

Palmer called out in his good-sergeant style. He launched the hawk, and a breath later he sang out, "Toss!"

Lexa carefully flung the piece of meat up and away with an underhand toss, just enough loft to it for the bird in its springing swoop off Palmer's wrist to hurl itself onto the dropping target in an eyeblink. The meat speared in its ^{talons} ~~beak~~, the kestrel resumed its perch and began tearing at its meal.

Chuckling, Palmer strode back to the area of the perches, collecting Lexa on the way with a "well done" squeeze just above her throwing elbow. He steered her to where the snowy owl, yellow-eyed within its intense shroud of white, sat tethered.

"Now we'll show you some hunting that's more of a glide," began Palmer, smoothly playing out the word. "Casper here has a wingspan of more than three feet, and with that he's capable of floating real fast over the tundra until he sees..."

Lexa found she and Palmer had ended up quite close, practically touching, as they stood there while he discoursed about the unblinking

bird. A long sergeancy in the Army and a determined slog through night classes had brought Palmer to this zoo career. He was published in his field, the care and repair of crippled birds of prey. He had a perfectly fine second marriage, to a wife who sold real estate, and they had a couple of kids. Palmer's plate is full, Lexa reminded herself for not absolutely the first time, he doesn't need anything more on it.

Fishboat rules, she savagely told herself and stepped well away from Palmer, looking only at the arctic owl on his gauntleted wrist.

DROP CAP

Lexa
~~She~~ had landed in Seattle during a foghorn Christmas, the whoommm? and gimme roommm! of freighters and ferries droning in from Puget Sound like dueling bassoon players. Each streetlight had its pyramid of fog, and fir trees lost their outlines near the top. Cars, their ^cla_quers muted by all the gray, looked anonymous and mousy.

Alaska when she left was sunlit, mountain after mountain shining. Let it, she told herself. Some sonofabitch will find a way to put it

in cellophane and sell it off.

As the cab crept from the airport to the half-erased city, she had this all worked out, how she would check into a motel and rent a car in the morning and head home. If the place where you go to announce your marriage has failed is home. More like out at first base, she tried to joke to herself.

She was barely into the motel lobby before she shucked her Kelty backpack and stacked it against her one suitcase and phoned him.

"Hi, it's Lexa Mi--McCaskill. I'm just...fogged in."

"We get that some, this time of year. Hey, how you doing?" Mitch's surprise at hearing from her sounded genuine.

"Been better," she answered honestly enough. "Driving across the mountains tomorrow. I--wonder^{e/}_λ if you'd be, too. Going home for the holidays."

"No, I don't do that any more."

"Probably smart. I'm going to have to tell them Travis and I split the blankets."

"Ah. One of those."

She could hear him saying the next thing ever so carefully, but he did not hesitate with it.

"Wait out this weather, why don't you. I've got room here. I'm going to some people's for Christmas dinner. Come with, no reason why not."

Now he paused.

"Lexa? The divorce news will keep. Believe me."

seven

Sky as clear as a vacationing meteorologist's conscience, sailboats sprinkled on either side of the floating bridge across Lake Washington like white tepees on a vast blue prairie, Mount Rainier sitting passive and massive over Seattle's southern horizon, even the chainlink commuter traffic grinding along less glacially than during most so-called rush hours--Mitch could scarcely believe such a death spiral of a day could yield an evening like this.

As he drove east toward the suburbs beyond the suburbs, where Lexa's catering job lay in wait, he gingerly checked around on his body

and found a place or two that felt better, some, for his having stopped at Gold's Gym and worked out vengefully on the weight machine. But the rest of him harbored one deep ache or another anywhere he cared to think about.

His mind kept returning to Bingford, that freckled rat. Giveaway, right; they'd all been given away, with ~~to~~^{toe} tags on, at the staff meeting.

Bing might as well

have folded up the whole business right there in front of them today, announced he was shutting down Cascopia or selling it off or giving it away to the Fremont bridgetender or whatever the inevitable disposal process was going to be. Now the next thing would have to be the d word, downsizing, and Mitch not so idly wondered whether Bing had enough guts left in him to go around from cubicle to cubicle saying fired instead. And if he was going to get around to saying it, Mitch fumed onward as he changed lanes and then changed back again in the thickening traffic at the Bellevue interchanges, he could have done so this morning and thereby relieved him, Mitch, of the rest of the day of stewing over the Berkeley conference piece, which had turned out to be a hash anyway.

In the fathoms of his bones, though, Mitch cringed at the thought

of no more Cascopia. He felt entitled to fear; he was very nearly the only person he knew of in America who had been doing the same thing steadily for ^{the past} twenty-five years. "Coastwatch" was the one long devotion he had ever been able to maintain in his life. Okay, sure, now there was Lexa, but...

Lexa. The unphoned.

He grabbed up the car phone that had been forced on him by Bing in one of his publisher moods, then realized. While he'd been busy writing down Lexa's phone message with the ring-around-the-rosy directions for getting to the party place, Shyanne tornadoed back into the cubicle to snatch up her ^{cherished} review video of The Gods Must Be Crazy, and he'd missed the phone number Lexa was giving. Nor, he found now, was Directory Assistance about to hand out the phone number of Aaron Frelinghuysen, latest cybernaire.

All Mitch knew was what everybody knew, that the guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had hit technology's ^{latest} jackpot with the library scanning program called Xandria, and out there in the night newly ruled by his cyberstorage, shelf after shelf in little old

Carnegie Publics was being zapped down to the size of a dust mote.

But, tough luck for the man who had next to everything, the prime mansion sites along Lake Washington had been used up by the earlier generation or two of computer richies, and so now the mode was to pick a spot along the next woodsy body of water, Lake Sammamish, and build something whopping. Mitch drove and drove and drove in the tangle of lakeside streets that turned into lanes and less, stopping four times to decipher Lexa's directions. Finally he found the driveway where, amid vehicles that must have cost big digits, sat her purplish VW van with Can't Complain Catering standing out in firm white script.

When she'd first found that van, it was painted in a flowery fantasia with scarlet lettering rampant, reading LOLLAPALOSER.

"The guy gave me a deal on it," Lexa had marveled.

"I'll bet he did." Mitch had circled the vehicle, twice. "You know,

Ingvaldson will have a stroke if he sees this in the driveway."

"Henry should visit the twentieth century before it's too late."

Carefully Mitch tried again: "Are most people going to want their finger food delivered in something that looks like it's been

orbiting the planet since 1967?"

That struck home. "I'll paint it royal burgundy," she said.

The Frelinghuysen house much surprised Mitch. Cyber barons had been building their dreamhouses the size and decor of airport terminals, but this one, while extensive, was low and restrained, nestled under undisturbed fine old cedar trees.

He was let in by some physically perfect member of the Household staff, from the toned look of him probably Frelinghuysen's personal fitness trainer. All courtesy, the muscleman pointed him in the direction of the kitchen.

On Mitch's way down the hallway, though, a wall-size glass case of coastal Indian masks suddenly loomed. The fantastic oval eyes, the playful exaggerations of proboscis and incisor and claw and ear, the unquenchable life in the wooden grins and leers and anguished expressions floated there like a sorcerers' seance. Holy Kajesus, Mitch stopped, overpowered, look at this guy's collection. Haida, Tsimshian, Tlingit, the tribes of the greatest carvers were all represented in this hallway Valhalla.

Telling himself he didn't have time to stand around being overawed, he tore himself away from the art but immediately came to a nook where a computer screen was showing the first mask in the case, a thunderbird headpiece with an awesome nose so hooked that it circled back on itself, abalone-shell eyes eternally wide awake, and skulltop ears which had little faces in them. Helluva piece, but if you possessed it, why bother to computer-display it? Mitch gave it a glance, then looked again.

The mask was dissolving on the screen. Outlines of templates, various sizes and shapes, revolved onto the screen until one descended into place and took form as the thunderbird's hooked beak. Then the template ghosted out of the beak and ascended, twice, and made the ears, the identical basic form as the beak. Ovoid templates spun into place and made the eyes, and then the equally mighty nostrils in the beak, and then smaller versions of the same template form made the littler eyes in the faces within the ears. White on blue, other lines formed themselves, the ceremonial mask inexorably growing in detail and power. Mitch realized he was watching a schematic of how the ancient carver had created the thunderbird head. But no carver. In an instant the complete mask

hovered there in the pleasant blue screen, then the screen seemed to turn to cedar. And the next mask in the collection, a flat-faced bulgy-eyed beaver, began to assemble from similar templates.

It was as hypnotic as it was spooky. Mitch knew that the original ~~sc~~ peoples of the coast loved to play with transformations, have two or more of the creatures they carved meld with each other in the same space by sharing body parts. Now the computer was taking apart the art by which the carvers had taken apart time and space and being and...

Mitch got out of there, caught his breath a little, and went on to the kitchen.

He found Lexa bossing her food help as if blasting off for Mars. It always unnerved him a little, her flinty way of running a crew. He had known her to fire the most charming kid on the face of the earth, kapow: "Told you once already, Kevin, learn to read your Mickey Mouse watch and be on time."

Now she leveled a look across the kitchen at Mitch and said:

"Well, hello there. A person of your description used to sleep with me."

"Used to? I thought that came with this job instead of Social Security."

He swapped ^{quick} greetings with the crew, Martha and Guillermo and Joe, and went right over to Lexa, aware he was more than a little late.

"Bridge traffic," he alibied reliably. "Anyway, hi. Video night at Potlatch Acres, have we got?"

"Everybody shut your eyes while I make out with the bartender," Lexa directed. She stood on tiptoes and planted a gale-force kiss on him. "So, lucky, how was San Francisco?"

"Breath-taking." Mitch seized a fistfull of carrot sticks.

"And...?"

Lexa poked her hands into her apron pockets and stood there spraddled, looking up at him. Her no-bullshit-allowed-on-these-premises stance.

"Gory details later, how about," Mitch bargained ^{tiredly} ~~yearily~~. He munched and tried to look semi-willing for her. "Reporting for duty. Honest."

More or less."

She gave him one more testing gaze, then said:

"Okay, right this way. The bar setup is over by the windows. You'll draw spectators."

He followed her on into a living room with a cedar-beamed cathedral ceiling and a glass wall out onto darkening Lake Sammamish, the lights of the other houses along the shore sparkling off the water. Subtly swank? Tastefully rarefied? Expensively understated? Mitch ~~gave up~~ reminded

himself he was such a hopeless peasant that he wouldn't savvy the gradations of opulence anyway, and gave up. Glancing over the bar setup and trying not to sound edgy, he maintained to Lexa: "No prob, boss. Let the sipping hordes come."

Lexa pretended to adjust the tail of his tent-sized white bartending jacket, surreptitiously pinched his butt, then headed once more for the kitchen to shake up the troops there. But she stopped at the doorway to glance back at Mitch, busying himself at arranging glasses.

She speculated on him for a minute, bulking there against the nightblack water, the big man she had traded Alaska for.

———
Sitka was still dark, she was still the lawful wedded wife of

DROP CAP

P. 93A follows →

Travis Midgett when the call came, Travis on his side of the bed saying
into the phone "God, they got it stopped? They don't? Okay, I'll be



there soon as I can get hold of a plane."

Lexa rolled over toward him, ~~squinting and~~ ^Jbatting her eyes as he snapped the bedlight on and dove for his clothes on the chair.

"Got ourselves an oil spill."

He sounded like the usual apologetic Travis, but yanking on his pants there in the sallow bedroom light he looked put out but ~~excited~~ ^{eager} along with it. Lexa would think, after, of something her grandmother had said about men when they had a forest fire to fight: They turn back into absolute boys.

She had to ask Travis "Where?" twice before he glanced around from the vital business of tucking in his shirt tail.

"Hnh? The worst. Valdez."

That dim Alaskan morning, everything that could go wrong at Valdez was racing to do so before sleepy-eyed officials could begin to catch up with the dimensions of the disaster--the thousand-foot-long tanker having daggered itself so thoroughly on a reef that eight of its eleven cargo tanks were spewing oil, the spill response equipment too little and too late; then the next inevitable thing, the wind picking up and spreading the

feds and the media invasion; she vowed not to let the boomtown-of-catastrophe atmosphere get to her, but it constantly did. As did the tarred dead birds, the dead sea otters, the dead seals, the dead this and the dead that of Prince William Sound.

Feeling about half-sick as usual, she was disposing of the ^{floppy} carcass of one more cormorant that she and the other volunteer bird-rescuers had tried unsuccessfully to soap-rinse the oil from, when Travis came around with the familiar man. His size made him unmistakable around town, even from a distance. One of Valdez's fevered rumors was that the French movie star, whatzisname from Manon of the Spring, had showed up in town to view the oil spill, until someone took a good look and said Gerard Depardieu was a shrimp compared to this guy.

"Montana, right?" Lexa said the instant Travis introduced him.

~~Mitch appeared startled and none too pleased.~~

"Does it still show that bad?" Mitch sounded none too pleased.

"We had Roziers in the Two Medicine country, where I'm from," she elaborated.
~~filled in~~ Her eyes lifted again to the curly black hair, the rocky set of his face while his eyes were busy investigating. "You look kind of like

their kissing cousin."

With the barest of smiles he owned up to that, saying that his family in Twin Sulphur Springs had shirt tail relations north there in the Two country, all right. "Probably they're the ones who got born with some sense."

Lexa held her tongue about that, and by now Travis was saying, "Giving him the full tour. Mitch's following this for his paper in Seattle."

A notebook was swallowed in Mitch's hand. "L-E-X-A, do I have it spelled right? You've been washing birds? How many of them pull through?"

The photo came then and there, Mitch of course asking if she minded but already cocking the camera as she collected the next oil-slicked cormorant against the chest of her rainsuit. This one was a beach find, she gave Mitch the vocabulary, maybe not quite as far gone as the floaters they found flopping out there in the actual curd of oil atop the water. She would remember that he then had question after question for her, and a barrage of others for Travis in his capacity as the state's wildlife monitor of this mess, before the commotion broke out at the town dock nearby.

P. 97A follows →

A fishing boat had tied up, grimy and loaded with herring cans of oil the fishermen had scooped up by hand. Photographers and reporters jammed around the fishermen who claimed they were capturing as many gallons of oil as the fleet of fancy skimming equipment ^(combined) Then the crowd surrounded an embarrassed oil company spokesman, who had to call over even more



pretty far removed from where the foundations of the Roziers were poured, back there. Of course she was curious, as exiles everywhere are about each other, but not enough to make life tricky yet. Meanwhile Travis and he chimed with each other, Travis ^{keen} ~~openly gratified~~ to have somebody for once interested in the ins and outs of the whole coastal ecosystem instead of coming around for thirty seconds for the latest body count on wildlife. Out of that, out of the two ~~of them~~ ^{men}, she could later tell herself, came their pipeline flight.

They lifted off in a white and yellow Cessna 207 at first light one Sunday, Travis professionally laconic in talking to the tower. Riding stuffed into the co-pilot's seat, Mitch watched out the side window for the airborne moment from the times he had been up with the Lighthawk pilot--the plane wheel halting its spinning an instant after takeoff and sitting motionless in the air. He half-expected to see Mount St. Helens rise beside the climbing plane.

Travis first circled out over Prince William Sound, the fleet of oil-skimmers and collecting barges below like beetles on an oddly sheened pond, the filthy bathtub ring around Prince William Sound stretching

toward the Gulf of Alaska beyond the horizon. Then he aimed the plane back over Valdez and the farm of storage tanks, and the silver worm of the pipeline stretched ahead.

Mitch no longer liked flying, and he never had liked having someone looking over his shoulder. The coppery presence at the corner of his eye caused him to glance back every so often.

Perched on the front edge of the jump seat behind Travis, Lexa thought to herself Hey, bud, this is Alaska, life is close quarters here and rubbed it in:

"I hope this is okay, me hitchhiking along?"

"Oh, sure, fine," Mitch lied. Couldn't say much else, with her husband doing the flying. He eyed Travis sideways, though, wondering how they sorted things like this out, how much Lexa mixed into his work. Stuck her spousy nose in, so to speak, although it did seem to be a fairly acute nose.

Wrapped in the sounds of the Cessna, the steady force of its engine and the vibrating thrum of the cockpit, they settled back for the long day of flying with the oil aqueduct of Alaska constantly

pointing past Mitch's nose out the side window. To his further confusion, next she yelped something to Travis about getting his tattoo kit out.

Travis grinned around at her like a boy given candy and yelled, "Let's go see him." He stood the Cessna on its right wingtip and zoomed the plane into a tight circle. The tundra fanned past beneath them, little squib lakes appearing and then quickly erasing, the three of them on their sides there five hundred feet in the air and Mitch concentrating on not giving in and reaching for the sicksack, until at last Lexa pointed to the wingtip and the galloping clump of ^{fur}~~bear~~ under it. Travis made a couple of swoops, so they could ^{view}~~see~~ the bear from each side of the plane, then he put the Cessna atop the piped path of oil again.

They flew across cockeyed rivers, channels bending back on themselves as if trying to make knots. One such set of kinks, unruly and silty, was the Yukon. And constantly the pipeline...

...goes and goes and goes, tracing its bright solo strand across
^{largest}
~~our biggest~~ state. It is true that it is a mere thread in the carpet
 that is Alaska. It is also true that this single thread has magically
dyed the rest of Alaska to the color of oil money...

much bumpy air to jostle that drift of thought, though. Marnie would have gagged at setting foot on a fishboat or even into one of the scabby Alaskan towns. And he himself? He had grown up in not much of anywhere. He had pulled out of there as soon as he could, too. He doubted he was Alaska material.

"Here," a little late, he thought to offer, "have some on my publisher." Lexa dug into his apple sack. Munching, they huddled out of the wind next to a ratty-looking snowmobile shed and watched Travis go about his plane chores.

Somehow demolishing her apple and managing to speak at the same time, Lexa asked as if suddenly curious:

"Ever wonder if you're doing any good at all? The things you write, I mean."

"I don't have the world straightened out quite yet," came back from him. "But it maybe doesn't hurt for me to keep poking around at it."

"Lots of us poked at this pipeline as hard as we knew how, and here the sucker came anyway."

"You're not big on oil, it sounds like."

"I'm not big on watching the spillionaires go at it. Travis and

to watch up at Mitch as she finished: "That way, you don't leave anything in the wilderness."

#

DROP CAP

They had been back from the pipeline flight eight days, trying to cope again in Valdez's riot of contradictory measures, when Travis suggested at breakfast:

"Come on down the Sound with me this morning. Something you need to see."

At the first stretch of oil-smeared rocky beach, a barge-like craft with what looked like artillery aboard was moving in close to shore. Timmons, Travis's boss from the Juneau office, was on hand. There was much consultation, and then a cannonade of high-pressure water jetted onto the rocks, spray and crude-oil sheen flying.

It was like watching a powerful fireboat at work, only the target here was not fire.

"Whoeee!" With the first hope she had felt in a long while, Lexa jiggled Travis in the ribs. "This is going to do it? They can just hose away the oil?"

"I can't use the name."

"Mitch, guy," Bing began, which he always did when he thought Mitch was getting in over his head.

"But it's somebody who knows somebody. It's solid."

"Only if you cover our ass--"

"I know, Bing."

"--every which way with--"

"Bing, you little craphead, I do know that."

"--reaction quotes from the poor bastards who signed off on the hot hosing."

"I was about to go do that," Mitch said, meeting the eyes of the woman whose marriage he was about to wreck.

#

I always knew, with Travis, that winters were going to be the worst. When we could get out, have some room around us, we didn't do too bad. But cooped up together, huh uh.

Posted by the kitchen door, Lexa was keeping watch on the expressions of the guests starting to circle the table of food. A bit of peering and comparing was good; slow stares at, say,

the curl of the lettuce leaves were not. This crowd seemed to be automatic grazers, plates on the move as they chatted over their shoulders, and she at least could breathe a sigh of relief at that. The space of white jacket across the room was less easy to map.

Mitch would be the same season all year long, if the world would
let him. That's a lot of if. I hope I'm not feeling winter coming,
again.

Lexa pushed the kitchen door sharply with her hip and disappeared to cutlery duty.

Meanwhile Mitch, with a touch of panic, was finding out that bartending had changed dialects since the last time he filled in at one of Lexa's feeds. Somewhere a switch had been flipped and everyone who had been drinking bottled spring water that cost more than perfume now could not get along without boutique beer. He had finally mastered the dozens of water labels; now here was the new zoo of brew. This was beyond ridiculous, he thought; this was getting as bad as wine. Still, he managed to maul the requested brands out of the army of dark little bottles until a twentysomething with hair like fine quills came

back to the bar complaining that he had been handed a Yukon Amber Ale when he'd asked for a Yukon Frontier Amber Ale.

"Right," said Mitch, ^{narrowing his eyes} ~~squinting~~ ominously at the offending label.

"Timeout," he announced to the waiting semicircle of thirsties. "Kiss your elbows, everybody, while I sort these brewskis." He clinked bottles around until the damned things were scrupulously alphabetized, Anchor Steam to Zyggurat Pale Ale, and re-opened for business by the time Lexa ~~came~~ ^{marched} back out of the kitchen to check on the vegetable dip supply.

While she hovered at the table and trafficked this or that onto people's plates--she always had the urge to pat a party into shape-- Mitch kept on whipping beer out like a Las Vegas dealer. By and large, this was a gathering of the young and climate-controlled whose idea of a good time seemed to be to compare the flexing qualities of their polycarbonate eyeglasses. Mitch overheard conversation after conversation about what a killer app Xandria was going to be and what a rad Inaire Frelinghuysen was along with it, until at last came a momentary break in the line. Using the chance to replenish clean glasses, Mitch was ^l started to hear a voice of about his own age urgently demand:

"Two six-packs of Pyramid Hefeweisen, my man."

Mitch looked over his shoulder at a chunky person with granny glasses and long hair parted straight down the middle.

"The band," the man growled impatiently. "I'm on guitar."

Mitch knew that if this was anything like all the other occasions Lexa had catered, she had already fought the band for territory during the setting-up and now they were lurking empty-handed in some far corner until time to play. He ponied up a six-pack. "One," he told the scowling guitarist, with a nod in Lexa's direction. "Boss's orders."

"She's a major bitch about who runs this gig," the musician complained. Cradling the six-pack, he still didn't leave. He glanced around and lowered his voice in asking:

"This it, for you?"

"Excuse me?"

"This how you bring in the skins?" the musician wanted to know. "I only ask because I'm looking. Running out of room on my plastic. Music's great, but it doesn't pay squat."

"Ah. No, ninety-nine-bottles-of-beer is only a hobby with me. I've

got a day job."

"At?"

Mitch flinched. Cascopia and "Coastwatch" he did not want to have to delve into. He fell back on: "Well, I'm a writer."

"I may give that a whirl," the guitarist mused, "when I get the time."

Mitch resisted the urge to pluck away the six-pack and send the music-player off dry as a dune. Instead he leaned over and said confidentially:

"Really, though, I work one more job to make a living. You know those 'Fire Danger' signs you always see alongside forests? Big pie chart kind of things, with a pointer set on LOW or MODERATE or HIGH? I go around, I'm the pointer changer."

"No kibble. What can that pay?"

"180K a year," Mitch said, ducking his head modestly.

"Woop! That 'd do. Who hires?"

"They advertise every year, you never noticed?"

The guitarist shook his head.

"Right before the fire season," Mitch specified. "The ads run the same day every year--June thirty-first."

"I'll watch," the guitar player said with fervor, and evanescenced off to wherever the band was holed up.

Another spurt of beer aficionados, latecomers, kept Mitch busy a while. Last of all, the physically supreme specimen who had let him into the house came through the line, accompanied by an equally blonde woman so lithe and tawny that her E-mail address must have been Sheena @ jungle.com. They were so gorgeous together they practically hurt the eyes. Mitch handed them a matched pair of beers and they strode away like cheetahs.

Amid his collection of pangs, Mitch singled out hunger as one he could do something about. He slipped over to the food table while Lexa was there inspecting its remnants to inquire:

"What do you want devoured?"

"Celery sticks."

"How come you never say the Swedish meatballs?"

Crunching away on the celery, he scanned around the room, curious.

"So where's our host? Offmorphing himself into Bill Gates or something?"

Lexa gave him a funny look. "You just served him a beer, goof."

"That 's Frelinghuysen?" Mitch yanked his head around to stare after the blonde muscleman. "Life is unfair, I can take. But this guy has more going for him than Jesus did."

Lexa shrugged. "What can I tell you, some jobs come with better perks than others."

A series of jarring chords indicated the band was tuning up. Lexa rolled her eyes. "See you around," she said and fled for the kitchen.

Mitch went and settled himself in back of the bar while the band, Cloak of Light, avalanched into its first set. "YOU left FIRST! YOU left WORST!" the lead singer grumbled to the accompaniment of blunt instruments, loud enough to be felt on the skin. Through that set and a bunch more, Mitch tried to keep himself tuned only to the industrial-strength music and dispensing an occasional beer. Watching Mister Granny Glasses wham away on the guitar, he felt scaly about setting him up for a nonexistent job on a phantom day in June. On the

other hand, the way the guy played he didn't have much more future than that in the guitar field.

Lexa sailed out of the kitchen only once and only long enough to snatch the last few slivers of smoked salmon away. She had on her hunkered-down-in-a-hailstorm expression. Mitch vamped a couple of dance moves for her benefit and she stuck her tongue out at him. He loved big helpings of sound and could not see why she clung to moany country-and-western; "There's no whang to it," he kept pointing out.

Now the band ~~came to~~^{reached} the end of another musical peregrination, and silence rang out.

"Primetime," someone near Mitch said. "Fre's going to play."

The band looked sour at Frelinghuysen coming up to share the stage, but hey, it was his stage. They shuffled around wanly while he vaulted up and went to his musical weapon of choice, which proved to be the synthesizer. Cries of encouragement chorused from the guests, Frelinghuysen deprecatingly waving them off. Then, ten of the world's richest fingers flexed themselves



once, twice, and began to caress the equipment:

*Pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE
pling pling pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling pling pling pling NEE-NYEE pling
WAH DAH DAH DEE DAH DUH...*

That Chariots of Fire theme suddenly conjured a wall of runners behind Frelinghuysen, the movie's familiar slow-motion frieze of British milers training on the beach for the 1920 Olympics. Except, everyone in the room caught on within moments, these were not those ancient Brits in frumpy shorts, these were younger and Lycra-clad and led by a significantly familiar figure.

The guests roared and applauded as the golden head rhythmically bounded along at the front of the pack and its still-golden current version bobbed over the keyboard.

"Free^y did cross-country at Lakeside," Mitch overheard. "High school state champion."

The theme music underwent another electronic metamorphosis and abruptly another wall turned into a stadium with a cinder track, this time a newsreel-gray figure striding and striding in gawky detachment.

Roger Bannister at Vancouver in '54, breaking the four-minute mile.

But the runner at his shoulder nobly setting the pace for him was no longer Chris Chamblin, it was Frelinghuysen. Fascinated and appalled, Mitch suffered the realization that he was the only person in the room who could remember when Bannister's historic mile happened, rather than

having it cooked into his mind by television's backward glances. He peered as hard as he could at the spectacle playing out over Frelinghuysen's fingering, but the simulation, the templates or whatever they were-- the mask of Frelinghuysen shouldering history along before he was born-- looked utterly seamless. Now, as soon as Bannister burst his historic tape, a mountain came into the room and two figures were loping its African slope, Kip Keino training with the playful and predatory cyber-Frelinghuysen shadowing him up through the thin air of Kilimanjaro.

Just when that magnificent duo scampered into a mist and Mitch thought he had endured through, the music reverted to the movie theme's plings of portent and another beach took over a wall, this time unmistakably the Oregon coastline, broadloom of sand between forested bluffs and haystack rocks with surf



grandly breaking. At a distance, a shimmer of tiny figures was coming.

As they grew ever closer, several dozen of them undulating in the satiny running, their track uniforms took on brightness against the tan beach^{and} green bluffs; colors from a fever dream, maroon, lemon, vermillion. By now it could be seen that two runners were moving well out in front, like the quickest in a flock of sandpipers. The righthand one of course was the requisite Frelinghuysen. The other was longhaired and mustached and as intense as the shaped flame of a cutting torch. Steve Prefontaine, running the sand like the Coos Bay demon he had been.

"Pre!" the party guests shouted in media-reified recognition.

Then began the chant:

"Pre! Fre! Pre! Fre!"

Ai yi yi, thought Mitch, and reeled to the kitchen.

Lexa was superintending the cleanup. Scraping, washing, and pouting, Joe and Guillermo appeared to be in agony at missing the music. She sent them a look that jerked them back to their chores, then turned to Mitch. "What in the name of Elvis is going on out there?"

"New group," he reported wearily. "Cyberman and the Synthetics."

—————

Afterward, going on out to her van and his car, Lexa provided:

"That was different."

The mutter from Mitch sounded ^{something} like:

"We can hope so."

After a couple of tries they found their way out of the lakeside maze of streets and Lexa in the lead zoomed for home. She was the type of driver who gobbled up yellow lights like grapes. After three intersections in a row flashed red in the windshield of his Honda, Mitch grabbed the car phone and punched her van's number.

"Lexa, suppose you could slow down to the speed of sound, so we can talk?"

The van ahead shot along for most of another block, then out came an arm signal he hadn't seen since the Driver's Ed handbook, Lexa's arm right-angled down to indicate coming to a stop. Also downpointing was her extended middle finger. After the van jarred to a halt at the next stoplight, in went her arm and her voice came over the phone:

"I thought you were in a strong silent mode tonight."

"Just because a guy doesn't say anything doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to say."

"You lost me there in the doesn'ts. So, what's to say, that can't wait until we get home?" He wouldn't dump me by car phone, would he?

The phone clapped to her ear, she peered into the sideview mirror, trying to glimpse Mitch past his headlights. The honk of the Honda's horn made her jump. The light had turned green.

"Make up your tiny goddamned mind!" she yelled into the phone and put the van in gear.

Mitch said mildly, "I ^{only} ~~just~~ wanted to report in that I missed you like hell."

"Is that supposed to warm my cockles?"

"If that's the part that could use some, sure. Just because a guy doesn't really know where your cockles are located doesn't mean--"

"Never mind!"

They drove in silence until the VW van and the Honda sailed in file onto the Evergreen Point floating bridge, shoreline lights reflecting toward them on Lake Washington. As they neared the western shore, Mitch inquired:

"Is this a fight?"

"It'll do until one comes along," Lexa said. "What is eating you?"

What could he answer, the bowels of the earth? The traitorous incisors of Bingford? His daughter the serpent's tooth? The golden gullet of Xandria?

"Been a day of win one, lose about a dozen, Lex." To start somewhere, he recited to her Bingford's scheme of turning Cascopia into a freebie paper.

"Wuh oh, sounds wrong from here," commiseration instantly came into Lexa's voice. "Our family motto always was, free stuff is that price for a reason."

"It's not just the freebie part," Mitch resumed after a moment. "It's--aw, hell, name it. Too many times up and down the field, I guess."

They drove in silence, Lexa waiting him out. It's his damned cell call.

Finally Mitch's voice arrived again, with forced brightness:

"On the other hand, I get the deck chair on the Titanic to myself now. Shyanne grabbed her herbarium and jumped overboard."

Goodo, at least he's not cradle-robbing. Lexa gunned the van toward

the next changing light, remembered, and reluctantly gave in to the brakes.

As the Honda's headlights eased up behind her, she put to him:

"What, then, Mitch? If it isn't ^{just} ~~Bing~~ giving away the store, what's
freaking you? Jocelyn give you a tough go ^{?"} ~~or what?~~"

"Could say that, yes. It seems I've been awarded the permanent
blame for trying to ^{limit} ~~control~~ the damage, back there when her mother and I
split."

"You knew that then. It'd take brain transplants to ever get those
kids of yours to change their minds about that. Maybe that's what kids
are for, one of God's little ways of telling you life doesn't come
cheap either. Mitch? You still do know the blame was worth it not
to carve up those kids, don't you?"

~~_____~~ "Yeah. Yeah. I was just reviewing for the test, I guess."

Ballard was tucked into its bungalows for the night. The vapor
lights at the ship canal locks glowed blue in their nightlong duty,
and there was the salt scent of Puget Sound as they parked both vehicles,
bumpers nearly touching in the skimpy driveway. As Mitch came up to help

carry her catering gear in from the van, Lexa broke a laugh at him.

"What now?" He peered at her in the dimness outside the house.

"Were you expecting one of those Fortune 500 twenty-year-olds to follow you home?"

"Can't stand to quit work tonight, huh?" She poked an indicative finger into the stiff white fabric still tented on him.

"Yeah, well," he glanced down at the bartender jacket he had forgotten to take off, "if you want me to say bartending is beginning to grow on me, so could fungus. Come on, Lex, let's get this stuff in. I'm about running on empty."

The phone message machine on the kitchen counter was blinking red-hot as usual. Lexa headed straight for it while Mitch arrowed up to the bedroom, unbuttoning his white jacket as he went. "If that's your next partythrower," he deposited over his shoulder, "tell her to have people bring their own bottles, okay?"

Shucking shoes and clothes right and left in the bedroom, all he could shed of the day, he felt a craving for sleep, geysering up out of his body's subterranean regions in the form of yawns. He made it as

far as pajamas before Lexa came into the room.

"Mitch. Some doctor named Loper, that call was. It's about your father."

He closed his eyes as if to see what it was like. Then blinked them open, looking at her with his face gone bleak.

"It would be," he said.