

HUGO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
HEIR TO THE EMPIRE

TIMOTHY
ZAHN

SOULMINDER



Soulminder

Timothy Zahn



CHAPTER 1

I Pray the Lord My Soul to Keep

THE EVENING'S VISITORS to Mercy Medical Hospital had long since gone home, as had most of the day staff, and the hallway outside the small equipment-packed room was as silent as a grave. Across the room, behind the medical repeater displays, the old Venetian blinds clattered quietly against themselves as imperfect window seals let in small gusts of the increasingly turbulent air outside. Shifting stiffly in his chair, Adrian Sommer groped for his coffee mug, trying to shut out the oppressive feeling creeping over him. Late at night, with the extra blackness of a storm approaching, it was a horrible time to have to watch a man die.

That the old man visible on the TV monitor would soon breathe his last, there was little doubt. The doctor preparing one last hypo of painkiller knew it—Sommer had seen that same stolid expression of resignation over a hundred faces over the past three years, and knew all too well what it meant. The family gathered together around the pastel-sheeted bedside knew it, too, even those who only hours before had been struggling vehemently to hide it from themselves. Sommer had listened as the conversation, faintly audible through the door separating the two rooms, had gone from hopeful to angry to resigned.

And as for the old man himself ...

Sommer sipped at his mug, his stomach burning with acid as the cold coffee reached it. *God, I thought, I hate this.*

Behind him, a chair squeaked. "I'm getting fluctuations," Jessica Sands announced quietly. "Won't be long now."

Sommer nodded. Pushing the morose thoughts away as best he could, he forced his mind back into work mode. "Mass reader is holding steady." He gave the instruments arrayed before him a quick scan. "Nothing showing on the Kirlian yet."

"Might want to switch the Mullner off stand-by," Sands suggested. "I still don't trust the Kirlian to give us enough warning." She paused as the blinds rattled again, louder this time. "Hope the lightning holds off until it's over."

"Oh, certainly," Sommer growled. "It'd be a shame for him to die without us getting any useful data out of him."

The words had come out with more bitterness than he'd intended them to, but for once Sands had the grace to let it pass without retort. For a long minute the wind and the drone of cooling fans were the only sounds in the room, and then Sands's chair squeaked again as she turned to look over her shoulder at him. "I've been thinking," she said. "After we've finished with this set, what say we move our operations somewhere else for a while? LA or San Diego, for instance."

Sommer eyed her. "Something wrong with right here?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said too casually, and her eyes slipped away from his gaze. "It'd be a nice change of scenery, for starters. Climate's supposed to be better there, too."

Sommer felt his lip tighten. "Climate. As in they have fewer thunderstorms?"

Sands threw him a glare that was half resignation, half impatience. “What are you trying to prove, Adrian?” she demanded. “That you *like* the feel of knives twisting around in your gut?”

In his lap, Sommer’s hands curled into impotent fists. “Running away isn’t the answer,” he told her stubbornly.

“I’d like to know what is, then,” she countered. “Standing there and getting your feet knocked off from under you every time a thunderstorm moves through sure isn’t doing you any good.”

“I do *not* get my feet kn—”

“Hold it!” Sands cut him off, swiveling back to her instruments. “I think it’s starting.”

Sommer’s eyes flicked to the main TV monitor, heart pounding in his ears. One look was all it took—the old man was indeed in his last moments. Flicking the selector on his other display to the Kirlian, he watched as the three-dimensional saddleshape began to flatten. “How’s the Mullner?” he asked.

“Coming in strong,” Sands said, a steady excitement creeping into her voice. “Fits the expected pattern: standard plus—oh, lots of embellishments.”

Sommer squeezed the arm of his chair, a fresh wave of acid pain shooting through his stomach. *Embellishments*. As if the experiences and memories, the joys and sorrows of a lifetime had no more meaning than decoration. “Any anomalies?”

“You mean because of the Alzheimer’s?” He sensed her shake her head. “No truncating of the memory traces or anything obvious like that. Something may show up when we run it through the computer, though.”

On the monitor one of the old man’s daughters, her back to the hidden camera, had taken his hand. Sommer blinked back tears, glad that he couldn’t see her face. “It’s starting to detach,” he told Sands.

“Right,” she said, an odd tautness in her voice. “Watch *real* closely, Adrian.”

“What—?”

There was no time to complete the question. On the monitor the old man stiffened ... and suddenly the Kirlian trace went flat.

Or, rather, almost flat. For a second it seemed to hesitate, and then, like a strong fish being drawn in on a line, the saddleshape began to reform. “Jessica!” Sommer snapped, eyes locked on the image. “What in God’s name—?”

The question faded on his lips as the saddleshape again flattened. For good, this time.

The old man was dead.

“Damn,” Sands muttered behind him.

Sommer drew a shuddering breath, a sudden sweat soaking his shirt as he turned to face her. “I thought we’d agreed,” he said, his voice trembling with suppressed emotion, “that we weren’t going to try the trap again until we had a better idea of what exactly we were doing.”

She looked back at him unblinkingly. “We *do* have a better idea what we’re doing,” she said calmly. “Every death we record gives us a better picture of how the lifeforce is mapped out—”

“How the *soul* is mapped out,” Sommer corrected her.

She shrugged fractionally. “The point is that we’ve identified fifteen new characteristic curves in the trace since the last trap experiment, and I thought it was time to give it another shot.”

She had a point—Sommer had to concede that. But that didn’t excuse her setting up the run behind his back. “You could have told me,” he growled.

The hard set to her eyes softened, just a little. “The anticipation is almost as hard on you as thunderstorms are,” she said quietly. “You know, I meant what I said before about taking this show off the road.”

Or in other words, the subject of her unauthorized experiment with the trap was closed. Temporarily.

at least. “We can’t afford to move,” he told her flatly. “Our equipment is here, our computer contracts are here, all our financial support is here.”

She gazed at him, studying his face. “We’re close, Adrian. Real close. You saw what happened. We had a genuine grip on the life—on the soul—there.”

“Except that it didn’t look any better than the last attempt we made.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she said. “We’ll see what happens when the computer’s chewed over it.”

Sommer shook his head heavily. “It’s not working, Jessica. Somewhere along the line we’re missing something. Proximity requirements, pattern identification, power, trap design—*something*.”

Sands’s eyes flicked over his shoulder to the TV monitor. “Well, we’re not going to be able to get the trap much closer than this. Not without putting it in someone’s lap. But if it’s pattern identification or one of the others, it’s just a matter of time and experimentation.”

Sommer sighed. “I know,” he said. “It’s just that ... ” He shook his head.

“I know; it’s been a long road for you,” Sands said quietly, her voice about as sympathetic as it ever got. “Look, I can pull all the packs and shut things down here. Why don’t you go on home, okay?”

Sommer wasn’t in the mood to argue. Outside, he could hear the rain beginning; the thunder wouldn’t be far behind. If he got a sleeping pill down him fast enough, he could possibly be out before the worst of it hit. “Okay,” he told her, getting to his feet. “See you tomorrow.”

For a moment he paused, his eyes shifting one last time to the TV monitor. The family had left the room now, and the doctor was tiredly turning off the various monitors. Sommer focused on the figure beneath the sheet, and as it always did, David’s old bedtime prayer whispered through his mind:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Blinking back tears, he turned away. Fumbling for the doorknob, he left the room.

He’d hoped to beat the thunderstorm home. The thunderstorm, unfortunately, won the race.

It was an especially violent one, too. The lightning flashed across the sky like a stuttering strobe light, blazing across the night and burning bizarre afterimage shadows into Sommer’s retinas. The thunder stabbed at his eardrums and shook his car, while the wind turned the trees lining the road into crazed dancers.

And as he fought the wheel and winced every time a particularly deep puddle threw a blinding wall of water across his windshield, he thought about David.

It had been exactly this sort of night, with exactly this sort of terrible visibility, when the SUV had run a stop sign and slammed into the passenger side of their car. David had taken the full brunt of the impact, his little body half crushed, half torn by the wall of twisted metal as he was thrown sideways against his restraints.

And with the rain dripping through the cracks in the roof, Sommer had held his son in his arms and felt the life leave the little boy’s body.

The life. The soul.

Could he have been saved? That was the question that had haunted Sommer’s every waking hour for the eleven years since that night. David’s body had been badly damaged, but even in the middle of the storm Sommer had been able to see that most of the injuries could have been repaired with proper medical care. Maybe all of them could have been.

But there had been no chance of that. Not that night. Not with the two of them trapped in the car.

with the raging storm scrambling every cell phone in the area. And so Sommer had held his son, and watched David's last few minutes silently drift away into eternity.

He vividly remembered wishing over and over that there was a way to keep his son alive. To keep the child's soul attached to his broken body for a little longer.

Or if not to keep body and soul together, perhaps to capture and preserve that soul until the body could be repaired.

It was in the moments afterward, as Sommer laid his son gently back onto the cushions, that the idea of Soulminder was born.

Two months later, he resigned his position at the hospital and set off to make that desperate hope and dream a reality.

Everything he'd done since had been focused on that goal. He'd dug into the literature and discovered the work of James Mullner, who had investigated the long-forgotten fad of Kirlian photography and found an unexpected but intriguing link between a person's coronal discharges and his moods and personality. He'd found Jessica Sands, whose technical and electronics genius more than compensated for Sommer's own limitations in those fields. When the insurance settlement money ran out, he'd cobbled together enough loans and grants from friends, colleagues, and small professional groups to keep the work going.

Only now that work had hit a dead end. Possibly the final dead end.

Sommer snarled a tired curse under his breath as a particularly dazzling spear of lightning blazed across the sky directly in front of him. *No*, he told himself firmly. There'd been other roadblocks over the years, and he and Sands had always found a way around them. They'd find a way around this one, too.

Somehow.

Sommer had made a promise to himself, and to David, and to every parent, child, or friend who had ever watched a loved one die. And that promise was going to be kept.

One of the advantages of the sleeping tablets was that they kept him from dreaming. One of the disadvantages was that they nearly always made him oversleep.

It was nearly eleven before he opened the door to the tiny office outside their equally tiny lab, and find that Sands had a visitor.

"Morning, Jessica," he said as the two of them looked up at him. "Sorry I'm late."

"No problem," she said, a touch of grimness in her voice as the man rose to his feet. "Mr. Westmont, my partner, Dr. Adrian Sommer. Mr. Thomas Westmont."

Westmont offered his hand, a quietly calculating look in his eyes. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. Sommer," he said, nodding. His hand was cool, disengaging with practiced ease almost before Sommer had taken it. "I've just been talking with Dr. Sands about the possibility of offering some financial support for your Soulminder project."

Sommer studied him. "I was under the impression, Mr. Westmont, that our underwriters had agreed to keep Soulminder confidential."

Westmont waved a hand negligently. "Yes, well, you know how it is, Dr. Sommer. People have contacts, and those contacts sometimes let information slip."

"Those contacts being ... ?"

"I hardly think that's important, Doctor. The point is that—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Westmont, but it's extremely important," Sommer interrupted. "We added those clauses specifically so that word of what we're doing wouldn't leak out. If someone's violated

confidentiality we need to know about it.”

Westmont gave a little snort. “Please, Doctor. The only reason contracts exist is so that lawyers will have a place to practice their jousting. As for privacy and secrets, please try not to be any more naïve than you absolutely have to. You should be thanking me, really.”

“I should?”

“Of course,” Westmont said. “Because it’s clear that you and Soulfinder are rapidly running out of money. Fortunately, I have access to a great deal of that precious commodity.”

Sommer looked at Sands. Her expression was even more wooden than it had been a moment earlier. “It sounds wonderful,” he agreed. “Where’s the hook?”

Westmont’s eyes went politely wide. “There’s no hook, Dr. Sommer. All we ask is that we be kept abreast of your progress and that we be allowed to share in the various side discoveries you pick up along the way.”

Sommer held his gaze. “Any particular side discoveries you had in mind?”

“Little things, mostly,” Westmont said with another shrug. “Any relationships or correlations you might have picked up between the shape of this soul-image of yours with, say, personality or intelligence or whatever.”

Somewhere in the back of Sommer’s mind, the name belatedly clicked. Thomas Westmont, chief legal bulldog of flamboyant Congressman Mula Barnswell. The architect of the Congressman’s latest attempt to slip one of his blatantly ethnically-slanted bills under the legal barriers that had been set up to catch such things. “I see. You’re *that* Thomas Westmont, are you?”

Westmont smiled, without even a trace of embarrassment or guilt. “I’m flattered that you recognize me.”

“The bill you’re pushing for Congressman Barnswell is hardly back-page news at the moment.”

“Yes, but most of the media fascination is with the chanting idiots out in front of the Capitol.” Westmont said, lip twisting with contempt. “Anyway, that’s beside the point.”

“Is it?” Sommer demanded. “Do you really expect us to believe that our data wouldn’t show up your documentation the day after tomorrow if we handed it over to you?”

Westmont cocked an eyebrow. “Are you saying your data *does* support the Congressman’s views?”

“I’m saying nothing of the kind,” Sommer said. “But I know that a collection of raw data can be twisted to support nearly any preconceived notion if you use a big enough wrench on it.”

Westmont shrugged. “Perhaps. But, really, that’s not the Congressman’s interest in your project. In fact, if you’d like, I’d be happy to stipulate that Congressman Barnswell wouldn’t release any of your data without discussing it with you first.”

“In one of these jousting-field contracts of yours?” Sommer asked pointedly. “You’ll forgive me if I say the Congressman and his associates don’t inspire that kind of confidence in me. Don’t forget, Mr. Westmont, that any misuse of our work is ultimately our responsibility.”

Westmont’s eyes narrowed. “Let’s not bleed quite so much, Doctor. A renewed sense of ethics may be all the rage among scientists these days, but the simple fact is that none of you is qualified to even see the long-term implications of your work, much less make any decisions concerning it. In a democracy that’s the job of the elected officials, the men in tune with the country’s needs and wishes.”

“Like Barnswell?” Sands put in, heavily sardonic.

Westmont glanced at her, turned back to Sommer. “The bottom line, Doctor, is that you need money. You know it and I know it, so let’s table the ethical posturing.” Across the desk, Sands snarled something under her breath. “I can have five million dollars in your account by this afternoon.”

Westmont continued, ignoring her. “You would then have three days to collect your data into reasonably readable form and send it to Congressman Barnswell’s office.”

“You’d be wasting the taxpayers’ money,” Sommer told him firmly. “The data is limited and raw and any conclusions you tried to draw from it would be completely useless.”

“Indeed?” Westmont cocked an eyebrow. “Are you saying there *are* indications there that you rather not be made public?”

“I’m saying nothing of the kind,” Sommer growled, backpedaling from the edge of the verbal trap. “I’m saying that at the moment there’s nothing solid anyone can draw from the data. On *any* topic.”

“Of course,” Westmont said, almost soothingly. His hand slipped beneath his suit coat, withdrawing a slender wallet. Selecting a card, he flicked it onto the desk. “Think about it, Dr. Sommer, Dr. Sand. And consider the fact that you’re down to your last shoestring on this. Without our money, Soulminster is finished.” He nodded toward the card as he put the wallet away and gathered his topcoat from the back of a nearby chair. “Call me when you’ve made your decision.”

The door closed behind him, and Sands spat a curse. “*Damn* him,” she snarled. “*Damn* him, damn Barnswell—*double* damn the idiot who let this leak.”

“Try to ignore him,” Sommer said. The confrontation-induced adrenaline was draining away, leaving behind a growing depression. Pulling over the chair Westmont had been sitting in, he sank into it, wincing at the residual warmth.

“Ignore him how?” Sands retorted. “In case you missed it, Adrian, Congressman Bigot-Lunatic Barnswell and his brain-dead fringe know about us. How long do you suppose it’ll be before they break the wonderful news that there are distinct and measurable differences between the souls of different races and genders?”

“The differences are between individuals, not races or whatever.”

“*I* know that,” she snapped. “You think such subtleties aren’t going to be lost once people like Barnswell get their grubby hands on it?”

“So what do you suggest we do?”

Some of the steel went out of Sands’s back. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “We could release ourselves, but Barnswell and everyone else with an axe to grind would jump on it and the final result would be the same. Not to mention that the publicity would probably scare off any potential renewals by our underwriters.”

Something in her voice ... “You aren’t seriously considering Westmont’s offer, are you?” Sommer asked, frowning.

She took a deep breath, her eyes meeting his with visible effort. “He was right, Adrian,” she said softly. “Soulminster *is* on its last shoestring here. Besides, we’d have three days to run the data through some more analysis—maybe decorrelate it beyond even Barnswell’s ability to distort it.”

Sommer stared at her. “Jessica, maybe to you this is just another job—”

“You know better than that,” she snapped. “Soulminster is just as important to me as it is to you. Besides, all the sentiment in the world isn’t going to change the facts. A, that we’re broke, and B, that Barnswell has money.”

Sommer locked eyes with her. “I am not,” he said, biting out each word, “going to let people like Barnswell get their filthy hands on Soulminster. Period; end of discussion.”

For a long moment they glared at each other in silence. Sands blinked first. “I don’t much like either,” she sighed. “Look. That stuff about moving to LA last night wasn’t all froth. I’ve got some feelers out to the police department there, trying to get them interested in the possible forensic applications of our Mullner-trace work. Why don’t I fly out there and see if I can squeeze some money

out of them? It would at least postpone any decision on Barnswell's offer."

"The decision's already been made," Sommer told her stubbornly.

Her standard patient expression began to look a little strained. "Sure," she said. "All the more reason for me to shoot over to LA."

Sommer got back to his feet. "Yeah, go ahead," he told her tiredly. "Has last night's data been chewed over yet?"

"I got it running before Westmont arrived," she told him, reaching for her terminal. "It'll be done soon if it isn't already."

"Thanks," he nodded.

She was studying one of the consolidated airline websites as he stepped through the back door of the office into the lab.

Keying off the last page of the correlation analysis, Sommer leaned back in his chair, reaching wearily for his coffee cup. Sands's gut-feeling statement the night before had been correct: the basic kernel of the old man's soul-image was indeed the same as all the other hundred-odd Mullner traces they collected over the last three years. Just the same, without any new correlations the analysis could not detect.

In other words, the deathwatch had been a total waste of time and effort.

As had been the one before, and the one before that, and the one before that. The last five samplings combined, in fact, had yielded only a single new correlation factor; even with a hundred samples to compare of, they still didn't have the slightest clue as to how the incredible tangle of embellishments could be interpreted, read, or otherwise made use of.

Soulminder wasn't just running out of money. It was also running out of steam.

"Nothing, huh?" Sands said from over at her own terminal.

Sommer shook his head. "Not a drop. I think we've finally hit the wall, Jessica."

She grunted deep in her throat. "Well, no one ever said this was going to be easy. Have you tried doing a similarity analysis on the embellishments yet?"

"The program's still running, but I'm not expecting anything. If the computer can't even distinguish Alzheimer's patients from normal people, it's sure not going to be able to find anything more subtle."

Sands swiveled her chair around to frown at him. "Last night must have hit you pretty hard. You usually bounce back from blind alleys better than this."

"Maybe I've bounced off one blind alley too many. Maybe the whole concept of Soulminder is just one massive blind alley."

"No," Sands said firmly. "It's going to work—we're going to *make* it work. We just haven't got the right handle on it yet. And we're not going to find it sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves."

Sommer took a deep breath, exhaled it between tightly clenched teeth. She was right, as usual. "All right," he growled. "Let's run it by again. We've proven the existence of the soul—or at least that there's *something* that leaves the body at death," he corrected himself before she could do it for him. "We can make a trace/map of this thing, show it consists of a common kernel plus embellishment, and the complexity of the latter correlating slightly with age. We can even trap the soul for—how long do you have hold of it last night?"

"Two point three seconds. Up two-tenths of a second from the last time."

He nodded. "And *that* gain represents three generations of trap upgrades, to the tune of eight hundred thousand dollars, *and* setting the trap directly beneath the patient's bed." He waved his hand helplessly. "So where do we go from here?"

Sands's lips compressed briefly. "We stall for time," she said. "We find something else of commercial or scientific value in the Mullner traces and peddle it to interested customers in exchange for fresh money."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Like Congressman Barnswell, for instance?"

"I didn't say that," she said. But there was a distinctly defensive set to her mouth. "I don't especially want his hands on our data either, you know. Do bear in mind, though, that there's absolutely no evidence in our Mullner traces to support his small-minded opinions. All he'd do would be to make a fool of himself if he tried it."

"A fool, or a martyr," Sommer said sourly. "He may be smart enough to play the one into the other. And don't forget that there are a lot of people out there whose brains shut down when they're faced by loud people waving scientific data."

Sands's eyes slipped from Sommer's gaze and came to rest on the trace printer—a high-sophisticated piece of equipment that they still owed nearly ten thousand on. "All right, Adrian," she said. "There's no point in discussing it anyway until I get back from LA. Which reminds me"—she glanced at her watch—"I really ought to get home and pack."

"Will you need a ride to the airport?" Sommer asked as she keyed off her terminal and got to her feet.

"No, thanks—I've got an airport shuttle coming to get me. Oh, here"—she scooped up a folder and handed it to him—"If you get a chance, you might want to file this into the database."

Sommer accepted the folder and glanced at the first page. The psychological profile and history of the man they'd watched die last night. "Sure," he sighed, tossing it onto his desk.

"Okay. Be good, and I'll see you tomorrow evening."

For several minutes after she left he just sat in the quiet room, staring at the display before him. So close ... and yet so very, very far.

Sands didn't understand. How could she? She was an electrical engineer, unschooled in the formalized ethical training that physicians like him had been run through in school and often needed to call upon. For all her enthusiasm she still saw Soulminder as little more than an intriguing challenge, and perhaps the road to future wealth and fame. A scientific and technological breakthrough, to be treated on a scientific and technological level.

Not as a way of saving lives. Certainly not as a memorial.

For a minute Sommer teetered on the brink of self-pity. But there was work to do ... and anyway he'd traveled that road all too often in the last eleven years. Taking a deep breath, he picked up the folder Sands had left him and opened it up.

It wasn't as depressing as he'd feared it would be. There was the heavy sense of a wake about it, certainly, leafing through the facts and figures of a man now dead. But on the other hand, the man had been old, and had lived a full and rich life before the effects of aging and Alzheimer's had sapped his strength and memory. Sommer turned the pages, scanning the records of the man's childhood and youth, a copy of his marriage certificate, the beginnings of his family—

A hand seemed to close over Sommer's heart. *First-born son, Harold, the line read. Died 8/16/55, five years old.*

The page dissolved into a blur as fresh tears rose to Sommer's eyes. The same age as David had been.

Except that, in this man's case, life had continued on afterwards. He'd pulled himself back together, kept his wife, had had more sons and daughters. He hadn't let his son's death become an obsession ...

Angrily, Sommer rubbed the moisture and self-pity from his eyes. "It's not like that," he snarled.

aloud to the empty room. He *wasn't* just doing it for David, but for every child who'd ever had to do unnecessarily. For every parent who'd ever had to face such a crushing trauma—

Abruptly, his train of thought froze on its rails. *Trauma*: an injury or shock to a person's body or psyche. And, perhaps, to the pattern of embellishments making up his soul-trace?

And if so, would similar events cause similar changes?

He looked up, glancing around the room. Their main Mullner setup was still back at the hospital, but they had a secondary one that Sands was forever tinkering with. The recording itself would be no problem—he could skip the data pack and just run it directly into the computer's memory. If Sands wanted something of commercial value, this might just do it.

For a moment he hesitated as natural caution reasserted itself. They hadn't hooked a living person to the Mullner since the very first calibration readings, and Sands had boosted both the power and read-density a hundredfold since then. Besides that, basic safety rules said never to try something new alone.

But it could easily take a day or more to find the proper correlation between his soul-trace and that of the old man. And if Sands came back from LA empty-handed, she might not be willing to wait that long.

The thought of Barnswell's bigots with their hands on David's memorial made up his mind for him. Pushing his chair back against the Mullner computer feed, he got to work.

The first time he'd gone under the Mullner, Sommer had been struck by the dreamlike qualities the device seemed to induce. Now, after Sands's improvements, the effect was even stronger. Sitting alone in the lab, the walls of which seemed to fluctuate between too close and too far, he listened to the hum in his ears and brain.

And dreamed of David.

David's birth, and the sixteen-hour labor that Sally had had to go through to bring him into the world. David's first step, ten months later, which had careened him headfirst into the corner of the coffee table. David at his daycare center when he turned two, at first impossibly shy and then turning completely around to become the world's shortest tyrant.

David on the night of his death.

Sommer had relived that night a hundred thousand times in the past eleven years, and though the emotion surrounding it had subsided from an exquisitely sharp pain to a dull background ache, the wound had never entirely healed. Would never heal.

The accident, and David's death. The funeral, and his frustrated sublimating into the burning need to find a way to keep such unnecessary deaths from ever happening again. His growing obsession with the Soulfinder project—yes, he could admit now that it had been an obsession. Sally's inability to understand his drive and reliving of the past. Ultimately, her inability to put up with it and him any longer.

David would have been sixteen this year. Sommer tried to envision him as a teenager, but he couldn't. The small, five-year-old face kept intruding, and eventually he gave up the effort. The face faded, and he drifted off into other, less painful dreams ...

It seemed to take him a long time to find his way back to consciousness, and when he finally became aware he discovered that that, at least, hadn't been an illusion. His desk clock read six-twenty: two hours and four minutes exactly since he'd activated the Mullner. Blinking aching eyes, he worked himself out of his chair and limped over to the computer. Even with the relatively low read-level he set the Mullner on it shouldn't have taken nearly that long.

Sure enough, the time indicator showed the Mullner had finished its trace two hours and two minutes earlier and had been waiting patiently ever since then for new instructions.

Frowning, Sommer keyed for storage and duplication of the trace and then took a moment to stretch stiff muscles. Knocking him out for two hours was a new trick, something the original Mullner mod hadn't been capable of, and for a minute he wondered uneasily if he was in for a long night of equally unexpected side effects. But aside from fatigue and a few muscle twinges he felt all right, and dismissed the worries as being overly paranoid.

Besides, he'd been pretty exhausted lately. Maybe all that had happened was that his body had seen the opportunity for a quick nap and taken it.

His stomach growled, reminding him it was dinnertime. Taking a deep breath, rib cage creaking with the effort, he sat down at the terminal and began to set up the comparison program. There would be plenty of time to run over to the deli down the street after the computer was chugging away.

As he worked he thought about the dreams. And wondered whether the Mullner apparatus induced similar ones in the dying.

"It's amazing the tricks one's mind plays when one starts getting old," Sands said conversationally, her fingers dancing nimbly over the relevant sections of the two Mullner traces, Sommer's and the other man's. "Take me, for instance. Thirty-six is hardly approaching senility, and yet, I would have sworn I could take off cross-country for a day without worrying that my partner would do something damn fool stupid."

"Guilty as charged," Sommer said, mentally urging Sands on. "Except that anything that works isn't stupid, is it?"

"You're thinking of treason," she corrected him absently. "For if it prosper, none dare call treason.' Stupid risks are always stupid risks." She hissed between her teeth, a sound that was as much thoughtful as it was deprecating.

Sommer could stand it no longer. "Well? What do you think?"

Sands hesitated, then shrugged. "I don't know, Adrian. I really don't know."

"Why not?" he demanded. He jabbed a finger at the spots where her fingers rested. "The exact same curl on both Mullner traces? What else could it be?"

"You're assuming—again—that it's the topography of the embellishment tendrils that's significant," she reminded him tartly. "We don't *know* that that's true. Besides which, you'll note that the two curls aren't in anywhere near the same area. How do you explain *that*?"

Sommer sighed, feeling the excitement of the discovery beginning to fade and slip from his grasp. "I don't explain it," he told her tiredly. "I presume it's related to the differing circumstances of our son's deaths—timing, emotional impact, life afterwards; that sort of thing. Yes, there's a lot more work that'll need to be done on it. But it *is* a start. Isn't it?"

"Of course it's a start," she soothed him. "And anything that helps us understand the lifeform certainly qualifies as progress." She waved a hand helplessly. "But whether it's enough to shake more money out of our underwriters is something else entirely."

Sommer clenched his hands into fists. "Did the people in LA give you any kind of timeframe for their response?"

"If you mean can we get this written up and sent to them before they make a decision, yes. Whether it'll affect that decision, I don't know." She hesitated. "And at any rate, we need to be thinking about long-term funding, not these last-minute, stop-gap things. I don't know about you, but I don't focus well when I'm wondering where my next circuit board is coming from."

“Barnswell is not getting his hands on Soulminder,” Sommer said flatly.

Her lip twisted, just a bit, before she could smooth it out. But it was there long enough for Sommer to read the impatience. “Look, Adrian, I know how you feel—”

“No, you don’t,” he cut her off brusquely. “We both know what Barnswell would do with the data. He’d tear it apart until he found something he could use as evidence for his petty little prejudices. And in the process he’d destroy Soulminder.”

“Oh, come *on*,” Sands snorted. “Aren’t you getting just a little melodramatic here?”

“Am I?” Sommer countered. “You really think potential underwriters will want their names and corporations associated with us after that?”

For a moment Sands was silent. “Maybe we can get some guarantees from him up front,” she said at last. “A written promise not to release any of the data without our permission. Westmont more or less offered that, you know.”

“Westmont also all but said that contracts were made to be broken,” Sommer countered. “What do we do if he reneges? Sue him for breach? It would be a useless gesture—the damage to Soulminder would already have been done.”

Sands looked him straight in the eye. “Five million dollars is a lot of money, Adrian,” she said softly. “A hell of a lot of money.”

“No.”

For a long moment they just stared at each other. Then, reluctantly, Sands broke the contact. “All right,” she said. “I guess I understand. Well ...” Getting to her feet, she headed for the door. “I guess I’ll go back to the hospital and pick up the trap.”

“I thought Dr. Samuels had another volunteer patient lined up for the room.”

“He does, but the prognosis gives her another two to four weeks to live, and I thought I’d see what else I could do with the trap. Maybe boost the range or focus—it’s got to be one of those that we’re missing out on. See you later.”

She left, and Sommer turned his attention back to the two Mullner traces spread out on the desk. Somewhere here was the evidence they needed to bring fresh money into Soulminder.

Five million dollars.

Tears blurred his eyes, and he sank down wearily into his well-worn chair. Five million dollars. Five million filthy dollars. From a filthy little man with a filthy little mind.

And Sands was probably on her way right now to get it for them.

“Damn!” he swore viciously, uselessly, to the empty room. Sands didn’t care a burned-out diode for his vision of Soulminder. Only for Soulminder itself. Coldly determined to make Soulminder work, he was willing to sell her own mother to see it work.

An iron-ringed, single-minded goal ... without which, Sommer knew full well, she would long ago have left him to carry the burden alone.

He sighed, hearing defeat in the sound of rushing air. Sands would sell their data to Barnswell—not today, then tomorrow or the next day. And there was nothing he could do to stop her. Even if he had the strength of will left to fight her; even if she didn’t really have as much right of ownership in the data as he did. She would sell out, and Barnswell would give her his assurances ... and as soon as her back was turned he would do what he damn well pleased anyway.

His eyes drifted to the file cabinet where the hard copies of their precious Mullner traces were stored. Little more than complex curlicues of ink on paper, as people themselves were little more than a collection of exotic chemicals. Each trace—somehow—the record of an entire life. The life of someone who’d allowed him to share in the very private moment of death ... and had trusted him

respect that privacy.

Sommer clenched his hands into fists and took a deep breath. “All right,” he said aloud, getting his feet. It would probably make Sands furious when she found out—and was almost certain unethical to boot—but right now his tacit promise to the souls he’d traced mattered a lot more than either consideration.

The project took nearly an hour to complete. Repeating the operation on the duplicate computer file was considerably easier, taking less than a quarter of that time, and when he was done he sat back in his chair in vaguely guilty satisfaction. Barnswell could now have the data, and if he misused it he and not Soulminder, would be the one to suffer most.

Or so Sommer hoped. At the very least, the individuals who’d let him take their soul-traces would be unaffected—

He paused in mid-thought as something suddenly occurred to him. Something so obvious that he couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it before.

For a long moment he just sat there, gazing off into space, feeling an old fire he thought he’d long since forever begin to burn again within him. Leaning forward, he attacked the computer keyboard.

A minute was all it took to hit the first wall. Muttering under his breath, he scooped up the phone and punched for Sands’s cell.

She answered on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Listen, do you remember where the data on the Mullner trace recognition pattern is stored?” Sommer asked.

“Uh ... try a file called FITTER.CV,” she suggested. “Or something like that—I’m sure FITTER is part of it. What do you want it for?”

“I think it’s time we took another shot at that approach,” he told her, struggling to keep his voice calm.

“What, you mean tailoring the trap to the individual soul? I thought we proved way back when that even a supercomputer wouldn’t be fast enough to record the Mullner trace and configure the trap fields in the time available.”

“Right,” Sommer agreed, “*if* we wait until the moment of death to take the reading. What if we instead take the initial trace beforehand, like I did last night.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. “I don’t know,” Sands said at last, slowly. “It’s not exactly the way we wanted Soulminder to work—you plug your average accident victim into the Mullner and you’re likely to kill him right there and then. You saw what it did to you.”

“So find a way to modify the Mullner,” Sommer ground out, beginning to be annoyed at Sands’s attitude. “Make it gentler but still able to take the entire trace. At least it’s something to try.”

“I agree,” Sands said. “I’ll see what I can do when I get back. Meanwhile, you might call Dr. Samuels and see if he can scare us up a guinea pig. Best bet is probably someone who’s reasonably healthy right now but needs some risky surgery.”

“Uh ... right,” Sommer managed, thrown off-balance a bit by her abrupt switch to his side of the argument. “I’ll do that. See you later.”

“Bye.”

They worked late into the night, Sommer on the computer software and Sands on the trap itself, until a throbbing headache forced Sommer to call it quits. Sands remained behind, and when he arrived the next morning there was a note from her telling him that, as of five-thirty a.m., the hardware modifications to the trap were complete. The note wished him luck with the software, and suggested he not expect her in too early.

Sommer got to work, but before he did so he took a moment to check the flag he'd planted in the Mullner-trace computer files.

The files had indeed been copied, just after he'd left the evening before.

Not unexpected, though it still hurt that Sands would go behind his back and against his wishes like that. But, oddly enough, even such duplicity was unable to dampen the growing enthusiasm within him, the gut-level sense that this time they were indeed on the right track. With any luck, Barnswell's money would take them far enough along that track that they would never again have to deal with him or his kind.

It took four more days to finish the software modifications, and another two after that to complete their limited repertoire of simulation tests. At that point, there was nothing to do but wait for Dr. Samuels to locate a likely patient.

Three days later, he did.

"You have to understand," Dr. Dian Janecki said gently, "that with this type of operation the chances of success are directly proportional to the immediate risk involved. The more of the medulloblastoma we can clean out of your son's cerebellum, the better his long-term chances of survival. At the same time, the deeper we go and the longer we stay there, the greater the dangers of the operation itself."

"We know that, Doctor," Peter Coleman said impatiently, the strain of his son's long illness etched on both his and his wife's faces. "If you're going to suggest more chemical treatments, don't bother. All they do is make Danny sick, and they aren't helping him a damn."

Janecki nodded her agreement. "I know that. And my colleagues and I agree that we can't put off surgery any longer." Her eyes flicked to Sommer. "What I'm going to offer you is—well, maybe it's an unexpected bit of hope. Dr. Sommer, if you and Dr. Sands would care to explain your proposal?"

Sommer mentally braced himself. "What we have, Mr. and Mrs. Coleman, is—maybe—a way to give Dr. Janecki that extra time she wants while still minimizing the risks of the surgery itself."

They listened in stony silence while he explained how Soulfinder could—in theory, at least—hold their son's soul in safety while the surgeons removed the cancer and gave his body time to recover. He finished, and for a long moment both parents were silent. Sommer held his breath ...

Coleman shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "Out of the question."

Huddled beside him, his wife threw him a startled look. "Peter—?"

"Out of the question, Angie," he repeated, more emphatically this time. "It's unnatural, it's unworkable"—he threw Sommer a suspicious glare—"and I'm not sure that it's not downright blasphemous right along with it."

"All surgery is unnatural," Sands pointed out calmly. "So is all medical treatment, if you want to come down to it. As for unworkable; yes, we freely admit that we can't guarantee success. But if we don't keep trying, we'll never succeed."

Coleman sent her the same glare he'd just given Sommer. "You are *not* going to experiment on my son," he growled.

Angie's hand tightened its grip on her husband's. "Peter, if there's even a *chance* it might help, why not try it?"

He looked down at her. "Why? I'll tell you why." He looked back at Sommer. "Tell me, Doctor, what happens if your Soulfinder gizmo works but winds up damaging Danny's soul in the process? Or what if you can't get it back into Danny's body afterwards? Or can't get it out at all?"

They were, Sommer had to admit, good questions. "I don't know," he conceded. "Releasing the soul from the trap shouldn't be a problem—shutting off the power will do that much. But as to the rest

it, we just don't have any answers yet."

"They can't hurt Danny's soul," Angie said, a new trace of firmness creeping into her voice. "There's nothing this world can do to a person that God won't heal in the next life."

"And what if God rejects Danny because he was part of something blasphemous?" Coleman countered. "What makes you people think you can stuff a human soul into a machine, anyway?"

"You could argue that the human body is nothing but a biomechanical machine," Sands pointed out. "Yet *it* manages to hold onto the soul quite adequately."

Coleman visibly clenched his teeth, shifting his eyes to Janecki. "What's *your* opinion of the Doctor?" he demanded. "You really believe they can do it?"

"I don't know," Janecki told him. "All I can say is that in my lifetime I've seen a lot of medical advances, some of which sounded a lot less plausible than this one. It's your decision, of course ... but in my opinion I don't see any reason not to give it a try."

"So that you can go in as deep as you want?" Coleman snapped. "Is that it? So you can play with your scalpel and hope that this half-baked idea will cover any mistakes you make in there—?"

"It doesn't matter," Angie spoke up, with a sudden strength in her voice that made her husband pause and look at her. "Dr. Janecki is going to try to get as much of the tumor out as she can, whether we use Soulminster or not." She blinked tears from her eyes as she looked at her husband. "Danny's going to be healed thoroughly," she said quietly, "or he's going to die. Right here, right now."

Coleman licked his lips, concern replacing the antagonism in his face. "You don't mean that, Angie. Where there's life there's always hope."

"Not any more, Peter," she said, an infinite weariness in her voice. "Not for me. Not for Danny. Can't you see that he's been through enough hell already?" She looked at Janecki. "He's not going to spend the next five years of his life in and out of hospitals, Doctor, and then die anyway," she said. "Heal him completely ... or let him go on to God."

Janecki nodded, her own eyes a little moist. "I understand, Mrs. Coleman. I'll do everything I can. She glanced at Sommer. "About Dr. Sommer's proposal, then ... ?"

Angie looked up at her husband. Coleman's face was tight ... but when he broke from her gaze and looked at Sommer there was no resistance left. Only resignation. "Go ahead, Doctor," he said.

Sommer nodded, a swirl of sympathetic pain and dark memory tightening his stomach and throat. "Thank you," he said quietly. The newly reworked Soulminster's first trial run ... with a five-year-old boy as its subject.

Unbidden, David's face rose up accusingly before his eyes, and the ache in his stomach grew worse. *A five-year-old boy*, he thought morosely. *God, why did it have to be a five-year-old boy?* "We'll have to do a tracing to map the Kirlian and Mullner patterns of his soul," he forced himself to say. "With your permission, I'll go ahead and set up for that right away." He got to his feet, wondering how long he was ever going to face the boy in there—

"I'll handle that," Sands put in smoothly, standing up beside him. "You can go with Dr. Janecki and start setting up the equipment in the operating room. Mr. and Mrs. Coleman, perhaps you'd like to come and watch me—the procedure's completely painless, but I imagine Danny would like your reassurance of that."

They nodded. Getting silently to their feet, they followed Sands from the lounge.

"I hope, Doctor," Janecki commented into the silence, "that you're right about all this."

Sommer took a deep breath. "I do, too. I know what they're going through, Dr. Janecki. I lost a son myself eleven years ago."

"I'm sorry," Janecki said, her eyes locking onto his. "What I meant was that I hope you're right."

about Soulfinder not doing any ... damage.”

Sommer felt his stomach tighten. “I hope so, too,” he said quietly.

The boy’s face was painfully thin, a thinness that his shaved head and the size of the operating table beneath him only served to emphasize. Watching the small monitor screen as they prepared him, Sommer felt a fresh ache in his heart. Danny was so young ... just as David had been. *If I should die before I wake ...*

“Adrian?” Sands’s voice came from the speakerphone beside him. “Things underway there yet?”

With an effort, Sommer forced the memories back. “They’re just getting ready to start,” he told her. “You getting everything all right?”

“Coming in clear and clean,” she assured him. “The trap here is set and running.”

“Same here,” Sommer said, wondering if this particular elaboration had really been necessary. If the trap set up beneath the operating table failed to catch Danny’s soul, after all, there was virtually no chance that the backup duplicate Sands had going in their lab would be able to do so. But on the other hand, distance might not be the significant factor, and the more sophisticated computer back there might be able to feed Sands’s trap a better Mullner trace than could the portable machine humming along at Sommer’s side.

Besides which, it was probably better that Sommer be here alone. Already he could tell that it was going to be a morning filled with thoughts of David, and Sands’s presence would only be an intrusion. “Kirlian and Mullner both look strong,” he added.

“Same here,” Sands confirmed. “By the way, I noticed a few minutes ago that the trap software was doing a continual scan of the entire Mullner-trace file. Is it supposed to be doing that?”

Sommer cursed under his breath. “Not really. I put that in as a secondary system in case the primary targeting flag got confused and lost hold of its target trace. I guess it did.”

“Fixable?”

“Not now,” he sighed. “I’ll have to tear the targeting software apart and completely rebuild it. Damn—I knew we were going to have trouble with that.”

“Well, no harm done,” Sands assured him. “This is only here for backup anyway, remember. As long as it doesn’t latch onto one of the already departed and yank them back from heaven, that is.”

“Not funny, Jessica,” Sommer growled.

“Sorry. They started there yet?”

He peered at the scene. “Looks like they’ve just finished putting him under,” he told her.

“Good. Be sure and keep a close watch on the EEG trace—if something starts to go wrong, we want as much warning as possible.”

“Sure,” he said between stiff lips. There was an odd note of anticipation in Sands’s voice, a quiet eagerness that sent an unpleasant shiver up his back. On some level, he realized, she was actually hoping Danny would die this morning.

The operation began.

For Sommer, it was an exercise in tense boredom. The camera had been positioned with convenience rather than a clinical view in mind, and it was rare when he got even a glimpse of the operating field beyond the wall of green surgical gowns. The surgeons’ voices, when he was able to hear them over the beeping of monitoring instruments, were calm and businesslike: the voices of people accustomed to holding human lives in their hands. Beside the TV monitor the bank of repeater instruments punctuated the minutes with the monotonous constancy of a steady heartbeat. The minutes stretched into an hour; into an hour and a half; into an hour and three-quarters.

And precisely an hour and fifty-two minutes into the operation, it abruptly fell apart.

“Adrian!” Sands snapped over the phone.

“I see it,” Sommer gritted, fists clenched in agonized helplessness. *If I should die before I wake* .

“Looks like neurogenic shock—no blood’s getting to his tissues. The EEG ... God, Jessica, they’re losing him.”

“Steady, Adrian,” she said tightly. “This is going to work. Everything reading ready?”

Sommer gave the Soulfinder instruments a quick scan. “It’s all set,” he told her, stomach churning. He’d fought to hold onto some semblance of professional calm through this, but now he could feel that professionalism boiling away like an ice cube on a hot burner.

Eleven years later, he was once again watching helplessly as David died. “No,” he half-whispered, half-groaned.

Once again, hope and wish proved inadequate. Two minutes later, it was all over.

“Adrian!” Sands barked. “What the hell’s happening?”

“He’s dead,” Sommer said mechanically, his eyes on the flat EEG trace. “It was ... it all happened so quickly.”

“Never mind that,” Sands bit out tautly. “What about the trap?”

Sommer broke his gaze from the EEG, recognizing even as he did so that he was afraid to look at the Soulfinder instruments. If it hadn’t worked ...

The trap registered active.

He tried twice before he could get the words out. “It’s got him,” he breathed at last. “Jessica, it worked. It’s really *got* him.”

Sands’s shuddering sigh whistled through the phone speaker. “Okay,” she said. “Good. Great. But we’re not out of the woods yet—we still have to get him back in his body—”

“Hold it,” Sommer interrupted her. On the monitor Dr. Janecki had stepped up to the camera microphone. “Dr. Sommer?” she called. “Should we continue with the operation?”

Bracing himself, Sommer switched on his intercom. “Yes,” he said. “The first stage seems to have worked.”

Even on the small monitor screen, he could see relief smoothing the lines around her eyes. A cautious and almost disbelieving relief. “I understand,” she said.

She turned away and began issuing instructions, and Sommer flipped off the intercom. “Dr. Janecki’s going to continue the operation,” he told Sands. “They’re getting the heart-lung machine set up—looks like they’ve got a hypo of neuropreservative, too.” He shivered at the thought. Neuropreservatives were still highly experimental, and what they did for dying brain and nerve cells was usually more than offset by the hallucinations and associated emotional trauma they inflicted.

But, of course, Danny wasn’t there to feel any of that.

“Well, she’s the doctor,” Sands grunted. “Probably knows what she’s doing. You think I should go ahead and shut down the backup trap?”

“No, leave it running,” Sommer said. “There’s no guarantee this one will keep going long enough, and if we really have Danny’s soul here I don’t want to lose it now.”

“Good point,” she agreed. “Keep an eye on the readouts, and if anything changes let me know right away.”

“You’ll be the first,” Sommer assured her, a trace of humor seeping through his fading tension. Leaning back in his chair, he took a deep breath, his eyes drifting to rest on the trap. A big, ugly conglomeration of hardware, sophisticated electronics, and software.

And now the temporary resting place for the soul of a five-year-old boy.

Or at least, he hoped that was what was there. It could, he reminded himself soberly, just as easily be nothing more than an echo of Danny's Mullner trace, or a secondary trace made of Danny's now-gone soul, or something else entirely.

Only time would tell. Time, and a successful attempt to return the soul to Danny's body. Only then would they really know.

For now, all he could do was wait. And hope that Sands's off-handed comment about pulling someone else back from heaven had been only a joke.

The operation was a success, with as much of the boy's tumor removed as the doctors could manage.

The surgery was followed by two days of recovery. Not nearly enough, in Sommer's opinion, given the complexity of the surgery. But it was as much as anyone was willing to allow.

And it was time.

"Well," Janecki said heavily, "I guess this is what they call the moment of truth."

Sommer grimaced, blinking uselessly against the grit that seemed to have become a permanent feature of his eyes during the past two days. "I hate that phrase," he growled. "Truth is an ongoing reality. It doesn't come in moments."

Janecki threw him an odd look, and he shook his head. "Sorry," he muttered, making one final adjustment to the waveguide cable arrangement connecting the Soulfinder equipment to Danny's body, motionless except for the slow rise and fall of the boy's chest with the rhythm of the heart-lung machine. "I'm a little nervous, I guess."

"Probably short of sleep, too," Sands commented, peering closely at the contact band circling Danny's head. "I've never found hospital cots to be all that comfortable, myself."

Sommer nodded silently. In point of fact, he'd hardly had any sleep at all the past two nights, and the short naps that exhaustion had forced on him had been filled with nightmares. "What do you think, Jessica?" he asked. "We ready to give it a try?"

She straightened, and for the first time he noticed the tension lines about her mouth. "As ready as we're ever going to be," she said.

"Dr. Janecki?"

She stepped over to the controls of the heart-lung machine. "I'm ready."

Sommer looked over his shoulder, to where Danny's parents stood silently against the wall. Then, setting his teeth firmly together, he turned back and reached for the trap release. *If I should die before I wake ...*

He touched the switch.

The lights indicating the soul's presence flicked out, and for a single, terrible, split-second eternity he was sure he had failed. David; now Danny—

And suddenly Danny's body twitched violently. "Mommy!" he croaked. "Mommy!"

She was there in an instant, her husband half a step behind her. "Danny!" she gasped, enfolding him in her arms.

And even as his eyes blurred with tears, Sommer felt his knees go weak. Turning away, he groped his way to a chair and collapsed into it.

"You okay?"

He blinked away the tears to find Sands squatting down beside him, her face shining with disbelief tinged triumph. "We did it, Jessica," he said.

"I know," she said, taking his hand and squeezing it. "Congratulations."

"You too," he breathed. It was over. After eleven years, it was finally over.

No. It was just beginning. “We still need to check Danny over,” he told her quietly, forcing back the growing euphoria. “Make sure he’s undamaged; make sure”—*it really is him*—“his memory and everything else is all right,” he said instead. The thought that someone other than Danny might have somehow been drawn into the trap still gave him the shakes.

“Dr. Janecki’ll take care of most of that,” Sands assured him. “She’s got a whole row of psychologists and brain specialists lined up ready to go to work.”

Behind them the door opened, and a nurse looked in. “Dr. Sommer?” she said, an odd expression on her face. “There’s a group of reporters down in the lobby who want to talk to you.”

Sommer cocked an eyebrow at Sands, got a puzzled shrug in return. “Not me,” she said. “Maybe Janecki or the parents called them.”

“Jumped the gun a little, didn’t they?” he grunted. Still, since it *had* worked out all right— “I’ll be right down,” he told the nurse. She nodded and disappeared, and he got to his feet. “You want to come down and get red-eye flashed to death?” he asked Sands.

She made a face. “I’ll pass, thanks. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather go back to the lab and start analyzing the trap readings.”

“Yes, well, be sure and leave both traps running,” he warned, digging out his comb and wishing he had taken the time to shower earlier. “Those neuropreservatives could still drive Danny into shock, and after all this we sure don’t want to lose him in extra innings.”

“Right,” Sands nodded. “I’ll just pull the packs and leave everything else intact.” Her lips twitched in a mischievous smile. “You’d better get down there and give them their lead story. And be sure to save something for your Nobel acceptance speech, okay?”

He stuck his tongue out at her, gave her hand a final squeeze, and left the room.

The nurse had, if anything, strayed on the conservative side: the mass of reporters resembled a mob more than they did a simple group. A dozen minicams swiveled toward him like gun barrels as he entered the lobby; twice that number of directional microphones were right behind them. Sommer stepped to more or less the focus of the semicircle, raised a hand for silence—

“Dr. Sommer,” a voice called, “how do you respond to the allegations made this morning by Congressman Barnswell’s attorneys that you have proved the existence of the human soul and of distinct racial differences in that soul?”

For a long moment Sommer just stood there, hand still raised, as the universe seemed to gently tilt around him. Barnswell—Sands’s secret sale of their Mullner-trace data to him—the work of the past two weeks had completely driven all of that from his mind. “Ah—yes,” he managed at last. “It was my understanding that Congressman Barnswell would discuss any implications of our work before he released it.”

“Do you confirm his results, then?” someone else asked, clearly uninterested in anything as common and un-newsworthy as betrayed trust.

“I confirm that our work has proved the existence of a human soul—or a lifeforce, if you prefer,” he added, remembering Sands’s own reluctance to use the more theologically loaded term. “But as for whatever these racial implications are that he thinks he’s found, I would say they are at the very least exceedingly premature, and more likely a whole-cloth fabrication of his followers’ prejudices.”

“Are there, then, different types of souls?” someone pounced.

Sommer gritted his teeth. “There are differences in souls, certainly,” he said. “Each one of us is a distinct individual—how on earth could our souls not be different? Again, though, there is absolutely no evidence at this point that there are any significant differences between racial, ethnic, or any other sort of group.”

“Dr. Sommer, it sounds as if you haven’t actually seen Congressman Barnswell’s conclusions yet. Is that true?”

“It is,” Sommer nodded.

“May I ask, then, how you can dismiss them out of hand?”

“Simple.” He glanced around the battery of minicams, a small fraction of his mind wondering just how Barnswell was going to take this. “As I said, Congressman Barnswell’s representatives promised not to release our data without our permission. To make sure he didn’t go back on that promise”—he took a deep breath—“I took the liberty of scrambling the personal profiles and Mullner traces of our subjects. Whatever patterns the Congressman’s people think they see, therefore, simply don’t exist.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then, the whole mob seemed to explode at once into a blizzard of shouted questions. Once again Sommer held up his hand; eventually, the wordstorm dwindled and died. “Ladies and gentlemen, as far as I’m concerned, Congressman Barnswell and his theories are old news, and not very interesting news, at that.

“Now, if you’re interested in a *real* story ... ”

It was, he thought more than once during that long day, as if he’d dropped a tactical nuke into the middle of the news industry. The shock wave of his announcement utterly shattered their neat, prepared list of events and stories to be covered, sending them scrambling for background and interviews and commentary. By early afternoon the shock wave had reached the political arena, prompting instant speeches from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and assorted foreign capitals. And as afternoon shaded into evening the wave jolted the nation’s religious leaders into statements of their own, ranging from reflexive denunciation on one extreme to cautious wait-and-see acceptance on the other.

Most of the sound and fury Sommer got only second-hand, mainly in the form of references within the never-ending stream of questions thrown at him by successive shifts of media people. Local media interviews, long-distance phone calls from the international news services, live network interviews on the evening news, late-evening commentary programs—he was put through the entire gauntlet. Occasionally he was asked about Barnswell, but it was clear that the Congressman’s big bombshell announcement had been completely lost in the glare of the Soulfinder story, and by the evening commentary shows all such questions had disappeared.

Finally, just after midnight, it was finally over.

“Is that it?” Sommer asked as the red light on the camera went out and the monitor showing his face went blank.

“That’s it, Doctor,” the station manager nodded, stepping forward to help him unfasten the microphone from his coat. “*Nightline* was the last one on your schedule.”

“*Your* schedule, you mean,” Sommer reminded him wearily. “None of this was *my* idea, if you recall.”

The other smiled. “You should have thought of that before you became famous,” he joked. “Anyway, the morning programs start at six—”

“Do me a favor and tell them I died overnight, will you?” Sommer told him, digging his knuckles into his eyes. “Death by overexposure, or something.”

The manager chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, Doctor—everyone’s got enough of you on file to cover half a dozen programs if they have to. Not to mention a hundred people standing in line to comment on your discovery. You have a car here?”

Sommer shook his head. “I left it back at the hospital. Probably got fifteen parking tickets on it by

now.”

“No problem.” The other caught the eye of one of the security guards, beckoned him over. “Blake Dr. Sommer needs a ride home. Make sure he gets there all right, and fend off any late-night vultures and paparazzi, okay?”

“Sure, Mr. Hardin,” the guard said genially. “My car’s out front, Dr. Sommer.”

Sommer swallowed as the other led the way through the maze of cameras and cables and lights. The thought that reporters and commando photographers might be lurking in wait for him at all hours was one that hadn’t occurred to him before, and it sent an unpleasant chill down his back. To lose a chance of a private life in a single day—

No, he told himself firmly. It’s just a temporary notoriety. That’s all. Nothing that’ll last past the end of the month.

Still, he felt his stomach tensing as he and Blake headed across the lobby toward the big glass door. No one was visible, but there were lots of places out of view where the paparazzi could be hiding. They stepped out into the cool night air ...

No flashes went off. No one jumped from behind the low shrubs shouting questions.

“This way, Dr. Sommer,” Blake said, leading the way across the circle drive toward the front parking lot.

Sommer followed, feeling relief and, paradoxically, a faint stirring of disappointment. He scowled at the latter; he was not—was *not*—going to be one of those who became addicted to fame—

He’d reached the middle of the circle drive when, fifty feet away, a pickup truck suddenly lunged away from the curb and headed toward him.

He paused, feeling his emotions re-mix themselves. So there *had* been a reporter lying in wait for him ...

And with fatigue and resentment dimming his brain, it was another second before it registered that the truck wasn’t slowing down. Was, in fact, still accelerating.

Directly toward him.

He tried to run. But it was far too late for that. Dimly, through the sudden rush of blood in his ears, he could hear Blake’s shouts as the other sprinted back in a futile attempt to help. Could hear the screams of the driver, slurred and angry and obscene.

Could feel the awful impact as the truck rammed into him, sending him hurling into darkness.

He seemed to be in a long tunnel, a tunnel that glowed with a dim but uniform light. For a moment he wondered where he was, and then he remembered. The truck, the impact, the darkness.

And it occurred to him that he was dead.

Dead.

For a moment he studied the word, and the concept behind it, waiting for the inevitable emotional reaction to hit him. To his mild surprise, there was none. Apathy, he thought at first, or perhaps completely mind-numbing despair. But it was obvious that neither label even came close to describing how he felt. It was, he decided, more like a deep and restful peace, one that permeated his being so thoroughly that it filled every corner, leaving no visible edges by which it could be defined or even really noticed without a deliberate effort to do so.

Ahead—a long way ahead, so it seemed, though he could sense that distance didn’t have much meaning here—he could see the end of the tunnel he was traveling through. Beyond it was a bright light; bright, yet not in any way hurtful ... and it was from the Light, he suddenly understood, that the sense of peace radiated. He willed himself forward; in response, though there was no sensation

movement, the tunnel walls increased their silent speed past him.

~~So gradually that he didn't notice at first, the movement of the walls slowed. Slowed, and then stopped.~~

There was no way to tell how long he waited there, hovering motionlessly in the center of the tunnel—time, like distance, seemed to have lost all of its meaning. Ahead, the Light beckoned to him; not insistently, like a siren being deprived of her victim, but like a friend, waiting with patience for him to finish the journey. Once, he tried explaining that the delay wasn't his doing, but even as he searched for a way to make himself heard at so great a distance he could sense that the Light already understood what had happened.

By the time the walls again began to move, Sommer understood, too ... and so it was with no surprise at all that he found the walls were moving in the wrong direction. The Light faded as he moved, disappeared entirely—

And abruptly pain flooded in on him.

He gasped, feeling the sensation of intruding air as something almost alien. A blinding stab of fresh pain lanced through his chest as he did so—

“Adrian!” a familiar voice almost barked in his ear. “Take it easy, Adrian, it's all right. You're here. You're safe.”

His eyelids were heavy, but with a supreme effort of will he pried them open. Sands was leaning over him; behind her, an unfamiliar face frowned at something outside his field of view. “Heartbeats look good,” the man said. “He's breathing on his own.” He peered at Sommer as if at a laboratory specimen. “I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it.”

Sands threw him an irritated glance before turning back to Sommer. “How do you feel?” she asked. “Can you talk?”

Sommer worked saliva into his mouth. “How long?” he croaked.

She understood. “That drunken idiot ran you down six days ago,” she told him, eyes flashing with anger. “One of Barnswell's more brainless supporters, I gather, who didn't much like you making a fool out of his idol on international television.”

“How's Danny?” The words came out easier this time.

“Making a rapid recovery,” Sands said, and there was no mistaking the satisfaction in her voice. “Dr. Janecki says that aside from an occasional moody thoughtfulness, there don't seem to be any aftereffects at all from his stay in Soulminster.”

Sommer thought about his own experience, and about the Light. “Maybe he wishes he hadn't been brought back,” he murmured.

Sands's forehead furrowed for a moment. “Yes, well, I'm sure that'll pass,” she said. “Janecki also says that because of Soulminster they were able to get nearly the entire tumor out. She figures that a couple of months of chemical treatments ought to clean out any residue, and that'll be the end of it. Her lips twitched in a smile. “I don't know about you, but I think that's a pretty good memorial for your son. Wouldn't you say?”

Sommer closed his eyes. A fog was rolling in over his consciousness ... “Yes. It's finished now.”

He heard Sands's hesitation, felt her hand squeeze his carefully. “You'd better get some rest,” her voice came distantly. “We've still got the lab's trap running, so there's no danger we'll lose you. You're pretty lucky it was still doing that complete file scan when you got run over.”

“Lucky,” he echoed, his own voice sounding even more distant than hers. His last thought before he fell asleep was of the tunnel ... and of the Light.

It was another two weeks before they would let him return to work.

To work ... but not to his lab.

“Well, what do you think?” Sands asked, gesturing proudly around her.

Sommer stared at the huge room, and all the gleaming electronic equipment laid out on long and uncluttered lab tables. “It looks like a Hollywood movie set,” he growled, an uncomfortable feeling beginning to gnaw at the pit of his stomach. “May I ask just who is footing the bill for all this?”

She waved her hand. “Oh, we’ve got backers coming out of our ears now. Everyone from basic electronics people like Hewlett-Packard—that stuff over there’s from them—all the way up to good old Uncle Sam himself.”

Sommer grimaced. “Oh, great. The government. How to screw something up, in one easy lesson.”

She gave him an odd look. “Maybe you haven’t got it yet, Adrian. No one’s moving in to take over—the only thing Washington’s concerned with at the moment is renting a set of Soulminder units to protect top government officials. *We’re* the ones in the driver’s seat. And that’s the way it’s damn well going to stay.”

Sommer shook his head, the movement sparking a twinge from his neck. “It won’t last, you know,” he reminded her. “The minute you apply for a patent on the trap there’ll be a hundred copycats making their own versions.”

“Which is why there won’t *be* any patents,” she told him. “We’ll put our money into keeping the Soulminder design and process a complete, black-hole secret. It shouldn’t be all that hard—thanks to you, we now know that Soulminder can handle a subject from at least ten miles away. We’ll be able to keep everything of value safely locked away in our own buildings, with our own security web around them.”

Sommer nodded tiredly. “Well, I wish you luck with it. Just make sure—”

“Whoa,” she frowned. “What’s this *you* stuff? We’re in this together, you know.”

“No, I don’t think so, Jessica. I’ve done everything I set out to do. Soulminder exists, it works, and according to you, it has a good chance of surviving. It’s over now.”

She snorted. “Hardly. There’s a tremendous amount of work yet to be done. Research on better neuropreservatives, regrowth of damaged tissue, bioengineered organs and limbs—maybe even entire replacement bodies—”

“Wait a minute,” he interrupted her. “What on earth are you going on about?”

She took a deep breath, eyes blazing into his with a dark fire he’d never seen there before. (Perhaps he’d perhaps only never noticed. “You see Soulminder as a holding tank for critical patients,” she said quietly. “I see it as mankind’s ticket to immortality. *My* ticket to immortality.”

For a moment he stared at her. To have worked with her for three years, without ever recognizing what it was that was driving her ... “That’s not realistic, Jessica,” he said gently. “Death is a part of life—”

“So was smallpox, once,” she said tartly. “I’ve heard all those arguments, Adrian. Every one of them is either nonsense or rationalization.”

“Death is a part of life,” he repeated, louder this time. “It’s as much a passage to what lies beyond as your birth was a passage into *this* world.”

She snorted, a sound that was at the same time contemptuous and oddly nervous. “What lies beyond? You mean all that stuff about tunnels, do you, and bright lights and passages and friendly voices?”

“Why not?” he demanded, even as her tone made him wince. “Don’t forget that I was there. I saw it.”

“Saw *what*?” she retorted. “Something real, or something totally imaginary? Can you *prove* it was

- [read Hate Crimes Revisited: America's War On Those Who Are Different online](#)
- [A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict online](#)
- [Magic Study \(Study, Book 2\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [read online Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP](#)
- [Playing with Books: The Art of Upcycling, Deconstructing, and Reimagining the Book for free](#)

- <http://drmurphreesnewsletters.com/library/A-Story-Lately-Told--Coming-of-Age-in-Ireland--London--and-New-York.pdf>
- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/Firewalls-For-Dummies.pdf>
- <http://deltaphenomics.nl/?library/Happy-Herbivore-Holidays---Gatherings--Easy-Plant-Based-Recipes-for-Your-Healthiest-Celebrations-and-Special-O>
- <http://tuscalaural.com/library/Revolutionary-Social-Change-in-Colombia--The-Origin-and-Direction-of-the-FARC-EP.pdf>
- <http://www.khoi.dk/?books/Let-Sleeping-Sea-Monsters-Lie-and-Other-Cautionary-Tales.pdf>