

THE MAN WHO  
*MELTED*



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**JACK DANN**

INTRODUCTION BY  
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For

*Gardner Dozois,*

who won't have to read it again



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# INTRODUCTION

ROBERT SILVERBERG

One thing that we all try to do, when we write science fiction, one thing out of many, is to see into the future: that is, to see the unseeable. But we do it in various ways. One way is to invent it by extrapolating out of our own knowledge of the present-day world, our stock of information about technological advances already in the early developmental stages, thus presenting the writer's view of how things are most likely to occur in the years ahead. Another way is to use one's innate intuitive sense, not necessarily founded in knowledge or probability or even logic, of how things *might* occur in the future in the particular story one wants to tell. Let us say that the first method is the engineer's method and the second the poet's method. Neither is superior to the other; each has produced some of the greatest work in the genre.

Every science fiction writer, after all, is attempting to create, to invent, to imagine, to pull right out of thin air, a world that does not yet exist, and to make it plausible to his readers. But there are many different means of going about that task, just as there are many different kinds of plausibility. Some writers, the engineers—Robert A. Heinlein is the prime example, but there have been plenty of others, writers such as Poul Anderson, Arthur C. Clarke, David Brin, Larry Niven, Kim Stanley Robinson, to name just a few—strive with particular care to devise visions of the future that are solid and convincing down to the smallest technological and political detail, so that in the aggregate they amount to writing a history of the future. The term “Future

History” is one that Heinlein explicitly applied to many of the books that he wrote in his prime period in the 1940s, which follow a chart of events covering several centuries to come that he had constructed a priori, and those books are full of remarkable foretellings of late twentieth-century reality.

Then there are the poets—Ray Bradbury is the exemplar here, but Harlan Ellison and Cordwainer Smith also come quickly to mind—who are concerned primarily with the future as a visionary construct, almost as a dream, rather than as a tangible reality, and give us vivid and dramatic vignettes of futures that may be more or less *possible* but are not necessarily very likely except in the context of the particular work of fiction that embodies it. They are stories, pure and not so simple, that happen to take place in a dreamworld that is labeled, for convenience’s sake, “the future.”

Most of us function between these extremes. For writers of the Heinleinian school—I’m referring to their literary technique, not to their ideological views—it is vital that the technological underpinnings of their stories should be a linear outgrowth of concepts already in existence in our own time. They want to show us a world of the future that they believe may someday exist, for better or (usually) for worse. The modern-day Bradburians move in the other direction, aiming for intensity and power of vision without feeling any need to have their stories also serve as predictive blueprints which depict a world that they regard as particularly likely to come into being. But the preponderance of science fiction today moves freely between these polarities, now reaching for visionary force, now buttressing the visions with nuts-and-bolts predictive extrapolation that serves to create the essential suspension of disbelief without which all other narrative strategies fail.

Which brings me to Jack Dann’s strange, haunting novel *The Man Who Melted*, a book like no other science fiction novel you have read, which provides us with breathtaking oscillations from one pole of science fiction to another. Dann, American-born, a resident of Melbourne, Australia, for the past ten years or so, has been a considerable figure in science fiction, as a novelist, a short story writer, and an anthology editor, since the 1970s. His first novel, *Starbiker* (1977), immediately displayed his flair for vivid imagery; he followed it in 1981 with *Junction*, which took a further step toward the visionary, into a kind of feverish surrealism; and in 1984 came the remark -

able *The Man Who Melted*, which is a melding and expansion of four powerful short stories published between 1981 and 1983, and which encompasses both the wildest sort of poetic vision and the most tight-focused sort of extrapolative thought.

Heinleinian predictive touches are here in abundance, though it is important to bear in mind that this is a book that was written some twenty-five years ago, give or take a year or two, and much of what was predictive then in this book is everyday reality today. For instance, we find in it something called “the Net,” a computer linkage that everybody uses routinely for communication and information gathering, and even for such mundane tasks as ordering groceries. Someone reading the book today who is unaware that it is several decades old will go right by those references to “the Net” without even noticing them, let alone applauding their prescience, since in our twenty-first-century world the Internet is simply part of the texture of everyday life, like automobiles, credit cards, and push-button phones. When we encounter a character in a recent story who pulls out his Visa card in a restaurant or taps out a telephone number on buttons instead of using a circular dial, there’s no reason for us to praise the writer’s Heinleinesque ability to peer into the future, because what he is doing is simply transcribing details of his daily mundane reality, not brilliantly imagining things to come. But Jack Dann, back there in 1982 or 1983, has one of his characters talk about having forgotten to send out for groceries on the Net, as happens late in *The Man Who Melted*; and those of us who are aware that there was no such thing as the Internet in 1982, let alone companies that would take Internet orders for grocery deliveries, feel that sort of shiver of surprise at the author’s gift of clairvoyance that readers of sixty-year-old Heinlein novels experience again and again as they find him describing the world of his near future—our recent past—with amazing accuracy.

There are such prescient touches all throughout *The Man Who Melted*. Some of them, like the grocery ordering, are right on the mark. One good example is the episode in which, in a few brief strokes, Dann conjures up a fanatic *jibadi* who calls himself the Mahdi, operating his holy war out of Afghanistan, and gives us a perfect prevision of the Taliban. And sometimes his invented future is just a trifle off, as when he refers again and again to something called

a “fax,” by which he means not the device for document transmission that we all have somewhere near our desks, but a means of instantaneous news dissemination of the sort we get from the Internet today. Be that as it may, the future that is portrayed in *The Man Who Melted* is very much a lived-in future, clearly and solidly envisioned, and shown to us by means of the technique Robert Heinlein pioneered, through implication rather than exposition, as a multitude of small background touches rather than in the form of straightforward lectures about the function of this or that gadget.

Dann has studied his Heinlein, yes. I think it might be possible to trace the ancestry of some of Dann’s themes back to such early Heinlein classics as *Methuselah’s Children*, *Beyond This Horizon*, and *If This Goes On—*, and there are touches here also of the later, wilder Heinlein of *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *I Will Fear No Evil*. But Heinlein at his wildest was always a supremely rational writer, and here is where Jack Dann parts company from him. Inventing a plausible future is something that Dann sees as important in a science fiction novel, but it is plainly not of *paramount* importance to him. Heinlein wrote as an engineer with a yearning toward prophecy; Dann writes as a poet. What he has given us is not intended as a warning that if certain current societal trends are not checked they may lead us into some sort of disaster (which was one of Heinlein’s main purposes; remember that one of his best early novels was called *If This Goes On—*) but as a self-contained fictional experience, a kind of hallucination in prose, a novel that takes on again and again the texture of a dream. “Dreams must explain themselves,” said Ursula K. Le Guin in another context entirely, but in fact they never do, and it is not Jack Dann’s purpose to explain anything here, let alone to be warning us against anything, but only to show us the essence of what life is like in the harsh, chaotic, schizoid world of his book, a world in which its characters repeatedly move in and out of what they call “the dark places.” “Here,” he says, as all writers from Homer to Cervantes to Mann and Kafka and Joyce and Faulkner have said, “Here is a world. Live in it for a while.” And he offers us no road maps.

In the furtherance of his goal, Dann is quite willing to allow the eerie dionysiac sweep of *The Man Who Melted* to transcend all normal narrative logic. The thread of events is often disturbingly nonlinear. Characters appear

without foreshadowing or context, vanish unexpectedly from the story and return, even die and are resurrected. The *Titanic* is rebuilt and destined to sink again, with the full advance knowledge of everyone on board. Mysterious incomprehensible cults operate somewhere in the background of the story, influencing the pattern of events without directly interacting in it. From time to time the characters enter into telepathic contact with one another; at other times they seem barely able to communicate by normal means. A feverish dreamlike aura pervades everything.

There's no indication here that Jack Dann seriously wants us to believe that the world of the twenty-second century, which is when *The Man Who Melted* takes place, is going to be the bewildering, apocalyptic thing that the book depicts, or even that there is any real possibility that such a world can ever take form. What he is doing is telling a story, not writing a tract: a story about *one* possible future, *this* possible future, a strange, turbulent future in which his tormented characters move back and forth across a dark, bleak landscape into which we of an earlier time must stare like uncomprehending strangers. It is the future as nightmare, science fiction as poetic vision, and that Dann manages to make us suspend our disbelief as we watch his people stagger across this hallucinatory realm toward the bare hint of awakening and redemption that is offered in the final paragraphs is an extraordinary accomplishment.

Our society may itself have become biologically dysfunctional, and some forms of schizophrenic alienation from the alienation of society may have a sociobiological function that we have not recognized.

—R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*

The individuals that make up the crowd are called “Screamers” or “Criers”; only when these afflicted people gather into groups of a certain number do they become telepathic and develop mass empathy or a collective consciousness. When not in a group, the individuals exhibit the various schizophrenic patterns of behavior.

—Alain R. Lucie, *The Collective Reality*

Perhaps *you* are the seed crystal. Perhaps *you* are the focus around which the masses of the living and the dead will gather. And in that moment, the world will be drawn to you and changed forever.

—*Le Symbole de Crieur* (Annotated)

# PART ONE





## O N E

**R**aymond Mantle took a flyer to Naples, the fallen city. It looked as grim as he felt. Nemesius, one of Mantle's many sources, said that a woman fitting Josiane's description had been located here. He couldn't be sure, of course, because his *informatore* had mysteriously disappeared. After all, Naples had become a dangerous place since it had fallen to the Screammers.

But Mantle had to find his wife, Josiane. Nothing else was important.

He had lost her during the Great Scream, when the screaming mobs tore New York City apart, leaving thousands dead and countless others roving about like the mind-deadened victims of a concentration camp. With the exception of a few childhood memories, he couldn't remember her after the Great Scream. It was as if she had been ripped from his memory. Mantle's amnesia was not total; he could summon up certain incidents and remember every detail and everyone involved except *Josiane*. She inhabited his memory like a shadow, an emptiness, and he was obsessed with finding her, with remembering. *She* held the key to his past. She was the element that had burned out, plunging his past into darkness.

Nemesius' man, Melzi, met Mantle in the crowded Piazza Trento e Trieste, and they walked north on the Via Roma, past a gang of *sciuscias*—half-

naked street arabs with implanted male and female genitalia on their arms and chests. It was not yet dark, but the huge klieg lights were on, illuminating the alleyways in harsh whites and yellows—as if bright light could prevent a Screamer attack. Police vans passed back and forth through the noisy crowds of *elemosina*, those on the dole. They lived in the streets and on the beltways, in gangs and clans and families. During the rush hours, this street would look like a battle zone. But even here, even now, old, familiar scenes caught Mantle's eyes: the shoeblacks and hurdy-gurdies and glowworms; the refreshment kiosks where a narcodrine could be sniffed for a few lire; the holographically projected faces of the holy saints which hung in the damp air like paper masks; and the ever-present *venditores* who sold talking Bibles and varied selections of religious memorabilia blessed by the Pope and sanctioned by the Vatican Collective which ruled the country. There were still strings of lemons hanging in shop windows; and lemon ices were being sold, as were *jettatura* charms, the coral horns and little bones everyone used to wear to ward off the evil eye. Now they were worn as protections from Screamers.

Here beat the heart of Naples, along the narrow, broken streets and crowded piazzas. Not far from here, though, small bands of Screamers still roamed, the last remnants of the mobs that had almost destroyed the city.

"We're going into the Old Spacca Quarter," Melzi said. He was a small man with thinning gray hair and a very clean-shaven face; he looked more like a clerk than a bodyguard. Most of the other men and women Mantle had to contact in the past were more obviously sleazy; they had the psychic smell of the streets all over them. "The woman who may be your wife is near Gesu Nuovo, off the Via Capitelli. Not a safe neighborhood. But we should not have any trouble finding the building. It is the only one that is not buried on the outside."

"Another one of Nemesius' warehouses?" Mantle asked.

"We might as well walk," Melzi said, ignoring Mantle's sarcasm. "The beltways are not in good condition hereabouts, and we won't find a cab that will take us into Spacca."

Although they were still in a relatively safe area, Mantle was nervous. His whole being was focused on the remote possibility of finding Josiane; everything else was white noise. He was as haunted as the street arabs around him.

“You can still turn around and go home,” Melzi said. “If the woman is a phony, *I* will know it.” Mantle did not respond, and Melzi shrugged.

After they had worked their way through the crowds for several more blocks, Mantle asked, “How much farther?”

“You’ll see, we are almost there,” Melzi said. He carried his heat weapon openly now. Mantle kept his hands in his pockets; he always carried a pistol when he had to be on the streets.

The Via Roma, along which they were still walking, became less crowded. When they crossed over into Spacca, they found the alleyways and narrow buildings almost empty. Everything was dirty; ahead were the burned buildings scoured by Screamers.

A small, dangerous-looking crowd gathered behind Mantle and Melzi. Mantle took his pistol out of his pocket.

“Not to worry yet,” Melzi said. “They’re not Screamers. As long as they are behind us, we are relatively safe. They’re nothing but *avvoltoio*.” He spat the word.

“What?”

“Stinking birds. Scavengers.”

“Vultures,” Mantle said.

“Yes, that’s it,” Melzi said. “Now, if we engage a crowd up ahead, then we might be in trouble. But we are armed, and I would burn the lot of them. It would not be worth it for them to attack us. Some of them know me; they would not get anything of worth. You see”—Melzi extended his free arm and fluttered his fingers—“not even a ring. I have beautiful rings, that is my weakness. Especially diamonds, which are my birthstone. I wear one upon every finger, even the thumb.” He made a vulgar gesture. “I might feel naked, but I’m not worried yet. Would you like to see them? My rings?”

“Yes, perhaps,” Mantle said, annoyed. The crowd following Mantle and Melzi was unnaturally quiet; it unnerved Mantle.

“Maybe later,” Melzi said. “If we do not have the luck to find your little bird.”

Mantle fantasized smashing the little man’s face. God, how he hated them all. All the filth from the streets. But if he could find Josiane tonight, it would be worth all the Melzis in the world.

“If the trash behind us were Screamers, *then* I would be worried,” Melzi said. “You never know with them. They walk about in their little groups, looking just like the filth behind us. Then all of a sudden they decide to scour the street and you’re dead. They’re like junkies; you can burn them, fill them up with bullets, but nothing seems to stop them. And you can’t even find them again, they just disappear. They’re like centipedes, all those legs and one head.” Melzi laughed at that, as if it were an original thought. Again he laughed, almost a titter. “I can smell them, you know. They smell different from *elemosina* or *avvoltoio*. Not like trash, just sick. You smell all right, of course. But there’s a whiff, I don’t know—”

“Shut up,” Mantle snapped.

“Oh, I am sorry if I have hurt your feelings. Certainly I did not mean any disrespect. Will you forgive me?”

They turned onto the Via Croce. A group of prostitutes, all hideously fat, sat on the steps of a palazzo and shouted, “*Succhio, succhio*,” as Mantle and Melzi passed. Melzi shouted obscenities back; he was more animated, nervous. There was much slave-marketeering hereabouts. Whores and old people, and especially children, were kidnapped and sold to those who would pay to hook-into their brains and taste their experiences, their lives. The black market catered to the rich. The dole was virtually nonexistent here; survival was the business of the day. Police and the other arms of government would not be found in these parts. This was free country.

“Now we must be a little careful, because this neighborhood is not so good,” Melzi said. He made the gesture of being shackled by crossing his wrists. “Many slavers hereabouts; they look just like anybody. We would fetch a good price,” he said preening himself. “I can imagine that you would be delicious to hook-into.”

Someone shouted; there was another scream. There was a fight ahead in the square of Gesu Nuovo. Men and women and children were brawling, it seemed, over small metal canisters of some sort—perhaps food or drugs. Mantle glanced behind him; only a few *avvoltoio* were following, but still they made him nervous.

“We have a stroke of luck,” Melzi said. “The fight will draw the *avvoltoio* and we can attend to our business.”

“How close are we?” Mantle asked, excited.

“We are there, you see, that’s it.” He pointed to a palazzo which actually looked whitewashed, a miracle in these parts.

“Jesus.”

“It is quite famous,” Melzi said. “Like the Crazy Horse near where you live.”

“I don’t think you can compare—”

“What’s the difference, except for the neighborhood? This palazzo is an attraction *because* of the neighborhood. Here you can find interesting pleasures; *polizia* do not make problems here.” Melzi looked at the women fighting in the square and made a clucking noise of disapproval as he watched a young woman being disemboweled in the quaint broken fountain. Mantle hesitated, but Melzi took him by the arm; the little man was deceptively strong. “We are here to find your little bird, that’s all.”

As they neared the palazzo, the streets became crowded once again. It was like stepping into another, albeit dangerous, country, into an international oasis amid the lowlife of the street. Mantle could see well-dressed, and well-guarded, men and women stepping quickly among the street arabs, hawkers, pimps, and other assorted street people. One dignitary was actually enclosed in a glassite litter that was shouldered by four uniformed men.

A woman approached Melzi, and he burned a hole in her throat. Mantle lunged for Melzi’s weapon, but Melzi deftly pulled it out of reach and continued to walk. *Elemosina* stepped over the dying woman as if she were a rock in the road.

“Scum,” Mantle said, drawing away from Melzi. His flesh was crawling. “Murderer!”

“Now calm yourself,” Melzi said, as if he were a bank clerk explaining why he couldn’t accept a customer’s credit. “That was just a precaution. She had evil thoughts in mind.”

“Could you smell those, too?”

“You are not in Cannes, *Signore*,” Melzi said. “And do not think you are safe here or now. Without me, it is doubtful whether you would ever get out of here alive, much less find your wife. Now do you forgive me? When last I asked, you ignored me.” Melzi was playing him, and Mantle knew it. But he was so close. All that really mattered was Josiane. “Well . . . ?” Melzi asked.

"I forgive you," Mantle said, as if he were spitting up raw meat. Nemesius will pay for this, he thought.

"Thank you," Melzi said, not pressing it further.

Mantle followed Melzi, who walked past the white palazzo. The building was high and imposing; it was formed in the style of a Florentine palace, complete with rich embossing, curved frontons, projecting cornices, and ringed columns, most of which were broken or cracked.

"Where are you going?" Mantle asked, noticing that it was growing dark. They walked along a cobblestone close, which Mantle was afraid might also be a dead end. Could Melzi and Nemesius have set him up? Mantle felt a touch of panic. No, he told himself. He had dealt with Nemesius for too long.

"This is the best way to get in," Melzi said, "although I must admit, this alleyway does look dangerous." He pounded on a heavy inlaid door. The door opened, but not before Mantle glimpsed that the shadows under the broken klieg at the end of the alley were moving.

"Meet Vittorio," Melzi said to Mantle as they entered a large pantry filled with canisters of foodstuffs and, from the look of it, rats. Vittorio was swarthy and as short as Melzi. He had almost transparent green eyes; waxed, curly hair; a kinky, short-cropped beard; and he wore a stained serge suit. He was missing a front tooth. Yet he bore himself as if he were presiding over a parliament of rich and respected *nobiluomo*.

"Buona sera." Then Melzi slipped him a package and Vittorio nodded to Mantle, mumbled, "*Mi scusi*," and walked off, presumably to hold court with the rats and kitchen cats.

"Well, come on," Melzi said. "He's going ahead to prepare her."

"Who is he?" Mantle asked.

"He's the proprietor, a very famous man. Don't be fooled by his teeth, he has many affectations. He owns this place and many more. And as you can see, he watches over his interests. That's the secret of success, is it not?"

Mantle followed Melzi out of the room and into a long, well-lit corridor. There was almost a hospital smell hereabouts, and Mantle shuddered, thinking of what might be going on behind closed doors. Josiane must be here, he told himself. He had to find her this time.

"We're taking a shortcut," Melzi said. "We're safer here than in the main

rooms, which are, of course, much more interesting. But then that's the allure of a place such as this, is it not? I'm willing to bet you'd run into a pal in one of those rooms. You'd be surprised who risks the streets for a night at Vittorio's."

They took an elevator to the top story. Mantle was afraid of elevators; they symbolized his life, which he could not control. They were driven, it seemed, by unseen forces. Once inside the box, you had to trust the machine. And the machine didn't care if it worked or not.

"You make it very hard for Nemesius, you know," Melzi said. "He has nothing but a few hollies of your little bird."

"The records were burned."

"Yes, how lucky for you Americans. Most of you got a second chance. Wiped the slates clean, so to speak. What I wouldn't give for such an accident."

"Come on, Melzi."

"One last thing, *Signore*," Melzi said. "You must remember that Vittorio is just a middleman, just like Nemesius. Just like me. It seems we've all become middlemen in these times." Melzi smiled at that, obviously satisfied with his philosophizing. "And you must also remember that there are *no* guarantees."

"I'll *know* if it's her," Mantle said.

They stopped at the end of the hallway and Melzi rapped twice on a metal door, which Vittorio opened. "She's right in here."

The room was a cell. It smelled of urine, contained an open toilet, a wall sink, a discolored bidet, a filthy mattress on the metal floor, a computer console and a psyconductor with its cowls and mesh of wires, and a wooden folding chair. On the pallet lay Josiane, or a woman who looked exactly like her. She was naked and perspiring heavily. Mantle almost cried, for her face and small breasts were black and blue. Her hair was blonde and curly, although it was matted with dirt and clotted blood. She looked up at him, her limpid eyes as blue as his own; but she was looking through him, through the walls and the world, and back into the dark places of her mind.

"Well," Melzi said, sharing a glance with Vittorio, "that certainly looks like your little bird."

"Here are her papers," Vittorio said to Mantle in an American accent, which was the current fashion; and then he passed Mantle a large envelope. But Mantle just held it; he was lost. His memory was jarred, and he slipped

back to the first time, in the old house in Cayuga, when there were still spruce and fir covering the mountain. But he didn't care about trees then. He was fourteen and Josiane was eleven—but developed for her age—and she came into his room and they lay on the bed and talked and she jerked him off as she had done since she was eight or nine, and he rolled over on top of her, stared steadily into her face and entered her. Then stopped, as if tasting some kind of delicious, warm ice cream, and they just stared at each other, moving up and down, breath only slightly quickened. It was more a way of talking.

Another memory came back to him: the face of a young woman in a crowd. The same face as the woman on the mattress.

"*Signore*, come back to the world," Vittorio said, and Melzi chuckled.

Mantle shook his head as if he had slipped from one world to another and mumbled, "Josiane." Then he rushed to the psyconductor, grabbed two cowl from the top of the console, and lunged toward her, intent on hooking into her thoughts; but Melzi caught him and pulled him away. "Are you that determined to burn your brain?" Melzi asked. "At least let me look at her first."

"We have many customers who wish to hook-into Screamers," Vittorio said. "But they must pay first. It's a policy of the house."

Melzi squatted beside the woman and examined her with an instrument that projected a superimposed holographic image of Josiane over her face. After several minutes, he raised the magnification and disappeared the holographic image.

"Whoever did this work was a real artist," Melzi said. "Her face corresponds exactly to the hollie. But you see, right there?" He indicated a dry area just below her earlobe. "You see, the pores are open everywhere else but in that tiny spot." He raised the magnification several more powers. "There you can see the faint thread of a suture. A recent job. He should have been just a *little* more careful and covered *that* up."

Mantle pushed Melzi out of the way and examined her himself. He felt anger and frustration burning through him, returning more violently than ever before. He began to shake. Once again he had tried to fool himself, this time with a burned-up Screamer, a *grido*, a *crieuse*—but she was not his wife!

"I don't think you would wish to hook-into that woman," Melzi said. "She is not—"



“But you must admit, *Signore*,” Vittorio said, “she looks exactly like the hollies with which we were provided.” Then Vittorio said to Melzi, “She was supposed to have been completely checked out by the man who brought her to me.”

Melzi only shrugged.

“My contact is a reputable man; he will be very unhappy—”

Then Mantle snapped completely—it was as if someone, or something, had suddenly taken him over. He punched Vittorio in the abdomen before Melzi could stop him. At once, the door to the hallway slammed open and one of Vittorio’s men entered. The man was big and had the dead look of the street about him. As Mantle turned, the man struck him hard in the chest and pushed him savagely against the wall. Mantle overcame his nausea and tried to free himself, but Vittorio’s man was too strong.

Melzi watched, his mouth pursed as if he were amused. “You must forgive my client,” he said to Vittorio. “He’s not right in the head. He—”

“Now he *will* buy the girl,” Vittorio said, still gasping for breath. He kept smoothing down his suit.

“Don’t even argue,” Melzi said to Mantle. Melzi nodded to Vittorio; and Vittorio, in his turn, told his man to release Mantle. Mantle made the credit transaction by applying his hand to the glass face of the computer console.

He had bought the woman.

“You realize that this is simply a transfer of funds from one account to another,” Vittorio said, having recovered himself. “It cannot possibly be traced.”

A matronly domestic entered the room with clothes for the woman and various messages for Vittorio.

“Get her dressed and let’s get out of here,” Mantle said impatiently.

“I named her Victoria. She’ll answer to that if she’ll answer at all,” Vittorio said. He nodded curtly to Melzi and left the room. His man followed.

Mantle felt his flesh crawl. He was sure that Vittorio had abused her. “Let’s get out of here. Now!”

“Let the girl finish dressing,” Melzi said. “I am in no rush to be on the streets. Just a few minutes ago you were going to hook-into her and now—”

“Now,” Mantle repeated. And he held out his hand to Victoria, who grinned at him, just as Josiane used to do.



The streets were empty—not a shadow moving, not a sound. It was dark, but the crooked, and usually deadly, intersecting streets were well lit, for anyone caught trying to break one of the kliegs would be torn limb from limb. The common folk had their own notions of law . However, enough lamps were broken to create a patchwork effect of white, black, and gray .

They were almost out of Spacca. Victoria seemed suddenly alert, her head cocked, as if listening to someone who was talking too low .

“I don’t like this,” Mantle said. His chest was aching, but he ignored it.

“It is very bad,” Melzi agreed. “It’ s going to be a big one this time. I didn’t expect anything like this to happen again so soon. I didn’t think there were enough Screamers to do it. But you never know. All we can do is hurry. There’s nothing to stop us, at least.”

Mantle repressed an urge to slow down. He was curious, not really afraid. *That*, he knew, was dangerous. If Mantle was caught in a crowd of Screamers, he might not be able to resist becoming like them—very few could.

“The girl is slowing us down,” Melzi said, grasping her arm and dragging her forward. “We don’t have much time. The farther we are from Spacca, the safer .”

“I don’t see anything yet,” Mantle said.

“*Jesù*, can’t you feel it? Come on, hurry.”

Mantle took her other arm. “Don’t hurt her, Melzi,” Mantle said. “You’re *hurting* her, let go of her arm.”

“She may look like your wife, *Signore*, but she’s still a *grido*. She feels nothing. She’s not in this world. I can smell that.”

Victoria suddenly started dragging her feet. She shook her head back and forth, her eyes closed, face placid, as if listening to music.

“We can’t drag her like this,” Melzi said. “Come on, little bird, wake up.” He slapped her back and forth on the face.

“Leave her alone!” Mantle said, bracing her arms as she fell to her knees. Her head was cocked, and she began to smile.

“I’m leaving, and so ar e you,” Melzi said. “I contracted to bring you home, and so I shall.” He pointed his heat weapon at Mantle. “Please forgive me, *Signore*, but if you do not come along, I will have to kill her . The smell

of *grido* is so strong all around us that I can hardly breathe. We've no time to waste. Now leave her be."

Mantle felt something in the air, electricity, as if a powerful storm were about to break, only its potential energy seemed sentient. Suddenly Victoria began to scream. Long, cold streamers of sound. Melzi—who was sweating profusely and looking around in nervous, darting movements as if he were about to be attacked from every side—shot Victoria in the throat, just as he had shot the other woman. Mantle shouted, but it was too late. He was overcome with hatred and disgust and sorrow. For that instant, it *was* Josiane whom Melzi had shot.

In return, Mantle shot Melzi, twice in the chest and once in the groin. It was as if Mantle's hand had a will of its own.

"But she will attract the others," Melzi whispered, referring to the Screamers. He looked nothing but surprised for a second, and then collapsed.

Mantle heard a distant roaring like faraway breakers. For an instant he was a child again, listening to the ocean calling his name. Then he saw the first Screamers running toward him, heads thrown back as they howled at the heavens like wolves. Thousands of them crowded the streets and alleyways, turning Spacca into commotion. Melzi had been right. The mob would converge upon them. It was a many-headed beast screaming for blood and Mantle, as if in response to Victoria's call.

Mantle had enough time to turn and run, but when he tried, Victoria rose before him like a ghost. She called to him, promised that she was Josiane. Her skin was translucent, her rags diaphanous, and her voice was that of the Screamers.

He heard Josiane's voice calling him, then a thousand voices, all Josiane's. . . .

The Screamers were all around him, pushing him, pressing against him, tempting him, a thousand sirens promising darkness and cold love. Mantle looked around, shaking his head in one direction, then another; and saw that *everyone* looked like Josiane. Then everyone turned into Mantle's dead mother, and an instant later, the features of every Screamer's face melted like hot wax. The mob took on the angry face of Mantle's dead father, then his dead brother. Every Screamer was changing, melting into someone Mantle had known or loved or hated.

"Stop it!" Mantle screamed as everyone turned into Carl Pfeiffer, an old

friend and enemy. But Mantle was caught, another Screamer. He was running with them—south, past the Via Diaz, through the ruins of bombed-out buildings and garbage-strewn streets, over the seamless macadam that covered the cobblestone roads once used by Romans. He screamed, lost in the mob. He could hear the thoughts of every other Screamer. Their cries and screams were the rhythms of fire and transcendence and death. He felt silvery music as the dark voices rustled his childhood memories like wheat in a field. He felt transformed, transported into the hot eye of a hurricane.

But a part of Mantle's mind resisted the dark, telepathic nets of the screaming mob, even now. Like a man pulling himself out of deepest sleep, he wrenched himself away. But he was only swallowed again, submerged in the undertow of minds.

Suddenly, he felt a blunt pain in his arm and shoulder—a Screamer running beside Mantle tripped and pushed him against the ragged stone side of the building. Although he couldn't stop himself from running or screaming with the others, he concentrated on the pain. He used it to close himself from the Circaen voices long enough to slow his gait until the mob was ahead of him. Then he fell to the macadam, exhausted and dazed.

Later, he would remember everything but the Screamer attack.

## T W O

The boardwalk creaked as Mantle walked, and the strong noontime sunlight turned the bistros, boardwalk feelies, and open-air restaurants white as bones in a desert. Once again he tried to remember what had happened to him last week in Naples, but his mind's eye was closed. Memory was lost in darkness.

He shivered as if he had remembered something painful, which quickly slipped away from him. He *knew* that he had been attacked by Screamers in Naples; he just couldn't remember. He remembered finding Victoria and shooting Melzi—he winced, just thinking about that—and then waking up in a hospital hallway that was lined with cots. He had suffered a mild concussion, and his arms and chest were black and blue. He had left the hospital as soon as he could to recuperate in the privacy of his hotel room.