

# Our Lady of Chernobyl

Greg Egan

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*We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth.*

—The envoy of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, describing the Church of the Divine Wisdom in Constantinople, 987.

*It is the rustiest old barn in heathendom.*

—S.L. Clemens, ditto, 1867.

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Luciano Masini had the haunted demeanor and puffy complexion of an insomniac. I'd picked him as a man who'd begun to ask himself, around two a.m. nightly, if his twenty-year-old wife really had found the lover of her dreams in an industrialist three times her age—however witty, however erudite, however wealthy. I hadn't followed his career in any detail, but his most famous move had been to buy the entire superconducting cables division of Pirelli, when the parent company was dismembered in '09. He was impeccably dressed in a gray silk suit, the cut precisely old-fashioned enough to be stylish, and he looked like he'd once been strikingly handsome. A perfect candidate, I decided, for vain self-delusion and belated second thoughts.

I was wrong. What he said was: "I want you to locate a package for me."

"A package?" I did my best to sound fascinated—although if adultery was stultifying, lost property was worse. "Missingen route from—?"

"Zürich."

"To Milan?"

"Of course!" Masini almost flinched, as if the idea that he might have been shipping his precious cargo elsewhere, intentionally, caused him physical pain.

I said carefully, "Nothing is ever really lost. You might find that a strongly-worded letter from your lawyers to the courier is enough to work miracles."

Masini smiled humorlessly. "I don't think so. The courier is dead."

Afternoon light filled the room; the window faced east, away from the sun, but the sky itself was dazzling. I suffered a moment of strange clarity, a compelling sense of having just shaken off a lingering drowsiness, as if I'd begun the conversation half asleep and only now fully woken. Masini let the copper orrery on the wall behind me beat twice, each tick a soft, complicated meshing of a thousand tiny gears. Then he said, "She was found in a hotel room in Vienna, three days ago. She'd been shot in the head at close range. And no, she was not meant to take any such detour."

"What was in the package?"

"A small icon." He indicated a height of some thirty centimeters. "An eighteenth-century depiction of the Madonna. Originally from the Ukraine."

"The Ukraine? Do you know how it came to be in Zürich?" I'd heard that the Ukrainian government had recently launched a renewed campaign to persuade certain countries to get serious about the return of stolen artwork. Crateloads had been smuggled out during the turmoil and corruption of the eighties and nineties.

"It was part of the estate of a well-known collector, a man with an impeccable reputation. My own art dealer examined all the paperwork, the bills of sale, the export licenses, before giving his blessing to the deal."

"Paperwork can be forged."

Masini struggled visibly to control his impatience. "Anything can be *forged*. What do you want me to say? I have no reason to suspect that this was stolen property. I'm not a criminal, Signor Fabrizio."

“I’m not suggesting that you are. So ... money and goods changed hands in Zürich? The icon was yours when it was stolen?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask how much you paid for it?”

“Five million Swiss francs.”

I let that pass without comment, although for a moment I wondered if I’d heard correctly. I was no expert, but I did know that Orthodox icons were usually painted by anonymous artists, and were intended to be as far from unique as individual copies of the Bible. There were exceptions, of course—a few treasured, definitive examples of each type—but they were a great deal older than *eighteenth-century*. However fine the craftsmanship, however well-preserved, five million sounded far too high.

I said, “Surely you insured—?”

“Of course! And in a year or two, I may even get my money back. But I’d much prefer to have the icon. That’s why I purchased it in the first place.”

“And your insurers will agree. They’ll be doing their best to find it.” If another investigator had a head start on me, I didn’t want to waste my time—least of all if I’d be competing against a Swiss insurance firm on their home ground.

Masini fixed his bloodshot eyes on me. “Their *best* is not good enough! Yes, they’ll want to save themselves the money, and they’ll treat this potential loss with great seriousness ... like the accountants they are. And the Austrian police will try very hard to find the murderer, no doubt. Neither are moved by any sense of urgency. Neither would be greatly troubled if nothing were resolved for months. Or years.”

If I’d been wrong about Masini’s nocturnal visions of adultery, I’d been right about one thing: there was a passion, an obsession, driving him which ran as deep as jealousy, as deep as pride, as deep as sex. He leaned forward across the desk, restraining himself from seizing my shirtfront, but commanding and imploring me with as much arrogance and pathos as if he had.

“Two weeks! I’ll give you two weeks—and you can name your fee! Deliver the icon to me within a fortnight ... and everything I have is yours for the asking!”

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I treated Masini’s extravagant offer with as much seriousness as it deserved, but I accepted the case. There were worse ways to spend a fortnight, I decided, than consulting with informants on the fringes of the black market over long lunches in restaurants fit for connoisseurs of fine art.

The obvious starting point, though, was the courier. Her name was Gianna De Angelis: twenty-seven years old, five years in the business, with a spotless reputation; according to the regulatory authorities, not a single complaint had ever been lodged against her, by customer or employer. She’d been working for a small Milanese firm with an equally good record: this was their first loss, in twenty years, of either merchandise or personnel.

I spoke to two of her colleagues; they gave me the barest facts, but wouldn’t be drawn into speculation.

The transaction had taken place in a Zürich bank vault, then De Angelis had taken a taxi straight to the airport. She'd phoned head office to say that all was well, less than five minutes before she was due to board the flight home. The plane had left on time, but she hadn't been on it. She'd bought a ticket from Tyrolean Airlines—using her own credit card—and flown straight to Vienna, carrying the attaché case containing the icon as hand luggage. Six hours later, she was dead.

I tracked down her fiancé, a TV sound technician, to the apartment they'd shared. He was red-eyed, unshaven, hung-over. Still in shock, or I doubt he would have let me through the door. I offered my condolences, helped him finish a bottle of wine, then gently inquired whether Gianna had received any unusual phone calls, made plans to spend extravagant sums of money, or had appeared uncharacteristically nervous or excited in recent weeks. I had to cut the interview short when he began trying to crack my skull open with the empty bottle.

I returned to the office and began trawling the databases, from the official public records right down to the patchwork collections of mailing lists and crudely collated electronic debris purveyed by assorted cyberpimps. One system, operating out of Tokyo, could search the world's digitized newspapers, and key frames from TV news reports, looking for a matching face—whether or not the subject's name was mentioned in the caption or commentary. I found a near-twin walking arm-in-arm with a gangster outside a Buenos Aires courthouse in 2007, and another weeping in the wreckage of a village in the Philippines, her family killed in a typhoon, in 2010, but there were no genuine sightings. A text-based search of local media yielded exactly two entries; she'd only made it into the papers at birth and at death.

So far as I could discover, her financial position had been perfectly sound. No one had any kind of dirt on her, and there wasn't the faintest whiff of an association with organized crime. The icon would have been far from the most valuable item she'd ever laid her hands on—and I still thought Masini had paid a vastly inflated price for it. Artwork—anonymous or not—wasn't exactly the most liquid of assets. So why had she sold out, on this particular job, when there must have been a hundred opportunities which had been far more tempting?

Maybe she hadn't been trying to sell the icon in Vienna. Maybe she'd been coerced into going there. I couldn't imagine anyone “kidnapping” her in the middle of the airport, marching her over to the ticket office, through the security scanners and onto the plane. She'd been armed, highly trained, and carrying all the electronics she could possibly need to summon immediate assistance. But even if she hadn't had an X-ray-transparent gun pointed at her heart every step of the way, maybe a more subtle threat had compelled her.

As dusk fell on the first day of my allotted fourteen, I paced the office irritably, already feeling pessimistic. De Angelis's image smiled coolly on the terminal; her grieving lover's wine tasted sour in my throat. This woman was dead, *that was the crime* ... and I was being paid to hunt for a faded piece of kitsch. If I found the killers it would be incidental. And the truth was, I was hoping I wouldn't.

I opened the blinds and looked down toward the city center. Flea-sized specks scurried across the Piazza del Duomo, the cathedral's forest of mad Gothic pinnacles towering above them. I rarely noticed the cathedral; it was just another part of the expensive view (like the Alps, visible from the reception room) ... and the view was just part of the whole high-class image which enabled me to charge twenty times as much for my services as any back-alley operator. Now I blinked at the sight of it as if it were an hallucination, it seemed so alien, so out of place beside the gleaming dark ceramic buildings of twenty-first century Milan. Statues of saints, or angels, or gargoyles—I couldn't remember, and at this distance, I couldn't really tell them apart—stood atop every pinnacle, like a thousand demented stylites. The whole roof was encrusted with pink-tinged marble, dizzyingly, surreally ornate, looking in places like lacework, and in places like barbed wire. Good atheist or not, I'd been inside once or twice, though I

struggled to remember when and why; some unavoidable ceremonial occasion. In any case, I'd grown up with the sight of it; it should have been a familiar landmark, nothing more. But at that moment, the whole structure seemed utterly foreign, utterly strange; it was as if the mountains to the north had shed their snow and greenery and topsoil and revealed themselves to be giant artifacts, pyramids from Central America, relics of a vanished civilization.

I closed the blinds, and wiped the dead courier's face from my computer screen.

Then I bought myself a ticket to Zürich.

\* \* \* \*

The databases had had plenty to say about Rolf Hengartner. He'd worked in electronic publishing, making deals on some ethereal plane where Europe's biggest software providers carved up the market to their mutual satisfaction. I imagined him skiing, snow and water, with Ministers of Culture and satellite magnates ... although probably not in the last few years, in his seventies, with acute lymphoma. He'd started out in film finance, orchestrating the funding of multinational co-productions; one of the photographs of him in the reception room to what was now his assistant's office showed him raising a clenched fist beside a still-young Depardieu at an anti-Hollywood demonstration in Paris twenty years before.

Max Reif, his assistant, had been appointed executor of the estate. I'd downloaded the latest overpriced *Schweitzerdeutsch* software for my notepad, in the hope that it would guide me through the interview without too many blunders, but Reif insisted on speaking Italian, and turned out to be perfectly fluent.

Hengartner's wife had died before him, but he was survived by three children and ten grandchildren. Reif had been instructed to sell all of the art, since none of the family had ever shown much interest in the collection.

“What was his passion? Orthodox icons?”

“Not at all. Herr Hengartner was eclectic, but the icon was a complete surprise to me. Something of an anomaly. He owned some French Gothic and Italian Renaissance works with religious themes, but he certainly didn't specialize in the Madonna, let alone the Eastern tradition.”

Reif showed me a photograph of the icon in the glossy brochure which had been put together for the auction; Masini had mislaid his copy of the catalog, so this was my first chance to see exactly what I was searching for. I read the Italian section in the pentalingual commentary on the facing page:

*A stunning example of the icon known as the Vladimir Mother of God, probably the most ancient variation of the icons of “loving-kindness” (Greekeleousa, Russianumileniye). It depicts the Virgin holding the Child, His face pressed tenderly to His Mother's cheek, in a powerful symbol of both divine and human compassion for all of creation. According to tradition, this icon derives from a painting by the Evangelist Luke. The surviving exemplar, from which the type takes its name, was brought to Kiev from Constantinople in the 12th century, and is now in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. It has been described as the greatest holy treasure of the Russian nation.*

*Artist unknown. Ukrainian, early 18th century. Cyprus panel, 293 x 204 mm, egg tempera on linen, exquisitely decorated with beaten silver.*

The reserve price was listed as eighty thousand Swiss francs. Less than a fiftieth what Masini had paid for it.

The esthetic attraction of the piece was lost on me; it wasn't exactly a Caravaggio. The colors were drab, the execution was crude—deliberately two-dimensional—and even the silver was badly tarnished. The paintwork itself appeared to be in reasonable condition; for a moment I thought there was a hairline crack across the full width of the icon, but on closer inspection it looked more like a flaw in the reproduction: a scratch on the printing plate, or some photographic intermediate.

Of course, this wasn't meant to be “high art” in the Western tradition. No expression of the artist's ego, no indulgent idiosyncrasies of style. It was—presumably—a faithful copy of the Byzantine original, intended to play a specific role in the practice of the Orthodox religion, and I was in no position to judge its value in that context. But I had trouble imagining either Rolf Hengartner or Luciano Masini as secret converts to the Eastern church. So was it purely a matter of a good investment? Was this nothing but an eighteenth-century baseball card, to them? If Masini's only interest was financial, though, why had he paid so much more than the market value? And why was he so desperate to get it back?

I said, “Can you tell me who bid for the icon, besides Signor Masini?”

“The usual dealers, the usual brokers. I'm afraid I couldn't tell you on whose behalf they were acting.”

“But you did monitor the bidding?” A number of potential buyers, or their agents, had visited Zürich to view the collection in person—Masini among them—but the auction itself had taken place by phone line and computer.

“Of course.”

“Was there a consensus for a price close to Masini's final bid? Or was he forced up to it by just one of those anonymous rivals?”

Reif stiffened, and I suddenly realized what that must have sounded like. I said, “I certainly didn't mean to imply—”

“*At least* three other bidders,” he said icily, “were within a few hundred thousand francs of Signor Masini all the way. I'm sure he'll confirm that, if you take the trouble to ask him.” He hesitated, then added less defensively, “Obviously the reserve price was set far too low. But Herr Hengartner anticipated that the auction house would undervalue this item.”

That threw me. “I thought you didn't know about the icon until after his death. If you'd discussed its value with him—”

“I didn't. But Herr Hengartner left a note beside it in the safe.”

He hesitated, as if debating with himself whether or not I deserved to be privy to the great man's insights. I didn't dare plead with him, let alone insist; I just waited in silence for him to continue. It can't have been more than ten or fifteen seconds, but I swear I broke out in a sweat.

Reif smiled, and put me out of my misery. “The note said: *Prepare to be surprised.* ”

\* \* \* \*

In the early evening I left my hotel room and wandered through the city center. I'd never had reason to visit Zürich before, but—language aside—it was already beginning to feel just like home. The same fast food chains had colonized the city. The electronic billboards displayed the same advertisements. The

glass fronts of the VR parlours glowed with surreal images from the very same games, and the twelve-year-olds inside had all succumbed to the same unfortunate Texan fashions. Even the smell of the place was exactly like Milan on a Saturday night: french fries, popcorn, Reeboks and Coke.

*Had Ukrainian secret service agents killed De Angelis to get the icon back? Was this the flip-side of all the diplomatic efforts to recover stolen artwork?* That seemed unlikely. If there were the slightest grounds for the return of the icon, then dragging the matter through the courts would have meant far better publicity for the cause. Slaughtering foreign citizens could play havoc with international aid ... and the Ukraine was in the middle of negotiating an upgrading of its trade relationship with Europe. I couldn't believe that any government would risk so much for a single work of art, in a country full of more-or-less interchangeable copies of the very same piece. It wasn't as if Hengartner had got his hands on the 12th century original.

*Who, then?* Another collector, another obsessive hoarder, whom Masini had outbid? Someone, perhaps, unlike Hengartner, who already owned several other baseball cards, and wanted a complete set? Maybe Masini's insurance firm had the connections and clout needed to find out who the true bidders at the auction had been; I certainly didn't. A rival collector wasn't the only possibility; one of the bidders could have been a dealer who was so impressed by the price the icon fetched that he or she decided it was worth acquiring by other means.

The air was growing cold faster than I'd expected; I decided to return to the hotel. I'd been walking along the west bank of the Limmat River, down toward the lake; I started to cross back over at the first bridge I came to, then I paused midway to get my bearings. There were cathedrals either side of me, facing each other across the river; unimposing structures compared to Milan's giant Nosferatu Castle, but I felt a—ridiculous—frisson of unease, as if the pair of them had conspired to ambush me.

My *Schweitzerdeutsch* package came with free maps and tour guides; I hit the WHERE AM I? button, and the GPS unit in the notepad passed its coordinates to the software, which proceeded to demystify my surroundings. The two buildings in question were the Grossmunster (which looked like a fortress, with two brutal towers side by side, not quite facing the river's east bank) and the Fraumunster (once an abbey, with a single slender spire). Both dated from the 13th century, although modifications of one kind or another had continued almost to the present. Stained glass windows by, respectively, Giacometti and Chagall. And Ulrich Zwingli had launched the Swiss Reformation from the pulpit of the Grossmunster in 1523.

I was staring at one of the birthplaces of a sect which had endured for five hundred years—and it was far stranger than standing in the shadow of the most ancient Roman temple. To say: *Christianity has shaped the physical and cultural landscape of Europe for two thousand years, as relentlessly as any glacier, as mercilessly as any clash of tectonic plates*, is to state the fatuously obvious. But if I'd spent my whole life surrounded by the evidence, it was only now—now that the legacy of those millennia was beginning to seem increasingly bizarre to me—that I had any real sense of what it meant. Arcane theological disputes between people as alien to me as the ancient Egyptians had transformed the entire continent—along with a thousand purely political and economic forces, for sure—but nevertheless, modulating the development of almost every human activity, from architecture to music, from commerce to warfare, at one level or another.

And there was no reason to believe that the process had halted. Just because the Alps were no longer rising didn't mean geology had come to an end.

“Do you wish to know more?” the tour guide asked me.

“Not unless you can tell me the word for a pathological fear of cathedrals.”

It hesitated, then replied with impeccable fuzzy logic, “There are cathedrals across the length and breadth of Europe. Which particular cathedrals did you have in mind?”

\* \* \* \*

De Angelis's colleagues had provided me with the name of the taxi company she'd used for her trip from the bank to the airport—the last thing she'd paid for with her business credit card. I'd spoken to the manager of the company by phone from Milan, and there was a message from her when I arrived back at the hotel, with the name of the driver for the journey in question. Far from the last person who'd seen De Angelis alive—but possibly the last before she'd been persuaded, by whatever means, to take the icon to Vienna. He was due to report for work at the depot that evening at nine. I ate quickly, then set out into the cold again. The only taxis outside the hotel were from a rival company. I went on foot.

I found Phan Anh Tuan drinking coffee in a corner of the garage. After a brief exchange in German, he asked me if I'd prefer to speak French, and I gratefully switched. He told me he'd been an engineering student in East Berlin when the wall came down. “I always meant to find a way to finish my degree and go home. I got sidetracked, somehow.” He gazed out at the dark icy street, bemused.

I put a photo of De Angelis on the table in front of him; he looked long and hard. “No, I'm sorry. I didn't take this woman anywhere.”

I hadn't been optimistic; still, it would have been nice to have gleaned some small clue about her state of mind; had she been humming “We're in the Money” all the way to the airport, or what?

I said, “You must have a hundred customers a day. Thanks for trying.” I started to take the photo back; he caught my hand.

“I'm not telling you I must have forgotten her. I'm telling you I'm sure I've never seen her before.”

I said, “Last Monday. Two twelve pm. Intercontinental Bank to the airport. The dispatcher's records show—”

He was frowning. “Monday? No. I had engine trouble. I was out of service for almost an hour. Until nearly three.”

“Are you sure?”

He fetched a handwritten log book from his vehicle, and showed me the entry.

I said, “Why would the dispatcher get it wrong?”

He shrugged. “It must have been a software glitch. A computer takes the calls, allocates them ... it's all fully automated. We flick a switch on the radio when we're unavailable—and I can't have forgotten to do that, because I kept the radio on all the time I was working on the car, and no fares came through to me.”

“Could someone else have accepted a job from the dispatcher, pretending to be you?”

He laughed. “Intentionally? No. Not without changing the ID number of their radio.”

“And how hard would that be? Would you need a forged chip, with a duplicate serial number?”

“No. But it would mean pulling the radio out, opening it up, and resetting thirty-two DIP switches. Why would anyone bother?” Then I saw it click in his eyes.

I said, “Do you know of anyone here having a radio stolen recently? The two-way, not the music?”

He nodded sadly. “Both. Someone had both stolen. About a month ago.”

\* \* \* \*

I returned in the morning and confirmed with some of the other drivers most of what Phan had told me. There was no easy way of proving that he hadn't lied about the engine trouble and driven De Angelis himself, but I couldn't see why he would have invented an “alibi” when there was no need for one—when he could have said “Yes, I drove her, she hardly spoke a word” and no one would have had the slightest reason to doubt him.

So: someone had gone to a lot of trouble to be alone in a fake taxi with De Angelis ... and then they'd let her walk into the airport and phone home. To delay the moment when head office would realize that something had gone wrong, presumably—but why had she gone along with that? *What had the driver said to her, in those few minutes, to make her so cooperative? Was it a threat to her family, her lover? Or a bribe, large enough to convince her to make up her mind on the spot? And then she hadn't bothered to cover her trail, because she knew there'd be no way to do so convincingly? She'd accepted the fact that her guilt would be obvious, and that she'd have to become a fugitive?*

That sounded like one hell of a bribe. So how could she have been so naive as to think that anyone would actually pay it?

Outside the Intercontinental Bank, I took her photo from my wallet and held it up toward the armored-glass revolving doors, trying to imagine the scene. *The taxi arrives, she climbs in, they pull out into the traffic. The driver says: Nice weather we're having. By the way, I know what you've got in the attaché case. Come to Vienna with me and I'll make you rich.*

She stared back at me accusingly. I said, “All right, De Angelis, I'm sorry. I don't believe you were that stupid.”

I gazed at the laser-printed image. Something nagged at me. *Digital radios with driver IDs?* For some reason, that had surprised me. It shouldn't have. Perhaps movie scenes of taxi drivers and police communicating in incomprehensible squawks still lingered in my subconscious, still shaped my expectations on some level—in spite of the kind of technology I used myself every day. The word “auction” still conjured up scenes of a man or woman with a hammer, shouting out bids in a crowded room—though I'd never witnessed anything remotely like that, except in the movies. In real life, everything was computerized, everything was digital. This “photograph” was digital. Chemical film had started disappearing from the shops when I was fourteen or fifteen years old—and even in my childhood, it was strictly an amateur medium; most commercial photographers had been using CCD arrays for almost twenty years.

*So why did there appear to be a fine scratch across the photograph of the icon?* The few hundred copies of the auction catalog would have been produced without using a single analog intermediate; everything would have gone from digital camera, to computer, to laser printer. The glossy end-product was the one anachronism—and a less conservative auction house would have offered an on-line version, or an interactive CD.

Reif had let me keep the catalog; back in my hotel room, I inspected it again. The “scratch” definitely wasn't a crack in the paintwork; it cut right across the image, a perfectly straight, white line of uniform thickness, crossing from paint to raised silverwork without the slightest deviation.

A glitch in the camera's electronics? Surely the photographer would have noticed that, and tried again. And even if the flaw had been spotted too late for a retake, one keystroke on any decent image-processing package would have removed it instantly.

I tried to phone Reif; it took almost an hour to get through to him. I said, “Can you tell me the name of the graphic designers who produced the auction catalog?”

He stared at me as if I'd called him in the middle of sex to ask who'd murdered Elvis. “Why do you need to know that?”

“I just want to ask their photographer—”

“Their photographer?”

“Yes. Or whoever it was who photographed the items in the collection.”

“It wasn't necessary to have the collection photographed. Herr Hengartner already had photographs of everything, for insurance purposes. He left a disk with the image files, and detailed instructions for the layout of the catalog. He knew that he was dying. He had everything organized, everything prepared. Does that answer your question? Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

*Not quite.* I steeled myself, and grovelled: Could I have a copy of the original image file? I was seeking advice from an art historian in Moscow, and the best color fax of the catalog wouldn't do justice to the icon. Reif begrudgingly had an assistant locate the data and transmit it to me.

The line, the “scratch”, was there in the file.

*Hengartner*—who'd treasured this icon in secret, and who'd somehow known that it would fetch an extraordinary price—had left behind an image of it with a small but unmistakable flaw, and made sure that it was seen by every prospective buyer.

That had to mean something, but I had no idea what.

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A list of the dates when Lombardy had fallen in and out of Austrian hands, committed to memory when I was sixteen years old, just about exhausted my knowledge of the Habsburg empire. Which should hardly have mattered in 2013, but I felt disconcertingly ill-prepared all the same.

In my hotel room, I unpacked my bags, then looked out warily across the rooftops of Vienna. I could see Saint Stephen's cathedral in the distance; the southern tower, almost detached from the main hall, was topped with a spire like a filigreed radio antenna. The roof of the hall was decorated with richly colored tiles, forming an eye-catching zig-zag pattern of chevrons and diamonds—as if someone had draped a giant Mongolian rug over the building to keep it warm. But then, anything less exotic would have been a disappointment.

De Angelis had died in the same hotel (in the room directly above me, with much the same view).

Booked in under her own name. Paying with her own plastic, when she could have used anonymous cash. *Did that prove that she'd had nothing to be ashamed of—that she'd been threatened, not bribed?*

I spent half the morning trying to persuade the hotel manager that the local police wouldn't lock him up for allowing me to speak to his staff about the murder; the whole idea seemed to strike him as akin to treason. "If a Viennese citizen died in Milan," I argued patiently, "wouldn't you expect an accredited Austrian investigator to receive every courtesy there?"

"We would send a delegation of police to liaise with the Milanese authorities, not a private detective acting alone."

I was getting nowhere, so I backed off. Besides, I had an appointment to keep.

My long-awaited expense-account lunch with a black-marketeer turned out to be in a health food restaurant. Back in Milan, I'd paid several million lira to a net-based "introduction agency" to put me in touch with "Anton." He was much younger than I'd expected; he looked about twenty, and he radiated the kind of self-assurance I'd only come across before in wealthy adolescent drug dealers. I managed to avoid using my atrocious German, yet again; Anton spoke CNN English, with an accent that I took to be Hungarian.

I handed him the auction catalog, open at the relevant page; he glanced at the picture of the icon. "Oh yeah. The Vladimir. I could get you another one, exactly like this. Ten thousand US dollars."

"I don't want a forged replica." Attractive as the idea was, Masini would never have fallen for it. "Or even a similar contemporary piece. I want to know who asked for *this*. Who spread the word that it was going to change hands in Zürich, and that they'd pay to have it brought east."

I had to make a conscious effort not to look down to see where he'd placed his feet. Before he'd arrived, I'd discreetly dropped a pinch of silica microspheres onto the floor beneath the table. Each one contained a tiny accelerometer—an array of springy silicon beams a few microns across, fabricated on the same chip as a simple, low-power microprocessor. If just one, out of the fifty thousand I'd scattered, still adhered to his shoes the next time we met, I'd be able to interrogate it in infrared and learn exactly where he'd been. Or exactly where he kept this pair of shoes when he changed into another.

Anton said, "Icons move west." He made it sound like a law of nature. "Through Prague or Budapest, to Vienna, Salzburg, Munich. That's the way everything's set up."

"For five million Swiss francs, don't you think someone might have made the effort to switch from their traditional lines of supply?"

He scowled. "*Five million!* I don't believe that. What makes this worth five million?"

"You're the expert. You tell me."

He glared at me as if he suspected that I was mocking him, then looked down at the catalog again. This time he even read the commentary. He said cautiously, "Maybe it's older than the auctioneers thought. If it's really, say, fifteenth century, the price could almost make sense. Maybe your client guessed the true age ... and so did someone else." He sighed. "It will be expensive finding out who, though. People will be very reluctant to talk."

I said, “You know where I’m staying. Once you find someone who needs persuading, let me know.”

He nodded sullenly, as if he'd seriously hoped I might have handed over a large wad of cash for miscellaneous bribes. I almost asked him about the “scratch”—*Could it be some kind of coded message to the cognoscenti that the icon is older than it seems?*—but I didn't want to make a fool of myself. He'd seen it, and said nothing; perhaps it was just a meaningless computer glitch after all.

When I'd paid the bill, he stood up to depart, then bent down toward me and said quietly, “If you mention what I'm doing, to anyone, I'll have you killed.”

I kept a straight face, and replied, “Vice versa.”

When he was gone, I tried to laugh. *Stupid, swaggering child.* I couldn't quite get the right sound out, though. I didn't imagine he'd be too happy if he found out what he'd trodden in. I took out my notepad, consulted the appointments diary, then let my right arm hang beside me for a second, dousing the floor with a fry-your-brains code to the remaining microspheres.

Then I took the picture of De Angelis from my wallet and held it in front of me on the table.

I said, “Am I in any danger? What do you think?”

She stared back at me, not quite smiling. The expression in her eyes might have been amusement, or it might have been concern. Not indifference; I was sure of that. But she didn't seem prepared to start dispensing predictions or advice.

\* \* \* \*

Just as I was psyching myself up to tackle the hotel manager again, the relevant bureaucrat in the city government finally agreed to fax the hotel a pro forma statement acknowledging that my license was recognized throughout the jurisdiction. That seemed to satisfy the manager, though it said no more than the documents I'd already shown him.

The clerk at the check-in desk barely remembered De Angelis; he couldn't say if she'd been cheerful or nervous, friendly or terse. She'd carried her own luggage; a porter remembered seeing her with the attaché case, and an overnight bag. (She'd spent the night in Zürich before collecting the icon.) She hadn't used room service, or any of the hotel restaurants.

The cleaner who'd found the body had been born in Turin, according to his supervisor. I wasn't sure if that was going to be a help or a hindrance. When I tracked him down in a basement storeroom, he said stubbornly, in German, “I told the police everything. Why are you bothering me? Go and ask them, if you want to know the facts.”

He turned his back on me. He seemed to be stock-taking carpet shampoo and disinfectant, but he made it look like a matter of urgency.

I said, “It must have been a shock for you. Someone so young. An eighty-year-old guest dying in her sleep ... you'd probably take it in your stride. But Gianna was twenty-seven. A tragedy.” He tensed up at the sound of her name; I could see his shoulders tighten. *Six days later? A woman he'd never even met?*

I said, “You didn't see her any time before, did you? You didn't talk to her?”

“No.”

I didn't believe him. The manager was a small-minded cretin; fraternising was probably strictly forbidden. This guy was in his twenties, good looking, spoke the same language. What had he done? Flirted with her harmlessly in a corridor for thirty seconds? And now he was afraid he'd lose his job if he admitted it?

“No one else will find out, if you tell me what she said. You have my word. It's not like the cops, nothing has to be official. All I want to do is help lock up the fuckers who killed her.”

He put down the bar-code scanner and turned to face me. “I just asked her where she was from. What she was doing in town.”

Hairs stood up on the back of my neck. It had taken me so long to get even this close to her, I couldn't quite believe it was happening.

“How did she react?”

“She was polite. Friendly. She seemed nervous, though. Distracted.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said she was from Milan.”

“What else?”

“When I asked her why she was in Vienna, she said she was playing chaperone.”

“*What?*”

“She said she wasn't staying long. And she was only here to play chaperone. To an older lady.”

\* \* \* \*

*Chaperone?* I lay awake half the night, trying to make sense of that. Did it imply that she hadn't given up custodianship of the icon? That she was still guarding it when she died? That she considered it to be Luciano Masini's property, and still fully intended to deliver it to him, right to the end?

What had the “taxi driver” said to her? Bring the icon to Vienna for a day? No need to let it out of your sight? We don't want to steal it ... we just want to borrow it? To pray to it one last time before it vanishes into another western bank vault? But what was so special about *this* copy of the Vladimir Mother of God that made it worth so much trouble? The same thing that made it worth five million Swiss francs to Masini, possibly—but what?

And why had De Angelis blown her job, and risked imprisonment, to go along with the scheme? Even if she'd been blind to the obvious fact that it was all a set-up, what could they have offered her in exchange for flushing her career and reputation down the drain?

I'd only been asleep ten or twenty minutes when I was woken by someone pounding on the door of my room. By the time I'd staggered out of bed and pulled on my trousers, the police had grown impatient and let themselves in with a pass key. It wasn't quite two a.m.

There were four of them, two in uniform. One waved a photograph in front of my face. I squinted at it.

“Did you speak to this man? Yesterday?”

It was Anton. I nodded. If they didn't already know the answer, they wouldn't have asked the question.

“Will you come with us, please?”

“Why?”

“Because your friend is dead.”

They showed me the body, so I could confirm that it really was the same man. He'd been shot in the chest and dumped near the canal. Not in it; maybe the killers had been disturbed. In the morgue, the corpse was definitely shoeless, but it would have been worth sending out the microspheres' code, just in case—the things could end up in the strangest places (nostrils, for a start). But before I could think of a plausible excuse to take the notepad from my pocket, they'd pulled the sheet back over his head and led me away for questioning.

The police had found my name and number in “Anton's” notepad (if they knew his real name, they were keeping it to themselves ... along with several other things I would have liked to have known, such as whether or not the ballistics matched the bullet used on De Angelis). I recounted the whole conversation in the restaurant, but left out the (illegal) microspheres; they'd find them soon enough, and I had nothing to gain by volunteering a confession.

I was treated with appropriate disdain, but not even verbally abused, really—a five star rating; I'd had ribs broken in Seveso, and a testicle crushed in Marseille. At half past four, I was free to leave.

Crossing from the interview room to the elevator, I passed half a dozen small offices; they were separated by partitions, but not fully enclosed. On one desk was a cardboard box, full of items of clothing in plastic bags.

I walked past, then stopped just out of sight. There was a man and a woman in the office, neither of whom I'd seen before, talking and making notes.

I walked back and poked my head into the office. I said, “Excuse me ... could you tell me ... please—?” I spoke German with the worst accent I could manage; I had a head start, it must have been dire. They stared at me, appalled. Visibly struggling for words, I pulled out my notepad and hit a few keys, fumbling with the phrasebook software, walking deeper into the office. I thought I saw a pair of shoes out of the corner of my eye, but I couldn't be certain. “Could you tell me please where I could find the nearest public convenience?”

The man said, “Get out of here before I kick your head in.”

I backed out, smiling uncertainly. “Grazie, signore! *Dankeschön!* ”

There was a surveillance camera in the elevator; I didn't even glance at the notepad. Ditto for the foyer. Out on the street, I finally looked down.

I had the data from two hundred and seven microspheres. The software was already busy reconstructing Anton's trail.

I was on the verge of shouting for joy when it occurred to me that I might have been better off if I hadn't been able to follow him.

\* \* \* \*

The first place he'd gone from the restaurant looked like home; no one answered the door, but I could glimpse posters of several of the continent's most pretentious rock bands through the windows. If not his own, maybe a friend's place, or a girlfriend's. I sat in an open air café across the street, sketching the visible outline of the apartment, guessing at walls and furniture, playing back the trace for the hours he'd spent there, then modifying my guesses, trying again.

The waiter looked over my shoulder at the multiple exposure of stick figures filling the screen. "Are you a choreographer?"

"Yes."

"How exciting! What's the name of the dance?"

"Making Phone Calls And Waiting Impatiently.' Its an*hommage* to my two idols and mentors, Twyla Tharp and Pina Bausch." The waiter was impressed.

After three hours, and no sign of life, I moved on. Anton had stopped by at another apartment, briefly. This one was occupied by a thin blond woman in her late teens.

I said, "I'm a friend of Anton's. Do you know where I could find him?"

She'd been crying. "I don't know anyone by that name." She slammed the door. I stood in the hallway for a moment, wondering: *Did I kill him? Did someone detect the spheres, and put a bullet in his heart because of them?* But if they'd found them, they would have destroyed them; there would have been no trail to follow.

He'd only visited one more location before taking a car trip to the canal, lying very still. It turned out to be a detached two-story house in an upmarket district. I didn't ring the doorbell. There was no convenient observation post, so I did a single walk-by. The curtains were drawn, no vehicles were parked nearby.

A few blocks away, I sat on a bench in a small park and started phoning databases. The house had been leased just three days before; I had no trouble finding out about the owner—a corporate lawyer with property all over the city—but I couldn't get hold of the new tenant's name.

Vienna had a centralized utilities map, to keep people from digging into underground power cables and phone lines by accident. Phone lines were useless to me; no one who made the slightest effort could be bugged that way anymore. But the house had natural gas; easier to swim through than water, and much less noisy.

I bought a shovel, boots, gloves, a pair of white overalls, and a safety helmet. I captured an image of the gas company logo from its telephone directory entry, and jet-sprayed it onto the helmet; from a distance, it looked quite authentic. I summoned up all the bravado I had left, and returned to the street—beyond sight of the house, but as close to it as I dared. I shifted a few paving slabs out of the way, then started digging. It was early afternoon; there was light traffic, but very few pedestrians. An old man peeked out at me from a window of the nearest house. I resisted the urge to wave to him; it wouldn't have rung true.

I reached the gas main, climbed down into the hole, and pressed a small package against the PVC; it extruded a hollow needle which melted the plastic chemically, maintaining the seal as it penetrated the walls of the pipe. Someone passed by on the footpath, walking two large slobbering dogs; I didn't look up.

The control box chimed softly, signaling success. I refilled the hole, replaced the paving slabs, and returned to the hotel for some sleep.

\* \* \* \*

I'd left a narrow fiber-optic cable leading from the buried control box to the unpaved ground around a nearby tree, the end just a few millimeters beneath the soil. The next morning, I collected all the stored data, then went back to the hotel to sift through it.

Several hundred bugs had made it into the house's gas pipes and back to the control box, several times—eavesdropping in hour-long overlapping shifts, then returning to disgorge the results. The individual sound tracks were often abysmal, but by processing all of them together, the software could usually come up with intelligible speech.

There were five voices, three male, two female. All used French, though I wouldn't have sworn it was everyone's native tongue.

I pieced things together slowly. They didn't have the icon—they'd been hired to find it, by someone called Katulski. Apparently they'd paid Anton to keep an ear to the ground, but he'd come back to them asking for more money, in exchange for not switching his loyalty to me. The trouble was, he really had nothing tangible to offer ... and they'd just had a tip-off from another source. References to his murder were oblique, but maybe he'd tried to blackmail them in some way when they'd told him he was no longer needed. One thing was absolutely clear, though: they were taking turns watching an apartment on the other side of the city, where they believed the man who'd killed De Angelis would eventually show up.

I hired a car and followed two of them when they set out to relieve the watch. They'd rented a room across the street from their target; with my IR binoculars I could see where they were aiming theirs. The place under observation looked empty; all I could make out through the tatty curtains was peeling paint.

I called the police from a public phone; the synthesized voice of my notepad spoke for me. I left an anonymous message for the cop who'd interrogated me, giving the code which would unlock the data in the microspheres. Forensic would have found them almost immediately, but extracting the information by brute-force microscopy would have taken days.

Then I waited.

Five hours later, around three a.m., the two men I'd followed left in a hurry, without replacements. I took out my photo of De Angelis and inspected it in the moonlight. I still don't understand what it was about her that held me in her sway; she was either a thief, or a fool. Possibly both. And whatever she was, it had killed her.

I said, "Don't just stand there smirking like you know all the answers. How about wishing me luck?"

\* \* \* \*

The building was ancient, and in bad repair. I had no trouble picking the lock on the front door, and

though the stairs creaked all the way to the top floor, I encountered no one.

There was a tell-tale pattern of electric fields detectable through the door of apartment 712; it looked like it was wired-up with ten different kinds of alarm. I picked the lock of the neighboring apartment. There was an access hatch in the ceiling—fortuitously right above the sofa. Someone below moaned in their sleep as I pulled my legs up and closed the hatch. My heart was pounding from adrenaline and claustrophobia, burglary in a foreign city, fear, anticipation. I played a torch-beam around; mice went scurrying.

The corresponding hatch in 712 was guarded just like the door. I moved to another part of the ceiling, lifted away the thermal insulation, then cut a hole in the plaster and lowered myself into the room.

I don't know what I'd expected to find. A shrine covered with icons and votive candles? Occult paraphernalia and a stack of dusty volumes on the teachings of Slavonic mystics?

There was nothing in the room but a bed, a chair, and a VR rig—plugged into the phone socket. Vienna had kept up with the times; even this dilapidated apartment had the latest high-bandwidth ISDN.

I glanced down at the street; there was no one in sight. I put my ear to the door; if anyone was ascending the stairs, they were far quieter than I'd been.

I slipped the helmet over my head.

The simulation was a building, larger than anything I'd ever seen, stretching out around me like a stadium, like a colosseum. In the distance—perhaps two hundred meters away—were giant marble columns topped with arches, holding up a balcony with an ornate metal railing, and another set of columns, supporting another balcony ... and so on, to six tiers. The floor was tile, or parquetry, with delicate angular braids outlining a complex hexagonal pattern in red and gold. I looked up—and, dazzled, threw my arms in front of my face (to no effect). The hall of this impossible cathedral was topped with a massive dome, the scale defying calculation. Sunlight poured in through dozens of arched windows around the base. Above, covering the dome, was a figurative mosaic, the colors exquisite beyond belief. My eyes watered from the brightness; as I blinked away the tears, I could begin to make out the scene. A haloed woman stretched out her hand —

Someone pressed a gun barrel to my throat.

I froze, waiting for my captor to speak. After a few seconds, I said in German, “I wish someone would teach me to move that quietly.”

A young male voice replied, in heavily accented English: “He who possesses the truth of the word of Jesus can hear even its silence.’ Saint Ignatius of Antioch.” Then he must have reached over to the rig control box and turned down the volume—I'd planned to do that myself, but it had seemed redundant—because I suddenly realized that I'd been listening to a blanket of white noise.

He said, “Do you like what we're building? It was inspired by the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople—Justinian's Church of the Divine Wisdom—but it's not a slavish copy. The new architecture has no need to make concessions to gross matter. The original in Istanbul is a museum, now—and of course it was used as a mosque for five centuries before that. But there's no prospect of either fate befalling this holy place.”

“No.”

“You're working for Luciano Masini, aren't you?”

I couldn't think of a plausible lie which would make me any more popular. “That's right.”

“Let me show you something.”

I stood rigid, prepared, hoping he was about to take the helmet off me. I felt him moving, through the gun barrel ... then I realized that he was slipping on the rig's data glove.

He pointed his hand, and moved my viewpoint; blindly for him, which impressed me. I seemed to slide across the cathedral floor straight toward the sanctuary, which was separated from the nave by a massive, gilded latticework screen, covered in hundreds of icons. From a distance, the screen glinted opulently, the subjects of the paintings impossible to discern, the colored panels making up a weirdly beautiful abstract mosaic.

As I drew closer, though, the effect was overwhelming.

The images were all executed in the same “crude” two-dimensional style which I'd derided in Masini's missing baseball card—but here, together *en masse*, they seemed a thousand times more expressive than any overblown Renaissance masterpiece. It was not just the fact that the colors had been “restored” to a richness no physical pigment had ever possessed: reds and blues like luminous velvet, silver like white-hot steel. The simple, stylized human geometry of the figures—the angle of a head bowed in suffering, the strange dispassionate entreaty of eyes raised to heaven—seemed to constitute a whole language of emotions, with a clarity and precision which cut through every barrier to comprehension. It was like writing before Babel, like telepathy, like music.

Or maybe the gun at my throat was helping to broaden my esthetic sensibilities. Nothing like a good dose of endogenous opiates to throw open the doors of perception.

My captor pointed my eyes at an empty space between two of the icons.

“This is where Our Lady of Chernobyl belongs.”

“Chernobyl? That's where it was painted?”

“Masini didn't tell you anything, did he?”

“Didn't tell me what? That the icon was really fifteenth century?”

“Not fifteenth. *Twentieth*. 1986.”

My mind was racing, but I said nothing.

He recounted the whole story in matter-of-fact tones, as if he'd been there in person. “One of the founders of the True Church was a worker at the number four reactor. When the accident happened, he received a lethal dose within hours. But he didn't die straight away. It was two weeks later, when he truly understood the scale of the tragedy—when he realized that it wasn't just hundreds of volunteers, firemen and soldiers, who'd die in agony in the months to follow ... *but tens of thousands of people* dying in years to come; land and water contaminated for decades; sickness for generations—that Our Lady came to him in a vision, and She told him what to do.

“He was to paint Her as the Vladimir Mother of God—copying every detail, respecting the tradition. But in truth, he would be the instrument for the creation of a new icon—and She would sanctify it, pouring into it all of Her Son's compassion for the suffering which had taken place, His rejoicing in the courage and self-sacrifice His people had shown, and His will to share the burden of the grief and pain that was yet to come.

“She told him to mix some spilt fuel into the pigments he used, and when it was completed to hide it away until it could take its rightful place on the iconostasis of the One True Church.”

I closed my eyes, and saw a scene from a TV documentary: celluloid movie footage taken just after the accident, the image covered with ghostly flashes and trails. Particle tracks recorded in the emulsion; radiation damage to the film itself. *That was what Hengartner's “scratch” had meant*—whether it was a real effect which appeared when he photographed the icon with a modern camera, or just a stylized addition created by computer. It was a message to any prospective buyer who knew how to read the code: This is not what the commentary says. This is a rarity, a brand new icon, an original. *Our Lady of Chernobyl*. Ukrainian, 1986.

I said, “I'm surprised anyone ever got it onto a plane.”

“The radiation is barely detectable, now; most of the hottest fission products decayed years ago. Still ... you wouldn't want to kiss it. And maybe it killed that superstitious old man a little sooner than he would have died otherwise.”

*Superstitious?* “Hengartner ... thought it would cure his cancer?”

“Why else would he have bought it? It was stolen in '93, and it disappeared for a long time, but there were always rumors circulating about its *miraculous powers* .” His tone was contemptuous. “I don't know what religion that old fart believed in. *Homeopathy* , maybe. A dose of what ailed him, to put it right again. The best whole-body scanners can pick up the smallest trace of strontium-90, and date it to the accident; if Chernobyl caused his cancer, he would have known it. But your own boss, I imagine, is just an old fashioned Mariolater, who thinks he can save his granddaughter's life if he burns all his money at a shrine to the Virgin.”

Maybe he thought he was goading me; I didn't give a shit what Masini believed, but a surge of careless anger ran through me. “And the courier? *What about her?* Was she just another dumb, superstitious peasant to you?”

He was silent for a while; I felt him change hands on the gun. I knew where he was now, precisely; with my eyes closed, I could see him in front of me.

“My brother told her there was a boy from Kiev, dying from leukaemia in Vienna, who wanted a chance to pray to Our Lady of Chernobyl.” All of the contempt had gone out of his voice, now. And all of the pompous scriptural certainty. “Masini had told her about his granddaughter; she knew how obsessed he was, she knew he'd never part with the icon willingly, not even for a couple of hours. So she agreed to take it to Vienna. To deliver it a day late. She didn't believe it would cure anyone. I don't think she believed in God at all. But my brother convinced her that the boy had the right to pray to the icon ... to take some comfort from doing that. Even if he didn't have five million Swiss francs.”

I threw a punch, the hardest I'd thrown in my life. It connected with flesh and bone, jarring my whole body like an electric shock. For a moment I was so dazed that I didn't know whether or not he'd

squeezed the trigger and blown half my face away. I staggered, and pushed the helmet off, icy sweat dripping from my face. He was lying on the floor, shuddering with pain, still holding the gun. I stepped forward and trod on his wrist, then bent down and took the weapon, easily. He was fourteen or fifteen years old, long-limbed but very emaciated, and bald. I kicked him in the ribs, viciously.

“And you played the pious little cancer victim, did you?”

“Yes.” He was weeping, but whether it was from pain or remorse, I couldn't tell.

I kicked him again. “And then you killed her? To get your hands on the fucking Virgin of Chernobyl who doesn't even work any fucking miracles?”

“I didn't kill her!” He was bawling like an infant. “My brother killed her, and now he's dead. He didn't mean to, but he panicked, and he killed her, and now he's dead too.”

*His brother was dead? “Anton?”*

“He went to tell Katulski's goons about you.” He got the words out between sobs. “He thought they'd keep you busy ... and he thought, maybe if they were fighting it out with you, we might have a chance to get the icon out of the city.”

I should have guessed. What better way to hunt for a stolen icon, than to traffic in them yourself? And what better way to keep track of your rivals than to pretend to be their informant?

“So where is it now?”

He didn't reply. I slipped the gun into my back pocket, then bent down and picked him up under the arms. He must have weighed about thirty kilos, at the most. Maybe he really was dying of leukaemia; at the time, I didn't much care. I slammed him against the wall, let him fall, then picked him up and did it again. Blood streamed out of his nose; he started choking and spluttering. I lifted him for a third time, then paused to inspect my handiwork. I realized I'd broken his jaw when I'd hit him, and probably one of my fingers.

He said, “You're nothing. Nothing. A blip in history. Time will swallow up the secular age—and all the mad, blasphemous cults and superstitions—like a mote in a sandstorm. Only the True Church will endure.” He was smiling bloodily, but he didn't sound smug, or triumphant. He was just stating an opinion.

The gun must have reached body temperature in the pocket of my jeans; when he pressed the barrel to the back of my head, at first I mistook it for his thumb. I stared into his eyes, trying to read his intentions, but all I could see was desperation. In the end, he was just a child alone in a foreign city, overwhelmed by disasters.

He slid the barrel around my head, until it was aimed at my temple. I closed my eyes, clutching at him involuntarily. I said, “Please—”

He took the gun away. I opened my eyes just in time to see him blow his brains out.

\* \* \* \*

All I wanted to do was curl up on the floor and sleep, and then wake to find that it had all been a dream. Some mechanical instinct kept me moving, though. I washed off as much of the blood as I could. I

listened for signs that the neighbors had woken. The gun was an illegal Swedish weapon with an integral silencer, the round itself had made a barely audible hiss, but I wasn't sure how loudly I'd been shouting.

I'd been wearing gloves from the start, of course. The ballistics would confirm suicide. But the hole in the ceiling and the broken jaw and the bruised ribs would have to be explained, and the chances were I'd shed hair and skin all over the room. Eventually, there would have to be a trial. And I would have to go to prison.

I was almost ready to call the police. I was too tired to think of fleeing, too sickened by what I'd done. I hadn't literally killed the boy—just beaten him, and terrorized him. I was still angry with him, even then; he was partly to blame for De Angelis's death. At least as much as I was to blame for his.

*And then the mechanical part of me said: Anton was his brother. They might have met, the day he was killed—at Anton's place, or the apartment with the thin blond girl. Trodden the same floor for a while. Wiped their feet on the same doormat. And since that time, he might have moved the icon from one hiding place to another.*

I took out my notepad, knelt at the feet of the corpse, and sent out the code.

Three spheres responded.

\* \* \* \*

I found it just before dawn, buried under rubble in a half-demolished building on the outskirts of the city. It was still in the attaché case, but all the locks and alarms had been disabled. I opened the case, and stared at the thing itself for a while. It looked like the catalog photograph. Drab and ugly.

I wanted to snap it in two. I wanted to light a bonfire and burn it. Three people were dead, because of it.

But it wasn't that simple.

I sat on the rubble with my head in my hands. I couldn't pretend that I didn't know what the icon meant to its rightful owners. I'd seen the church they were building, the place where it belonged. I'd heard the story—however apocryphal—of its creation. And if talk of divine compassion for the dead of Chernobyl being channelled into a radioactive Christmas card was meaningless, ludicrous bullshit to me ... that wasn't the point. De Angelis had believed none of it—but she'd still blown her job, she'd still gone to Vienna of her own free will. And I could dream of a perfect, secular, rational world all I liked ... but I still had to live, and act, in the real one.

I was sure I could get the icon to Masini before I was arrested. He wasn't likely to hand over all his worldly goods, as promised, but I'd probably be able to extract several billion lira from him—before the kid died, and his gratitude faded. Enough to buy myself some very good lawyers. Good enough, perhaps, to keep me out of prison.

Or I could do what De Angelis should have done, when it came to the crunch—instead of defending Masini's fucking property rights to the death.

I returned to the apartment. I'd switched off all the alarms before leaving, I could enter through the door this time. I put on the VR helmet and glove, and wrote an invisible message with my fingertip in the empty space on the iconostasis.

Then I pulled out the phone plug, breaking the connection, and went looking for a place to hide until

nightfall.

\* \* \* \*

We met just before midnight, outside the fairground to the city's north-east, within sight of the Ferris wheel. Another frightened, expendable child, putting on a brave front. I might have been the cops. I might have been anyone.

When I handed over the attaché case, he opened it and glanced inside, then looked up at me as if I was some kind of holy apparition.

I said, "What will you do with it?"

"Extract the true icon from the physical representation. And then destroy it."

I almost replied: *You should have stolen Hengartner's image file instead, and saved everyone a lot of trouble.* But I didn't have the heart.

He pressed a multilingual pamphlet into my hands. I read it on my way to the subway. It spelt out the theological differences between the True Church and the various national versions of Orthodoxy. Apparently it all came down to the question of the incarnation; God had been made information, not flesh, and anyone who'd missed that important distinction needed to be set right as soon as possible. It went on to explain how the True Church would unify the Eastern Orthodox—and eventually the entire Christian—world, while eradicating superstitions, apocalyptic cults, virulent nationalism, and atheistic materialism. It didn't say anything, one way or the other, about anti-semitism, or the bombing of mosques.

The letters decayed on the page, minutes after I'd read them. Triggered by exhaled carbon dioxide? These people had appropriated the methods of some strange gurus indeed.

I took out my photo of De Angelis.

"Is this what you wanted of me? Are you satisfied?"

She didn't reply. I tore up the image and let the pieces flutter to the ground.

I didn't take the subway. I needed the cold air to clear my head. So I walked back into the city, making my way between the ruins of the incomprehensible past, and the heralds of the unimaginable future.