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They were in the hotel, the singer and her companion, on the thirty-second floor of the hotel that was said to be the finest in the city.

They had come to the hotel direct from the airport, through the secured private subway link. They had been in the hotel for five days, and still they had not stepped outside on to the streets of the city. Neither did they plan to.

The singer had an engagement scheduled for New Year's Eve, which was five days on, but otherwise they had no plans. The singer's companion had passed through that phase of his life in which it was important to him to have plans. The singer had never seemed to make them at all.

The singer's companion, whose name was Robert Duke, would have liked to have seen the action in the streets as they entered the city, the huge crowds gathering near the hotel to celebrate the singer's return. But the streets were not safe.

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The private subway system that carried them from the airport to the hotel was of recent construction. Duke had scanned a couple of newsbites on it a few months before, and it more than lived up to its publicity. It was almost worth the trip in itself, to a city which he had never much cared for, to sit there strapped into the thickly upholstered velvet-covered seat in their private car, sipping his mineral water as they raced into town

through the steel-lined, blast-resistant tunnel at 300 kilometers an hour. It was a new thing, in a world where there were all too few new things, and Duke was momentarily enthralled.

He gazed out through the thick bulletproof glass of the porthole at the walls of the tunnel. The walls were lined with the fiber optic cables which connected the city to the world. Information was racing past them in both directions: news and sports and entertainment but above all financial information. For all its recent difficulties, this city was still a major international financial center. The money rushed by, pulsing into the global electronic funds transfer webs, and Duke could almost feel the breeze.

It was to protect these communication links, the newbrite had told him, that this blast-resistant conduit had been conceived. Premium subway service had been an add-on, but a lucrative one, now that ground travel in this city had become more dangerous than the old public subway system.

“Terrific, huh?” Duke said to the singer’s child, Daniel.

“Sure,” Daniel had agreed, not looking up from the display screen of his seat-tray. “Really terrific.” The boy was watching an old *Road Runner* cartoon, selected from the subway car’s vast entertainment menu.

Any normal seven-year-old, Duke thought, would have been at least a little impressed. But the singer’s child was anything but a normal seven-year-old.

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In the hotel, the singer and her companion passed the time. They accessed the latest music and skimmed the latest movies and scanned the latest ideas. They ate and drank and played with the singer’s child. They looked out on the city through the high wide windows of their suite and watched the disturbances.

The disturbances were bad. The singer and her companion had seen worse disturbances in different cities at different times, but they agreed that the disturbances were very bad this year in this particular city.

Security forces battled deviant groups. Distant mortars kicked up clouds of dust. Ambushed automobiles exploded in mined streets. Sometimes the sky burned red at night. The noise of all this failed to penetrate through the thick, soundproof windows of the hotel, but they could see that the disturbances were very bad.

The hotel could have been in Nepal and it could have been in Beirut and it could have been in St. Petersburg. It could have been anywhere the big hotels still stood, but it was in New York. The singer and her companion were in town for the New Year, another New Year in another big hotel. Except that this year, the New Year's Eve of 2024, the party would be something special.

This year, the party would be held in honor of the singer, whose name was Martha Nova. She was about to release her first new collection of songs, in audio, video, holo and other formats, in five years. The party to celebrate its release would be shown both in real-time and in endless reiterations on entertainment channels around the world.

For years now, the singer had been in seclusion from the world, steadfastly ignoring the pleas of her recording company and her fans for new songs, or for even the most fleeting personal appearance. And through all that time, her legend had grown. Anthologies of her old songs, endlessly recombined and re-permuted with unreleased outtakes and alternate versions into apparently new commodities, were downloaded into millions of home entertainment systems.

The singer was adored everywhere, in Tokyo and in Stockholm, in Cairo and in Winnipeg, in Seoul and in Reykjavik. At only thirty-three years old, she was said to be the most popular singer in the history of the world.

The party would be for the singer, and Robert Duke was merely tagging along. He would be careful to remain in the background. He had no wish to compete with the singer. It would be no contest in any case.

Duke himself had once been a famous singer. Although never as celebrated as Martha Nova, his name and his voice had been known almost

everywhere. But these days he hardly thought of himself as a singer at all. These days, he saw himself more as a dancer.

Once, his voice had burned deep, penetrated the soul. Now, as he slumped past his fiftieth year, his voice was to all intents gone. But there was still the dance. The dance was in his style, in the way he moved through his life, moved on and moved up. It had always been the dance, as much as the voice, that people had paid to experience, and that much was still left to him, there was still the dance.

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It was an old hotel, built in a period of great confidence and expansiveness. The ceilings were high, the carpets were thick and hardly worn-down, the dining rooms hushed and well-mirrored.

Robert Duke had always liked this hotel. He had first stayed here many years before, at that juncture in his career in which he had begun to really make it, to break through all barriers, to take this and all the other cities by storm. It was here, too, that he had honeymooned with his second wife, a leading indie screenqueen of that long-ago year, while the reporters and *paparazzi* had clustered outside the door of their suite.

Martha Nova had no memories of this hotel, only powerful premonitions, the strongest she had ever felt. In her memories of the future, the hotel loomed enormous.

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The singer believed that she could see the future. She had been seeing the future since she was five years old.

The visions had come to her one night as she lay sleeping, and in the beginning they had driven her into madness. But eventually she had learned to live with them, even to take a certain comfort in them. Eventually, through her music, she had found that she could comfort other people too.

She often sang about what she saw up ahead. What she saw, above all else, was decay, dissolution, the approach of the end-time.

She liked to sing, she adored her child, she loved Robert Duke. These were not small things. Her enjoyment of them was intensified by the knowledge that they were getting very near the end.

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Duke sat on the couch in the living room of their hotel suite, looking over a printout showing Martha's itinerary for her forthcoming west coast promotional tour. The flack from RealTime, Martha's record company, had dropped it off that morning along with the voucher for a private jet to L.A. They would be leaving the day after New Year's Day, according to the itinerary.

"Heavy duty tour," he said. "Press conference, talk shows, personal interviews."

Martha was sitting on the couch with Daniel, playing Go on the room's wallscreen. She looked away from the display of winking colored lights and smiled. "Yeah," she said. "They really laid it on. But I thought, if it makes them happy. It's not as if I'm going to *do* any of this stuff."

She looked to him for his response. He looked away.

Martha did not expect to be making that west coast trip. She expected to die here, in the hotel. She had told him that months before: "*It's where it ends. Where it all ends.*"

Martha expected to die. And by now Duke knew enough to believe her predictions. But he didn't believe this one, wasn't yet ready to believe it. He continued to hope that this one time she would be wrong.

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Martha screened her video-messages.

"Martha, I need to see you. Really."

The man on the screen was pale, beyond fashionably pale, sickly pale. His gray hair was short but wild, and his eyes were wilder, dancing from side to side. He was sweating visibly. His voice shook. He clawed at his face with his fingernails as he spoke.

"Who is that?" Duke asked, looking over her shoulder. "Is that . . ."

Martha, still intent on the screen, nodded without turning her head. “Yeah,” she said. “Abe.”

Abe Levett. Martha’s original manager. The one who had discovered her—if anyone really “discovered” a Martha Nova—and guided her to the top.

It had been years since Duke had heard anything of Abe Levett.

“I’ve got . . . a business proposition,” Levett was saying, uncertainly. “We have some business we need to discuss.” He licked his lips. “Really. So call me, Martha.”

This was not the Levett Duke remembered. The one he remembered had been loud, aggressive, hyped-up, often flat-out obnoxious; not this pallid, halting shadow.

“Whatever happened to him?” Duke asked.

But he knew what had happened to Abe Levett. For a while, it had been the talk of the business. Martha and Levett had fallen out after he had signed her up to play Vegas. Martha had wanted to keep touring the country and playing to her real fans; Levett had wanted to go after the big bucks. Or so the story ran.

Soon after that, Levett was history. Martha fired him, and he had had some kind of breakdown. Martha had found a new manager, but Levett had never found another Martha Nova. Perhaps he had never even tried.

Duke had heard some of this from a woman who sung backup for Martha in Vegas that year. “Horrible gig. You could see Martha hated every minute of it. Abe had set it up, but he spent the whole time complaining. Screaming at Martha, ranting at the band, he was like in this constant *rage*. Then one night I look out the window of my hotel room and I see him running right into the traffic. Cars zipping all around him, but he doesn’t seem to see them. Major freak-out.”

Martha had frozen the message display.

“Abe had a . . . panic attack,” she told him. “That’s what the doctors called it, after they admitted him to the hospital.”

Martha had never talked to him about what had happened to Abe. And he had never asked. He had sensed it was a touchy subject for her. But now she seemed to want to talk about it. “What set it off?”

“I did,” she said. “I set it off. Abe became deathly afraid of me.”

“Why?”

“I think you know why, Robert. Because I *am* scary, if you take what I say seriously. Abe never wanted to do that. But one day he couldn’t deny it any longer. But he couldn’t handle it either. So he broke down completely.”

“And you never saw him again?”

“When they first admitted him, but not after that. The doctors thought I was a disturbing influence on him. And later, when he was well enough to have a say in the matter, so did Abe.”

“But he wants to see you now.”

He nodded towards the wall panel.

Martha unfroze the display. The screen darkened, lightened, and they were looking at Levett again. “Martha, I really need to talk with you . . .” And again. “It’s real important . . .” And again. Each time wilder, more frantic.

“What do you think he wants?” Duke asked, when they had viewed the last of the messages.

“To see me.”

“But why now?”

“You might say that we have some unfinished business.

“Are you going to call him back?”

“No. But I’ll see him at the party.”

“You invited him?”

“No. But he’ll be there.”

“You’re not worried he’ll pull some number?”

“*Que sera sera*,” she said.

It was of her favorite expressions, and the title of one of the few songs by other songwriters that she ever performed. *Que sera sera*. That just about summed up her attitude to life.

The singer's child, Daniel, looked up from his home-schooling work. "I remember Abe."

"You must have been, what, two years old?" Duke said. "And you remember Abe Levett?"

"I remember him," the child insisted. "I remember how he ran. Into the heat, into the traffic. Down among the cars, hard white and smooth, under the signs that burned all night. I remember how he ran."

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Duke surfed the music playing on the webchannels, flipping restlessly from one station to the next. The music was terrible. The music was wretched, strangled, desperate. The music was of its time.

He looked from the wallscreen to the singer's child, who was playing on the floor, painstakingly building up towers out of hundreds of small magnetized plastic components, then blasting them down with the accompanying wrecking kit. In some ways the child seemed almost backward, socially and psychologically. In others he was almost unbelievably precocious.

"Hey Daniel," Duke said. "You want to watch the wallscreen with me? You want to watch the ship come down from Mars?"

The child considered. "I don't know if that would be very interesting. It isn't going to crash or anything."

He completed his latest construction project, then destroyed it again. "All right," he said. "Let's watch the ship come down from Mars."