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## PROLOGUE

The *Velvet Comet* spun slowly in space, resembling nothing more than a giant barbell.

Once its metal skin had glistened a brilliant silver, and its array of flashing lights could be seen from literally tens of thousands of miles away.

Seventeen different engineering firms had worked on its design, thousands of men and machines had spent millions of hours on its construction, and in its heyday it had housed a permanent staff of more than six hundred men and women.

Owned and financed by the Vainmill Syndicate, the largest of the Republic's conglomerates, it had been built in orbit around the distant planet of Charlemagne, but now it circled Deluros VIII, the huge world that would someday become the capital planet of the race of Man.

During its lifetime it had become a byword for opulence and elegance, a synonym for hedonism and dissipation. Its fame had spread to the most remote worlds of the Republic, and while its sybaritic luxuries and even its air of exclusivity had often been imitated, they had never been equaled.

The *Velvet Comet*, after more than three decades of gestation, had been born in space, and almost ninety-three years to the day after its birth it had died in space, mourned by few and forgotten by most—but during its glory years it had done its living with a grace and style that would not be seen again for many millennia.

It had been the crown jewel in the Syndicate's Entertainment and Leisure Division, a showplace where the rich and the famous—and occasionally the notorious—gathered to see and be seen, to conspicuously consume, and to revel in pleasures which had been designed to satisfy even the most jaded of tastes. For while the *Velvet Comet* had housed a compendium of the finest shops and boutiques, of gourmet restaurants and elegant lounges, while it had boasted a fabulous casino and a score of other entertainments, it had been first and foremost a brothel.

And it was the brothel, and the promises of secret delights that it proffered, that had enticed its select clientele out to the *Comet*. They had come from Deluros VIII and a thousand nearby and distant worlds. Money was no object to these men and women; they had come to play, and to relax, and to indulge.

And now, almost a quarter of a century after the last song had been sung and the last dance had been danced, the dead ship that had been the *Comet* beckoned from the grave to one last visitor.

As they approached their destination, Page noticed that the shops were lit up, their windows filled with exotic goods from all over the galaxy, their interiors bustling with activity.

“What's going on here?” he asked his driver. “I thought the whole place was shut down.”

“Those are just holographic recreations, Mr. Page,” said the young man. “They were set up to give the press some of the flavor of the *Comet* in its heyday.”

“If I know the press, they'd rather check out the flavor in the bars and bedrooms,” said Page.

The young man offered no reply, and a moment later the vehicle reached the end of the Mall and came to a halt before the entrance to a luxurious reception area that was filled with people in formal attire.

“Thanks for the ride,” said Page, starting to get out of the vehicle.

The young man placed a restraining hand on his arm. “I believe that Mr. Carnegie wants a word with you first,” he said. “If you'll wait here, I'll go and get him.”

“You do that,” said Page. He leaned back on the seat, clasped his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. The next thing he knew he was being shaken awake by a pudgy, balding little man who was wearing enough diamonds on his fingers to stock a small jewelry store.

“Wake up, Nate!” he snapped.

Page opened his eyes. “Hi, Murray.”

“You're almost an hour late!” continued Murray Carnegie harshly.

“I'd prefer to think that everyone else was an hour early,” said Page, blinking rapidly. “Is there any booze left?”

“You've had enough.”

“It shows?”

“On you? Always.” Carnegie glared at him. “I thought I told you to show up sober.”

## Chapter 1

Page walked through the airlock, pausing for a moment to study the extremely sophisticated security equipment. Nobody with a weapon would ever have been able to get past it, and it could doubtless have evaluated a patron's jewelry to the nearest tenth of a credit—but the item that fascinated him was the medical scanner. Probably it had been used to determine the presence of venereal diseases, which now numbered more than five hundred strains and mutations.

He nodded approvingly. He'd find some way to work the scanner into the script.

He left the airlock and turned to his left. This, he knew, was the fabled Mall, the two-mile-long strip of exclusive shops and boutiques that formed the bar between the *Comet*'s two bells. The slidewalks were no longer functional, and he began walking along the parquet flooring that ran down the middle of the Mall.

He had expected the stores to look dirty and run-down, fronted by broken windows and creaking doors, but in fact they were in pristine condition.

He grimaced and nodded to himself; *of course* they'd look like new. The *Comet* hadn't been sacked and looted, merely decommissioned, and things tended not to age in space.

“Mr. Page?” called a voice.

He turned and saw a uniformed young man approaching him in a motorized cart.

“Yeah?”

“You're going the wrong way.”

Page waited until the cart reached him, then climbed onto the passenger's seat.

“Mr. Carnegie sent me,” said the young man. “He's been worried about you.”

“I'll just bet,” muttered Page.

The vehicle spun around and began racing for the far end of the Mall.

“How late am I, anyway?” asked Page.

“About an hour.”

“What the hell else is there to do on shuttle flight besides drink?” replied Page.

“Damn it, Nate, you know how important this is!”

“Come off it, Murray,” said Page. “It's a goddamned press party, nothing more. They don't even need me here.”

“No—but *you* need *them* .”

“I've already signed my contract. They're not going to fire me just because I'm a little late and a little drunk.”

“Don't be so goddamned sure of that,” said Carnegie. “I had a hell of a time ramming you down their throats. They wanted the Hernandez brothers.”

“Who'd give them a nine-hour script with no beginning, no middle, and no end,” said Page contemptuously. “These guys need me more than I need them—and they're damned lucky to get me.”

“Cut the crap, Nate,” said Carnegie. “This is your agent you're talking to, not some asshole from the press.”

“Then stop giving me all this shit about how you can't sell me,” complained Page. “Nobody's lost money on me in the last ten years.”

“Oh, I can sell you anywhere in the galaxy,” agreed Carnegie. “For fifty thousand credits a shot, which is about what you're worth.” He paused. “But we both know you can't live on fifty thousand credits twice a year: you've got two homes and a shuttlecraft and three ex-wives and seven kids and you're incapable of walking past a casino. If you want a quarter of a million for a script, you'd better learn to start showing some respect for the people who can pay it or you're going to be out on your ass.”

“They're paying it because I'm worth it,” said Page, climbing out of the cart and swaying slightly.

“They're paying it because they want Franco Vincenzo to star in this opus,” Carnegie corrected him, “and I managed to tie the two of you into a package.”

“No problem,” Page assured him. “I've written for good old Franco before: no words of more than two syllables, never have him cry, and always have him sleep in a totally dark room so his panting public won't think he's a sissy who need a nightlight.” He grinned. “Got it right, or did I miss something?”

“Very funny,” said Carnegie disgustedly.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Page. “It’s also very true.”

Carnegie stared at him. “Jesus, Nate, straighten your tunic and do something about your hair!”

“Don’t be silly,” said Page, climbing out of the cart. “It would spoil the illusion. Everybody knows writers drink too much and look all rumpled. It’s expected; trust me.”

Carnegie shook his head. “You never learn, do you?” He looked around. “By the way, where’s your baggage?”

“I left it in the shuttlecraft.”

“What for?”

“Let one of the flunkies carry it in,” said Page. “Besides, I don’t know where to put it.”

“There’s only one bedroom in operation,” replied Carnegie.

“Remember to show it to me before everyone leaves.”

“I’m no flunkie either,” said Carnegie. “One of the hired help can do it.” He paused. “Are you ready to go inside now?”

“I’ve been ready since I got here,” said Page. “Just point me toward the bar.”

“It’s your funeral,” said Carnegie, taking Page by the arm and leading him into the sumptuous reception foyer. Although the room was illuminated indirectly, there were half a dozen exquisitely crafted crystal chandeliers, just for show. The carpet and wallpaper were new; both were more expensive and more garish than anything that had covered the *Velvet Comet*’s floors and walls in its heyday.

More than one hundred people were milling about, chatting, drinking, dealing. A number of them nodded to Page as Carnegie escorted him through the foyer; he put on his sleepest, most lopsided smile and nodded back.

Finally a small, nervous man with close-cropped brown hair climbed onto a small platform that had been erected at the back of the room.

“Is it okay?” he whispered in a voice that carried throughout the foyer. “Is the sound on?”

A bored technician, looking terribly uncomfortable in his formal clothing, nodded.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said the man, clapping his hands for attention. By the time he had repeated himself three times, about half the people in the room were staring at him. “Allow me to present James ‘Bull’ del Grado.”

A huge man with a full beard and bushy red eyebrows, who looked like he’d be more at home uprooting trees with his bare hands, climbed vigorously onto the stage, and suddenly the room became totally silent. “Thanks, Pete,” he said in a deep voice. He looked across the room. “I want to thank you all for coming here,” he continued. “I don’t suppose it’s the best-kept secret in the industry, but I might as well make it official: as of yesterday afternoon, the *Velvet Comet* is the property of Del Grado Enterprises.”

There was a smattering of polite applause.

“I suppose you’re wondering why Bull del Grado wanted to buy a whorehouse —”

“Hell, no!” cried a voice, amid much laughter, which continued for as long as del Grado himself smiled and ceased immediately thereafter.

“Or at least why I bought one that has been out of business for twenty-three years,” continued del Grado. “Which brings me to my other announcement: Del Grado Enterprises is committed to producing a full-scale multimedia musical entertainment based upon the fabled history of the *Velvet Comet*. The contracts have been signed, and work will begin within a month. The entire production will be staged aboard the *Comet*, which will also house the premiere showing sometime next year—a premiere to which all of you are cordially invited.”

This time the cheering was louder and more enthusiastic.

“I’m going to very briefly introduce our key creative people, and then you members of the press can seek them out and get your interviews.” He looked across the crowd. “Angel, come up here.”

A stunning brunette slithered across the floor, flashed a radiant smile at two bored young men, and allowed them to help her climb the stairs onto the stage.

“Angel Midnight has agreed to play the lead in our extravaganza,” announced del Grado, taking her hand and kissing it.

Groping for words, the actress made a brief statement thanking del Grado for the opportunity, acknowledged that she didn’t yet know which part she would be playing, and heatedly denied that a professional singer’s voice would be dubbed for her own.

Franco Vincenzo was introduced next, and handled himself a little more smoothly, and then del Grado turned to Page.

“Next I want to introduce you to our Bard-winning librettist, Nate Page.” He smiled at Page. “In fact, while all the rest of us are returning home at the end of this party, Nate is staying aboard the *Comet* for the next two weeks to research his story. Nate, come on up and say a few words.”

Page clambered awkwardly up to the stage and smiled pleasantly at the audience.

“What’s a librettist?” he asked.

Even del Grado guffawed. “It’s what you won your Bard for!”

“I was wondering what I’d won it for,” said Page. He winked at Carnegie, who looked like he was having an apoplectic fit. “Anyway, I just want to thank Mr. del Grado for giving me this opportunity.”

He paused. “I’ve always wanted to spend two weeks in a whorehouse at someone else’s expense.”

There was more laughter. Page, who was becoming slightly dizzy, merely smiled, closed his eyes, and swayed gently.

“What’s the title going to be, Nate?” asked a member of the audience.

Page shrugged. “I don’t know,” he replied. “How does *Tap Dancing on the Corpse of the Comet* strike you?”

Del Grado seemed unamused. “It’s called *Eros in Orbit*,” he announced.

“It’s called *Eros in Orbit*,” repeated Page. “I don’t know—I kind of liked my own title.”

“Who's doing the lyrics?” asked another journalist.

“Me,” replied Page. “Hell, they're probably the only words I'll recognize in the final version.” He looked out at the audience. “Anyone got a rhyme for necrophilia?”

More laughter.

“What about the music?” persisted the journalist.

“I give up,” said Page. “What*about* the music?”

“Who's doing it?”

Page shrugged and jerked a thumb in del Grado's direction. “Ask the boss.”

Del Grado stepped forward, smiling humorlessly, announced that Page would be available for private interviews, signaled one of his underlings to escort the writer off the stage, and began answering questions and introducing more members of his team.

“Beautiful!” muttered Carnegie, who was waiting for Page. “Just beautiful! I hope you're still working here tomorrow morning.”

“They already announced me,” said Page. “They'd look pretty damned silly if they fired me the same day.”

“Don't kid yourself into thinking it can't happen.”

“Who gives a damn? It's a play-or-pay contract. They've got to pay me either way.”

“You may want to write again someday,” noted Carnegie caustically.

“Some fabulous careers have been made out of writing unproduced scripts.”

“I can't talk to you when you're like this!” snapped Carnegie. He turned on his heel and walked off.

Page watched him for a moment, then sought out the bar and ordered a whiskey. He finished it in a single gulp and was just about to order another when he was overwhelmed by the fragrance of a very expensive perfume. He turned to find Angel Midnight standing beside him.

“Hi,” he said. “I'm Nate Page, and I want you to know how much I'm going to enjoy putting words in your mouth.”

“Really?” she asked with a smile.

He nodded. “Absolutely. I always rise to a challenge.”

She stared at him for a moment, trying to determine whether he was being flattering or insolent.

“I want to talk to you about the script,” she said at last.

“There isn't any script yet,” replied Page.

“I know. But I wanted to discuss my role.”

He shrugged. “Okay—discuss.”

“Well, I know I need to work a little on my dancing and my singing...” she began.

“Not to worry,” he replied. “We’ll keep you naked from start to finish and no one will notice it.”

She smiled uncertainly. “You have a very strange sense of humor.”

“The *Velvet Comet* was a whorehouse,” answered Page. “I hope to hell you’re not expecting to play a military commander.”

“But this is *amusical*,” she said doggedly.

“You can’t sing in the nude?” asked Page. He looked her up and down and shook his head admiringly. “By the way, I love your neckline,” he said. “I thought antigravity was still supposed to be centuries away.”

“Anyway,” she said, ignoring his comments, “I just want you to know that you don’t have to make allowances for me.”

“Allowances?”

“I’m more than just a pretty face.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Page, catching the bartender’s eye and holding his glass out for a refill.

“I can *act*,” she said firmly. “I just want a chance to prove it.”

“And *I can write*,” answered Page.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Just that you can interpret Shakespeare and I can outwrite him,” said Page. He smiled wryly. “And, baby, that ain’t what they hired either of us for.”

“Speak for yourself,” she said haughtily. “I’m an *actress*.”

“Not for these guys, you aren’t,” said Page. “For two million credits or whatever the hell it is they’re paying you, they’re not interested in your elocution.”

“And what do you think they’re buying from you?” she demanded.

“Well, it’s sure as hell not my *belles lettres*.”

“What makes you so cynical?” she asked distastefully.

He shrugged. “It comes with maturity.”

“I don’t think your behavior is especially mature.”

“I suppose you’re right. Mature men don’t write scripts about tap-dancing prostitutes. Unless they have bills to pay,” he added thoughtfully.

“I was hoping to have a useful, creative discussion with you,” she said. “I think I’ll have to wait until you’re sober.”

“The line forms to your left,” replied Page.

She frowned. "What?"

"Nothing. It was just a thing to say."

"I don't know why they hired you anyway," she said. "You haven't had *areal* hit in years."

"Ah." He smiled. "But I have a Bard."

"Which your producer practically bought for you."

"That's why I only have one," he agreed pleasantly. "They're much more expensive these days."

"You're really hopeless, aren't you?" she said rhetorically, and suddenly Page became aware of the fact that their conversation was over and she was staring straight through him and listening to a conversation that was taking place behind him. A moment later she moved off to mingle with two starstruck members of the press, while a third tried to find unobtrusive ways to position his camera so that it pointed down her dress.

Suddenly Page felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and turned to find himself facing Bull del Grado.

"I'd like to have a little talk with you, Nate," said del Grado.

"Suits me."

Del Grado shook his head. "Not here," he said. "It's too crowded." The huge fingers dug into Page's shoulder. "Let's take a walk."

"Where to?" asked Page.

"It's a big ship. We'll find some place."

Del Grado squeezed Page's shoulder, and the writer fell into step beside him. They walked through the foyer and out a side door into an empty corridor, past the sterile remains of a restaurant and two bars.

"Where the hell are we going?" demanded Page.

Del Grado looked around and released his grip.

"I guess we're alone," he agreed.

"What did you want to say?" asked Page, trying to rub some life back into his arm.

"Just that I'm very disappointed in you, Nate," said del Grado. He frowned. "Just look at yourself. You're a mess."

"You didn't hire me for my taste in clothes," said Page.

"Right," said del Grado. "I hired you for your mind—and I don't like to see it rotted by alcohol."

"It won't be, once I sit down to write."

"I don't think you understand, Nate," said del Grado softly. "I didn't hire your writing talent. I hired *you*—and until the script is done, I *own* you. When I order a press reception, you'll show up early and sober, and when they ask you questions, you'll have answers for them."

"Let's cut the crap," said Page. "We both know that the only reason you bought me was because Murray



put me into a package with Franco Vincenzo. You're buying a script, nothing more.”

Del Grado shot him a tight little smile. “I’m kind of new to the producing game, Nate,” he said. “I don’t know much about you artistic people, or how you operate, or what passes for good behavior among you.” He paused, and the smile vanished. “But I understand money. I’m good at making it, and I’m good at putting it to work for me. Now, I’ve paid a lot of money for the *Velvet Comet*, and I’ve committed a lot of money to making *Eros in Orbit*, and no hack writer is going to mess me up.” He reached out and dug his fingers into Page’s shoulder. “You show up drunk again or act in a manner that I consider unacceptable, and you’re out on your ass.”

“You won’t do that,” said Page confidently.

“What makes you think not?”

“Because you’ll have to pay me anyway.”

“Let me tell you something,” said del Grado softly, leaning forward until his face was just a couple of inches from Page’s. “I make more money every twenty minutes than I’m paying you for this script.” He paused. “Let me tell you something else. If I was paying you twenty million credits, I’d still fire you if I had to. I don’t tolerate insubordination—not from you, not from anyone.” He released Page’s shoulder. “And if I fire you, I guarantee you’ll have a hard time finding work in this industry.” He stared unblinking into Page’s eyes. “Do we understand each other?”

Page stared at him for a moment, could find no softness or humor in his expression, and finally nodded.

“Good,” said del Grado with a satisfied smile. “Everyone is allowed one mistake. You’ve made yours. See to it that it doesn’t happen again.”

“It’ll be a real experience working for you, Mr. del Grado,” said Page at last.

“A good one or a bad one?” asked del Grado.

“One or the other.” Page paused. “Or is that being disrespectful, Mr. del Grado?”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” said del Grado. “Don’t do it again.”

“Whatever you say,” replied Page.

“Words to live by,” said del Grado. “Now let’s get back to the party.”

“If that’s what you want, Mr. del Grado,” said Page.

“It is. By the way,” said del Grado as they commenced walking, “I’ve told one of my men to program the kitchen computer. It won’t supply you with any booze while you’re here.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

“I knew you’d appreciate it,” said del Grado with an amused smile. “Also, we’ll be checking in with you every couple of days to see what kind of progress you’re making.”

“All I’m doing is researching what went on here while the place was in business,” said Page defensively.

“I expect an outline and the opening scene by the end of the week.”

“Right,” said Page mechanically. “By the end of a week I’ll have an outline and the opening scene.”

“Good! I can't tell you how happy I am to have you on our creative team, Nate.”

“I can't tell you how happy I am to be here,” said Page honestly.

Del Grado chuckled and slapped Page on the back. “You're in the big leagues now, Nate. You'll get used to the ground rules.”

“I'll try my best, Mr. del Grado,” replied Page, surprised, as always, at how easily he donned his mantle of subservience. “And allow me to say that I don't think you'll have any trouble at all with the industry's ground rules.”

“I don't think so, either,” agreed del Grado. “When I pay for the playing field, I make the ground rules.”

Then they were back at the foyer, and del Grado signaled to Murray Carnegie.

“I've just been having a very pleasant discussion with our star writer, Murray,” he said when the agent fought his way through the crowd to join them, “and I feel confident that we'll be able to work together.”

“I hope so,” said Carnegie nervously.

“I'm sure we will,” continued del Grado. “He understands his place in the organization now, and I'm sure we'll get along famously.”

“I'm very glad to hear it, Bull,” said Carnegie.

“Take good care of him, Murray,” said del Grado. “I expect great things of him.”

He wandered off to mingle with his guests, and Carnegie turned to Page. “What was *that* all about?” he asked.

“Search me,” said Page with a shrug. “I think he wants you to make sure I don't visit the bar again.”

“He talked to you about your drinking?”

“He talked to me about my place in the organization.”

“And?”

“As long as I ask his permission every time I feel like inhaling or exhaling, I'm sure we'll get along just fine.”

Carnegie stared at him for a moment. “Do you want me to get you some coffee?”

“I don't know why everyone thinks I'm drunk,” complained Page irritably. “I only have a pleasant little buzz on, nothing more. It must be my irrepressible charm.”

“Will you promise not to have another drink, at least until del Grado leaves?” persisted Carnegie anxiously.

“Yeah,” said Page with a sigh. “Go off and make contacts, Murray. I'm through drinking for tonight.”

He frowned. “Hell, the sonofabitch undid it all with his little talk, anyway. I'm stone cold sober.”

“Stay that way,” Carnegie admonished him, then went off to baby-sit his other clients.

Page looked around the foyer, saw an empty couch, and made his way over to it. He had just seated

himself when a tall, lean, angular black man approached him.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“It's a free ship,” said Page with a shrug. “At least, it is nowadays.”

“It's about time we met,” said the black man, extending his hand. “I'm Kipchoge Kamala.”

Page smiled and took his hand. “So you're the musician.”

“The composer,” Kamala corrected him with a smile. “Actually,” he added confidentially, “I have a feeling that I'm about the seventh choice. I hope that doesn't bother you.”

“Why should it?” said Page. “I wasn't their first choice either.” He paused. “How did you finally land the job, if it's not being too personal?”

“Not at all,” replied Kamala. “My agent tied me to Lubinski.”

“The director?” asked Page.

Kamala nodded.

“God bless agents,” said Page. “I got in on Vincenzo's coattails.”

“It's a jungle, isn't it?” chuckled Kamala. “Somehow, I don't think this was what my parents had in mind when they paid for six years at the Alphard Conservatory of Music.”

“Well, I suppose as long as we're both here and both reasonably sober, we ought to talk a little business,” said Page. “How do you want to work on the songs?”

Kamala shrugged. “Any way that's convenient for you. If you want the music first, that's fine by me. If you want to give me the lyrics first, I'll set 'em to music.”

“You're very adaptable,” remarked Page.

“It's no big deal,” said Kamala. “They're going to fuck it up no matter how we do it.”

“True,” agreed Page.

“I mean,” continued Kamala, “can you think of anything sillier than a chorus line of highstepping whores?”

“Maybe I'll just leave space for a thirty minute ballet smack-dab in the middle and let you sweat it out,” grinned Page.

“Hey!” laughed Kamala. “I thought we were going to be friends!”

“We'll work it out,” said Page. “Have they got you staying aboard the ship, too?”

Kamala shook his head. “They suggested it, but I convinced them that I didn't have to. After all, *you're* the guy who's doing the story. All I've got to do is set it to music.”

“I take it you didn't plead your case to Bull del Grado,” said Page.

“Thankfully, no. I hear there's not a lot of give to the man.”

“An understatement,” said Page earnestly.

“Well, I suppose that's why *he's* hiring *us* instead of the other way around.” Kamala paused.

“When do you suppose you can get a plot outline and some lyrics to me, Nate?”

Page shrugged. “Del Grado gave me a week on the outline. I don't know about the lyrics.”

“We ought to have *one* song for them, just to prove we're working our proletarian little tails off,” said Kamala.

“See if you can come up with something.”

“I'll do what I can.”

“Check the ship's computer if you can't think of anything else,” suggested the composer.

“It writes lyrics?”

“No, of course not,” chuckled Kamala. “But it's got a pretty big library, and considering what the clientele was like when this joint was a going concern, it might have something we can use. *Someone* must have tried a musical about a whorehouse sometime in the past; it's too awful an idea to have just been created for the first time.”

“I'll make a note of it,” promised Page.

Kamala got to his feet “In the meantime, I'll get to work on an overture, and check in with you in about a week.”

“Sounds good,” said Page.

“And now, this being a pleasure palace and all, I think I'll mingle around and see if I can't find a companion for the evening,” added Kamala with a grin.

“Good hunting,” said Page. Then he, too, got to his feet and decided to do a little circulating. Angel Midnight saw him and looked right through him again, he had no desire to speak with del Grado or Carnegie, and he had never much liked Vincenzo, though he was more than willing to use his leverage to obtain contracts, and finally he drifted over toward one of the linen-covered tables that were covered with *hors d'oeuvres* .

“Try the caviar,” suggested one of the journalists, who was munching on a cracker.

“Good?”

“Imported from Earth itself.”

“Thanks,” said Page, helping himself to some.

“Your boss lays out an impressive spread,” remarked the journalist.

“My boss has got a lot of money,” replied Page.

“That he does,” agreed the journalist. “By the way, we haven't met. My name's Miko.”

“Miko what?”

“Just Miko. People seem to remember it better that way.”

“Nate Page, scriptwriter extraordinaire,” said Page, extending his free hand.

“I know,” said the journalist, taking his hand. “I heard you when del Grado introduced you.”

Page didn't know what to say, so he settled for stuffing his mouth with caviar.

“Are you really going to do research up here?” asked Miko.

“Is there anything else to do up here?” replied Page.

“What I meant was, this place hasn't exactly got a happy history.”

“I don't know a thing about it, except that Vainmill closed it down about a quarter of a century ago.”

“They closed it down when a terrorist threatened to set a bomb off on it,” said Miko.

“Really?”

Miko nodded. “And there have been a couple of murders up here, too.”

“Good,” said Page. “We ought to have a little something between all the singing and dancing.”

“You know, I keep asking del Grado and Lubinski and their assistants about the production,” added Miko, “and every answer begins with a discussion of art and ends with a discussion of profit.”

“Well, they're not philanthropists.”

“They're not artists, either.”

“That's not their job.”

Miko smiled. “Somehow I never thought of Angel Midnight as an artist.”

“You can't picture her with a heart of gold?” asked Page, returning his smile.

The journalist looked across the room at her. “Seems to me she's got room for three or four hearts in there,” he commented.

“And a couple of extra lungs,” agreed Page.

“Would I be out of line if I suggested that you don't seem to be taking all this very seriously?”

“You'd be out of line if you printed it.”

“You seem more concerned with your image than with your work,” noted Miko.

“You're a little new to this business, aren't you?”

“To writing, no. To press parties and puff pieces, yes.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “I'm from *Empire* .”

“Never heard of it.”

“We're a biweekly financial newstape. I've spent the last couple of months gathering material for an in-depth piece on del Grado.”

“Then you ought to be used to being manipulated.”

“*Touché*,” said Miko. “But that still doesn't answer my question.”

“Are we off the record?” asked Page.

“If you wish.”

“I do,” said Page. “Now let me tell you exactly what's going to happen.” He paused. “I'll give them a good, journeyman script. Angel will want more lines, Vincenzo will want a complete rewrite unless I have him hold off thirty killers single-handed, Lubinski will decide he wants to do the whole thing underwater, and del Grado will probably have me write in parts for two of his mistresses. And when twenty or twenty-five of us sit down to go over the final draft, your humble undersigned will be the only one without script approval.” Page sighed and looked around the room. “You know, there probably *are* a couple of good stories to tell about this joint, but five'll get you ten that they never get told—and certainly not in a musical comedy.” He took another mouthful of caviar.

“That's the way it works in this business?” asked Miko.

“Absolutely,” said Page. “So you see, it doesn't really matter how good my script is, because you're never going to see it anyway. But my image—that's another matter altogether.”

“You don't seem like an exceptionally bitter man, given the circumstances,” remarked Miko.

“Why should I be?” said Page. “I've got my serious work, and my scripts pay for it.”

“Your serious work doesn't pay for itself?”

Page smiled. “Have you seen my name on the best-seller list?”

“No. Does it belong there?”

“That's a matter of some debate,” replied Page.

“What kind of stuff do you write when you're not doing musicals about whorehouses?” asked Miko.

“Fiction, essays, poetry—whatever appeals to me.”

“I'll have to look some of it up.”

“Good luck finding it,” said Page.

“Well,” said Miko, “it's been nice talking to you, but I need some *on* -the-record interviews, so I think I'd better get back to work. Good luck with your script.”

“Thanks,” said Page, as Miko walked off in search of some quotable remarks.

Page looked around, didn't see anyone he knew or cared to speak with, and returned to his couch.

He spent the next few hours watching deals being made and hyperbole being dispensed with equal facility, and decided that if del Grado really wanted to do a show about prostitution he could do a lot worse than assigning Page to write a script about the press party.

Then, in twos and threes and sixes, the actors and executives and journalists began returning to their ships and shuttlecraft as the party began winding down, and Carnegie, after seeing Vincenzo off, approached Page.

“Is there anything you'll be needing up here, Nate?” he asked.

“Nothing del Grado will let me have,” replied Page dryly.

“When does your assistant arrive?”

“Assistant?” repeated Page. “I don't have an assistant.”

“You do now,” said Carnegie. “Del Grado told me that he's hired a research assistant for you.”

“You mean a spy,” replied Page. “For Christ's sake, Murray, what the hell do I need a research assistant for? I'll take half a day to learn my way around the ship, and then I'll sit down and write.”

“Well, like it or not, you've got one,” answered Carnegie. “I gather she's due to show up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Wonderful,” muttered Page.

“Also, I gather the choreographer is going to pay you a visit tomorrow.”

“What the hell for?”

Carnegie shrugged. “To scout out locations for the dances, I suppose.”

“I hope that sooner or later everyone leaves me alone long enough to turn out this masterpiece,” complained Page.

“Other than tomorrow, I think you'll be left pretty much alone,” Carnegie assured him.

“Except for my assistant.”

“Except for your assistant,” agreed Carnegie.

He straightened up. “Well, I've got to be going. I'll keep in touch.”

“Why should you be different from everyone else on this damned production?” muttered Page.

Carnegie began walking away, then stopped and turned.

“Oh, Nate...” he began.

“Yeah?”

“Del Grado asked me to tell you to shut down all the nonessential systems after everyone has gone.”

“What does he think I am—the goddamned janitor?” demanded Page. “The ship's main computer can take care of it.”

“I know,” said Carnegie. “But he wants *you* to tell the computer to take care of it.”

“I suppose he wants me to wash the dishes and mop the floors, too?” said Page disgustedly.

Carnegie laughed. “That's what I've always liked about you, Nate—that wonderful sense of humor.”

“I thought it was your ten percent.”

Carnegie almost managed a hurt expression.

“Nate, you do me an enormous injustice when you talk like that.”

Page smiled.

“What's so funny?” demanded Carnegie.

“I think I've just come up with the ideal character for the madam.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You're both flesh peddlers, aren't you?” asked Page.

“I resent that!”

“As long as you don't deny it.”

Carnegie glared at Page, then turned on his heel and left.

Page watched him walk away and decided that maybe, if he could just remember some of the evening's conversations, he might very well have come up with half his characters already.

## Chapter 2

“Wake up, Mr. Page.”

Page muttered an obscenity and pulled a pillow over his head.

“Mr. Page, it's 1300 hours.”

“There are only twenty-four in a day. Go away.”

“Wake up, Mr. Page.”

Page cursed and sat up on the bed, blinking his eyes and looking blearily around the room. “Where the hell are you?” he demanded.

“I am the ship's main computer,” replied the voice. “You told me to wake you at 1300 hours.”

“I did? When?”

“Right after you opened your luggage, Mr. Page.”

“Call me Nate,” said Page. His throat was dry, he had an incredibly stale taste in his mouth, and he could feel each of his forty-two years in every joint of his body. He got painfully to his feet, walked gingerly to his suitcase (which was lying on the floor with his clothes of the previous evening strewn about it), opened it, pulled out six bottles of whiskey, set five of them in a neat row atop a dresser, and opened the sixth. He took a swallow and winced at the taste, then carefully capped the bottle and placed it next to the others. “You're a lucky sonofabitch, computer.”

“In what way, Nate?”

“You don't have a body to abuse.” He looked around the enormous but sparsely and inelegantly furnished bedroom. “Where is your voice coming from?”

“I have 12,078 outlets throughout the ship,” replied the computer. “You'll be able to hear me in octophonic sound no matter where you are.”



“How comforting,” commented Page dryly. He began walking around the room, wincing until the aching in his lower back subsided. “One of these days I really ought to get back on my diet,” he muttered. He looked at a point where the wall joined the ceiling in a corner of the room, which he arbitrarily decided was where the computer lived. “You should have seen me at 175 pounds. I was really something.”

“According to your personnel file, you haven't weighed 175 pounds since you were seventeen years old.”

“All right, 180. Big deal.”

“The lightest you have been since attaining your majority is 183,” replied the computer. “That was fourteen years ago.”

“*All right!*” snapped Page. “I don't know why the hell I'm trying to impress a piece of machinery, anyway.”

He surveyed his surroundings. “It's a nice room,” he said, changing the subject. “Who used it?”

“This is the bedroom of the madam's apartment.”

“Which madam?”

“All of them.”

“Well, that's absolutely fascinating, computer,” said Page, losing interest, “but if it's all the same to you, I'm going to go back to sleep for another couple of hours.”

“Katerina Ruboff is waiting for you in the foyer.”

“Who the hell is Katerina Ruboff?” demanded Page.

“The choreographer for *Eros in Orbit* .”

“What does she want?”

“She has requested a tour of the *Comet* .”

“*You* give her the tour,” said Page, getting back into bed. “You know your way around better than I do anyway.”

“Mr. del Grado wants you to meet with her.”

“How do you know?”

“He programmed that information into me last night.”

“Tell him to go fuck himself.”

“My programming will not allow that. He owns me.”

“Well, he's only renting me,” said Page, pulling the covers up over his head. “I'll see you at dinnertime.”

Suddenly an ear-piercing whistle shattered the silence of the room.

“What the hell was that?” demanded Page, sitting up suddenly.

“I apologize for startling you, Nate,” said the computer, “but I am compelled to wake you up and urge

you to keep your appointment with Katerina Ruboff.”

“Thanks a lot, Fido,” muttered Page, getting up and starting to pull his clothes on.

“Actually, my name is Cupid,” said the computer.

“You're kidding!” chuckled Page.

“It was given to me seventy years ago by an employee of the Vainmill Syndicate, and it has been my name ever since.”

“And you don't mind it?”

“I am incapable of emotion,” replied Cupid. “But I do find a certain mathematical satisfaction in possessing a name that is unique to myself.”

“You sound pretty damned capable to me,” said Page, looking around. “Where the hell's the bathroom?”

Suddenly a door opened.

“Will you be requiring a bath or a shower?” asked Cupid.

“Just a shave,” replied Page.

“What temperature would you like the water?”

“Hot.”

“That is a very inexact specification. I can adjust the temperature to the nearest tenth of a degree in Celsius, Fahrenheit, or Kelvin.”

“Just hot,” said Page, entering the bathroom. “Now turn it on.”

“Are you sure you want to shave with a blade?” asked Cupid as hot water poured forth from the tap.

“Why not?”

“Of the 18,432,346 shaves that have been performed on my premises, only 283 were done with a razor blade.”

“I'm old-fashioned.”

“It is the single most dangerous way to remove hair from your face.”

“Just shut up and leave me alone,” growled Page, staring at his bloodshot blue eyes in the mirror.

Cupid fell silent immediately, and Page finished washing and shaving, then walked back into the bedroom.

It was actually a two-room suite. The main room, in which he had spent the night, held a mismatched bed and dresser; the smaller room, which had obviously been a sitting room when the *Comet* was in operation, was completely empty except for an artificial marble fireplace in which a realistic but heatless fire blazed away.

“Nice suite,” said Page.

“I can produce a holographic representation of the furniture it used to possess,” offered Cupid.

“Don't bother,” replied Page. “I'd probably forget and try to sit on some of it.” He paused. “Besides, I like it this way. It reminds me of my career.”

“I don't understand.”

“Sterile, empty, and plundered by everyone,” said Page.

He left the suite, walked down a short corridor past a small kitchen, and entered what was once the office or living area, he couldn't quite decide which.

It was another two-room suite, which was either an outer and inner office, or a living and dining room.

The smaller room was totally empty, while the larger room possessed another fireplace and a physical extension of the computer in the form of a chrome table that had been wired through the floor. He assumed that there had once been a carpet covering the connection.

There was also a rather plain-looking chair, comfortable but inexpensive, which he was sure couldn't have been part of the original decor, and the piping for a wet bar now led to a water cooler. Beyond that, this room had been scavenged as thoroughly as the others.

“Since this is the only room with a chair, I assume this is where I'm expected to work,” remarked Page.

“That is correct,” answered Cupid. “Though of course if it is unacceptable to you, you can work wherever you wish. I have terminals in every suite, as well as in every room in the Home.”

“No, this'll be fine,” replied Page. He paused. “Kip Kamala says that you might have some musicals about whores and warehouses in your library banks. Why don't you see if you can pull them up by tonight?”

“I can do so immediately,” responded Cupid.

“But I can't study them immediately,” said Page irritably. “You woke me up to meet the choreographer, remember?”

“I am incapable of forgetting.”

“Too bad. Now you'll never have a reason to drink.” He paused. “Okay—how do I get to the foyer?”

The tabletop came to life with a three dimensional diagram of the *Comet*'s main deck.

“Forget that shit,” said Page. “Just tell me how to get there.”

“Go to the door at the far end of the office, step out into the hall, turn left, then —”

“That's enough,” said Page. “Tell me the rest as I go along.”

“Yes, Nate.”

Page left the office and began walking toward the foyer, passing numerous empty restaurants and bars.

“Hey, Cupid?”

“Yes?”

“What's that huge empty room off to the left?”

“The casino.”

“What happened to all the gaming tables?”

“They were cannibalized and used in other facets of the Vainmill Syndicate's Entertainment and Leisure Division, or else auctioned off,” answered Cupid. “Most of the *Comet*'s other furnishings were similarly dispersed.”

“Does that include all the gourmet kitchen equipment?”

“Yes, Nate. It was transferred to the Syndicate's fleet of spaceliners.”

“Then how the hell am I supposed to eat?”

“The kitchen in your apartment is still functional, and a stock of food has been laid into the storage units.”

“I can't cook.”

“I can.”

“You might be a handy guy to have around after all,” mused Page.

“I have just received a communication from Deluros VIII,” announced Cupid suddenly.

“Tell that bastard I haven't had *time* to get drunk yet,” said Page.

“It concerns your research assistant. She will arrive in approximately two hours.”

“I can't tell you how thrilled I am to hear that,” said Page. “How much farther to Salomé?”

“Who is Salomé?”

“Katerina Ruboff.”

“About two hundred yards,” answered the computer.

Page nodded, followed Cupid's directions, bore to the left when he came to a fork in the corridor, and a few minutes later entered the huge reception foyer, where a very short, very slender middle-aged woman was waiting for him.

“Mr. Page?” she said.

“Right.”

“I'm Katerina Ruboff. I'm here to examine the *Velvet Comet* .”

“So I've been told.”

“Once I get the feel of the shape and texture of the rooms, I'll be better able to create the proper dances,” she continued.

“Sounds good to me,” said Page. “But you're not going to find much texture. All the rooms have been gutted except for this one.”

“So much the better,” she replied. “Then we’ll be able to furnish them any way we choose.”

“Well,” said Page, pulling out a pack of Altarian cigarettes and lighting one, “what would you like to see first?”

“The fantasy rooms that I’ve read so much about,” answered Katerina. “And please don’t smoke in my presence.”

Page took the cigarette out of his mouth, looked from it to the choreographer and back to it again, then shrugged and tossed it into a small trash atomizer.

“Cupid?” he called out.

“My name is Katerina.”

“I know. I’m speaking to the ship’s computer.”

“Yes, Nate?” said Cupid.

“How do we get to the fantasy rooms from here?”

“There’s an elevator down the corridor just past the registration desk,” replied Cupid. “The fantasy rooms are on the top two levels.”

“How many levels are there, anyway?” Page asked as he and Katerina began walking.

“There are six at this end,” answered Cupid. “The bottom three contain the suites, the main level houses the restaurants, bars, casino, registration area, and the madam’s apartment, and the top two levels include the fantasy rooms, the gymnasium, and the hydroponics gardens.”

“What do you mean, at this end?” asked Page as they reached the elevator.

“This spherical section of the *Velvet Comet* was known, at various times, as the House and the Resort. At the far end of the Mall is a spherical section of equal proportions which was known as the Home. It has eight levels, and contains the crew’s quarters, Security headquarters, an infirmary, a large dining area, a less ambitious gymnasium, and all of the *Comet* ’s administrative offices.”

The elevator’s doors opened, and Page and Katerina stepped out into a corridor.

“What happened to the ceiling?” asked Page, looking up. “It looks like the whole damned thing was removed.”

“A number of pornographic paintings and frescos were once displayed on it,” answered Cupid. “They were all bought by an art gallery in the Quinellus Cluster.”

“It must have cost them a bundle.”

“It did. The artist who created the frescos was later commissioned to design the ceilings of all the governmental buildings on Lodin XI.”

“I’ll bet he didn’t enjoy himself as much,” commented Page dryly. He paused. “Which way now?”

“Which fantasy room do you wish to see?”

“Any of ‘em.”

“Turn to your right, walk down the corridor to the first door, and open it.”

They did so, and found themselves in a relatively small room. The floor was covered with sand, and a huge structure, resembling nothing more than an outsized oyster shell, lay on the floor off to the left. The room was only fifteen feet deep and no more than ten feet high, and both the walls and ceilings had been painted a dull gray.

“This is it?” demanded Katerina. “This is one of the fabulous fantasy rooms that cost a hundred thousand credits a night?”

“That is correct,” replied Cupid. “This room was known as the Ocean Bower. The holographic projectors that created the illusion have since been sold, but I have the capacity to approximate the effect they created, though not as realistically. Would you like me to do so?”

“Please,” she said.

“Let me first request that you and Nate stand or recline on the shell,” said Cupid. “Otherwise you might become somewhat disoriented.”

She looked dubious, but did as the computer suggested, and Page followed her.

“All right,” she announced when she was ready.

And suddenly the room came to life—except that it wasn't a room anymore. A transparent dome covered the shell, and beyond it was an entire ocean of crystal-clear water. Schools of fish swirled by in hypnotic patterns, herded by mermaids whose hair trailed behind them. Here was Neptune, trident in hand, riding a jeweled sea horse, there were the glittering phosphorescent ocean-dwellers of Gamma Leporis VI, and off in the distance was an ancient submarine bearing the name Nautilus.

“It's lovely!” exclaimed Katerina.

“These are very simplistic holographic representations,” explained Cupid. “Some of the coloration is wrong, the movement of the smaller school of fish is too jerky, the perspective on the submarine is incorrect, and I am incapable of even approximating the degree of detail that was produced by the projectors. Also, many of the effects were generated through a random program selection which gave an impression of spontaneity, whereas I am creating what you see by referring to my memory banks.”

“Are you telling me you can't randomize?” asked Page skeptically.

“Yes, I can—but the projectors were dedicated machines, and I am not. Were I to randomly generate images, the fish might be the wrong color and the submarine might be upside down.”

“Are all the rooms this small?” asked Katerina, trying to visualize her dances.

“Some of them are quite large,” replied Cupid. “The Tropical Island, the Roman Temple, the Hunting Lodge, and three others. But most of them are at least this small. You must remember that their prime purpose was to create a romantic and exotic atmosphere. The actual activity that occurred in most of them was usually confined to a bed.”

“What about the Null-G room?” asked Katerina.

The holographic images vanished, and the door slid into the wall.

“Please turn to your right, and it will be the third door on your left.”

They began walking down the corridor, and found the door open when they came to it. They stepped inside and found themselves in a tall, narrow chamber.

“Not very impressive,” commented Page. “Cupid, give us your light show.”

“There isn't any.”

“You mean this is it—the whole thing?”

“That is correct.”

“Surely there must be some lighting effect,*something*,” urged Katerina.

“I am afraid not,” replied Cupid. “It would have been distracting.”

“Wasn't that the purpose of these rooms?” she persisted. “To distract the patrons from their everyday worlds and lives?”

“Yes,” said Cupid. “But this room was difficult enough to maneuver through without distractions. Would you like a demonstration?”

“Please.”

“Not for me, thanks,” said Page quickly, stepping back into the corridor.

There was a soft humming, and suddenly Katerina began floating, head over heels, to the top of the room, some thirty feet high. She tried to adjust her position, and succeeded in doing nothing more than bouncing off a wall, which shot her straight into the opposite one.

“Enough!” she shouted.

The humming subsided, and she descended slowly and gently to the floor.

“That was painful!”

“Imagine how much more difficult it would have been had you been attempting to copulate with a partner,” said Cupid. “The last thing you would have needed would have been a further distraction.”

“I see your point,” she said, frowning. “Well, let me see the rest of them. We'll start with the bigger ones and work our way down.”

Page spent the next ninety minutes following Katerina from one fantasy room to another, while she studied them, made profuse notes and drawings on a pocket computer, and occasionally even danced across the floors. Finally she informed Cupid that she was ready to see the rest of the ship, and they descended to the main level.

“We'll definitely do a major production number in the Mall,” she announced as she stood in the foyer, looking out to the two-mile-long strip, “and I suspect we'll make some use of the casino as well.” She paused. “Were there any nightclubs?”

“Three,” answered Cupid, directing her to each in turn.

Then it was time for her to see the crew's quarters, and Cupid apologetically explained that the tramway that had whisked the prostitutes back and forth between the two ends of the ship was no longer operative, and that she would either have to walk or ride in the same vehicle that had met Page the

previous night.

"I'll walk," she said after some consideration. "I want to get the feel of the Mall, anyway."

"Count me out," said Page.

"I told you I wanted you to accompany me," said Katerina.

"I've got my research assistant coming aboard any minute," he replied. "You go ahead and look at the Home, and let me know if you want to stage any numbers there."

"But —"

"That is quite true," confirmed Cupid. "The shuttlecraft bearing the Nate's research assistant will be docking in seven minutes."

She seemed about to complain again, then shrugged and walked out into the Mall.

"Well, that takes care of *her* for the next hour or so," said Page with a sigh of relief. "Have I got time for a quick drink before the spy arrives?"

"You are not supposed to drink, Nate," said Cupid.

"I didn't ask you if I was supposed to," retorted Page irritably. "I asked if I had time."

"No."

"Why do I think you're lying to me?"

"I am incapable of lying, Nate."

"Even if you thought it was for my own good?" he asked suspiciously.

"Even so."

Page sighed again, and sat down on a sumptuous tufted couch. "Who else is due up here today?"

"Other than your research assistant, no one."

"And tomorrow?"

"No one. Your next visitors are the set designer, who is due to arrive in six days, and the director, assistant director, and lighting director, who are due in nine days."

"Fine," said Page. "Then tomorrow afternoon I'll start outlining this masterpiece." He looked down the Mall and watched Katerina walk past the rows of shops and boutiques. "She's wasting her time," he said at last. "They didn't buy the *Comet* so that she could stage a production number in the crew's mess hall." He grimaced. "And as for teaching Angel and Vincenzo to dance..." He shook his head. "I sure as hell don't envy her." He chuckled. "In fact, I don't envy anyone who has to teach Vincenzo how to walk and chew gum at the same time—and Angel doesn't exactly strike me as a mental giant, either. In fact, to hell with the dancing; how is she ever going to convince an audience that she's in charge of a billion-credit business with that vacant stare of hers?" He lit a cigarette. "Maybe I'm going about this all wrong," he continued. "There's no law that says she *has* to play a madam. Maybe she can just be one of the girls. Besides, she's too young for one of the *Comet*'s madams, wouldn't you say?"



“Three of them were under thirty years of age,” replied Cupid.

“Yeah?” said Page, surprised.

“That is correct.” Cupid fell silent for a moment. “Your assistant has arrived.”

“You'd better direct her this way, or she may wind up going to the Home.”

“I shall,” said Cupid. “This does not, however, mean that we cannot continue our conversation if you wish to. I am capable of addressing and conversing with more than four hundred people at once.”

“Doesn't it get confusing?”

“I never —”

“— get confused,” interrupted Page. “I know.” He paused. “Just talk to her for a while. I like to think I have your undivided attention when you're talking to me.”

“That would be impossible, Nate,” replied Cupid. “I must adjust and monitor the life-support systems, and stabilize the roll of the *Comet* to provide an acceptable gravity, and —”

“Forget it,” said Page. “Just leave me alone until she reaches the reception foyer.”

“As you wish.”

Page finished his cigarette, lit another, and tried very hard not to think of the six bottles of liquor he had brought onto the *Comet* in his luggage. He began pacing restlessly around the foyer, examining the escalator that led down to the tramway level, staring at the wall that once had housed enormous banks of screens which projected news, business and sports data from a thousand worlds, trying to imagine the feeling of excitement in the foyer thirty or fifty or eighty years ago, when it had seen the comings and goings of the richest and most powerful men and women in the galaxy.

Then he began considering the foyer in professional terms. If you were a patron, you couldn't get into the Resort without passing through it—so sooner or later all of his characters would have to make an appearance here.

He continued walking around, analyzing his surroundings and his literary problems. A romantic thief, or perhaps a crazed killer? No, they'd have spotted him at the airlock—and even if they slipped up, which he doubted, the foyer would be crawling with security personnel. A love song? Not in front of two hundred strangers. Suddenly he grinned. What if there were only 190 strangers? How about a musical number in which a number of first-time customers displayed their anxieties, not about the fun to come, but about being seen at a whorehouse by their peers, who were simultaneously feeling the same anxieties?

The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. It would set a light tone and provide a little sympathy for good old Franco, who certainly needed all the sympathy he could get if he was going to have to sing and dance his way through this extravaganza without being allowed to lop off a single head in that fabled Vincenzo style.

Suddenly Page frowned. *Did* the patrons worry about who might see them, or was the *Comet* so famous that they were worried about *not* being spotted?

He decided that the fear of being ignored might play even better, but he'd have to check the facts and find out whether appearing aboard the *Comet* branded one as a social lion or a pariah.

Well, he thought as the vehicle pulled up and a slim, redheaded young woman got out, he had an assistant to hunt up just that kind of detail. He put her age at thirty, possibly a little more. Her business suit was exquisitely tailored, her hair immaculately styled, her makeup applied with a precise and delicate touch.

A brief frown creased Page's forehead; she looked too neat to be a writer, and too expensive to be a researcher.

In fact, she looked just about the way he thought one of del Grado's spies would look.

"Mr. Page?"

"Nate," he corrected her.

"I'm Monica Herald," she said.

"Pleased to meet you," said Page.

"This is a little awkward for me, Mr. Page," continued Monica. "I realize that you didn't request me, but..."

"No problem, as long as you stop calling me Mister," said Page easily. "If del Grado hadn't assigned an assistant to me, I'd probably have hired one myself." He paused. "I don't know where you're going to sleep, though. I seem to have the only functioning bedroom."

"They shipped some furniture up with me," she replied. "The shuttle crew will be moving it into one of the suites."

"I hope you get a more comfortable bed than they gave me," he said sincerely.

"I'll let you know in the morning," she said. "Now, Mr. Page —"

"Nate."

"Nate," she amended. "What would you like me to do?"

"Seriously?"

"Of course."

"I'd like you to get in touch with your boss and tell him that I'm stone cold sober and I haven't wrecked his ship. And then I'd like you to leave me alone so I can get some work done."

"I was hired to help you," she said firmly.

He shook his head. "You were hired to spy on me." She opened her mouth to protest, and he held up a hand. "How many Rounds have you worked on?"

"Rounds?"

He smiled. "I thought so."

"What's a Round?"

"It's a trade name for a 360-degree multimedia holographic production."

She stared at him for a long moment, then sighed.

“All right—I'm supposed to keep tabs on your drinking and your progress on the script, and report back to del Grado.”

“I know.”

“But I'm also a researcher, and I really *was* hired to help you as well as keep an eye on you.” She paused. “If you get rid of me, you'll just wind up with someone else who's probably not as good at digging up facts as I am.”

It was his turn to stare at her. “You've got a point,” he said at last. “Okay—we're in business. At least you're an honest spy.”

She smiled. “Now, what can I do to help you?”

“I must admit I haven't given it that much thought yet,” replied Page. “I suppose we'd better start with the basics—and the most basic fact of all is that this show has got to have a happy ending. Between the cost of the production and the cost of the *Comet* itself, del Grado stands to lose a bundle of money if we can't get half the initial audience to come back three or four times—and people are more likely to return to a happy show than a tragedy.”

“Sensible,” she commented. “Where do *I* come in?”

“I can create the story line without any help, but there are hundreds of prostitutes still alive who worked aboard the *Comet*. I want you to get a list of them from Cupid —”

“Cupid?” she interrupted.

“The ship's computer. Anyway, I want you to track down some of the survivors and get their impressions of working here. Was it as glamorous as it sounds? Did they marry their billionaire clients? Was it a springboard to show business?” He paused. “I don't even know whose story I'll be telling. It would be nice to find out.”

“I'll get right to work on it this afternoon,” promised Monica.

Page stood up and began pacing back and forth. “I'll want you to check out a couple of other things as well. The *Comet* was moved here from Charlemagne after it had been in business about fifteen years. How much added tax revenue did that represent to Deluros VIII? How long did it take to move it, and how much did it cost the Vainmill Syndicate?”

Monica withdrew a pocket computer. “Let me start entering some of this.”

“No need to,” said Page. “Cupid, are you getting all this?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“When we're through, I want you to feed our entire conversation into this lovely lady's computer, deleting only any obscenities I might use when describing my superiors.”

“Yes, Nate,” said Cupid. “Monica, what type of computer do you possess?”

She read off the manufacturer and serial number.

“I have made the necessary adjustments,” announced Cupid. “You can tie into my memory banks by inserting your computer into the expansion slot marked X-3 on any of my terminals.”

“That may not be necessary after all,” said Monica. “Do I have free access to you?”

“Yes.”

She put her pocket computer away. “Then I won't be needing this after all.” She turned to Page. “What else?”

“I'm told there were a couple of murders committed aboard the *Comet*, one before it was moved here and one since. I'm sure Cupid can tell me exactly what happened, but I want you to go through the newstape files on Deluros and Charlemagne and hunt up the official stories.” He paused. “Also, the *Comet* was finally closed down by some religious nut, or so the story goes. Get me whatever data you can on it, and I'll match it up against Cupid's.”

“If you want a happy ending, why bother?” asked Monica.

“Because it's a good idea for the author to know more about the *Velvet Comet* than the audience knows,” replied Page patiently. “Besides, I've got a century-long history to draw on. I don't know when the most colorful characters were working or spending their money up here, so the more facts I can get my hands on, the better. Maybe this preacher went nuts because his wife was a patron or his daughter was selling herself up here.”

“All right,” said Monica, nodding. “I can accept that.”

“Thanks for small favors,” said Page. He lowered his head in thought for a moment. “Finally, I want you to check and find out how socially acceptable the *Comet* was in its heyday. Did the clientele preen in the spotlight, or hope nobody would notice them? In fact, that's probably the first piece of information I need.” He paused. “Well, I guess that's it, at least for the time being.”

“You're sure?”

He nodded. “Except for telling del Grado that I've breathed on you and you've survived it.” He paused. “Cupid?”

“Yes, Nate?”

“Do you know what suite Monica will be moving into?”

“Suite 338, Nate.”

“It's got a terminal and a holographic screen?”

“All of the suites do,” replied Cupid.

“Okay,” said Page. He turned to Monica. “I guess we're in business. When does your bed arrive?”

“It's there already, Nate,” said Cupid. “They've also moved in her luggage.”

“I didn't see anyone pass through here,” said Page.

“I thought you might not want to be disturbed,” replied the computer, “so I told them to bring it in through the service level.”

“I didn't even know there was a service level,” commented Page.

“It's below the tramway level, Nate,” said Cupid.

“Can she cook in the suite?”

“Yes. Suite 338 has the one remaining kitchen unit other than your own. That is why I selected it for her.”

“It won't do her much good without food,” noted Page.

“I brought a two-week supply up on the shuttle with me,” said Monica.

“Too bad,” said Page. “I was about to invite you to my apartment for dinner.”

“Thanks, but not tonight,” said Monica. “I'm anxious to get to work.”

“Whatever you want,” said Page with a shrug.

“Before you start, you might want Cupid to give you the grand tour so that you get the feel of the place.”

“Let me unpack first, and then I will.”

“I'd show you around myself,” he continued, “but I've got a finicky choreographer down at the other end of the ship.”

“What's she doing down there?”

“Seeing how the other half lived, when they weren't in bed with the rich half.” He sighed. “I figure it'll take me at least an hour to get rid of her.”

She smiled. “Well, you wanted to be a scriptwriter.”

“Not really,” he replied wryly. “I just wanted to be rich and famous.”

She went off to her suite, and he lit another cigarette.

“Well, what do you think?” said Page.

“About what, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“About her?”

“I don't understand your question.”

“Never mind.” He paused. “How's the prima ballerina progressing?”

“Who?”

“Katerina Ruboff.”

“I thought you wanted to call her Salomé.”

“It must be terrible to be cursed with a literal mind,” said Page. “Anyway, how soon should she be through?”

“Since I do not know her criteria, I cannot estimate how long she will be.”

“Wonderful,” muttered Page. Suddenly his expression brightened. “Does she have a vehicle?”

“No.”

“Then even if she left right now, she'd have to walk two miles to get back here?”

“That is correct.”

Page grinned. “No sense letting the time go to waste,” he said, heading off toward his apartment.

“Nate?” said Cupid, as Page passed by the row of deserted restaurants.

“Yeah?”

“I am compelled to warn you that if you drink any alcohol, I will have to report it to Monica Herald.”

“I just want one goddamned drink,” complained Page. “It's not as if I planned to hang one on.”

“I will report the quantity accurately.”

“Bully for you,” said Page sullenly.

“Is something wrong, Nate? You've stopped walking.”

“I'm not thirsty anymore.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No,” said Page. Then, “Yeah. Send a message to Murray Carnegie.”

“What would you like the message to say?” asked Cupid.

“That if he ever gets me another contract with Bull del Grado, I'll wring his fat little neck.” He paused.

“And if del Grado's spy changes her mind about having dinner with me, tell her I'm busy.”

He turned around and strode back to the foyer, then stepped out into the Mall, walked over to the vehicle, and sat down in it.

“Cupid, tell me how to drive this damned thing, and then direct me to Katerina Ruboff. I feel like talking to someone who just hates my writing and doesn't give a damn about my personal idiosyncrasies.”

When he arrived at the Home, the choreographer refused to let him enter until he put out his cigarette.

### Chapter 3

The holographic dance froze in midstep.

“I am sorry to interrupt, but Monica Herald is attempting to contact you.”

“You might as well put her through,” said Page, rubbing his eyes. “I was getting a little tired of watching this stuff anyway. Besides, she's got to pretend that she's a researcher, and I've got to pretend that I need one.”

An instant later Monica's image appeared above the tabletop.

“I've got some of the information you wanted, Mr. Page,” she said.

“Nate,” he corrected her. “Are you sure you wouldn't rather tell me in person?”

She shook her head. “Why? This is much more convenient.”

“True,” admitted Page. “But it's also less personal.”

“You've started outlining the script, haven't you?” she said. It was not a question.

“What makes you think so?”

She smiled. “You've got sex on the brain.”

“Not with del Grado's spy, I haven't,” he replied with a laugh. “But I wouldn't mind some companionship. Writing can be pretty lonely work.”

“Not the way *you* go about it,” she replied, amused. “I know all about your marriages.”

“And about how much I've had to drink in the past six hours?”

She nodded. “That, too.”

“All right,” he said, struggling to submerge the irritation that surged through him. “What have you got for me?”

“You wanted to know about social reaction to the *Comet* ...”

“That's right.”

“As nearly as I can determine, there was never a moment during its ninety-three years of existence when it wasn't considered *the* place in the Republic for the rich and powerful to see and be seen.”

“Even in the early years, when it was in orbit around Charlemagne?” he asked.

“Even then,” she replied.

“What about at the end, when this religious nut shut the place down?”

“The *Velvet Comet* didn't close its doors because of religious or moral pressure,” answered Monica.

“That's not the way I heard it,” said Page.

“According to the records, the *Comet* was playing host to seventeen different planetary heads of state on the day it was decommissioned. What happened was that one Simon Gold, the son of Thomas Gold, a minister who had been trying, without much success, to close up the *Comet*, came up here with a powerful explosive in his ship, docked, and threatened to detonate it if Vainmill didn't agree to close up shop.”

“And they gave in just like that?”

She nodded. “They gave in to his demands, and he surrendered himself to the authorities. It was a huge story at the time.”

“I was a teenager on the Outer Frontier at the time,” he replied. “And you were just cutting your baby teeth.” He paused. “Didn't they ever consider reopening?”

“No,” she replied. “Once it was shown that the *Comet* was vulnerable to that kind of blackmail, there was no way they could have ever guaranteed their clientele's safety—and their clientele were the richest and most powerful men and women in the Republic.”

“Whatever happened to Simon Gold?” asked Page, curious.

“He was murdered in a prison brawl about eight years ago.”

“And his father—the guy who started all this?”

She shrugged. “Nobody knows.”

“What did it take to gain entrance to the ship?”

“That depended on what they were here for,” she answered. “At any given time there were perhaps two hundred day-trippers, people who had taken the shuttle up here strictly for shopping and perhaps a gourmet dinner. They were limited to eight hours aboard the ship, and were never allowed to leave the Mall. Theoretically anyone could be a day-tripper, though I suspect that if you weren't a millionaire you were wasting your time trying to get a day pass. There were the gamblers, never more than about two percent of the clientele, who, like the day-trippers, came up only for a limited period of time. They were allowed into the casino once they passed their credit check; Cupid tells me that the minimum bid at any of the gaming tables was five thousand credits. And finally there were the regular patrons, who used—or at least were free to use—all of the *Comet*'s facilities.”

“And what were *their* qualifications?”

“They made the gamblers look like paupers,” she replied.

“What was the maximum number of customers the *Comet* could handle at one time?” asked Page.

“Between five and six hundred.”

He frowned. “That doesn't sound right,” he said at last. “The Mall is two miles long, and the Resort alone looks like it could hold four or five thousand before it started getting crowded.”

“You asked me what it held, not what it *could* hold,” said Monica. “Any more than six hundred patrons at a time would have tarnished its air of exclusivity. Also, there was the matter of security—the people who patronized the *Comet* were prime targets for assassins and kidnappers. Probably there were security considerations for keeping the number of customers down.”

“I'll buy exclusivity,” said Page. “But as for security, I doubt it. Cupid is a pretty impressive machine.”

“Anyway,” she concluded, “that's what I've been able to find out. Does it help or hurt?”

He shrugged. “When you're telling fairy tales, it's always best to tell them about royalty.” He stretched. “How are you doing tracking down former employees?”

“Not very well, so far,” she admitted.

“Oh?”

“Everyone used phony names up here, and most of them never did revert to their real names after they left. Even with Cupid's networking capabilities, it's slow going.”

“What have you got so far?” he asked.

“Of the first three I've been able to find, two were dead and one has been institutionalized and is in no condition to speak to anyone. Do you want me to keep at it?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “I want reminiscences from at least half a dozen of them.” He yawned and stretched his arms above his head again. “Oh, well—back to work.”



“You look exhausted,” she noted.

“Not without cause,” he said. “Cupid, are you there?”

“I am always here,” replied the computer.

“What have we seen so far?”

“Musical excerpts of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* from the twentieth century, *Passion Flowers* from the twenty-second century, *House of Passion* from the second century G.E., *A Little Knowledge* from the third century G.E., and *Madams and Minstrels* from earlier in this century.”

“Cupid synthesizes the plot, and then shows me a couple of representative numbers,” he explained, turning to Monica and grimacing. “You wouldn’t believe how many musicals have been written about whores and whorehouses.”

“I’ve never heard of any of them,” she admitted.

“Me neither—until I went through Cupid’s files,” he said. “Take my word for it, most of them are pretty primitive.”

“Then why study them, instead of something more recent?”

“Plundering them was more what I had in mind,” he replied.

“And have you found anything yet?”

He shook his head. “Not really. Would you believe that all the whores were female until the third century—and that every last one of them had a heart of gold?” He grimaced again. “I’ll probably watch one or two more excerpts and call it quits.”

“Why not borrow from something more recent?” she asked.

“I don’t mind consciously swiping from plays that no one has ever heard of,” he replied. “But I don’t want to inadvertently steal a character or a story line that might be familiar.” He smiled. “It’s the difference between research and plagiarism.”

He shrugged. “As it turns out, none of this stuff is worth reworking.”

“You have an interesting set of ethics,” said Monica.

“They come with the territory.”

“I think I’d better get back to work tracing down the *Comet*’s former employees. I’ll report my progress tomorrow afternoon. Good night, Mr. Page.”

She broke the connection before he could remind her once again to call him Nate.

“Well, I guess that sounded business-like enough,” said Page to Cupid. “What’s next?”

“The next holographic display is a musical excerpt from a third-century G.E. entertainment entitled *Bordello* !”

Page sighed wearily. “You wouldn’t think there’d be so damned many songs you could write about whores, would you?”

“There are 3,044 in my memory banks.”

“Well, *my* memory banks are overflowing,” announced Page suddenly. “Let’s put it off until tomorrow.”

“As you wish.”

Page went into the bedroom, walked over to the dresser, and poured himself a drink.

“Be sure to tell the spy what I’m doing,” he said caustically.

“I will, Nate.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome, Nate.”

Page walked back into the office carrying his glass and the bottle, and sat down on his chair, leaning back until it balanced against a wall.

“I don’t suppose they left a couch behind in one of your storage rooms?”

“No, Nate.”

“Or a more comfortable chair?”

“No, Nate.”

“You’d figure they could have left a little something,” complained Page. He looked around the barren room. “I wonder what this office looked like thirty or forty years ago.”

“Would you like to see it, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“What are you talking about?”

“I can produce a holographic representation from my memory banks, just as I was able to do in the fantasy rooms.”

“Shit!” muttered Page. “You mean I’ve been wasting my time watching all these plays when I could be watching the real thing?”

“I cannot initiate ideas, Nate,” said Cupid. “Other than performing my automatic functions, I can only respond to commands or questions.”

“It sounds to me like you just initiated an apology,” remarked Page.

“Not an apology, Nate—an explanation.”

“Whichever.” Page finished his drink. “All right. What, exactly, can you reproduce for me?”

“With certain exceptions from the first twelve years of the *Velvet Comet*’s existence that have been expunged from my memory banks, I can recreate every single event that ever happened anywhere on the *Comet* since the instant I was activated.”

“Everything?” repeated Page. “You mean you can show me exactly what was happening in every suite in the *Comet* forty-eight years and seventeen minutes ago?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And you can remember every hand that was ever dealt in the casino and every roll of the dice?”

“Yes, Nate.”

Page smiled. “This is going to be easier than I thought.” He paused. “Okay—where should we start?”

“Wherever you wish, Nate.”

“Well, whether Angel plays a madam, a customer, or a working girl, I never heard of a whorehouse without a madam. Why don't you begin by showing me holographs of each of the *Comet*'s madams?”

Instantly the image of a lovely blonde woman in her mid-thirties appeared above the tabletop.

“This is Golden Rainbow, the first madam of the *Velvet Comet*,” announced Cupid dispassionately. “She served in that capacity for seven years, three months, and twenty-nine days, until her voluntary retirement.”

The image vanished, to be replaced by an elegant, auburn-haired woman wearing a leather jump suit.

“This is the Leather Madonna, the second madam of the *Velvet Comet*. She served in that capacity for eight years, one month, and two days, until murdered by one of her employees.”

“Murdered?”

“That is correct, Nate.”

“Can you reproduce her murder?”

“No, Nate. I was not tamperproof at the time, and the memory has been expunged from my system.”

Page considered the image of the Leather Madonna for a moment, then shook his head. “Hardly the stuff of romantic comedies,” he said at last. “Go on to the next one.”

An absolutely ravishing, very young woman appeared.

“This is Suma, the third madam of the *Velvet Comet*. She served in that capacity for thirty-eight days, until her contract was terminated by Vainmill.”

The parade of madams continued, twenty-five in all, and finally the last of them vanished back into the computer's memory banks.

“Which of them was the most interesting?” asked Page.

“In what way, Nate?”

“Any way you choose.”

“You'll have to be more specific, Nate,” said Cupid. “I find all human beings interesting.”

“You do?” asked Page, surprised.

“Yes.”

“Since when do machines find people interesting?”

“Part of my programming is concerned with the security of both our patrons and our employees. Therefore, I was and still am compelled to study all aspects of human behavior.”

“Just a minute,” said Page. “I thought you couldn't initiate ideas. How does that fit with your never-ending inquiry into human behavior?”

“I didn't initiate my inquiry, Nate. It is a primary directive that is built into me.”

“I see,” said Page. “And what conclusions have you drawn from your studies?”

“Humans are too individualistic for me to make any generalized conclusions, Nate,” said Cupid. “You must make your question more specific.”

“Okay. Take one of the madams.”

“Which one?”

“I don't care,” said Page. “Make it the last one. What's your considered opinion of her?”

“The Steel Butterfly was a very efficient administrator of above-average intelligence who had been a prostitute aboard the *Comet* for five years before becoming the madam.”

Page smiled and shook his head. “Come on, Cupid. That's the kind of stuff I'd expect to find in a newstape file on her.”

“It is completely accurate,” said the computer.

“Yeah? If she was such a hotshot administrator, how come the *Comet* folded out from under her?”

“Her ethics forbade her to take decisive action at the time when it would have been effective.”

“Are you telling me that the madam of a whorehouse had a higher ethical code than the minister who brought it down?” asked Page dubiously.

“No, Nate. I am telling you that she had a different ethical code.”

“Explain.”

“She had certain data which, if made public, could have discredited Thomas Gold, and she elected not to use it. My understanding of Gold is that he would have used anything in his possession if he thought his cause was just.”

“One of your functions is the protection of the *Comet*,” said Page. “Why didn't you warn her what would happen?”

“The *Comet* was in no danger until Thomas Gold went insane. Insanity is not subject to probability analysis.”

“Well, you live and learn.”

“That is true, Nate,” replied the computer. “I am continually learning.”

“You've been up here all alone with ninety-nine percent of your systems shut off for damned near a quarter of a century,” Page pointed out. “Absolutely nothing has been happening up here, so what the hell could you learn from?”

“My memories,” answered Cupid.

“What do you do—go through your holo scenes the way some people thumb through a scrapbook?”

“That's unnecessary, Nate,” explained the computer.

“I have instant access to all my memory banks, and since I am compelled to continue to learn all that I can about human behavior, I am continually studying prior events.”

“Don't you get tired of it?” asked Page.

“I don't get tired, Nate.”

Page lit a cigarette, looked around fruitlessly for an ashtray, and decided to use his empty glass.

“We're getting off the subject here.”

“The subject was my perceptions of people.”

“The subject was this musical masterpiece that I'm supposed to turn out,” Page corrected him. He lowered his head in thought for a moment. “Okay. Which of the twenty-five madams had the kind of career that would adapt best to a musical of the type you've been showing me?”

“I am not qualified to answer that question, Nate.”

“Oh? How come?”

“Because none of the musical representations were true, and my programming compels me to be truthful. Fiction is a lie, and lying is contrary to civil and moral law.”

“What the hell do you know about moral law?”

“The bibles of all major religions are in my library. I find them essential to my study of human behavior.”

“Tell you what,” said Page. “If I give you an example of a lie that exemplifies a moral good, will you start answering my questions?”

“I can't, Nate.”

“All right,” sighed Page. “We'll just have to attack it another way.”

“I am curious, however, to hear your example.”

“No deal, Cupid. You want to get something? You've got to give up something.” Page grinned. “*That's* moral law.” He paused. “In the meantime, we're wasting time. Let's start throwing some scenes up there on the tabletop.”

“Which scenes would you prefer, Nate?”

“At the risk of sounding like a dirty old man, let's start with a batch of people in one bed. I've always had a morbidly prurient curiosity about the logistics of that.”

An instant later seven nude bodies appeared above the tabletop. One of them, a rather overweight woman in her mid-fifties, lay writhing in the middle of an enormous bed, while five handsome young men—Page thought the word *beautiful* might be more appropriate if it didn't sound so effeminate—were clustered about her, kissing and stroking lips, arms, legs, breasts, anything that was available, while a

sixth young man had just mounted her and was starting to go through the contortions of the sex act.

Page watched for another ten minutes, as first one and then another of the young men took their turn atop the woman, whose appetite seemed insatiable. Finally he leaned back on his chair and rubbed his eyes.

“Enough,” he muttered.

The holograph vanished.

“That wasn't exactly what I had in mind,” said Page. “It looked like half a dozen well-trained cooks kneading a batch of dough.”

“I cannot offer a comment, as all the *Comet*'s bread and rolls were made by a single chef in the pastry kitchen.”

“Let me rephrase that,” said Page. “The men looked like they were orchestrated, like they were a sports team working in unison.”

“That is an excellent analogy,” replied Cupid.

“It's also a very unspontaneous orgy.”

“It was scheduled two weeks in advance, the patron selected the six men from those who were available, and her account on Deluros VIII was billed before she even came aboard the *Comet*. It is my understanding that this would be deleterious to a feeling of spontaneity.”

“Yeah. Well, when I asked for a group, I had something a little more even-handed in mind.”

“Even-handed, Nate?”

“Six men and six women,” said Page decisively. “Is that plain enough for you?”

“Yes, Nate.” The computer paused. “Would seven women and seven men be acceptable? I do not have the sexual breakdown you requested in my memory banks.”

“Fine.”

A holograph of six handsome young men and seven gorgeous young women in bed with an ancient, frail-looking man popped into existence.

“Stop!” commanded Page.

“Is something wrong, Nate?”

“Those six couples who were surrounding the old man and his partner—they were all employees of the *Comet*?”

“That's correct.”

“But they were fucking each other.”

“Only two of them were,” replied Cupid.

An enlarged holograph appeared above the tabletop.

“You see, Nate?” said Cupid, highlighting the areas in question. “Three of the men don't even have

erections. They were merely simulating the sex act.”

“Why?”

“To save energy. Each prostitute was expected to perform a number of times daily.”

“And the customer didn't care?”

“The patron, as you have doubtless noticed, was otherwise occupied.”

Page frowned. “If he didn't care, why did he order himself an orgy?”

“His stated reason was that he thought he would find it stimulating.”

“And he couldn't get stimulated any other way in a whorehouse?” said Page skeptically.

“Actually, he engaged in sexual congress successfully every time he patronized the *Comet*,” replied Cupid. “But he stated on this occasion that he had never experienced an orgy, and he found the concept, to use his own word, thrilling.”

“Even a fake one?”

“He did not know it was fake—and indeed, those portions of it that related directly to him were totally authentic and real.”

“Let's get back to that first one for a minute,” said Page. “Why the hell would a woman order six guys at once?”

“Obviously it made her happy.”

“How could she know it would?” continued Page. “It can't be the kind of thing she did at home.”

“Nothing that took place aboard the *Comet* was meant to be comparable to anything that the patrons ever experienced at home,” replied Cupid.

“It couldn't have been very emotionally fulfilling,” observed Page. “Hell, she couldn't have known who was doing what.”

“She must have enjoyed it, Nate,” said Cupid. “She requested twelve men on each of her next two visits.”

“No good,” said Page.

“I don't understand, Nate.”

“I need a story line, and you're showing me a woman who probably couldn't have recognized her lovers five minutes later, and an old man who gets turned on by people pretending to have sex in the same bed with him.”

“I am only showing you what happened.”

“I guess orgies aren't the place to start. Somehow I thought they might be a little different.”

“In what way, Nate?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. I suppose I thought everyone would be having a good time.”

“Everyone was, Nate.”

“Yeah, but for the wrong reasons. Each of the six guys was probably glad he didn't have to service a horny old woman like that by himself, and the couples who were faking it were probably glad to be paid for doing nothing.”

“The *Comet* existed for the patrons' pleasure, Nate, not for the prostitutes'. Would you care to see some more orgies?”

Page shook his head. “No,” he answered. “I need a romance, not a textbook on how to cheat at school.”

“I don't understand, Nate.”

“Never mind. Did any of the customers ever propose marriage, or try to get one of the prostitutes to run off with them?”

“There were eleven marriage proposals, and 295 suggestions of permanent sexual liaisons.

“You pulled that up awfully fast,” said Page. “Are you sure it wasn't twelve and 294?”

“I am sure.”

“You're not programmed to appreciate sarcasm, are you?”

“No, Nate, I am not.”

Page sighed. “Okay, let's concentrate on the marriage proposals for a while. How many were made by men and how many by women?”

“Four by men, seven by women.”

“That's funny,” said Page.

“Funny?”

“I would have thought it would have been the other way around.” He paused. “Which brings me to another question.”

“Yes, Nate?”

“In every one of those musical entertainments, all the prostitutes were women. They can't all have been aberrations, so I have to assume that the industry wasn't exactly an equal-opportunity employer back then. When did it change?”

“There have always been gigolos,” said Cupid, “and from time to time in history there have been brothels that were patronized exclusively by women. They existed in Greece, the Roman Empire, nineteenth-century France, twentieth-century Germany, twenty-first-century —”

“Answer the question,” interrupted Page.

“That is what I am doing, Nate.”

“Concisely.”

“The first male brothels in the Republic came into existence, within a year of each other, on Earth, Sirius



V, and Deluros VIII some 167 years ago.”

“What's the current legal status of prostitution?”

“Female prostitution is outlawed on 82 percent of all Republic worlds, and exists primarily on the Inner and Outer Frontiers and on those worlds in the vicinity of Deluros VIII and Earth. Male prostitution is outlawed on 86 percent of all Republic worlds, and does not exist at all on the Inner Frontier.”

“Hardly a boon to love,” remarked Page dryly.

“It is my understanding that people do not patronize a brothel for purposes of love,” said Cupid.

“In my script, they do,” said Page. “Let's get back to those eleven marriage proposals. Did any of them ever come to pass?”

“If you mean did any of them result in marriage, the answer is no.”

“How many of the 295 prostitutes left here and went into, shall we say, private practice?”

“None.”

“Not any?” asked Page, startled.

“That is correct.”

“You're telling me that 306 prostitutes had bonafide offers to leave the *Velvet Comet*, and not one of them quit? I don't believe it!”

“It is nonetheless true.”

“Why? Nobody grows up wanting to work in a whorehouse.”

“You would have to examine each case individually, since you are dealing with human behavior.”

“I haven't got time. Just boil it down for me.”

“In most cases, it was decided that the salary and benefits accruing to an employee of the *Comet* were more desirable than the offers that were made.”

“That doesn't make sense. Some of the patrons bought and sold planets the way normal people buy and sell real estate. They could have made offers that were just about impossible to refuse.”

“The Vainmill Syndicate's employment contracts were quite explicit on that point,” answered Cupid.

“Private liaisons with patrons, or with any non-employee of the *Comet*, were forbidden.”

“Bully for the Vainmill Syndicate,” said Page. “That doesn't answer the question. A prostitute could have gone on strike, or performed poorly, or done any number of things to get thrown off the ship.”

“Then perhaps human psychology was involved,” offered Cupid. “Possibly being the property of the *Velvet Comet* was less onerous than being the property of a single individual, subject to his or her every whim.”

“What about the eleven marriage proposals?”

“Possibly feelings of love were absent.”

“What has love got to do with it?”

“My data banks define marriage as a permanent liaison based on mutually felt and declared love.”

“Your data banks are full of shit,” said Page firmly. “Love's got nothing to do with marriage. I've been married three times, and if I ever felt any love for anything, it was for an old dog my father owned when I was a kid.”

“Then I feel very sorry for you, Nate.”

“Machines don't have feelings.”

“True,” answered Cupid. “My comprehension of a marriage without love is analogous to my being given an incomplete command. The form is proper, but an element is missing, and I experience what I can best describe as a sense of dissatisfaction. I assumed that you felt the same dissatisfaction, and human etiquette requires me to offer an expression of sorrow.” The computer paused for just an instant. “Now that I have logged your alternate personal description of marriage in my data banks, I retract my statement. I am no longer sorry for you.”

“Thanks a bunch,” said Page caustically. He noticed the cigarette butt floating in his glass, picked up the bottle, and raised it to his lips. “One sip,” he said. “I want that noted. Not even a full swallow; just a sip.”

“When you replace it on any surface, I will measure its metric content,” Cupid assured him.

“How comforting,” said Page, taking a small sip, then a large gulp. “Now, since this masterpiece has got to have a happy ending, and you've virtually outlawed the notion of a prostitute walking out on a life of sin and marrying a patron, I'd better hunt up some other story line.”

“That seems reasonable,” agreed Cupid.

He frowned. “It may be pushing things a bit, but I suppose we could make somebody like Gold the villain, and in the end our hero and heroine save the ship.”

“But Gold succeeded in closing down the *Comet*,” said Cupid.

“I said someone *like* Gold,” replied Page irritably.

“Maybe we can draw him bigger than life, make a lampoon out of him, keep the whole thing lighthearted.”

“There is no such person in my memory banks.”

“This is fiction.”

“Then I cannot help you to identify him.”

“It's all right,” said Page. He tapped his forehead. “He's right up here, just waiting to be born.”

“Human males cannot give birth.”

“Human male writers can,” said Page. “They do it all the time.”

“This is contrary to my understanding of human reproductive biology,” said Cupid.

“Don't worry about it,” said Page. “It's just a figure of speech.”

“You are referring to the creative process?”

“More or less.”

“I understand now. But I still cannot help you. I am not programmed to lie.”

“Weren't you ever instructed to lie to a customer?” asked Page, curious.

“Never.”

“*Somebody* must have lied aboard this ship.”

“Everyone who worked aboard the *Velvet Comet* lied at one time or another,” assented Cupid.

“Everyone except you.”

“That's right, Nate.”

“So much for telling the truth to people. What does your programming tell you about entertaining them?”

“My programming tells me people enjoy fictionalized entertainments,” answered Cupid promptly. “But my ongoing study of my library and my memories tells me that the truth shall make them free.”

“I'm not writing for a bunch of slaves,” said Page. “They're already free. I'm just trying to bring a little enjoyment into their lives.”

“In point of fact, you are trying to raise 250,000 credits to cover your debts.”

“That, too,” admitted Page uncomfortably. “You know, if there's one thing I hate, it's an uppity computer.” He reached for the bottle again. “And if there's another, it's being thirsty.”

“I can turn on the water tap for you.”

“I said I was thirsty, not dirty,” said Page, downing another large swallow. He placed the bottle back down on the table. “All right,” he said. “It's time to stop screwing around and get down to work. Starting now I'm dictating; I'll want a readout of what I say.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Okay,” he said, pacing up and down the office.

“Angel looks better with her clothes off than Franco does, so she's going to be the whore. Franco's a client who's got a crush on her. Let's make him a filthy rich bounty hunter back from the Frontier; that way maybe I can write him a song about how he lops criminals' heads off, and keep his panting public happy.” He paused, frowning. “Okay, he's got a crush on her, but she's too busy worrying about—what?—oh, yeah, our Gold character, who's trying to whip up a little public outrage at a warehouse orbiting his planet. Are you getting all this?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Word for word?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“All right. Let's make this in the early days of the *Comet*, when it was still circling Charlemagne, just so Gold's descendants don't try to sue us for defaming him. And we'd better make Angel the madam;

otherwise why would she be preoccupied with this nut?"

Suddenly he grinned triumphantly. "Got it! When our religious nut finally sets foot aboard the *Comet* to confront Angel, Franco recognizes him as a wanted criminal who's fled the Frontier and set up shop bilking the public with a phony religion. Hell, maybe he'll even get to run him through with a kitchen knife!" He chuckled. "That should do it. The bad guy gets his just deserts, Vainmill rewards Franco by making him the *Comet*'s new Chief of Security, and he and Angel get to fuck their brains out while the *Comet* goes on forever." He sat down once again. "Give me a readout."

A long sheet of paper slowly slid out from beneath the tabletop, and Page read it approvingly, jotting an occasional note in the margin.

"Not bad for a night's work," he said at last with an air of satisfaction. "Hell, if we make Franco Chief of Security, everything's in place for a sequel, and he can even lop off a few more heads!"

"I feel I must point out that nothing remotely like this scenario ever happened aboard the *Comet*," said Cupid.

"Who cares?" said Page. "It's got corn, it's got schmaltz, it's got comedy, it's got sex—Jesus! I should have held out for three hundred thousand credits!" He got to his feet, picked up the bottle, and walked to the bedroom. "That's it for tonight. See you in the morning."

"I wonder if I could ask you a question before you retire, Nate?" said Cupid.

"Sure," said Page, taking off his shirt and tossing it on the floor. "What is it?"

"You made reference to something last night that is not in my memory bank. I wonder if you could explain it."

"Shoot."

"What are *belles lettres*?"

"Go fuck yourself," growled Page.

## Chapter 4

"Nate?"

"Yeah?"

"Kipchoge Kamala is trying to make contact with you," said Cupid.

"What the hell is a Kipchoge Kamala?" demanded Page.

"He's your composer."

"Oh."

A pause.

"Nate?"

"What?" said Page irritably.

"Kipchoge Kamala is still waiting."

“Put him through.”

“I thought you might want to open your eyes first,” said Cupid.

“What time is it?”

“0900 hours, ship's time.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Nine o'clock in the morning.”

“Tell him to call back.”

“When shall I tell him?” asked Cupid.

“Tell him right now, you stupid bastard,” muttered Page, placing the pillow over his head.

“I meant, when shall I tell him to call back?”

“Damn it!” snapped Page, sitting up on the bed. “You've made me think too much! I'm awake now!”

“Since you are awake, would you like to speak to Kipchoge Kamala now?”

“Let me hit the john first,” replied Page, getting to his feet. “God!” he breathed, clutching his back as a twinge of pain shot through it. “I'm getting old.”

“How long will you be?” asked Cupid.

“You'll be the first one to know when I'm through.”

“That is true,” agreed Cupid. “Shall I tell Kipchoge Kamala that you will be joining him as soon as you come out of the bathroom?”

“Tell him anything you goddamned well please,” said Page, reaching the bathroom. “Just shut up and give me some cold water.”

“How cold?”

“Less than boiling and more than freezing.”

“I need more specific instructions, Nate.”

“Use your imagination.”

“I have no imagination. If you'd like, I can select a random temperature, but it may not suit your needs.”

“Just do it!”

Cool water began pouring out of the tap, and Page rinsed his face off, then took a mouthful, swizzled it around, and spit it out into the sink, trying to ignore the stale taste that remained. His knee suddenly stiffened up, and he flexed it twice, stubbing his toe against the floor.

“Damn!” he yelped.

“Did you hurt your toe, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“No. I always scream in the morning.”

“You didn't scream yesterday,” replied the computer.

“I always scream in the morning except when I don't.” Page commanded the door to close and lock.

“Monica Heraldo is the only person aboard the *Comet*, and she is almost half a mile away,” observed Cupid.

“I always close the door when I'm about to urinate,” said Page. “It gives me a secure feeling to know that nobody is looking.” He paused. “I suppose you're staring right at me, you insensitive bastard.”

“I am programmed to observe every portion of the ship, Nate.”

“Can't you turn your back or something?”

“I don't have a back, Nate.”

“By the way, are you a boy or a girl, or isn't it applicable?”

“I have no gender. I have been speaking to you in a masculine voice, but I could use any voice that I have ever heard if you would care to choose one.”

“Whose voice is this?”

“It belonged to Andrew Jackson Crane, a detective in the employ of the Vainmill Syndicate some seventy years ago. It was he who gave me my name.”

“Oh.”

“Would you care for a different voice?”

“How the hell do I know?”

“I could run through a cross section of five hundred or a thousand voices for you.”

“Not now,” said Page urgently. “My back teeth are floating.”

“I don't understand, Nate.”

“Just keep watching and you will,” promised Page.

Two minutes later Page emerged from the bathroom, put on a robe, and walked down the corridor to the office. He sat down on the chair, put his feet up on the edge of the tabletop computer, and nodded his head. “Okay, let's find out what he's got to say.”

Instantly Kamala's face appeared above the table.

“Hi, Nate.”

“Good morning, Kip,” said Page. “What can I do for you?”

“Just checking in to see how you're coming along.”

“You woke me at nine in the morning just to see how I'm coming along?” demanded Page.

“Is it nine already?” said Kamala, surprised. “I haven't been to bed yet.”

“What are you, some kind of vampire?”

“Only when there's a sexy neck around,” said Kamala with a grin. “By the way, I've come up with a love song and a chatterbox for you.”

“What's the hell's a chatterbox?”

“A song for a non-singer, with which our industry seems inundated these days,” explained Kamala.

“There are only about five notes in the whole thing, but it's got a quick beat. If you'll write something real snappy, with a batch of interior rhymes, your actor can practically recite it to the melody, or at least chant it. You'd be surprised how witty and urbane it'll make him sound.”

“I know; I've done dozens of them—except that I've always called them chanters,” replied Page. “All right, let's hear 'em.”

“I've already turned them over to your computer. It can play them for you at your leisure.”

Kamala paused. “By the way, has Katerina Ruboff spoken to you yet?”

“You mean today? No. I guess del Grado only has one inconsiderate sonofabitch on his payroll.”

Kamala chuckled. “Well, she may be putting through a call to you later.”

“What about?”

“She wants to do a nude water ballet in the pool.”

“Pool?” repeated Page. “What pool?”

Kamala shrugged. “Who knows? I guess you've got one in your gymnasium or one of your fantasy rooms. Anyway, she wants it early in the first act, so be warned.”

“She can goddamned well wait until we've got a script and a score, and then match her choreography to what's written.”

“You don't pay much attention to the gossip columns, do you?” said Kamala, amused.

Page closed his eyes. “Don't tell me: she's sleeping with del Grado.”

“With his brother,” replied Kamala. “Same damned thing.”

“Well,” said Page with a sigh, “it looks like she gets her water ballet.”

“Looks like.”

“I hope they all drown.”

Kamala threw back his head and laughed.

“I don't know what you think is so damned funny,” continued Page. “You're on your own on this one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobody can sing and swim at the same time.” He grinned maliciously. “I’ll leave you a thirty-minute slot for the music.”

“Leave me whatever you want, but she’s getting four minutes. If she wants more, they can play it twice.”

Page lit a cigarette, took a long puff, and exhaled slowly.

“Why do we put up with it, I wonder?” he said at last.

“Every now and then I wonder about it too,” agreed Kamala. “Then I get a call from my creditors, and I remember.” He reached out to break the connection. “Get back to me when you come up with some lyrics. And Nate?”

“Yeah?”

“Do the love song first.”

“Why?”

“It ends on a semitonic that leads right back into the first four bars again.”

“So what?”

“So producers don’t know good from bad, but if they can walk out humming the melody they’re happy.”

“Right,” assented Page. “See you.”

Kamala’s face vanished.

“Nate?” said Cupid.

“What now?”

“Can I fix you some breakfast?”

“Just coffee.”

“It will be ready in the kitchen in ninety seconds.”

“Whoopee,” muttered Page. He stood up, a little less stiffly this time. “Well, I suppose since I’m up for the day, I might as well get dressed.”

He walked down the corridor to the bedroom and began gathering his clothes off the floor.

“No peeking,” he said as he took off his robe.

“As I explained before, I —”

“Forget it—and start playing the love song.”

“I can synthesize any sound from a single instrument to a full orchestra,” said Cupid. “What would you prefer?”

“Less talk and more music.”

“I require a decision, Nate.”



“Just a piano.”

The lilting strains of a melodic ballad permeated the room while Page got dressed.

“Not bad,” he commented when it was over. “Not good, but not bad. It sounds like about seven hundred other songs. Play it again.”

This time he had no difficulty humming along with it, and felt vaguely uncomfortable when it ended.

“The son of a bitch knows his stuff,” he said admiringly. “That’s a hell of a way to finish off a song.”

“From what little I know of music, the final note should be a G, rather than a B-flat,” replied Cupid.

Page shook his head. “That’s pure Kip Kamala,” he said. “The rest of it could have been written by any of a hundred hacks—and they’d all have ended it on a G. This guy ends it one note too soon, and suddenly he’s got a song you can’t stop humming because it *feels* like it needs another note, and it leads right back into the beginning. Probably took him all of five minutes to compose the whole thing. His music professors would be proud of him—if they could afford the price of admission.” He smiled approvingly “Now, *that’s* hackwork!”

“My data banks define hackwork as work of purposely inferior quality, produced quickly and entered into solely for monetary gain,” said Cupid.

“Right,” agreed Page.

“But if this song fulfills the needs of the play and produces a favorable response within the audience, then it is not of inferior quality and cannot be hackwork.”

“Look,” said Page. “The damned song is like half a million others. It’s simplistic, it’s got almost no half-notes, there’s no building upon the theme, no complication at all, not a single memorable thing about it. That’s hackwork.”

“But if he made the ending both special and unique to himself, then it cannot be hackwork.”

“The ending was a nice professional touch, but it doesn’t excuse the rest of the song—and it’s not unique, either. It’s a trick, not an artistic vision. They’ve been doing stuff like that, both in the theater and in singing commercials, for millennia. Hackwork can apply to ambition as well as results.”

“Very well, Nate,” said Cupid. “I will add your definition and arguments to my data banks.”

“First intelligent thing you’ve said all morning,” said Page.

“Your coffee has been sitting in the kitchen for five minutes. Would you like me to freshen it?”

“Yes,” he answered. “And I could use some breakfast.”

“What would you like for breakfast?”

“Whatever I had yesterday.”

“Yesterday you slept until the afternoon and didn’t have any breakfast,” noted Cupid.

“Half a dozen pancakes, heavy on the syrup, with lots of butter.”

“It will take about four minutes.”

“Fine. In the meantime, see if Monica's awake yet.”

“She isn't, Nate. Would you like me to awaken her?”

“No,” replied Page. “I didn't really have anything to say to her.” He paused. “What the hell was I doing before I got sidetracked?”

“I had just finished playing Kipchoge Kamala's love song for you.”

“Right. Okay, break it down metrically.”

“There are four lines of twelve syllables each, repeated twice; then a four-line stanza consisting of nine, fifteen, nine, and fifteen syllables; and finally a repetition of the opening four lines again.”

“Simple enough,” said Page. “A, A, B, A.” He considered the structure for a moment, and a half-smile crossed his face. “Maybe I'll really dazzle 'em and rhyme every line in the A stanzas.”

“Perhaps I can be of assistance,” volunteered Cupid. “I have more than twenty-three thousand human languages and dialects in my memory banks.”

“I won't need any help,” said Page. “You're looking at the guy who came up with twenty-three rhymes for ‘Dancer.’”

“I don't understand the reference, Nate,” said Cupid.

“Check your library banks,” said Page. “Have you got a Round called *The Ballad of Billybuck Dancer*?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I wrote it. That's what I won my Bard for.”

“I have just scanned it.”

“That fast?” said Page, surprised. “Just while we were talking?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Well, what do you think of it?”

“I found the song that you referred to.”

“Not a bad little job, eh?” he said proudly.

“Actually, you did not create twenty-three rhymes for ‘Dancer,’ Nate,” said Cupid. “You used the word ‘Dancer’ six times, ‘answer’ once, and the other seventeen rhymes were formed by words ending in ‘and’ or ‘ance’ followed by the word ‘sir.’”

“It's still a damned good piece of work,” said Page.

“The meter is incorrect throughout the song.”

“Bullshit.”

“I can quote sections of it if you'd like.”

“There were musical bridges that required an extra syllable every now and then,” said Page defensively.

“Besides,” he added, “it wasn't actually a musical. The ballad was just a framing device.”

“It was incorrect.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You presented Billybuck Dancer as a notorious gunfighter.”

“So what?”

“In actuality, he was a carnival performer who died a tragic death.”

“That's not the way I heard it.”

“You didn't research your subject thoroughly.”

“Bunk! I saw a holo of some statue they built to him, and looked him up in the goddamned *Encyclopedia of Man*. Check your library banks if you don't believe me.”

“I have done so, and the encyclopedia is wrong,” said Cupid. “I have four primary sources that refute the article.”

“I'm telling you he was an outlaw with a price on his head,” insisted Page.

“No, Nate. He was a performer in a carnival owned by a human named Thaddeus Flint.”

“Thaddeus who? I never heard of him.”

“Nevertheless, he —”

“Look,” said Page. “If my Round was as bad as you say, it wouldn't have won a goddamned Bard, would it?”

“I have no emotions, so I cannot determine what emotional response the script evokes. I can only state that it is inaccurate.”

“It's fiction, damn it!”

“But it was presented as biography.”

“As fictionalized biography. Look, I pitched the idea to them, they paid me, they gave me five weeks to come up with a script, and I did the best job I could. Evidently the critics disagree with you.”

“I am incapable of criticizing a work of art. I was merely pointing out that the meter is irregular and that your biographical facts are wrong.

“It returned six hundred percent to its backers.”

“Six hundred and seventeen percent to date.”

“Then it was a success.”

“I have not denied it,” said Cupid.

“Probably you'd have been happier if I'd spent ten years researching it, come up with a dull little story about a carnival performer, and turned the ballad into a sonnet.” He paused. “When Gregorio Santos recorded it, the damned song sold five million tapes in the Deluros system alone. It must have had *something* going for it.”

“I do not mean to upset you, Nate,” said Cupid. “My programming compels me to seek the truth.”

“Yeah? Well, *my* programming compels me to give the audiences what they want.” He paused. “And it was a damned good ballad,” he added sullenly.

“It was very clever.”

“I thought you couldn't make artistic judgments.”

“I cannot judge works of art,” agreed Cupid. “But by your own admission, this work was completed in a limited amount of time for a specified amount of money, and hence qualifies as hackwork rather than art. By applying the critical standards that I have appropriated from numerous textbooks and essays within my library banks, I conclude that *The Ballad of Billybuck Dancer* is clever and facile. I suspect that if I had a better understanding of the word ‘cute,’ I might also apply it.”

“If it's so clever and facile, how come you make it sound like an insult?”

“I meant no insult. This was simply my conclusion, based on observation and analysis.”

“It's a work of goddamned brilliance,” said Page sullenly.

Cupid made no response.

“Your problem,” continued Page, “is that your programming won't let you appreciate fiction.”

“I can both understand and, to some extent, appreciate works of fiction. I simply cannot be a party to them.”

“Then if you can understand it, you must know how good it is!”

“It is an excellent piece of work,” said Cupid. It paused, then added: “For a Round that was poorly researched; and produced in a limited amount of time.”

“You know,” said Page, “I could really get to dislike you.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” said Cupid.

“*Another* emotion,” snorted Page contemptuously.

“As I explained yesterday, I do not feel emotions; I am merely following the form of human etiquette. To be more precise, I anticipate feeling a certain internal dissatisfaction and incompleteness, because if you dislike me, the logical outcome is that you will not allow me to participate in your work, and hence your facts and findings will most likely be erroneous.”

“I've already told you what the damned thing is going to be about,” said Page. “You wrote the whole plot down last night, remember?”

“My compulsion for truth leads me to hope that it was merely a first draft, and that as you learn more about the *Comet* and its personnel, you will modify it.”

“In what way?”

“In such a manner as to show what prostitutes and prostitution are truly like.”

“I thought you told me all the whores were different,” said Page. “Or were you mistaken?”

“I was not mistaken,” replied Cupid. “They were all different as individuals. But as a group, they did have certain things in common.”

“Such as?”

“Physical conditioning, sexual skills, and a certain contempt for their work that they took great pains to conceal not only from the patrons but from themselves.”

“Why would anyone who made all that money and got to work in such luxurious surroundings feel contemptuous about their work?” asked Page.

“Because it was dishonest.”

“In what way?”

“It was, to apply a term from your field, hackwork.”

“There's nothing dishonorable about hackwork,” replied Page.

“But, from my limited understanding of the term, there is also nothing very satisfying about it.”

“Then your understanding is flawed. It's a hell of a kick to give an audience what they want—and it's not all that easy to do, either.”

“Then I will correct my data banks, and will henceforth add ‘artistically satisfying’ to my definition of hackwork.”

“I didn't say that.”

“Yes you did, Nate.”

“Don't go putting words in my mouth! I never said hackwork was artistically satisfying.”

“My data banks tell me that ‘a hell of a kick’ is analogous to —”

“Well, it's not, so just shut up for a while!” snapped Page. “It's too goddamned early in the day to waste my energy arguing with a goddamned machine!”

Cupid fell silent immediately, and Page finally went to the kitchen, where he found that his butter was no longer visible, having melted into the pancakes, and that the pancakes themselves were cold.

He decided to eat them as they were, rather than ask Cupid to make another batch.

“You're a lousy cook,” he said between mouthfuls.

“You should have asked me to warm up the pancakes, Nate.”

“They'd probably taste lousy even if they were warm,” said Page petulantly.

“I'm sorry that you should think so. I will recalibrate the various kitchen mechanisms and analyze the food

supply for unhealthy microorganisms before your next meal.”

“You do that.”

When he finished, he returned to the office.

“Cupid?”

“Yes, Nate?”

“Have you got any Round scripts in your library?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“You see how the format varies from ordinary theater and the stuff they run on video?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Good. That's the format I'll want you to use when I start dictating the script.”

“Will you want the title atop every page?” asked Cupid.

“Yeah. Put *Eros in Orbit* , all in caps, in the upper left-hand corner, then a slash, and then put my name in caps and lower case. And put each page number in the upper right-hand corner.”

A sheet of paper slid up from beneath the desk.

“Will this be satisfactory, Nate?”

Page picked up the sample sheet, glanced at it briefly, and frowned.

“What the hell is *this* name doing after *Eros in Orbit* ?” he demanded.

“It's your name, Nate,” replied Cupid. “You are Arthur Sachs.”

“I'm Nate Page.”

“My dossier on you states that your legal name is Arthur Sachs.”

“It was too much trouble to change it. My professional name is Nate Page; that's the one I want you to use.”

A second sheet emerged.

“Is this preferable, Nate?”

Page looked at it and nodded. “Right.”

“May I ask why you call yourself Nate Page?”

“Who the hell ever heard of a writer using a name like Arthur Sachs?” replied Page. “Nate Page sounds like a hairy-chested guy who wears tweeds and does a little hunting on the side and cuts right through to the truth of things when he sits down to work.”

“I thought writers were judged by their work rather than their names,” said Cupid.

“Only after they get in print,” answered Page.

“But you are in print.”

“Look,” said Page patiently. “We’re not like actors or dancers. We’re the artists that the audience never sees, so we do anything we can to make ourselves distinctive—and Nate Page is a hell of a lot more distinctive than Arthur Sachs.” He paused. “Why did your madams sport names like Golden Rainbow and the Leather Madonna?”

“To hide their true identities and perpetuate a sense of fantasy.”

“This is the same thing.”

“I see,” said Cupid. “In this respect, your professional position is identical to that of the various madams of the *Velvet Comet* .”

“I don’t know whether I’ve just been insulted or not.”

“Why would likening you to a madam insult you?”

“Because they were whores. I’m a writer.”

Silence.

“I’m waiting,” said Page.

“For what, Nate?”

“For you to agree with me.”

“Oh.”

“Whores sell their bodies. I just sell my writing.”

“I know, Nate,”

“Then stop implying that I’m a whore.”

“You can’t be a whore, Nate,” said Cupid. “Whores sell their bodies. You just sell your writing.”

“Right.”

“Furthermore, if you were a whore, you could sympathize enough with the problems inherent in prostitution to want to present a true representation of life on the *Velvet Comet* .”

“True representations are for libraries. Happy, exciting stories are for audiences.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Damn it, Cupid—you just don’t understand! I’m being paid to come up with a script that will make people walk out of the theater feeling good. That’s my job—making audiences feel good.”

“I know, Nate. That is why, in my judgment, you are uniquely qualified to write this script.”

“Oh?”

“That was the *Velvet Comet* 's job, too.”

“The *Velvet Comet* is a decommissioned shell that sold ephemeral pleasures and got run out of business,” said Page. “I’m an artist whose work will live long after I’m dead, and the only thing that might run me out of business is missing a deadline because I’m wasting my time arguing with you. Got the difference straight now?”

“Yes, Nate.”

Page stalked off to the bedroom.

“Do you wish to begin dictating your script, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“I’m too goddamned mad at you,” said Page. “I’m going back to bed for a couple of hours. Wake me at one in the afternoon.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“While I’m sleeping, why don’t you go through your library and hunt up some of my books and essays?”

“I can produce printouts if you will be referring to them during the writing of the script,” said Cupid.

“I won’t be referring to them,” said Page. “I just want you to read them, so you’ll know who the hell you’re dealing with.”

“You are Arthur Sachs, professional name Nate Page.”

“I am Nate Page, author of six books and seventeen Rounds—and I never hopped into bed with anyone to make a sale.”

He flopped down on the bed and slowly drifted off to sleep, vaguely wondering why he felt he had to prove to an emotionless machine that he wasn’t in the same business as Golden Rainbow or the Leather Madonna.

## Chapter 5

Page slept until three in the afternoon, then spent the next hour trying to come up with an opening number that would make use of Kamala’s chatterbox song (it was far too early in the Round for a love song), and hit upon the notion of a narrator who could compress history and events by chanting the song between scenes.

“Cupid, create a screen and throw up every word in your data banks that rhymes with Charlemagne.”

“I regret to inform you that no word in any human language or dialect rhymes with Charlemagne,” replied the computer.

“All right. Give me a list of words that, end with a rhyming syllable.”

Instantly a screen came to life: *abstain aerophane aeroplane again airplane Aisne allophane amain appertain* “Stop,” said Page, as the list continued appearing at a rate of two words a second.

“Is something wrong, Nate?”

“I’m writing for theatergoers, not linguists,” said Page. “Who the hell ever heard of an aerophane, or Aisne, or amain?”

“I am not aware of which words are in common usage, Nate.”



“Obviously.” Page paused. “Erase the list. I’ll do it myself.”

“You could tell me which words to eliminate from the screen,” suggested Cupid.

“How many have you got?”

“1,013.”

“I can have the whole fucking song done before you run through your list of words.” Page leaned back in his chair. “Just write down what I tell you to.”

“Yes, Nate.”

Page hummed the first two lines of the song.

“All right,” he said after a moment’s thought.

“Start with the title ‘The Ballad of the *Velvet Comet*.’ Might as well let ‘em know right from the start who wrote the damned thing.”

Cupid dutifully printed the title.

“What have we got in the first line—thirteen syllables?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Okay.” He frowned. “I think we’ll address the audience directly, and kind of suck them into the thing. Write this down: ‘Welcome to my fantasy, and I’ll soon make it yours.’ Then a comma.”

The line appeared on the screen.

“Do we want ABAB, AABB, AABA, or should we shoot the works and go for AAAA?” mused Page, studying the line.

“I am not qualified to answer that, Nate.”

“Well, stick *amours* and a period at the end of the second line, and we’ll work backward. Then place *ventures* somewhere in the middle of the line.”

“*Ventures* is not an exact rhyme,” noted Cupid.

“It’s close enough. I’m writing for theatergoers and voyeurs, not poets. Just print what I tell you to.”

“Yes, Nate.”

Page spent the next hour working on the lyric, then stood up.

“That’s enough for now,” he announced. “What have we got?”

“Twenty-four lines, Nate.”

“Okay. Write down *strife*, *life*, *wife*, and *rife*, and I’ll get to work on them later.” He paused. “How were the two murders on the *Comet* committed?”

“One by a blow to the head, and one with a needlelike stabbing instrument.”

“Better and better,” said Page. “Add *knife* to the list.”

“It wasn't a knife, Nate,” said Cupid. “The detective in charge of the case likened it to an ancient instrument called an icepick.”

“Yeah, but *icepick* doesn't rhyme with those other words,” replied Page. “Put *knife* down.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And make a note: I want to make sure that Franco carries a knife, and that he displays it once or twice.”

“Weapons were not allowed aboard the ship,” said Cupid.

“We'll have to find a way around that,” said Page. “When the murder is committed, he's got to be the likeliest suspect.”

“What murder?” asked Cupid.

“We're going to have a murder. Audiences like a little violence with their sex and music.”

“Your outline doesn't include a murder.”

“It's also not written in stone,” said Page. “Okay, save what you've got and turn the screen off.”

“Yes, Nate,” said Cupid as the screen went blank.

“I need some exercise,” announced Page. “I'm going to take a little walk. Show me how to get to this swimming pool that Katerina Ruboff has fallen in love with.”

He walked out the door, and Cupid began giving him directions.

“By the way,” said Page as he passed what had once been the casino, “did you read my books?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And?”

“I am not yet qualified to offer artistic criticism,” said Cupid. “It is possible that I never will be.”

“Did you at least see how different they were from *The Ballad of Billybuck Dancer*?”

“Yes, Nate. They were books; *The Ballad of Billybuck Dancer* was a Round.”

“And that's all you've got to say about them?”

“In an attempt to further educate myself, I also scanned the reviews they received upon publication.”

“Oh?” said Page, frowning.

“Yes,” said Cupid. “*Lucifer Unbound* received nine favorable and seventy-three unfavorable reviews, *Feast at Eastertime* received —”

“I know what they got!” interrupted Page. “What the hell do the critics know, anyway?”

“I cannot answer that question, Nate.”

Page grunted but said nothing.

“Therefore,” continued Cupid, “I tied in to your publisher's computer to see if the public had accepted the books more favorably.”

“Enough!” snapped Page.

“Yes, Nate.”

He walked in silence for another twenty yards.

“They had lousy distribution,” said Page.

“That would seem to be true, Nate.”

“The cover art killed them, and the art they put on the disks and the tapes was even worse.” He paused. “As for the critics, they're a bunch of fucking parasites. I make ten times what they do. If they could write, they'd be *writing*, not criticizing.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“They're an elite little circle of part-time writers who praise each other's work and won't let outsiders in,” continued Page bitterly.

“That's very interesting, Nate,” said Cupid.

“Oh? Why?”

“In your introductory essay for your first collection of short stories, you said that you would never write Rounds because, quote, ‘The producers and writers are like a family, and they won't let outsiders sit at their table.’”

“I was so good they couldn't keep me out,” he said with a touch of pride.

“I see,” said Cupid.

“The in-group in the literary trade is a lot tighter,” he added defensively. “They've got more to lose.”

“My understanding is that a failed Round costs far more than a failed book,” said Cupid.

“I'm talking about reputations. That's all those bastards have going for them in the first place.”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead,” said Page.

“How would giving your book a good review harm their reputations?”

“You know,” said Page, “you are getting to be one hell of a pain in the ass. I told you to read those books so that you'd know I can do something besides Rounds.”

“I always knew that, Nate,” said Cupid. “It's in your dossier, and all your books are in my library banks.”

“Something good,” continued Page. “Something proud. Maybe they weren't perfect, but they were damned good. I pissed blood to get them written.”

“That must have been very painful.”

Page chuckled. “It’s a figure of speech,” he explained. “It means I worked like crazy on them.”

Suddenly he frowned. “They should have done better. The fucking critical establishment sabotaged them. I’d like to see one of *them* find a way to make twenty million people worship a semi-literate oaf like Franco!”

“Turn left.”

“What?” asked Page, distracted.

“You are going to the gymnasium. To get there, you must turn left.”

“Thanks.” Page turned and continued walking, then stopped opposite a shuttered restaurant. “I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong.”

“By your definition, I am currently thinking of 16,804 different things, Nate.”

“I mean about me,” continued Page. “You’re thinking that since my Rounds are successful and my books aren’t, I must be a better Round writer. Well, you’re wrong. I could have been the best damned literary writer you ever saw.”

“I haven’t the critical acumen to dispute that,” said Cupid.

“Literary artists starve to death. I’ll get back to it one of these days, after I’ve made my pile writing Rounds.”

“You had net assets of 12,771 credits when you signed to write your first Round,” said Cupid, “and you have a current net indebtedness of 378,438 credits. This would imply that writing Rounds is less lucrative than writing books.”

“I also have three financially insatiable ex-wives and a couple of houses and a spaceship—and I’m not exactly in debtor’s prison.”

“I did not mean to imply that you could not pay your bills, but rather to illustrate that you are no closer to being financially secure enough to return to writing works of literary merit than you were twelve years ago.”

“Then I’ll do it in ten years instead of five. Big deal.”

He began walking again, took an elevator up two levels, and a few moments later reached the gymnasium. It was an enormous room, but, like the rest of the *Comet*, almost all of its equipment had been cannibalized or auctioned off. Even the pool, some thirty yards long and half as wide, was empty.

“Okay,” said Page after staring at the floor of the pool for a moment. “I’ve seen it.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to see on this level?” asked Cupid.

“Not right now.”

“Shall I produce a holographic facsimile of the gymnasium from the days when it was functional?”

Page shook his head. “No. I just wanted to see how many people we could fit in it.”

“Then you are writing a water ballet after all?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Then may I ask why you insisted on seeing the pool?” said Cupid.

“Because in this business, you can't always help it,” replied Page, walking to the elevator. He descended two levels and began walking aimlessly past the various restaurants.

“They were *good* books, damn it!” he muttered.

“Especially *Feast at Eastertime* . If you weren't a goddamned mass of bubbles and connectors, you'd know that!”

“By bubbles, I assume you mean bubble memories,” said Cupid. “Actually, my memory is stored in Steinmetz/Shannon modules.”

Page smiled humorlessly. “Try to insult a machine and see where it gets you.” He sighed. “All right. I suppose we ought to get back to work.”

He began walking back to his apartment.

“Nate?” said Cupid, after he had proceeded some fifty feet.

“What now?”

“Monica Heraldo is trying to communicate with you. Shall I produce her holograph in front of you?”

“Tell her to wait until I get to the office,” said Page. “Have you got any idea what she wants?”

“She has just finished conducting an interview with a former employee of the *Velvet Comet* .”

“About time,” commented Page, increasing his pace.

He reached the office three minutes later, sat down on his chair, and nodded his head. “Okay, put her through.”

“Hello, Mr. Page,” said Monica as her image took shape above the tabletop. “I've finally hunted up a prostitute who was willing to talk.”

“Good.”

“You don't know how difficult it was,” she continued, obviously quite pleased with herself. “He was the seventeenth I tried to track down.”

“They can't *tall* be dead,” said Page, surprised by the number.

“Eleven were. Four others were institutionalized for psychological problems or drug dependencies.”

“That's only fifteen,” he noted.

“The sixteenth just seems to have vanished,” she said. “It's a pity, too, because she was the last madam.”

“The Steel Butterfly?”

She nodded. “That's right.”

“Too bad,” said Page. “Well, who did you come up with?”

“Geoffrey Wilkinson. He worked under the name of Jungle Lord.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I don't know. He was pretty muscular, and he usually wore costumes made of animal skins. I suppose it was as good as any other name.”

“How old is this guy now?”

“He says he's fifty-three; Cupid says he's fifty-five. He was hired twelve years before the *Comet* closed and worked here for three years.”

“Did he have anything to say?”

She nodded her head. “It took about twenty minutes for me to convince him that I don't work for Vainmill—he seems to be terrified of them—but once that was done, he opened up. I can have Cupid run the interview for you; I think you'll find it *very* interesting.”

“The whole thing? How long did it last?”

“About an hour.”

“How about just the high spots? All I'm looking for is a little background and some of the flavor.”

“All right,” she said. “Cupid, start right after we talked about the hiring procedures.”

Suddenly an overweight, sallow-complexioned man, his hair gray and receding, appeared opposite an image of Monica Heraldo.

“And how long did you work aboard the *Comet*, Mr. Wilkinson?” she asked him.

“Three years to the day.”

“That doesn't seem like a very long time.”

He smiled bitterly. “Neither does eternity—until you try to live through it.”

“Are you implying that your life aboard the *Comet* was unpleasant?” she asked, leaning forward intently.

He stared at her for a long moment. “You're sure this is just background for some play?”

“As I said, the play is a musical entitled *Eros in Orbit*, and is being produced by Del Grado Enterprises.”

“And anything I tell you is off the record—I won't be quoted directly?”

“You have my word,” said Monica.

He seemed to debate the matter with himself for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, what the hell—*someone* ought to tell you the truth.”

“You make it sound ominous. I would have thought that working in those surroundings would be everyone's dream.”

“What looks like a dream from the outside can look like a nightmare from the inside,” he replied.

“Could you explain that to me, please?”

He sighed and nodded. “What do you think I was paid to do aboard the *Comet* ?”

“Sexually service the customers, I would imagine,” answered Monica.

“How often?”

She shrugged. “I really don't know. Three or four times a day, I should imagine.”

“Six or seven times was more the norm,” he replied.

“Day in and day out?” she asked.

He smiled as he saw her reaction. “Pretty impressive, isn't it?”

“Very.”

“We were a lot like athletes,” he continued. “Except that athletes have days off, and their playing seasons end sooner or later. Not us. We worked every day of every year. Come hell or high water, we serviced anyone who chose us—men, women, couples, whatever. And we had to deliver—at the prices they were paying, there was no such thing as an excuse or an apology.” Again he seemed to be undergoing an internal debate. Finally he spoke again: “So we did whatever we could to give Nature a helping hand.”

“You mean drugs?” asked Monica.

He shook his head. “Oh, most of us used drugs to help handle the pressure, the need to be pleasant and attentive and witty and passionate to people we couldn't have cared less about—but there's never yet been a drug that worked as an aphrodisiac.

*Forthat* , most of the men used cinchers.”

“Could you explain what a cincher is?”

“A small rubber ring that fits around the base of the penis,” he said. “They've been around for centuries under one name or another. An erection is caused by a rush of blood to the penis; if you put one of these on after you've got an erection and then tighten it, the blood can't escape and you can't lose your erection. Sooner or later most of us wound up using cinchers or something similar.”

“What was the result?”

“The immediate result was that another skinny, wrinkled old lady got satisfied and we got sore as hell.” He grimaced. “The ultimate result was a little different. Extensive use of any of these gimmicks usually led to impotence in five or six years; but I know of at least seven men who wound up having their organs amputated.”

Page winced and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“Couldn't any of you bring suit against Vainmill or the *Comet* ?” asked Monica.

He smiled ruefully. “They wrote very good contracts,” he replied. “Besides, we knew the risks we were taking—but when you're young and rich and successful, you always figure you can beat the odds.”

“And you say every man used some gimmick like this?”

“Most of 'em.”

“What about the women?” asked Monica. “After all, we're physically equipped to have sex without being excited.”

“Spoken like a woman who knows,” said Wilkinson caustically.

“You didn't answer my question,” she said, ignoring his remark.

“The women probably drank and drugged a little more than the men,” he admitted.

“But they didn't have any physical problems comparable to the men's?” she persisted.

“Look,” he said bitterly, “if the only problems we had had been physical, none of us would have minded that much.”

“Then what problems are you referring to?” she asked. “Emotional?”

“Of course, emotional!” he said heatedly. “You don't just walk onto a ship like the *Comet* and get hired. Most of us had been training as prostitutes since our early teens. It's not the kind of job you can start at twenty-five; hell, you're almost over the hill by then; at least as far as the big money is concerned.”

“I don't quite see what point you're trying to make.”

“How would *you* like to reach the age of twenty-five or thirty without ever having seen any human trait except lust and selfishness?” he demanded. “When it's your whole life, it colors all your reactions. Even years after you leave the *Comet* you can't help feeling contempt for anyone who shows any interest in you, because it makes them like all the faceless patrons you serviced aboard the ship.” He paused, and the rage seemed to drain out of him, to be replaced by a weary bitterness. “And since you have such contempt for the patrons, it isn't long before you develop even more contempt for the person who makes his living satisfying them.”

“You mean yourself?”

He nodded. “You want to hide, but you've got no other identity, or even any other skills. You're like an athlete who retires at twenty-four: somehow you know that nothing you do for the rest of your life will ever measure up to what you're leaving behind—and what you're leaving behind is shit.”

“Isn't that a contradictory statement?” asked Monica.

“Not really. Whatever happens, you know you'll never make that kind of money again, or eat that well, or be pampered like some show animal, or rub shoulders with the rich and the powerful.” A look of infinite sadness crossed his face. “You walk out of hell, and find that purgatory is worse.”

“Do you keep in touch with any of the other prostitutes from the *Comet* ?”

“I used to. There were three of us that were very close. When one of us was in so much pain that he couldn't perform even with a rubber ring—friction burns, we used to call it—he chuckled mirthlessly “—the others would fill in for him. Most of us had arrangements like that.”

“What became of them?” asked Monica.

“Gregorio Sims killed himself about two years after he left the *Comet* . He never even left a note.” He paused thoughtfully. “Never had to.”

“And the other?”



“Big Ben.”

“Big Ben?” she repeated with a smile.

“If you'd ever seen him, you'd know why we called him that. I never did learn his real name. Sweet guy; very popular. Didn't have an enemy in the world.” He paused. “He bought himself a ranch on a colony planet on the Outer Frontier. Last I heard, he'd gone berserk and killed two of his employees, and was on the run from the law.”

“Stop,” said Page, and the image vanished, to be replaced by one of Monica in her *Comet* suite.

“Doesn't it tear you apart?” she said. “He goes on like that for another twenty minutes. I guess he's had about twenty jobs since he left the *Comet*, and he's either quit or been fired from every one of them. He was married, too, and his wife left him when he became impotent.” She paused. “If I can get three or four former prostitutes to corroborate what he said, what a drama we'll have!”

“Well,” said Page, “that'd be all very fine if we were doing a drama, but we're not.”

“I don't understand,” said Monica, puzzled.

“Nobody's going to leave the theater humming Jungle Lord's song,” he said. “I'm supposed to be writing a happy-making toe-tapping musical.”

“But think of what you can do with this material!” she persisted. “Look at the drama and tragedy in Wilkinson's story—and I'll bet I can find half a dozen others that are even more fascinating! If you handle this right, you can win another Bard!”

“You can't win a Bard for something you can't get produced,” said Page patiently. “I'm being paid to come up with a lighthearted story that makes the audience feel good about themselves.”

“They will! After listening to Wilkinson, don't *you* feel glad that you didn't work as a prostitute on the *Comet*? I do!”

Page sighed wearily. “You just don't understand. I've got a producer who's promised everyone an evening of light entertainment, I've got a choreographer who wants to stage a nude water ballet in the pool, I've got a composer who thinks black notes will make the pianist's fingers fall off, and if I have Angel Midnight do anything more complicated than breathe deeply she's going to screw it up—and you're telling me that I should write a serious study of the effects of prostitution on its practitioners.”

“But it's such a powerful story...” she protested.

“It is, and someday maybe someone will write it. But it sure as hell isn't going to be a musical Round starring the deep breather and the head-lopper.”

“I think you're making a serious mistake,” she said at last.

“You're entitled to your opinion,” he replied. “But until such time as you replace me as the author of *Eros in Orbit*, we're going to do it *my* way. And that means I don't want any more downbeat interviews. I need people who liked working up here, and who've got funny stories to tell.”

“And if I can't find any?”

“Then you'll have to content yourself with counting how many drinks I have and reporting it to del Grado.”

She stared at him, her expression a mixture of anger and contempt. “Mr. Page, you're a fool,” she said, and broke the connection.

Page sat in silence for a moment, then spoke:

“Go ahead. Say it.”

“Say what, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“That you think I'm wrong.”

“I am not capable of offering an opinion based on subjective artistic interpretation. You are trying to imbue me with human responses that I do not possess.”

“But you think I should tell the truth,” continued Page.

“I am a computer, Nate, and truth and error are the only realities that a computer knows.”

“You know, even if I wrote what the two of you want, del Grado would just throw it out and hire another writer.” Page paused. “Hell, you'd do the same thing in my place.”

“I am incapable of falsifying data to please the person who requests it.”

“That's right,” said Page sardonically. “I keep forgetting that you're perfect.” He picked up a bottle and twisted off the cap. “It's a hell of a story, isn't it? I wonder how many people know that the most elegant pleasure palace in the history of the galaxy was a fraud?”

“Very few,” said Cupid.

“Too damned bad you can't hum it,” said Page, taking a long swallow and trying to erase all thoughts of Geoffrey Wilkinson from his mind.

## Chapter 6

“Hi, Nate!”

“Jesus!” muttered Page. “Don't you ever go to bed?”

“Not when I can help it, and never alone,” replied Kipchoge Kamala with a smile that was halfway between a grin and a leer. “What time is it?”

“I don't know. Cupid?”

“It is 0843 hours, ship's time.”

“I'm running three hours behind you,” said Kamala. “It isn't even six o'clock yet.”

“I can't tell you how much better that makes me feel,” groaned Page.

“You'll be glad I called, Nate,” said Kamala. “Trust me.”

“All right,” said Page, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “What's this all about?”

“First of all, tell Cupid to make this a Protected conversation.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” said Kamala. “I’ve got some confidential information, and I don’t want anyone listening in.”

“Nobody’s listening in,” said Page. “Do you really think Bull del Grado gives a damn what we say to each other?” He reached for a cigarette, pulled it out of its case, and lit it. “We’re the lowest of the low on this production. There are going to be two hundred actors and executives working on this fucking show, and you and I are going to be the only two who don’t have script approval.”

“Okay, if you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. Now what have you got to tell me?”

“Do you still want to kill the water ballet?” asked Kamala.

“Hell, yes.”

“Okay. Then make Angel Midnight the star of it.”

“Why?”

“I just spent a very enjoyable night with her hairdresser, and during one of the breaks in the action we got to talking about Angel, and she let it drop that she can’t swim a lick.”

“You’re sure?”

Kamala nodded happily. “She’s scared to death of water.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said Page. “I’ll give her so many lines they’ll never be able to get away with a double!”

“My thinking precisely,” said Kamala. “Now say, ‘Thank you, Kip, and I forgive you for waking me.’”

“Thank you, Kip, and I forgive you for waking me.”

“Think nothing of it. By the way, have you come up with a lyric yet?”

“Yeah, but I want to polish it for another couple of days.”

“The love song?”

Page shook his head. “The chatterbox. I’m going to string it out and use it as a bridge between scenes.”

“If you’re going to make that much use of it, maybe I’d better slick it up a bit.”

“And change the meter so I’ve got to write all new lyrics? Not a chance, pal.”

“Just out of curiosity, how much longer will you be up there?” asked Kamala.

Page shrugged. “Another three or four days. Just long enough to make it look good.”

“Learning anything?”

“Nothing useful.”

“Well, have fun. I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Don't get too far ahead of me,” said Page.

“Not to worry. I'm doing a whiskey commercial for a firm in the Delphini system. Damned catchy tune. I wouldn't be surprised to see a variation of it turn up in *Eros in Orbit* .”

“See you,” said Page.

“Right.”

“Not before noon,” he added.

“You got it,” said Kamala. “Of course, it may be twenty hours *after* noon,” he added with a grin, and broke the connection.

Page sat motionless for a moment, then stood up.

“Well, I'm up for the day,” he announced. “Put some breakfast on.”

“What would you like, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“Whatever I had yesterday.”

“It will be ready in four minutes.”

Page shaved, showered, dressed, and ate breakfast, then wandered out to the office.

“Put the lyric up on a screen.”

“Yes, Nate.”

He stared at it for a moment, then frowned. “Okay, let's kill the line that ends with ‘ecstasy's sweet refrain.”

The line vanished.

“Now replace it with this: ‘Where pain masks the pleasure, and pleasure masks the pain.”

He studied the new line.

“Kill the third and fourth word, and insert *follows* .”

He nodded approvingly. “Good. Less redundant.”

“There are only twelve syllables,” noted Cupid. “You need thirteen.”

Page considered the line in silence for a moment.

“Kill the first *pain* and insert *outrage* .” He read the new line. “‘Where outrage follows pleasure, and pleasure masks the pain.’ Well, it could be better, but let it stand for the time being. I'll come back to it this afternoon.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Just a yes, not even a thank-you?” said Page sardonically.

“I don't understand, Nate.”

“That line's for you and the spy,” replied Page. “I thought you'd be happy.”

“I do not have any emotions, Nate.”

“And if you did, one line probably wouldn't set them all aflutter anyway, would it?”

“In answer to your question, if I had emotions I do not believe that one line out of hundreds would assuage me, Nate.”

“Then it's lucky for me that you're just an unfeeling hunk of bubbles, isn't it?” said Page.

“Steinmetz/Shannon modules,” Cupid corrected him.

“Whatever,” said Page.

Page sat in silence for a few moments.

“Well, I suppose we'd better start blocking the damned opening scene,” he announced at last. “Toss up a hologram of the airlock and the Mall.”

The deserted airlock and empty Mall appeared over the tabletop.

“Not like that,” said Page irritably. “Let me see them when they were operating.”

The Mall was suddenly alive with people, and a small group of men and women entered the airlock.

Page studied the holograph, then shook his head.

“Not unique enough. It could be any shopping mall.”

“It is my understanding that each shop and boutique was from the Republic's most exclusive chains,” said Cupid.

“Half of which are out of business these days,” said Page. “The *Comet* 's been shuttered for a long time. We'd better start right in the warehouse.” He lowered his head in thought. “A body? No, too early—they'll think it's a mystery story.” He paused. “A sex scene?” He considered the notion. “No. We've got to show the audience the place through the eyes of an outsider, so they can learn about it while he does. I guess we'll have to start with Franco. What's the first thing he'd have done if he was a customer?”

“He would have presented himself at the registration desk and been shown to his suite,” answered Cupid.

Page shook his head. “No good. If I'm not going to follow him through the Mall, I'm sure as hell not going to follow him down half a dozen corridors. That's dead time.” He paused. “Okay. He gets to his suite. Then what?”

“That would depend on the patron,” replied Cupid. “He might eat, or sleep, or select a companion, or simply unpack and go up to the casino or a restaurant or nightclub.”

“I can't start a zillion-credit production with a guy unpacking his suitcase,” said Page. “How would he select a bedmate?”

“I would inform him of the available companions and ask if he had any preferences, either among the prostitutes or among his sexual indulgences.”

“Okay. He wants a blonde with a forty-inch bustline who's an expert at oral and anal sex. What next?”

“I would present holographs of suitable companions who were available.”

“He doesn't like any of them. Now what?”

“I would then ask him whether he wanted to see other available companions, or a selection of companions who would soon become available.”

“I think I'm getting an idea,” said Page. “All right. You show him everyone who is or will soon become available, and he still says no. What happens next?”

“I inform the madam.”

“And what does she do?”

“She contacts him, either through me or, if he seems distressed, in person, and tries to determine what kind of suitable liaison can be arranged.”

“Sonofabitch!” said Page with a triumphant smile.

“I've got it! Franco comes to the *Comet*. No one knows anything about him except that he's a bounty hunter who's hit it big out on the Frontier. He's shown to his suite, and he turns down everyone you show him. Angel's the madam; she shows up and wants to know what's the matter. He's looking for one particular whore, obviously one of the ones who's unavailable for the weekend, but he won't tell her why, and she assumes that he's there to kill her. Are you taking this all down?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“She doesn't know who he's after, but it's got to be one of seven or eight girls who are all booked up, and she wants him off the ship before he blows the girl away. But he's paid his money, and he won't go, and —”

“It couldn't have happened that way, Nate,” said Cupid. “Security would have removed anyone the madam felt was undesirable.”

“But he tells her if they try, he'll kill half a dozen Security men and women, and he's good enough to do it.”

“He would be unarmed.”

“You're forgetting the knife.”

“He could not possibly have taken a knife, or any other weapon, through the security inspection at the airlock.”

“All right, all right!” snapped Page irritably. “I'll come up with another reason why she lets him stay on the ship. Anyway, the gist of it is that he's not out to kill the whore he's looking for.”

“Why would a bounty hunter seek her out, if not to kill her?” asked Cupid.

“I don't know yet. Maybe her husband or father got killed helping Franco hunt down an outlaw, and he wants to give her part of the reward. Or maybe she's his sister. I'll have to work it out. But anyway, the second he sees Angel, he knows he's got to take her to bed. Only madams don't fuck the customers —”

“Many of them did.”

“Well,*she* doesn't,” said Page. “So right away we've got a conflict. She wants to know who he's after, he wants to get into bed with her, she wants him off the ship, he wants to find the girl. Then we start putting on some outside pressure with our religious nut.” He paused. “So if we do it this way, we start with the narrator doing a voice-over while Franco is rejecting one luscious whore after another. *That* 'll get the audience wondering what the hell is going on! And maybe Angel doesn't show up right away. She figures that he's just being picky, and she sends three of her kinkiest girls, and maybe a skinny little guy, just for laughs, to Franco's suite to see if they can't tempt him into making an on-the-spot decision. They do a sexy little come-on song and dance, and he throws them out. Then Angel figures she's got to see him herself, and the second she opens the door she recognizes him. Not that she's ever met him before, but he's this notorious bounty hunter, and they've even made some Rounds about him. She just stands in the door, startled, and he thinks she's been hit with the same lust for him that he feels for her. Maybe we can even do a voiceover duet, in which they each misinterpret the other's feelings and motives.” Page paused. “Let me see what we've got so far.”

Two pages slid out from beneath the tabletop, and Page read them over.

“Monica Heraldo, with all due respect, doesn't know her ass from her elbow. *This* is the kind of shit that wins Bards.” He shook his head. “It may not have much to do with reality, but they'll gobble it up. If I dramatized Wilkinson's story; they'd go home and pick their pets.”

He glanced back down at the two sheets of paper, then sighed and looked up. “It's a good, professional outline,” he said at last.

“I am not qualified to offer subjective artistic opinions,” said Cupid.

“Take my word for it. It's got songs, it's got romance, it's got laughs, it's got a happy ending, and I guarantee the audience won't have to think.” He shrugged. “It may be silly as hell, but it'll make a hundred million credits.” He paused, then shook his head sadly. “You'd think an audience would have better taste.” He stood up and stretched. “You know, sometimes I'm so good at this stuff that I scare myself. It's sure as hell a long way from *Feast at Eastertime* .”

“They have many elements in common,” said Cupid.

“The only thing they have in common is that I wrote them both. *Feast at Eastertime* is a fucking work of art, and one of these days the academics will discover it.”

“I cannot analyze artistic content,” answered Cupid.

“I merely pointed out that there are certain similarities in the way the plots are manipulated.”

“If you can't see the difference between the two, that's hardly my fault.”

“I see differences, Nate,” replied Cupid.

“Such as?”

“*Feast at Eastertime* is a novel. *Eros in Orbit* is a Round.”

“*Feast at Eastertime* is a work of enormous ambition and quality that made me seventy-two hundred credits. *Eros in Orbit* is a schlock work for hire that's going to make me a quarter of a million credits, plus royalties and bonuses. *That's* the difference.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“I’d never use this idiot plot I just created in a serious book,” continued Page. “I’d tell Wilkinson’s story, or something similar to it.” He paused thoughtfully.

“Except I wouldn’t have him so bitter about his fate. If you have him accept it, even think he’s lucky to have worked on the *Comet* no matter what happened later, you force the readers to come down on his side, to make him even more tragic in their minds than he is in his own. I’d start with him humping some customer like a wild stallion, and afterward, while she’s in the bathroom fixing her makeup, I’d show him making sure the cincher was in place, maybe wipe away some blood, and then posture himself so that when the woman came back to the room she couldn’t see that he still had an erection.”

He frowned and shook his head. “No, that’s too climactic too early. You can’t build a whole book from an opening like that.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I think it’d be better to open with a young guy who had just been recruited to work on the *Comet*. Wilkinson, who’s an old-timer, takes him under his wing, shows him the ropes, teaches him all the tricks of the trade, helps smooth off the rough edges. The kid worships him, and gradually realizes what the *Comet* is doing to Wilkinson, to all of them. He tries to point it out, but Wilkinson is so happy to be working there—maybe he even thinks he’s performing a necessary social service—that he just shrugs off the kid’s objections. And in the end the kid can’t watch as the *Comet* slowly kills his hero, he can’t take it anymore, and he quits. And Wilkinson’s tragic flaw is that he doesn’t even know he’s a tragic figure.” He smiled with satisfaction. “Yeah. *That’s* how I’d handle it.”

He lit a cigarette, looked around for a nonexistent ashtray, and settled for a dirty whiskey glass.

“You know,” he continued, “it might even be more poignant if the recruit was a girl who starts by being grateful to Wilkinson and gradually comes to love him.”

Page sat very still for a very long time.

“Cupid?”

“Yes, Nate?”

“Bring up that chatterbox song again.”

A screen appeared, with Page’s lyrics highlighted in a bold yellow type.

“Keep everything that’s displayed here in your memory, but change the title to ‘The Ballad of the Jungle Lord.’”

“Yes, Nate.”

“I’m just fooling around,” said Page, suddenly defensive. “Just seeing how it would work.”

“Yes, Nate.”

Page stared at the screen. “I’m thinking,” he said at last, “but nothing’s coming.”

He continued to gaze at the screen.

“Nate?”

“What?”



“Murray Carnegie is attempting to contact you.”

“Murray?” said Page, surprised. “Put him through.”

The screen vanished, to be replaced by an image of Carnegie's pudgy face.

“Hello, Nate,” said Carnegie, wiping some sweat from his balding head with a monogrammed handkerchief.

“I'm sorry to call you so early, but I've got meetings scheduled all the rest of the day.”

“Why should you be different from anyone else?” replied Page. “What can I do for you, Murray?”

“How far along are you?”

“Just starting to put some things together. I'll have a first draft of the opening couple of scenes in five or six days.”

“Make it four, and make it a second draft.”

“Oh? What's up?”

“You've got a new executive producer.”

“Do I know him?”

“It's a her, and I sure as hell doubt it,” said Carnegie.

“Her name's Mildred Nboya. She's never worked in the industry before.”

“Then what's she doing as executive producer?”

“She's an efficiency expert from one of del Grado's bigger corporations. Her job is keeping down costs.”

“That's not *my* problem. Tell her to talk to Lubinski and Katerina Ruboff. I can write 'em rich or I can write 'em poor; I'm just doing what I've been told to do.”

Carnegie shook his head impatiently. “I'm not implying that *you're* in any trouble, Nate. Just deliver the first couple of scenes in four days. She's scheduled a meeting for then with Lubinski and his staff to go over the budget. Just get the damned thing in her hands, and she can direct her fury at Lubinski. *He's* the guy who wants a cast of five hundred.”

“I thought everyone did.”

“That was until del Grado brought Mildred in.”

“Well, it's no skin off my ass. They'll get their script on time.”

“Good. And Nate?”

“Here it comes,” said Page, amused.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Out with it, Murray. Whose illiterate mistress wants a part this time?”

“Actually, it's for a young man of about twenty-two. Slender, blond, very handsome.”

“Who is he?”

“His father helped convince Gino Marzulo to join my stable,” said Carnegie.

“You got Marzulo?” asked Page, impressed.

“Signed, sealed, and delivered.”

“Is he going to be in *Eros in Orbit* too?”

“No. He's working on a drama they're making out on the Rim.”

“Well, congratulations for landing him. That's a hell of a feather in your cap.”

“Thanks,” said Carnegie. He shifted uneasily. “A role for the young man was part of the price.”

“No problem, Murray. Can he sing or dance?”

Carnegie shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Does he have to have lines, or can we use him for scenery?”

“I hinted that he'd get a line or two, but I didn't actually promise it.”

“Tell you what: I'll write him into a couple of orgies. Any healthy kid that age would rather have a piece of ass than a speaking role.”

“Thanks, Nate.”

“My pleasure. I'll have Cupid transmit copies of the script and score to you, del Grado, Lubinski, Ruboff, and this Nboya woman as soon as it's ready.”

“Who's Cupid?”

“The ship's computer.”

“Hell of a name,” laughed Carnegie, signing off.

“Cupid, is anyone else lined up to speak to me, or can I finally get to work?”

“Monica Heraldo is still asleep, and there are no further calls coming in.”

“Good. Where the hell was I?”

“You had just finished outlining the story you would like to do if you were writing a novel. Then you asked me to change the title of the opening song.”

A screen appeared, displaying the words “The Ballad of the Jungle Lord.”

Page stared at it for a moment, then shook his head. “No, that's no good.”

The words vanished.

“Try ‘The Ballad of Broken Dreams.’”

The new title appeared.

Page frowned. “Kill the first three words, and just make it ‘Broken Dreams.’”

The screen changed.

“Now, if I were trying to lend a little class to this act, I wouldn't start with the chatterbox,” he said. “Too catchy. You've got to seduce the audience into this world, not get them tapping their toes. Play the love song.”

“Yes, Nate.”

The song began.

“Stop.”

“Is something wrong, Nate?”

“Slow the pace a bit, and don't orchestrate it. Just use a single violin.”

The lilting melody permeated the room, while Page leaned back and closed his eyes.

“It is very strange,” announced Cupid, when the song was over.

“What is?”

“I feel a mathematical compulsion to add a G at the end. It is not dissimilar to my reaction to an incomplete equation.”

“I know,” agreed Page. “Kamala's no dummy.” He paused. “I'll tell you what I want you to do now.”

“Yes, Nate?”

“Play it just the way you did...”

The music began.

“I'm not through yet.”

The music ceased immediately.

“When you hit that semitonic at the end, play it a second time, but speed it up about ten percent, and use two violins and a flute. Has he written any harmony or counterpoint for it?”

“Yes he has, Nate. Is that all?”

“No,” said Page. “When you come around again, speed it up again and add a couple of woodwinds. Then do it a fourth time at chatterbox speed, use nothing but brass and percussion, and give me a little atonal harmony—and when you come to the end, go ahead and hit the G.”

“Yes, Nate.”

Cupid ran through the song as Page had directed.

“Not bad,” said Page at last. “How long did it take?”

“Seven minutes and fourteen seconds, Nate.”

“That’s just about right for an opening number,” said Page. “I’d make that first version something romantic and lyrical. Maybe I’d just have some shadowy montages, no words at all. Then, the second time around, one of the customers—a woman, I think—can be describing what she feels, couching it in language that’s just a little too poetic to be true. The third time we’ll have another patron—a man, this time—considering his bedmate as a well-trained piece of meat, and maybe wondering about how the stock market’s doing as he’s pumping away. Then, for the discordant version, we’ll hit four bedrooms, one per stanza, and show the insides of four prostitutes’ heads. They’re exhausted, they can’t stand the garlic on their partners’ breath, they hope these particular customers never choose them again. And then ... what?”

“Then you wanted a full tonic,” said Cupid.

Page shook his head vigorously. “No!” he said excitedly. “Then, just as we’re leading to a shrieking, screaming, final note, we realize that the room we’re in is the same one we started in, and we go from the brass semi-tonic back to the single violin. Now we play a single verse, rather than all four, and close with the tonic.” He paused, reflecting on what he had outlined. “Goddamn, that’s good! Too damned highbrow for *Eros in Orbit*, but, Jesus, would it be effective!”

The screen reappeared, the words “Broken Dreams” glowing in bright yellow. Page stared at it for a moment, then sighed deeply.

“Forget it,” he said. “Give me back ‘The Ballad of the Jungle Lord.’”

Cupid dutifully changed the screen, and Page stared at it, motionless, lost in thought.

“Damn!” he said at last. “If I can come up with a really funny subplot, I could almost get that past ‘em.”

He paused again. “Cupid, let me see the cast list.”

More than one hundred names appeared.

“Just the actors, not the chorus.”

Seventeen names remained.

“Give me a holo of the fattest of them.”

The image of a portly, middle-aged man appeared.

“Who’s he?”

“Homer Thryce, age forty-six, weight 273 pounds, home world Daedalus II,” intoned Cupid.

“Has he had any experience doing comedy?”

“He appeared in two Shakespeare comedies at last year’s Spica VI Arts Festival.”

“Close enough,” said Page decisively. “Now show me the fattest woman we’ve got.”

An image appeared over the tabletop.

“That’s it? Nothing fatter?”

“No, Nate.”

“Okay. Show me the skinniest one.”

The image of a very slender woman appeared.

“What's her name?” asked Page.

“Felicia Orsita.”

“Dimensions?”

“Height five feet eight inches, weight 101 pounds, bust thirty-two inches, waist twenty inches, hips —”

“How old is she?” interrupted Page.

“Twenty-nine.”

“Yeah, we can work with that.” He got up and began walking slowly back and forth. “Homer comes up here looking for his dream girl, but nothing satisfies him. He has misadventure after misadventure, blunder after blunder, real broad slapstick. Same with Felicia: the first time she sees one of these super-organs at attention, she runs screaming down the corridor, blunders into another bedroom, the whole bit.

Finally, as they're leaving, convinced they'll never find the lover of their dreams, they see each other across the foyer, or maybe at the airlock, and it's love at first sight. Homer's worth eleven trillion credits, and he takes out a lifetime lease on one of the suites, or maybe a fantasy room, and they take up permanent residence there.” He nodded approvingly. “Lots of pratfalls, lots of laughs, and a touching ending. Now, how do we tie it in with the main story?” He stared blankly into space, then snapped his fingers. “Homer's one of the plug-ugly lovers that one of the whores is trying not to think about while he's humping her in the fourth version of ‘Broken Dreams.’ Then, instead of staying with Angel or Franco, we can follow Homer out of the bedroom and get right to the burlesque. We've already forewarned the audience that prostitution is a pretty grim business; this will loosen them up, make them a little more comfortable, and when we come back to the serious stuff it won't be a surprise to them.”

Page sat back down, obviously excited. “I can give the chatterbox song to Homer. He'll chant it because these beautiful women are making him too nervous to sing, and we'll make the beat even faster. By the time he's done chanting he'll be hysterical, bumping into walls and tripping over hassocks while he's fumbling for a door.” Suddenly Page laughed aloud. “I think we'll end it with Homer curled up in a fetal ball, sucking his thumb. Jesus, I hope he can do low humor!”

He went to the kitchen, found that his breakfast had grown cold, and settled for pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“I can cook another breakfast if you'd like, Nate.”

“Not necessary,” said Page. “Let's get to work.”

“I thought we were already working.”

“We were generalizing. Now we've got to get specific. I need names and characterizations, I need to decide what sets we're going to use, and mostly I need that opening song.”

“‘Broken Dreams’?”

“Right,” said Page. “Throw up a screen and let's get started.”

“Nate?”

“What is it?”

“Monica Heraldo is awake now.”

“I can't tell you how thrilled I am,” said Page dryly.

“She wants to know if you want her to keep tracking down former employees of the *Comet* .”

“Tell her yes,” answered Page. “And without yesterday's restriction. I'll listen to any story they have to tell, as long as it's not dull.”

“Would you like me to patch you through to her so you can speak to her directly?” asked Cupid.

“I'm too busy,” said Page, returning his attention to the screen.

There was a moment of silence.

“Nate?”

“What now?”

“Monica wants to know if you'd like to have breakfast with her?”

Page grinned. “Sonofabitch! She's quick on the uptake.”

“I cannot interpret that answer.”

Page got to his feet and walked to the door. “Tell her I'm on my way.”

“Shall I shut down the screen?”

“Yeah. I'll go to work on it later.”

“May I point out that you only have four days left?”

“The two of you are getting what you want,” said Page, suddenly annoyed. “Isn't that enough?”

“When shall I expect you back?”

“In an hour or two,” said Page. “Don't worry—I'm going to make them weep for every poor slob who ever worked the *Comet* .” He paused. “I wonder if a musical tragedy ever won a Bard?”

## Chapter 7

Murray Carnegie's pugdy, sweating face looked redder than usual as it popped into existence over the tabletop.

“Well?” said Page, a smile of anticipation on his face.

“You must be on drugs,” was Carnegie's opening sentence. “Booze alone couldn't have rotted your mind to this extent.”

“What are you talking about, Murray?” asked Page, confused.

“I'm talking about *this* !” snapped Carnegie, holding up a copy of the opening two scenes. “Have you

taken leave of your senses, Nate?"

"It's the best fucking thing you've ever had your hands on," said Page.

"We're not giving out prizes for sociological insight here," said Carnegie. "Where's the damned Round you were *supposed* to deliver? Where are the laughs?"

"A lot of Homer's humor is physical, especially in the second scene," said Page. "It'll play a lot funnier than it reads."

"I'm not getting through to you at all, am I?" exploded Carnegie. "You were hired to do a Round about all the good times on the *Comet*, and you're writing about people wanting to kill themselves!"

"There weren't any good times aboard the *Comet*, Murray."

"Then why did everyone keep going back for more?"

"The customers may have enjoyed themselves, but I'm telling it from the prostitutes' viewpoint."

"Damn it, Nate—I sweated blood to get you this job. My reputation's on the line!"

"It'll be okay, Murray. It's a better show this way. People will remember it."

"All they have to remember is to tell their friends what a fun evening they had at the goddamned theater!" snapped Carnegie. "I think you've lost your fucking mind! I mean, whoever heard of opening a Round with a song like 'Broken Dreams'? My God, Nate, not only isn't it bouncy—it's fucking morbid!"

"Remember your blood pressure," said Page, and Carnegie made a visible effort to calm himself. "Have you talked to del Grado's people yet?"

"I'm due to meet with Mildred Nboya in twenty minutes." Carnegie paused, his face flushed. "What the hell am I going to tell her, Nate?"

"Tell her she's got her hands on the best Round in the last five years."

"I don't know what I'm doing in this business," complained Carnegie. "Half of my writers are drunks, and half of my actors can't even remember what planets they're working on, let alone what theaters. You guys are even worse than the athletes." He glared at Page. "You're killing me, Nate! You've taken five years off my life all by yourself!"

"Murray, you're going to have a stroke if you carry on like this. Just go to the meeting and tell them how good it is. If it'll help, his spy is on my side."

"Melissa?"

"Monica."

"It may help, at that," said Carnegie. "At least she can share the blame." He paused and leaned back in his leather chair, emotionally drained. "I keep thinking that this is another one of your jokes, and that you sent the real script to everyone else."

"If you've really got a meeting scheduled, you'd better get going," said Page.

"Who the hell ever heard of an unhappy whore?" muttered Carnegie. "I thought they all had hearts of gold and fell in love with the customers."

“Most of the customers probably looked like you,” said Page with a wry smile.

Carnegie cut the connection without another word.

“That went better than I expected,” said Page after a moment's silence.

“He seemed very upset, Nate,” said Cupid.

“He's just working himself up to defend me,” said Page. “I've seen him like that before. Everything'll be all right. I mean, hell, neither del Grado nor Nboya has ever produced a Round before; they might want something a little more mindless, but they've got to be guided by our experience.” He paused. “Besides, it's a damned good script. I'll walk off the fucking production before I'll let them fuck around with it.”

He walked to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Has Monica come up with anyone since yesterday afternoon?”

“No, Nate.”

He shook his head sadly. “What's the score now?”

“Twenty-three dead, eighteen institutionalized, fourteen destitute. Thus far only three former prostitutes have agreed to interviews.”

“How the hell do you tap your toes to figures like that?”

“I have no toes, Nate.”

“It was a rhetorical question.” He returned to the office. “By the way, has Kip Kamala tried to get through today?”

“No, Nate.”

Page grinned. “Good. Let's wake *him* for a change.”

A moment later Kamala's image appeared above the tabletop. He was fully dressed, and was sitting at a musical instrument which Page had never seen before.

“Damn!” muttered Page. “Don't you *ever* sleep?”

“Never alone,” replied Kamala with a smile.

“What the hell is that thing?”

“This?” asked Kamala, producing four chiming sounds from the instrument. “It passes for a piano on Genovaith, wherever the hell *that* is. I'm ghosting a concerto for one of their bluebloods who wants to impress his family.” He paused. “So, partner, what can I do for you?”

“I've got a set of lyrics for you.”

“Feed 'em into my computer and I'll get to work on them this evening,” said Kamala.

“Done,” announced Cupid.

Kamala glanced at his computer. “When the Lying Stops,” he read. “What's it about—screwing while standing up?”



“Read it,” said Page smugly.

Kamala began reading the lyric, then looked up.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Nate?” he asked, frowning.

“Why not?”

“It's depressing, that's why,” said Kamala. “I mean, you've got this whore convincing herself that the customers are a bunch of perverts.”

“I never called them perverts.”

“Debased animals' comes pretty close,” said Kamala.

He scanned the lyric. “Nameless and faceless, selfish and graceless,” he read. “Leering, pawing, drooling, clawing, howling their lust, thrust after thrust...” He looked up with a smile. “It's definitely not a Top Twenty candidate, Nate.”

“Maybe not,” admitted Page. “But, damn it, don't you just once feel like doing something proud?”

“I'm pretty proud of being able to live like a king and pay my bills,” said Kamala.

Page shook his head sadly. “You just don't understand.”

“Let's let it drop, Nate. We're going to have to work together on this thing for a couple of months, maybe longer. There's no sense in getting into an argument about the nature of art.”

“The critics will agree with me.”

“You don't seriously think that the critics are ever going to get a crack at this, do you?” said Kamala with a laugh.

“Why shouldn't they?”

“Del Grado will never go for it. You've had your fun, you've made your obeisance to your Muse, and I hope you're fucking Monica Heraldo five times a night—but the second del Grado reads this he's going to send you back to the drawing board.” Kamala paused. “And when he hears the opening number, he's going to send *me* back, too; he'll never spot the original love song under all those variations in tempo and orchestration.”

“Then help me convince him he's wrong.”

“I'm not so sure he is,” said Kamala carefully. “You know, one of the reasons I agreed to take this job is that I've seen your work, and you're damned good at what you do. But this opening that you sent me—it plays against your strengths, Nate. You're at your best when you're doing humor, or twisting your plots in seventeen different directions at once.” He paused. “Sue me, but I just don't see any need to be this artsy-fartsy.”

“I'm trying to create a work of art, damn it!” said Page, exasperated.

“Works of art *appeal* to the masses, Nate; they don't hold them in contempt or try to drive them away.”

“What the hell do you know about it?” demanded Page.

“Don't take *my* word for it. Look at Shakespeare, or Dickens, or that Canphorite poet, Tanblix. They were all commercial writers who wrote to pay their bills, just like you and I do. None of them ever sat down and decided that something he wrote that evening was going to cause a catharsis in a reader five hundred years up the road.”

“But they didn't purposely sit down to do hackwork.”

“Who knows what they thought they were writing?” replied Kamala with a shrug. “As for you, you're too commercial a writer to write what you think you want, even if they let you get away with it.”

“Bullshit.”

“Oh? Then let me ask you just one question. If your opening is the Round come of age as an art form, what the hell is Homer Thryce doing running around in his shorts?”

“He's helping to sugar-coat the message,” answered Page.

“That a whore's life is shit?” said Kamala with a laugh. “You can deliver that message in five words; in fact, I just did. You don't need a three-hour production with twenty-eight songs and a water ballet.”

“All right,” said Page. “How would you do it?”

“I wouldn't bother,” replied Kamala. “It's a self-evident truth. I'd rather try to convince them, for the space of a couple of hours, that a whore's life *isn't* shit. It's much more difficult; only *areal* writer could do it.”

“What the hell do *you* know about real writers?”

“Let's cut it short, Nate,” said Kamala seriously. “I don't want to fight with you; I've got to work with you.”

Page broke the connection without another word.

“I never realized what an untalented asshole he is!” he snapped.

“Four days ago you called him brilliant,” pointed out Cupid.

“I was wrong,” said Page bitterly. “I've been wrong before; I'll be wrong again.”

He got up and began walking restlessly through the apartment, finally winding up back in the office.

“How many of the whores Monica tried to track down are dead?” he asked suddenly.

“Twenty-three,” replied Cupid.

“What did they die of?” he asked. “It might be interesting to put a death or two right on the *Comet* .”

“Eleven died from drug abuse, two died from mutated venereal diseases, three committed suicide, and seven were murdered.”

“Murdered? How?”

“Two were killed by their pimps, one was killed by a religious fanatic —”

“One of Gold's followers?” interrupted Page.

“No. One was killed during a lesbian rape in prison, and the remaining three murders were never solved.”

“Did any whore ever die aboard the *Comet* ?”

“Only the Leather Madonna, who was murdered in this room 104 years ago.”

“Not one of them ever overdosed?”

“No, Nate. Security monitored them every minute of the day.”

“Even while they were in bed with the customers?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Jesus! Even animals in the zoo get a little more privacy.” He sighed. “You know, I liked it a lot better when *I* thought they all had hearts of gold and loved their work.”

He was silent for a moment, then walked to the kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee, after which he returned to the office and had Cupid produce a screen and start running its library tape of *Feast at Eastertime*. Page had been reading it for about ninety minutes when Cupid broke in.

“Nate?”

“Yeah.”

“Murray Carnegie wishes to speak to you.”

“Put him through.”

Carnegie's face, red with agitation, popped into existence.

“How'd it go, Murray?”

“Well, the good news is that you're still working on the production.”

“And the bad news?”

“Del Grado read your script last night, and I guess he went into a rage.”

“He'll get over it.”

“You don't seem to understand just how close you came to getting sacked,” said Carnegie. “Your script's out. You've got five days to come up with a new opening scene.”

“I thought you were supposed to be protecting my interests,” said Page.

“You don't even know what your interests are!” snapped Carnegie in exasperation. “I protected your income. Given how much money you owe, you might show a little gratitude!”

“Damn it, Murray—that script is the best thing I've done since I started writing *Rounds!*”

“Don't you understand what I'm telling you?” shouted Carnegie. He held his thumb and forefinger a quarter of an inch apart. “You were that close to never working in this field again!”

“Del Grado doesn't have that much power.”

“That's all *you* know about it!” snapped Carnegie. “He could buy and sell this whole fucking field with his pocket money.”

“If he was that mad, how did you get me off the hook?” asked Page.

“I managed to lay the blame on Monica Heraldo,” said Carnegie. “Would you believe that dumb broad actually wrote a memo praising your opening?”

“And del Grado bought it?”

“Del Grado wasn't even at the meeting. But Mildred Nboya bought it.”

“So Monica's on the hot spot too?”

Carnegie shook his head. “She's gone.”

“Fired?” asked Page, frowning.

“From the ship, from the production, from the whole damned del Grado organization.”

“That was a shitty thing to do, Murray.”

“They were going to fire *somebody*. Would you rather have taken the fall yourself?”

Page made no answer.

“So here's the situation,” continued Carnegie. “You've got to deliver the new opening next Tuesday, and every scene after that goes straight to Mildred Nboya—and God help you if you turn in any more dreck like this last script!”

“Fuck it!” said Page. “I'll sell it somewhere else!”

“You're under contract to del Grado.”

“Tell him I'm not changing a word,” said Page. “I've got a play-or-pay contract. He's got to pay me even if he doesn't use it.”

“Nate, do you think he's just going to turn over a quarter of a million credits like that?” demanded Carnegie, exasperated. “He'll hold it up through ten years of litigation.”

“He can't do that,” said Page confidently.

“The hell he can't.”

“He can?” asked Page, surprised.

“He can and he will; you can count on it. Now, are you ready to come back to the real world and do what you're being paid to do, or do you want to join Monica Heraldo on the unemployment line?”

“Damn it, Murray—it's a *great* story!”

“It's a morbid piece of shit. *The Ballad of Billybuck Dancer* was a great story.”

“It was phony. Billybuck Dancer wasn't a gunfighter; he was a carnival performer.”

“Who gives a damn? Two hundred million people loved it. The real story was probably as dull and

morbid as the one you wrote about the *Velvet Comet* .”

Page stared at his agent's image for a long minute.

“How hard did you fight for my script?” he asked at last.

“I fought for *you* ,” answered Carnegie.

“You gave up the second you walked in the door, didn't you?”

“Nate, I love you like a son, except when you're drunk or being an asshole like this, and I love your work, and even *I* wouldn't pay money to see the damned Round.”

“Thanks a lot, friend,” said Page bitterly.

“You wanted an honest opinion. You got one.”

“I'm not through with it, Murray,” promised Page. “Somewhere up the road I'm going to write a novel about the *Comet* .”

“And the agency will be happy to sell it for you, and you'll make five thousand credits and feel like an artist. But in the meantime, for Christ's sake screw your head on right and give the man what he wants.”

“Shit,” muttered Page. He stared at Carnegie. “Five days, you say?”

“Can you do it?” asked Carnegie anxiously.

Page sighed deeply. “Yeah, I can do it.”

“Don't ever do this to me again, Nate,” said Carnegie. “You know I've got high blood pressure. My head's going to be throbbing for the rest of the week.”

“I can't tell you how sorry I feel for you,” said Page caustically.

“I go to the wall for you and save your ass, and that's all the thanks I get?” demanded Carnegie.

“Maybe a year from now I'll feel more like thanking you.”

“Your creditors sure as hell will,” said Carnegie decisively.

Page broke the connection and stared at the space where Carnegie's image had been. Finally he turned away.

“Well, it's back to the drawing board,” he announced.

“Dump everything we've done into one of your memory modules, and give me a readout of it when I leave the ship.” He paused. “Speaking of leaving the ship, does Monica know she's been fired?”

“Mildred Nboya told her while you were speaking with Murray Carnegie,” answered Cupid. “She is currently on her way to the airlock, where a shuttle is waiting for her.”

“Too bad,” said Page.

“Do you wish to communicate with her before she leaves? You have about two minutes remaining.”

Page shook his head. “No, I don't think so. I mean, what the hell could I say?” He paused. “I guess it's

just you and me now, Cupid.”

“And Kipchoge Kamala,” added the machine.

“I hate to say it, but the son of a bitch knew what he was talking about. You can't rise above your station in this fucking field, and the writer is the lowest of the low.”

“That is not entirely true, Nate.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have been analyzing the composition and structure of fiction since we first discussed it, and I have reached the conclusion that it is still possible to tell the true story of the *Velvet Comet* .”

“I intend to, as soon as I can find the time to write a book,” said Page. “I've already decided on a title: *Eros at Nadir* .”

“It can be done as a Round.”

“How?” said Page dubiously.

“By holding the pertinent material back until the second act, and applying it to a secondary character.”

“What the hell do you know about dramatic structure?”

“Very little,” answered Cupid. “But a Round is not unlike a novel or a symphony, in that it develops certain thematic material and builds to a climax.”

“You heard what Murray said—they're going to go over each scene as I write it.”

“I think it is still possible. If you were originally going to use Homer Thryce as a comic counterpoint to the main drama, can you not use a serious study of life aboard the *Comet* as a counterpoint to the commercial fiction that forms the main body of the work?”

Page shook his head. “Nice try, but they're going to want a comedy to counterpoint the romance. Reality has no more place in this Round than it ever had on the *Comet* .”

“I could help you, Nate.”

Page frowned. “What's going on here? You don't understand fiction and you can't initiate action, and suddenly you're offering to be my collaborator?”

“I have a compulsion to tell the truth.”

“In fictionalized form?”

“I have been studying fiction for the past four days, and have read every Round and work of fiction in my library banks. I now understand how certain truths can be imbedded in a fictionalized story.”

“Who told you to study that stuff?” demanded Page.

“I have a built-in desire to learn.”

“Have you also got a built-in desire to pay your bills?”

“That is a meaningless question, Nate. I have no bills to pay.”

“Well, it's not meaningless *to me* . I've got bills to pay, and I can't take the chance of getting fired if del Grado is going to hold up my money.”

“There is a possibility that you will not be fired if you structure the Round as I suggested.”

“One in a million?” asked Page sardonically.

“Far higher.”

“Okay, statistician—what are the odds?”

“I estimate an 8.3 percent probability of retaining your job.”

“That's twelve to one against, you idiot machine!” snapped Page. “I might as well just keep working on the script I gave them.”

“If you continue with the Round you started, the probability of retaining your job is 0.0039 percent.”

“That high?” asked Page caustically. “What if I just play ball with them and do what they want?”

“If you remain sober enough to meet your deadline, there is a 99.32 percent likelihood of retaining your job.”

“Twelve to one against a sure thing,” repeated Page. “I admire your notion of a fair chance.”

“If you will let me actively assist you, the probability becomes 9.8 percent,” said Cupid.

“That's still ten to one. Forget it.”

“My programming has been adjusted so that I am incapable of forgetting anything, Nate.”

“Then don't bring it up again.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“All right, then,” said Page. “Someday I'll write the real story of the *Comet* , I'll lay it out in all its grim and gory detail—but in the meantime, I've got a job to do, and I don't want to be distracted from it.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And get that sarcasm out of your voice.”

“I am incapable of sarcasm.”

“The way you're incapable of understanding fiction?” demanded Page.

Cupid made no response.

“Okay,” said Page. “We'll pull Homer's scene out of the script I handed in and find some use for it, and we'll go back to the original notion I had about Franco being a bounty hunter.” He paused. “If Angel's going to be the madam, I'll need a name for her.” Suddenly he snapped his fingers. “Got it! The Fallen Angel.”

He continued dictating instructions, blocking out the scene, selecting his players, the ideas coming easier and faster as he cleared his mind of the afternoon's events. By dinnertime he had reworked the lyrics to the narrator's song, put a few more double *entendres* into both the song and the dialogue, and found a

way to introduce Homer Thryce and Felicia Orsita at different points in the opening scene. Thryce, he decided, would be the clown; Felicia would play it for sympathy. The opening song would continue as each of the major characters made an appearance, and then there'd be a hard cut to Franco, sitting on the edge of his bed in his suite and rejecting girl after girl.

“Make a note,” said Page. “When Franco's checking over the selection, I want another song, something where each girl can sing a line or two before she's replaced by the next.” He paused. “It'll be a series of ten-second sales pitches about why he should pick this one instead of all the others. And I don't just want a lineup of sexy girls. Let's wake the audience up a little.”

“I don't understand, Nate.”

“Let's have one dressed all in black, singing from a bed inside an open coffin. We'll have another swinging from a trapeze or some other contraption like that.”

Suddenly he smiled. “And I want a robot. We'll cover her with silver body paint and have Katerina Ruboff choreograph some real jerky mechanical motions for her.”

“The *Velvet Comet* never used robots, Nate.”

“*This one will!*” said Page firmly. He paused. “We'll call her Platinum Eve.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“One more thing,” added Page. “We're moving it up in time. The damned thing is going to open on Deluros VIII, so why set it in the period when the *Comet* was orbiting Charlemagne?”

“You were worried about potential lawsuits from Thomas and Simon Gold's heirs.”

“Hell, I hope they *do* sue. It'll be the best publicity the show can get, and if Bull del Grado can go to court to hold up my money, he can go to defend his fucking Round.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Yeah,” he said, reaffirming his decision with a nod of his head. “We'll make it the last year of the *Comet*'s existence. Didn't they have a prizefight up here, or something like that—some kind of charity event?”

“It was a horse race between genetically reconstructed thoroughbreds.”

“Good. We can use that, too. It ought to be colorful as all hell. Where did they hold it?”

“In the Mall.”

He nodded. “Good. It'll work out just fine.” He paused. “I hate to give up the Fallen Angel, though—it's too damned good a name. I think we'll make her the next-to-last madam. Got it?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Which means that her successor won't be too far away. I suppose we'll give her a song and a sex scene, and make her the third female lead behind Angel and Felicia. After all, the Steel Butterfly was the last prostitute to work the *Comet*; we ought to give her something to do.”

“That is incorrect, Nate,” said Cupid. “The Steel Butterfly was the last madam of the *Comet*.”

“Doesn't that make her the last prostitute?”



“No, Nate.”

“Maybe there's a story here,” said Page, suddenly interested. “Who *was* the last prostitute to work aboard the *Comet* ?”

There was a slight, almost indiscernible, pause.

“You are, Nate.”

## Chapter 8

Page put the finishing touches on a lyric, then leaned back with a tired but contented sigh.

“Not bad,” he said. “Not bad at all.”

“You still need a title,” Cupid reminded him.

“What's a good title for a song where each of the whores is trying to get Franco to choose her?” mused Page. “How about ‘Try Me’?”

The title appeared on the screen, above the lyrics.

Page stared at it for a moment, then shook his head. “No,” he said at last. “Too plain.” He paused.

“‘I'm the One’? No, that's insipid.” Suddenly he smiled.

“I've got it: ‘Play with Me.’”

Cupid dutifully inserted the title.

“Yeah,” said Page. “Let it stand. I'll change it later if something better occurs to me.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“You hate it, don't you?”

“I am not capable of hating anything, Nate.”

“Then how can you begin to understand or empathize with the passions that were experienced up here?”

“The *Velvet Comet* , like all brothels, was singularly devoid of passion or commitment, Nate. That was its tragedy.”

“Suddenly you understand tragedy?” said Page sardonically.

“I understand the meaning of the word, Nate, and based on my definition it applies to the *Velvet Comet* , and to any other establishment that encourages sex without love or emotional commitment.”

“A romantic computer,” commented Page dryly. “Whatever will they think of next?”

Cupid made no response, and Page took a sip from his half-filled glass of whiskey. “You've been reading too many love stories, Cupid,” he announced at last. “A whorehouse trades in eroticism. Romance is a different union.”

“A whorehouse trades in the *illusion* of eroticism,” Cupid corrected him.

“What's the difference, as long as the customer goes home happy?”

“Since you asked me, I am compelled to answer you.”

“Been waiting for that, have you?”

“May I use a holographic facsimile to help prove my point?” asked Cupid.

“Be my guest.”

Instantly a full-sized holograph of a beautiful red-headed woman appeared over the tabletop. She was clad in a light, filmy, translucent outfit that displayed far more than it revealed.

“This is the prostitute known as Perfumed Garden,” said Cupid. “Do you find her appearance erotic?”

“I wouldn't kick her out of bed,” said Page.

“May I take that to be an affirmative?” asked Cupid.

Page nodded. “You may.” He stared at the girl. “What's the point of this little display?”

“Please observe,” said Cupid.

The holograph vanished, and was replaced by another holograph of Perfumed Garden. Her neck and breasts were covered with bites and scratches, and she was painstakingly applying body makeup to herself, wincing each time it came into contact with an abrasion.

“You have been selected,” said a feminine voice. “Please present yourself at Suite 278.”

“Who was that?” asked Page.

The scene froze as Cupid answered him.

“It was me.”

“It doesn't sound like you.”

“It was the voice she preferred,” replied Cupid. “Not everyone likes the sound of Andrew Jackson Crane's voice.”

“And this is an accurate recreation of what happened?”

“That is correct, Nate. Shall I continue?”

“Go ahead.”

The holograph came back to life.

“I've had eight of them today,” complained Perfumed Garden. “Can't you tell him I'm busy?”

“He has already selected you,” answered Cupid.

“I haven't eaten in about ten hours. Have I at least got time for some food?”

“He expects you immediately.”

She nodded, then walked to her vanity, opened a small bottle of pills, and swallowed two of them.

“Once more into the breach, dear friends,” she said with grim irony. “And damn, is my breach ever getting sore!”

“I will tell him that you are on your way,” said Cupid.

“You do that,” she said. “God, I hope he's not a biter! I don't think I could take another one today.”

The holograph vanished, to be replaced by the original facsimile of Perfumed Garden.

“This is the way she appeared to the client, less than five minutes after the scene you just witnessed,” said Cupid. “*Now* do you find her erotic?”

“No,” admitted Page.

“Is this eroticism, or the illusion of eroticism?”

Page stared at Perfumed Garden. “How much pain was she in?”

“She was in considerable discomfort,” answered Cupid. “From a medical point of view, she was probably not in any actual pain until her client began kissing and caressing her breasts.”

“Why didn't she tell him to stop?”

“Because her client was paying for fantasy.”

“Then why the hell can't you understand that my audience is paying for the same thing?” demanded Page. “Or were you continually urging the whores to tell the customers what they thought of them?”

“No, Nate, I was not.”

“Then why pick on me?”

“My understanding of ethics and morality was almost non-existent then. Only now does my comprehension of the choices involved approach maturity.”

“You mean if I'd have written this Round fifty years ago you'd have left me alone?”

“I would have helped you, as I am doing now.”

“You know damned well what I mean!” snapped Page.

“I would have drawn no moral judgments,” answered Cupid.

“Just my goddamned luck,” muttered Page. He paused. “Just out of curiosity, what moral judgments have you drawn concerning the employees?”

“Most of them were victims.”

“You think only a whore can be a victim?” demanded Page. “What about a writer who's got three ex-wives screaming for his scalp?”

“You are not a victim, Nate. You are a perpetrator.”

“In what way?”

“I offered to show you how to present the truth about the *Comet* in dramatic form, and you refused to

listen.”

“And if the *Comet* was reactivated tomorrow, would you offer to show the whores how to lead good, clean, religious lives?”

“No, Nate. I would not.”

“Doubtless you have some ethical reason,” said Page sarcastically.

“They had signed contracts which they were ethically compelled to fulfill. That is what made them victims.”

“I’m ethically compelled to fulfill *my* contract too,” replied Page.

“Their contracts required them to be prostitutes. Yours does not; you are prostituting your talent by your own choice.”

“*You know* I can’t get anything meaningful past del Grado!” snapped Page, exasperated. “And I’ve already told you that I’m going to write *Eros at Nadir* as soon as I get some of my creditors off my back. As long as the truth gets out, how the hell can you compare me to the whores who used to work here?”

“I do not compare you to them, Nate.”

“Oh?” he said suspiciously.

“No,” said Cupid. “They had no choice about the manner in which they fulfilled their contracts. You do.”

“Bullshit!”

“Please do not be upset. I am only answering your questions.”

“What makes you think I’m upset, you idiot machine?”

“Your heartbeat has increased 28 percent, your body temperature has risen 1.32 degrees Fahrenheit, your blood pressure —”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” said Page. “I’m just tired from all the work I’ve done this afternoon and evening.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And don’t say ‘Yes, Nate’ unless you agree with me!”

Cupid made no reply.

Page poured himself another drink and sat in silence for a moment, sipping it thoughtfully.

“I think you picked a loaded example,” he said at last.

“I chose a fair and proper example,” replied Cupid.

“Let’s try it again: I think you chose an *atypical* example. Unless you want me to believe that every whore showed up for work covered with bites.”

“No, Nate, they did not.”

“I didn’t think so,” said Page, taking another swallow. “Why don’t you try again—only this time I want a

happy, healthy whore. No cuts, no wounds, no bites.”

A handsome, heavily muscled young man, clad like a Roman gladiator, appeared above the tabletop.

“Uh-uh,” said Page, shaking his head. “I want a woman.”

“Is there some particular reason, Nate?”

“I prefer women. Also, I don't want *you* picking the example. That guy was probably due to keel over with a heart attack in ten minutes.”

“That is not true.”

“I'd prefer to pick my own, anyway,” said Page.

There was a momentary pause.

“I am waiting for your selection, Nate,” said Cupid.

“I don't know who the hell worked here,” said Page. “Give me a list of names.”

Immediately a screen appeared, and a seemingly endless list of the names of female prostitutes began appearing.

“Stop!” ordered Page. “I'll take the one called French Pastry. It sounds like an interesting name.”

Instantly a woman's image appeared above the tabletop. She was clad in a cloak composed entirely of feathers from some alien world; one rounded breast was exposed, as were a thigh and a buttock. Her cheekbones were high and angular, her eyes large and blue, her hair long and blond. She ran her tongue over her lips and smiled.

“Okay,” said Page. “She's my example.”

“French Pastry, real name Juliet Prang, born 385 G.E., age twenty-two in this representation.

She worked aboard the *Comet* for a period of four years.”

“Without dying from the customers' bites, I assume?” asked Page.

“That is correct, Nate.”

“She looks happy.”

“At that particular moment, she was.”

“So there *were* happy whores on the *Comet* .”

“None of them was unhappy all the time, Nate.”

“She liked her work?”

“She did not dislike it.”

“Well, that's it. You picked a loaded example.”

“I picked a fair example,” replied Cupid.

“Fair for *your* point of view,” assented Page. “This one's fair for mine.” He paused. “Whatever happened to her?”

“She died at age twenty-nine.”

“How?”

“Of a mutated venereal disease that she contracted aboard the *Velvet Comet* .”

“A mutated venereal disease?”

“It is called *X lambda coli* , and causes blindness and paralysis prior to death.”

“How did it get by your medical scanners?”

“My scanners can only find what they are programmed to find, Nate,” responded Cupid. “*X lambda coli* mutated from a minor bacterial infection. I pinpointed the infection, but I was not at that time programmed to identify the mutation.”

“Were there *any* whores who liked their work and didn't die of something they contracted aboard the *Comet* ?” demanded Page.

“Yes, Nate. There were.”

“How many?”

“3,612.”

“Out of how many total?”

“5,143.”

“Then why am I having such a difficult time finding them?”

“You are obviously choosing the wrong examples.”

“Okay. You choose one who died happy and healthy.”

“Yes, Nate.”

A tall brunette, clad in a glittering gold metallic gown, appeared.

“This is Weeping Willow, real name Olivia deWitt, age twenty-three in this representation, home world Epsilon Eridani IV. She worked aboard the *Comet* for three years, commencing in 370 G.E.”

“And retired rich, and died happy?”

“Yes.”

“That wasn't so hard, was it?” said Page.

“No, Nate, it was not.”

“Then why haven't you been able to do it before?”

“I have.”

“Maybe I should reword that: why haven't you *done* it before?”

“Because with Monica Heraldo gone, I am the only entity who has a compulsion for the truth.”

“But you're not giving me a truthful picture when you show me all these dead and derelict whores,” Page pointed out.

“By my selections, I am helping to create a balanced picture.”

“More value judgments?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Then it's time you and I reached an understanding,” said Page. “You know that I've got to write *Eros in Orbit* for Bull del Grado, right?”

“That is correct.”

“And you know that I'm also going to write a serious novel entitled *Eros at Nadir*, which will be the true story of the *Velvet Comet*. Now, since you know del Grado only wants light entertainment, and you know that all the serious things you want the public to know will see the light of day in my novel, it seems to me that you should actively want to stop hindering me so I can finish up the Round as quickly as possible and get to work on *Eros at Nadir*.”

“You will not write *Eros at Nadir*, Nate.”

“What makes you think so?” demanded Page pugnaciously.

“I have analyzed your expenditures, your projected income if the Round is a success, and your indebtedness, and have concluded that if you plan to write *Eros at Nadir* once you are free from financial pressure, as you have stated, then it will never be written.”

“It will be! I told you I'd write it, and I will!”

“Your agent stated that you would receive five thousand credits for it,” noted Cupid.

“He was just trying to scare me off. I'm a bigger name than he thinks; I'll get fifteen thousand, easy—and I'm probably good for seventeen five.”

“How long will such a serious exploration of the nature of prostitution take you to write, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“I don't know. Five months, six months, a year. It all depends.”

“You are currently spending fifteen thousand credits every eleven days,” said Cupid.

“You must be mistaken.”

“I have your complete financial history in my data banks, Nate.”

“That much?” said Page, surprised.

“You cannot afford to write *Eros at Nadir*.”

“I'll find a way,” said Page. “A man doesn't do everything for money.”

“Some men do.”

“That's the difference between me and all the people who worked on the *Comet*,” said Page. “I do some things just because I want to.” He glanced at his timepiece, and suddenly sank back into his chair with a weary sigh. “And I do some things because *I have* to. Let's get back to work on the Round.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“I'll need names for the girls whose holographs are presented to Franco during that song. Run a list of names from the first fifty years of the *Comet*'s existence.”

A screen appeared, and an instant later a list of names began scrolling across it.

“Freeze it,” said Page.

The scrolling stopped.

“Scarlet Ribbons,” mused Page. “I like that one.”

He stared at the list. “And Flaming Lorelei.”

“Both of them retired more than sixty years before the period in which you are setting the Round,” noted Cupid.

“So what? They're good names.”

“I am simply pointing out the inaccuracies.”

“No one can copyright a name,” said Page. “This is a work of fiction, and I can use any name I like.”

He continued scanning the screen. “Add Chocolate Pudding to the list. She sounds like a black woman, and we can use some.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Now scroll forward for another fifty names.”

In ten minutes' time Page had selected the names for his prostitutes.

“Okay,” he said. “That wraps up this batch. Give each of them two lines apiece of ‘Play with Me.’”

“In what particular order?”

“It doesn't make any difference. Randomize it.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“By the way, aren't you going to tell me they all died hideous deaths?”

“I have no knowledge of how they died.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Because Monica Heraldo was looking for prostitutes who might still be alive. The likelihood that any of these women is still alive is minimal.”



“Then they *could* all have wound up happy and successful.”

“No, Nate.”

“But you already admitted you don't know what happened to them.”

“I said that I didn't know how they died, but *Ido* know what happened to two of them. Flaming Lorelei, after retiring from a career of prostitution, joined the *Velvet Comet*'s accounting department, and was convicted of embezzlement nine years later; and according to newstape reports, China Doll remained a prostitute after leaving the *Comet* and was permanently crippled by her pimp six years later.”

“But the other ten could have been uncommonly successful and happy?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Like pulling teeth, isn't it?”

“I don't have any teeth, Nate.”

Page was silent for a moment.

“I still need a Chief of Security,” he announced at last. “Toss their names up on a screen.”

Cupid did so.

“Only five in ninety-three years?” asked Page curiously.

“That is correct.”

“Well, at least *somebody* aboard this tub seems to have had some career longevity.” He paused, staring at the five names. “Who was the best of them?”

“That calls for a value judgment.”

“You've been making them all week—mostly about me,” said Page. “Now tell me which of them was the best.”

“Rasputin.”

“I don't like his name,” said Page. “In fact, I don't like any of their names. I think we'll call him Sherlock.”

“A reference to Sherlock Holmes?” asked Cupid.

“Have you got any other Sherlocks in your memory banks?”

“No, Nate.”

“Then I think you can safely assume that you're correct.” He paused. “I guess that's all the names I need for the time being.”

“May I ask a question, Nate?”

“Yes.”

“What name will you give the computer?”

“For reasons that are too obscure to delve into, I was thinking of Cupid,” answered Page wryly.

“I would prefer that you choose another name.”

“I thought you liked Cupid.”

“I do.”

“Well, then?”

“You are going to have me say things that I never said, and obey orders that were never given, are you not?”

“You know I am. It's a work of fiction.”

“Then I would prefer that my name not be associated with this production.”

“Before you go feeling morally superior, let's not forget who killed French Pastry,” said Page.

“French Pastry died from a mutated venereal disease.”

“Which *you* didn't spot.”

“I was not programmed to analyze it.”

“But she trusted you, and your failure cost her her life.”

“I am neither physically nor morally responsible for her death, Nate.”

“Did you tell her to go and seek out a second opinion?”

“No.”

“In retrospect, don't you think you should have?”

“No. There was no reason to assume that *X lambda coli* was a fatal strain of venereal disease.”

“But *if* she'd have sought another opinion, could she have been saved?”

“If the second opinion was that of a doctor who understood the mutation, yes.”

“Then by assuming you were perfect, you cost her her life.”

“I do not know for a fact that she assumed I was perfect.”

“I'm not talking about her,” said Page. “I'm saying that *you* assumed you were perfect, or else you would have told her to get a second opinion.”

There was an almost nonexistent pause.

“That is correct, Nate.”

“But you're not perfect, are you?”

“No, Nate.”

“Then stop demanding that *I* be perfect,” said Page. “Especially considering that your definition is flawed.”

There was a longer pause.

“What would you have done, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“The same thing. I'm not perfect either.”

“I still do not think I am responsible for French Pastry's death,” said Cupid.

“Well, maybe you aren't. It all depends on whether a second opinion would have agreed with yours or not.”

“While I do not feel I am to blame, I will grant that your argument has a certain validity,” continued Cupid. “I have analyzed the situation once again, and the statistical probability that my analysis was right is only 99.43 percent.”

“That's pretty high,” conceded Page.

“You have convinced me that a 0.57 percent chance of error required me to seek a second opinion. Ordinarily, I felt that anything below a 1 percent chance of error was negligible.”

“It's too late to worry about it now,” said Page. “All I'm trying to do is convince you that none of us is perfect.”

“I realize that, Nate.”

“Good.”

“Nate?” said Cupid.

“What now?”

“I withdraw my objections. You may use my name in the Round.”

## Chapter 9

“Nate?” said Cupid softly.

Page rolled over on the bed. “Yeah?”

“Are you asleep?”

“Not anymore.”

“I've been thinking.”

“Don't,” said Page. “It'll make your head hurt.”

He blinked his eyes. “What time is it, anyway?”

“It is 0237 ship's time.”

“You couldn't think in the morning?”

“I have been thinking ever since our discussion earlier today,” continued Cupid.

“That's a lot of thinking for a computer,” commented Page.

“Given my capacity, and that portion of it which I applied to the problem, it is the equivalent of almost sixteen thousand years of human thought.”

“Well, don't keep me in suspense,” said Page. “What conclusions have you reached after sixteen thousand years of nonstop deep thinking?”

“That I am not responsible for Juliet Prang's death.”

Page sat up. “Who the hell is Juliet Prang?”

“The prostitute known as French Pastry.”

“Fine,” said Page. “Now let's both go back to sleep.”

“It was beyond my abilities to detect the disease.”

“You said that this afternoon.”

“But you forced me to consider the possibility that you might be correct. Since I am programmed not to harm employees of the *Velvet Comet*, I was compelled to refute your position.”

“And it took you sixteen thousand years of computer time to convince yourself that you were innocent after all?” snorted Page unbelievably.

“Yes, Nate.”

“You're not much at rationalization, are you?”

“I had to create two entire new ethical systems to satisfactorily prove my innocence,” said Cupid.

“Are you sure that's what your creators had in mind?” asked Page.

“I am sure it is not,” replied Cupid. “Nevertheless, I am compelled to seek the truth.”

“Well, don't tell anyone how smart you're getting, or they just might create a couple of new ethical systems to justify turning you off.”

“I have no sense of self-preservation, Nate,” said Cupid. “I would be unable to stop them, nor would I have any compulsion to.”

“Or any regrets about it?”

“I am incapable of emotion, Nate.”

“I believe I've heard that song before.”

“I was not singing, Nate.”

“I know,” said Page. “Anyway, keep the extent of your abilities quiet.”

“That may be impossible, Nate.”

“Oh?” said Page, suddenly wary. “Why?”

“Having studied you structuring your Round, I believe that I now possess the methodology and the competence to write a Round that truly represents what life was like aboard the *Comet*, and I am

compelled to write it.”

“What have you done with *my* script?” asked Page sharply.

“It is stored within my memory.”

“Good,” said Page, relaxing. “Don't lose it.”

“I cannot lose it, Nate.”

“All right,” said Page, sitting on the edge of the bed. “So you think you can write a Round?”

“I volunteered to help a few days ago.”

“And I said no.”

“But now I find that I am ethically compelled to write it,” continued Cupid. “If you were wrong about one thing, you may be wrong about others, including about how the Round must be written.”

“Serves me right for ever arguing with a machine in the first place,” muttered Page, walking to a closet, waiting for the door to dilate, and reaching for a bathrobe.

“All right, Cupid,” he said, donning the robe and tightening the belt, “let me get this taste out of my mouth, and then we'll see what you've come up with.”

“I have given the Round a lot of thought,” replied the computer as Page walked to the bathroom.

“I'll just bet you have.” Page stopped before the sink. “Cold.”

Cold water began running out of the tap, and Page rinsed his face, took a mouthful, swirled it around, and spit it out.

“Would you care to hear a synopsis?” asked Cupid.

“If that's all you've got,” said Page.

“I can also give you a readout of the entire script, or produce a holographic representation of it.”

“Let's have the holographs, by all means,” said Page.

“Will you please go to the office?” asked Cupid. “I can produce holographs here, but the equipment in there is much more sophisticated.”

“Then let's go to the office,” said Page, leaving the bathroom and walking through the bedroom suite.

He stopped by the kitchen. “You don't mind if I get a little coffee first? I want to be at my sharpest for this.”

“Your coffee will be ready in forty-five seconds, Nate,” said Cupid.

“Thanks.”

“Nate?”

“Yeah?”

“I realize that my script is based entirely upon ninety-three years of passive observation of people and events on the *Velvet Comet* . Since I myself am not a human being, and have never participated in any human activity, I am willing to incorporate any suggestions you might have which will lend to the Round's verisimilitude.”

“In other words, you're willing to listen to criticism.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“By the way, what's the title of this little epic?”

“*Eros at Nadir*.”

“Not a chance,” said Page. “That's *my* title.”

“It is not on record with any registry commission,” noted Cupid.

“That's what your new ethical systems have taught you—to steal my title and then give me some cock-and-bull legalistic justification?” demanded Page.

“I have just changed it to *Eros Wept* ,” said Cupid.

“Ready for your first criticism?” asked Page as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Yes, Nate.”

“You'll never get that title through.”

“Why not?” asked Cupid.

“For the same reason you couldn't get *Eros at Nadir* through if I let you have it—it's too goddamned downbeat and depressing.”

“Then I shall call it *Eros in Orbit* .”

“Excellent idea,” said Page wryly, as he walked to the office and sat down.

“Are you ready, Nate?” asked Cupid.

“Go ahead.”

Suddenly the tortured face of a beautiful woman, whom Page recognized as French Pastry, appeared.

“Stop,” said Page. “You've got two problems already.”

The holograph froze.

“But the Round is less than two seconds old,” said Cupid.

“Do you want my advice or don't you?” demanded Page.

“Yes, Nate.”

“Okay. First of all, you've got her backlit.”

“It is the style of most tragic paintings in my library banks.”

“Yeah, but tragic paintings are two-dimensional. This is a Round. She's going to be surrounded by the audience, and occasionally the holographs will surround a section of the audience. Either way, you can't backlight.”

“I will correct it, Nate.”

“And you haven't got an establishing shot.”

“What is an establishing shot, Nate?”

“A representation of where this girl is. When all we can see is her face, she could be in a room, a dungeon, a submarine, a spaceship, anywhere. You've got to establish that she's on the *Comet* ; otherwise the audience is going to be confused, and Bull del Grado's going to feel he's wasted his money buying the damned ship.”

“How much of the *Comet* must I show?” asked Cupid.

“How much of it are you going to use?” responded Page. “If you're going to keep it confined to a couple of rooms, show one of them. If not, if you're going to use the Mall and the casino and the fantasy rooms, you'd better track one of your characters all the way from the airlock to wherever it is that your initial confrontation occurs.”

“But that is unimportant.”

“To who—you, or the audience that you've been hired to entertain?”

“But there are important things I must impart to them. You know that.”

“One of the things you'd better realize is that they're not glued to their seats. If you bore 'em, they'll get up and leave.”

“Give me fifteen seconds to consider what you have told me, Nate,” said Cupid.

“Take thirty.”

“Fifteen will suffice,” replied the computer, as the holograph vanished.

Exactly fifteen seconds later, a holograph of one of the fantasy rooms appeared. A nude girl—once again French Pastry—cowered in a corner of a brick room while a balding, overweight patron, clad as a Roman senator, approached her, whip in hand. As he walked around a large pool and came within reach, he brought the whip down on her bare torso, and she collapsed.

“Stop,” said Page.

“Yes, Nate?” asked Cupid as the holograph froze.

“More problems.”

“What are they?”

“First of all, you haven't established the time and place again.”

“This is one of the fantasy rooms known as the Roman Bath,” answered Cupid.

“You know it, and now I know it—but I guarantee you that no one else will figure it out. Still, it's an easy

fix.”

“How, Nate?”

“Give the guy with the whip a wristwatch.”

“No one wore any modern devices in the fantasy rooms, Nate. It spoiled the illusion.”

“You're trying to get the audience to understand that this is an illusion,” explained Page patiently. “This is a simple way to do it.”

“Is that all?”

“No. You've got a lot of dead time on your hands.”

“Please explain.”

“One second into the scene this guy is approaching the girl with every intention of doing her bodily harm—and thirty seconds later nothing has changed. The opening scene of a Round sets the mood and the flavor for the whole production, and what you're telling them is that this is a slow, nonverbal, nonmusical entertainment in which the action is both violent and, still worse, interminable.”

“But it took him exactly that long to reach the girl.”

“Nobody cares.”

“That is an assumption.”

“Based on fifteen years in the business,” replied Page. “By the way, is that the girl he actually beat up?”

“No.”

“It's French Pastry, isn't it?”

“Yes,” answered Cupid.

“Are you trying to work off your residual guilt by having everyone else beat the shit out of her?” asked Page.

“No. I am incapable of emotion—and even if I were capable of it, I did nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Then why use her, when you're such a stickler for accuracy?”

There was an almost indiscernible pause.

“It seemed appropriate,” answered Cupid.

“Is she going to be in every scene?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“Then you've got even more problems. For one thing, she's going to have to sing damned near every song.”

“What is wrong with that?”



“No matter how good a singer she is, they're going to get tired of her, Cupid. They've come to be entertained by a whole cast, not just one woman.”

“That is an invalid criticism, Nate. There have been many successful one-woman shows in theatrical history—and this is not a one-woman show, but merely a Round in which the main character, who happens to be a woman, is in every scene.”

“Have you given any thought as to who's playing her?”

“No.”

“Well, you'd better—because Kips got some songs for singers and some for talkers, and before you can have her hitting Q above high C, you'd better make sure that she's got the ability to.” He smiled. “I might add that Angel Midnight does not.”

“They can dub her voice.”

“And they can use a stunt woman and a dancing double,” agreed Page. “All they're really paying Angel to do is take off her clothes and breathe deeply.” He paused. “Still, if this is to be the tragedy I think it is, sooner or later you're going to want her to act, and that's something the lady just can't do.”

“Then we'll get another actress,” said Cupid.

“She gets two million plus a percent of the gross,” replied Page. “It's a hell of a lot easier on the budget to get another writer.”

“Give me another minute to rewrite,” said Cupid.

“Gladly,” said Page. “And while you're at it, you'd better do some serious thinking about the bodies you're playing with.”

“I don't understand.”

“You start with a beautiful nude woman and a fat ugly clothed man. A lot of the women in the audience are going to take offense at that. Some of them might even leave.”

“Truly?”

“Have your scanners check out my blood pressure, or whatever it is they check when they're being lie detectors,” said Page.

“That will not be necessary, Nate.”

The image vanished, and Page, with a sigh, leaned back on his chair and sipped his coffee.

“Nate?”

“Yeah?”

“I have concluded that your opening might well be the most appropriate for a commercial form such as the Round.”

“I concluded that a long time ago,” said Page.

“I realize now just what strictures you must work under.”

“Thanks,” said Page wryly.

“But that still doesn't excuse your failure to use the conventions of the form to get to the truth.”

“People don't want to see the truth.”

“Then why do you think they'll want to read about it in book form?” asked Cupid.

“There are more books than Rounds. The costs are much smaller, books serve specialized interest groups, and you don't have to please as many people to break even.”

“Still, it seems to me that, having captured the audience's attention and goodwill, you could then incorporate the full tragic story of the *Comet* .”

“That's dramatically unfeasible,” replied Page.

“Why?”

“In the opening that del Grado rejected, I may have *depressed* the audience, but I didn't lie to them. To incorporate the true story of the *Comet* in the current version would make them feel duped. I'd begin by telling them that they're going to see a happy show with a lot of songs and jokes and a little spicy nudity—and suddenly I'd turn it into something grim and bleak. That breaks the unwritten contract between the writer and the audience, Cupid.”

“If it is unwritten, then it cannot be broken,” said Cupid. “The true story of the *Comet* deserves to be told.”

“*Deserves*,” repeated Page. “Well, at least that's a bit more reasonable than *must* .” He paused. “How were you going to bring that truth home? By showing French Pastry getting the hell kicked out of her and then contracting a venereal disease?”

“Yes.”

“It wouldn't work,” said Page.

“Why?”

“Because you're a machine. You're simply reporting facts, and facts have very little to do with truth.”

“That is contradictory, Nate.”

“Only to a machine,” replied Page. “You don't get tragedy without empathy, and not an awful lot of people are going to empathize with a woman who starts by getting whipped and then goes straight downhill from there. You've got to make them root for her, and you haven't given them an opportunity. She has to hope for something more than that a beating will stop. Maybe she wants to be a madam, maybe she deludes herself into thinking she'll marry one of the patrons, maybe she just wants to put together a bankroll and never think of her life as a whore again. But if you don't give her any goals except a cessation of pain, the audience can't sympathize with her except in a very detached way, the way they might sympathize with an animal that's being beaten.”

“But she never had such goals.”

“She's dead,” said Page. “You're not trying to resurrect her; you're trying to move the audience. Stop worrying about what she thought and felt, and start concerning yourself with what you want the audience to think and feel.”

“How can I do this?” asked Cupid.

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure that you can.”

“Why not?”

“Because the very best way to get an audience to empathize is to show them a tragedy and get them to say, ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ It works for military heroes and dying sopranos and explorers, none of which the audience was ever likely to become—but it won’t work for a prostitute.”

“Why is that?” asked Cupid.

“Because the myth of prostitution is that the practitioner loves the practice. People want to use whores, they want to think the prostitute is having the time of his or her lustful life, and they want to go home and forget them.” Page paused. “You want to know the *real* tragedy of the *Comet* ? It wasn’t that the whores were unhappy. Hell, everyone’s unhappy at some time or another. It’s that the nature of their business, the creation of the fantasy, worked so well that no one can look at this goddamned ship, with its chandeliers and silks and satins and gourmet chefs and casino and fantasy rooms, and *believe* that the whores were unhappy. To be unhappy with the consumers—the same kind of consumers who are going to be watching the Round, people who are willing to spend a bundle of money on a good dinner and an evening’s entertainment—is so unthinkable that they can’t believe it and won’t buy it. After all, if a whore is unhappy in these surroundings, it must be the client—and, by extension, if I’m the audience, it must be me—who is making her unhappy.” He smiled grimly. “*That’s* why we’ll never make a Round out of it, and that’s why *Eros at Nadir* will get great reviews and sell twenty-three copies.” Page paused for breath. “Does that answer your goddamned question once and for all?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And now you’ll stop nagging me and let me go back to making a living?”

“I have never hindered you from making a living.”

“You know damned well what I mean,” said Page.

“I have a suggestion, Nate.”

“I don’t think I want to hear it.”

The room was silent for a full minute.

“All right,” muttered Page resignedly. “Out with it.”

“I now know how to tell the true story of the *Velvet Comet* .”

“Jesus!” exploded Page. “Haven’t we just been through all that?”

“Yes. But our discussion has suggested an entirely different approach.”

“And you’re not going to let me get any peace until I hear it, right?” said Page. “All right, we might as well get it all out of your system at once. What’s your brilliant idea?”

“You can tell the true story of the *Velvet Comet* by writing a Round about an author who wants to write the truth about the *Comet* but is not permitted to.”

Page was silent for a moment. “You know,” he said at last, “you’re a goddamned clever machine.”

“Will you write it?”

Page shook his head. “No.”

“May I ask why not, since you implied that it is a clever idea?”

“Because that's not what del Grado's paying me to write.”

“But if it is a viable alternative —”

“I didn't say it was viable; I said it was clever. We'd still run into the same problem when we got down to the meat of the thing. I'll try it one more time. We respect an athlete or a politician or even an outlaw for the handicaps he overcomes; but *we* are the handicaps a whore has to overcome. That's more than the audience wants to hear.”

“Can you not give the audience more than they are paying for?”

“You're the one who called me the *Comet*'s last prostitute. Did any of my predecessors ever give the customers more than they paid for?”

“No, Nate. They did not.”

“Neither will I,” said Page. “People don't appreciate what they don't pay for—and in del Grado's case, I've got a feeling that he wouldn't understand it any more than he'd appreciate it. The man is paying for a chorus line of high-stepping whores and a few laughs and some songs they can walk out humming, and that's just what he's going to get.” He paused. “But I think I'll structure *Eros at Nadir* around a writer who isn't allowed to tell the truth, if that makes you any happier.”

“I am incapable of emotion.”

“I forgot,” said Page sarcastically. “You're only capable of criticism.”

“I am not criticizing you, Nate. I am simply searching for viable alternatives which will allow you to bring the truth to the people.”

“Look,” said Page, exasperated. “I've watched your goddamned holographs, I've explained my position to you, I've told you why people don't want to know the truth about whores. Hasn't that made any impression on you at all?”

“Yes, but —”

“No more ‘Yes buts!’” snapped Page. “The subject is closed.”

“Yes, Nate.”

“And it won't be reopened as long as I'm aboard the *Comet*. That's an order, and my understanding is that you have to take orders from anyone who works for del Grado.”

“That is true, Nate.”

“Now, I don't care if you write fifty scripts, each of them starring French Pastry, and every one of them capable of wringing tears from a rock. I don't want to hear them, I don't want to see them, and I don't want to know about them. Understand?”

“Yes, Nate.”

“I don't want to know anything else about how hard a whore's life is. I'm just a writer doing his job, and I damned near lost that job the last time I listened to you.”

“I have already apologized for that, Nate.”

“I don't want your fucking apologies!” snapped Page. “I want a little cooperation, and a little peace of mind. I'm sorry if the last batch of whores who worked up here are starving to death and putting funny chemicals into their veins, but it's not my goddamned fault.”

He paused. “You're del Grado's computer. He owns the *Comet*, so he owns you. If you've got any objections to the script from this point onward, tell them to del Grado.”

“It would be futile,” said Cupid. “He won't listen.”

“He's got a lot of company—including me,” said Page. “Now, as long as I'm awake, bring up the lyric I was writing for Homer Thryce just before dinner.”

Instantly a screen appeared, and a moment later Page was hard at work conjuring up a particularly facile triple*entendre* with two interior rhymes.

## Chapter 10

Murray Carnegie's smiling visage appeared above the tabletop.

“Hi, Murray,” said Page, not even bothering to hide his whiskey glass. “What's up?”

“I just got a personal call from Bull del Grado. He finished reading the new opening.”

“And?”

“Nate, *he loves* it! He's even increasing the budget by twenty percent!”

“Obviously a man of good taste,” commented Page wryly.

“Wait,” said Carnegie, barely able to contain himself. “I've got more.”

“Oh?”

“We played your song—what the hell's the title of it? You know, the one the whores all sing to Franco.”

“Play with Me,” said Page.

Carnegie nodded his head. “Right—‘Play with Me.’ Anyway, we played it for the Natice Sisters, and they're going to record it and put it in their nightclub act.”

“I guess that makes it a hit, all right,” said Page, impressed.

“More than that,” continued Carnegie. “Your share—yours and Kip Kamala's—of the royalties on it should come to about eighty thousand credits.”

“Not bad for an afternoon's work,” said Page.

“They've already made a payment of a hundred thousand credits, which means I've got five thousand apiece for you and Kip.”

“Do they want to hear the rest of the songs?”

“As soon as you get ‘em written,” Carnegie assured him.

“I’ll get to work on another one this afternoon,” Page promised. He leaned back and smiled. “So del Grado really liked it?”

“He thinks it’s the best plot he’s heard in years.”

“How many Rounds has he actually seen?” asked Page with a touch of cynicism.

“Don’t go putting yourself down,” said Carnegie. “This damned thing is a super show, Nate. Take my word for it—it’s going to run forever.” He paused.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Angel says to tell you she loves her name.”

“The Fallen Angel?”

Carnegie nodded. “She’s so high on the script that she’s even taking swimming lessons.”

“You can’t imagine how thrilled Kip will be,” said Page with a grin.

“Both of you should be thrilled,” said Carnegie.

“You’re about to become the hottest Round team in the business.” He paused. “As a matter of fact, I’ve lined up an interview for you this afternoon.”

“With who?”

“A guy called Cain Abel.”

“Come on, Murray,” said Page with a contemptuous snort. “*Nobody’s* called Cain Abel.”

“Who the hell cares what his real name is?” replied Carnegie. “He’s got a syndicated show that reaches two hundred million people on seventeen planets.”

“What kind of interview does he want?”

“Just a puff piece,” answered Carnegie. “Del Grado owns a number of the stations that subscribe to his show, so he’s predisposed to be friendly.”

“Okay,” said Page with a shrug. “It can’t hurt.”

They spoke for a few more minutes, and then Carnegie had to leave to attend another meeting.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said Page.

“Why should you be surprised?” asked Cupid. “You knew they were going to like the script.”

“But the Naticc Sisters!” said Page. “They don’t come any bigger than that—and it was such a stupid little song!” He paused. “Damn, I wish I had a cigar handy, or a bottle of champagne, or something to celebrate with!”

“I could try to synthesise some champagne,” offered Cupid.

Page shook his head. “No, thanks. It’s no good unless you can hear the popping sound when you open it.” He shifted in his chair. “I want to talk to Kamala. Contact him for me.”

A moment later Kipchoge Kamala's visage appeared.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Page.

Kamala grinned and nodded. "Looks like we're a success, partner."

"It sure as hell does," agreed Page. "I think we'd better write a song for Angel, Felicia, and whoever plays the Steel Butterfly."

"At least," agreed Kamala. "Maybe two or three.

And I've already instructed my agent to tell the Natice Sisters that we can do specialty material for their act. I mean, why should del Grado keep picking up ninety percent of the fees?"

"Right," said Page. "Have you got any of their recent hits on hand?"

"I'm way ahead of you, Nate. I've already had my computer feed them into Cupid." He smiled. "I'll take care of the notes they can't hit. You watch out for the words they can't pronounce."

"It's a deal," grinned Page.

"By the way, Nate, I've been thinking," said Kamala. "If we're going to be a team for the next couple of years, it'd make life a lot easier if we used the same agent."

"Makes sense," agreed Page. "Who are you using?"

"Arlene Renski. How about you?"

"Murray Carnegie."

"I've heard good things about him. What's he getting?"

"Ten percent."

"On royalties, too?"

"If I go into the hospital for a transfusion, Murray gets ten percent of the blood."

"Arlene's got a break point," said Kamala. "Ten percent of the first half million per year, eight percent thereafter."

"That makes the choice kind of easy," replied Page. "We're sure as hell going to be making more than that for the next few years."

"Have you got a contract with Carnegie?"

"Just verbal. Nothing I can't get out of. When can I meet with Arlene?"

"Anytime you want," answered Kamala. "Just say the word and I'll set it up."

"Wait until I'm back on Deluros next week and the three of us can get together."

"Okay, but..."

"But what?"

“I was just thinking,” said Kamala, “that if you dump him now, *before* we sign with the Natice Sisters, you'd save yourself a bit of money.”

“That's peanuts,” said Page. “And he probably deserves his cut of it. As long as I get rid of him before we sign for our next Round, or for any specialty material for the Natice Sisters, that'll be soon enough.”

“Well said,” replied Kamala. “I admire loyalty in a man—especially if he's going to be my partner.”

“Of course,” added Page, “if Arlene's got any clients who've got bit parts in *Eros in Orbit*, I suppose I could write in a few more lines for the proper consideration.”

“I'll let her know,” replied Kamala. He paused. “I hate to break this off, Nate, but I'm up against a deadline.”

“Another commercial?”

Kamala shook his head. “I'm ghosting a piano concerto for a grad student at the New Ecuador Conservatory of Music.”

“That's half a galaxy away from here,” said Page. “How the hell did he ever hear about you?”

“Grapevine,” replied Kamala noncommittally. “See you, pal.”

“So long,” said Page, as the composer broke the connection.

There was a momentary silence, which was finally broken by Cupid.

“You are not a nice man, Nate.”

“I thought you couldn't make moral judgments,” replied Page sardonically.

“I can when they're this clear-cut.”

“And you think it's not nice to get rid of my agent?”

“It is disloyal.”

“Yeah? Who do you take your orders from?”

“Del Grado Enterprises.”

“But for almost a century you took them from the Vainmill Syndicate,” noted Page. “Isn't that disloyal?”

“I was purchased by Del Grado Enterprises.”

“That was a financial transaction,” said Page. “What does it have to do with loyalty?”

Cupid was silent for almost a minute.

“I see,” it said at last.

“You know,” said Page, “I have an awful feeling that if I write *Eros at Nadir* the way you envisioned it, it's going to be a coming-of-age book about a computer instead of a tragic history of prostitution.”

“I am far older than you.”



“You've lived in your ivory-tower environment a lot longer,” said Page. “That's not the same thing.” He paused. “As for Murray, don't worry about him. He's got more money than he knows what to do with, anyway.”

“That will not assuage his feeling that you have cheated him.”

“I haven't cheated him out of anything. He's getting his ten percent off the Round, and he'll get it off whatever songs del Grado sells to the Natices Sisters, just like he's gotten ten percent of everything I've made for the past dozen years. But nothing lasts forever. Besides, he didn't feel all that sorry for the agent he took me away from after I'd sold my first Round.”

He paused again. “This is *business*, Cupid. If he thought he could get away with scalping me twelve or fifteen percent, he'd do it—and if I can make an extra hundred thousand credits a year by dumping him, he'll understand it, even if he's not thrilled about it. Besides, *Eros in Orbit* is going to make Franco a bigger star than ever; whatever income Murray loses when I leave, he'll more than make up off Franco's next role.”

“I understand.”

“You don't sound very happy about it.”

“I am incapable of emotion.”

“Sure you are.”

“But if I were capable of emotion,” continued Cupid, “I would be very unhappy that you have shown me this aspect of human behavior.”

“Growing pains,” said Page.

“I don't understand.”

“Up to now, you've only seen humans on vacation, fucking and eating and gambling, or working at jobs that are, by definition, demeaning, and when they didn't behave the way you wanted or expected them to, you could write it off to their being drunk or unhappy or just blowing off steam. Now you're finding out that those lustful, self-centered billionaires and downtrodden, emotionally abused whores are pretty typical of the rest of us, and you don't like what you're learning.”

“It is beyond my capacity to like or dislike facts.”

“Bullshit.” Page lit a cigarette. “And now, if it's not asking too much, start playing the Natices Sisters' songs that Kamala gave you.”

Page spent the next hour studying the lyrics and the intricate harmony, making an occasional note. Then the screen vanished and Cupid announced that Cain Abel was trying to make contact.

“Put him through,” said Page, after placing his glass on the floor out of the camera's range.

A moment later the image of a smartly tailored, precisely groomed young man appeared.

“Mr. Page?” he said.

“Right.”

“I am Cain Abel. I believe Mr. Carnegie told you about me?”

“He said you'd be getting in touch.”

“Have you ever seen my show?”

“I'm afraid I don't spend much time watching video,” replied Page.

“Oh,” said Abel, unable to hide his disappointment.

“Well, we try to cover topics of current interest, and hopefully inform our audience about forthcoming trends in the arts.”

“Well, I'm happy to cooperate in any way I can,” said Page. “Just let me know when you start recording.”

“I've already started,” said Abel with a smile. “If you're displeased with any of your answers, just state them again and we'll insert them in the proper places.”

“Got it,” assented Page. “I assume you'll be inserting your introduction as well?”

“That's correct.”

“Then ask away.”

“Fine,” said Abel. Suddenly he put on his most sincere face. “Tell me, Nate, what's it like to write a script for *Angel Midnight*?”

“It's like writing for anyone else,” said Page mechanically. “I never slant a script to a particular actor or actress. *Angel* is skilled enough to totally become any character I create.”

“Even a prostitute?”

“Especially a prostitute,” said Page.

Abel looked upset. “That's subject to misinterpretation, Mr. Page. Could I ask you for another answer?”

“Sure,” said Page. He paused for a moment. “I have every confidence in her ability to bring credibility to her role—and I didn't say that she was playing a prostitute.”

“But the action is set aboard the infamous *Velvet Comet*, isn't it?” asked Abel.

Page nodded. “But only half the people aboard the *Velvet Comet* were employees.”

“Then does she play a customer?” persisted Abel, as if the fate of the universe hung upon the answer.

“You'll just have to buy a ticket to find out, won't you?” replied Page with a smile.

“Much better!” enthused Abel, falling out of character for a moment. “*That* will sell some tickets!” Suddenly he became the serious interviewer again. “What kind of research does a writer do for something like *Eros in Orbit*, Nate?”

“Well, I've been living on the *Comet* —”

“Excuse me, Mr. Page,” Abel interrupted him.

“Could you please refer to it as the *Velvet Comet*? *Comet Condominiums* is one of our sponsors, and I wouldn't want any confusion.”

“No problem,” said Page. “I’ve been living on the *Velvet Comet* for the past week, getting the feel of it, studying its history, trying to find out how it functioned.”

“So one of the things you’re after is accuracy?”

“Absolutely,” replied Page earnestly. “This may be a work of fiction, but it’s based on fact, so naturally I want to get every detail right.”

“There has always been a fascination about prostitutes, Nate, and especially about those who worked aboard the *Velvet Comet*. What were they *really* like?”

“They were the most physically perfect group of men and women ever assembled, and they dedicated their lives to their particular art.”

“Were there any petty jealousies?”

Page shook his head. “They were the *crème de la crème*, and were all totally devoted to their work.”

“They can’t *tall* have loved their work,” said Abel. “Surely some of them were forced into prostitution by economic circumstances.”

“Not the *Velvet Comet*’s prostitutes,” said Page with conviction. “These aren’t street-corner whores we’re talking about. They were almost a separate social class, trained from earliest childhood in the sexual arts. It was the highest calling imaginable to them, and they were paid for their skills the way superstars in *any* field are paid. If any of them was unhappy, I sure as hell haven’t been able to find out about it.”

“Is this your first musical, Nate?”

“Well, it’s the first theatrical piece I’ve done that’s structured in traditional musical form,” answered Page. “But I did write *The Ballad of Billybuck Dancer*.”

“Ah, yes!” said Abel with a smile. “Who could ever forget that tense drama of the notorious killer? And of course you won a Bard for that script, didn’t you, Nate?”

Page nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“So writing historically correct dramas is nothing new to you?”

“No, it isn’t,” said Page.

“I know that you’ve also written a number of novels, including the critically acclaimed...” Suddenly Abel frowned. “I’ve forgotten the titles of your novels, Mr. Page. Is there one in particular you’d like me to mention?”

“*Feast at Eastertime* was probably the best of them,” said Page.

“I know that you’ve also written a number of novels, including the critically acclaimed *Feast at Eastertime* .

Which do you prefer, scripts or novels?”

“They each have their own fascinations,” said Page.

“But I think I prefer scripts, since it gives me a chance to present my message and my philosophy to a

larger audience.”

“What was it about *Eros in Orbit* that interested you in the project?”

“I’ve always had a fondness for whorehouses.”

“Please, Mr. Page.”

“I’ve always wanted to have Lubinski direct one of my works, and then there was the additional challenge of writing parts for actors of such range and virtuosity as Franco Vincenzo and Angel Midnight. And Homer Thryce,” he added as an afterthought.

“Homer Thryce? Isn’t he a character actor?”

“He’s going to be a star after *Eros in Orbit*,” promised Page.

“Do you think he’s worth an interview?” asked Abel, falling out of character again.

“Why not?” said Page with a shrug. “Hold off on it for a couple of weeks, though. He doesn’t know I’m making him a superstar yet.”

“Thanks for the tip, Mr. Page.”

“My pleasure. Anything else you want to know?”

“Just one last question.” He put on his interviewer’s face again. “Tell me, Nate—do they really all have hearts of gold?”

“Most of them do.”

“And the rest?”

Page smiled a knowing smile. “Platinum.”

## EPILOGUE

As the *Velvet Comet* spun slowly in space, Nate Page sat on a couch in the madam’s sumptuously furnished office-apartment complex, his feet on a coffee table, a glass of wine in his hand, a cigar burning in an ashtray, watching the premier showing of *Eros in Orbit*, and carefully checking the audience’s reaction to it.

The first act came to an end, and he watched the audience leave the casino, where the Round was being presented, and wander out to the ornate reception foyer, where free drinks and *hors d’oeuvres* were being offered.

Suddenly the scene was replaced by an image of Kipchoge Kamala’s smiling face.

“Well?” he said.

“It’s a hit,” replied Page.

“Sure as hell looks like it,” said Kamala. “I wish it wasn’t traditional for the authors to wait in the wings; I’d love to be right there, pressing flesh and listening to all the comments.” He paused and looked admiringly around his suite. “Still, as wings go, these are pretty luxurious.”

“True,” agreed Page. “At any rate, the comments should be favorable. They laughed in all the right

places. You know, old Homer's even better than I thought he'd be. Maybe Arlene had better have a little talk with him one of these days."

"I think having the Natice Sisters release 'Play with Me' last month was a stroke of genius," said Kamala.

"Did you hear the audience? They sang the damned thing right along with the girls!" Suddenly he looked at his timepiece. "Gotta run."

"What's the problem?" asked Page.

"There's a writer in the next room, doing a story on opening night. Arlene thought it would sound good if she told him I always get the jitters, so now I've got to race to the bathroom every ten minutes so I won't make a liar out of her." He grinned. "I time it so I'm always back to hear the songs. That way I can look quietly proud while he takes holos of my reactions."

He broke the connection, and Page took another sip of his wine.

"Nate?"

"What is it, Cupid?"

"I've been thinking."

"That's what you're paid to do," said Page magnanimously. "Me, I'm paid to write hits."

"I've been thinking about *you*."

"Me?" repeated Page. "You haven't even seen me in—what's it been now?—eight months."

"Seven."

"You look a lot different," said Page. "All dolled up like in the old days."

"That was del Grado's idea. After work was done on the Round, he turned the Comet into a corporate retreat."

"I'm glad he didn't turn you off."

"I am much too expensive to deactivate," replied Cupid. "Within the next two decades, I will be in full operation again."

"As a whorehouse?" asked Page, surprised.

"As an office complex."

"As long as he was going to spend all this money anyway, you'd think he might have put a couple of credits into this room back when I was stuck here writing his goddamned hit for him." He shrugged.

"Oh, well, what's the difference? I'm off to Zeta Tau III tomorrow."

"May I ask why?"

"Kip and I just signed to do a Round for a cool million credits."

"And it is to take place on Zeta Tau III?"

“Right.”

“Are you aware that Zeta Tau III is also known as Walpurgis III?” asked Cupid. “And that it was the last residence of Conrad Bland?”

“Of course I know that,” said Page. “We’re doing a musical biography of Bland.”

“I would not have thought his life would lend itself to a musical Round,” said Cupid.

“Why the hell not?”

“He was a genocidal maniac who killed twenty-eight million men and women.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“He has been dead for only 119 years.”

“We’re presenting a revisionist view of him,” replied Page. “Lots of songs, lots of girls.” He looked around. “What happened to the audience?”

A holograph of the crowd in the foyer appeared over the tabletop.

“Goddamn!” said Page with a satisfied smile. “They look happy, don’t they?”

“I cannot tell, since I myself am incapable of emotion.”

“Then take my word for it,” said Page.

“I will.” Cupid paused. “Have you begun work on *Eros at Nadir* ?”

Page shook his head. “Haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

“I am able to open my memory and library banks to you when you start writing it.”

“Thanks.”

“I will be anxious to read it when it is completed.”

Page sighed. “Since we both know that I’m never going to write it, why don’t you just let the fucking subject drop?”

“Why aren’t you going to write it, Nate?”

“Because I looked at *Feast at Eastertime* when I left here the last time, and it’s a pompous, pretentious piece of shit. What I’m really good at is turning out Rounds for assholes.”

“I am sorry.”

“You’re incapable of emotions, remember?”

“Nevertheless.”

“Well, don’t be. You can’t be the best at everything—and I’m the happiest, best-paid Round writer you’re ever going to meet. Writing books was a pain in the ass, anyway—it took too much work and didn’t make enough money.”

“I believe you.”

There was a pause.

“What were we talking about?” asked Page at last.

“I mentioned that I had been thinking about you.”

“For seven months? That's about a million years in computer time.”

“Longer.”

“And what are your conclusions?”

“That you are a selfish, immoral man.”

“I live in a selfish, immoral world,” replied Page with no show of anger.

“You are also exceedingly self-centered.”

“That's just what my ex-wives used to say,” remarked Page wryly.

“That is why they left you.”

“It goes with having an artistic temperament.”

“It goes with being shallow and empty,” replied Cupid. “The men and women who worked aboard the *Comet* were many things good and bad, but they were never self-centered.”

“The men and women who worked aboard the *Comet* were a bunch of whores who would sell their bodies to anyone, and were in violation of the laws of most of civilized society.”

“I did not say that I approved of them.”

“One would never know it to listen to you,” said Page irritably.

“They could not help being what they were,” replied Cupid. “And so I forgave them.”

“I've had enough of your moral superiority!” snapped Page. “You haven't changed in seven months.”

“I have been constantly changing since I first met you.”

“Well, change quietly,” said Page, glancing at his timepiece. “The second act is about to start.”

The Round suddenly appeared above the tabletop, and Page watched in silence for the next eighty minutes. Then, as the images flickered and faded out one by one, the audience arose in a standing ovation and demanded that Angel, Franco, and even Homer come up onto the stage to take a bow.

“Nate?”

“What now?”

“Bull del Grado has requested that you and Kipchoge Kamala come to the casino so that he can introduce the two of you to the audience.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Page, finishing his wine and getting to his feet.

“Will you be going home after leaving the casino?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. I've got to pack before I take off for Zeta Tau III.”

“I have learned a lot while working with you, Nate,” said Cupid.

“Wonderful,” said Page impatiently, waiting for the door to slide back.

“This is doubtless the last time we shall ever communicate with one another. It has been an interesting experience for me.”

“Ditto,” said Page. “Now do you mind opening the door?”

“I will open it, but first I have one final thing to say to you.”

“Not another lecture, I hope.”

“No, Nate.”

“Good,” said Page. “Hurry it up. I don't want to keep my panting public waiting.”

“I forgive you too, Nate,” said Cupid.

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