

End Of Days

by

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Marjod was lying face-down on the floor of the cabin when Kern returned from the traps late in the morning. As Kern dropped to a knee beside her left shoulder, he wondered whether he should turn her over, to see her one last time. But if he saw how she had done it, he might be tempted to try it himself.

Oh, Marjod . . .

A seagull *skreeed*, as if to mourn her passing, the echoes fading in the surrounding Rockies like the spirit that had been hers, muted by the lush pads of spring wildflowers.

Kern had not been gone very long—the traps and weirs were still empty—but in the interim Marjod had managed to do something to herself so swiftly that the nanogens could not repair it in time to keep her alive.

She was facing away from him, one blue eye still staring into the beyond. Under her chin welled a puddle of blood, almost black in the shadows behind the old sofa. The puddle was contiguous with the great pool that had spilled from under her torso, the liquid cool and tacky as it soaked into the knee of his denims. She had fallen on her right arm. Her left arm, alongside her body, was also black with blood. He realized now what she had done.

Kern thumbed her eyelid shut, and sighed heavily as he rose, loathing the task her death made necessary. His eyes followed the broad ribbon, black in shadow and crimson in the sunlight through the front window, to her heart where it had come to rest against the south wall. It had ceased beating, but that scarcely mattered to the nanogens. Already they had constructed tendrils in the direction of Marjod's corpse, had begun lengthening the stumps of the aorta and the pulmonary arteries and veins. He stood still, staring. My God, how had she found the strength and the will to complete her final task? To make not just the one great incision, but to plunge her hand inside the cavity and hack and slash until all the links between the heart and the body were severed . . .

Oh, Marjod—

He could guess what she had used: the fish filleting knife, sharp as a scalpel and sturdy enough to cut through sinew. She knew his daily routines, and she knew how long the human body could live without oxygen. The length of his absence had been more than sufficient. Dead Marjod might be, yet the nanogens could work miracles, even rebuild the brain if necessary. They could not re-ignite life itself, but they would try.

From the bedroom Kern brought a woolen blanket, wrapped Marjod's corpse

in it, and slung it over his shoulder. Relieved of the burden of blood and heart and life, Marjod weighed on him with the substance of a discarded mannikin. This was not, *could not be* Marjod. The temporary delusion failed to ease his mind but helped him see what had to be done. There was soft ground on the other side of the creek they fished. Burial was taboo, but he had neither the means nor the desire to cremate her—and in any case no one would ever know of her demise. On the way down the slope he snagged the spade from the garden, and the soft chuffing of his boots in the loose surface dirt echoed back to him as whispers of breath in a cavern. After Kern splashed across the creek and climbed the low, undercut bluff where the creek made the great turn eastward, he laid Marjod gently on the sparse grass and prayed silently while he excavated a grave deep enough to discourage the few remaining predators—cougars, mostly, and coyotes. Within half an hour, only the low mound of tamped earth signified that the woman had ever lived.

The nanogens promised forever. She had broken their promise.

Another gull passed overhead and called out as if bidding him to follow. Kern hesitated, blotting the perspiration on his forehead with a swatch of his undershirt. The cabin on this western slope, facing the sunset, had been their refuge for the past nine years. To abandon it so readily felt disrespectful of Marjod and his decades of memories of her, of them. Yet he had no stomach for the crimson mementoes of her inside the cabin, or for their removal. She was an open wound on his body that he could not bring himself to look at. If he didn't look at it, maybe it wasn't as bad as it felt. Ignorance gave him something to cling to, to keep himself afloat.

And what if he did follow the gull to the coast? If the people living there still remembered what he was, his return could become ugly. Still, he had always longed to return to the ocean one day. With Marjod gone, Kern heard its summons anew, demanding a response, and he yielded despite his ambivalence. If later he needed something from the cabin, he could always return for it.

Despite his surrender, departure required a conscious effort. Kern placed one boot-clad foot on the flat rock in front of him and followed it with the other foot, gathering momentum. Soon he was taking a lateral tack around the foothill, following the contour that had once been listed on physical maps at 2500 feet above sea level, drawn by the sound of distant waves growing louder in his ears, until he reached the crest of the saddle that linked the foothill to the next one north. There, he paused.

The ocean appeared a stranger to Kern now that Marjod was dead. In the evenings on that saddle, out of sight of the coastal residents, they had held hands and spoken in the intimate whispers of couples who had long become comfortable with one another, taking in the canopy of stars and the luminescent froth below and gazing out to the vanishing point in the horizon where the stars and sparkles were indistinguishable from one another. Stars, like nanogens, promised forever. Now, alone in the afternoon daylight, Kern saw only the vast aqua-green stretch of the Great Central Gulf that had encroached over the past century from the Gulf of Mexico as far north as Canada. With binoculars he might

have made out the rugged coastline of the Black Hills to the northeast or even, on a very clear day, the two small islands that remained of the bluffs of Sioux City and Omaha. Kern lowered his gaze to the coastline and the tiny islets a quarter-mile offshore but was unable to locate Seaside. For a moment it seemed to him that the rolling terrain that lay between the foothills and the ocean blocked his view of the village. Belatedly he realized that the encroachment of the water had inundated the village and that what he thought at first were islets and crags were in fact the tops of the taller stores and houses.

In the three years since he had last visited the shoreline, the water had risen to within a mile of the foothills. And how much further would it rise?

The urge to find what remained of Seaside impelled Kern onward. He began a gradual descent, selecting the most passable slopes, following the creek here and there along the periphery of the forest, keeping to the shade wherever it was available. The sea disappeared behind the hills. Only the sounds of the waves betrayed its presence. Soon Kern began to hear voices: cries and laughter and the calling out of names. Children were at play.

When finally Kern came over the last of the bluffs he was startled by the closeness of the sea. The gentle slope at the bottom of the bluff led directly to the beach, not 200 meters away. Already the tides had deposited a thin layer of coarse ochre sand and fragments of shells, together with the detritus of civilization—plastic soda bottles, partly decomposed disposable diapers, pitted stalks of wood, and the odd rag. To the north, on higher ground, the survivors from Seaside had erected makeshift dwellings of stone, wood, tin cans beaten flat, anything they could find that could be fashioned into a wall or a roof. They had laid out small terrace gardens. And further north, where an arm of the sea pierced the lowland between two hills, organized fishing teams dragged nets through the inlet.

Carefully Kern picked his way down the bluff toward the sea, savoring the smell of brine and salt, old friends still waiting for him. His boots left rough imprints in the young, coarse sand as he turned north and wandered parallel to the shore. Now and then a stronger wave reached the imprints to form short-lived puddles rimmed with froth. The tide was coming in. Presently Kern slowed and stopped, uncertain now. The playing children seemed oblivious to his emergence from the forested foothills, but some of the adults performing daily chores on the higher ground had paused to consider his arrival and its significance. Kern could not reassure them. Other than to answer the call from the sea, he had no idea why he had come.

A child tugged at the tails of his shirt, drawing Kern from his introspection. Narrow gaps between his upper incisors gave him an urchin's smile, bright as the sunlight in his eyes, and his bowl-cap of black hair had been badly trimmed by dull scissors. He was wearing blue swimming trunks dotted with yellow happyfaces, and recently he had lost the nail from the second toe of his left foot. Kern, who had never fathered children—one of the physiological prices he had paid for the nanogens—suddenly felt an emptiness larger than that left by the death of Marjod.

The child held out a deflated, multicolored ball. A cursory examination told

Kern that it had no visible punctures and probably had lost its air over time. But to re-inflate it would require a pump and a needle, items clearly beyond the technological level of the village remnants.

Another doomed memento of our civilization, thought Kern. Shaking his head, he returned the ball to the boy, who trudged away, dejected. Disappointed as well, Kern made for the villagers on the higher ground. This was their territory; he ought at least to ask permission to wander around.

As Kern approached, a young woman paused to smile at him. She might have been the child's mother—the physical resemblance was there, even down to the gaps in the incisors. Kern decided her skin was the color of cappuccino, not a comparison she was likely to understand, given the generation chasm separating them. Her smile faded as he climbed past her, making for the man standing at the top of the hillock and issuing instructions.

Kern introduced himself. "I don't mean to intrude," he said, enduring a brief inspection. "With your permission, I'd like to roam the beach awhile."

The foreman shaded his eyes from the sun and looked up at Kern. His voice was low and barely carried the two meters to Kern's ears when he spoke. "Better for you if you roam further down the coast," he said. "We want no trouble here."

A shadow of dismay fell over Kern, though he kept it from his expression. After all these years, technology continued to haunt them, the stories passed down generations . . . perhaps now as cautionary tales. Kern had no way to oppose the bias—protestations that he meant no harm to anyone obviously still fell on deaf ears.

At least the foreman had been civil about it. Perhaps that was social progress, of a sort. "I understand," said Kern, resigned. "May I ask—how did you know?"

"I didn't *know* you were Fixed," answered the foreman, "until just now."

As Kern turned to leave, he collided with the smiling woman, spilling water from the open canteen in her hand. He caught her arm before she tumbled down the slope, and dragged her to level ground. While both of them gushed apologies, the foreman made a sound of disgust. "You shouldn't be up here, Paloma. Not in your condition."

The woman planted fists against her hips, defiant. "I'm in better shape than you, Andrew Peavy," she growled, the canteen now dangling from the shoulder strap banging against her thigh as she spoke. "And I'll not be a burden to anyone. I'll pull my own weight, and thank you. And why would you be running off able-bodied help?" she added, with a glance toward Kern.

"It's not your concern, Paloma," said the foreman. "Kern, you should heed my suggestion."

Paloma latched onto Kern's elbow. "Well, come along, then," she ordered, as the foreman's eyes narrowed in disapproval. "It's time we took a break from our labors."

The woman led Kern down the gentle slope behind the higher bluffs toward a clutch of rude huts nestled among the silver maples that marked the boundary of the forested lands. In recent years the waters had engulfed Seaside like a gigantic ameba, and even now they extended pseudopods, silvery in the sunlight,

inexorably into the low breaks in the bluffs where the men now fished, and Kern reckoned that, for a time during the inundation, scavenging and salvage had become the most critical and sought-after of abilities. Absent industry and production, the coastal dwellers had been forced to improvise, taking what materials they could and rendering them into whatever form was required. Rusted sheet metal from old cars thus became roofs and doors for the huts—in the sun these glistened, and Kern realized that the metal had been rubbed with some sort of fat as a rust inhibitor. He saw no bricks, and no kiln. Clay would have eased their construction woes considerably, but the only deposit he knew of lay in a broad valley three days' journey to the northwest, and he doubted this information would do more than tease them unnecessarily.

The woman's opposition to the foreman puzzled Kern. Where Peavy had been unwilling to countenance a Fixed in his neighborhood, Paloma seemed entirely too ingenuous, unguarded. In a society supposedly wary of strangers, she had behaved incautiously. If she saw him through different eyes—what did she see? What did she know . . . ?

Paloma's hut had no door, only a large fragment of an old poncho that she drew aside to allow Kern to pass. He did so warily, his smile a lie—although it was generally pointless to try to harm a Fixed, he was still capable of feeling pain. He was glad of the company, but Paloma clearly wanted something from him. He had no idea what she thought he could give her.

The interior of the hut was unexpectedly neat, if spare. A thick sleeping pad, stained by grass and by age, stood rolled up and bound in one corner, a wooden chair in another. Near an opening in the back of the hut Kern spied a hearth, with two chunks of split log and a tepee of kindling awaiting ignition. Pushed into the ground on either side of the hearth were lengths of rusted rebar, the top ten centimeters of each bent down and back up to accommodate a cross bar, a rotisserie, or pots for stew or soup. A rickety wooden table with two drawers completed the furnishings.

Paloma bade Kern sit on a soft patch of grass, and he did so in tailor fashion, slightly hunched over, facing her. She remained standing. An awkward silence settled upon them, and Kern became aware of her, which did nothing to ease the tension. Her eyes told him nothing, except that now she was reluctant to look at him.

"It doesn't show yet," Kern said at last, solicitous to put her at ease. She blinked at him, and he explained, "Your pregnancy."

Now she looked puzzled. "What makes you think I'm . . . ?"

"Peavy did refer to your condition."

Her eyes glowed in the shadows of the hut, signaling her comprehension.

"No, I am not with child," she told him. "He was referring to my . . . to this."

Her fingers dug into her right thigh, bunching the fabric of her ragged and patched denims to draw the material up past the top of the leather hiking boot and expose a thick shaft of hardwood. Halfway up her calf the binding began, fixing the stump of the leg to the shaft. Kern guessed the boot was part of the prosthetic unit. A wonder she had not limped on the way here—but he recalled the willful determination with which she had stood up to Peavy. A quiet woman

with a quiet pride she was, and Kern studied her with renewed alertness.

Her exposure of the injury was an invitation to talk about it, so Kern said, "What happened?"

Paloma's dark eyes flicked in the direction of the ocean. "A shark took it, not quite three years ago."

Kern barked a laugh of surprise. "Sharks!"

"The waters are warm, and deep enough," said Paloma. She dropped to her knees on the grass and sank back. "And I was careless."

"I'm sorry," said Kern.

"It wasn't *your* shark." A smile tickled the corners of her mouth, and she shrugged, and added, "I can offer you water, or a glass of sun tea. It's an herbal, but you'll probably notice the apple mint most."

Kern closed his eyes. Marjod was not yet dead half a day, and here he was already with another woman. That he did not feel himself on the verge of a fresh intimate relationship failed to diminish the pang of guilt that now stung him. In the deep past Marjod had turned a blind eye to his rare liaisons, as he had to hers. At this moment, however, he could not quite put his finger on the difference between the past visits and the current.

Kern looked at Paloma again. In the shadow of the corner of the hut she sat still, hands folded in her lap, looking demure as she awaited the bidding of her guest. Surely she grasped that he was an outcast, a misfit.

"The tea, perhaps, but later," he finally answered. "Paloma, I appreciate your hospitality, but this is not going to please your foreman."

Under the cropped jersey her delicate shoulders moved slightly, acknowledging the problem and dismissing it. "Andrew does not see beyond the next encroachment of the sea," she said. With her thumbnail she pried a mote of dirt from under a fingernail and wiped it on her denims, and Kern recalled with wry amusement that nail trimming was one process the gentschies had never gotten the nanogens to understand. No matter how far back he trimmed them, within the day each nail had grown back out to the programmed length, including a perfect millimeter of gray along the tip. On the other hand, although at that length tearing a nail was a risk, the damage was easily repairable.

But Paloma had short nails broken by her hardscrabble life, two of them torn recently, perhaps while gardening. The injuries marked the insurmountable difference between them, and Kern, deciding belatedly that this visit was a bad idea, moved as if to leave.

"Please don't go," pleaded Paloma. In the shadows her eyes glistened.

Kern hesitated. He had journeyed to the coastline without a specific purpose in mind, avoidance of the bloody reminders in the cabin a reason to go from, not to come to. He had meant to steer clear of Seaside and its inhabitants, who presumably remained biased against him, only to find that the assault by the sea had scattered them and reduced their numbers. Now they sought only to continue, to eke out an existence as best they could. Were they yet so different from him? He wondered whether the very question stemmed from his longings long suppressed—the desire for intercourse with those who, after all, were his own kind. The death of Marjod had disturbed a dusty shelf in his mind where he

had put basic social needs on display as if in a private museum. Now, it seemed, these were not ready for retirement, after all, but they needed practicing. He scarcely knew where or how to begin. With the woman, still regarding him with glistening eyes? What did she want from him?

Before Kern could respond to her plea, there came a rustling of leaves and grass outside the hut, the soft impact of approaching footsteps, and he tensed, searching the back wall for an exit. In the darkness of his mind gathered a memory of a night long ago when they had come for him and his kind, and he had fled from their society. A soft knocking dispelled the memory, for those who had come for him then did not knock. "Paloma," said the foreman, quietly. Through cracks in the wall materials Kern could see him standing there, looking away, as one who did not wish to intrude, deference to her privacy trumping his feelings regarding her guest . . . or perhaps toward what she and her guest might have been doing.

Paloma, still seated on the floor, blinked at the distraction. "Yes, Andrew."

Kern felt the man's hesitation. Then: "When you've finished your break, the guddlers could use some help cleaning the fish and preparing the smoker."

"He means you," whispered Paloma, to Kern.

"I'll be there presently," said Kern.

The finger of water between the hills was neither wide nor deep, and the villagers had dammed off most of it after the high tide, trapping a few incautious smelt and perch. These they caught with their hands or in sieves of cloth and deposited in pails of water. Scaling and cleaning the catch was left to the women and older children. While several men gathered the last of the fish, others, including Kern, prepared the smokehouse.

The sturdiest structure of the bluff settlement, the stone-and-plank smokehouse had been assembled with joints that fit smoothly, with a roof that allowed no air to escape save through the vent pipe and no rain to enter. It had but the one door, set in the jambs with minimal play, fixed there with two hinges of stainless steel. In the middle of the floor had been dug a shallow depression, into which the men placed cordwood from the pile beside the smokehouse—hickory, mostly, and some oak.

On racks affixed to the walls hung cleaned fish. Kern, kneeling by the ash-filled depression to tepee the wood, estimated there might be enough to supply the inhabitants for a week. The day's meager haul might add a couple days more. No one had said much to him—despite the foreman's invitation, Kern remained a stranger—and he reckoned the men were trying not to think about any seasonal reductions of their catches. The village was perpetually a month from starvation.

Kern knew he might help them. The subsistence gardens that he and Marjod managed could supplement their supplies. But once that was exhausted, the villagers would fall back to the previous patterns—and leave him with nothing at all. Secrecy enabled his continued survival. He did not know them well enough to risk disclosure.

Still, it was possible that Peavy had invited him into the group to lull his

defenses, to catch him off-guard. It took no great stretch of reasoning to see that Kern had survived in the mountains somehow. Either he had a great cache of foodstuff, or he grew his own, and surely Peavy and Paloma and others understood as much.

And what of Paloma? Her invitation preceded that from Peavy. What had she seen in him?

This was one reason why the Fixeds absented themselves from society, thought Kern. To escape the labyrinthine machinations.

One of the men put a flame to the kindling, and minutes later the cordwood was aflame, filling the interior with the smell and smoke of a forest fire. "We'll have to feed the coals all night," he said, ushering Kern outside. Smoke followed them outside into the dusk.

"I'll take the first watch," offered Kern.

The man made a desultory gesture toward Paloma, coming to meet them. "It seems you've won a reprieve," said the man.

Alone once more with Paloma in the hut, Kern ate fastidiously by candlelight of baked bread and a bean and lentil soup, the woman watching him all the while. Inside the hut she smelled of the sea, as if she had recently bathed there. Near the roots, her hair was still flecked with beads of water. She did not serve herself, and Kern wondered whether he was eating food she could not spare. He might have claimed a lack of appetite, but he wanted to avoid discourtesy. He hoped the same conflict did not arise in another context—for it was now quite clear to him that Paloma meant to share the sleeping pad with him as well.

By the time Kern finished the soup, night had fallen. Until sunrise there was little that could be done except perhaps some stitchery or tidying, and Kern felt shadows of expectation descend onto his shoulders. The reasonable social options were threefold: conversation, lovemaking, and sleep, separately or in combination. And Paloma was looking at him with glowing eyes, her choice already made.

Kern put the empty bowl and mug into the basin for washing in the morning. Across the candlelight their eyes met briefly. Then Paloma crawled on all fours to the sleeping pad, knelt there, and drew the cropped jersey over her head and cast it aside. Her skin was a shade lighter where the upper garment covered her, her petite breasts attending to receive his touch. An irregular pale splotch on her left flank, just above the floating ribs, suggested that the rough skin of the shark had abraded her as it swam away with her limb. With the thought, Kern's eyes went to her prosthesis.

"It's my leg," Paloma said dejectedly. "Isn't it? It puts you off." She sighed. "Dammit . . ."

"You won't accept that it's my age?" said Kern. "After all, I'm 173 years old."

"But nothing can happen to you," protested Paloma. "I mean, they'll fix it, right?"

Kern smiled, and moved to the corner of the sleeping pad and sat down. He spoke slowly, reluctant to share his loss, but owing the woman an explanation. "The truth is, Paloma, that I lost a loved one this morning. And I'm feeling . . . a

bit lost."

Her eyes, huge now, searched his. "But that's not possible! I mean . . . how is that possible? How can that be?"

Kern was trying not to think of Marjod, lying in a lake of her own blood on the floor of the cabin. How was it possible? For Marjod, it had taken more than a simple willingness to die; she had required a terrible determination in order to act at all.

"One has to have a particular mindset, a focus," Kern told her. "But yes, it can be done."

Paloma fell silent, picking at an imaginary blemish on her forearm. "How long had you . . . been together?" she asked at last.

There had only been the two of them. They had grown accustomed to one another the way one takes one's arm or a leg for granted. For so long they had been one, that even their infidelities, tiny protests against routine and monotony and unacknowledged to one another, had been shared. And now, for an instant, Kern knew a flash of anger: how could she have done that to *us*?

But entropy was the way of the universes, thought Kern. Everything winds down. The boy's beach ball lost its air and would remain forever deflated. The fire in the smokehouse, though stoked throughout the night, would die down at last. And, despite the nanogens, people and their relationships were meant to wind down as well. Death was the proper endgame of life. Entropy might take years, decades . . . even centuries, but it was inexorable. He wondered whether Marjod's suicide marked her acceptance of that. Whether she had, nanogens be damned, wound down at last.

"We'd lived together for 136 years," answered Kern.

Paloma gasped.

More than a century, thought Kern. He and Marjod had joked about their Hundredth Anniversary. Fiftieth was gold, and Sixtieth diamond, but what was the Hundredth? Finally, giggling and giddy after finishing off a bottle of rum they had found, intact and not caramelized, on a bottom shelf in a decrepit and long-abandoned convenience store, they had decided on dysprosium.

Kern smiled at the memory of that night.

"You're thinking about her, aren't you?" said Paloma. It was not an accusation.

"You're a very comely young woman, Paloma," said Kern. "But I'm a very old man."

"You look not much older than me. And no, I'm not deceived." She patted the pad beside her. "Please?"

Kern edged a little closer, just out of easy reach of her. "Paloma, I can't make you pregnant . . ."

She hushed him. "I know about the trade. The capacity for reproduction in exchange for eternal life. It's okay."

The capacity, he thought, but not the desire. The intimacy of the candlelight and the nearness of the woman were having their effects. But Marjod—

"Tonight," Kern said softly, "perhaps if I could just sleep."

Paloma fluffed a cushion for him. It smelled of and felt stuffed with fresh

grass. "I've been discourteous," she said. "Forgive me." And after Kern made himself comfortable on the sleeping pad, she curled in delicately beside him.

Daylight and Paloma brought Kern wide awake as if they were one and the same. On the edge of darkness he had been teetering, dreaming, of a woman. Marjod . . . but not Marjod. He came back from that edge with the dim sensation of having entered her. He opened his eyes, and looked up into Paloma's. Straddling his hips, leaning slightly forward, her mouth open, she was moving up and down to a purpose and a primitive rhythm hidden behind her dark, vacant eyes. Although they had scarcely just joined, already he was slick with her moisture, and, recognizing the moment, he was ready, even eager, to succumb to her movements.

But he had been a man for too long. A century and a half had passed since he would become tumescent at the merest touch of a woman. Paloma had given him no choice, had not required his consent. He grasped her hips and held her still. "What are you doing, Paloma?"

The woman closed her eyes and moaned.

Kern tried to sit up as she squirmed against him. "No, Paloma. Get off me, please."

"Please," she breathed, trying to resume her rhythms. "Make me whole again."

Kern twisted roughly, withdrawing from her, and jostled her aside. He retained the memories still of those terrible days long ago—how many Fixeds had the mobs torn apart in vain attempts to assure themselves of virtual mortality? In hope they had ingested blood, fragments, any part of the Fixeds they could swallow, so that the nanogens would incorporate themselves into their bodies.

"Dammit," Paloma whispered hoarsely.

Kern sat up at last. "It doesn't work that way, Paloma. The nanogens are typed to the DNA. Mine will only repair me."

"But you have to," she cried. "Only you can do it."

"I cannot. I don't know that I would if I could," he added, thinking again of Marjod.

Paloma screamed, and leaped back onto him, her legs vising him, her stump a club against his spine. "Fuck me! You have to make me whole again! *I want my leg back!*"

Kern unwrapped her legs and threw her off him. As she rebounded, he clipped his fist against the shelf of her jaw, knocking her unconscious.

The screaming, he quickly realized, had not stopped. Outside in the settlement, faint at first, he heard other cries. They grew louder, and the ground shook with footfalls as people ran past the hut. Quickly Kern gathered up his clothing, and dressed himself before he stepped outside.

The villagers were running away: women and children, and some of the men, though these were fleeing at a more measured pace, not in terror but in awe and horror. Kern looked past them toward the edge of the forest, and his heart stuttered.

Marjod was staggering down a slope toward the beach. From her open chest, caked with dirt and dried blood and oozing remade blood, long tendrils extended, taut as they dragged her heart along the ground fifty meters behind her. Covered with dirt and leaf fragments, it tumbled and bounced like a child's toy. Stiffly and stiff-legged she made her way to the sand, dripping blood but dead still, animated by the nanogens which had been unable to jump-start her life.

"Marjod!" Kern yelled. She could not hear him, but the nanogens reacted to the sound of his voice, and they turned her, zombie-like, toward him, arms held wide in a parody of greeting.

Kern ran to her, beyond shock now. Despite the exertion, his chest was constricted, and he fought to breathe. His feet thudded into the sand, jarring him, casting words from his mouth, a repeated question: what have we done, what have we done? He did not even hear the words at first, so focused was he on the horror waiting for him on the beach. The trail of tendrils behind her had fallen slack, and Marjod's heart was rolling and bouncing the last few meters down the slope and onto the sand. Kern gathered it up like a ball, and wound the tendrils around it as he drew near Marjod.

What have we done?

Beyond Marjod, tied to a makeshift pier, floated a rowboat. Kern chucked her heart into it, and scooped her up to deposit her in the stern. His mind was blank. He saw images of his actions, without giving thought to what he was doing. He was driven without awareness to protect his zombified mate from the nanogens, from the settlers, and from herself. She could not know, would never know, what he was doing for her. Only after Kern picked up the oars and began rowing did his mind pause to reflect.

Marjod lay sprawled athwart the stern of the rowboat, her heart having spilled into the great cavity from which she had wrenched it. The nanogens continued to hold her arms out for him, fixed in that position as if she were a mannikin. For one mad moment she reminded him of a giant Barbie doll . . . anatomically incorrect now, the operation having failed. Kern swore softly at the sacrilegious thought. She deserved better.

He looked up from the boat. They were perhaps a quarter kilometer from shore now. People had gathered there, gawking and pointing. At this distance Kern was unable to hear them, but he knew some were still screaming and crying. Mothers pulled their children to them, hiding their eyes from the monster that had descended upon them from the forest. Perhaps some of them even thought he was saving them from it.

Damn you all, he thought, still rowing ferociously, and then dismissed the curse. The waters still rose, and the settler's numbers shrank—condemning them was redundant. If they were to survive, they would have to start anew and reinvent, rather than steal what had been done before . . .

. . . from what had clearly failed, Kern thought, and stopped rowing. Here the waters of the great gulf were smooth, scarcely rocking the rowboat. Kern leaned forward to touch Marjod's forehead. Her skin felt gritty and cold, and he regretted the contact. Briefly, he closed his eyes and remembered holding her on a lazy

spring morning, their bodies entwined. He kept his eyes closed and focused on that vision as he spilled her body into the water, as he cast her heart out, trailing the remade aorta and pulmonary arteries and veins the way a comet trails sparks.

After the splash, Kern opened his eyes. Marjod was gone. He retained the sensation of her touch that morning, of her body. With those images he had cured himself of the horror she had become; he, and not the nanogens. They could repair functions—but not visions, not memories; only he could do that.

Five meters away, the water began to boil violently. Kern saw a gray dorsal fin, and another. The remanufactured blood had drawn the sharks to feed. Fervently, he hoped that digestion would overcome the restorative powers of the nanogens. And if it failed . . . then at least he would be unaware of the failure. He nodded to himself: he could die with that.

Marjod, he breathed, and dove into the water.