

The Org

A Stephan Raszer short

RASZER HAD BEEN WATCHING THE YOUNG ACTRESS come and go for three days, and seen no one on her tail. If experience hadn't predisposed him to take her story seriously, he might've been ready to write it off as a new flavor of self-promotion. (Even class acts like Diana Surrey had to play to the bleachers these days.) She'd claimed they were monitoring her movements, maybe even tapping her phone, and that they'd gone so far as to take a table next to hers at *Mélisse*, but so far it was all vapor. It had occurred to him that she might not yet be famous enough to ruin.

If it had been strictly a stalking case, he'd have recommended another private investigator--someone better at driving away vermin. If the main draw had been Diana Surrey's wealth and celebrity, he'd have taken a pass. What had persuaded Raszer to come to the aid of the alluring Ms. Surrey was the explicit nature of the threats she claimed to have received from her even more famous ex-boyfriend.

She said he'd threatened her with what he called a "phase repo." If she remained a PTS (Potential Trouble Source), he'd warned, they would take it all away. Her fame. Her desirability. Even her talent. None of these, he'd warned, were hers by right.

For what The Org gaveth, The Org could take away.

In effect, they'd threatened to put her right back where she'd started, and that was not a good place at all.

Diana hadn't taken the more far-fetched warnings to heart at first, and once the world knew that it was over between her and the famously boyish boyfriend, she'd followed her publicist's advice and accepted an offer from ABC to dish The Org on "The View." She'd been unsparing in her criticism, and a few days later, had received a Seizure of Assets letter from something called Southland Surety Corp. Grasping the awful reality, she took action: a flurry of agent and attorney calls led her to Stephan Raszer, an investigator of spiritual fraud and--so they said—a retriever of hijacked souls.

When he'd insisted he wasn't Anthony Pellicano, and that she might do better with a really scary lawyer, she'd leaned deliberately forward, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "But you've got something extra, right? And besides, I do have a lawyer. He's the one who gave me your name, Mr. Raszer. Okay if I call you Stephan?"

"Sure," he'd said. "Stephan rhymes with *even*. Can't explain the spelling. Parental affectation, maybe."

"And Raszer rhymes with *laser*..." She'd lingered over the last word.

A meaningful silence had passed as she searched his face and he processed her choice of words. She'd evidently been told about his flaw, an attribute at once physical and metaphysical which made him a private eye not quite like any other. There was a "break" in the iris of his left eye, a tiny rupture that——under great psychic stress and excitation——emitted light of indigo wavelength in a concentrated, wire-thin beam, enabling him, so they said, to perceive the most subtle shades of truth and deceit: to spot the counterfeit pearls. In L.A., this gave him a professional edge, particularly in the

detection of a spiritual swindle. Because in Los Angeles, for every genuine healer, every true prophet, every real shaman (and there were a few), there was a dark twin—a mimetic imposter ready to take you down, body and soul. For every star, there was a cinder.

On this, the third night of Raszer's surveillance, Diana had an assignation, and wanted to be certain she wasn't tailed. If her new lover had been another actor—even another star—the discretion might have seemed counter-intuitive. A whiff of scandal could, after all, be a career stimulant. Stars no longer needed to be beyond reproach. On the contrary, she'd told Raszer, it had been strangely thrilling to find nude pictures of herself on the web. You weren't really famous, she'd confided, until people cared what you looked like naked or dead.

But Diana Surrey didn't want a scandal. She was sleeping with the very married Los Angeles City Attorney Jim Harrah, and in the political arena, indiscretion led to all the wrong kind of headlines. In his world, Harrah was plenty famous enough to ruin.

The Org would see to it.

She was twenty-seven, high-boned and breakably beautiful, fond of mandarin collars and vintage hats. Her ink black hair glimmered henna in the light, and her violet eyes wore an expression of constant surprise. Raszer liked her work well enough, though her effect on screen seemed more reflected radiance than inner glow. Maybe that's what they'd given her, and were now threatening to reclaim as retribution for her apostasy. She'd done small but buzz-worthy roles in two films starring her ex-boyfriend before pledging her troth to him in an elaborately choreographed "spiritual marriage" held in the garden of the Org's Hancock Park Star Temple, after which her career had graphed a two-year ascent. It was all good...and then it wasn't.

He offered her the lead beside him in a two-hundred million dollar sci-fi epic, on the condition that she be certified “Clean” before photography began. She’d accepted the terms, and let herself be taken to an ersatz ante-bellum manor in Orlando where they were to remove the “neuron traces” which they said were planted like malignancies in her reactive mind. This, he’d assured her, was all SOP. It was “detox,” and it worked.

Look where it had gotten him.

Raszer had seen her taped spot on “The View” because his research assistant, Monica Lord, had recorded it and insisted that he watch it. He’d listened to Diana’s tales of brainwashing and sexual humiliation, and heard her describe her famous boyfriend’s complicity, and all this had summoned up the anger he’d felt a thousand times before when hearing accounts from other victims of such betrayals of faith. When she’d come to his house on Whitley Drive for her first consultation, they’d sat for two hours on the deck overlooking the Cahuenga Pass and he’d suppressed fury when she described how they’d inserted a “galvanic m-probe” into her uterus to check for the presence of “psychic lesions”: emotional scars left by both present and past life trauma.

A sick joke, he’d thought. Inducing trauma in the name of rooting it out. But he thought it unlikely that they saw the irony. They seemed a humorless crowd.

If you trafficked in Los Angeles, The Org was all but unavoidable. It dominated Hollywood Boulevard the way Disney dominates Times Square, and commanded enough prime real estate nearby to comprise a congressional district. Streets were named after it, and a permanent seat on the city council was its tribute. It was richer than the parent companies of Paramount or Universal. And yet, as far as Raszer could see (and he gave

groups nominally devoted to psychic health every benefit of doubt), it possessed not one quantum of spiritual authenticity.

Raszer was a tracker, typically hired to locate and extricate what the press liked to call “cult victims” and he preferred to call “strays.” From all appearances, Diana Surrey had managed to extricate herself just fine, and he might have refused the case if not for her involvement with Jim Harrah. Harrah had a reputation for being uncorruptible when it came to rackets. If the City Attorney was hearing the same stories that Raszer had heard--and if he truly cared for her--The Org might finally have a worthy adversary. And that was reason enough to want to buy this illicit affair a little more time to blossom.

He had just lit a cigarette and begun to bliss out on a snaky Thom Yorke vocal drifting down from a third-floor balcony when he saw her emerge from the building in a feathered hat, and hail the limo down from its idling station. It was December, so she wore a long coat, more for looks than warmth. She lived on the top floor of The Argyle, a vintage Old Hollywood apartment building extravagantly renovated by Blackfriar Properties, which was a subsidiary of Sigma Investments, which was an offshore holding of SymTech, which was fully owned by The Org. Not long ago, actresses of Diana Surrey’s rank would not have rented in Hollywood, but that was before The Org had bought in. They had seen the change coming, understood the hunger for glamor, the need for restoration. They’d made Hollywood grand again.

She got into the limo after a half-turn in his direction. The streetlamp caught her eyes briefly. In the high-angle light, her alabaster cheeks looked over-rouged. He started his car and waited a few seconds before turning on the lights. The limo pulled away from

the curb, and even before its exhaust trail had fully dissipated, a second vehicle pulled out. It was a late model Lexus, black or maybe dark green, two men in the front seat. The timing of its move did indeed suggest pursuit, though three turns would tell the story. Experience had taught him that by sheer chance, forty percent of cars will shadow the first two turns, dropping to twenty-five percent for a third. If it went to a fourth turn, it was a tail.

Raszer made the left turn onto Franklin Avenue, staying better than a half a block behind the Lexus. He etched the shape of its bumper, the span of its taillights, and the license plate into memory. The last of these wasn't difficult. The plates were vanity. XENU 369. It was what was both maddening and ridiculous about these people. They didn't even bother to be discreet. They were *that* sure.

His cell phone burped. The number was Diana's.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi. Is that you behind me?" She sounded anxious.

"I'm two cars back. I think we're a caravan."

"Fuck," she breathed. "I *told* you. Are you sure?"

"I will be in a minute. Tell your driver to make a right on Hollywood Boulevard after the dogleg at LaBrea. Then take Crescent Heights down to Olympic."

"And that's supposed to lose them?"

He could make out the faintest outline of her face against the rear window of the limo far ahead, and only because she had Audrey Hepburn's cheekbones.

"No. Don't worry."

"But I am worried."

“There’s a Starbuck’s at Robertson. Pull into the lot in the rear and come all the way around into the alley that feeds back onto Olympic. Get out, and send the limo back the way we came. Wait for me at the curb. I’ll take you the rest of the way.”

Jim Harrah and his family lived in Rancho Park, a leafy enclave that spilled south from Fox Studios like a giant front lawn. The offices of the city attorney were downtown, but he kept a private office closer to home in a Century City high-rise, and that’s where they were to meet. After-hours sex in the office, thought Raszer. *That extra measure of frisson*. Diana followed his directions to the letter, and sure enough, the pursuing Lexus made a wide U-turn in front of Starbuck’s and stayed with the decoy limo. In all likelihood, not for long.

Once in his front seat, and sure that the tail was gone, she began to talk.

“That was pretty smooth,” she said. “Simple, but effective.”

“It’s best not to overthink when you’re dealing with morons.”

She laughed, and the laugh was as classy as the rest of her.

He glanced in his rearview mirror. “But it won’t take long for even them to notice your absence from the back seat.” He made a right turn onto Avenue of the Stars.

“Long enough, I hope,” she said.

She waited a beat or two for him to reassure her, and when he said nothing more, she moved on:

“Cool car. Retro Euro sort of cool. What is it?”

“It’s an Avanti. A rebuilt 1967. Retro is right.”

She waited again, and then asked:

“Are you a talker...or are you the strong, silent type?”

He smiled, but all she saw was the slightest curl at the corner of his mouth. “Do I look like the strong, silent type?” he asked her.

“Yes and no. Physically, you’re kind of a roughed up Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*. Tough but sweet. I think you talk mostly with your eyes. And sometimes you get hurt.”

“Are you ‘mapping’ me?” he asked. He was teasing her. *Mapping*, in Org-speak, was how you determined whether a person’s past life injuries were only flesh wounds (treatable with the basic \$2500 intro package), or mortal blows to the inner being (requiring the full \$35,000 immersion—or more.) Full health was a lifetime outlay, an expense you just had to accept along with the house payment and tax bill.

“No,” she said. “I’m sizing you up.”

“You’re way too young to remember *Bullitt*,” he said.

“I’m an actress. It’s my job to remember.”

“I guess so.”

He pulled into the semi-circular drive at 2120 and continued down into the valet parking area. After he’d stopped the car and waved off the attendant, she turned toward him, her hands folded in her lap.

“How do I get home?”

“I’ll take you. It’s not like I’m going anywhere. You hired me for the evening.”

“Kind of like an escort,” she said.

“Right, only not.”

“It must feel . . . a little weird. Driving a woman to a rendezvous, and then waiting while... You know. I mean it’s not like you’re a chauffeur.”

“I can think of worse ways to spend the evening. And besides,” he said with a soft smile, “I get to see how great you look when you come out.”

“Hmm,” was all she said. Then, before getting out, she did an almost imperceptible double-take, as if to gauge whether his comment had been cheeky or surprisingly charming.

“Call me when you’re ready,” he said. “I’ll be in the Sheraton bar across the street, nursing my jealousy with warm brandy.”

She nodded, got out, and tapped the window goodbye.

After a few minutes, he turned his keys over to the attendant and walked across the wide street to the Sheraton. Barely an hour elapsed before his cell phone chimed and it was Diana on the line, distinctly unsatisfied and very upset.

“Come get me,” she instructed. “I’ll be in front.”

He retrieved his car and pulled it once again into the circular drive. Within seconds, she was in the seat. The color had risen above the blush in her cheeks, but it wasn’t the flush he’d expected to see.

“Bad date?” he asked, pulling onto the boulevard.

“It’s over,” she replied.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be. Right now, I’m angry enough not to hurt. Tomorrow you can feel sorry for me.”

“Do you want to go home?”

“Yes. No. Can we... No. Yes, take me home. Do you have a cigarette?”

He nodded, gave her one, and lit it. She touched his hand while he held the flame to her, and he could feel her shaking. The left side of her face stood in fine, flickering relief, consciously favored, while the right side fell away into shadow. Just then, he caught something he hadn't seen before, but should have. It had been there on the screen, and on every magazine cover.

She was unfinished.

The features on her right side, beginning with the eyebrow, were just slightly less perfect, and positioned some scant fraction of a centimeter lower, than those on the left. Not enough to mar the overall impression of beauty, but surely enough to defy classical proportion.

This imperfection was, in fact, part of her allure, but you probably couldn't persuade her of that. It was also the sort of unformedness that excited the Pygmalion in a certain kind of man. Experience had shown him this. Suddenly, he understood why she'd been drawn to her ex-boyfriend, and to The Org, and why she'd made easy prey.

She wanted someone to finish her.

"He poured me a glass of champagne," she said, and turned to blow the smoke out the window. "And then all of a sudden he started talking like a fucking lawyer. Little spikes hidden in the words, but not so little that I couldn't feel them. He said it would be 'ill-advised' for us to continue seeing each other, and 'not helpful' to my career to keep going public against The Org. Asshole!"

"Damn," said Raszer, with a shake of his head. "They got to him. What else?"

"He said there were times when even the best of people had to think less about being right and more about surviving."

“Hard to argue with that, I guess. But it’s cold.”

“Yeah, but what does it mean—really.”

“It means he has good reason to believe they can sabotage your career . . . and probably his, too.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” she said, and tossed out the cigarette. “How did I ever get myself into this?”

He gave her a look. It had become evident that all that class was as artfully worn as the stylish hats and chemisettes.

For the entire trip back to Hollywood, Raszer saw no sign of pursuit. Oddly, it made him uneasy. After making a right turn on Gower and then coming around onto Argyle, he rolled slowly down to the building entrance, checking the parked cars on both sides of the street. He pulled up to the yellow curb just before the entryway.

“What am I going to do now?” she asked.

“You’re going to go in, run yourself a hot bath, and find an old movie to fall asleep to. In the morning, you’ll take stock. Fire your agent. Call in the friends you have who aren’t tied into this con, and go forward. There’s a way to get free of these people. They’re not the KGB.”

“Does it cost extra to have you walk me to the door?”

“No,” he said. “It comes with the ride.”

“Good,” she said, “’cause I’m a little spooked.”

When they were through the double-secured doors and in the foyer, she turned to him. He saw something new, and when she spoke, her voice had dropped a register.

“Now that you’re inside, can I make you a drink?”

“I’m surprised they allow booze in this building. Doesn’t that violate the blood oath?”

“Fuck that,” she said. “I’m not their lab rat anymore.”

The apartment was airy and suitably luxurious, but a little chilly. Everything—even the stressed wood flooring—was white. Diana had done little to personalize it, but then, she’d probably spent little time there. She had unopened bottles of single-malt scotch and a few designer liqueurs. Gift basket stuff, probably. There was no evidence that a meal had ever been prepared in the kitchen. Raszer asked for the scotch, neat, and boosted himself onto the kitchen counter.

She handed him the glass, holding onto it for a beat, their fingertips just touching.

“You know what freaks me the most?” she asked.

“Tell me.”

“Before all this. Before *him*. Before *them*. I wasn’t the sort of girl who had affairs with powerful married men. *They* made me that. They start by telling you how damaged you are. They empty you out and say they’re purging all the poison. Then they build you up into this . . . power woman with no pity and no—who’s that woman who wrote those books about conniving females and powerful men?”

“Ayn Rand?”

“Yeah, her. Anyhow, I got into the role, and now I don’t know who the fuck I’ll be if they take it away.”

“But you do know it’ll be your choice.”

“I’ve never had to choose,” she said. “I’ve always been chosen.”

“Wow. What does that feel like?” Raszer asked.

“It’s nice, mostly. Like being driven to a party. You know where you are, but not how you got there.”

“Well, it’s time for you to take the wheel,” said Raszer. “Best to begin with simple stuff. Like where you’d choose to live if you didn’t live here—in this apartment?”

“I dunno. The beach, I guess. Santa Monica Canyon, maybe.”

“That’s do-able. A short-term choice requiring some follow-through. What about right now. In the moment, I mean. What’ll you choose to do right now to feel better?”

“I think I’d like to kiss you,” she said.

“I’m not sure if that’s a choice or an impulse.”

“For a woman it’s the same thing.”

Raszer laughed, and parted his knees just enough to allow her slim hips up against the counter. Her mouth was her most sensual feature: wide and warm, down-turned at the corners, the only element of her physique that was in any way extravagant. She did with it something he loved: she smiled when she kissed. He ran his hands up her body and she shivered in response. Things were moving rapidly.

“This might not be the greatest idea,” he said softly.

She kissed him again and he pulled her close.

“Tell you what,” he said, when her tongue had left his mouth. “Let’s figure out how to get you out of this flat and into someplace that doesn’t feel like a minimum security prison. Then, if you still want to, we’ll make each other feel good. Right now, I think I’d better go.”

Back on the street in front of the Argyle, Raszer hesitated before getting into his car. Something felt out of whack, and not only because he'd just left a beautiful, willing woman to sleep alone. If he wasn't mistaken, his personal threat level had just gone from yellow to orange. After ten years of travel on the lunatic fringe, he'd come to accept that he had a virtual radio telescope in his head, like a satellite dish carved from the back of his skull. It had been that way since a spectacular flame-out and near-death experience a decade earlier. The experience had left him "a sensitive."

It had unsettled him at first to be so aware, to experience the world at such a high order of magnification. Now he made use of it as best he could. He knew the mental circuitry was somehow connected to the thing in his left eye, the little flaw that flared into luminence in the nearness of both angels and demons.

He'd just fitted his key in the door when the men materialized at his elbows. Both wore ear pods and the conspicuous bulge of shoulder-holstered weapons beneath their sportcoats. The central casting look of their chiseled features and swept-back hair wasn't unusual for L.A., where even plumbers were telegenic. Something told him these weren't the guys from the Lexus. These were cops.

"Will you come with us, Mr. Raszer?"

"Shit," said Raszer. "I'd rather not tonight, guys."

"We could just arrest you," said the one on his right.

"On what charge?" Raszer asked.

"Stalking," answered the big one on the left. "We know you've been following her. Once you entered the building, though, you crossed the legal line."

“For Chrissake,” Raszer said, knowing his protest was probably futile. “She let me in.”

“That’s not how we saw it,” said the big man. “What we saw looked more like a rape about to happen.”

Raszer put his palms up. “Okay. I get it. The fix is in. Let’s get this over with.”

“It won’t be so bad, Mr. Raszer,” said the smaller man. “Life doesn’t offer a lot of second chances.”

The Org’s palatial Star Temple was an eye-roller to anyone in on the joke. It probably had been even in the 20’s, when the Inces had built it to house the likes of Carole Lombard and Clark Gable. A six-story imitation Italian palazzo amid palm trees and tumbleweed on a funky stretch of Highland Avenue. Much as Raszer loved Hollywood, he knew that no amount of European pretension could ever mask the border town smell or the hiss of rattlesnakes in the brush. But The Org’s people thought the building was just grand, and had made it the nexus of their courtship of the town’s royalty. They didn’t seem to have a clue what was genuine and what wasn’t.

The cops escorted Raszer to a meeting room on the top floor and left him at an empty conference table. A few minutes later, two flat-faced young functionaries took seats opposite him, and shortly thereafter, were joined by a tall, tuxedoed man with shoe polish black hair and a serenely superior stare. He carried with him three thick, leather binders which bore the seal of The Org. Raszer recognized him from wire service photos. He was a big deal, for all intents the acting CEO of The Org.

“How do I rate their heir-apparent?” Raszer asked the man. “I’m not a celebrity.”

“You are in some quarters, Mr. Raszer,” the man answered. “We certainly know your work. What is it the newspapers call you? A cult-buster?”

“So much for my carefully cultivated anonymity,” Raszer said. “Did you invite me here to give me a star on Hollywood Boulevard?”

He had hoped for a smile but didn’t get one.

“Something much better,” his host replied. “We’d like to retain your services. Exclusively. You seem to have a nose for snake oil.”

Raszer held his tongue.

“Ethan Ebersoll,” said the tall man, offering his hand across the table. “General counsel and head of operations.”

“I know your work, as well,” said Raszer. He took the hand lightly. It had the texture of American cheese. “Why do you imagine I’d want to be in your employ?”

“Because,” said Ebersoll, “we share a contempt for those who cynically exploit the human desire for spiritual advancement. Our success has spawned hundreds of sham competitors who’ve conned thousands of people out of their savings. You probably know that five years ago we purchased the Cultwatch organization out of bankruptcy court. We own a terabyte’s worth of files on fraudulent religious organizations. We’d like to use them. We’d like to offer you the directorship. A lifetime appointment, Mr. Raszer, with a generous salary and, of course . . . benefits.”

Raszer smiled. “I have to say, Mr. Ebersoll: you’ve earned your rank. That’s as good a grift as I’ve seen. You want me to put the competition out of business so that you can be the ones to con those people out of their savings.”

“You read too many tabloids,” countered Ebersoll. “You, of all people, should

know better. We've helped untold thousands conquer despair and claim mental and spiritual health. I'm talking mutual benefit. After all, *you* need our help, too."

"How can you help *me*, Mr. Ebersoll? I kicked my addictions years ago, and I don't need a career."

"Those things can change."

"How's that?" Raszer asked. His tone suddenly was cold.

Ebersoll turned to the operative on his right, who lay the fat binders one by one in front of Raszer.

"Do you know what these are, Mr. Raszer?" he said.

"No, but you're about to tell me," Raszer replied.

"They're what we like to call 'dead agent files.' One for Miss Surrey, one for City Attorney Harrah—which we hope not to utilize. And one for you. With this file, and the data that supports it, we can obliterate you."

"All lies, presumably," said Raszer.

"Not lies, Mr. Raszer. The proximate truth. When you're under assault as we are, you fight fire with fire."

"Sorry. Any skeletons I've got were out of the closet long ago."

"You may not know yourself as well as you think you do. Take a few minutes to thumb through. It's a walk down memory lane. Maybe even some memories you didn't know you had. None of us see ourselves as others see us."

Ethan Ebersoll rose from the table and walked to a large, curtained French window. A brass band was warming up six floors below in the palazzo's garden.

"What's the occasion?" Raszer asked, opening the book.

“A tribute,” said Ebersoll. “Los Angeles Citizen of the Year. Good party. Would you like to come?”

“No thanks,” said Raszer. “I don’t drink Kool-Aid. Who’s the honoree?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” said Ebersoll, turning away.

The first item in the dossier was—appropriately enough—a copy of his birth certificate. His father’s name: Rosen. His mother’s: McGuire. That much was true, but that was where his life and the life of the man whose chronicle this purported to be parted ways. Farther on, there was enough legit material to anchor the file in nominal fact: reviews from his failed acting career, school transcripts, tax returns. Interspersed with these, however, were clippings, photographs, medical and legal records of a wholly fictitious stripe, each one looking as official as if it had issued from files kept in a parallel universe.

“Christ,” said Raszer. “It’s a lot of work to destroy someone, isn’t it?”

“You’ve already done the lion’s share,” said Ebersoll. “You’ve made a real mess of it. Cocaine, alcohol, child endangerment. Tax fraud, mail fraud, theft of classified documents. Bi-polar disorder. Why, you can’t get through the day without thinking about re-opening those scars on your wrists, can you?” He strode back to the table and leaned in. “You’re a desperate man, Raszer. But we can help. Orgtech can make you whole again. We can erase those neuron traces as effectively as lifting scum from a pond.”

“No, thanks,” said Raszer. “And by the way: fuck you.” He stood up and pushed away the binder. “I’m going home.”

“Before you do,” said Ebersoll flatly. “Be sure to peruse the appendix. Exhibit A-6 might interest you.”

Raszer remained standing and flipped to the appendix. A wave of nausea hit him after the first paragraph. He sat back down. There was a photograph of his daughter, Brigit, at age seven, accompanied by what was presented as an official transcript of her interview with a psychologist assigned by the family court that had handled Raszer's divorce, and continued to monitor custody arrangements.

"Pedophilia," said Ebersoll. "The most repellent crime of all. Shame on you."

Raszer flipped rapidly through the appendix, speed-reading its catalog of horrors.

"None of this would hold up in court," he said, containing fury. "These records don't exist."

"They do now. And in the hands of the right judge, they *will* hold up." Ebersoll paused for effect, and Raszer saw the henchman on his left smirk. "State and local court systems are in disarray with their mandates to switch from paper files to digital storage. And you know, Stephan . . . all the world asks is the appearance of legitimacy."

"That should be The Org's motto."

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Ebersoll called.

"They're ready for you downstairs," said a young man whose ceremonial outfit resembled that of a refugee from the *HMS Pinafore*.

"I see the Navy's here tonight," Raszer said.

Ebersoll pursed his lips, then stood, and the stooges did likewise.

"Take some time," he said, indicating the dossier. "I think you'll find all the dots connect. And take a look at the others, too, if you like. I'll be back in thirty minutes to wrap things up."

He leveled his stare at Raszer and squinted like a jeweler examining a diamond's hairline crack. At that very moment, the chain reaction in Raszer's skull had reached critical mass, and the tiny, clay-colored mote in his eye had begun to flicker. It wasn't an alchemy triggered by outrage or indignation; these alone wouldn't have been enough to kindle his fire. It was something about the man, Ebersoll, himself. Something coming off him like a bad smell. He was a fake. A human forgery.

"Now that's a trick I haven't seen," said Ebersoll. "Except in certain dogs and animals of the night." He looked about the room for whatever might be striking Raszer's eye at just the right angle to cause the focused refraction of light.

Raszer said nothing, but locked his sights on the figure opposing him, determined to identify what he'd glimpsed a moment earlier. The light from his eye grew brighter and more directional. Ebersoll took a step back, unconsciously recoiling from the scrutiny. Moment by moment, the heat of Raszer's stare burned away scale, skin, and subterfuge until he was able to regard the man as he was. It was a spiritual x-ray that left nothing hidden.

He scanned The Org leader's psychic substructure from chakra to chakra, criss-crossing the ground of his being in search of that secret place where a soul should have been.

Finally, exhausted, he let out a gasp. "Oh, Jesus," he said numbly. "You haven't got one." Suddenly dizzy, and weakened both by the effort of his examination and its monstrous conclusion, he reached for the nearest chair and dropped into it..

Ebersoll, sensing the threat and doubtless feeling more naked than he had in his unnatural life, turned to one of the aides and said, "Stay in the hall. Lock the door behind

you. I'll be back after the ceremony." He took dead aim and shot his captive a glare certainly intended to ice his inner heat, then left.

Raszer was alone.

He sat, unmoving, for a few moments. In the aftermath of psychic insights afforded by his wild eye, recall was exceedingly vague. It was like remembering something said, then being immediately unsure of whether it'd been said in life or in a movie.

Moreover, what he'd glimpsed was not a presence, but an *absence*.

He shuddered, then rose and went to the window. He wanted to observe the spectacle in the garden. Gathered in front of the platform was an audience of about three hundred, and in the front row, in the chair directly opposite the podium, sat the presumed honoree. Even at this distance it was easy to recognize City Attorney James Harrah.

He returned to the table and gathered the dead-agent files into a stack, then went to the door and rattled the knob. "If you don't let me use the toilet," he called out, "I'm going to pee on the ficus plant." There was no answer. "I swear to God. Or maybe I'll do it right here and let it seep out under your shoes."

After a beat, the cylinder turned. The instant the door was opened, Raszer jabbed two fingers into the glands just beneath the hireling's jaw and simultaneously squeezed the brainstem with his free thumb and forefinger. The man crumpled like a marionette. He would be out, at best, for thirty seconds. Raszer wheeled around, scooped up the dossiers, and headed rapidly down the opulent hallway in the direction of the wide, carpeted stairwell.

He kept his head up and tried to measure his pace so that he wouldn't look like a man in flight. So far, so good. On the third-floor landing, however, he heard a shout, and then the crackle of a walkie-talkie below. He considered a detour into the hallway. A building like this one must have a fire exit. Failing that, a window and a downspout would do. But no sooner had the thought come when the newly revived operative appeared a flight above him and shouted for him to stop or be shot.

Bullshit, thought Raszer. *They won't take that chance. Not even with the cops in their pocket.*

He hurtled down the stairs to the broad second floor landing, where a crystal chandelier hung above a rug embroidered with the emblem of The Org. On the facing wall was mounted some kind of coat of arms, crossed by a pair of what appeared to be authentic antique battle swords.

The walkie-talkie crackled again, nearer. Raszer stopped cold. The man holding the device rounded a corner below and mounted the stairs, joined a few seconds later by an armed security guard. The two in front were a mere eight steps away, while the man in the rear had reached the third floor landing. The vaulting double-doors of the palazzo flew open and the threshold was commandeered by the second of Ebersoll's two operatives, also on a walkie-talkie.

Four-to-one, facing a gun, and nowhere to run.

Discretion might have argued for surrender. How could they risk to keep him captive? But Raszer's preternatural intuition told him that they might risk a great deal, and as the security guard slipped his hand to the gun grip, Raszer wedged the binders

under his left arm, wheeled about, pulled one of the antique swords from the wall, and turned to face his antagonists.

The man with the walkie-talkie paused, as anyone would pause in the presence of a man with a sword. The armed guard set his foot on the step, then did likewise, holding up his palm to halt the man coming from Raszer's rear. There were two seconds of indecision. Raszer calculated the angle and force needed to jump the banister, then muttered, "Fuck it," and charged straight through the men facing him, brandishing the saber.

An instant later, he barrelled past the spur-of-the-moment block offered at the front door, and a beat after that, heard the pop and felt the bullet burn into the muscle tissue of his right leg. "Shit!" he yelled, and stumbled toward the Third Street gate, running on the power of his internal combustion. Once out, he made for the middle of the street, and saw that his pants leg was already saturated with blood.

He scanned the street, then tried in vain to flag down a panel truck emblazoned with the eternally smiling face of 'George Brazil, Plumber.' His pursuers had reached the gates and had called in a second armed guard. A nearby woman screamed, and a homeless man ducked behind a Hummer parked on the east side of Bronson. Three spaces down from that, a limo pulled speedily away from the curb and screeched to a halt at Raszer's side, momentarily offering cover.

The rear window dropped. It was Diana Surrey.

"Oh, my God!" she cried. "You're hurt. Get in and I'll take you to Cedars."

"Talk about the cavalry!" said Raszer, clambering into the back seat and dumping the binders. "How did you—"

“I saw them take you from my window. I knew they’d—“ Her eyes widened as she saw the amount of blood he’d lost.

“I know,” he said, clutching his leg. “He must’ve hit an artery.” He surveyed the limo, then eyed what she was wearing. A longish skirt of some soft, seashell colored material.

“How much do you love that skirt?” he asked. “I need a tourniquet.”

“It’s Armani,” she said. “But there are always more where it came from.”

“We’re gonna make it a mini,” he said.

She started to unzip the skirt, but Raszer shook his head and said, “No time.” He leaned way over, took the hem in his hands, and rent it with his teeth. Then, in the fluid motion that urgency brings, he tore free a strip about thirteen inches in breadth, gently lifting her legs to slip it from beneath her thighs.

“No man’s ever gotten me out of a skirt that fast,” she said.

He smiled and bound his upper thigh as tightly as he could. It would have to do. Blood had already pooled on the leather seat.

“As fast as you can,” she said to the driver, who’d been keeping his own counsel. “He’s badly hurt.” Then she leaned back, exhaled a sigh, and said, “Jesus. What happens now?”

“We find out if they deserve their unpleasant reputation.”

Diana eyed the hefty binders scattered between them on the seat. She saw that one of them bore her name.

“You got away with something,” she said. “What is it?”

“Take a look,” said Raszer. “It’s like having your worst enemy as a press agent.”
He grimaced as pain shot from leg to brain. “Ever been through a legal battle?”

“Nothing more serious than a divorce,” she said.

“That’s no party,” said Raszer. “This’ll be worse.”

“And when it’s over?”

“When it’s over . . . maybe you’ll have that place in Santa Monica Canyon. And maybe the Devil will have to find a new place to hide in Hollywood.”

As the limo sped down Beverly Boulevard, Raszer lay his head on the cool leather, closed his eyes, and felt the faint beating of pulse against his left eyelid.

