens if you die now? For at least the past fifty years all the women in the world have been sterile. So who are you going to go into?"

"No one," he said at last in a choked, resolved voice. "No births. Never again will there be receptacles for the soul."

"So where will you go?" Now Martin was just playing with him, seeing how far his faith would take him.

"Limbo," he said, shrugging in utter despondency. "That place where we wait between incarnations. Wait and decide on the next life's possibilities."

"You mean we got to choose?"

"Of course. That was the way it worked. We chose different lifestyles, different experiences."

"But even now, believing that nothing's waiting for you, you still wish to die?"

"Yes." The word formed from the shadows and Martin knew that however badly Rajib desired it, he could not grant that wish. He would not risk martyring this man. His death now might encourage his disciples to embark on centuries' of reversal experimentation.

"All right," Martin said, the lie forming easily. "Come with me and we'll make it painless."

###

The old medical center, a seven-story, ebony-plated, windowless structure, was just a hundred yards away, connected to the second level of the administration building by a covered causeway of thick, transparent glass. The night held a tenuous grasp on the city, apparently intimidated by the mob, the roving heli-floaters and the threat of blinding explosions.

Searchlights struck out from the tops of buildings and roamed across the desperate faces below. Martin nearly made it across without incident, but then Rajib suddenly pulled away. His heart lurched, as he feared Rajib might actually find a way to break through the causeway walls and hurl himself to his death. But the prisoner only stumbled a few yards, then dropped to his knees. He squinted and pointed, his mouth open wide as if he were seeing an angel. Martin ran to him and hauled him to his feet. As he dragged Rajib back, he caught sight of a figure standing between two torch-wavers in the crowded street.

It was a young woman dressed in black—almost like mourning

clothes. Martin saw her for just an instant, but was struck with the certainty that she was staring up at Rajib expectantly, perhaps waiting for him.

Rajib was crying, shaking Martin's hand and literally weeping with happiness. He was sure he was about to die, and given the way he was reacting Martin knew he'd have to seal him up somewhere for a couple of decades at least—somewhere he'd be in no position to cut off his own head or throw himself from a tower.

What had been a somber acceptance of death had now transformed into total anticipation. Something he'd seen had sent him into an enthusiastic frenzy. And when finally, ten minutes later, the serum was administered and Rajib looked up with utter gratitude and hopeless optimism, Martin felt the heavy twinge of guilt.

After he told Rajib the truth, Martin actually had to leave the room. Orderlies were sent to restrain Rajib and lead him to confinement. And as Martin walked down the pale, slanting hallways, he heard the now-immortal Rajib shouting on about betrayal and loss.

His virulent words were still echoing in Martin's ears when he stepped back into the covered chamber and began his return over the silent, stunned crowd. Below his feet they swayed and surged in the roving spotlights, moving like the uncontrolled ebb and tide of the sea. He paused, suddenly weak with vertigo, and leaned against the transparent wall.

And far below, he saw her, the same woman, clothed all in

black and highlighted in a slow-moving searchlight. She wore the typical Hindu veil and the long robes. However, something about her stance had changed. Previously, she'd given the impression of expectation, as if awaiting something grand. Now, all the energy seemed to have fled her form. Her shoulders sagged, and her head lowered. Martin had the sense that some purpose for which she had come had just gone unfulfilled.

He continued to stare at her. The spotlight left her position and then the torchlights blazed off her features and danced across her veil.

That was when she turned and disappeared into the crowd. But it was in that slow turn that he saw what it was that froze him to the spot for a good two minutes, before he ultimately raced back into the center and called for a legion of floater-drones and fifteen squadrons to comb the city.

When she turned, he saw for an instant her silhouette and the distended belly, jutting out like a great ball.

She was pregnant.

TWO

April 17, 2289

As soon as Martin entered his penthouse the lights sprang to life, sprinkling the furniture and paintings in a smooth afterglow. It was his first time home in over five days. He set a bag against the corner of a leather couch and went to a black-paneled door where a section opened at his approach.

"Scotch," he muttered, and immediately a glass pushed through, two ice cubes clattered into it, and a spout doled out a half-glass full of bronze liquid.

"Windows," he said in a tired voice, returning to the couch. At once, the far wall lost its opaqueness and revealed the dazzling twilight skyscape, marred only by two steep, black towers. Deep froths of turquoise slid under violet waves at the horizon, while thin, wispy clouds ran simple routes over the sky. Martin sank back into the soft couch and propped up his tired feet. He gazed out at the picture-perfect view, looking down at the sprawling city and sipping his drink.

A sudden, sharp buzz sounded.

"Yes?"

A flat, holographic slide materialized in the center windowpane. Camilla's face appeared. She gave him a thin smile. "You're back."

Martin wearily lifted his glass to her projection.

"Can I come up?"

"I stink," he muttered. "Maybe you should give me time to shower."

"Why? It'll be like the old days. Before the penthouse, before the personal hover-cruisers, before... you know."

"Yes, I do. And, thank you, but that's a part of my history I don't care to recall."

"Too bad. I want to talk." Her image fizzled and the flat screen folded in on itself.

Martin cursed and finished the rest of his drink; he

started to rise to get another. He'd have time. The lifts usually took several minutes to get from the lobby to his suite— unless she was projecting from just outside his door—

The door buzzer sounded, then slid open. "Greetings!" Camilla said, stepping inside. She wore a red jumpsuit, black belt and boots. It was, Martin realized, again something he couldn't recall ever seeing her wear. As usual, Camilla was one for variety, and despite two hundred years she always managed to dress in something new.

"I don't know if that outfit really suits you," he said flatly.

She shrugged. "You know, I kind of agree. Maybe I won't wear it again. At least in this millennium." She went to the drink dispenser. "Gin, no ice." She turned, brought the glass to her lips and leaned against the wall.

Martin spread out his hands. "So, Camilla..."

"You know what I want to hear."

Nodding, Martin sat back down. He swished the melting ice cubes around in his glass. "Then the answer is no. Haven't found her."

"Really?" She coughed hard, deliberately. "You mean to tell me that the Regional Administrator, the head big man himself, with all his computerized trackers and his squadrons of loyal servants, can't even locate one pregnant woman? What, did she outrun you?"

Martin hung his head. "You know, Camilla. I'm really tired. Maybe we should continue this—"

"What about the satellites?" She walked over to the terminal at the other side of the dispenser, and started tapping keys. "Here are your logs. Latest search attempts... Let's see... Nothing turned up in the mountains. Himalayas are showing no human readings. You set the parameters to track all the way to Slavo-Romania. And your apprehending orders are still in effect at every transit station and checkpoint."

A few seconds later she slithered into the chair opposite Martin. "So, my friend. Are you beginning to doubt your vision yet? Come on—you didn't actually see her, did you?"

Martin sighed. "Don't you have something else to do?"

"No. Remember? Our job here is done. No one's left to convert. And Rajib's little movement is breaking apart. As long as he was mortal they had a clear symbol to mark their opposition. He was some kind of reverse deity—you know, this one could die and get sick and all that, and meanwhile his worshippers were the immortals. Kind of ironic, don't you think?" She smiled and sucked down the rest of the gin. "Cheer up, Marty. You've won. The way is clear, and it only took two centuries."

"Great. Now if you don't mind—"

"Did you really see her?"

"Yes! Damn it, I did. And so did Rajib. If it was just me, I'd say you could be right, but he saw her too, and when he did, his mood transformed completely, as if by ending his life there would be a great hope..."

Camilla set down her glass and crossed her legs. "Wait a

minute. Are you saying he thought that if he died, then... his soul could be reborn into her child?"

Martin stared for a long moment past Camilla. Outside, the dying sunset shed crimson tears between the indistinct skyscrapers. "That's exactly what he thought."

"How do you know? Wait—did you go to him again?"

"Just a few hours ago. When I returned from Nepal, after enduring a three-hour flight listening to the whispers of my men questioning my sanity."

"How's old Rajib doing?"

"He's in a paralysis tube. They let him out to eat one last meal and he tried to cut through his windpipe with a fork. We'll keep him confined from now on. I approached him and got right to the point, asking him what he had seen the night of his conversion."

"And..." Camilla leaned all the way forward, almost falling out of the chair.

"And," Martin continued, taking his eyes away from hers. "Rajib said simply: 'She will not come again.'"

"Huh?"

"Exactly. So I asked him, 'Who won't come again?' He ignored me. Started weeping right there in his cell. And in his paralysis he couldn't even wipe off his tears."

"Did you help him out?"

"No. Listen, he muttered something about how another chance had been given to us."

"Us? The Administrators?"

"No. Us—the human race."

"Oh." Camilla stood up slowly, stretching.

"One soul, he said, could have started the change. One child. Rajib thought he could have been the one. He said he was ready for the role."

"What role?" Camilla asked. "Oh, right. He thought that our souls got to choose the characteristics of the next incarnation. So, what was he going to come back as? Oh, let me guess—a scientist? Someone to undo the genetic manipulation, reverse our tampering and restore our original form?"

"Maybe," Martin said with a shrug. He rubbed his eyes. God, he really needed a shower. And a couple more drinks. "Rajib didn't really say. I got the impression he just had faith that he would come back as whatever was needed."

Camilla walked slowly to the windows. Her arms hung loose at her sides, and she seemed to be breathing slowly. "Did he say anything else?"

"Yes." Martin shook his head, clearing away his uncertainty. This was stupid. Why was he feeling so despondent? This should be a time of rejoicing. The golden age he and Camilla—and the other Eternists had planned for—was nearly at hand.

"Well...?" Camilla turned around and leaned back against the view of the darkening city.

Martin sighed. "He said that since she—whoever 'she' is—will not come again, we have lost."

Camilla nodded. She set down her glass on the table, and

without a look at Martin, walked to the door.

"Camilla?" She was in a strange mood. Something had come over her, an emotion unfamiliar to Martin, even after so many years of companionship.

She turned abruptly. "Good luck on your search. I'd call it off, if I were you. Maybe Rajib's right and I was wrong, and we haven't won anything."

The doors closed behind her, and Martin sat alone in the sudden quiet.

THREE

June 4, 2289

"We've combed the sub-continent, Marshall Sanders, and have searched as far north as Hungary and as far west as Morocco. But the woman and child—who surely would have been born by now—cannot be found."

"I see," said the image on the holo-projection in Martin's hover-cruiser. He was currently two thousand miles over Rome and speeding back to New Delhi. The Marshall said: "You are convinced now that reports of this woman were... exaggerated?"

Martin took a deep breath. He felt the engines vibrating through his seat, rattling his bones and numbing his heart. Could it be? She obviously wasn't a real woman. But... was she as Rajib implied—some kind of metaphysical chance at redemption? A divine opportunity? Some kind of Avatar? A one-time only manifestation that could actually bear a child?

No. The lack of evidence proved otherwise. She was only an apparition, some shared hallucination. There was nothing to be concerned about. Science was infallible. Pregnancies were impossible, and reincarnation absurd.

"Yes, Marshall," he said at last. "I am calling in the searchers. It's over. The sub-Saharan project is a success."

#

Back in New Delhi four hours later, Martin visited the detention center. Rajib was out of the paralysis tube and placed in a padded cell where he lay curled up like a fetus in the corner. He hadn't moved in a month, and had to be fed against his will. Poor, deluded man. But Martin wasn't too concerned. Rajib's devastated now, but in the centuries to come, I'm sure he will join the rest of us in our immortal dance.

Martin left, planning to close the inoculation center. His work was done.

And he had the rest of his endless life to begin.

FOUR

April 5, 5943

"Did you hear?" announced Camilla as she casually walked back into Martin's life after nearly twelve years of absence. She wore a brilliant green dress with a glaring yellow shawl and rose-colored sandals. Her hair was cropped high and set with a single white flower. She lifted a pair of silver-edged sunglasses over her forehead.

"Where have you been?" he asked, glancing up from his work—a model of the H.M.S. Bounty. Nearly seventeen feet long and half-finished, it filled most of the center room of the lodge and blocked the best view of the Alps. But Martin didn't really care. After three hundred years in the same mountainside home, he had grown weary of the scenery. The model, at least, had consumed a good forty of those years, and he had found its intricate construction and meticulous beamwork to be infinitely rewarding.

"Oh, here and there," said Camilla. "Still building this thing? You don't seem to be any farther along then when I left you."

Martin scowled at her. "Aren't you going to say your usual, 'Greetings, you haven't changed a bit'?"

She shook her head, slowly. "Not this time. I've got... news."

"Oh? What is it?" News was something there hadn't been much of in the past couple hundred years. After the global unification battle of 2467 and the dissolution of nations, it didn't take long until the Eternist leadership moved to stamp out all the remaining factions of antagonism and to root out potential conflicts. It was, at times, exceedingly bloody—the transition to peace. But it had come, and by the third millennium, the true focus of a unified humanity rolled into place. The proliferation of pleasure centers, the flowering literary and artistic creations. Elimination of pollution and waste. The restoration of paradise, in short. Less than

twenty-five hundred years passed and in just the blink of an eye those petty problems which plagued humanity's mortal days had vanished completely, destined to resurface only in those really artsy holo-films or in documentary specials.

Despite all they'd accomplished as a single, unified race, there was nothing but the expectation of greater things to come. For example, they still hadn't achieved faster-than-light travel, and couldn't explore even the closest stellar neighbors. So many wonders and new experiences still awaited. So, despite what Rajib had said thirty-six hundred years ago, there was no doom around the corner. Nothing to suggest that this wasn't the fulfillment of humanity's destiny.

"Rajib Manijupabra is dead," Camilla said in a whisper.

Martin blinked, and waited until she repeated the words. He had kept Rajib confined for over three thousand years, hoping that the poor man would turn his convictions around and accept the blessings that had been forced upon him. Eventually Martin had set him free, believing the state of the world would change his mind, and feeling that at least now, his words held no more power to influence a population long since disinterested in an afterlife.

"How?"

Camilla made a sweeping motion across her neck. "Twelfth-century broadsword, I think it was. Stole it from a museum and nearly cut off his own head. Seems he meditated in isolation for a few centuries in the Himalayas, then made his decision."

With a shake of his head, Martin sat back against the

wooden, stained hull. Why was he so moved? True, any death in this day and age was a noteworthy event, but Martin couldn't help but feel responsible.

"What're you thinking?" Camilla asked, ducking her head under the prow and stepping around a scaffold. The room smelled like dust and glue, diffused occasionally by the mountain breeze through an open window, which offered a hint of sunflowers and fresh grass.

"Nothing," Martin said, setting down his sander as he rose. He brushed off his pants and white cotton shirt. "Well..."

"Come on, tell me," she said as she tiptoed over a loose board and pulled herself along the prow.

"I just hope, I guess... that wherever he is now, I mean if there's anything—you know—after this..."

"Yes?" she looked at him, bright eyes wide.

"—that he is at peace."

Camilla squinted at him. She lowered her sunglasses, stepped right up close to his face, and then lifted them up.

"Martin Templane? Is that really you?"

"Stop it. I'm just saying..."

"That there might be something on the other side?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what I'm saying. He didn't have to die, is all. I wish he could have found a way to be happy."

"Like you are?"

Martin looked up at his boat, and plucked a hammer from its post. "Right. Look, I'm going to finish one more thing, then

why don't we go down to Munich and see some shows?"

"New ones?"

"How do I know? I haven't been down there in decades. But someone had to create something in all that time, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Camilla said with a shrug as she spun around and walked to the windows. She stared out at the dizzying mountains, capped with ever-present crowns of ice. "Though I've found that precious little changes these days."

Martin started to hammer one dangling board back into place. "Sorry if I've disappointed you. I guess I'm not all that exciting anymore."

"Oh, don't kid yourself. You were never all that exciting."

"Really? Then why have I had the honor of your friendship for so many centuries?"

"Because," Camilla said in a low voice, her back still to him, her fingers pressed against the glass, seemingly against the mountain ridges themselves. "I've been waiting for you to change."

The hammer missed its target by a good three inches. Martin swallowed hard. "What do you mean? Change what?" He looked down at himself, half-believing she was kidding again and was going to say he needed a new wardrobe at least once every century.

"It's been almost four thousand years, Martin. Since the serum. Since immortality. You and I were there at the start.

We assisted Centuristic and the new Eternist leaders, and with them we took it upon ourselves to become gods. We did it. We created a new being, molding immortal man in our own image."

"And?" Martin responded. "We should be proud. Look at the results."

Camilla pressed her left cheek against the glass. "Four thousand years, Martin. Haven't you had any doubts?" Before he could answer she said: "I have. Too many. I've lost track of the sleepless nights. I've taken to wandering alone, for years and years. Do you know where I go?"

Martin shook his head, his voice gone.

"Cemeteries, that's where. A pilgrimage, I guess you could call it. Cemetery after cemetery. The Americas, Asia, the Isle of Britain, Africa. Everywhere you see these cemeteries overrun with vines and grass. No one keeps them up. No one cares. The dead—our ancestors—are gone, forgotten for good.

"But I go there, and I touch the moss-encrusted stones and press my hands against the cracked vaults and lay down over their earthen tombs. That was our fate, Martin. We should be there with them, along with everyone else now up and walking around."

"What are you saying?"

"Nature's cycles are perfect in all other things. We were just one part in a cycle, an endless, perfect cycle."

"And now we're the anomaly?"

"We are. Look at us. Unchanging. Come on, I swear you haven't moved in twelve years. That's got to be the same shirt—"

I knew it, Martin thought. Back to the clothes. Then it hit him. "Is that why you're always trying to look different? Every time I see you its something new. Clothes, hair..."

"Don't psychoanalyze me, Martin. I'm asking if you have any doubts."

"About us? About four thousand years of immortality?" He thought for a moment, but despite the pang of guilt for Rajib, there was nothing. "No, I don't. You can't convince me that this isn't right. It feels right. It always has."

"Even when we were drugging entire cities to reduce their opposition to infertility? Even when the Administration ordered you to fire-bomb the whole eastern quadrant where the rebel scientists were raiding our labs?"

Martin winced, but finally nodded. "I guess, unlike you, I always looked at the big picture. I knew that this day would come."

Camilla's eyes were wet—whether from the glare off the snow-capped peaks or from emotion, Martin was unsure. She stepped up to the prow, looking under it into Martin's eyes. Slowly she pulled the flower from her hair.

It wasn't a daisy, Martin saw at last, but couldn't place its type.

"A lotus," Camilla said, extending the white petaled flower to him, stem-first. "During my cemetery pilgrimage I spent a lot of time reading downloads of old religious texts. Hinduism in particular—especially the ancient Vedic beliefs. I wish I had known more about it four thousand years ago."

He took the flower, turning it slowly in his left hand while he lowered the hammer in his right.

Camilla cleared her throat. "It's a symbol of rebirth. The god, Indra, was born in its petals, fully armored, and he arose to battle for the redemption of mortal man. Maybe you'll find some meaning in it, as I have." She shrugged. "Now, I'm sorry, but I've got a transport to catch in an hour."

"Wait!" Martin gasped, setting down the hammer and stumbling after her. He held out the lotus like a rare gift. "You just got here. Where are you going? When will you be back?"

She wheeled suddenly, then threw her arms around his neck. "Be grateful, sweet friend, for your lack of doubt. I pray you never suffer what I endure."

"Camilla," Martin stammered, holding her close. "Surely, this is just a phase. You—"

A soft kiss fell on his cheek, and then she whispered: "Eternity is a long time for regrets. I wish we had thought of that."

"Camilla..." he started after her, but the door slammed, and he was once again alone in the lodge. The sound of the revving float-pad echoed off the distant, bleak mountains.

FIVE

March 23, 9789

"There you are!"

Her voice almost rattled Martin out of the levitation chair under the apex of the dome. A hundred twenty feet above the marble observatory floor he had been adjusting the sighting mechanism on the fourth lens of the telescope. For twelve weeks he had been studying gravitational fluctuations in the Crab Nebula, pursuing astronomy, the latest of his burgeoning interests.

"Peru, of all places," Camilla said, directly below him. Martin peered down, and could just make out the orange vinyl jacket and bright blue stretch pants. Her hair was long and braided with gem-like stones. "Do you know how hard it was to track you all the way up here?"

"Rather difficult, I would imagine," Martin responded, adjusting the chair's controls and descending swiftly.

"Don't you ever check your cyber-mail?"

"Not in the past two months, I'm afraid. I've been a little involved here. The nebula is amazing, you wouldn't believe the things I've catalogued..."

"Yes, yes. Great. So you haven't heard?"

"What?" She was looking at him strangely. Her face was pale and her eyes—they held a strange, fearful quality. Martin stepped out of the chair and gave her a swift embrace. "Has it been over a year?"

"Almost two, star-watcher. And you know—"

"I haven't changed a bit. Yes, yes." He smiled at her, but she only offered a weak grin in response.

"So," he said. "What's wrong?"

"We've been summoned."

Martin felt his legs go weak. He let go of her arms.

"We...?"

"All the old Administrators. The call was sent out four nights ago. Priority Urgent. Couldn't reach you out at this roof of the world, so they had me come fetch you."

"Are you going to tell me what's happened, or do I have to pull up my mail?"

"The unthinkable has happened, that's what."

Martin took a deep breath. "What do you mean?" What could be unthinkable? His brain couldn't come up with any scenario. They had everything covered, everyone was happy and fulfilled. Taking turns at the various roles, doing anything their heart desired. Having all the variety they dreamed of. Cyberdrones handled the menial work, and everyone was free to pursue, singly or in groups, their every whim.

"I didn't believe it at first," Camilla continued. "And I'm still withholding judgment until the medical reports are complete. There has to be some other explanation. Has to be. In any case, we're all being brought together to form a plan to contain the news."

"What news?" She was driving him crazy. This was the last time he'd keep himself in isolation for so long.

Camilla touched his shoulder briefly, and gave it a soft squeeze, as if drawing strength to continue. "We'll get to the bottom of this, I'm sure. It has to be something unnatural."

"What?"

"Something the investigators missed."

"Come on, tell me—"

"They say they can't find any external agents. But in the old village of Bruesell there are four people dead—apparently of natural causes."

SIX

May 6, 10080

"I'm scared."

Martin responded by wrapping his arms around Camilla under thin silk covers; he caressed her shoulders in the soft night radiance filtering through the skylight. Gazing up at the constellations he again marveled at how much even the night sky had changed in his lifetime. New stars had been born during the centuries, new lights adding their images to the celestial tapestry.

"Aren't you?" she whispered.

Martin held her tighter, feeling her warm breath on his neck, relishing the touch of her smooth skin. It had been so long in coming, the transition from friends to something more, and his only regret was that it had arrived as a result of shared emotions which neither of them had been familiar with.

"Martin..." As she lifted her head off his chest the pale starlight collected in her hair and streamed down her face.

"We shouldn't be so pessimistic," he said, trying to sound comforting while suppressing a gnawing fear. Of course he was

scared. The death toll continued to rise. And in the past ninety years, as the Administrators lost the battle of news containment, the scientists were unable to restrain the specter of death. Whatever it was that randomly selected its victims had gained momentum.

"Why not?" she whispered, an edge to her voice. The sheets rustled with her subtle movements, and the scent of cinnamon incense still hung in the air, mixed with the heady aroma of various wines. Camilla's retreat in the French valley of Levix-Lorraine had been a favorite of Martin's recently. Despite all the exotic places he'd lived, he still found her conservative home in the vineyards quite charming and resting-away from it all in a way not even remote mountain peaks could offer.

"Our best scientists are working on the problem right now," he said, hoping that would be enough in the way of a reply. He didn't want to talk about it now. Why spoil this moment? Funny, trying to capture a moment. Five hundred years ago there was no fear of losing such limitless experiences. Now...

Camilla made a disparaging sound. "In almost three hundred years they're no closer to discovering the cause." She was, of course, correct. Whatever it was that systematically attacked them from the inside could not be isolated. Death was slow, although mercifully painless, but always accompanied by a deep emotional malaise—an uncharacteristic depression. The victim fell into a morose state, utterly vacant of emotion, and essentially sleepwalked through the remainder of their years.

The main lab in New Hollandia, which Martin had visited

more times than he cared to remember, had thousands of patients just sitting on the lawn, none of them moving or responding in any but the most basic ways to external stimuli. It was as if they'd seen it all and wanted nothing more to do with anything.

And no one talked about the East Wing of that lab. Where the babies were.

The ones from Project Failsafe.

The decision had been made fairly quickly six years ago. The time had come. The volunteers were numerous; and hope, for at least a time, ran high across the world. A great mission was beginning: and the new Adams and Eves, carefully chosen, were honored and reverently proud of their role in shaping the next wave of humanity.

It had been so long since children were carried, and in those nine months it seemed the entire race held its collective breath.

They were born, seven hundred in the first trial.

Not one of them cried.

Not one smiled.

Martin held Camilla tighter, and tried to black out the images of hundreds of small beds in the East Wing. The eerie silence, the slowly moving arms and legs. The unblinking eyes.

There was no second trial. Project Failsafe was closed and spoken of no more.

Whatever the cause of the disease, there were no observable modes of transferal. It wasn't a virus, nor was it genetic. Martin thought back to their monthly updates and daily briefings

through the secured com-channels of the newly re-instituted Centuristic Pharmaceuticals. Camilla's conclusion, presented recently to the Board, was that it was as if something invisible, yet directly attached to our basic structure and necessary for our survival, was giving up the fight. Surrendering, perhaps, in the face of a meaningless future.

It's as if our bodies are just winding down, she had told them. Collapsing on a sub-cellular level. As if the absence of some vital resource or nourishing agent was finally manifesting itself. It wasn't a breakdown in the serum. The genetic re-sequencing was still intact, unchanging and inviolate. But death came, nonetheless. Just a cessation of life brought on slowly and irrevocably.

And the babies? Martin thought about that often, but always stopped short of giving voice to the whispers at the back of his mind: no souls can come back in..

Martin cringed when he thought back to the prior age of mortality, when the X-Plague came for everyone he loved. He squeezed Camilla tighter. How long until this new Death came for her? For him? It usually took someone as many as twenty years to die, but the symptoms didn't really manifest themselves for a couple of years. He shuddered. Maybe we already have it. They were working on a tester. That, at least, would be something.

Camilla ran one fingernail down his neck and traced the path of shadows over his chest. "What's the latest count? I haven't had the courage to check the com-links in a week."

Martin swallowed, a dry effort. He tasted the remaining flavor of the Chardonnay. How much did they drink? Several bottles, at least. It was one simple pleasure that remained through the millennia. Martin thought about giving her a lower number, just to save this night and its tranquillity. But he could never lie to her. Not Camilla. After all they'd been through. He said: "Two hundred million in the early stages."

"How many dead?"

"Six hundred thousand," Martin said, and felt her cheek settle against his chest. He spoke into her soft hair. "Be patient, my friend. They're working on it. They'll find a cure."

"Will they?"

"Yes." He had to be positive. There was nothing else he knew. After almost eight thousand years of trust in this system and in the golden future of humanity, there was no way he would give in to despair. They had made it this far, and no invisible killer was going to close the curtain on this act.

"How?"

"I don't know, yet. But they will. You'll see." He stroked her hair as he gazed at the hazy line of the Milky Way. "We beat death once. This is just a minor setback."

It might have been his imagination, but when Camilla moved her cheek he thought he felt a thin streak of wetness spread over his chest.

September 7, 10659

They sat on the pier in the hot sun on the isle of Ceylon and watched another funeral barge make its way out from the mainland.

"That's the biggest ship I've ever seen," Camilla said in a dreamy voice.

Martin shook his head. He wouldn't respond to her. It was the same size as the one they saw last month. And the month before that. He couldn't bear to think of it. Why did she want to come here every month? The platform on the barge reared up, hydraulics fueling its incline. A mile or two out into the New Indian Ocean, and it still wasn't far enough. He could still see the tiny forms spilling off the edge. Thousands upon thousands of corpses.

He reached for her. The strap of her white dress had come off her left shoulder. That same dress, he mused. Four times this week she's worn it. He choked back a surge of emotion, fixed her strap, and leaned over and hugged her.

She didn't hug him back. Her eyes stared straight ahead—vacant, hopeless. He recalled how Camilla used to enjoy wandering the ancient cemeteries. Maybe that was why she liked coming here. Some part of her still held that attraction to the mystique of death.

He stayed with her on the pier until the barge disappeared into the distance, off to its next port and next collection. They stayed until the sun bled its vital energy into twilight,

and timid stars emerged like frightened children upon a corpse-strewn battlefield. The black waves swept crimson trails until the night and its cooling air came to brush free the heat and dust from the tumultuous day.

Hours later, breaking the regular sounds of the somber tide, Camilla lifted her arm and pointed to something low on the eastern horizon. "What's that one?"

Martin answered without looking. She always pointed to the same constellation. It seemed to draw on her subconscious. "Orion," he whispered, his lips pressed close to her ear.

"Oh."

Once again Martin tried to think of some possible significance in her selection. Orion, known to the ancient Egyptians as Osiris, and personified as the god of resurrection and rebirth, had descended once more to the lowest point in its ten thousand-year cycle.

"Oh," Camilla whispered again, continuing to stare at the seven stars, unconscious of Martin's arms around her. He reached down and picked the Lotus from the bouquet he had prepared for her in the morning. As he did every morning.

And as he fixed the flower in her hair, he closed his eyes and unbidden images sprang to life on the canvass of his mind. He recalled a night far in the past. A narrow causeway leading to the conversion center, and a mortal man literally weeping with joy at a perceived chance for rebirth.

And then the words, We have lost, ebbed out from across the years.

We have lost.

Martin settled his arms around Camilla. That day so long ago... He had seen the same thing that Rajib had seen, yet he had been unmoved, driven by his enthusiastic arrogance, convinced that the course of humanity was his to chart.

Why? Why did she appear to both of us? Why did I see her?

Camilla trembled in the cool night breeze. But she said nothing. Arms at her side, lips dry, eyes unfocused.

Have we lost?

The daily com-link updates told the current count and coldly stated how many were left. The last time Martin checked they were down to forty percent, and about half of those were in the early stages. Mankind had made it eight thousand years without death, and now it had come back with a vengeance. Most of the scientists were gone, as were most of the other Administrators. Those that remained had the disease and couldn't care less about discovering a cure.

Those like Martin that had escaped so far had fallen into their own sort of modest depression, given to existential ramblings, to long walks through places of beauty and immortal perfection. The Himalayas. Macchu Picchu. The Grand Canyon.

Camilla stirred in his embrace. She lazily lifted her right arm and pointed low on the eastern horizon. "What's that one?"

Releasing her slowly, Martin backed away and left her side. He kicked off his sandals and walked several feet into the ocean before falling to his knees in the crashing surf. Amidst the

frothing waves and the rising wind he lifted his face to the heavens and shivered uncontrollably, while back on the pier Camilla slowly rocked to an unheard melody.

EIGHT

March 7, 11899

Ten percent, the com system update cheerlessly informed Martin when he awoke. He stumbled out of the leather chair and walked past the concealed windows that would have presented a view of sprawling Cairo. Infested with flies and rats, the city baked under a blazing sun, while its human monuments mostly fell into disrepair. Only this tower retained its generator and some semblance of habitation. Other pockets of life remained, Martin knew, but no one really came outside. They were here and there, and he could find the others if he wanted to, but for the past three hundred years Martin had spent most of the time holed up inside, isolated.

Ten percent. What was being done with the bodies? Probably nothing. The cyberdrones had failed over the centuries, their power units burnt out and never replaced. Skeletons remained in their same positions, littered throughout the world, a mute testament to a project that began in death, and had come full circle.

He left the suite only once a year. As he did yesterday. To travel in his heli-floater to the French valley with the overgrown vineyards and fields of wild grapes. To kneel before

the clear white marker on the grounds tended carefully during his visits. To place a single white lotus on her grave and to fight back the emotions that grew no weaker with the passing years.

Yesterday he sat by her stone most of the day and far into the night. Calling to mind all the old memories. The arguments, the long talks, the questions.

Don't you have any doubts?

He had lain down on the plush grass at one point, curled up like a baby, while inside his mind raged with the incessant battle of just such doubts. Eternity is a long time for regrets, she once said.

Thankfully, he didn't have that long.

Two days ago he had taken the test. Just like he did every week, he had the scanner analyze his system. It had finally happened.

It's come for me, as I knew it would.

Martin Templane would soon pass into oblivion, and leave behind an empty world.

NINE

March 6, 11904

His activity during the first two years of the disease was wearing down. What had started as an intense desire to see and experience everything one last time had led to a flurry of action, of globe-trotting and sensation-seeking. When that had

grown tiresome, he returned to Cairo and took to wandering the deserted streets, watching the sunsets and staring at the glimmering stars over the half-buried pyramids.

Finally, the effects became more pronounced. The malaise, the apathy. For the past two years he left the house on only two occasions—those being to visit Camilla's grave, and each time, to place a lotus by her marker.

Today was another anniversary, and he had already picked out the flower—the largest, whitest yet. She would have approved of his selection.

But after today—Martin had come to a decision about that, and about the course of his remaining days.

He would not go quietly. He refused to tread further down a meaningless path. He would take the route of countless thousands before him. The Amenara Tower was the tallest building in Cairo—over a thousand feet high. Once a mighty commercial center, now a ghost structure, home to rats and roaches. But there was a well-worn path up the stairs to the roof. Martin believed the concrete below was permanently stained with the blood of so many that had jumped...

Tomorrow.

I will join them. Join Rajib. Join Camilla. In Limbo.
In nothingness.

Surprisingly, he was looking forward to it.

TEN

March 7, 11904

At the railing.

It took almost an hour to climb the stairs. Wonder how long to fall? he thought as he placed trembling hands on the hot metal. The concrete was chipped and worn, the metal rusted. This thing's dangerous, he thought giddily. Someone could get hurt.

He peered over the edge. The spires and flat tops of Cairo's structures baked in the hazy sun under a cloudless azure sky. Far off to the east were the indistinct silhouettes of the pyramids on the Giza plateau. And there, the Sphinx's head, the only portion remaining from the concealing sand drifts and the hand of time.

He pulled himself up, balancing carefully with one foot on either side of the hot rail. His shoes, torn and caked with dirt, sought for purchase on the crumbling surface. Over a protruding toe the tower's body narrowed to a dizzying, distant point on the street below.

Just one step, and end it all. Eternist no more. Death has been patient, waiting for you.

Martin took a last, deep breath. Hot, stale air filled his lungs, and he almost choked on the dust and sand. One last look around...

As his feet shifted and maintained an awkward balance, he scanned the city. Left and right. Back and—

His skin erupted in a prickling sensation. Something caught his attention.

There. On the top of the old Menkari Data Building. On the roof.

Another figure. A fellow jumper? No...

His heart froze, he stumbled and almost toppled over. Then, righting himself and jumping back, he landed awkwardly and spun on the roof. He got up, leapt to the rail and peered over.

An apparition from the past stood on that distant roof. About a hundred feet below and across the street.

A distant figure wrapped in black robes that undulated in the soft desert winds.

Once he believed her to be simply a vision.

This time... he knew she was more. But what exactly? Just a symbol of divinity and rebirth, or an actual Avatar—available to deliver one pure, untainted birth and then vanish? The possibility staggered his mind; understanding, which at first eluded him, clarified and took hold. Finally, he understood her appearance for what it was: an invitation. She held her arms out, and he could see the swell of her belly beneath the dark fabric.

He backed away from the railing, his heart pounding its hardest through his chest. After a breath, he returned to the edge and looked down.

There was no one there.

At that point he still could have jumped. A hundred questions ran through his mind, a thousand inconsistencies and illogical possibilities. But sometimes, as Camilla might have said, you just had to have faith. He raced down the thousands

of steps, and as he rounded each corner and cleared each floor, he made up his plan.

#

Damn this disease! He fought it as best he could, just barely overcoming the mental fatigue and resisting the depression. So much to do. So many preparations.

He had spent the rest of the afternoon at the last medical center in Northern Africa. Brought as many men as he could find, and convinced them to cooperate with his experiment. The men didn't really understand what Martin meant to do, but they went along with it, figuring refusal would take too much effort.

So, there were now hundreds of sperm samples stored in a freezer on the lower level. The center had one main and two auxiliary solar generators, and Martin could only pray that they would continue to run a little longer without anyone around to keep them maintained.

And also, he thought, I can only hope that my soul is strong enough for what must be done on the other side. If, as he believed, he was being given the opportunity to be born ahead of all the others, then he hoped he'd be able to choose his next incarnation...

With sudden force, a realization struck home: after all this time it had always been there—the utter simplicity of the

truth: that it wasn't Rajib she had appeared to those many years ago.

It wasn't Rajib. That understanding seeped through his core, freeing sight as if peeling crusty bandages from his eyes. The invitation had been misinterpreted, lost in the crowd. Her appearance had always been meant for Martin and Martin alone—singling him out and offering just one skeptical, arrogant mortal a simple choice. He could let Rajib die—not necessarily to be directly reborn; that didn't matter. It was only Martin, that mattered. He had been chosen: the representative of free will, with the power and authority to act. Unlike Rajib, who had one-sided faith and no free will, Martin could see both sides; and like some modern-day Solomon he could have had the wisdom and the strength to speak in one voice for humanity, to change the path they were on and to avert destruction.

But he had kept silent.

He had been unreceptive then; and now the invitation was back. He wondered if perhaps She had always intended to return and give him one more chance; only the next time she would come at an age much different and after a world of lifetimes had changed his soul.

And now there was only one option: death and rebirth.

Shaking with fear, yet almost giddy with anticipation, Martin felt like some tragic Greek hero setting foot on a long-

denied shore, acknowledging his misdeeds and humbly accepting the gods' mercy. We've waited for you, Martin imagined a voice whispering. It issued out of some vast Hall of Souls, shadowy and somber, where countless kneeling forms impatiently waited on his decision.

One choice, but with a clear message: accept this, and jump to the head of the line.

Martin shivered uncontrollably. Extinction was only years away. Thousands of years ago the option to prevent all this had been rejected. Today, humanity was offered its second chance: a slimmed down alternative, a difficult trek back from the brink.

Martin knew what was needed this time. Not a messiah. Not a scientist. There wasn't time for any of that. There was only one answer, and he smiled at the irony of such simplicity.

The pieces were in place. Martin made an entry in a personal recorder and left the device in the medical center, just in case the memories were not complete when he returned in the next life.

However, given that this was their one shot at restoration, he had to hope he would be allowed some leeway on the other side. Rajib said that our souls got to choose their next incarnation.

I really hope that's true.

It was done. The preparations complete.

#

At dusk, Martin returned to the roof. Calmly he approached the rail, and without so much as a last thought, he set his hands on the cooling metal and vaulted over the side.

EPILOGUE

March 6, 11923

When little Tyler took his first step Janey and Benjamin were there, clapping cheerfully in wordless encouragement of their brother's brave endeavor. They all were so beautiful, Lynn thought with pride as they played in the sand, as they crawled, stumbled and fell in the shadow of the Great Pyramid.

Times like these Lynn thought of her mother. Did she feel this same way about me? I guess I'll never know. Don't remember anything about her.

She didn't really remember much of her early life. She knew she'd had a good childhood. She'd spent her early years with a kindly middle-aged couple that didn't really have much to say, other than that someone had left her, newborn, on their doorstep. They just sat on their porch most every day; but they showed her enough to get by. Then they died, slowly but quietly. Lynn was alone again. Alone in this great, ancient city. Maybe in the whole world. She wasn't really sure.

In any case, she had plenty to do. She spent most of her

time reading in the libraries and wandering through the great museums. Watching old holo-videos, traveling about in floating cars. She saw a lot of skeletons and decomposing bodies, and she cried a lot of the time. But there were many animals, nice creatures that seemed at ease on the land or in the water. Plenty of life was still about, and that made her happy. This was no dead world she had been born into.

It was just missing something.

She found out what that was on her fourteenth birthday. Driven by some strange compunction that at times seemed to control her wanderings, she entered a curious white building and went directly to an operating elevator. At the bottom level she discovered a wall of metal seals. And she saw a Recorder.

She played back the entry. And listened to it twice.

Then she broke the seals—already knowing what she would find inside, in the refrigerated compartments.

As to what happened next...

She had three beautiful examples of that. Benjamin got over his infection last month. She was worried for a time, but the danger had passed, and he was none the worse. Janey was just about the most precious thing she'd ever seen. And she knew Tyler would grow up to be a strong, fine young man.

They all had different fathers, and she guessed she'd never know what those men were like. Sometimes, late at night while she watched the children sleep in the soft starlight filtering through the open windows, she wondered how people lived for so long without this simple joy.

She smiled a lot now. More than ever. She was nineteen years old, and she hoped to live long enough to see her great-great grandchildren. She didn't know if that was possible, but it was a good dream.

—One of many that she'd share with her children, those here now, and those to come.

But before that, tomorrow she planned to go to the garden.

Then, she'd take the children out into Cairo. They would take a brisk walk through the quiet city, making their way to their destination—where they'd each place a single white lotus on the pavement below the Amenara Tower.