

Koestler pushed open the door. Two people lay in near-darkness beneath the covers of an enormous bed. One was Billy Styvesant. The other Koestler assumed to be his girlfriend.

“Found them!” Koestler shouted over his shoulder.

Detective Leone came up behind him. Her breath came out in small clouds of vaporous air.

The couple in the bed weren’t quite sleeping, however. Both people looked pale, nearly dead.

“That’s Billy,” Detective Leone said. “Who’s that with him?”

Koestler stowed his Clobberer. “Her name is Melissa. Melissa Connors.”

“She know about Billy?” Leone whispered.

“I don’t think so,”

Melissa Connors seemed to be conscious. She struggled to awaken. Her mouth moved and her eyelids fluttered like two frail butterflies.

“What happened?” Koestler asked.

The woman’s skin was dry and a baby-blue color. Koestler guessed that they had been this way for days and both were suffering from severe dehydration.

“Billy,” Melissa Connors whispered feebly. “S-s-someone s-shot him...”

Detective Leone pulled out her phone and dialed EMS.

“Who shot Billy?” Koestler asked.

“The p-p-police,” Melissa Connors breathed. She then lifted a crooked hand from beneath the covers and pointed at the wall beyond the foot of the bed. Not the door. Not the nearby window. The wall.

“We are the police,” Koestler said. “Billy was working with us.”

Connors appeared not to register his words to her. “We were sleeping. I looked up...and he s-shot Billy. He c-came out and s-shot him.”

Again the trembling hand pointed at the wall behind Koestler.

“Did he shoot you, too?” Koestler asked.

“Please h-help...”

“Help is on its way,” Detective Leone said over Koestler’s shoulder.

Melissa Connors closed her eyes. The room had a smell of death about it even though both people on the bed were still alive.

Koestler stood up. Amber Leone still had her phone out.

“You’d better call the captain,” he said in an urgent whisper. “I think this is the player again.”

Leone nodded and went outside to place the call.



BILLY STYVESANT AND HIS GIRLFRIEND were airlifted to the Aaron Stively Medical Center in Culver City. Koestler had chosen that particular hospital not because it was nearest. It wasn’t. But Bob Thermopylae had been sent there after the bust the night before and Koestler wanted some answers. All three victims were now in a special detention wing of the hospital under close observation.

Kip Dixon arrived in Face twenty minutes later, when he got the news. Edwardian Rux was not far behind. They gathered in the reception area of the south wing of the hospital. Two armed and armored guards stood like chubby insects at the entrance to the ward.

Dr. Randall Helms oversaw the detention wing. He was tall, bespeckled, and softly-spoken. Once Billy Styvesant and Melissa Connors had been taken care of Dr. Helms met the Protean set in the reception area.

“I must admit,” Helms said carefully, “I’ve never seen hypothermia like this.”

“What makes say that?” Edwardian Rux asked.

“I’ll show you,” Helms said. “Come this way.”

Helms escorted them past the guards and went directly to Bob Thermopylae’s room. Thermopylae—permanently morphed as Madonna Ciccone—lay buried beneath a layer of blankets, one of which was a thermal blanket monitored by one of the machines nearby. Koestler was stunned by the baby-blue glow of Thermopylae’s soft skin.

In a low voice, Helms said, “It only seems like hypothermia. His blood pressure is very low, which you’d expect and his body temperature is steady at eighty-nine degrees. But there’s something else.”