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GAME OF THE CENTURY

THE WINDOW WAS LEFT OPEN at midnight, January 1, 2041, and three minutes, twenty-one seconds later it was closed again by the decisive, barely legible signature of an elderly Supreme Court justice who reportedly quipped, "I don't know why I have to. Folks who like screwing sheep are just going to keep at it."

Probably so.

But the issues were larger than traditional bestiality. Loopholes in some badly drafted legislation had made it perfectly legal to manipulate the human genome in radical ways. What's more, said offspring were deemed human in all rights and privileges inside the US of NA. For two hundred and twelve seconds, couples and single women could legally conceive by any route available to modern science. And while few clinics and fewer top-grade hospitals had interest in the work, there were key exceptions. Some fourteen hundred human eggs were fertilized with tailored sperm, then instantly implanted inside willing mothers. News services that had paid minimal attention to the legislative breakdown took a sudden glaring interest in the nameless, still invisible offspring. The blastulas were dubbed the 1-1-2041s, and everything about their lives became the subject of intense public scrutiny and fascination and self-righteous horror.

Despite computer models and experiments on chimpanzees, there were surprises. Nearly a third of the fetuses were stillborn, or worse. Twenty-nine mothers were killed as a result of their pregnancies. Immunological problems, mostly. But in one case, a healthy woman in her midtwenties died when her boy, perhaps bothered by the drumming of her heart, reached through her uterine wall and intestines, grabbing and squeezing the offending organ with both of his powerful hands.

Of the nine hundred-plus fetuses who survived, almost thirty percent were mentally impaired or physically frail. Remarkably, others seemed entirely normal, their human genes running roughshod over their more exotic parts. But several hundred of the 1-1-2041s were blessed with perfect health as well as a remarkable stew of talents. Even as newborns, they astonished the researchers who tested their reflexes and their highly tuned senses. The proudest parents released the data to the media, then mixed themselves celebratory cocktails, stepping out onto their porches and balconies to wait for the lucrative offers to start flowing their way.

MARLBORO JONES came with a colorful reputation. His father was a crack dealer shot dead in a dispute over footwear. With his teenage mother, Marlboro had lived at dozens of addresses before her mind failed and she leaped out of their bedroom window to stop the voices, and from there his life was a string of unbroken successes. He had coached, and won, at three different schools. He was currently the youngest head coach of a Top Alliance team. Thirty-six years old, he looked twenty-six, his chiseled features built around the bright, amoral eyes

of a squirrel. Marlboro was the kind of handsome that made his charm appealing, and he was charming in a way that made his looks and mannerisms delightfully boyish. A laser mind lurked behind those eyes, yet in most circumstances he preferred playing the cultured hick, knowing how much it improved his odds.

"He's a fine lookin' boy," the coach drawled. "Fine lookin'."

The proud parents stood arm in arm, smiling with a frothy, nervous joy.

"May I?" asked Marlboro. Then without waiting for permission, he yanked the screen off the crib, reached in and grabbed both bare feet. He tugged once, then again. Harder. "Damn, look at those legs! You'd think this boy'd be scampering around already. Strong as these seem...!"

"Well," said his mother, "he is awfully active."

"In a good way," the father cautioned.

"I believe it. I do!" Marlboro grinned, noticing that Mom looked awfully sweet in a tired-of-motherhood way, and it was too bad that he couldn't make a play for her, too. "Let me tell ya what I'm offering," he boomed. "A free ride. For the boy here --"

"Alan," Mom interjected.

"Alan," the coach repeated. Instantly, with an easy affection. Then he gave her a little wink, saying, "For Alan. A free education and every benefit that I'm allowed to give. Plus the same for your other two kids. Which I'm not supposed to offer. But it's my school and my scholarships, and I'll be damned if it's anybody's business but yours and mine!"

The parents squeezed one another, then with a nervous voice, the father made himself ask, "What about us?"

The coach didn't blink.

"What do you want, Mr. Wilde?" Marlboro smiled and said, "Name it."

"I'm not sure," the father confessed. "I know that we can't be too obvious --"

"But we were hoping," Mom blurted. "I mean, it's not like we're wealthy people. And we had to spend most of our savings --"

"On your little Alan. I bet you did." A huge wink was followed with, "It'll be taken care of. My school doesn't have that big college of genetics for nothing." He looked at the infant again, investing several seconds of hard thought into how they could bend the system just enough. Then he promised, "You'll be reimbursed for your expenses. Up front. And we'll put your son on the payroll. Gentlefolks in lab coats'll come take blood every half-year or so. For a healthy, just-under-the-table fee. How's that sound?"

The father seemed doubtful. "Will the scientists agree to that?"

"If I want it done," the coach promised.

"Will they actually use his blood?" The father seemed uneasy. Even a little disgusted. "I don't like thinking of Alan being some kind of laboratory project."

Marlboro stared at him for a long moment.

Never blinking.

Then he said, "Sir." He said, "If you want, they can pass those samples to you, and you can flush them down your own toilet. Is that good enough?"

Nobody spoke.

Then he took a different course, using his most mature voice to tell them, "Alan is a fine, fine boy. But you've got to realize something. He's going to have more than his share of problems. Special kids always do." Then with a warm smile, Marlboro promised, "I'll protect him for you. With all my resources and my good country sense, I'll see that none of those predators out there get their claws in your little Alan.

"Mom said, "That's good to hear. That's fine."

But Father shrugged, asking, "What about you? It'll be years before Alan can actually play, and you could have left for the pros by then."

"Never," Marlboro blurted.

Then he gave the woman his best wink and grin, saying, "You know what kind of talent I've been signing up. Do you really think I'd go anywhere else? Ever?"

She turned to her husband, saying, "We'll sign."

"But --?"

"No. We're going to commit."

Marlboro reconfigured the appropriate contracts, getting everyone's signature. Then he squeezed one of his recruit's meaty feet, saying, "See ya later, Alan."

Wearing an unreadable smile, he stepped out the front door. A hundred or so sports reporters were gathered on the small lawn, and through their cameras, as many as twenty million fans were watching the scene.

They watched Coach Jones smile and say nothing. Then he raised his arms suddenly, high overhead, and screamed those instantly famous words:

"The Wildman's coming to Tech!"

There was something about the girl. Perfect strangers thought nothing of coming up to her and asking where she was going to college.

"State," she would reply. Flat out.

"In what sport?" some inquired. While others, knowing that she played the game on occasion, would guess, "Are you joining the volleyball team?"

"No," Theresa would tell the latter group. Never patient, but usually polite. "I hate volleyball," she would explain, not wanting to be confused for one of those glandular, ritualistic gifts. And she always told everyone, friends and strangers alike, "I'm going to play quarterback for the football team. For Coach Rickover."

Knowledgeable people were surprised, and puzzled. Some would clear their throats and look up into Theresa's golden eyes, commenting in an offhand way, "But Rickover doesn't let women play."

"That was a problem, sure."

Daddy was a proud alumnus of State and a letterman on the famous '33 squad. When Theresa was born, there was no question about where she was going. In '41, Rickover was only an assistant coach. Penises weren't required equipment. The venerable Coach Mannstein had shuffled into her nursery and made his best offer, then shuffled back out to meet with press and boosters, promising the world that he would still be coaching when that delightfully young lady was calling plays for the best team to ever take any field of play.

But six years later, while enjoying the company of a mostly willing cheerleader, Coach Mannstein felt a searing pain in his head, lost all feeling in his ample body, and died.

Rickover inherited the program.

A religious man driven by a quixotic understanding of the Bible, one of his first official acts was to send a letter to Theresa's parents, explaining at length why he couldn't allow their daughter to join his team. "Football," he wrote, "is nothing but ritualized warfare, and women don't belong in the trenches. I am sorry. On the other hand, Coach Terry is a personal friend, and I would be more than happy to have him introduce you to our nationally ranked women's volleyball program."

"Thank you sincerely."

"Coach."

The refusal was a crushing blow for Daddy.

For Theresa, it was a ghostly abstraction that she couldn't connect with those things that she truly knew and understood.

Not that she was a stupid child. Unlike many of her 1-1-2041 peers, her grades were respectably average, and in spatial subjects, like geometry and geography, she excelled. Also unlike her peers, Theresa didn't have problems with rage or with residual instincts. Dogs and cats didn't mysteriously vanish in her neighborhood. She was a good person with friends and her genuine admirers. Parents trusted her with their babies. Children she didn't know liked to beg for rides on her back. Once she was old enough to date, the boys practically lined up. Out of sexual curiosity, in part. But also out of fondness and an odd respect. Some of her boyfriends confided that they preferred her to regular girls. Something about her--and not just a physical something--set them at ease. Made them feel safe. A strange thing for adolescent males to admit, while for Theresa, it was just another circumstance in a life filled with nothing but circumstances.

In football, she always played quarterback. Whether on playground teams, or in the various midget leagues, or on the varsity squad in high school.

Her high school teams won the state championship three years in a row. And they would have won when she was a senior, except a mutant strain of parvovirus gave her a fever and chills, and eventually, hallucinations. Theresa started throwing hundred meter bullets toward her more compelling hallucinations, wounding several fans, and her coach grudgingly ordered her off the field and into a hospital bed.

Once State relinquished all claims on the girl, a steady stream of coaches and boosters and sports agents began the inevitable parade.

Marlboro Jones was the most persistent soul. He had already stockpiled a full dozen of the 1-1-2041s, including the premier player of all time: Alan, The Wildman, Wilde. But the coach assured Theresa that he still needed a quality quarterback. With a big wink and a bigger grin, he said, "You're going to be my field general, young lady. I know you know it, the same as I do...!"

Theresa didn't mention what she really knew.

She let Daddy talk. For years, that proud man had entertain fantasies of Rickover moving to the pros, leaving the door open for his only child. But it hadn't happened, and it wouldn't. And over the last few years, with Jones's help, he had convinced himself that Theresa should play instead for State's great rival. Call it justice. Or better, revenge. Either way, what mattered was that she would go somewhere that her talents could blossom. That's all that mattered, Daddy told the coach. And Marlboro replied with a knowing nod and a sparkling of the eyes, finally turning to his prospect, and with a victor's smile, asking, "What's best for you? Tour our campus first? Or get this signing crap out of the way?"

Theresa said, "Neither."

Then she remembered to add, "Sir," with a forced politeness.

Both men were stunned. But the coach was too slick to let it show. Staring at the tall, big-shouldered lady, he conjured up his finest drawl, telling her, "I can fix it. Whatever's broke, it can be fixed."

"Darling," her father mumbled. "What's wrong?"

She looked at her father's puffy, confused face. "This man doesn't want me for quarterback, Daddy. He just doesn't want me playing somewhere else."

After seventeen years of living with the girl, her father knew better than to doubt her instincts. Glaring at Marlboro, he asked flat out, "Is that true ?"

"No," the man lied.

Instantly, convincingly.

Then he sputtered, adding, "That Mosgrove kid has too much chimp in his arm. And not enough touch."

There was a prolonged, uncomfortable silence.

Then Theresa informed both of them, "I've made up my mind, anyway. Starting next year, I'm going to play for State."

Daddy was startled and a bit frustrated. But as always, a little bit proud, too.

Coach Jones was, if anything, amused. The squirrel eyes smiled, and the handsome mouth tried not to follow suit. And after a few more seconds of painful silence, he said, "I've known Rickover for most of my adult life. And you know what, little girl? You've definitely got your work cut out for you."

Jones was mistaken.

Theresa believed.

A lifetime spent around coaches had taught her that the species was passionate and stubborn and usually wrong about everything that wasn't lashed to the game in front of them. But what made coaches ridiculous in the larger world helped them survive in theirs. Because they were stubborn and overblown, they could motivate the boys and girls around them; and the very best coaches had a gift for seducing their players, causing them to lash their souls to the game, and the next game, and every game to follow.

All Theresa needed to do, she believed, was out-stubborn Coach Rickover.

State had a walk-on program. Overachievers from the Yukon to the Yucatan swarmed

into campus in late summer, prepared to fight it out for a handful of scholarships. Theresa enrolled with the rest of them, then with her father in tow, showed up for the first morning's practice. An assistant coach approached. Polite and determined, he thanked her for coming, but she wasn't welcome. But they returned for the afternoon practice, this time accompanied by an AI advocate -- part lawyer, part mediator -- who spoke to a succession of assistant coaches with the quietly smoldering language of lawsuits and public relations nightmares.

Theresa's legal standing was questionable, at best. Courts had stopped showing interest in young ladies wanting to play an increasingly violent sport. But the threat to call the media seemed to work. Suddenly, without warning, the quarterback coach walked up to her and looked up, saying to her face, "All right. Let's see what you can do.

"She was the best on the field, easily.

Pinpoint passes to eighty meters. A sprint speed that mauled every pure-human record. And best of all, the seemingly innate ability to glance at a fluid defense and pick it apart. Maybe Theresa lacked the elusive moves of some 1-1-2041s, which was the closest thing to a weakness. But she made up for it with those big shoulders that she wielded like dozer blades, leaving half a dozen strong young men lying flat on their backs, trying to recall why they ever took up this damned sport.

By the next morning, she was taking hikes with the varsity squad.

Coach Rickover went as far as strolling up to her and saying, "Welcome, miss," with that cool, almost friendly voice. Then he looked away, adding, "And the best of luck to you.

"It was a trap.

During a no-contact drill, one of the second-string pure-human linebackers came through the line and leveled her when she wasn't ready. Then he squatted low and shouted into her face, "Bitch! Dog bitch! Pussy bitch! Bitch!"

Theresa nearly struck him.

In her mind, she left his smug face strewn across the wiry green grass. But then Rickover would have his excuse -- she was a discipline problem -- and her career would have encompassed barely one day.

She didn't hit the bastard, or even chew off one of his fingers.

Instead she went back to throwing lasers at her receivers and running between the tackles. Sometimes her blockers would go on vacation, allowing two or three rushers to drag her to the ground. Yet Theresa always got up again and limped back to the huddle, staring at the stubborn human eyes until those eyes, and the minds behind them, blinked.

It went on that way for a week.

Because she wouldn't allow herself even the possibility of escape, Theresa prepared herself for another four months of inglorious abuse. And if need be, another three years after that.

Her mother came to visit and to beg her daughter to give it up.

"For your sake, and mine. Just do the brave thing and walk away."

Theresa loved her mother, but she had no illusions: The woman was utterly, hopelessly weak.

Daddy was the one who scared her. He was standing over his daughter, watching as she carefully licked at a gash that came when she was thrown against a metal bench, her leg opened up from the knee to her badly swollen ankle. And with a weakling's little voice, he told her, "This isn't my dream anymore. You need to reconsider. That, or you'll have to bury me. My nerves can't take any more twisting."

Picking thick golden strands of fur from her long, long tongue, Theresa stared at him. And hiding her sadness, she told him, "You're right, Daddy. This isn't your dream."

The war between player and coach escalated that next morning.

Nine other 1-1-2041s were on the team. Theresa was promoted to first team just so they could have a shot at her. She threw passes, and she was knocked flat. She ran sideways, and minotaurs in white jerseys flung her backward, burying their knees into her kidneys and uterus. Then she moved to defense, playing ABMback for a few downs, and their woolly, low-built running back drove her against the juice cooler, knocking her helmet loose and chewing on one of her ears, then saying into that blood, "There's more coming, darling. There's always more coming."

Yet despite the carnage, the 1-1-2041s weren't delivering real blows.

Not compared to what they could have done.

It dawned on Theresa that Rickover and his staff, for all their intimate knowledge about muscle and bone, had no idea what their players were capable of. She watched those grown men nodding, impressed with the bomb-like impacts and spattered blood. Sprawled out on her back, waiting for her lungs to work again, she found herself studying Rickover: He was at least as handsome as Marlboro Jones, but much less attractive. There was something both analytical and dead about the man. And underneath it all, he was shy. Deeply and eternally shy. Wasn't that a trait that came straight out of your genetics? A trait and an affliction that she lacked, thankfully.

Theresa stood again, and she limped through the milling players and interns, then the assistant coaches, stepping into Rickover's line of sight, forcing him to look at her.

"I still want to play for you," she told him. "But you know, Coach...I don't think I'll ever like you...." And with that, she turned and hobbled back to the field.

Next morning, a decision had come down from On High.

Theresa was named the new first-string quarterback, and the former first-string -- a tall, bayonet-shaped boy nicknamed Man O War -- was made rocketback.

For the last bits of summer and until the night before their first game, Theresa believed that her little speech had done its magic. She was so confident of her impression that she repeated her speech to her favorite rocketback. And Man O War gave a little laugh, then climbed out of her narrow dormitory bed, stretching out on the hard floor, pulling one leg behind his head, then the other.

"That's not what happened," he said mildly. Smiling now.

She said, "What didn't?"

"It was the nine of us. The other 1-1-2041s." He kept smiling, bending forward until his chin was resting against his naked crotch, and he licked himself with a practiced deftness. Once finished, he sat up and explained, "We went to Coach's house that night. And we told him that if we were supposed to keep hurting you, we might as well kill you. And eat you. Right in the middle of practice."

She stared at her lover for a long moment, unsure what to believe.

Theresa could read human faces. And she could smell their moods boiling out of their hairless flesh. But no matter how hard she tried, she could never decipher that furry chimera of a face.

"Would you really have?" she finally asked.

"Killed you? Not me," Man O War said instantly.

Then he was laughing, reminding her, "But those linebackers...you never can tell what's inside their smooth little minds...!"

TECH AND STATE began the season on top of every sport reporter's rankings and the power polls and leading almost every astrologer's sure-picks. Since they had two more 1-1-2041s on their roster, including the Wildman, Tech was given the edge. Professional observers and fans, as well as AI analysts, couldn't imagine any team challenging either of them. On the season's second weekend, State met a strong Texas squad with its own handful of 1-1-2041s. They beat them by seventy

points. The future seemed assured. Barring catastrophe, the two teams of the century would win every contest, then go to war on New Year's Day, inside the venerable Hope Dome, and the issue about who was best and who was merely second best would be settled for the ages.

In public, both coaching staffs and the coached players spouted all the hoary cliches. Take it one play at a time, and one game at a time, and never eat your chicken before it's cooked through.

But in private, and particularly during closed practices, there was one opponent and only one, and every mindless drill and every snake run on the stadium stairs and particularly every two ton rep in the weight room was meant for Tech. For State. For glory and the championship and a trophy built from gold and sculpted light.

In the third week of the season, Coach Jones began using his 1-1-2041s on both sides of the line.

Coach Rickover told reporters that he didn't approve of those tactics. "Even superhumans need rest," he claimed. But that was before Tech devastated an excellent Alabama squad by more than a hundred and twenty points. Rickover prayed to God, talked to several physiologists, then made the same outrageous adjustment.

In their fourth game, Theresa played at quarterback and ABM.

Not only did she throw a school record ten touchdowns, she also ran for four more, plus she snagged five interceptions, galloping three of them back for scores.

"You're the Heisman front-runner," a female reporter assured her, winking and grinning as if they were girlfriends. "How does it feel?"

How do you answer such a silly question?

"It's an honor," Theresa offered. "Of course it is."

The reporter smiled slyly, then assaulted her with another silliness. "So what are your goals for the rest of the season?"

"To improve," Theresa muttered. "Every Saturday, from here on."

"Most of your talented teammates will turn professional at the end of the year." A pause. Then she said, "What about you, Theresa? Will you do the same?"

She hadn't considered it. The UFL was an abstraction, and a distraction, and she didn't have time or the energy to bother with either.

"All I think about," she admitted, "is this season."

A dubious frown.

Then the reporter asked, "What do you think of Tech's team?"

One play at a time, game at a time, and cook your chicken...

"Okay. But what about the Wildman?"

Nothing simple came into Theresa's head. She paused for a long moment, then told the truth. "I don't know Alan Wilde."

"But do you think it's right...? Having a confessed killer as your linebacker and star running back...?"

The reporter was talking about the Wildman. Vague recollections of a violent death and a famous, brief trial came to mind. But Theresa's parents had shielded her from any furor about the 1-1-2041s. Honestly, the best she could offer this woman was a shrug and her own smile, admitting, "It's not right to murder. Anyone. For any reason."

That simple declaration was the night's lead story on every sports network.

"Heisman hopeful calls her opponent a murderer! Even though the death was ruled justifiable homicide!"

Judging by the noise, it made for a compelling story.

Whatever the hell that means.

After the season's seventh week, a coalition of coaches and university presidents filed suit against the two front-runners. The games to date had resulted in nearly two hundred concussions, four hundred broken bones, and thirteen injuries so severe that young, pure-human boys were still lying in hospital beds, existing in protective comas.

"We won't play you anymore," the coalition declared.

They publicly accused both schools of recruiting abuses, and in private, they warned that if the remaining games weren't canceled, they would lead the pack in a quick and bloody inquisition.

Coach Rickover responded at his weekly press conference. With a Bible in hand, he gave a long rambling speech about his innocence and how the playing fields were perfectly level.

Marlboro Jones took a different tack.

Accompanied by his school's lawyers, AI and human, he visited the ringleaders. "You goddamn pussies!" he shouted. "We've got contracts with you. We've got television deals with the networks. If you think we're letting your dicks

wriggle free of this hook, you're not only cowards. You're stupid, too!"

Then he sat back, letting the lawyers dress up his opinion in their own impenetrable language.

But the opponents weren't fools. A new-generation AI began to list every known infraction: Payments to players and their families. Secretive changes of title for homes and businesses. Three boosters forming a charity whose only known function was to funnel funds to the topflight players. And worst by far, a series of hushed-up felonies connected to the 1-1-2041s under his care.

Marlboro didn't flinch.

Instead, he smiled -- a bright, blistering smile that left every human in the room secretly trembling -- and after a prolonged pause, he said, "Fine. Make it all public."

The AI said, "Thank you. We will."

"But," said Marlboro, "here's what I'll take public. You pussies."

With precision and a perfect ear for detail, the coach listed every secret infraction and every camouflaged scandal that had ever swirled around his opponents' programs. Twenty-plus years in this industry, and he knew everything. Or at least that was the impression he gave. And then as he finished, he said, "Pussies," again. And laughed. And he glared at the Stanford president -- the ringleader of this rabble --telling that piece of high-born shit, "I guess we're stuck. We're just going to have to kill each other."

Nobody spoke.

Moved, or even breathed.

Then the president managed to find enough air to whisper, "What do you propose?"

"Tech and State win our games by forfeit," the coach told them. "And you agree not to play us in court, either."

"The president said, "Maybe."

Then with a soft synthetic voice, his AI lawyer said, "Begging to differ, but I think we should pursue --"

Marlboro threw the talking box across the room.

It struck a wall, struck the floor. Then with an eerie calm, it said, "You cannot damage me, sir."

"Point taken." The coach turned to the humans. "Do we have a deal? Or don't we?"

Details were worked out; absolutely nothing was signed.

Near the end of negotiations, Marlboro announced, "Oh, and there's one last condition. I want to buy your lawyer." He pointed at the AI. "Bleed it of its secrets first. But I want it."

"Or what?" Stanford inquired.

"I start talking about your wives. Who likes it this way, who likes it that way. Just so everyone knows that what I'm saying is the truth."

The AI was sold. For a single dollar.

Complaining on and on with its thoughtful, useless voice, the box was thrown into the middle of Tech's next practice, and nothing was left afterward but gutted electronics pushed deep into the clipped green grass.

TECH'S AND STATE'S regular season was finished. But that turned out to be a blessing as far as school coffers and the entertainment conglomerates were concerned. Hundred point slaughters weren't winning the best ratings. In lieu of butchery, a series of ritualized scrimmages were held on Saturdays, each team dividing its top squads into two near-equal parts, then playing against themselves with enough skill and flair to bring packed stadiums and enormous remote audiences: All that helping to feed an accelerating, almost feverish interest in the coming showdown.

Sports addicts talked about little else.

While the larger public, caring nothing for the fabled gridiron, found plenty else to hang their interest on. The contrasting coaches, and the 11-2041s, and the debate about what is human, and particularly among girlfriends and wives, the salient fact that a female was the undisputed leader of one team.

Sports networks and digital wonderhouses began playing the game of the century early, boiling down its participants into algorithms and vectors and best guesses, then showing the best of their bloodless contests to surprisingly large audiences.

Eight times out of eleven, the digital Tech went away victors.

Not counting private and foreign betting, nearly ten billion reconstituted dollars had been wagered on the contest by Thanksgiving. By Christmas Eve, that figure had jumped another five-fold. Plus there were the traditional gubernatorial wagers of state-grown products: A ton of computer chips versus a ton of free-range buffalo.

Theresa spent Christmas at home with parents and grandparents, plus more than a dozen relatives who had managed to invite themselves. If anything, those cousins and uncles and assorted spouses were worse than a room full of reporters. They didn't know the rules. They expected disclosures. Confessions. The real and the

dirty. And when Theresa offered any less-than-spectacular answer, it was met with disappointment and disbelief.

The faces said as much. And one little old aunt said it with her liquor-soddened mouth, telling her niece, "You're among family, darling. Why can't you trust us?"

Because she didn't know these people.

Over the past eighteen years, she had seen them sporadically, and all she remembered were their uncomfortable expressions and the careful words offered with quiet, overly cautious voices.

Looking at her, some had said, "She's a lovely girl."

"Exotic," others volunteered.

"You're very lucky," to her parents.

Then out of pure-human earshot, they would ask, "What do you think is inside her? Dog? Dinosaur? What?"

Theresa didn't know which genes went into her creation. What was more, she hadn't felt a compelling need to ask. But whatever chimerical stew made up her chromosomes, she had inherited wonderful ears that could pick up distant insults as well as the kindest, sweetest words.

She was trying to be patient and charitable when one idiot leaned forward, planted a drunken hand on her granite-hard thigh, then told her with a resoundingly patronizing tone, "I don't see what people complain about. Up close, you're a beautiful creature..."

Daddy heard those words, their tone.

And he detonated.

"What are you doing?" he screamed. "And get your hand off your niece?"

Uncle John flinched, the hand vanishing. Then he stared at his brother with a mixture of astonishment and building rage, taking a deep breath, then another, before finding the air to ask, "What did I say?"

"Why? Don't you remember?"

The poor fool sputtered something about being fair, for God's sake.

The rest of the family stood mute, and stunned, and a few began asking their personal clocks for the time.

"Leave," Daddy suggested.

To his brother, and everyone else, too.

He found the self-control to say, "Thank you for coming," but then added, "My daughter isn't a freak. She isn't, and remember that, and good night."

Christmas ended with a dash for the coats and some tenth-hearted, "Good lucks," lobbed in Theresa's direction.

Then it was just the three of them. And Daddy offered Theresa a sorrowful expression, then repeated his reasoning. "I've been listening to their contemptuous crap for nearly twenty years. You're not a monster, or a possession, and I get sick, sick, sick of it."

"Theresa said nothing.

Mother said, "Darling," to one of them. Theresa wasn't sure who.

When nobody responded, Mother rose and staggered into the kitchen, telling the AI to finish its cooking, then store the meat and vegetables and mounds of stuffing for later this week, and into next year.

Theresa kept staring at her father, trying to understand why she was so disappointed, and angry, and sad.

He averted his eyes, then said, "I know."

What did he know?

"You're right," he confessed. "You caught me. You know!"

But Theresa couldn't make herself ask, "What am I right about?"

A citizen of unalloyed strength, yet she couldn't summon enough air to ask, "What is it, Father? What am I supposed to know?"

The Hope Dome was older than the players. Led by Miami, a consortium of cities had built that gaudy glass and carbon-fiber structure out on the continental shelf. Its playing field lay nearly fifty meters beneath the water's surface, and rising ocean levels combined with the new generation of hurricanes had caused problems. One of the bowl officials even repeated that tired joke that it was hope holding back the Atlantic. But then he winked slyly and said, "Don't worry." He unlocked a heavy door next to State's locker, revealing an enormous room filled with roaring bilge pumps whose only purpose, he boasted, was to send a river's worth of tiny leaks back into the sea.

In contrast to the palace-like Dome, the playing field was utterly ordinary.

Its dimensions and black earth and fluorescent-fed grass made it identical to a thousand other indoor facilities.

The day after Christmas, and both teams were given the traditional tour of the Dome and its field. To help extract the last greasy drama out of the blandness, Tech was still finishing its walk-through when State arrived. On the field together, with cameras and the world watching, the teams got their first naked-eye look at one another. And with a hundred million people waiting for anything, the two Heisman candidates met, and without any fuss, the two politely shook hands.

The Wildman offered Theresa several flavors of surprise.

The first surprise was his appearance. She had seen endless images of man-child, and she'd been near plenty of 1-1-2041s. But the running back was still impressive. There was bison in him, she had heard. And gorilla. And what might have been Siberian tiger genes. Plus something with an enormous capacity to grow bone. Elephant, perhaps. Something in the shape of his enormous head reminded her of the ancient mammoth skulls that she'd seen haunting the university museum.

The second surprise was the Wildman's mannerisms. A bowl official, nervous enough to shiver, introduced the two of them, then practically threw himself backward. But the boy was polite, and in a passing way, charming.

"We meet," he grunted. "Finally."

Theresa stared at the swollen incisors and the giant dog eyes, and telling herself not to stumble over her tongue, she offered her hand and said, "Hello," with the same pleasant voice she used on every new friend.

The Wildman took her hand gently. Almost too softly to be felt.

And with a thin humor, he said, "What do you think they would do? If we got down on our knees and grazed?"

Then the third surprise said, "Alan."

And the fourth surprise added, "You're just joking. Aren't you, son?"

Parents weren't normally allowed to travel with the players. But the Wildes appeared to be the exception. Theresa later learned that they accompanied him everywhere, always. Pulling her hand out of Alan's giant hand, she offered them a smile, and the mother said, "How are you, dear?"

The father offered, "I'm an admirer." His right hand was plastic. Lifelike, but not alive. Retrieving his hand, he added, "We're all admirers, of course."

How did he lose the limb? she wondered.

Because it was the polite thing to say, Theresa told them, "The best of luck to you. All of you."

Together, the Wildes wished her the same cliché. Then they said, "Alan," in a shared voice. Practiced, and firmly patient.

The boy stared at Theresa for a long moment, his face unreadable. Perhaps there was nothing there to read. Then with a deep bass voice, he said, "Later."

"Later," she echoed.

Two hundred kilos of muscle and armored bone pivoted, walking away with his tiny, seemingly fragile parents flanking him -- each adult holding tightly to one of the hands and whispering. Encouragements, or sage advice. Or grave warnings about the world.

Even with her spectacular ears, Theresa couldn't hear enough to tell.

Days meant light practices, then the daily press conferences where every ludicrous question was asked and asked again with a linebacker's single-mindedness. Then the evenings were stuffed full of tightly orchestrated fun: Cookouts. A parade. Seats at a nuclear polka concert. Then a beach party held in both teams' honor.

It was on the beach that the Tech quarterback, Mosgrove, made a half-joking comment. "You know what we should do? Together, I mean." And he told the other 1-1-2041s, thinking they would laugh about it.

But instead of laughing, a plan was drawn up between the sea trout dinner and the banana split dessert.

On New Year's Eve, coaches put their teams to bed at ten o'clock. That was the tradition. And an hour later, exactly twenty-two of their players crept out of their beds and their hotel rooms, slipping down to the same beach to gather in two distinct groups.

At midnight and for the next three minutes and twenty-one seconds, no one said one word. With fireworks and laser arrays going off on all sides, their eyes were pointed at the foot-chewed sand, and every face grew solemn. Reflective. Then Theresa said, "Now," and looked up, suddenly aware of the electricity passing between them.

What was she feeling? She couldn't put a name to it. Whatever it was, it was warm, and real, and it felt closer even than the warm salty air.

Still divided along team lines, the players quietly walked off the beach.

Theresa meant to return straight to bed, even though she wouldn't sleep. But she stopped first at the ladies' room, then happened past one of several hotel bars, a familiar face smiling out at her from the darkness, a thick hand waving her closer.

He was sitting alone in a booth, which surprised her.

With that slick, aw shucks voice, he asked, "Are my boys finding their way home again? Or am I going to have to get myself a posse?"

"They'll end up in their rooms," she assured.

"Sit," said the coach. Followed by, "Please."

She squeezed her legs under the booth. Marlboro cuddled with his beer, but he hadn't been alone for long. The cultured leather beneath Theresa was still warm. But not the seat next to her, she noted. And she found herself wondering who was here first.

"Buy you a drink, young lady?"

She didn't answer.

He laughed with that easy charm, touched the order pad and said, "Water, please. Just water."

"I really should leave," she told Marlboro.

But before she could make her legs move, he said, "You pegged me. That last time I came calling, you saw right through that brown shit I was flinging. About needing you for quarterback, and all that." A wink, then he added, "I was lying. Wasn't I?"

She didn't say one word.

Chilled water arrived, and Theresa found herself dipping into a strange paranoia. Mosgrove had suggested that meeting on the beach because Theresa had to come past this bar, and Coach Jones was waiting to ambush her, slipping some drug into her system so that tomorrow, in front of the entire world, she would fail.

A silly thought. But she found herself shuddering, if only because it was finally beginning to sink in ... what was going to happen tomorrow...

She didn't speak, but Marlboro couldn't let the silence continue. After finishing his beer and ordering another, he leaned over and spoke quietly, with intensity. He told her, "You saw through me. I'll give you that. But you know something, young lady? You're not the only shrewd soul at this table."

"No?" she replied.

Softly. With an unexpected tentativeness.

Then she forced herself to take a sip of her chilled water, licking her lips before asking, "What did you see in me?"

"Nothing," Marlboro said.

Then he leaned back and picked up the fresh beer glass, sucking down half of its contents before admitting, "I don't read you kids well. It's the muscles in your faces. They don't telephone emotions like they should."

She said, "Good."

He laughed again. Nothing was drunk about the man, but something about the eyes and mouth told her that he had been drinking for a long while. Nothing was drunk about the voice, but the words had even more sparkle and speed than usual. "Why do you think it is, young lady? All this noise and anguish about a game? A fucking little game that uses a hundred meters of grass and a ball that doesn't know enough to keep itself round?"

"I don't know --" she started.

"You're the favorite," he interrupted. "State is, I mean. According to polls, the general public hopes that I'm beat. You know why? Cause I've got twelve of you kids, and Rickover has only ten. And it takes eleven to play. Which means that on your team, at least one pure-human is always out there. He might be full of steroids and fake blood, and he's only going to last one set of downs, at most. But he's as close to being one of them butter-butts as anyone on either team. And those butter-butts, those fans of yours and mine, identify with Mr. Steroid. Which is why in their hearts they want Tech to stumble."

Theresa watched the dark eyes, the quick wide mouth. For some reason, she couldn't force herself to offer any comment, no matter how small.

"And there's that matter of coaches," said Marlboro. "I'm the godless one, and Rickover is God's Chosen, and I bet that's good enough for ten or twenty million churchgoers. They're putting their prayers on the good man."

She thought of those days last summer -- the pain and humiliation of practically begging for a spot on the roster, all while that good man watched from a distance -- and she secretly bristled. Less secretly, she took a deep breath, looking away and asking him finally, "If it isn't me, who? Who do you see through?"

"Parents," he said. Pointblank.

"My folks?" she asked.

"And all the others too," Marlboro promised. Then he took a pull of beer, grinned and added, "They're pretty much the same. Sad fuck failures who want to bend the rules of biology and nature as much as they can, diluting their blood and their own talents, thinking that's what it takes for them to have genuinely successful children."

Theresa thought of her father's Christmas tantrum.

More beer, then Marlboro said, "Yeah, your parents. They're the same as the others. All of 'em brought you kids into existence, and only later, when it was too late, they realized what it meant. Like the poor Wildes. Their kid's designed for awesome strength and useful rage, and so much has gone so wrong that they can't get a moment's rest. They're scared. And with reason. They seem like nice people, but I guarantee you, young lady, that's what happens when you're torn up by guilt. You keep yourself sweet and nice, because if you falter, even for a second, who knows what you'll betray about your real self?"

Theresa sighed, then grudgingly finished her water. If there was a poison in this booth, it didn't come inside a thick blister of glass.

"Darling." A thick, slurring feminine voice broke the silence, saying, "Darling," a second time, with too much air. "Marl, honey."

A hand lay on the tabletop. Theresa found herself looking at it and at the fat diamond riding the ring finger. She asked herself what was wrong with that hand. It was too long, and its flesh wore a thin golden fur, and the fingernails were thick and curved and obviously sharp. Theresa blinked and looked up at the very young woman, and in that instant, the coach said, "My fiancée. Ivana Buckleman. Honey, this is the enemy. Theresa Varner--"

"How are you?" said the fiancée, a mouthful of cougar teeth giving the words that distinctive, airy sound. Then she offered the long hand, and the two women shook, nothing friendly about the gesture. With blue cat-eyes staring, Ivana asked, "Shouldn't you be asleep, miss? You've got a big day tomorrow."

Marlboro said nothing, drinking in the jealousy.

Theresa surrendered her place, then said, "Good luck, Coach."

He stared at her, and grinned, and finally said, "You know perfectly well, girl. There's no such bird."

Coach Rickover was famous for avoiding pre-game pep talks. Football was war, and you did it. Or you didn't do it. But if you needed your emotions cranked up with colored lights, then you probably shouldn't be one of his players.

And yet.

Before the opening kickoff, Rickover called everyone to the sideline. An acoustic umbrella was set up over the team, drowning out the roar of a hundred thousand fans and a dozen competing bands and the dull thunder of a passing storm. And with a voice that couldn't have been more calm, he told them, "Whatever happens tonight, I am extraordinarily proud of you. All of you. Ability is something given by God. But discipline and determination are yours alone. And after all my years in coaching, I can say without reservation, I've never been so proud and pleased with any team. Ever."

"Whatever happens tonight," he continued, "this is my final game. Tomorrow morning, I retire as your coach. The Lord has told me it's time. And you're first to hear the news. Not even my wife knows. Not my assistant coaches. Look at their faces, if you don't believe me."

Then looking squarely at Theresa, he added, "Whatever happens, I want to thank you. Thank you for teaching an old man a thing or two about heart, and spirit, and passion for a game that he thought he already knew.... "

The umbrella was dismantled, the various thunders descending on them.

Theresa still disliked the man. But despite that hard-won feeling, or maybe because of it, a lump got up into her throat and refused to go away.

The kickoff set the tone.

Man O War received the ball deep in the end zone, dropped his head and charged, skipping past defenders, then blockers -- 1-1-2041s, mostly --reaching his thirty-five meter line with an avenue open to Tech's end zone. But the Wildman slammed into him from the side, flinging that long graceful body across the side line and into the first row of seats, his big-cat speed and the crack of pads on pads causing a hundred thousand fans to go silent.

State's top receiver couldn't play for the first set of downs. His broken left hand had to be set first, then secured in a cast.

Without Man O War, Theresa worked her team down to the enemy's forty. But for the first time that season, the opening drive bogged down, and she punted the ball past the end zone, and Tech's first possession started at their twenty.

Three plays, and they scored.

Mosgrove threw one perfect pass. Then the Wildman charged up the middle twice, putting his shoulders into defenders and twisting around whatever he couldn't intimidate. Playing ABM, Theresa tackled him on his second run. But they were five meters inside the end zone, and a referee fixed his yellow laser on her, marking her for a personal foul -- a bizarre call considering she was the one bruised and bleeding here.

Man O War returned, and on the first play from scrimmage, he caught a sixty meter bullet, broke two tackles, and scored.

But the extra point was blocked.

7-6, read every giant bolo board. In flickering, flame-colored numbers.

The next Tech drive ate up nearly seven minutes, ending with a three meter plunge up the middle. The Wildman was wearing the entire State team when he crossed the line -- except for a pure-human boy whose collarbone and various

ribs had been shattered, and who lay on the field until the medical cart could come and claim him.

14-6.

On the third play of State's next drive, Theresa saw linebackers crowding against the line, and she called an audible. The ball was snapped to her. And she instantly delivered it to Man O War, watching him pull it in and turn upfield, a half step taken when a whippet-like ABM hit the broken hand with his helmet, splitting both helmet and cast, the ball bouncing just once before a second whippet scooped it up and galloped in for a touchdown.

Tech celebrated, and Theresa trotted over to the sidelines. Rickover found her, and for the first time all year -- for the first time in her life -- her coach said, "That, young lady, was wrong. Was stupid. You weren't thinking out there."

21-6.

State's next possession ate up eight minutes, and it ended when the Wildman exploded through the line, driving Theresa into the ground and the ball into the air, then catching the ball as it fell into his chest, grinning behind the grillwork of his helmet.

Tech's following drive ended with three seconds left in the half.

28-6.

Both locker rooms were at the south end. The teams were leaving in two ragged lines, and Theresa was thinking about absolutely nothing. Her mind was as close to empty as she could make it. When a student jumped from the overhead seats, landing in the tunnel in front of her, she barely paused. She noticed a red smear of clothing, then a coarse, drunken voice. "Bitch," she heard. Then, "Do better! You goddamn owe me!" Then he began to make some comment about dog cocks, and that was when a massive hand grabbed him by an arm, yanking him off his feet, then throwing his limp body back into the anonymous crowd.

The Wildman stood in front of Theresa.

"She doesn't owe you fuck!" he was screaming. Looking up at hundreds of wide eyes and opened, horrorstruck mouths, he shouted, "None of us owes you shit! You morons! Morons! Morons!"

HALF-TIME needed to last long enough to sell a hundred happy products to the largest holo audience since the Mars landing, and to keep the energy level up in the dome, there was an elaborate show involving bands and cheerleaders from both schools, plus half a dozen puffy, middle-aged pop entertainers. It was an hour's reprieve, which was just enough time for Rickover to define his team's worst blunders and draw up elegant solutions to every weakness. How much of his speech sank home, Theresa couldn't say. She found herself listening more to the droning of the bilge pumps than to the intricacies of playing quarterback and ABM. A

numbness was building inside her, spreading into her hands and cold toes. It wasn't exhaustion or fear. She knew how those enemies felt, and she recognized both festering inside her belly, safely contained. And it wasn't self-doubt, because when she saw Man O War taking practice snaps in the back of the locker room, she leaped to her feet and charged Rickover, ready to say, "You can, but you shouldn't! Give me another chance!"

But her rocketback beat her to him. Flexing the stiff hand inside the newest cast, Man O War admitted, "I can't hold it to pass. Not like I should."

Rickover looked and sounded like a man in absolute control.

He nodded, saying, "Fine." Then he turned to the girl and said, "We need to stop them on their opening drive, then hang close. You can, believe me, manage that."

Theresa looked at the narrowed corners of his eyes and his tight little mouth, the terror just showing. And she lied, telling him and herself, "Sure. Why not?"

Tech took the opening kickoff.

Coach Jones was grinning on the sidelines, looking fit and rested. Supremely confident. Smelling a blowout, he opened up with a passing attack. The long-armed Mosgrove threw a pair of twenty meter darts, then dropped back and flung for the end zone. Theresa stumbled early, then picked herself up and guessed, running hard for the corner, the whippet receiver leaping high and her doing the same blind, long legs driving her toward the sky as she turned, the ball hitting her chest, then her hands, then bouncing free, tumbling down into Man O War's long cupped arms.

State inherited the ball on the twenty.

After three plays and nine meters, they punted.

A palpable calm seemed to have infected the audience. People weren't exactly quiet, but their chatter wasn't directed at the game anymore. State supporters tucked into the south corner -- where the piss-mouthed fellow had come from -- found ways to entertain themselves. They chanted abuse at the enemy. "Moron, moron, moron!" they cried out as Tech moved down the field toward them. "Moron, moron, moron!"

If the Wildman noticed, it didn't show in the stony, inflexible face.

Or Theresa was too busy to notice subtleties, helping plug holes and flick away passes. And when the Wildman galloped up the middle, she planted and dropped a shoulder and hit him low on the shins.

A thousand drills on technique let her tumble the mountainous boy.

Alan fell, and Theresa's teammates would torpedo his exposed ribs and his hamstrings, using helmets as weapons, and sometimes more than helmets. One time,

the giant man rose up out of the pile and staggered -- just for a strange, what's-wrong-with-this-picture moment. A river of impossibly red blood was streaming from his neck. The field judge stopped the game to look at hands until he found long nails dipped in red, and a culprit. Tech was awarded fifteen meters with the personal foul, but for the next three plays, their running back sat on the sideline, his thick flesh being closed up by the team's medics.

Tech was on the eleven when he returned, breaking through the middle, into the open, then stumbling. Maybe for the first time in his life, his tired legs suddenly weighed what they really weighed. And when he went down hard, his ball arm was extended, and Theresa bent and scooped the treasure out of his hand and dashed twenty meters before one of the whippets leveled her.

For a long minute, she lay on her back on that mangled sod, listening to the relentless cheers, and trying to remember exactly how to breathe.

Tech's sideline was close. Pure-humans wearing unsoiled laser-blue uniforms watched her with a fan-like appreciation. This wasn't their game; they were just spectators here. Then she saw the Wildman trudge into view, his helmet slightly askew, the gait and the slope of his shoulders betraying a body that was genuinely, profoundly tired. For the first time in his brief life, Alan Wilde was exhausted. And Theresa halfway smiled, managing her first sip of real air as Marlboro Jones strode into view, cornering his star running back in order to tell him to goddamn please protect the fucking ball --

Alan interrupted him.

Growling. Theresa heard a hard low sound.

Jones grabbed his player's face guard, and he managed a chin-up, putting his face where it had to be seen. Then he rode the Wildman for a full minute, telling him, "You don't ever! Ever! Not with me, mister!" Telling him, "This is your fucking life! It's being played out right here! Right now!" Screaming at him, "Now sit and miss your life! Until you learn your manners, mister! You sit!"

Four plays later, Theresa dumped a short pass into her running back's hands, and he rumbled through a string of sloppy tackles, all the way into the end zone.

State tried for a two-point conversion, but they were stopped.

The score looked sloppy on the holo boards. 28-12.

Tech's star returned for the next downs, but he was more like Alan than like the mythical Wildman. In part, there was a lack of focus. Theresa saw a confused rage in those giant, suddenly vulnerable eyes. But it was just as much exhaustion. Frayed muscles were having trouble lifting the dense, over-engineered bones, and the pounding successes of the first half were reduced to three meter gains and gouts of sod and black earth thrown toward the remote carbon-fiber roof.

State got the ball back late in the third quarter. Rickover called for a draw play, which might have worked. But in the huddle, Theresa saw how the defense was lining up, and she gave Man O War a few crisp instructions.

As the play began, her receiver took a few steps back.

Theresa flung the ball at a flat green spot midway between them, and it struck and bounced high, defenders pulling to a stop when they assumed the play was dead. Then Man O War grabbed the ball, and despite his cast, heaved the ball an ugly fifty meters, delivering its fluttering fat body into waiting hands.

Rickover wanted to try for two points.

Theresa called time-out, marched over to Rickover and said, "I can get us three." It meant setting up on the ten meter line. "I can smell it," she said. "They're starting to get really tired."

"Like we aren't?" Man O War piped in, laughing amiably as medics patched his cast.

The coach grudgingly agreed, then called a fumbleroosky. Theresa took the snap, bent low and set the live ball inside one of the sod's deep gouges. And her center, a likable and sweet pure-human named Mitch Long, grabbed up the ball and ran unnoticed and untroubled into the end zone.

28-21, and nobody could think for all the wild, proud cheering of pure-humans.

State managed to hold on defense.

Mosgrove punted, pinning them deep at their end with ten minutes left.

Theresa stretched the field with a towering, uncatchable pass, then started to run and dump little passes over the middle. The Wildman was playing linebacker, and he tackled her twice, the second blow leaving her chin cut open and her helmet in pieces. Man O War took over for a down. He bobbled the snap, then found his grip just in time for the Wildman to come over the center and throw an elbow into his face, shattering the reinforced mask as well as his nose.

Playing with two pure-humans at once, Theresa pitched to her running back, and he charged toward the sideline, wheeled and flung a blind pass back across the field. She snagged it and ran forty meters in three seconds. Then a whippet got an angle, and at the last moment pushed her out of bounds. But she managed to hold the ball out, breaking the orange laser beam rising from the pylon.

Finally, finally, the game was tied.

Marlboro called time out, then huddled with his 1-1-2041s. There wasn't even the pretense of involving the rest of the team. Theresa watched the gestures, the coach's contorting face. Then Tech seemed to shake off its collective fatigue,

putting together a prolonged drive, the Wildman scoring on a tough run up the middle and Mosgrove kicking the extra point with just a minute and fifty seconds left.

35-28.

Rickover gathered his entire team around him, stared at their faces with a calming, messianic intensity. Then without uttering a word, he sent eleven of them out to finish the game.

The resulting drive consumed the entire one hundred and ten seconds.

From the first snap, Theresa sensed what was happening here and what was inevitable. When Man O War dropped a perfect soft pass, she could assure him, "Next time." And as promised, he one-handed a dart over his shoulder on the next play, gaining fifteen. Later, following a pair of hard sacks, it was fourth and thirty, and Theresa scrambled and pumped faked twice, then broke downfield, one of the whippets catching her, throwing his hard little body at her belly. But she threw an elbow, then a shoulder, making their first down by nothing and leaving the defender unconscious for several minutes, giving the medics something to do while her team breathed and made ready.

Thirty meters came on a long sideline pattern.

Fifteen were lost when the Wildman drove through the line and chased Theresa back and forth for a week, then downed her with a swing of an arm.

But she was up and functioning first. Alan lay on the ground gasping, that wide elephantine face covered with perspiration and its huge tongue panting and an astonished glaze numbing the eyes.

Tech called time-out.

Mitch brought in the next three plays.

He lasted for one. Another pure-human was inserted the next down, and the next, and that was just to give them eleven bodies. The thin-skinned, frail-boned little boys were bruised and exhausted enough to stagger. Mitch vomited twice before he got back to the sidelines, bile and blue pills scattered on the grass. The next boy wept the entire time he was with them. Then his leg shattered when the Wildman ran over him. But every play was a gain, and they won their next first down, and there was an entire sixteen seconds left and forty meters to cross and Theresa calmly used their last time-out and joined Rickover, knowing the play that he'd call before he could say it.

She didn't hear one word from her coach, nodding the whole time while gazing off into the stands.

Fans were on their feet, hoarsely cheering and banging their hands together. The drunks in the corner had fashioned a crude banner, and they were holding it

high, with pride, shouting the words with the same dreary rage.

"MORON, MORON, MORON," she read.

She heard.

The time-out ended, and Theresa trotted back out and looked at the faces in the huddle, then with an almost quiet voice asked, "Why are turds tapered?"

Then she said, "To keep our assholes from slamming shut."

Then she gave the play, and she threw twenty meters to Man O War, and the clock stopped while the markers moved themselves, and she threw the ball into the sod, halfway burying it to stop the universe once again.

Two seconds.

She called a simple crossing pattern.

But Coach Jones guessed it and held his people back in coverage. Nobody was open enough to try forcing it, which was why she took off running. And because everyone was sloppy tired, she had that advantage, twisting out of four tackles and head-faking a whippet, then finding herself in the corner with Alan Wilde standing in front of her, barring the way to the goal line.

She dropped her shoulder, charging as he took a long step forward and braced himself, pads and her collarbone driving into the giant man's groin, the exhausted body pitched back and tumbling and her falling on top of him, lying on him as she would lie on a bed, then rolling, off the ground until she was a full meter inside the end zone.

She found her legs and her balance, and almost too late, she stood up.

Alan was already on his feet. She saw him marching past one of the officials, his helmet on the ground behind him, forgotten, his gaze fixed on that MORON banner and the people brandishing it in front of him.

Some were throwing small brown objects at him.

Or maybe at all the players, it occurred to her.

Theresa picked up the bone-shaped dog treat, a part of her astonished by the cruel, calculated planning that went into this new game.

Carried by a blistering rage, Alan began running toward the stands, screaming, "You want to see something funny, fucks? Do you?"

Do nothing, and State would likely win.

But Theresa ran anyway, hitting Alan at the knees, bringing him down for the

last time.

A yellow laser struck her -- a personal foul called by the panicked referee.

Theresa barely noticed, yanking off her helmet and putting her face against that vast, fury-twisted face, and like that, without warning, she gave him a long, hard kiss.

"Hey, Alan," she said. "Let's just have some fun here. Okay."

A couple thousand Tech fans, wrongly thinking that the penalty ended the game and the game was won, stampeded into the far end of the field.

In those next minutes, while penalties and the crowd were sorted out, the 1-1-2041s stood together in the end zone, surrounding the still fuming Wildman. And watching the mayhem around them, Theresa said, "I wish." Then she said it again -- "I wish!" -- with a loud, pleading voice.

"What are you wishing for?" asked Man O War.

She didn't know what she wanted. When her mouth opened, her conscious mind didn't have the simplest clue what she would say. Theresa was just as surprised as the others when she told them, "I wish they were gone. All these people. This is our game, not theirs. I want to finish it. By ourselves, and for ourselves. Know what I mean?"

The 1-1-2041s nodded.

Smiled.

The rebellion began that way, and it culminated moments later when a whippet asked, "But seriously, how can we empty this place out?"

Theresa knew one way, and she said it. Not expecting anything to come of her suggestion.

But Alan took it to heart, saying, "Let me do it."

He took a step, arguing, "I'm strongest. And besides, if I'm caught, it doesn't mean anything. It's just the Wildman's usual shit."

Police in riot gear were busy fighting drunks and bitter millionaires. The running back slipped off in the direction of the locker room, as unnoticed as any blood-caked giant could be. Then after a few moments, as the crowds were finally herded back into the stands, Marlboro Jones came over and looked straight at Theresa, asking everyone, "Where is he?"

No one spoke.

Rickover was waving at his team, asking them to join him.

Theresa felt a gnawing guilt as well as an effervescent thrill.

Marlboro shook his head, his mouth starting to open, another question ready to be ignored --

Then came the roaring of alarms and a fusillade of spinning red lights. Over the public address system, a booming voice said, "There is nothing to worry about. Please, please, everyone needs to leave the dome now! Now! In an orderly fashion, please follow the ushers now?"

Within fifteen minutes, the dome was evacuated.

Coaching staffs and most of the players were taken to the helipad and lifted back to the mainland, following the media's hasty retreat.

Twenty minutes after the emergency began, the 1-1-2041s came out of their hiding places. The sidelines were under sea water, but the field itself was high enough to remain mostly dry. Security people and maintenance crews could be heard in the distance. Only emergency lights burned, but they were enough. Looking at the others, Theresa realized they were waiting for her to say something.

"This is for us," she told them. "And however it turns out, we don't tell. Nobody ever hears the final score. Agreed?"

Alan said, "Good," and glared at the others, his fists bleeding from beating all those bilge pumps to death.

Man O War cried out, "Let's do it then!"

In the gloom, the teams lined up for a two-point play. State had ten bodies, and including the whippet still groggy from being unconscious, Tech had its full twelve.

Fair enough.

Theresa leaned low, and in a whisper, called the only appropriate play.

"Go out for a pass," she told her receivers and her running back. "I'll think of something."

She settled behind the minotaur playing center, and she nestled her hands into that warm damp groin, and after a long gaze at the empty stands, she said, "Hey."

She said, "When you're ready. Give it here."