

IMMORTAL

VALJEANNE JEFFERS

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Praise of *Immortal*:

“Immortal is an amazing story that flows like water. It’s a speculative cool piece that takes the reader on a trip that is horror, cyber-punk, and fantasy, all rolled in one. Valjeanne Jeffers is one of those authors who can make words drip color. I had a ball exploring her world. I was captivated by the surreal dreamscapes Karla and Joseph ebbed in and out of, and the utilitarian society in which they spent their waking lives.”

Edward Uzzle, author of *Neters and Retro-Km*, www.daathrekh.com.

“Ms. Jeffers has created an oddly vivid and not so far-fetched neo-Earth in *Immortal*. Quick paced and well-crafted, I felt a connection with her protagonists and a distilled hatred for her antagonists. The characters' backstories fit together like the pieces of an intricate puzzle. From the absence of war to the presence of the obscenely paranormal...” B.

Sharise Moore, author of *Taste: an Erotic Fantasy Series*,
www.blaqmermaidpress.com

Valjeanne Jeffers was born in Tuskegee, Alabama the first daughter of Lance and Trelle Jeffers. She is a graduate of Spelman College and is a member of the Carolina African American Writer's Collective. Valjeanne writes poetry (also under the pen name Valjeanne Jeffers-Thompson). Her poems have been featured in *Revelry 2006*, *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South 2007*, *Drumvoices Revue 2007, 2008*; and *Little Black Book: Bedtime Stories for Lovers Volume II*. She was also semifinalist for the *2007 Rita Dove Poetry Award*; and her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Pembroke Magazine 2007*. Her writing has also been published in the anthologies: *Liberated Muse I: How I Freed My Soul*, *Making Sense of the Madness* and *Future Passage*.

Other titles by Valjeanne Jeffers:
Immortal II: The Time of Legend
Stealer of Souls (forthcoming)

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For my children: Toussaint, Gabrielle, Mikal and Little Valjeanne. I will love you always.

IMMORTAL

VALJEANNE JEFFERS

*We're all children of
the world
A hungry man in search
of a hungry girl
The extreme supreme of
all cannibal
The most waste and two-faced
of all animals
Take my soul, baby...*
Curtis Mayfield

Part I

*If you are destiny
we can fly
past lotus blossoms,
primordial ruins
see the bright lights
of cities below
stand in deserts
and be lifted by the wind...*
From The Book of Legend

1/ SPECTAR

SHE was in the basement again. It was pitch black, the only illumination a glowing, quarter moon etched into the floor. A burst of light split the darkness, and she moaned low in her throat.

Please, I don't want to see anymore...I don't want to look.

Yet her feet moved of their own volition, inching toward the mark...and the twisted bundle now lying in its center. A man was curled upon the stone. He wasn't breathing, and his limbs were tiny and withered. But she knew he wasn't dead.

He wasn't human.

The daemon opened his eyes. *I've been sleeping. But for how long?* He could feel his arms and legs, but the sensations were muted as if they'd traveled from a great distance.

Then he remembered. He'd been imprisoned – snatched from his body by the magic that had trapped him here. Even now sleep, like a delicious drug, threatened to overtake him. But he fought it away.

How many centuries would pass while he slept?

A doorway appeared in his mind and just beyond it, a tattered clump of flesh and bone...

Karla's eyes flew open – the scream caught in her throat. *It's just a nightmare. I'm Ok. I'm here now, at home.*

The Indigo woman turned her head to look at the bedroom console. Six-thirty glowed on the screen. She scooted out of bed, picked up a remote from the nightstand and turned off the alarm.

Karla walked across the wooden floor of her living area into a kitchenette. A press of her fingers on the first sphere of a triangular pod started coffee brewing.

She filled a cup with chicory, walked back into the living area and pushed the second button on her remote, activating a blue panel beside the window. Jazz music filled the apartment. Like her bedroom console the unit kept time, transmitted holographic images and played tapes.

Using the third button, she opened the curtains. Curled upon her futon, the Indigo woman watched as the illuminae changed Topaz's violet sky into a mellow shade of peach. She thought of the dreams. For as far back as Karla could remember, she'd had them.

Otherworldly, exquisite and always with an unsettling clarity so different from the normal phantasms she read about. *When I eat, I wake*

up full – and stay that way until lunchtime. If somebody hits me, it hurts like hell...

And her dream lover left her limp with satisfaction, even after she awoke, sure he was still beside her.

At night Karla wrote them down, pouring all of her fears and desires into the notebooks. She spent hours in the library, reading stories of reincarnation and demonic possession, searching for answers. She'd found them too – dozens of them. But none could satisfy the yearning that burned inside her.

Every time she closed her eyes to sleep they beckoned, calling to her. Mornings, she awoke like a swimmer who'd been underwater for too long, grasping for the fabric of reality – moaning with pleasure or trembling with exhilaration.

One night they're going to swallow me whole. I'll never wake up or maybe I'll just fall through to whatever's on the other side...and this new one, something's different about it. I know the others but this one – this one scares me so bad I'm afraid to sleep.

“What time is it?”

The top left knob of her console blinked. “*The time is 7:00 am,*” a pert, female voice replied.

Seven o'clock! I'd better hustle! Karla gulped down her coffee, and hurried back into the bedroom to dress.

Tehotep watched the tall, slender woman thumb through her closet. He wasn't invisible, only dim. As long as he stayed in the shadows, she couldn't see him. But noise couldn't be cloaked by magic.

The Indigo woman tossed a red knit, shirt and jeans on the bed, slipped off her pajamas and walked into the bathroom. As she stepped into the shower, the nozzle automatically clicked on, spraying her body with water. He followed, standing just beyond the doorway ...

Karla finished bathing, and Tehotep quickly moved back into the shadows – all the while devouring her with his eyes. Her skin, dewy with moisture, looked like melting chocolate her nipples, blackberries.

She towed off her full breasts and long legs and he licked his lips imagining the things he would do with her – *to* her – the endless perversions he'd force her to submit to. Things she'd come to enjoy, when she tried to please him.

The young woman walked into the bedroom. He watched her pull up her panties, hook her bra, slip her arms into the straps. Image after image flooded his mind. Tehotep felt himself harden; a soft groan escaped his lips...

Karla froze then stared into the corner facing her bed. *It's only a bunch of dirty clothes, you're hearing things!*

In that instant he appeared: an Indigo man with full lips, slanting onyx eyes and a shaven head. Voluminous garments hung from his muscular frame. Their eyes locked, and she gasped in recognition. The dark man smiled, nodded his head...

And vanished.

Karla gazed at the pile of laundry – all that remained of him – and wondered if she'd lost her mind. With trembling hands she finished dressing her thoughts scurrying about like rats in a maze. *It's him! I didn't imagine it! He was here, but that's impossible –!*

There was a knock at the door and she jumped. *Get it together girl, that's the twins.*

She walked into the living room, picked up her remote and pointed it at the entrance. It slid open and the eight-year-old twins,

Carlos Jr. and Ashley, small and brown like their mother, ran inside.

Ashley's shoulder length braids were tied off with ribbons.

"Good morning Karla," they sang in unison, hugging her.

"Good morning love bugs. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Waffles," said Ashley.

Carlos Jr. flapped his hand at his sister. "You *always* want waffles.

Make mine French toast."

When Karla and the twins' mother had first become friends,

Tatiana and Carlos were both working nights, and she'd offered to make breakfast for their children during the week. That was two years ago.

Now Tatiana worked as a beautician, although her mate still worked evening shifts at the metal emporium. But fixing meals for the twins had become a habit Karla didn't want to break. She was crazy about them, and Topaz's food prices were next to nothing.

"Coming right up." The dark woman took milk and breakfast pellets from her cold box, and slid the nuggets into a diamond shaped oven. In twenty seconds, they expanded with heat.

"*Done,*" the oven announced. The children sat at the table, just outside the kitchenette.

Karla served them, walked into the living area and took a cipher from the box on the coffee table. She lit it and puffed nervously; with the other hand combing her fingers through her short,

wavy hair.

“Smoking is stinky,” Ashley pronounced her mouth full of waffles.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” *How did he get in my apartment? Piss on that! How did he get out?*

“Mommy’s mad at Daddy ‘cause he ain’t been home in *two days!*” Carlos Jr. announced, snapping her back to the present.

“Hasn’t, not ain’t and your mother probably wants to tell me about it herself,” Karla scolded gently.

“Yeah,” piped Ashley, “don’t tell *family* business.” There was a knock at the door, she opened it and Tatiana strolled in: an Indigo woman with her hair coiled into tiny braids.

“Hey girl.” Tatiana greeted her.

“Hey yourself, want some coffee?”

“Definitely,” the petite woman flopped on the couch, “Kids hurry up; the transport unit will be here in minute.”

After the twins left for school, the women sat on Karla’s futon drinking coffee.

“Carlos hasn’t been home in two days.”

“Your son already told me.” Karla eyed her friend with concern. “So what are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know.”

“You said the next time he pulled this shit, you were gonna put him out.”

Tatiana stared into her cup. “When he comes back, I’ll talk to him –*really* talk to him,” she mumbled. “He’s got to get it together, or find someplace else to stay.”

“Yeah, you said that last time too.”

“Karla he’s a good man and he loves me, he’s just got issues! His daddy used to beat him up. Carlos gets depressed when he thinks about it so he smokes rush. He doesn’t do it every day – ”

The dark woman gritted her teeth. “Ti, I don’t wanna hear that *shit!* He’s a junkie – if he was serious about dealing with his addiction, he’d check into a clinic!”

Tatiana’s small, oval face narrowed with anger. “I’m not one of your residents so don’t preach to me, Ok? It’s my life and my man!”

“I’m not trying to preach,” Karla said softly. She touched her friend’s hand. “It’s just that you deserve better – better than him. You need a man that’s gonna be there for you all the time. Not somebody who keeps giving you love, and taking it back.”

“Look, I know what you’re saying, up here,” Tatiana tapped the side of her head with her fingertip, “but relationships aren’t simple, they’re tangled like vines. You don’t make up your mind to leave someone you love just like *that*.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

“You ever been in love?”

“Uh-huh, I have.”

“Really, with who? I mean, I’ve never seen you with anybody for more than a few months.”

“With – ” a brown face appeared in her mind’s eye. Loved. Cherished. But Karla had never met him – not while she was awake. She looked sheepish. “It’s been a while.”

The Indigo woman furrowed her brow. “So long ago you don’t remember his *name*? Then you weren’t in love.”

Karla avoided Tatiana’s searching eyes. “I don’t wanna talk about him,” she fumbled for the words to stop her friend’s questions, “it’s too painful.”

“Oh, it’s like *that* huh? I understand... Karla, he took my ID card.”

“*Damn!* How’re you going to make through the week?”

The petite woman shrugged. “I’ll figure something out.” She set her cup on the table. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“You need some credits?”

“Probably... I’ll let you know. You better get going.”

Karla activated the door lock then watched Tatiana slowly climb the steps to her flat. *How could Carlos do this to her again?*

The elderly woman held the curtain back from her window. She was short with large eyes, a wide nose and full lips a shade lighter than her ebony skin. Her thick salt and pepper hair was twisted into two braids atop her head. Her calico spotted cat, Nutmeg, rubbed against her legs, meowing plaintively, but she ignored him.

Opal watched the tall, Indigo woman descend the stairs and cross the street. Once Karla was out of sight, she opened the door, walked down the hallway to the back exit and followed the brick path into her garden.

There was a pecan and cherry tree, a profusion of roses, lilacs and daises, and the bees were having their breakfast. The garden square was hemmed in by apartment buildings and faced a tool shed.

She continued down the end of the path to the shed. This time Nutmeg didn’t follow and he’d ceased to beg for attention. Instead, he

sat solemnly on his haunches and watched her pick up a can of oil, and a rag from beside the doorway.

Opal oiled the door hinges and wiped away the excess. She squirted more oil on the cloth and rubbed it into the door.

Anyone observing this ritual would see an elderly woman polishing a tool shed. If they looked more closely, they'd notice her whispering to herself and think she was senile. And that was just fine with her.

The old woman stepped back: admiring her handiwork. She strolled up the little path, and took a seat in one of the cushioned lawn chairs beneath her trees. Nutmeg stopped harassing the bees, bounded over and wound himself around her legs.

Opal reached down and stroked his back. The illuminae was beautiful today. Perhaps she'd linger a bit and enjoy it.

Dressed in breeches and sandals, Joie rode through the forest of his ancestors. The illuminae filtered through the trees, sketching filigrees in the mulch below.

The warrior was tall, with reddish brown skin, almond eyes and high cheekbones. Jet black hair hung loosely about his shoulders. Silver and turquoise rings dangled from his ears and wrists.

Joie was half asleep, his muscular thighs loosely gripping the mare's flanks, for she knew the way to their favorite stream better than he did.

They reached the brook and he dismounted, kneeled and splashed water upon his face and neck, finally cupping a pool in his hands to drink.

"Joseph..." He glanced around, instantly wary. The forest was teeming with supernatural life – and not all of it friendly.

Among the most dangerous were Wood Sprites – forest succubae that took the form of human women to capture men. Their victims slowly starved to death, losing all grasp of time as they languished in their captor's embrace.

A mahogany shaded woman emerged from the grove of trees to his right. She had a wide nose, full lips and was dressed in a thigh length garment made entirely of overlapping feathers. Her kinky hair was braided atop her head. Gold ornaments hung from her ears, neck and arms.

She had the voluptuous body of a young girl. But her large dark eyes held knowledge no girl could ever possess, and she had all

the earmarks of a preternatural creature – though friend or enemy, Joie couldn't tell.

He decided not to stay and find out.

In one fluid motion the warrior rose and leaped on to his horse.

“Joseph wait!” She stepped forward and spread her hands, palms outward, as a gesture of goodwill.

Despite the danger, he was curious. And she was lovely.

“That's close enough!”

Joseph is not my name. Who is he? Your dead mate? Or perhaps a favored slave?”

“I have a message for you...for who you will become leagues from this day.” Her voice was soft and melodic – like a song.

Intrigued, Joie leaned towards her, a smile playing about his lips. “Speak beautiful fortuneteller, if that's what you are.”

“You are needed in Topaz.”

“Topaz? I have never heard of it.” Suddenly he couldn't look away from her strange eyes... or urge his horse to a gallop. She is bewitching me! With dawning terror, Joie realized he might never leave the forest.

“The city does not exist here, in your time. But your future self knows it well, and it is to him that I speak. You must journey to find your heart's desire, Joseph to find the one you long for.”

Now the enchantress's brows drew together in anger. Her voice doubled in volume echoing through the woods. “I've visited you before! Why have you ignored my commands? When you awake, remember my words and hark unto them! Go to Topaz, we will speak again at that time.”

She turned and disappeared into the forest.

Centuries before the Time of Legend, Sorre's Copper citizens had been warriors and hunters. Now its inhabitants grew vegetables, and herded sheep and goats; for Sorre was the chief supplier of crops and animal proteins for the New World.

Joseph had lived here his entire life. His parents had taught him to grow corn, beans and peas. He'd learned to listen to the wind to predict the weather, to put his ear to the soil to hear its heartbeat.

And he learned that all creatures have a soul, no less worthy of respect than his own. These were the gifts Mata, his mother, and Lowe, his father, had given him.

His grandfather had shared these values too and other gifts as well – tales of long dead warriors and bloody battles; of evil magicians and shape shifters; and of a war between good and evil that never really ended.

Joseph stood on his porch for a moment, enjoying the illuminae’s first light. Then jumped down, and crossed the street to his grandfather’s cabin.

As he mounted the steps, an elderly man opened the door and stepped out, his lined face breaking into a smile when he saw Joseph.

Ripple had an aquiline nose and coffee colored skin. Thick black hair laced with gray was spread over his shoulders, and he wore a flannel shirt, jeans and boots.

“Good morning, Joe.”

“Good morning, Grandfather.”

The old man sat in one of the two wooden chairs, and took a pipe from the table beside him. “I knew you’d come to see me this morning.”

Joseph sat down next to him. “How?”

“Because it’s almost time for you to make your journey.”

The young man slapped his thigh. “Damn, you’re amazing! How do you always know what I’m thinking?”

Ripple chuckled. “An elder’s intuition. She came to see you again?”

“Last night.”

“So what are you waiting for? Go to Topaz, find your destiny.”

Elbows resting on his knees, Joseph rubbed his hands together. “Just like that huh?”

“Why not?”

“You don’t think its crazy for me to move halfway across the New World, because of a dream?”

“I think you’d be crazy not to. I’d have left the first night she visited me. Besides you were never meant to be a farmer. You hate it.”

The Copper youth laughed. “Yeah, I do hate farming. But what about you, with all your stories of blood and magic. How can you settle for,” he waved his hand, “*this?*”

“I’m an old man. I enjoy the illuminae setting in the evenings, the fresh air; the peace and quiet. That is enough for me,” Ripple winked, “that, and the frisky widow next door.”

For a while they sat in silence.

At length Joseph said: “I’ve got some credits saved. I guess I could take my paintings – see if I can find a buyer. You’ll hold my land in

trust until I return?”

Ripple puffed serenely on his pipe. “Sure, I’ll take care of it but you won’t come back...not as a farmer.”

Karla boarded the trolley and took a side seat. Leaning her head against a crooked arm, she gazed absently out at the city. Citizens riding bicycles, and a few on horse back passed the trolley. Auto taxis idled in front of wooden houses, and black garbed enforcers were making their morning patrols.

Topaz, like all New World cities, was a hodgepodge of the very old and the very new.

Four hundred years ago, before the Time of Legend, war and crime had almost destroyed the planet.

The Book of Records told stories of citizens hiding under their beds, as taser fire shattered their windows – stories of gang wars, of entire city blocks destroyed by explosions – of a world dying of the toxins that filled its water and air.

But in the year of our One 3075, war, crime and pollution didn’t exist.

Contamination of the environment was illegal. Recycling was mandated by planet law. Weapons had been outlawed and purged from New World Tundra. Only a few remained on display in museums. Prisons had become behavioral clinics where inmates were taught the life skills they needed to be mainstreamed back into society.

It was illegal to have homeless living within one’s borders, and cities were punished with heavy fines if they didn’t house them in private living quarters.

Junkies were the exception to this rule, since so many of them lived in dormitories; and they were locked out if they missed curfew.

It was forbidden for a citizen to be unemployed if he could work. Tundra law dictated that every able-bodied man and woman must be given a job, and it was forbidden to pay a citizen less than she needed to buy both necessities, and a few luxuries.

Racism and sexism were also relics that the New World had discarded during the Time of Legend, when everyone had been fighting to survive the holocaust. Then, they were luxuries the planet couldn’t afford.

Now, like the chemical waste that had once poisoned Tundra, they’d been forgotten.

But rush and placid *were* legal. If you were an addict you simply went to a nightspot flashed your ID card and, if you had credits for the

month, got high. If your card was empty, you went to a dormitory and did the same thing. Just not in luxury.

In fact, Tundra politicians – at their citizens’ request – had bankrolled illicit drugs. They seemed to say: “If you want to kill yourself, feel free to do so at the planet’s expense.”

Yet, these same politicians rolled out the red carpet for any junkie who wanted to kick. Thus, plush clinics like CLEAN (“Clean living experiences and no chemical dependency”) where Karla worked, were not uncommon.

She pulled the bell for her stop, got off and began her morning walk through Diamond Alley to CLEAN. Diamond Alley, an erstwhile factory district, had been turned over to the small business community.

In the Alley, it wasn’t unusual to find a family living above their boutique or diner. Zoning laws banned nightspots and liquor stores, but wine was sold in restaurants.

Smiling, Karla watched the children playing kickball and soccer; at the folks busy laying out rugs and dresses for sale, and dusting the sidewalks. It was all so boisterous and chaotic. But the timeless Alley never failed to make her feel loved – part of the ever spinning rotund of humanity.

It was a serene, grounded feeling and perfect for chasing away shadows.

She stopped at her favorite restaurant, *The Dragon*, and stood under the awning to order. The owner’s son, Josh, greeted her with a smile. He was wiry, Amber and, in Karla’s opinion, delicious.

“Hey sexy, green tea right?”

She returned his smile. “Please.” Green tea was her morning ritual – that and flirting with Josh.

He drew tea from the liquids machine and handed her the cup. Blushing, Karla gave him her plastic ID card.

Josh inserted it into the flat register’s slot. “There you go.” He handed the card back to her then brushed his fingertips across her hand.

“You gonna think about me today?”

“All day, lover.”

“Alright baby. You have yourself one *fine* day.”

“Bye Josh,” Karla strolled on grinning to herself. He was a sweet guy, and only a few years younger than she. *I might go out with him one day. Just for the hell of it.*

CLEAN was ensconced in the six-story warehouse at the end of the block. Another warehouse across the street had been converted into an apartment building. But the largest one by far was next door, curving

around in stark, rectangular splendor to face Topaz Bay.

Karla inserted her card into a metal box beside the door. After ten seconds, a male voice greeted her: “*Karla 11582, entry granted.*” The door slid open.

“Morning Zane, morning Telo,” Karla hailed the female enforcers guarding the door.

As she walked through the gathering room, a volley of “Hellos” pelted her from residents lounging on couches and armchairs, watching the net.

“Morning, Karla.”

“Hey, Karla.”

She waved at them. “Hey guys.”

Matt, dressed in a collar shirt and jeans, stood holding his office door open for her, his console having told him of her arrival. He was a slender, Fuchsia man barely as tall as she.

Matt’s rumpled blond hair always made him look like he’d just jumped out of bed. That, and his boyish smile, made him look younger than his thirty-five years.

Karla stepped inside the cubicle. “Good morning.”

“Morning pet, want some chicory?”

“No, thank you.”

Matt perched on the edge of his desk, and scowled playfully at her. “You could bring me an Amber breakfast once in a while. I can smell it all over you.”

Karla settled in the chair on his right. “What you smell is green tea. Besides, you know I’d bring you one, if you asked *nice*ly.”

He laughed, then broke off eyeing her critically. “You alright love? You look a little peaked.”

The Indigo woman dropped her eyes. “I had trouble getting to sleep last night.”

“Seems like that’s been happening a lot lately.”

Insomnia was the excuse Karla always gave Matt when she’d had one of her more exhausting dreams. Right then and there she decided she’d used it one time too many.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine.”

“You sure? Because from where I’m sitting you don’t look it.”

“What’d I just say?” Karla retorted peevisly. She bit her lip, instantly regretting the harsh words.

Matt studied her with tender, green eyes. “Karla, I’m your friend. I’m not trying to pry but if you need help, all you have to do is ask.”

Why does he always have to be so sweet? “I know, I didn’t mean to snap at you.” It was so hard to meet his eyes, and harder still to lie.

“I’m just grouchy,” she grinned tentatively, “from lack of sleep I guess.”

“It’s Ok love,” Matt returned her smile. “I’m not made out of glass. I just wanna make sure you’re alright.”

“I am, I promise.”

“Fair enough.”

In that instant, Karla wanted to bare her soul to him. But she couldn’t. Not this time. After five years, they had moved beyond the circle of healer and addict. He was her “angel,” as she jokingly called him from time to time; and there was always an intensity behind her humor.

Five years ago, when Karla had first stumbled into CLEAN she was almost dead – worst, she’d wanted to die. Matt had nursed more than her body back to life; he’d nursed her spirit, helping her to rediscover her will to live.

Once she was sober, he’d convinced her to train as a caretaker. In another lifetime they might have been lovers; and she’d seriously considered it. He was intelligent, attractive, and already a good friend.

But with Matt it would never be a casual affair. There was already too much history between them. That was the problem.

Sometimes Karla told herself she was crazy for not giving him the opening she knew he was waiting for – crazy for waiting for a man she never saw until she fell asleep.

But, crazy or not, until I find out what’s on the other side, I can’t pursue a serious relationship with anybody.

And what if I told him about this morning? What if I told him about that creature who appeared in my flat? I wouldn’t be working when I finished, that’s what.

Matt might be an angel and this might be paradise. But even in utopia, you couldn’t practice therapy if you were insane.

Karla rose. “I’m going to get some breakfast.”

Matt jumped down. “Wait a tick...we had a new guy come in this morning.” He walked behind his desk and pulled a disc from the top drawer.

“Rush or placid?”

“He’s been a rush addict since he was 14. I want you to take a look at his tape, afterwards pass it along to Hung Wai.”

She took the proffered disc. “I’ll watch it while I eat.”

“Good girl. With any luck we’ll be able to resume living sessions this afternoon.”

Karla paused, hand on the doorknob. “Matt?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome. What are you thanking me for?”

“For always being there, for caring about me.”

“I do care. If you change your mind later and want to talk...”

The blond man shrugged.

“I know you’ll be here.” *Sorry I had to lie to you old friend.*

She walked across the hall to the breakfast bar, where Su Ling was setting plates of food on the counter. Another resident, Victor, was cooking. Karla picked up a plate of tofu sausages and eggs, and crossed the room to her office.

During intake, addicts told a potential house why they wanted to get off drugs. After all of the caretakers had viewed the disc, the residents watched it and the house voted on whether to accept the applicant.

If the majority voted against him, well that was that. But if an addict was rejected by three clinics in a row, the Topaz Council stepped in and placed him wherever there was an empty bed – and without a vote.

Karla slid the disc into her console’s bottom panel. A caramel colored man with thick lips, long, kinky hair and hazel eyes appeared on the screen facing her desk. His voice sounded early twenties, but he looked much older.

“My name is Silver 55168 and I’m a junkie,” he began. “I’m tired of sleeping outside when I miss curfew, tired of living in dormitories. I did things I’m ashamed of...hurt people,” his voice broke.

After a long moment, the youth wiped his eyes and went on: “There’s got to be more to life than this...getting high and later, looking for the next fix.”

“My parents were rush junkies. It’s all I ever knew. I wanna do whatever it takes – I’ll do anything – I just want a chance.”

Karla sat staring at the now blank screen. She knew what it was like to have addicts for parents. Her folks had both abused placid, the drug preferred by older users for its lazy, floating high. While rush hit addicts with sensual jolts, placid caressed them with feathery touches.

But placid was just as addictive as rush, and just as lethal. Repeated use caused mood swings, loss of appetite and eventually, death.

When she was ten, her mother Arlene had been killed in a knife fight with another junkie. Her father Charles, burdened with a little girl to

raise, had alternately loved, beaten and abandoned her – often leaving Karla alone for weeks at a time.

She remembered the mood swings, the bruises when he couldn't "shoot up," and showing up for dinner at the homes of her playmates. Any wonder she'd escaped the notice of the enforcers.

But she also remembered Charles and Arlene as kind, though emotionally unstable, parents. After Arlene was killed, Charles was all the family she had left and she didn't want to be fostered to another family. So she'd hid her hunger and Charles's abuse from the peacemakers.

By the time Karla was 15 she was a rush junkie. At sixteen, she ran away from home, joining other young addicts who became her family. She stumbled home every now and again to check on her father. Charles had barely noticed.

It was during one of Karla's infrequent visits that she found him: dead from an overdose. She was 21 years old. Her father's death was the final blow that led her to CLEAN, and to Matt.

Silver was applying for bed number 75, and if she had anything to with it, he would be sleeping in it tonight. She popped the disc out, walked to the cubicle next door and knocked at the stall.

Hung Wai, a tall, Amber man, with his black hair plaited to his waist, appeared at the door.

"Good morning, Hung Wai."

"Morning, Karla."

"I brought the new applicant's tape." She handed him the disc.

"Would you give it to Maria when you're finished?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks." She hesitated, wanting to say more.

Hung Wai's long face creased with irritation. "Was there something else?"

"No, I guess not. I'll see you at the meeting."

"The caretakers' offices are on the ground floor." Karla pointed to each of the four cubicles, two on both sides of the shuttered kitchen.

Silver's application had been accepted with only one dissenting vote. Hung Wai said he didn't trust him. Now, Karla was giving Silver a tour of his new home.

She gestured to the flat screen mounted to a post in the center of the room. "On this console you can listen to music or watch net shows. If it's after 11:00 o'clock, just keep the volume settings low." The youth trudged alongside her, dragging a green knapsack.

Karla pointed to the bag. “Is that your stuff?”

Silver grinned, his teeth were surprising white and even. “Yeah...”

Boy, he’s got great looking teeth for a junkie. “Is it heavy?”

“Little bit, but I’m Ok.”

She returned his smile. “We don’t have far to go.”

They boarded the elevator and got off on the sixth floor.

“Seventy-five residents share floors two through six. Every floor with living quarters has a pool table and a weight room, and there’s a library on the third floor.”

“CLEAN doesn’t have an in-house medical staff, but if you have an emergency we’ve got a 24 hour hotline that can be accessed using any console; and a panic button on every floor.” Karla pointed to the red button next to the elevator.

“Or you can tell one of our enforcers. They’re here round the clock.” She waved at the two golden-skinned Telphanes flanking the left wall and they nodded their bald heads in greeting.

“Come on, I’ll show you to your room.” Karla walked him to his cubicle: one among the fifteen, rectangular stalls that lined the floor; followed him inside and settled in one of the two armchairs, while he sat on the bed.

She grinned, “Believe it or not, I’m almost finished. Breakfast is served between 9:00 and 10:00; lunch between 12:00 and 1:00. Meditation is at 10:30, and living sessions are from 2:30 to 4:30. Matt’s been assigned as your personal caretaker. During your first week, he’s available to you 24 hours a day.”

“The house rules are posted on every floor, but I’ll go over them because you can be evicted for breaking just one. No drugs allowed unless they’re prescribed. No visits to a resident’s cubicle unless you’re invited – this one’s really important because we’ve got male and female residents living here. You’re adults, we don’t care what you do, so long as it’s consensual and it’s not group sex. No rapes or orgies allowed.”

“No physical violence allowed either. If you’ve got a problem with one of your housemates, see your caretaker.”

“That’s it,” Karla stood, “any questions?”

Silver shook his head. “Naw, I’m cool.”

“So you think you’re gonna like it here?”

He smiled shyly. “I think I’m gonna *love* it.”

Karla leaned down and hugged him. “Welcome to the family.”

Tehotep sprawled on the cushioned divan, one leg thrown over

the couch arm, Red and black hued carpets were scattered over the hardwood floors.

Black marble columns supported the ceilings. The warehouse was lit by oil burning lamps and scented candles, the walls, decorated with paintings of mortals coupling with daemons.

He eyed the six addicts lounging about the room: four sucking greedily on rush pipes, two others making love in the corner.

For weeks, he'd been luring them here. They preferred his house to the dormitories – and even the nightspots. There were no rules here, no credits to worry about. They only had to remember that his commands were law.

Now they numbered 60. Soon, he would have hundreds.

For a moment, he gazed feverishly at the two slaves and was sorely tempted to join them. *No, it's time for the ceremony.*

Tehotep rose from the chair and spread his arms. *Come to me...* In moments, he was surrounded by his acolytes

Surviving for weeks on a diet of little more than drugs, his slaves were emaciated. He wondered if they would all survive the transmogrification.

“Take off your clothing and go to the basement.” They glanced at each another fearfully. He'd threatened to kill them if they *ever* went into the basement. Now he was ordering them to break his own edict?

“Obey me *now*.” His voice would brook no refusal. They disrobed and in twos and threes began to board the elevator.

When they'd all reached the ground floor, Tehotep appeared in the center of the room. The acolytes jumped then stared at him fearfully. Yet another sorcerer's trick to prove he wasn't human.

But once they got a good look at the room, they were ready to bolt.

The cellar was bereft of furniture or windows and lit by four candles, one in each corner of the room. A huge, half circle had been etched into the floor and painted with a crimson substance that glowed eerily in the dim light. Those standing near the door started to back away, mumbling under their breath.

“If you try to leave, I will kill you where you stand!” His voice held them immobile.

“You!” He called a thin, trembling woman to him, and directed her to mold her body to the design.

He ordered a second slave to lie beneath her, so that his fingertips touched her toes. One by one, at his command, they fitted

their bodies to the diagram.

Tehotep stepped inside the fractured circle, raised his hands and began to chant: “*Transformai edivai, transformai edivai...* That which is whole, let it be broken, that which is pure, let it be defiled...”

Ghostly shadows appeared along the walls, their voices merging with his. The chant grew to a roar.

His acolytes began to scream...