

Sepoy

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There had been a time, near the end of the twentieth century, when very few people would have believed anything like the Tucfra Hegemony would ever be necessary. Then the global temperature had risen almost 50 percent faster than those unpleasant forecaster types had said it might, the tides had washed away beaches from the Riviera to the Great Barrier Reef, Londoners had discovered they couldn't get through an English May without an air conditioner, and it had seemed a little matter like the exact amount of fumes and radiation each city or province could dump into the atmosphere might be a *causede guerre* after all. When the tucfra ship had orbited Earth in 2044, three small wars had already gone nuclear, the United States was lurching toward its second devolution, the Austro-Hungarian Economic Bloc was exchanging threatening faxes with the Russo-Turkish Defense Pact, and humanity had only been saved from a global plague, brought on by an attempt to use biological weapons, by a notably ruthless decision by the last prime minister of the Republic of India.

Intellectually, Jason Jardanel was willing to admit—in the privacy of his own thoughts, anyway—that the Hegemony had probably kept his fellow humans from wiping out every vestige of organized society on their planet. When he was confronted with the kind of suggestion he had just heard, however, he reacted like every upright, thoroughly conventional citizen of the New England Confederation was supposed to react.

“I'm a human,” Jason told the woman lying beside him. “I'm not a tucfra. I'm not a seep. I'm a human.”

The words hadn't come out that way, of course. She had caught Jason by surprise, while he had been languidly contemplating the ceiling of his bedroom, and he could still become almost unintelligible when a surge of emotion went racing through his psyche and he forgot to shape each syllable with extreme care. In the sentences Marcia Woodbine had actually heard, “human” had sounded more like *hammen*, “tucfra” like *tafre*, “not a seep” like *naughtahhsip*. Earlier Marcia had lifted Jason out of his wheelchair. Later she would cradle his skinny, flabby body in her arms and lift him out of bed.

He had thought she was just another one of those women who improved their opinions of themselves by dispensing sexual charity. They seemed to come along every year or two and he never turned them down if they were reasonably presentable. There had even been one or two he had liked.

“They thought you would feel that way,” Marcia Woodbine said. “They told me I could tell you this was an offer that should stay open for some time. Your records apparently indicate you've got just the kind of intelligence they need the most—the ability to think very fast when you're confronted with practical problems.”

Jason stared at the ceiling. Twenty minutes ago, when he had opened his eyes between gasps, he had seen her, astride, towering above him, her breasts swinging from side to side, her face, with the close cut black hair, looking like it belonged on a Greek vase. There had been a young violinist in a North Pacific chamber orchestra, five years ago, who had looked like that. Jason had played a video of the chamber version of Sallinen's *Shadows* eight times just so he could look at her. He had never quite admitted to himself, at the time, that he had played it for that reason, but he had.

“They said I should also make it clear they would have to pick the body type they give you. It's apparently very important you look a certain way for the kind of jobs they have in mind.”

It was a subtle approach, but Marcia couldn't quite pull it off. Jason could have picked up the tension in her voice if he had been listening to her through a concrete wall. *That's the offer we're making you*, Marcia was saying. *You can have a real body. You can walk around. You can pursue women. You just have to serve us. You just have to take the oath. To Us.*

“I’m also supposed to tell you some of the things they have in mind will be dangerous. They’re not offering you a picnic.”

“I think you had better go,” Jason said.

This time every syllable he fabricated would have earned him a happy shout of praise from the speech therapy program he had worked with when he was five. The pace he was speaking at, on the other hand, would have given most people apoplexy. Jason had never walked along an icy street but he had long ago learned that strong feelings affected him the same way slippery walks affected pedestrians. He could only handle them by creeping along syllable by syllable.

“I ... would ... ap ... pre ... ci ... ate ... it ... if ... you ... would ... take ... me ... out ... of ... this ... bed ... and ... go.”

\* \* \* \*

Two minutes after the door closed behind her, Jason was sitting in front of his desk with his wheelchair plugged into his information system. He had been working when Marcia had rung his bell and the work still had to be finished before the end of the day.

There were people Jason knew who would be happy to argue that he already had a functioning body. Some of the more radical techies would even have claimed the artificial physique he already possessed was bigger and more powerful than the best merely organic body the tucfra could grow in their medical centers. Every important item in Jason's apartment—the refrigerator, the cooking units, the doors, everything—was linked to a dual-input interface that would respond to two types of instructions: voice commands and signals from the control panel built into the right arm of his wheelchair. The personal service unit in his bedroom had even been outfitted with attachments that could handle most of his routine dressing and undressing. Jason spent 23 percent of his income on a personal service agency that sent two people around once a day, but he could sit here in his room alone, manipulating the devices that were linked to his computer, and do most of the things he needed to do without any help from anyone.

The speakers on his entertainment system could respond to the subtlest variations in bow pressure a violinist could transmit to the human ear. The entire ten by twelve wall on his left could be converted into a high-resolution screen. His communications equipment connected him to a net that could provide him with companions and entertainments that could be located anywhere in the world. He had received so many calls from his friends last week that he had been forced to set up a privacy block just so he could have some time to himself.

What difference could a new body make?

The image on Jason's primary screen was the score of a string quartet by M.K. Sun, a composer who had written over a hundred and twenty quartets during the thirty years she had been an active producer. The first great Oriental composer to write in traditional Western forms, Sun had been a successor to the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean performers whose violins and cellos had been such a notable presence on the world's concert stages since the last decades of the twentieth century. Jason's employers, the Hartford Quartet, played a selection from Sun's output at almost every concert on their schedule. They relied on Jason to search Sun's catalog, analyze the available data on the audience they were going to be playing for, and come up with a selection that fitted the audience profile. For over six years now Jason had been planning the quartet's programs, making their travel arrangements, arranging alternate programs when one of them became sick, and even handling their fund raising.

“Scroll,” Jason said. “Tempo—moderato 105. Execute.”

The score scrolled across the screen at about the tempo Jason's four employers would probably play it. His brain turned the notes into a musical daydream that was probably a good approximation of the way they would interpret it. Sun was noted for the elegant surface polish of her compositions but that external sheen always covered a structure that was as complex as anything Bach had ever produced. She had, in effect, treated the string quartet as if it was a traditional Oriental art form such as haiku or Chinese brush painting.

A light glowed under a loudspeaker. The voice of his apartment building's security system superimposed itself on the music dancing in his head. "Jason Jardanel has a visitor. Name—William Patros, Department of Internal Security. Message: I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes, Mr. Jardanel, if it isn't inconvenient."

\* \* \* \*

Patros had a round, youthful face and one of those medium-sized bodies that seem to have a lot of shoulder. His companion was named Jeanette O'Keefe and she was taller and older.

"We have some questions about the woman who just left here, Mr. Jardanel. Is there any chance she said something that indicates she may be employed by an organization that may be associated with the tucfra? We already have a number of indications that she is, but we'd naturally like to accumulate all the direct testimony we can put in our files."

Jason let his head slump to one side. His right hand rose off the arm of his chair and he let it wander around aimlessly for several seconds, as if he had started to make a gesture and lost control. There were times, Jason had long ago learned, when his condition had its uses.

"You think ... Marcia ... may be ... a seep?"

"It would probably be more accurate to say we know she is."

"I'm afraid this was a ... purely social ... visit. I don't think she said anything at all about ... poli ... tics."

"Is this the first time she's visited you like this?"

Jason's mouth shaped itself into a twisted smile. "It's the first time she's been here alone."

"We have reason to think she sometimes makes people offers—that she often functions as a recruiter."

One of the software packages stored in Jason's electronic files was a counseling program designed for people with his "difficulties." He was well aware, thanks to the time he had spent with the program, that people with his condition had a natural tendency to be accommodating. When you were totally dependent on others, an abrasive personality was not a survival characteristic. Now, looking up at Patros's face, Jason had to fight the reflex that encouraged him to give his visitors whatever they wanted.

His mouth twisted into another smile. "I don't think she thought I was the right ... physical type."

"What did she offer you?" Jeanette O'Keefe said. "A new body?"

O'Keefe had been leaning against the wall on which Jason had hung his little collection of antique instruments, with her head only half a nod from a twentieth century replica of a wooden Baroque flute. She slid into the conversation without making the slightest shift in her position.

“Marcia Woodbine came here ... like many women ... because she wanted to be ... kind. There are ... women ... who seem to ... respond ... that way.”

“And you're in the habit of accepting their kindness?”

“She is very ... attractive.”

“Recruiting for seeps is illegal in our Confederation, Mr. Jardanel. So is failure to report it.”

It was a statement that was so obvious Jason might have smiled if he had heard anyone else throw it into a conversation. There was probably no political unit on Earth in which the word *seep* could arouse so much hostility.

In the nineteenth century, a few thousand British subjects had ruled millions of Indians by working through soldiers and civil servants recruited from among the Indians themselves. In the twenty-first century, a couple of thousand aliens managed eight billion human beings with the aid of several million human agents. In the Indian section of the British Empire, British officers had commanded regiments of Indian soldiers who had been called sepoys. In the world of the Tucfra Hegemony, the tucfra were the real power behind the UN “peace force,” the UN civil service, and an army of “consultants,” spies, and secret agents who had infiltrated every society on the globe. The New England Confederation had been forced to accept the presence of a tucfra embassy—but its flag was a globe guarded by a rattlesnake, and its laws and attitudes matched the sentiments expressed by the flag.

“We enjoyed a ... purely social ... afternoon. I'm afraid I can't help you with your ... investigation.”

“If she didn't offer you a new body yet,” O'Keefe said, “she will. It's one of the major bribes they use to gain recruits. They've probably had their eye on you for years.”

“I'm a human being. Ahm nawht ... a ... seep.”

“A new body can be a very hard incentive to resist, Mr. Jardanel,” Patros said.

“I've ... become ... fonder ... of this one than you might think. It has its ... defects ... but it's mine.”

It wasn't the best sally he had ever come up with, but Patros smiled anyway. “There are studies,” Jason said, “of the way ... people with disabilities ... react to changes in their situation. It isn't ... cut and dried. People have committed ... suicide ... after ... beneficial ... changes. Big changes involve ... alterations ... in your self-image ... in your relations to others.”

“The tucfra seem to have other ideas,” O'Keefe said. “Whole body replacement technology is the one medical procedure they seem to be absolutely determined to keep out of our hands. Every human researcher who's ever tried to develop the technology has either been co-opted by them or sidetracked in some other way. It's the most important reward they have to offer collaborators, and they know it. The British imperialists used to keep the poorest people in their society living in the worst kind of poverty so they could recruit them into their armies. The tucfra spread viruses that turn people like you into cripples and then keep us from developing the only technology that will help you so they can offer a bribe very few people can bring themselves to refuse.”

“I'm not ... interested ... in becoming a seep. I might like a new body but that doesn't mean I will do ... anything ... to get it.”

O'Keefe pushed herself away from the wall. She closed the space between them with three long, easy-going strides. Jason raised his head and found himself looking up at a taut, angry face that looked just like all the indignant masks he had seen on a thousand news videos.

“We expect loyal citizens to cooperate with the authorities, Mr. Jardanel,” O'Keefe said. “The people we are opposing have voluntarily terminated their membership in the human race. There is no reason why *anytrue* human should be unwilling to help us deal with them.”

\* \* \* \*

Jason had been eleven when his parents had made him stop watching the adventures of Captain Rhena Krishmikari and her sidekick, Lieutenant John White. Most boys that age had watched the other show and identified with Major Khan Singh and his sidekick, curvy Special Agent Dori Chang. Even then Jason had been the kind who would rather watch a woman when it came time for the lead to jump out of a helicopter or shoot it out with a South American dictator who was testing new bacteriological weapons in his underground torture chamber. He had already known that, for him, there was no point in *identifying* with anyone, male or female, who did things like that.

The first time his father had caught him, his parents had disconnected his TV control for two hours. The next time it had been disconnected for two days.

They had been even firmer, a year later, when he had searched the library for information on the controversy over his disease and discovered that the official position of the New England Confederation could be shattered by any kid with a keyboard who had the guts to ask the right questions. It had taken him less than ninety minutes to decide that the virus that had poisoned his major motor nerves had been developed by a human government, several years before the arrival of the tucfra, and spread by human carelessness. He had even located three different studies—by epidemiologists from three different countries—that proved that the virus had traveled from the Arabian desert to the regions that had the strongest commercial ties with the Saudi regime. He had spent five happy minutes savoring one more proof that adults were just as dumb as his thirteen-year-old ego had known they were—and then his mother had entered the room, and he had seen the terror in her eyes when she had realized he was looking at a map that showed the areas with the highest incidence of the disease were Singapore and the metropolitan concentrations that surrounded Tokyo and Los Angeles.

There was no legal way the government of the New England Confederation could keep him from any information he really wanted. Legally, he could just phone the library and the database software would routinely transmit any video or written document anyone on Earth had filed in an information system. This was New England, after all—a republic which was carrying on the best traditions of the human race, as they had been embodied in the Constitution of the United States of America. And even if the library wouldn't cooperate with his request—how could you keep a kid from pressing the right buttons on his TV and picking up the stuff that came pouring down from the UN satellites?

The answer could be seen in the way Jason turned away from O'Keefe's face as she bent over him—and the way O'Keefe reached out, without any hesitation, confident he wouldn't object, and turned his head back toward her eyes. A republic didn't need censorship laws when it had private citizens who were willing to write S's on people's cheeks with well-directed lasers—or apply plastique and napalm to the homes of parents who didn't exercise proper supervision of their children. Jason's father had regularly “donated” 5 percent of his income to the COH—the Children of Humanity. He had even run little errands for the COH when he had to travel out of the Confederation on business. Jason's mother had understood, without anyone telling her in so many words, that the amateur chamber music groups she organized were only supposed to play music that had been written by composers who were “certifiably

human.”

At one point, O'Keefe went up to Jason's desk and removed the cartridge interface that translated his slurred vocalizations into signals his computer could react to. She stared at it thoughtfully, glanced across the room to make sure Jason had seen her, and then replaced it in its slot.

Jason hadn't looked at the clock when Patros and O'Keefe had entered his apartment, but he knew Marcia had left him a little after four. By five thirty, they had been harassing him for over an hour. There had been no blows and no overt threats, but what difference did that make? There were a thousand ways in which O'Keefe and her buddies in the COH could turn him into a helpless lump of misery. For the few seconds O'Keefe had been holding the interface cartridge in her hand, he had been totally isolated from most of the systems he would need in any emergency in which he couldn't use a keyboard.

“All we need is a single statement from you,” Patros said. “If Woodbine didn't do it this time, then she'll do it sooner or later. We can't do anything legally without a statement from someone who's been approached. It doesn't matter if she did it just now or if she does it the next time you see her. All you have to do is give us a call.”

“You can even invite her back,” O'Keefe said. “Nobody's going to object if you have a little fun first. We're a lot more understanding than people give us credit for.”

\* \* \* \*

Marcia had given him two numbers he could contact, with some mumbo-jumbo he could go through if he wanted to make it look like he was making an ordinary business call that had been encrypted for conventional business reasons. The call could go to Atlanta—to the hotel where the Hartford Quartet was currently staying—and from there it would go to a tucfra installation in the Carolina Federation which would relay it to its true destination. The encryption process was supposed to be some kind of gee-whiz development that the tucfra were “confident” the security agencies in the New England Confederation couldn't decode, Marcia had claimed. They would know he had made an encrypted call, but that would be it.

“Except, of course,” Jason had said, “that they'll also know I just happened to call someone who has access to that kind of encryption software.”

“It still won't give them any usable evidence. The Confederation courts tend to be strict about things like that. You've got a lot of fanatics in this area, but your courts tend to be just as fanatic about procedures.”

He called the number that was supposed to put him in touch with Marcia herself, and she popped on the screen seconds after he had initiated the process. It only took her a moment to recover from her initial shock and get herself under control. She was sitting in her dining room having dinner with a friend, and she had to keep her thoughts to herself until she could step into another room.

“I'm sorry, Jason,” she said when she had settled into her bedroom. “I wouldn't have said a word to you if I'd known that could happen. This is the first time I've ever gotten any indication they've been watching me.”

“I wouldn't assume ... O'Keefe ... is going to worry about the ... legal issues. She probably wants a statement from me so she can convince her ... superiors ... in the COH she isn't just ... killing people ... at random. Don't assume she'll leave you alone if she doesn't get it.”

“My superiors will probably pull me out of this territory as soon as they think they can. The main thing

we have to worry about is what happens to you. My personal recommendation is that you should go ahead and cooperate with them. Unless you're willing to take up my offer, of course.”

“I called you to warn you.”

“Then I suggest you cooperate with them. I can guarantee you all the tucfra I've ever met would give you the same advice.”

“If I call ... O'Keefe ... and tell her you just tried to ... recruit me ... it will be just like I gave her permission to ... kill ... you. I've seen how she looks, Marcia. I've ... looked ... at ... her ... face.”

“You're under no obligation to protect me, Jason. I made a stupid mistake somewhere, and now it's up to me to look after myself. The longer you wait before you cooperate with them, the more it's going to look like you were giving me time to get away. You have to go on living here. You've already done more than anybody could expect of you just by making this call.”

“Is that another example of the ... moral principles ... our lords and masters are supposed to be teaching us?”

“The tucfra have a civilization that is thousands of years older than ours. They've created a society that can live with weapons of mass destruction and all the other technical developments that nearly destroyed our own civilization. Their entire civilization is based on the idea that all the individuals in a technological society have to live by certain principles—and stand by them, even when it means they might be better off as individuals if they didn't. I put you in danger when I approached you. That means I'm expected to act like someone who has taken on certain obligations. They wouldn't want me to act any other way.”

“And while you're getting yourself ... killed ... worrying about me, two thousand aliens are ... gobbling up ... fifteen percent of all the goods and services produced on earth.”

“We're alive. We have a functioning world government. The global temperature has dropped almost a full degree. The imbalance in the distribution of wealth has been corrected to the point where half the people in the poorest country on Earth have the same standard of living as the population of Europe. We might have accomplished all that without them, but we've got several thousand years of history that indicate we wouldn't have.”

He couldn't see her back, but he knew it was about as stiff and proud as a human spine could take. Her face was glowing with the kind of idealism you saw on the faces of the actors they used in the recruiting videos that the United Nations regiments sent down over the satellites.

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O'Keefe forced her way onto Jason's primary screen seconds after he broke the connection with Marcia.

“You made an encrypted call,” O'Keefe said.

“It was a ... business ... call. I always ... encrypt ... business calls.”

“With a type of encryption even the Department of Internal Security can't decrypt? You aren't being frank with us, Jason. You apparently have access to some exceptionally advanced encryption software. A loyal citizen should be eager to give his government the opportunity to put a product like that to good use.”

“It ... was ... a ... private ... business ... call. There is no reason why any ... government ... agency should be ... monitoring ... my phone.

“The government agency can monitor your phone, Jason, on the grounds that you belong to a category that is very attractive to recruiters and have been seen with someone who is believed to be a recruiter—and you know as well as I do that the activities of the government agency in question are not your primary worry.”

\* \* \* \*

He called the second number Marcia had given him, and told the gatekeeper who answered the phone that he wanted to speak to one of the people who was really in charge. The gatekeeper spent a few seconds fussing over a computer screen, but apparently Marcia had filed all the relevant information. The trim figure that replaced the gatekeeper could have been the same tucfra officer that Captain Rhena had always chatted with when she had received the lowdown on the latest mission the video script writers had dreamed up for her. The tucfra generally preferred the bodies of athletic males in their late thirties or early forties when they chose to sample the pleasures available to beings who had been endowed with a human physiology. There were rumors that they sometimes entertained themselves by assuming the bodies of panthers or wolves when they were alone in their private domain in the Sahara, but there was no evidence that that was true. No one had ever seen a tucfra who didn't look like a debonair, totally relaxed human male in the prime of life.

“I've already examined Ms. Woodbine's reports,” the tucfra said. “Please feel free to assume I've been fully informed about your present situation.”

“I want to know—will she be ... safe ... if I co ... operate with them?”

“I can only repeat what Ms. Woodbine has already told you, Mr. Jardanel. The best advice we can give you is to urge you to cooperate with your visitors at once—unless, of course, you're willing to accept our offer. I can assure you no one involved in this situation will engage in any action that will give our adversaries in your region the impression that you tried to give her time to escape.”

“I'm asking about *her* . Will ... she ... be ... safe?”

“We are giving her the best possible support someone in her situation can receive. I can't go into any more detail than that, obviously, but I think you know enough about us to know we don't abandon anyone who has given us their support.”

“Can you ... guarantee ... she'll be safe? Can you ... give me ... your word?”

The tucfra smiled thinly. This was the first time Jason had ever actually talked to a tucfra, but they both knew he had probably read fifty essays and editorials on tucfra ethics and stared at his share of the two-minute ethical pep-talks the tucfra PR experts had scattered along the electronic byways. No species, the tucfra propagandists claimed, could survive the impact of high technology without a scrupulous sense of personal honor. There was no concept in tucfra ethics that was more critical. The army of lawyers that had infested the old United States had been a sure sign, according to this theory, that the old society could not handle the complexities created by technology. No one could write laws that could guide people through that level of complexity.

“There's no way in the world anyone can promise you that, Mr. Jardanel. That would be about the most dishonorable thing I could do, in fact. All I can tell you is that I know Ms. Woodbine well. I can assure you she's just as anxious to have you look out for yourself as I am. Your concern for her is exactly the

type of reaction we are looking for in the people we would like to recruit. It would be a great loss if anything happened to you.”

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It had been three years since Jason had run the video of the North Pacific Chamber Orchestra playing Sallinen's *Shadows*. The young violinist sitting at the second desk didn't look as much like Marcia as his memories had indicated, but he could see how she and Marcia could activate the same areas of his psyche. The violinist was slimmer and younger than Marcia, with a spray of freckles over the bridge of her nose, but she had the same clean features, the same milky complexion, the same air of easy competence.

The speaker over his door emitted a genteel beep. An auxiliary screen lit up, and he found himself looking at Patros's face. “Would you mind if I come up, Mr. Jardanel? I'm afraid I have to trouble you again.”

Jason glanced at his clock. It had been just about thirty minutes since he had left the appropriate message on the security agent's information system. His wording had been mildly ambiguous—*I'm just calling to tell you I've received the offer you were interested in*—but it should have given Patros all the support he needed for whatever he and O'Keefe were planning to do next.

“Dedya gamah ... message?”

“I'm happy to say we did. And we appreciate it very much, too.”

The elevator was equipped with a security camera that came on automatically whenever the elevator door slid open. The camera was mounted just below the ceiling, so Jason got a good view of the way the light played across O'Keefe's hair as she slipped into the elevator after Patros.

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Marcia's face filled Jason's primary screen. On the auxiliary screen on the left, Jason could see the wide-angle view that displayed the carefully arranged tableau his own system was transmitting. He was slumped in his chair with his weight resting on his right side. O'Keefe was standing behind the chair with her left hand resting on his shoulder.

“There's a police office three blocks from here,” Marcia said. “I can turn myself in there in ten minutes.”

Jason closed his eyes and concentrated on the relaxation technique his speech therapy program had taught him. He formed the first carefully shaped syllable of the speech he had worked out in his head and O'Keefe reached around him as soon as she heard the strangled beginnings of a sound and covered his mouth with her left arm. She patted him on the cheek with her right hand, as if she was soothing a child, and Jason cringed when he saw the look on Marcia's face.

“We think it would be best if you came here,” O'Keefe said. “This is a security matter, not a police matter.”

“As I understand it,” Marcia said, “you are not an official of the Department of Internal Security. I am perfectly willing to give myself up and stand trial. But I believe it would be best if I surrendered to an authorized police officer.”

“Mr. Patros is a fully accredited official of the Confederation government. We are not here to negotiate with you. We want you here *now*. I'm certain Jason feels the same way.”

O'Keefe's hand tightened on Jason's bony, under-muscled shoulder. Marcia stared out of the screen for a moment and then tipped back her head. Her face took on the same recruiting-video glow that Jason had seen before.

\* \* \* \*

“At least we don't have to worry about whether or not she'll come,” O'Keefe said. “That's one of the few advantages we have over these people. She wouldn't leave you here now if the tucs had an armored helicopter hovering over her apartment, ready to take her straight to whatever hole they've got waiting for her.”

“And you use ... that ... against her?”

“She's an enemy of the human race, Jason. She doesn't have any more in common with you or me than a worm does.”

O'Keefe and Patros had been carrying bulky equipment bags when they had entered the apartment. Now they had both slipped into armored tunics and lowered visored combat helmets over their heads. As every action-adventure enthusiast knew, the helmets were essentially an infantry version of the command and control technology that was routinely crammed into combat planes and armored vehicles. The technology packed into the helmets included components that could guide the wearer's aim, sensors that could maintain a 360 degree watch on their surroundings, offensive electronic devices that would attempt to disrupt whatever command and control devices Marcia might manage to conceal on her person, and an expert system which could evaluate the situation and coordinate the efforts of a three-person combat team faster than any individual member of the team could think.

Patros saw Jason staring at the hardware and gave him a shrug. “You can't take too many precautions,” Patros said. “A lot of these people have been enhanced. Our friends in the Sahara have ways they can enhance muscles and nervous systems even when they let their agents keep their original bodies.”

“There's no such thing as a human seep,” O'Keefe said. “They may *look* human, but it's just a facade. That wasn't a woman in your bed, Jason. It was a thing.”

They had both shoved their hands into gloves and snapped leads to wires that connected the gloves with a junction hidden under their tunics. The tunics looked bulky and awkward compared to the stylish body armor Jason had seen in videos, but the video equipment had normally been worn by characters who represented organizations that could devote unlimited resources to glamorous weaponry.

“Jason Jardanel has a visitor,” the security system said. “Name—Marcia Woodbine.”

“Say the words, Jason,” O'Keefe said. “We can always let her in with the keyboard.”

“Admit ... the ... visitor.”

The security cameras picked Marcia up as she entered the elevator and followed her down the hall toward Jason's door. The dressy black cape she was wearing had a swing and heft that made her look like a fashion model.

Something hard pressed against the side of Jason's neck. He pulled away from it, and O'Keefe shifted toward the front of his field of vision and let him see the bulky little weapon she was holding in her hands.

“Just sit still,” O’Keefe said. “This is not the time to get fidgety, Jason.”

Patros was standing on the other side of the room, where he would be located on Marcia's left side when she came through the door. Jason rolled his eyes in that direction and saw the security agent checking the electronics on a gun that had come off the same assembly line as the item O’Keefe had just brought to his attention.

Marcia had come to a stop two steps from the door. She waited without saying anything, and Jason realized O’Keefe and Patros were deliberately making her stand there.

Patros turned his head toward the microphone over the door. “We would appreciate it if you would take off your cape. Please do it in full view of the camera.”

Marcia slipped her cape off her shoulders and let it fall onto the floor behind her. She was wearing the same kind of pants and pullover outfit she had been wearing the last time she had come here, but she looked stiffer and less bouncy.

“I’ll take her,” O’Keefe said. “Forget that. I’ll take her.”

Patros turned his visor toward her and then shrugged. “Just don’t take too long. I wouldn’t give her a second myself.”

“She’s a traitor. She should know that she’s being executed.”

It took Jason a moment to realize that he had been listening to two-thirds of a three-way conversation. The expert system in their helmets could talk to both of them through their earphones. It had apparently told them that Patros should shoot Marcia from the side—as she came through the door—and O’Keefe had overridden it.

The muzzle of O’Keefe’s gun pressed against Jason’s neck again. “Let’s hear you say the words one more time, Jason. I’m certain your security system will be glad to receive some additional evidence you’re a good citizen who cooperates with the people who defend his freedoms.”

Patros had already settled into firing position, with the gun braced against his stomach and his left hand gripping the carrying handle. Now he turned his visor toward O’Keefe and stared at her again.

“I’m going to be making reports when this is over,” O’Keefe said. “They’re going to be asking me about you, Jason. Don’t you think they’ll want to know if you seemed truly cooperative?”

Patros shook his head. He crossed the room in three long strides, brushed his hand against the manual lock switch, and returned to his position.

“The door is unlocked,” Patros said. “You can come in.”

On the screen, Marcia pushed open the door from the other side. Jason turned his head away from the image and watched the real door swing into the room.

Marcia turned toward O’Keefe as soon as she stepped through the doorway. The red dot from the laser sight on Patros’s gun pinpointed the spot on her chest where the bullet would go in.

“Turn it off,” Patros said. “My electronics just beat your electronics.”

O'Keefe still had her arm around Jason's head. The gun was digging into his neck as if she was trying to kill him by driving it through the side of his throat.

"It's off," Marcia said. "I turn it off by sub-vocalizing."

The pressure on Jason's neck let up. O'Keefe took her arm off his head and stepped away from the chair.

The noise didn't start until Marcia was halfway across the room and then it was nothing more than the phut, phut, phut of Patros's gun emitting a three-shot burst sound that was so subdued it was as unassertive as a polite cough. One moment Marcia had been looking around her with bright, wide eyes dancing between Patros and O'Keefe. The next this intent, tight-faced demon was hurtling toward Jason with a red light glowing in her hand. Something dropped on the floor beside Jason's chair. O'Keefe choked out the first syllable of an obscenity.

The weapon Marcia had used was about the only effective piece of hardware she could have hidden in her clothing—a six inch cylinder that was sometimes called a laser "sword." It was usually used as a personal self-defense weapon and it had the great advantage that it could be carried like a pen or a pocket flashlight. It was called a sword because its pulse lasted a little over a second and people who didn't have time to develop their marksmanship skills frequently trailed it across their targets with a short slashing motion. Its great weakness was the fact that it had to recharge for several seconds after each pulse.

The keyboard on the arm of Jason's chair included a control panel for the chair itself. Marcia flowed past him with a velocity that was about twice as fast as the best speed any human should be able to force out of human muscles, and he rubbed his forefinger into the On square as if he was trying to scrape the plastic off.

His middle finger traced a path on the steering square. The chair shot forward with a force that made his head swing, but he managed to keep his hand on the control panel and chart a course that sent him charging toward Patros.

There was a long, strange moment when the muzzle of Patros's gun seemed to be pointed toward Jason's face. Then Patros moved to the right, to get a clear shot at Marcia, and Jason's finger drew a curve that kept the chair rolling straight at Patros's hands and the thing they were holding.

Patros's visor swung toward Jason. Patros jumped to the left, directed by the expert system in his helmet, and the chair rolled by him with the left wheel almost bruising his heels.

Patros had been standing directly in front of Jason's collection of instruments. The sensors on the chair activated the emergency speed controls but the bumpers still rammed into the wall with an impact that threw Jason's chest against the safety harness. A skinny Baroque oboe fell out of its clip and clattered across the floor.

Jason's hand overshot the control panel the first time he tried to get his fingers back into position. He tried to force it onto the panel by sheer will power and then gave up and brought the chair around with the slowest, most precisely articulated verbal commands he could squeeze out of his system.

O'Keefe was lying on the floor, with Marcia standing over her. A dark stain had spread across the entire left side of Marcia's pullover and the top third of her pants. On the floor just in front of the wheelchair,

Patros was down on his knees, reaching across the tiles for his gun—which he had probably dropped, Jason assumed, when Marcia's laser had struck at his hand in the same way it had struck at O'Keefe's.

Jason's hand settled into position on the control panel. The chair shot forward. Another impact threw him into the safety harness. Patros lurched for the gun in spite of the disruption and Jason pushed forward again, as if he was driving a bulldozer into a pile of dirt.

Marcia strode across the room with O'Keefe's gun in her hands. She had set the selector on single shot, and there was something peculiarly businesslike about the brief little puff of sound.

\* \* \* \*

Patros was doubled over with his visor pressed against the floor when Jason's brain finally started registering the things his eyes were picking up. Marcia had fired at point blank range, with the gun poised just above the point where Patros's neck joined his shoulder, and blood was still welling out of the hole and spreading across the security man's neck and the collar of his tunic.

“Do you think you're safe?” Marcia said. “Do you think they'll blame *you* for this?”

“Is he ... dead?”

“They're both dead. I broke her neck while she was down.”

She had laid the gun on the floor so she could press both her hands against her side. Her enhancements obviously included components that could shut off pain and keep her functioning, but the soggy-looking stain was still oozing relentlessly across her clothes.

“Will O'Keefe's people believe I did this all by myself, Jason? Will they believe you if you claim you didn't help me? You'd better come with me if they won't.”

She closed her eyes and hunched over her wound. There was a moment when Jason thought she was going to fall over. She turned away from him somehow, and he watched her stumble into the bathroom.

He heard her mumble something in a voice that was almost inaudible, the medicine cabinet gave her an answer, and he picked up enough words to know the cabinet was telling her how to treat her wound. The supply modules that were linked to the medicine cabinet covered 80 percent of the free wall space in his bathroom. The cabinet couldn't tell her how to remove the bullet or repair her mangled internal organs, but it could give her antibiotics, a self-sealing patch for the hole, and pain killers if her enhancements needed some help.

He backed the chair away from Patros's body and maneuvered himself into the middle of the room. There was a position that put him just forward of an imaginary line that connected O'Keefe's sprawling legs with Patros's head. If he placed the angle of the chair just right, he could watch the bathroom door without seeing either of them.

Marcia was walking like a bent-over old woman when she eased herself out of the bathroom. She rested one hand on his desk and talked to him with her chin slumped against her chest.

“There's a car downstairs. They're supposed to have a hovercraft meet me at the beach. It may have to violate New England space by a few meters but I think they're willing to do that.”

His brain was beginning to recover from the first shock. He was not, after all, someone who had a lot of

illusions about the durability of the human body. No one had ever had to tell Jason Jardanel that the human body was a complex, highly vulnerable system which depended on the interactions of millions of highly vulnerable components.

“You can drive like ... that?”

“I think I'm good for half an hour. It's up to you. Whatever you want.”

Her eyes stayed on the floor. She was still hunched over but he could detect the same stiffness in her spine he had picked up when she had given him her big speech on the phone.

“You're not ... going to go ... until I tell you ... it's all right. Is that it?”

“Give me an answer, Jason! Please give me an answer.”

Her body slumped again. She turned her head away from him as if she was ashamed of the outburst.

“They would have killed you if I hadn't come here,” she said. “They don't pretend about that. They would have killed you just so we'd know they meant it next time.”

“So I ... owe you ... something?”

“You don't owe anyone anything. I'd just like an answer. So I can go.”

“I don't ... know ... if they'll ... believe ... I didn't ... help you.”

“Then come.”

“You went after her first. I ... understand ... that. You didn't move until she took ... the gun ... away from my neck. You wouldn't be ... hurt ... if you'd gone after him first.”

“She would have killed you. I didn't come here to get you killed. That really is the way we operate, Jason. You may have to do the same thing yourself if you join us.”

“You might not ... reach the ... rendezvous.”

“I'll do my best to get you close enough so you can try to go the rest of the way in your chair.”

“She liked ... violence. They all like ... violence.”

“We'd spend our lives tearing each other's throats out if people like her had their way. If she wasn't fighting the tucfra, she'd be killing people over something else.”

“The tucfra only let us ... kill ... when it's ... good ... for us?”

“Would you rather let people like O'Keefe run things? Would you rather have us spend the next five hundred years fighting people like her over whatever little bits of civilization we didn't destroy with our mistakes?”

“I ... couldn't ... let them ... kill ... you. My father ... my mother ... they would have ... killed ... them, too.”

“Please give me an answer, Jason. Please.”

His fingers crawled across the control pad. The chair rolled forward and he turned it toward the door.

“Lean ... on ... the chair. Tell me ... if I go ... too fast.”

“You're coming with me? You're joining us?”

“Do ... I ... have ... any ... choice?”