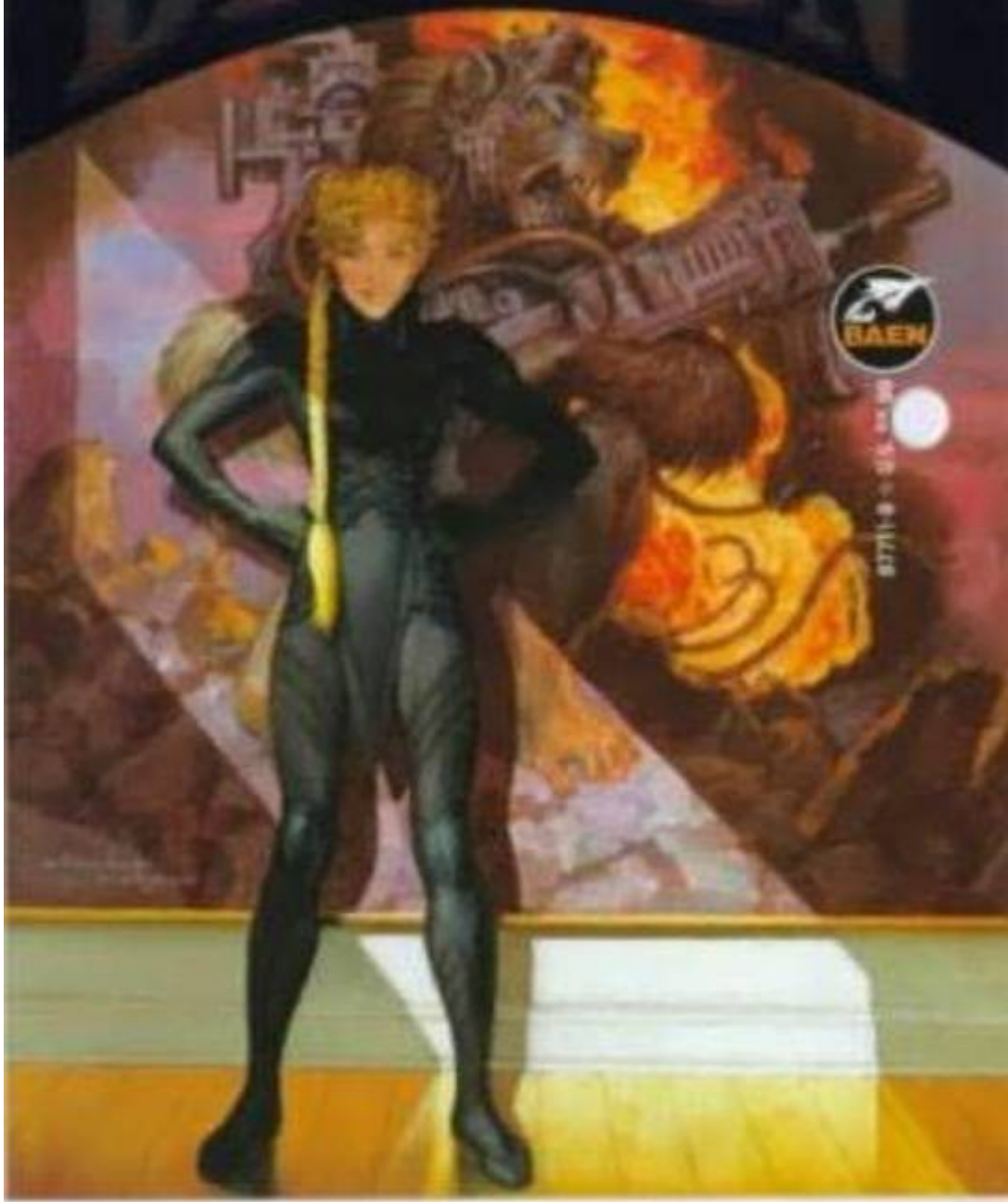


**S. M. STIRLING**

# DRAKON



Drakon

S. M. Stirling

CHAPTER ONE

DOMINATION TIMELINE

EARTH/1

MAY 21, 442nd YEAR OF THE FINAL SOCIETY

(2442 A.D.)

Gwendolyn Ingolfsson stood naked beside the stream. It was an early spring day in the central Rockies, chilly and intensely fresh. Wind whispered quietly through the fir trees dotted through the upland valley, down from the snowpeaks to the west, and fluttered the new leaves of the aspens. It carried the scent of grass and trees, rock, small burrowing things, more faintly elk and—she inhaled—a grizzly, off a kilometer or two upwind. For a moment she gave herself to the wind and silence, face turned to the morning sun, watching a condor sweep its shadow across the flower-starred meadows.

Then she turned back to her camp. The fire was out, her last meal of hand-caught trout and rabbit scorched scraps in the ashes. Beside it was a tripod of spears, shaped ashwood tipped with chipped flint heads bound on by rawhide; her obsidian knife and hide bag hung from them. For a moment she considered taking some of the gear for keepsake, then shook her head. The memory would stay with her, of making them and using them these past six months; let wood and leather and stone rot and tumble and the land grow over them. Or let another find and use them; there were two or three species in this reserve with the hands and the wit, perhaps even feral humans.

She spoke to her transducer:**now**.

The wait was not long. Her ears pricked forward at the whistle of cloven air. A speck fell out of the sky, became a matte-gray flattened wedge ten meters long by five wide. It settled to the ground with a faint sigh and a doorway opened. Gwen sighed herself as she stepped through into the long open room within, regret mingled with pleasure. *Back to civilization*.

"Temperature twenty-one," she said aloud.

The air warmed. She ran a palm cleaner over her body—time for the comfort of hot water later—and dressed in a set of blacks from a container. Another container scanned her before releasing a leather weapons belt, old but well-kept; she checked the charge on the plasma gun automatically, a nostalgic feeling. Obsolete, almost as much as the layer knife on the opposite hip, but she'd carried this very weapon on the last human-hunts here in North America; she was old enough to remember that, the biobombs and the kill-sweeps. Then she sat in the recliner at the nose of the aircraft.

"Visual, optical, maximum." Three-quarters of the hull disappeared to the eye, leaving only the power and drive systems in the deck behind her opaque. "Lift, course to Reichart Station, speed . . ." She considered. "Four hundred kph, height five hundred meters." The craft had orbital capacity, but she wasn't in a hurry. "Call, to legate Tamirindus Rohm."

The wedge lifted, turning and heading southeast down the valley. A square of space before her opened and showed quiet moving colors. Then it flashed to display, only the lack of scent and moving air to distinguish it from a window.

"Service, Tamirindus," Gwen said.

"Glory, Gwen."

The legate was floating in zero gravity—Gwen recognized the background, an office at the GEO end of the Kenia beanstalk; the blue-and-white shield of Earth covered the window behind her, with the northeast corner of Africa visible and the long curve of the Stalk vanishing into the distance below.

Duty. The Directorates wouldn't have called her unless something important needed her attention.

The younger woman—she was only a little over two hundred, half Gwen's age—looked enough like her to be her sister. Hair bright copper rather than mahogany, and a slightly more slender build: apart from that they had the shared likeness of their respective generations of *Homo drakensis*. Deepscan would have shown more differences, of course, despite periodic DNA updates that kept Gwen roughly current, and she doubted the youngster had ever bothered with the full set of combat biomods. The Draka hadn't had much use for them in her lifetime.

"Not my idea of a vacation," Tamirindus went on. "Glad the bears didn't eat you."

"Mostly hibernating, in winter," Gwen answered. "I ate one of them. Believe me, you appreciate the finer things more if you go without for a while. Now, the wild ghoulon packs, they can be really dangerous . . . and I think I spotted sign of humans, ferals."

Tamirindus's eyebrows went up. "Still?"

"Oh, they're not *quite* extinct. It's not an elegant species, but it's tough and they breed fast." She stretched. "Speaking of which, how's the reproduction going?"

"Brooders about ready, doing fine."

"Not using an orthowomb for your eggs?" Gwen made a *tsk* sound. "And you with the Technical Directorate."

Tamirindus grinned. "Tradition has its place. Besides, I like to watch them swell and feel the baby kick in their bellies. The brooder's a pet; the Rohms've used her line since the first century. Her great-grandmother brooded me."

The aircraft extended a cup of coffee; Gwen took it and sipped with slow pleasure. Conversation and coffee were things she'd missed in the wilderness too. Shapes drifted outside Tamirindus's office wall-window, habitats, fabricators, an Earth-orbit to Luna shuttle, the bell-tube-globe shape of an interplanetary craft. Further away they were bright dots against the black of space and the unwinking glow of stars, and in the middle distance the huge frame of the next interstellar colony ship under construction. Gwen's eyes dwelt on that for a moment. Travel from star to star was one-way, and she had never quite decided it was time to leave the home system. Sol-based instruments were enough to tell if there was a life-bearing planet, and to learn much of its detail. Uncrewed probes followed for more detailed work, to see if the prospects were good, and so far five colonizing expeditions had gone out in the probes' wake. Only information and a few frozen samples ever came back; the ships themselves were part of the equipment needed by the settlers.

"Well, if I'm free, I'll visit Rohmplace for the naming feast," she promised the other Draka. It was a while since she'd been to Mars, anyway. "Am I likely to be free?"

"That depends," Tamirindus said. "I may not be able to make it. You know, fifty years ago I almost decided to emigrate because this job was so boring?"

Gwen nodded. One of the drawbacks of immortality was that promotion became positively glacial, even with the population decline. On the other hand, it also made it easier to wait. *Though that can be a drawback too. Patience and laziness can be interchangeable.* The other woman went on:

"Well, we had *another* disaster with the space-based molehole platform. Moving it out to the Oort didn't help at all. This one was bad, heavy casualties. The only consolation is that the weird shit accompanying the accident proves we're doing something right. We haven't figured out exactly what happened or what went where, though.

"So, they've tried microgravity; now the neuron-whackers think a stable planetary field might help." More seriously: "We're trying everything at once, all possible avenues. I've got a dozen teams working on it now. This is *important*, Gwen."

It was. For four centuries the Domination and the descendants of the refugees who'd fled to Alpha Centauri hadn't done much more than glare at each other. By the time the Solar System recovered enough from the Last War to do anything, Alpha Centauri was too tough a nut to crack. War over interstellar distances was an absurdity; the energy costs too high, the defender's advantages from being near a sun too great. Both sides had skirmished a little, traded information a little, and raced to colonize suitable systems first—the only real clash had occurred when two expeditions arrived nearly simultaneously at one such. Colonies were autonomous, because interstellar government was even more ridiculous than war.

In theory it was possible to *destroy* inhabited planets from light-years distant, although not to conquer them. Nobody had ever thought it worthwhile, when retaliation in kind was just as easy and the preparations simple to spot. With communications time in years and travel time in decades, even the closest star was vastly too far to rule. Only the huge resources of entire solar systems made colonization possible at all; there certainly wasn't any economic payoff.

This project might change all that. And the Samothracians—the descendants of the American colonists in the Alpha Centauri system—were ahead. They'd always been better physicists, even before the Last War; the Domination had only started looking into moleholes because espionage indicated the enemy were.

"Downlink?" Gwen said. Best to start right away. You could stuff information into your brain via transducer, but understanding it still took time and effort.

"Not on the Web. Infoplaque by courier; you know, Suicide Before Reading secret. It's waiting for you, along with your stuff. We need to know if it's worthwhile putting more resources into this subproject; the energy budget's enough to notice, even these days."

And really large energies were difficult to handle on a planetary surface; that was probably why the project had been put in sparsely populated North America, just in case. With the Atlantic Ocean to act as an emergency heat sink.

"Glory."

"Service," Gwen replied in farewell. "I'll have a report for you as soon as I can."

She held the coffee cup out for a refill and frowned as the link disappeared. Tamirindus was worried, which meant the Technical Directorate was worried. *Which means I should be worried.* Something of a novelty; this last century or so had been very peaceful.

"Manual," she said, tossing the cup into the cycler. To her transducer:**news.**

The aircraft swooped and dove as her hand settled on the joystick it extruded. Mountains gave way to high rolling plains, green with new grass. Life swarmed, wild horses, antelope, once a herd of bison a million strong. On the shores of a lake a pack of centaurs surrounded a mammoth, shooting with thick recurved bows, galloping in to stab with long heavy lances. Bogged in the lakeside mud, the giant reddish bulk raised its trunk and trumpeted in agony. The females and colts waited at a distance, setting up dome tents and preparing to butcher the great curltusker. None of the stallions looked up from their task, but the others pointed in wonder at the low-flying aircraft, the young running in circles and kicking their hind feet up in sheer glee.

Meanwhile information flowed in; there were a hundred million of her people in the Solar System, and

ten times that number of *servus*, enough to generate considerable news. Gossip, politics, tournaments, duels, wingflying in the domed craters of the Moon, a redirected comet streaking through the nearly clear atmosphere of Venus as the long trouble-plagued terraforming came to an end, sailboats drifting down the ocean that filled the Valles Marineris on Mars. The Cygnus Nine probe had reported in, and there was not only a habitable planet, but an intelligent species on it.

That made her flip the aircraft up, let it do the piloting and take notice; that was only the second race of sophonts found so far, in scores of systems. Planets were the general rule around Sol-type stars, life more common than not, biochemistries roughly compatible with Earth's rare but not impossibly so. Sapient, language-using, tool-making species were very uncommon. The previous discovery hadn't been made until after the colonizing expedition landed, the natives being the equivalent of *Homo erectus*, very scarce and not having made much impact on their planet. This new bunch were *extremely* interesting. Weird-looking, two big eyes and two little ones near a perforated beaklike projection in the middle of their . . . well, probably faces. A Bronze Age-equivalent technology, so they wouldn't be any trouble for the colonizing expedition. A few thunderbolts and the Gods from the *Sky* would be worshiped with fervor.

Of course, the natives would be wild. It would probably take a while to understand the biology and produce a proper domesticated strain, but even so it would be useful to have a population in place rather than breeding from frozen ova alone.

Below, grassland dwindled. Forests appeared along rivers and grew thicker. Fields drew their swirling lines across the landscape, each clustered around a manor house and its dependencies, the estates separated by kilometers of wilderness. Settlement faded again east of the Mississippi, until the Appalachians reared blue and silent, covered with ancient woods of hickory and oak. A thread of smoke rose from one mountain valley; probably goblins. Gwen grimaced. *Loathsome little things*. One of the Conservation Directorate's mistakes, in her opinion—although they did make good, tricky game. The Adirondacks flashed by, spruce and white pine broken only by the blue eyes of lakes.

A scattering of manors marked the Hudson valley, but nobody had ever bothered to resettle Long Island or Manhattan. Thus it was free for Technical Directorate use. Beyond, the Atlantic stretched silver and immense.

"Query," the aircraft said. "Security query from Reichart Station . . . Confirmed access."

Just as well, since the orbital weapons platforms would be tracking her. *Back to work*.

\*\*\*

Reichart Station's surface was a village set in parkland, amid oak and maple forest growing over what closer inspection would show to be ruins. Here and there a giant stub of crumbled building showed, what had survived the airblasts and half a millennium of weather and roots. Several hundred acres were surrounded by the inconspicuous fence-rods of a sonic barrier to keep animals and wild sapients out. Tile-roofed cottages stood among gardens, around a few larger buildings in the same whitewashed style; lawns and brick paths linked them, centered on a square with an ornamental pond. The settlement was three and a half centuries old, at first a biohazards research institute, later branching into physics. Tied into the Web, there wasn't much need for extensive physical plant, and what there was could be put underground. A heavy power receptor showed in the distance, new construction; superconducting cable would be run underground to the centrum.

The whole population was turned out to greet her, nearly a thousand all told. A visit from a *drakensis* in

person would be rare here, entry being restricted. A bow like a ripple went over them as she stepped down from the aircraft.

Gwen's nostrils flared slightly, taking their scent. Clean, slightly salty, seasoned with curiosity, excitement, awe, a touch of fear, a complex hormonal stew that signaled *submission*. The scent of *Homo servus*, comforting and pleasant; it brought a warm pleasurable feeling, a desire to protect and guide.

Their type was more diverse in looks than her own, closer to the ancestral *Homo sapiens sapiens*; this particular group tended to light-brown skins and fair hair, and a height about half a head below her hundred and seventy-six centimeters. There were children among the crowd. Reichart Station would be a community of its own, with its own customs and folkways, by now. The group standing to meet her were middle-aged or older, although they showed few signs of it; they'd been designed to remain vigorous into their ninth or tenth decade before a brief senescence and an easy death.

"Greetings," Gwen said.

"We live to serve," they replied.

The awe-fear scent grew stronger as they reacted to the subliminal stimulus of her pheromones. She throttled back consciously. No sense in spooking them—the long wilderness vacation had made her a little sloppy.

"I'm Glenr Hoben," the *servus* said. "Administrator. This is Tolya Mkenni, my lifepartner and head of research on the Project." She could hear the capitalization on the name.

Tolya gave a half-bow; she smelled a little nervous, and her pupils were slightly dilated. "We've been achieving interesting results, overlord, but it's an intricate question. We're thankful for one of the Race to direct us."

Gwen smiled and shook her head. She'd been a scientist of various types—she'd started in planetography, back around the time of the Final War—but was mainly a troubleshooter these days.

"I'm here primarily to assess and report," she said. "If things look promising, more personnel will be assigned."

Introductions followed. A pair of adolescents bowed and presented her with flowers, some type she wasn't familiar with, probably a local bioproduct. The blossoms had a heady scent, rather like plum brandy with a hint of cinnamon. The two who presented them were pretty as well, a boy and girl of about sixteen in white tunics.

"What pleasant youngsters," she said.

"Mine and Tolya's," said Glenr with quiet pride. "Tomin is already studying research infosystems, and Mala quantum-gravitational dynamics. They'll serve the Race well."

"I'm sure they will," Gwen said sincerely. *Servus* were short-lived and meek and biddable, but the best of them were just as intelligent as her kind, and possibly more creative. "I'll spend the rest of this evening and tomorrow resting and assimilating data."

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Gwen knew the courier's presence in the villa marked for her use before she saw him. Slightly to her surprise, it was a Draka like herself; she could tell that from the scent, sharper and harder than a *servus's*. A youngish man—no more than sixty or so, she judged—in War Directorate uniform. The Directorates *were* taking this matter seriously. He rose with the leopard gracefulness of the Race and extended the infoplaque. It was about the size of her thumbnail; far larger than necessary to carry the data, but more convenient for handling.

"Service," she said.

"Glory," he replied, dropping the plaque into her palm.

"Received," she said, and touched the corder fastened to his wrist. "I'd better get right on to it."

The man nodded grimly; his control was excellent for someone so young, but she could sense tightly-held fright.

"I was with the salvage crew that worked over the platform out in the Oort," he said. "Believe *me*, we're dealing with the unknown here. And I'm not entirely sure that the enemy haven't been meddling."

Gwen nodded. Contamination of infosystems was a perpetual threat, one of the few forms of military action that *could* be carried out over light-years. There was always some traffic in information between the systems, mostly scientific. The Samothracians had always been better at infosystems, just as the Race did more with biologicals—but the InfoWeb was the skeleton of modern civilization. The unspoken threat of retaliation with biosabotage, or simply with asteroids punched up to relativistic speeds, had kept anything too obvious from happening. The potential of the molehole projects . . . was that worth the risk of direct action to the enemy?

Certainly. A functioning macrocosmic molehole would break the long stalemate. The Final War might well turn out to be less final than they'd thought.

"Service to the State," she said, in the old formal mode.

He saluted, fist to chest. "Glory to the Race."

Silence fell on the villa, unbroken save for the breathing of her ghoulon in its quarters at the back; the courier must have brought it in. The transgene was asleep, but its senses were just as keen as hers, and it would wake in the extremely unlikely event of intruders. Gwen slipped the plaque into the receptor of a pocket reader; it extended a thin diadem that she dropped over her head to rest on her brows. She lay down on a couch in the lounging room and thought at her transducer:

begin.

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She came aware and blinked, lifting the cirlet from her brow. The data was *there*, downlinked in instants; the hours since had been spent organizing and assimilating it. The process was far from complete, but well begun. Hunger and stiffness had roused her, and the sound of the ghoulon padding in. Her mind felt overcrammed and bloated, like a stomach after a too-heavy meal.

The room was not dark to Gwen, not to eyes that could rival a cat's, and see into the infrared as well. The guardbeast rose from all fours, one hand pointing to the door; somebody was approaching. A silent



snarl lifted teeth from its muzzle. Ghoulloons were an early experiment, the first of the sentient transgenes. Basically a giant Gelada baboon, with material from certain breeds of dog, from the hunting cats, and from human stock for intelligence, vocal cords, and a fully opposable thumb. They made superb guardians and hunt-servants, although not bright enough to operate any but the simplest machines. Crude work by current standards, but still occasionally useful.

She listened herself, drew air through her nostrils, stretched. "No, I think I know who that is, Wulka," she said quietly. "Go back to your room."

Gwen slipped out of the blacks and underclothes and walked to the door. The villa lights came up around her automatically. The door was carved wood on hinges, local handicrafts. Tomin and Mala stood outside, bearing a bottle of wine and a hamper that smelled of food. The adolescents were wearing flower wreaths in their pale hair, and nothing else.

"We—" they began.

"I know," Gwen said, laying a finger across each pair of lips.

She savored their scent, a slight tang of apprehension and a rising involuntary excitement as they responded to her pheromones. Those strengthened in their turn as she relaxed conscious control and let her arousal blossom. Her hands trailed down to rest over their hearts, a pleasant contrast of hard curve and soft, with the same quickening beat beneath both. Their flushed and bright-eyed smiles answered her heavy-lidded one. It was a feedback cycle, self-reinforcing for all three. This should be a rare and memorable experience for them—the pleasure would be as intense as they could bear—and an enjoyable one for her after six months alone in the wilderness.

"A charming gesture," she said. And just what she needed to relax. "Do come in."

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Tolya gestured at the holographic image that hung over the table and it rotated through a figure-eight.

"This is a three-dimensional representation," the physicist said. It showed something rather like an hourglass shape. "We take a molehole from the quantum foam, pump in energy to enlarge it, and stretch the ends apart. Both ends always remain fully congruent in spacetime. It's a closed timelike loop."

That was the theory, at least. You could anchor one end and whip the other out like a bead on the end of an elastic string. Something sent through one end emerged from the other without subjective duration. The side-effects were extremely odd; if one end were traveling at relativistic speeds, you got the time-dilation effect reversibly. Observed from the outside, it would take the mobile end 4.2-odd years to reach say, Alpha Centauri. But from the fixed end back at Sol, it would be a matter of weeks until the moving exit reached across the light-years. Stepping in would move you 4.2 light-years in space, and 4.2 years in *time*. So far that was only a weird amplification of ordinary high-tau interstellar travel. Seriously strange was the fact that you could step *back* through the molehole and through time; and if you sent the mobile end on a round-trip journey to the Centauri system and returned, you'd have two gates right next to each other, separated by more than eight years in time.

FTL always was considered equivalent to time-travel, Gwen mused. The surprising thing was that both seemed to be possible.

"Of course, as an object passes through, the molehole tries to pinch out—you have to feed in heavy

energy to keep it from closing, a virtual-matter ring. We've achieved consistent results using slightly enlarged ones and passing subatomic particles through, down on a single-atom scale. Proof of concept; it definitely works, overlord."

"But."

The *servus* scientist sighed and ran a hand through her graying hair. "Yes. There seems to be some sort of asymptotic phenomenon that takes over when we enlarge. The energy inputs give extremely variable results, and the variability increases exponentially as size goes up. It's a chaotic effect, somehow. The theory we have says that once stabilized the molehole shouldn't do that, but obviously the theory's not everything we could wish. At a guess, I'd say that there's some sort of . . . inherent linkage to the quantum foam. There could even be advantages to that, eventually, but it's not a completely understood phenomenon. In fact, overlord, it's not even partly understood."

"What are you trying?"

"Well, we're running a series of tests; enlarging the captive molehole *without* separating the ends spatially. That ought to be easier under a relatively heavy and uniform gravitational field. We'll bring it up in size before manipulating it; still very small compared to the eventual macrocosmic applications, you understand. About on the scale of a medium-sized molecule. If we can do that, then we might be able to separate the ends later. Here's the math."

Figures replaced the holograph. Gwen let her transducer take them in, running a mental comparison with the previous attempts.

"These functions—what're you assuming?" she said after a moment, calling up a sequence of equations. "Where did you get these quantities?"

Tolya shrugged and spread her hands, "We're guessing. The experimental results should give us an order-of-magnitude answer on how wrong we are, and then we can try again. It isn't quick, I'm afraid, overlord, but—"

"—elegance buys no yams, yes," she replied, nodding approval. "Good solid rule-of-thumb work. More productive than any simulations, when the basic metrics aren't fully known. The space-based team tried to go too far too fast, in my opinion."

A heavy wash of flattered pleasure at her words scented the air; she could feel the enthusiasm like a glow around the long plain table. Her own answered it. These were obviously a first-class group.

Progress. Back in the times of the Old Domination, when the Draka and their subjects had both been archaic-human, it had been impossible to entrust work like this to the underclasses. She had seen the last of that herself, being the first generation of the New Race.

"We're running the first series now, overlord," Tolya said. "You could monitor from here."

"No, I'll come down," she said thoughtfully.

Not that looking at the casings of the machinery would give her more information than she could get here, but you never knew what prompted an intuitive leap. They crowded into the elevator, a bit of a tight press with Wulka in one corner. The *servus* crowded away from the transgene's fur, squeezing together to avoid transgressing Gwen's sphere of social space. She kept her dominance pheromones throttled

down to the minimum in the crowded quarters, but it was a relief when the doors hissed open. They were a *long* way underground here. The shaft opened directly onto the centrum, with another display monitor in the center of the circular room. Around it were consoles with recliners for the attendants. They sat silently, seldom moving, controlling their instruments through transducers and the relay-circlets around their temples.

"Ready to run," one of them said aloud.

Gwen stepped to the display table. It was physically over the facility, more for symmetry's sake than anything else. Right now the graph-holos were showing standby power only. The molehole was represented by a line of white light. Her transducer was Draka class, and she slipped effortlessly into communion with the machines and their operators. It was not quite like artificial telepathy, but nearly. Tolya was directing them with crisp efficiency:

bringing it up. skip level four in thirty seconds, power on. mark.

this is the level the platform had trouble with?Gwen asked.

yes, overlord, but we've reached it before without a problem.

Gwen nodded,**proceed, cautiously.**

Seems steady enough,the physicist thought.**one more level and then stabilize and monitor.**

A technicians thought.**power overage.**

Odd.Tolya hesitated,**cut energy input, 10%.** To Gwen:**overlord, it ought to collapse in a gravity field if we take it down, pity to lose the molehole, but—**

Power overage. It's not contracting.A pause.**Loss of symmetry, the metric is varying.**

Gwen cut in.**put it on auto and evacuate.** She looked up. Tolya was staring at the console, wide-eyed.

overlord, we'll lose the facility!

Gwen spoke aloud. "Uplink the data, realtime." Crucial to get something of value out of this. "Evacuate the settlement. And *get out!*"

Her voice took on the whipcrack of command. The others obeyed instantly, all but Tolya. The chief physicist halted for an instant in the shaft door.

"Overlord—"

" *Go.*"

Her mind grappled with the machines. *Get the data out.* The control systems were trying to shove the molehole back down into the quantum foam where it belonged, and failing. The danger was sudden, shocking, as unexpected as a grizzly heaving itself out of hibernation beneath her feet. It focused her, as nothing else had in generations. Get the scientists out; right now, they were more valuable to the Race than she was. Save the facility if she could. *That's not working.* The machines were trying to starve the molehole, but obviously the power input was coming from somewhere else. Once it rose over a tripping

threshold it started expanding on its own, exponentially. Vacuum energy, perhaps.

All right, we'll try the other way. She rapped out through her transducer: **maximize containment fields**. If she couldn't starve it, see if it choked.

There was an almost-audible hum from beneath her feet. Several alarm systems began to indicate physical breaches in components; all this was taking place in a space smaller than her fist, ten meters or so below.

Well, that didn't work either. Fear now, harsh and unaccustomed. The facility was lost, and her with it if she didn't get out in time.

"Out!" she rasped, and began the leap backward that would take her into the elevator shaft.

The ghoulon reacted with an equal, animal swiftness, reaching out to grab her and add the momentum of its arm to her bound.

Blackness.

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"Damnation!"

Alarms flexed through the detection instruments of the USSNF *President Douglas*. The cruiser was waiting on minimal-power standby, most of the crew in stasis units, everything heavily stealthed. The passive sensors were fully active, however.

Captain Marjorie Starns, United States of Samothrace Naval Forces, looked down at the screen again; the implants gave her the same information, with the mathematical overtones. The images of others of the active crew appeared in front of her: her executive officer, Lyle Asmundsen, and the Strategic Studies Institute honcho, Menendez.

She called up data; Earth spun before them, as if the ship were orbiting the planet, rather than nearly a tenth of a light-year beyond Pluto. A grid lay across it, and a point flashed.

"Eastern coast of North America," she said.

"Certain it was a molehole?" The spook, George Menendez.

"Nothing else produces an event wave like that," she said. "Very brief; it cycled through its stability point, grew and collapsed. They're still working on the control—but they're getting closer. That one nearly worked. Of course, they evidently don't know what happens when you open one through a sharply-flexed spacetime matrix, but this'll give them an idea. They're not what you'd call really sharp theoretical physicists, but once you know something's possible . . ."

The intelligence agent started to shrug, then stopped and crossed himself. "Jesus," he whispered. "That's another *Earth* they broke through to."

The captain nodded jerkily. "We've got a responsibility here," she said. "Samothrace is always uninhabited, to a very high order of probability. But any other Earth . . ."

"What was the degree of displacement?" Asmundsen said.

She consulted the machines; the theoretical breakthroughs behind them were recent, but capacity had grown swiftly.

"It'll take a while to be certain, but probably timelike negative, with a vertical temporal displacement of about . . . four centuries and a lateral of six hundred—close to the minimum possible. The event-wave track's quite clear. Something went through, and it was alive when it did."

Menendez nodded. "What can we do?"

Asmundsen smiled bleakly. "We *could* put the whole ship through on that track," he said. "If we moved farther into the solar gravity well."

Starns grunted laughter. "And put up a sign, *hurrah, we're here* for the snakes. They could follow us *en masse* in a couple of weeks. Anything we put through is going to be out of precise chronophase, and the more energetic the mass put through is, the more noticeable. Once the snakes realize what's going on . . ."

"Should we do anything?" Menendez said. "Our mission priority is information. Samothrace is waiting for this data."

The naval officers exchanged glances. "We'll have to leave now anyway," Starns replied. "They're going to detect us when we run for the transit molehole back to the Centauri system." Modern drives transferred momentum between ship and cosmos directly, but the process inescapably bled energetic quanta far above the level of vacuum energy.

"That would cover a minor insertion."

"Very minor," Menendez said thoughtfully. "We've got to be careful about giving them an extra energy source to detect. If they manage to trace whoever it was they lost, it'll give them a big jump on mastering the molehole technology."

"Besides a possible bolthole when The Day arrives," Starns said. "Plus . . . well, whoever's on the other side of that molehole doesn't deserve a live snake running around."

"It might have been a *servus*, not a *drakensis*."

"Possible, but can we count on it? And even a *servus* might be able to set up some sort of beacon; they're not stupid just because they've been mind-gelded."

Menendez nodded decisively. "One agent, minimal equipment," he said. "I'll revive and brief my best operative—Lafarge."

"Sure he'll volunteer?" Starns said dubiously.

The spymaster smiled bleakly. "They all volunteered to be inserted on *our* Earth if necessary," he said. "Anything else will be a rose garden by comparison."

## CHAPTER TWO

JANUARY 1, 1995 A.D.

EARTH/2.

Falling. Consciousness returned, and Gwen was falling, under gravity. Reflex snapped her hands out and they closed on rough metal, stopping her with a jar that clicked her teeth together. Something fell past her. She froze, eyes wide with shock. She keyed her transducer, but there was *nothing*, not even the location-signal from the navsats. She was out of contact with the Web; it felt like having two limbs amputated, or part of her brain.

Smells. The air was heavy with them, rank. Rusty iron. Burnt hydrocarbons, enough to gag you. A stew of chemicals, half of which she couldn't identify. Scorched metal; there was a thin hole burnt through the beam she held, as if by an energy weapon. The smell of old concrete. And—

Humans.

Many humans, and *close*. Their rank feral smell clogged her nostrils, thrumming along her nerves with remembered terror.

It was impossible, and it cleared her head. *Don't try to understand. React.*

She was hanging by her hands from an iron walkway in a large dimly lit room, nearly ten meters up. Grimy skylights overhead let in a diffuse light. Enough for her eyes to see clearly, and there were IR sources down there, too. She could hear voices. The language had a tantalizing almost-familiar sound. Gwen focused on it, filtering out the rumble of background noise.

" *Who dot?*" More incomprehensible shouting.

It was English, but very far from her dialect. *Samothrace? I'm in the Alpha Centauri system?* her mind gibbered. No time for that. Not the right mix, anyhow.

Figures below her; the scent grew stronger. Enough for her to distinguish between individuals, and that they were not only *Homo sapiens sapiens* but the African subspecies, and all males. Twenty-two of them. It had been four hundred years since she wined that particular scent, but perfect memory was her heritage. Heads turned up, and a bright electric light. More gabble. The light speared her, a moment of pain in her dark-adapted eyes. A shout from below, as her eyes glittered in the beam, shining cold green like a cat's—the designers had used feline genes for the nightsight system.

A weapon extended at her. Some sort of slug-gun. Another gabble of voices, and one raised in command.

Gwen took a long slow breath. No time to think, only to react. She watched the muzzle train on her, hung one-handed, then drew and fired.

The crash of a plasma discharge filled the empty building with actinic blue-white light for a second, thunder echoing back from the walls. She released her grip and fell, slapping the plasma gun back into its holster as she did. *Anything can pick up a plasma discharge.* Wherever she was, she didn't want detectors tracking her. There were about twenty of the humans, all of them with those archaic slug-guns. But it would be pitch-dark to them . . .

Instead she drew the layer knife, a blade as long as her forearm and made of a sandwich of thin-film diamond between fillers of density-enhanced steel. The impossible strangers blundered about in their darkness, voices shrill with panic. Muzzle-flashes split the black, still directed upwards to where she had been. Jacketed metal pinged about, and there was a scream of pain as it struck someone.

Gwen landed, letting her weight drive her down into a crouch, then came erect. Poised. Began the movements of a dance taught her long ago, when she was first trained for war.

The Human-Killing Dance.

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"What *have* we here?"

Detective Lieutenant Henry Carmaggio had seen a great deal in his two and half decades with the NYPD. This was a first, even since the posses moved into town back in the eighties.

"Christ," he said quietly.

The warehouse had been abandoned. That made it the perfect place for a big buy, in the opinion of the two groups who'd met here.

Bad mistake, he thought, holding his handkerchief over his nose. He'd helped with bloaters—bodies found in apartments and whatever, some several weeks ripe—back in his uniform days. This was different, and worse, even though the . . . slaughter . . . couldn't have been more than six hours ago. It smelled like his uncle's butcher shop on East Houston back when he was a kid, only worse; his uncle would never have allowed brains to spill on the floor, or the heavy shit-stink that underlay the blood. He could identify cordite as well.

There were at least twenty bodies under plastic sheets, the basics of photography and sketching already completed—this looked like one of the times you weren't certain how many exactly until you put all the parts back together. Spent brass sparkled under the temporary lights. Everyone was here, but for once nobody who shouldn't be was walking around the crime site. Not quite everyone: the media ghouls and the brass weren't out in force quite yet. They would be soon, of course. Even in New York, this sort of multiple homicide didn't happen every day.

"Henry, we've got something very fucking *odd* here," the corpse-robber said. *Excuse me. Medical Examiner.* The Insidious Dr. Chen herself. This crime scene was getting the full bells-and-whistles treatment.

He turned to her with a grunt; Mary Chen was a small woman, Chinese. Didn't usually use the f-word much. There had been a time, when he was new to Homicide, when he'd felt a prickle of interest at an unusual case. Now he just felt a sort of anticipatory tiredness. The ordinary ones were bad enough, and far too numerous.

"Take a look at this."

She pulled a plastic sheet back. Carmaggio squatted, shifting his Styrofoam coffee cup to his left hand, and gave a soundless whistle. He put the handkerchief back to his face.

"What happened to *him*? " Whatever it was, it'd opened up his skull and left nothing much above the eyebrows. There was a heavy cooked smell, and the inside of the empty brainpan was boiled-looking. "Some sort of exploding bullet?" Damn, the punks always got the latest.

"Whatever it was, it splattered his brain and bits of his skull for twenty feet around," she said. "Charred or parboiled. In fact, it cauterized the veins. Notice how there's not much blood around him? But this is the easy one. He was definitely shot with something; there's an entry hole just over his eyebrows."

She walked to the next, her feet making little *tack* sounds as the congealing blood on the bottoms of her shoes stuck to the concrete. That reminded Carmaggio, and he pulled on a pair of thin-film gloves. No sense taking chances. Christ, he remembered when only the live ones could kill you.

"Plenty of blood with *this*, " he said.

"Tell me. Glad *I* didn't have breakfast."

It took something to make Chen admit that. Something had sliced neatly through this one's throat all the way to the spine, and halfway through that. The head lay at an acute angle to the body, and the body in an immense pool of brown-red, still liquid under the crust.

"Look. The edges are awfully neat."

"Machete," Henry said. "Good sharp machete, strong swing."

"Maybe. Look at this one."

Another body. This time one arm was off, sliced at the shoulder.

"Awfully sharp machete, wouldn't you say?" She led him to another. "There are four or five similar to this one."

The dead man's head looked distorted, *as* if the side of the skull above the ear had been dished in.

"Sledgehammer?" Henry said.

The examiner shook her head, touching the area with a metal probe. It gave with a mushy softness. "Area of impact's too big," she said. "About palm-size. Whatever it was, it was traveling fast enough to turn the bone there to gravel, like slapping them up alongside the head with a board, *really* hard.

"And here's our prize," she went on.

"Marley Man," Carmaggio said. *Well, there's one case we'll never have to close.*

"Surprised you recognize him." The tall, thin black man's face was a pulped mass, like a redbrown flower surrounded by dreadlock petals.



"It's the gold beads on the ends of his dreads," he replied. "What got him?"

"A fist."

Henry snorted.

"All right, a fist-sized metal forging on the end of a pneumatic piston," she said. "Look at it." She indicated points with the stylus. "Knuckles. Same on a couple of the others."

He noticed one of the specialists examining the body's hand. "Got something?"

"Skin and hair under the nails," the man replied.

"Good." *Very* good, these days. As good as a fingerprint, sometimes.

He looked around at the carnage, outside at the blinking lights and uniforms putting up yellow tape. "These folks *definitely* lost the War on Drugs. Okay, how many gunshot fatalities?" His voice sounded a little hollow in the huge dim echoing space of the warehouse.

"None."

"Say *what?* "

He nodded at the spent brass and the weapons being photoed and bagged up. The usual mix—cheap stuff, those cheesy Tech-9's, some Glocks, a MAC-10, two Calicos, one expensive H&K 9mm which had better stay in the evidence room.

"Some bullet wounds, but none of them fatal. Ricochets. These guys were shooting, but not at each other. And not for long."

"Well, I guess that proves the NRA's right; it really *isn't* guns that kill people," Henry said. "Maniacs with machetes and baseball bats kill people. Even when the people are killer posse Jamaicans armed to their gold-capped teeth."

He turned to his assistant, Jesus Rodriguez, and indicated the guns and packaged drugs being dusted for prints and carefully packed away.

"What's wrong with this picture?"

"*Si*. No money. But I didn't think the perps would leave it."

"Yeah, but why leave the *stuff*, man? It's all here, samples, bags, vials, you name it. They had a goddamned *supermarket* going, even some Ecstasy like they expected passing Euroweenies, but nothing's missing. Just the money."

Mary Chen smiled. Henry didn't like the expression—and he suspected she didn't like him. The feeling was mutual, but she could do her job.

"Couple of the bodies show heel marks, usually to the back of the head. Coup de grâce. And I saved the best for last." She turned her head to one of her own team: "Tag, bag and ship. Let's get the meat

back to the shop and get some details."

They walked over to a table. "Here it is," she said, and uncovered it with a gesture a little like a maître d'hotel whipping the cover off a dish.

Henry stared, fumbling in his jacket for his cigarettes and then remembering he'd quit. It was an arm, detached at the shoulder. Naked, except for reddish . . . fur, fur with darker spots. Thick, dense fur running all the way down to the knuckles. The palm was black and heavily callused. The arm was about the same size as Henry Carmaggio's leg, and he was six feet and weighed two hundred pounds. The detective prodded cautiously at the limb with a gloved finger, then manipulated the joints. Unmistakably meat, the real thing. Fresh, too.

"Chen," he said, after a minute's silence. "I'm going to assume you didn't go down to the zoo and kill a gorilla to play a practical joke on me."

"It's not a gorilla," she said. "Look—the thumb structure's human. Fully opposable." She took the giant hand in both of her tiny ones and touched the thumb to each fingertip. He sensed tightly-controlled fear in the forensics expert. Just like him.

"So it's a baboon. One of those sinsemilla growers out on the West Coast had a Bengal tiger as a watchdog. The Animal Rights woo-woos sued the DEA cowboys who shot it when they raided his place—read about it in the Post."

"It's not a baboon either," Chen said. "Wrong shape, too big, and they don't have spots. Did a giant, spotted, one-armed baboon go running out of here between one and four this morning?"

"Who'd notice, in this neighborhood?" Rodriguez said.

Clinton's not actually that bad an area, Carmaggio thought. Even if it had been known as Hell's Kitchen once. Most of it positively yuppified, except for the odd pocket of squalor like the warehouse. A couple of years and this would probably be boutiques.

"They took long enough to call us about this fire," he replied. A glance down at his notepad: "Nothing, then a very loud noise—sounded like thunder, or an explosion—another loud noise like thunder but not as loud, a flash of light—hey, maybe a concussion grenade—then lots of gunfire."

Henry Carmaggio had seen a great deal in his forty-five years. In a way, it was reassuring that things could still surprise him.

"Chen," he said heavily, "I'm not going to go to the Captain with a report that Marley Man's posse was wasted by giant spotted baboons." He remembered the first body. "Giant spotted baboons with ray guns. And for Christ's sake, keep this goddamned arm under cover until we have something to say—you can imagine what the media would do with it, and not just the *Enquirer*."

"All right. I'll have to talk to your lab people: we'll need serious help, maybe consult someone at the university."

"As long as it's quiet. I want to retire, but not next week to someplace with compulsory medication."

"That," Chen said, "is *your* problem. You're the one who has to write up the site report." Then in a dead-flat tone: "I'm going to do my best on this, Henry. I really am."

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Gwen finished vomiting into the stained toilet and staggered erect, taking a deep breath. Control clamped down again. Letting fear-nausea overwhelm her had been stupid, a waste of calories she might not be able to replace at once. She flushed, after a moment's puzzling out the control, then climbed into the shower. Her blacks washed free easily, memory-molecule fabric snapping back to freshness. Then she stripped and began the more difficult task of getting skin and hair and nails free of the blood. The gouges along her neck where the last one had grabbed at her were already healing. Alternating cold and hot water helped bring her back to alertness; it wasn't really possible for her to go into shock, but she'd come as close as her biology allowed. Besides that, she had the slightly flushed sensation that meant her immune system and panspecifics were eliminating a number of unfamiliar bacteria and viruses.

Only one shot had hit her, in the thigh muscle. The molecular-web armor under her skin had caught most of the impact, leaving the slug a lump between the subcutaneous fat and the muscle. She probed carefully with a pair of nail scissors from the medicine cabinet, gritting her teeth against the sting. She could will the pain away, of course, but it was unwise to do that except in an emergency.

Pain was a valuable teacher; the universe whispered to you in pleasure, talked to you in reason, but with pain, it shouted.

The twisted lump came free and she pressed the lips of the small wound back together long enough for the clotting to seal it, testing the leg. *Full junction*. Then she brought the spent bullet up and looked, tasted.

Jacketed lead alloy, she decided. *Quaint*. That type had gone out of use about the time she was born, in the 1970s, replaced with prefragmented synthetic crystal. The slug was coated with some sort of long-chain polymer and tipped with tungsten; that and the pointblank range were why it had got through her blacks.

She tossed it aside and walked back into the living room, picked up the body of the shabby apartment's owner and dropped it behind the couch. The stink was one more minor annoyance in the foul air of the place. She gathered up the . . . newspapers, that was the word . . . and went into the kitchen cubicle. Most of the food in the cooling unit was repulsive, but she'd eaten worse in her time, and *Homo drakensis'* digestive system could handle anything organic. Methodically, she stoked herself, starting with the two liters of milk and loaf-and-a-half of bread. She read.

New York City. 1995. She felt her skin roughening, and forced blood into the capillaries. Four years before the start of the Final War; according to that date, she ought to be on board a cruiser orbiting Titan. And less than twenty years old. Her eyes scanned in a flicker, taking a long ten to twenty seconds per page. The written language was much closer to her own than what she'd heard of the spoken form, but still a struggle.

*I was right. This isn't my 1995.*

Which was almost a relief; *her* New York City had been destroyed by multiple fusion-bomb hits in the opening minutes of the War. The newspapers showed her a world so alien, so full of assumptions she didn't know, that they were mostly incomprehensible. The "Many Worlds" hypothesis must be literally true; every collapsing of a quantum wave front produced all possible outcomes. This was a world whose history followed a different track.

There are hundreds of *separate nations here*.

In her history, there had been only two by the last decade of the twentieth century. *The Domination . . . the Domination doesn't exist at all*. The people who'd given birth to the New Race had never been. Her mother had never been, her human mother, nor the womb-mother brooder who'd borne the egg. Her own children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren would never be born. Her whole species didn't exist.

Her stomach knotted again. *No*. Reverse peristalsis wasn't going to do her any good at all.

Nothing is going to do any good. She was exiled as no one in all history had ever been exiled. She was the only one of her kind in the entire *universe*.

"No," she said aloud. "The world's still there; the Domination's still there. It's just not *here*."

And any transfer process had to be reversible, at least in theory. If the local humans didn't kill her, she was going to live a long, long time—with the last retrofit, indefinitely, the geneticists said. There was no hurry. The thought calmed her.

The plastic box on the counter rang. Gwen reached out and pulled the cord from the wall. It was early in the morning, long before dawn, but that ring meant she couldn't stay here even a few hours. Somebody might come and look if there was no answer, and she couldn't stop and fight battles with the ferals.

Damn. It would be several days before she *had* to sleep, but she was tired already. She finished off the bowl of noodles and started in on a boxed cake, revoltingly sweet but useful calories. Her fingers cracked open the plastic sheeting and exposed the insides of the telephone. She peeled back the insulation on the cord with a thumbnail.

Braided copper wire. They might or might not use opticals here, then. Magnetic coil bell inside the phone. Some sort of integrated control circuit. Relays for the control buttons. Primitive, and not a technology that had ever been used in the history she learned. She disassembled the hand unit with the microphone and speaker. More magnetic resonance. That gave her an idea. Gwen bent, stuck a hand beneath the cooling unit and lifted it around. S-curves of tubing ran up the back; an electrically powered compressor unit beneath them. She snapped one of the coils, and sniffed. Freon. A compression-expansion heat pump system, second-century B.F.S. stuff—nineteenth century, using the old system. Not very efficient insulation, either. Her eyes narrowed, moving around the apartment.

It was small, very shabby, and she could hear the scuttle of cockroaches around the baseboards. Her hand snapped out and caught one between thumb and forefinger. *Exactly the same as ours*. Not surprising; cockroaches were a very stable species. So; this was how this society's, this United States', poor lived. It must be a fully industrialized economy; there was a video entertainment unit, plenty of food in the cooler, running water. The living standard was comparable to what most of the Domination's subject-races had had at this date in her history. Less hygienic than her ancestors would have tolerated, and the food would be violently unhealthy from what she remembered of *Homo sapiens's* nutritional needs, too much fat and sodium, but there were more durable goods than you'd expect. Thoughtfully, she pulled the video unit's cable out of the wall and skinned it.

Ah, optical fiber. Quite new, too, much more recent than the building. She pulled the back panel out. *Cathode ray tube*. Another machine produced audio from hand-sized disks. She disassembled it. *Optical storage but in digital form*. Another technology not used in her world's past in precisely that way. *And they have coherent-light emitters*. Her history had developed those as weapons first. She

traced its controls and put a disk on for an instant, then shut it off with a wince; that was noise, not music.

A continuous rumble of traffic noise came from the streets outside the five-story brick building. She walked to the windows, feeling the numbness fading a little from her mind as she went from flight to investigation. Much taller buildings showed in the middle distance, glittering through the darkness, casting pillars of wavy-looking heat into the night. The stink of burnt petroleum was heavy; these people used internal-combustion engines for surface vehicles. Very odd. Lights went by overhead; she leaned out and filtered sound to catch the engines.

Turbines. Combustion engines again, but that type *was* part of her past. She looked up. None of the habitats, satellites, innumerable artificial lights that would have shown; just stars, through light-haze heavy enough to hide most of them from human eyes. The new moon showed only darkness on its shadowed side, none of the jewel-lights of domed crater-cities.

Strange, Gwen thought. *They have optical fibers and coherent-light, but not enough space activity to notice.*

"Well."

The apartment yielded little more of use; the owner's wallet confirmed that identity documents were many and evidently essential to everyday life. She had several sets from the warehouse, but they'd be useless—whatever passed for a Security organization here would be watching for them. Some clothes that might be handy. A little more of the currency, but she already had a large bag stuffed with that. Thoughtfully she transferred it to a zippered carryall she found in a closet; the original was rather heavily bloodstained. So was the top layer of . . . *100 dollar bills*; she discarded those, too.

"I will need a base. I've got to learn my way around here, and not be conspicuous while I do it. I'll need help."

A quick inventory of her assets. The currency. Her plasma gun, layer knife, and belt unit, tucked in with the money. Too conspicuous here; evidently the locals didn't carry weapons on the street. One set of walking blacks, one set of underwear, one pair of boots. The transducer in the mastoid bone behind her ear; useless for connection to a nonexistent Web, but it also held the basic memory-store and comp functions linked to her brain. Without that, she *would* be crippled. Luckily it was quasi-organic, powered from her bloodstream and self-repairing.

And herself. One four-hundred-sixty-year old Draka female, capable of passing for human if nobody did a scan on her body, capable of a good deal else these humans would have trouble imagining.

Myself most of all. She went to the window she'd used to gain entrance half an hour ago and bared her teeth at the world.

Time to go hunting.

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"It's Puerto Rican beer," Jesus Rodriguez explained. "That Anglo stuff, it loses something on its way through the horse's kidneys, *patron*."

Henry grunted and lifted his own Coors. There wasn't all that much noise in the cop bar at this late hour—some, since they were mostly shift workers, after all. A fair haze of cigarette smoke, which made

him itch for one himself. He took another swallow of the beer and a handful of salted peanuts. The percentage of smokers in the force was a lot higher than in the general population, just like the share of messy divorces and alkies. It came with spending your life staring up society's anus.

I really should go home. There ought to be half a pizza in the refrigerator, if it hadn't gotten moldy. His stomach turned slightly. The death stats on divorced men were probably caused by stuff like that; men just had too high a squalor tolerance to live well on their own. What was it Angela had said about him, back in his bachelor days?

"Men don't live like human beings. You live like bears with furniture."

"What?"

"Something my ex-wife said," Henry replied, and repeated it. It was only six months since the papers had come through, but he could joke about it now.

Jesus shook his head, grinning; but then, he was a newlywed with a kid on the way. *Thank God Angela never wanted kids*, he thought. Carmaggio had, but he'd never pressed it—something for which he was now profoundly grateful.

"You should find a good woman," Jesus said.

"The only women I meet are cops, suspects, relatives of the deceased, or in body bags. Or waiting tables." The waitress came by and collected their empties. "Hey, Myrtle—Jesus says I should meet a good woman. What about it?"

Myrtle looked at him and started laughing; the chuckles faded across the room as she walked away. They redoubled when she got behind the bar and told her friends . . .

Thanks, partner, Carmaggio thought sourly.

"Could be worse. Think of the ones you'd be meeting on the beat, or in Vice." Jesus prodded at the heap of newspapers on the table, covered with dark rings from bottles.

"How does it feel to be famous?" he said, admiring one shot of himself.

"If I catch you on *Good Morning America*, your ass is grass," Carmaggio said. "Plus those vultures will eat your liver. And watch what happens when we don't catch the perp. Even the ordinary civilians will decide we're not heroes anymore."

"Don't be negative, *patron*. I still think two of Marley Man's boys got away. If we catch them . . ."

". . . we'll have two ganja-soaked goons who shot each other in the dark and ran like hell," Carmaggio said, belching. He picked up a newspaper. "*Vigilante Killer Strikes?* Christ, where do these people get their ideas, the Sci-Fi Channel?"

The other detective shrugged and moved his chin toward the TV set over the bar. The words were inaudible, but they both knew what the carefully-tousled reporter was saying. Mostly that nobody knew anything about the Warehouse Massacre.

"And by now those two punks have probably decided that Martians are moving in on the crack trade."

Jesus shrugged. They also both knew that there was nothing more unreliable than the eyewitness testimony of the untrained. Particularly if the witness had any time to think about what had happened; people could do things to their memories that Hollywood FX masters and film-editors could only dream about.

"They might know something," Jesus pointed out gently.

Henry smiled back. *Getting old. Getting pessimistic.* Had he ever been that bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? *Not since I landed in Saigon,* he decided. Mind you, that had its advantages. Even police work in New York couldn't be worse than the Cambodian border.

He hoped.

"Well, this case sure as shit isn't going to go away. No matter how much the Captain burns our ass. Not that he'll stop trying; too much pressure from on high."

The policemen nodded somberly in unison and finished their beers. No doubt about *that*.

"Maybe I should have kept that promise to God and become a priest," Carmaggio said.

"?Qué es?"

Henry shrugged.

He'd gone out the door of the chopper fifty feet up, when the burst wentptank-ptank *down the length of the tail boom and blew three holes through the man next to him. Out without knowing it happened, until he hit mud that was deep and clinging. He landed on his back, so he didn't drown like a lot of the grunts pinned down that day, but it ran into the corners of his mouth. Stunned like an ox in the slaughterhouse by the fall, spitting out a taste of oily rot, bleeding from a pressure-cut on his scalp where the helmet had struck. The reeds closed above him, the friendly reeds, four feet tall in the marsh. Hiding him from the gook snipers in the trees.*

The helicopter augured in a hundred yards away, men hanging from the skids. He could feel the heat of the explosion as the fuel went up, like sun on his face. When the .51-caliber machine guns opened up from the treeline, the slugs went by six inches from his face, and each cut reed had a perfect semicircle of glowing red at the severed end—just like touching a lighted cigarette to a piece of Kleenex.

Intelligence thought there was one VC company in the woods. Fucked up, as usual. Two fucking battalions *of NVA*.

Four hours until the fast-movers came in and laid snake and nape, two hours before the next wave coptered in. Victor Charlie moving through the reeds, singsong gook talk, shots and screams as they finished off the American wounded. Lying waiting for a coolie hat and a Kalashnikov to show over the reeds, waiting and praying and promising God . . .

"*De nada,*" he said. "Let's get you back to your new wife."

There were some things you just couldn't talk about to anyone who hadn't been there.

## CHAPTER THREE

"Detective, can you confirm that this is the work of the Warehouse Massacre killer?"

The reporter thrust a microphone at Carmaggio's face. *How would you like that up your ass?* he thought, squinting into the lights. He knew that made him look like an Italian Neanderthal, but pretty wasn't his long suit.

"We're investigating all possible leads," he said politely. The words were polite, at least. "You'll be informed as soon as we have definite information."

So you can blab it to the perp and help him get away, he added to himself, cutting through the crowd outside the tenement with an expert shoulder-first motion. Fortunately, the uniforms were keeping civilians and the press out of the actual building, although tenants were already being interviewed in front of the cameras on the sidewalk outside. None of them would know anything, but that wouldn't stop the Fourth Estate from doing their usual thorough job of misrepresentation, bias, groundless speculation and general farting around.

A detective saw a lot of crime scenes; the trip up the stairs was like a journey down memory lane. At first glance this one looked more like the general run than the warehouse had. Henry Carmaggio ducked through the yellow tape and through the door, hands carefully in his pockets. The slum apartment could have been dozens he'd seen. Even the smell was familiar, and not too bad—the window had been open for the whole ten days or so since the killing, in cold weather. The stale grease was actually worse.

Jesus Rodriguez met him, wearing one of the new eye-videos, mounted on a headband with a recording unit. *Toys*, Carmaggio thought.

The medical examiner's people were bagging the body, not Chen herself this time—a singleton didn't rate it. One of them looked up:

"Kick to the sternum, kick to the back of the head. The heelmarks match with the warehouse."

Carmaggio nodded. *Details follow at 11:00.* "Try not to—" he began, then thought better of it. "When the press ask, tell 'em space aliens did it. Or Elvis. Better still, tell 'em space aliens *pregnant* by Elvis did it as a Satanic ritual."

The examiner grinned as Carmaggio turned away. Jesus took him to the window. It was going dark outside, cold and clear.

The window was an ordinary sash type, with a protective grate of half-inch iron bars, overlooking a four-story drop to an alley, with a flat roof opposite. Two of the bars had been pulled out of their settings; nothing fancy, a simple straight pull. There was blood on the other bars, where somebody had squeezed past; Carmaggio was willing to bet the blood was secondhand. The lock on the window had been snapped, and the window left open. There was a heelprint on the windowsill; one of the Ident crew was photographing it and setting out scraper and plastic baggie.



"Blood?" Carmaggio asked.

"Yep. Mud as well."

A blood spray and another large irregular stain marked the worn carpet. Carmaggio looked at the location, then back at the window.

"Somebody climbed up the wall, pulled out the bars, and opened the window—breaking the lock in the process. When the owner came over, the perp kicked him in the chest, then in the back of the head while he was lying on the floor. Then moved him, a few minutes later."

"Yeah, but Lieutenant—I think . . ."

"What?"

"I think that was just to get him out of the way."

He nodded, and walked into the tiny bathroom. There was a sludge of dark brown in the bathtub, and marks on the walls and floor.

"Messy. Didn't use the curtain." The tests would take a while, but he was morally certain the blood would match with the warehouse samples. Anyone who cut up twenty men was going to be coated with the stuff.

A chalk X marked a spot near the toilet. Rodriguez held up an evidence bag. "Bingo," he said.

Carmaggio examined it carefully. "Nine-millimeter Talon," he said. "One gets you ten ballistics show it's from a posse gun. Looks like it hit a flak vest."

Rodriguez held up another plastic bag, this one with a pair of cheap nail scissors. "I think this was what the perp used to extract it," he said. "Quite the surgeon, *si*?"

They moved to the kitchen. Papers were spread on the rickety deal table with its red-and-white checked plastic tablecloth, along with empty tins and a milk carton. Plus a scattering of one-hundred dollar bills. Ident squad officers were picking them up with tweezers and dropping them in baggies.

"Then the perp sat and read the newspapers, ate everything in the fridge—*everything*—tore apart the phone, the TV and the CD player, lifted the fridge around and broke off one of the coils, got rid of the grubby soiled part of the money from the warehouse, and left."

"And they broke off the key in the lock when they went, too. Left the window open, as well."

Carmaggio looked over at the windowsill. "No, they had the window open all the time they were here. Maybe it's an Eskimo."

"That's Inuit."

"Whatever. Anything from the neighbors?"

"Nothing. The lady next door called it, she noticed the smell." Jesus flipped open his notebook. "Maria Sanchez. Victim's name was Antonio Salazar, custodial worker, thirty-eight, single. Minor record, public

intox, possession, that stuff—one step up from the steam-grate crowd. Looks like he was here about ten days before anyone noticed."

"Which would put this about the same time as the warehouse," the detective said. *Nobody notices when a janitor doesn't show up.* They'd assume he was on a bender, or something. Either the perp was very smart, or they'd lucked out in their choice of victim.

"More or less, *patron*, "

Carmaggio grunted. *Don't let what you want to be true cover your eyes.* Still, the MO was suspiciously alike—and the bizarre aspects were pushing his coincidence button.

"So," he said. "Twenty posse drug-dealers, and one anonymous janitor. Motive?"

"Dropped in for a wash and a snack," Rodriguez said, tapping the empty milk carton with his ballpoint.

"I think you may be right—a snack and somewhere to hide for a few hours. The distances are right."

Carmaggio turned slowly on his heel, looking over the little roach-trap. *Shitty place to die.* Probably an even shittier place to *live*, come to that, but that wasn't his department.

A slow burn of anger started at the back of his throat, unexpected and unfamiliar. Marley Man was no loss; and face it, Antonio Salazar was a complete loser who'd've ended up on a slab someday in the not-too-distant future. Probably put there himself with a needle; he was the old-fashioned kind and Dame Horse came with a dark rider these days. It wasn't even that the killings had been casual, probably motiveless. He saw plenty of those. It was . . . *like Uncle Luigi and the rabbits*, he realized.

He'd been seven when that happened. Going over to his uncle's, and the old guy had been killing rabbits. Big hutch full of rabbits, and Luigi standing by it in his undershirt, belly hanging over his pants, suspenders dangling, a burnt-out cigarette hanging off his lower lip. Luigi was a bricklayer, and he had hands like baseball mitts. Big beefy arms, fat but with lots of muscle underneath. The big hand went down into the cage and *wham* a rabbit came up in it, kicking and squealing and dropping black round pellets of rabbit shit. Eyes bugged out. Then Uncle Luigi sort of wrung it with fingers and thumb—a quick cracking sound, and it kicked and went limp. A toss, and it went onto the table with the others, next to the little curved knife.

Carmaggio had still been screaming when Uncle Luigi got him home. Dad gave him the belt and sent him to his room, but he wouldn't eat the stew anyway.

The perp here was killing the way Uncle Luigi did the rabbits.

The force of his own rage surprised him; and it was mixed with something else, something much more commonplace.

Fear.

"We're going to hear from this fucker again," he said quietly.

Jesus took the videocam rig off his head and looked down, snapping the cassette out of the machine. "*Si.* I've got that feeling too."

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Stephen Fischer woke to the sound of a quiet, burring clicking sound. His bedroom was dark and the air still, smelling of incense and a sexual musk.

Jesus, what a lay! he thought blurrily. *What an experience.*

He felt too heavy to move anything more than his eyelids, to do anything but breathe. *I'd always thought "drained" was a figure of speech,* he thought.

Eerie. He'd been sitting quietly with a beer, not even trying for a pickup. Better not to try right after a breakup; girls could sense it if you were too needy. It was late, nobody there, and he hadn't been in the place for two years, not since he married.

He'd noticed her the minute she came in. Black tracksuits weren't the usual dress for the after-work crowd on the Street, even at Fernways, which catered to the younger up-and-coming set—although the suit had a sort of shimmery quality to it up close. She'd come in with a draft of cold air . . .

That's odd. She must have been freezing in that stuff out on the street in January.

. . . come in with a nylon duffel bag in her hand, and given the place a once-over. God, those eyes. Big and green, in the dark aquiline face. Model looks, model walk. And she'd come over to *his* booth, just slid right in.

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"Order food," she said.

And slid a hundred-dollar bill onto the table. The accent had floored him as much as the money. A German trying to sound like Scarlett O'Hara might have sounded that way, but it was thick enough to be barely comprehensible. Voice soft and deep, like velvet.

Fischer blinked at her. *This doesn't happen to guys on the Equities Desk,* he thought. In fact, he doubted it happened to anyone outside the movies.

The booth was dim, only a single candle burning on it. The underlight brought out the sculpted angles of her face; model looks, but not the neowaif type. She was dark enough to be a Latina, but the eyes were bright green and the mahogany red of her hair looked genuine.

"Ah, I'm Stephen Fischer," he said.

There seemed to be a lump in his throat, making it a little difficult to talk. That wasn't the only lump, either. He wavered between annoyance—he'd been out of his teens for a decade and a half—and delight. There'd been nothing since the divorce and not much for the year before it.

"Gwendolyn Ingolfsson," she said. For a moment she stared at his extended hand and then took it. That was another surprise; her hand was hard, like smooth articulated wood. A jock's hand. The nails were trimmed very close.

"Would you like to join me for dinner?" he said.

"Yes."

Silence fell for a moment. A waiter came over with another place-setting and a menu; her head tracked him smoothly, then turned back to Fischer.

"What would you like?" he went on, trying not to burble and feeling sweat break out under his collar. *And I'm goddamned nervous too.* Events were out of control, and normally he didn't like that. *To hell with control.*

"I'm hungry. Several dishes."

The green eyes bored into his. He called the waiter over, ran down the menu; Fernways had a small selection, but it was all good. Food arrived; the woman—Gwendolyn, odd name—began to eat, neatly but enormously. His eyes widened. She was not gaunt, but the figure under the loose fabric was obviously the product of heavy exercise club investment, real sweat equity. How could she eat like this?

She looked up from finishing off her twelve-ounce porterhouse. "Tell me about *yourself*," she said; the accent seemed a little less notable.

Fischer loosened his tie and talked; through the dinner, through dessert—she had two—through coffee and brandy. Somehow he never got around to asking the questions, beyond "New in town?" and "Where are you from?" Clipped answers: "Yes" and "Born in Italy."

"So," he said at last, trying desperately not to squeak. "Would you like a nightcap? At, ah, at my place?"

She smiled, showing very white teeth. "Yes."

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Christ, I may never move again. She'd taken his hand the minute they walked into the little studio apartment and led him straight to the bed. Naked she didn't look like a model; more like an Olympic pent-athlete, if they'd come in a non-flat-chested variety. His memory blurred into impossibilities.

*I couldn't have done all that.*

She wasn't in the bed. He could tell it by the feel, even before he saw the light of his computer monitor on. That was the clicking sound, the keyboard.

It was a moment before what he was watching made any sense. Gwen was sitting, eyes glued to the screen; it was logged on to the Internet. Text was scrolling by at far above reading speed through his 28.8 modem. Her hands poised over the keys; every few seconds they would strike in a blur of speed, too fast for him to see individual keystrokes at all. And not loudly, a precise controlled tapping giving exactly as much force as needed. There was an encyclopedia open on the desk beside the machine. When the high-speed modem was exchanging data, she flipped through the pages. No, stared at each page for about three seconds, then flipped it over.

She's reading. The conviction hit him like cold water, and he gasped. Her head turned slightly. He gasped again when she rose and turned to face him.

"You've been watching me, Stephen," she said . . . sadly?

The accent was much less noticeable now. She walked over to the bed, barely visible in the faint blue glow of the monitor.

"I'm sorry you did that."

"What . . . look, what the *hell* were you doing with my computer?"

"Stephen, when do you expect someone to call?"

He barked in bewilderment. His stomach lurched.

"Call?"

"Call you here."

"Maybe nobody this weekend. Come off it, I want some answers."

She put out a hand—

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Gwen finished flushing the soiled sheet down the toilet in pieces of suitable size, then looked thoughtfully at the body hanging by its heels from the shower head, draining.

No, it wouldn't fit—even butchered. And the spirit of chaos alone knew what would happen if she blocked the drains. She walked out into the kitchenette and took a quick look inside the refrigerator.

Yes. If she put all the food on the counter, then disarticulated the limbs, the whole body should fit nicely, with the head in the freezer. At maximum refrigeration, it would be some time before the smell became obvious to humans. *Let's see, skull, torso, each limb in two sections*, she decided, and went to work with a regretful sigh.

"I'll have to be more subtle," she reproached herself, as she finished packing the refrigerator. "I can't go on leaving a trail like this."

Besides, Stephen had been . . . yes, sweet. Killing him had been almost as unpleasant as putting down a *servus*. She hadn't taken pleasure from a human since her youth, back when they'd been common, before the modified type completely superseded them. Interesting. Stephen might have been very useful, too, if she hadn't been careless. Too risky once he'd become suspicious, though. Wild humans were very difficult to condition properly; it would take weeks of work before she could be sure of one. A *servus's* emotions could be played like a violin, and of course they were raised to accept the Draka. Humans varied wildly, and at best their susceptibility to pheromonal controls was spotty.

The problem was that she was simply not used to pretense. Unlearning habits as ingrained as hers wasn't going to be easy, even with survival at stake. She'd have to *understand* the humans here, not just their nature but their culture.

Gwen fixed herself a snack of raw vegetables and cold cuts and took the plate back into the bedroom. She would eat the perishables first, then the canned goods; that ought to last her for a few days. Throttling back on her metabolism was possible, but it made her sluggish and couldn't be reversed immediately in an emergency when she needed burst speed and strength. Nothing came free; her system

was packed with extra capacities and they all required fuel. There was always the dead human, of course . . . *But no*. Granted that it wasn't exactly cannibalism, she'd still have to be considerably more rushed before thinking seriously about that. There were plenty of food vendors about, if she was cautious.

Stephen Fischer had kept very complete records of his life on the little perscomp. Between that and the print books and the CD-ROMs, and what she could access from this *net*, the weekend should be far from wasted. By its end she should know better how to judge when someone would show up to investigate, in plenty of time to move along. With luck, she might be able to stay here a week or so.

A permanent nest would be more difficult. *I'm going to need a front*, she knew. *Subtle. Be more subtle next time.*

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Dr. Mary Chen clipped the X rays to the lighted background glass. For comparison, she had a normal arm's prints next to them, and a shot of a gorilla's she'd gotten from the primatology people over at the University.

The woman beside her bent close to the film, whistling silently. "Oh, now this is really, really interesting," she said, adjusting her glasses.

The professor used a pen from her blouse pocket—she wore a plastic protector—to trace the lines of the bones.

"Look at the ratio of the radius and ulna to the upper arm," she said. "Definitely nonhuman, far too long, but it's not exactly like any of the other higher primates. And this gap here, not pongoid at all. Hmmm."

She pushed up the glasses again and peered at the film with her nose almost touching it. "From the wrist and hand, this isn't a knuckle-walker. Palm, more probably. The hand is extremely human in structure, except that the bones are more robust, but the wrist isn't like anything I've ever seen. It's almost as if it's been structurally reinforced."

"There's heavy callus on the palm," the doctor confirmed.

Pure technical interest, Chen thought. She didn't seem to see the *implications*, which had been keeping the Medical Examiner awake every night for the past three. She sipped at the cold tea in its paper cup and grimaced. Caffeine wasn't working anymore. She yawned.

"I'd say it was probably some sort of baboon," the primatologist said. "Though the thumb structure is wrong, more like a hominid. And it's far too large; the size is more gorilloid. But it's more like a baboon than anything else I can think of."

She beamed at Chen. "Dr. Chen, do you realize what this *means*?"

She nodded jerkily.

"An entirely new species! Fascinating. And"—her voice dropped conspiratorially—"first publication."

"No publication until I give explicit, written authorization," she said sharply. *This woman is a complete space cadet.* "And I'll want a written release to that effect."

The academic's face dropped a little. "It'll take months even for a preliminary report anyway," she said. "Oh, all right. And you'll get full credit."

Chen nodded and turned to the cooler. The room was dark except for the lights behind the display panel; it was well after normal hours. She turned on the overheads and pulled out the long tray, unsealing the plastic wrap around the arm.

"Oh, wonderful." The scientist bent over it, pulling on surgical gloves, and clicked on a recorder. "Specimen is—"

Scary as hell, she thought, as the other woman kept on talking into the little machine. *Scary as hell*. And not just because it was so weird. There were *implants* in it. Something in the bone like embedded fibers, fibers that dulled her best bone saw; they'd had to use a metal-cutting saw, and change to a new blade every few seconds.

She waited until the preliminary examination was complete. "The next step would be genetic analysis, I'd say."

"Oh, certainly, Dr. Chen," the professor agreed. "With a comparative analysis, we can pinpoint the evolutionary divergence." She shook her head. "Where could a species like this have hidden itself? It must be quite large—" she stepped back and considered "—I'd say in the four- to five-hundred-pound range. Even a relict population in some out-of-the-way area . . . fascinating! Where did you say you acquired it?"

"I didn't," Chen said.

Very out of the way, she thought. *Wherever it comes from, twenty people died when it arrived*. She remembered the warehouse, its floor awash with blood. Mary Chen had never limited her training in observation and deduction strictly to her work. What followed was obvious. Something had come from somewhere, along with this arm. Something with human-sized heels, that used a knife sharper than a laser scalpel. *And if one can . . . come . . . here, then others can*.

The primatologist was speaking into her hand-held recorder again. Chen wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

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"You're not going to enjoy this," Chen's voice said. "I thought I'd give you some warning."

Carmaggio shifted his feet to the corner of his desk and looked with displeasure at the pound or so of skin hanging over his belt under the shirt. *I don't enjoy looking at that, either*, he thought, cradling the receiver, the cinnamon danish and the coffee mug simultaneously. Sure, he was past the middle forties, but that didn't mean he had to let everything go. On the other hand, regular hours were a joke in police work; and the number of donuts and greasy deli sandwiches he'd shoveled into his face made him queasy when he thought about it. He prodded at the roll with a finger. *Not too bad*. And he'd stopped smoking, after all. He tried to convince himself he'd done it for his health, and failed. It was just too much of a hassle, with all the nonsmoking areas.

I ought to spend more time in the gym. God knew it could scarcely cut into his social life.

"All right, break my heart," he said. "Start with the arm."

A long moment of silence. "I didn't have the facilities for that, so I called in a favor over at NYU."

"What do they say?"

"They don't say anything; they run in circles and throw their hands in the air and shout." Flatly: "Okay, basically it is a baboon. Only it's not." Unwillingly: "The DNA is congruent with Gelada baboons—mostly. Ethiopian mountain baboon, fairly rare. About fifty percent matchup. The remainder's . . . mixed. Leopard. Canine. And, ah . . . human."

Carmaggio took his feet down from the desk and sighed, rubbing his forehead and dredging up things he'd seen on nature documentaries and old copies of *Popular Science*. "Something escaped from a lab?"

"You've been watching too many bad movies. Putting a firefly gene in a tomato or correcting cystic fibrosis is one thing. Playing Frankenstein is something else. We'll do things like . . . that . . . someday, but not for a long time. Hell, the human genome project isn't finished yet."

"What about the arm, then?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

He'd always wanted to have Chen-the-omniscient admit that. Somehow it wasn't very satisfying. "All right, let's look at this from a cop point of view. The fucking arm is academic, we'll leave it with the academic types. We're cops, let's do the cop things."

"Nothing mysterious about cause-of-death for most of the Jamaicans. It's all in the autopsy stuff I'm sending up. Loss of blood from radical wounding, consistent with a knife about eighteen inches long. Or blunt injury trauma; in plain English, crushed skulls, frontal bone driven into the brain, two cases of massive perforation of the heart and lungs by rib fragments. Several injured postmortem by a very powerful kick to back of the head—more crushed skulls, and crushed and severed upper spinals. Whoever did it was making extremely sure."

"Good work."

"That's the basics. You want to hear my opinion?"

He waited. Chen continued. "The tissue damage from the knife is as weird as the rest of it. It was *sharp*. Razor sharp, scalpel sharp. There are *cut hairs* on those bodies; it didn't haggle or chop, it just sliced through hair and skin and clothing, plus the odd gold chain. And it *stayed* that sharp while it went slamming through major bones, sharp and completely rigid. A thin blade, Henry, not a tanto knife or a machete. From the marks on the bones, about as wide as a fingernail at maximum."

"Hmmm." A real knife-fighter didn't put a razor edge on his weapon. That made it too likely to turn on bone or even gristle. Really thin blades were too whippy for use. "Keep it coming."

"The blunt injuries? It's impossible, but whoever did that stuff did it barehanded. Kicking and punching and . . . slapping. They slapped people on the side of the head and knocked their skulls in. A couple of those dreadlockers shot each other, but they didn't hit whoever was doing them enough to slow him down. We're not talking Kung Foolishness here. What with the arm, I checked up. A gorilla's about fifteen times as strong as a human being. Whoever did this is about halfway to that level. Freak strong."



Henry made an affirmative noise and nodded, taking another bite of the danish. The posses were about as bad as they thought they were. If somebody, or even a dozen somebodies, had killed twenty of them, he didn't want to meet the ones who'd done it. Not without a lot of backup.

"The one with his head blown off?"

"That's got me completely baffled. The entry wound in the forehead is cauterized, as if someone had burned through with a welding torch. Then the brain was cooked—flash cooked, the explosion was steam. There's a bit of very finely divided metallic copper there too, God knows why."

Chen paused. "Now, what about the skin from under Marley Man's nails?" she asked. A forensics question; police business, not the Medical Examiners.

"We sent it over to Quantico." The FBI lab there did favors for local police departments. "They ran a microsatellite DNA analysis. Caucasian—Northwest European—and female. The hair's natural dark red. No DNA matches in any of the databases, but that just means she hasn't served in the armed forces or been sent to jail since the early nineties."

Carmaggio sighed. It had been the first honest—well, honestly bizarre—evidence to turn up so far. Except.

"Except?"

"They did a full comparative DNA run. It—I quote: *'Nonhuman. About a ninety-four percent correspondence. That's less like us than a chimp. A mammal, a primate, but not human, strictly speaking. Whatever it was, it couldn't interbreed with us; gross differences in the number of chromosomes.'*

"Different? Different how?"

"I asked. They told me that we don't know what most of our *own* genes do." After a moment: "Then they told me not to send them any more practical jokes. I think the Fed was scared, Chen."

"What's going in the report?"

He took a deep breath. "We're going to tell our esteemed Chief of Detectives that a drug deal went sour and all Marley Man's posse got wasted, knife and club and gunshot wounds. Some animal remains were found at the site. We've got the DNA make on a person who might or might not have been at the crime site at the time of the murders. We're questioning all the usual suspects; if you lined up all the people who wanted Marley Man dead, it'd stretch to Jersey. Send me your stuff, I'll edit it that way, and attach it to my report."

"You're going to hush this up?"

"No, I'm going to keep my credibility and yours," he said. "Hell, it's an official report, not the Bible."

Back in Nam once, he'd been on a patrol that went into some bad bush right after an artillery fire mission. A lot of craters, a lot of busted-up trees, and one arm—still in its black pajamas—by the side of the trail. The loot had reported it in as a stepped-on kill, confirmed, and three probables. Which was fair enough, since Charlie did try to carry away as many of his dead as he could. Only he'd learned from a radioman back at the firebase that about six more patrols had reported the same arm; so that one

unfortunate Vietcong had turned into about a platoon's worth of casualties. And the sucker might not have died in the first place.

Ever since then, he'd thought of definite-sounding official reports as being sort of elastic. Not necessarily completely divorced from reality, but not necessarily having any close relationship to it, either.

"Henry, we *can't* hush this up. Think of what it *means*. There could be—"

"Look, shut up, will you? The problem with unbelievable evidence is that nobody will believe it. And if we push it on people, they won't believe *us* about anything. That's twenty years of experience talking, and you *will* listen. I'm betting that whoever . . . hell, whatever . . . did this number on Marley Man's boys is going to do something else. And *I'm going to find them*. "

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Gwen sighed and leaned back in the lounge. She remembered more than four centuries past . . .

The fountain. It was old, Renaissance work. Much older than the plantation in the hills of Tuscany. It played in a little courtyard flagged with black and white stones, surrounded by arches borne on pillars. The central part of it was a statue of a maiden pouring the water from an amphora over one shoulder, all in age-green bronze. It fell into a round bowl of stone, the edge carved with a time-worn design of vines.

I remember.

The sun warm on her bare skin, and the slick surface of the marble under her left hand. Her right—a three-year-old's hand, still slightly chubby—dived into the cool water. The fingers flicked, a touch of scales, and a goldfish soared into the air. Gwen giggled and moved her hand. Flick, flick; more goldfish soared upwards. The fish tumbled back into the water with little splashing sounds, darting away to the other side of the pool.

"Missy Gwen, stop that."

That was her tantie-ma, Marya. Gwen turned toward her and ran, leaping up to wrap arms and legs around her. Marya braced herself against the solid impact and hugged her back. The child nestled against her, taking in the familiar comforting scent.

"Here, punkin," her mother said.

Marya handed her down, and she cuddled against the sleek warmth of her mother's side in the recliner, yawning and shifting until she was comfortable and drifted into sleep . . .

Maybe that's why I remember, Gwen thought. *The scents*. Her mother Yolande had smelled human—had *been* human, the last generation of human Draka.

That scent was heavy all about her, in Stephen Fischers little apartment. A flash of memory: Yolande older, in uniform, the high-collared black tunic of ceremony. Standing at the top of a stairway under a dome on Mars . . .

She shook her head. *Back to work*. She frowned and made another note on the pad. It wasn't strictly necessary, of course; she had eidetic memory, and the transducer for backup. Just an old, old habit to help her see the *shape* of a sequential problem. Perhaps that was why she'd gone into reverie. Her

mother had done that too, made notes.

She wrote:

1: *Identity.*

She'd need, let's see, a *birth certificate*, and then documentation from there. False documents could probably be arranged with stolen money. She made a sub-heading: *American or other?*

2: Base of operations.

She looked around Stephen Fischer's cramped little apartment. It was much cleaner and better furnished than the one she'd used in her first flight from the warehouse, but not all that much bigger. *Something better than this*. Fischer had evidently made a fairly high salary, but equally evidently it didn't go far here. Like most Draka, she could put up with cramped quarters at need, but didn't like it.

3: *Legitimize the money.*

That ought to be reasonably easy. Even in her own history, the Americans had been sloppy-careless about security matters right up to the end—otherwise they might not have lost the Final War. These Americans hadn't had the long struggle with the Domination to keep them on their toes, and to judge from what she'd read, they had a crime problem like nothing her world had ever seen in any major country. With a huge criminal class, there *had* to be ways of transferring profits to noncriminal organizations.

In a way, if this had to happen to someone, it was as well it was her. She could remember what a market economy with a non-notional currency was like; the Domination had had something like that back before the War, and she'd studied the American version in know-the-enemy lectures. Very long ago, but the data was still there. The freewheeling anarchy outside wasn't all that *much* like what she remembered from either case, but there were useful hints. The younger generation knew valuata as something exchanged over the Web, and rather theoretical in any case.

Legate Tamirindus, for example, would have been completely lost for a good long while.

4: Establish organization.

She chewed meditatively on a carrot. Obviously, if she was ever going to contact home again she'd need huge resources; here, that meant money. She had a lot to sell, four and a half centuries' worth of technology, only the simplest of which would be applicable at all. The problem would be to do it without attracting too much attention. That meant disguising it as commercial activity.

5: *Do physics.*

That would be difficult. She'd never been a pure scientist. Few Draka were. Fighters, rulers, explorers, the arts, applied science—but basic research was *servus* work, mostly. It would be hands-on for her now. Nobody here would know much physics beyond the witch-doctor level.

On the other hand she had the training, and her arrival here indicated several lines to look into. Moleholes obviously retained a quantum-indeterminate quality. With an anchor at both ends, though . . . She'd have to make the tools to make the tools, with several regressions before that, even for some sort of crude signaling device. Either it would be possible, or not; time to worry about that when it came to it.

6: *Call home.*

She finished the carrots and smiled. *Establish a bridgehead. Bring through a couple of orbital battle stations and launchers*, she thought, *modified for planetary bombardment*. The specs were still on file. It had been a while since the Race had an opportunity for conquest. Then the locals would be . . . what was that expression she'd read? *Ah. Toast.*

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Jennifer Feinberg cried into the pad of wadded Kleenex, threw it into the deskside wastebasket, and reached for more.

Carmaggio helpfully pushed the box under her groping hand. He looked around; a tiny cubicle of an office on the 27th floor, computer, book racks with bound tables and trade periodicals, an African violet, and a cup of cold chamomile tea on the cluttered desk beside the picture of a man in a doctor's white coat. His professional eye classified Ms. Feinberg effortlessly: early thirties, Jewish, five-five, a hundred and thirty-five pounds—she probably dieted and exercised ferociously to keep it there—economics degree from NYU. Eight years with the same securities firm, fairly rapid promotion. Father a doctor . . . A pleasant face, black hair and big brown eyes, conservative business suit, pearl earrings. Attractive in a wholesome way, if you weren't put off by brains.

Probably has a studio apartment on the Upper West Side, he thought, and checked his notebook. Yup. And a cat, and went to the opera fairly often, and read books Carmaggio'd never heard of. The only thing not on the to-be-expected list was the other picture on her desk; a young man in baggy olive-green BDU's, smiling, an Army-issue drab towel around his neck and a helmet under one arm. *Brother, probably*. Thin beaky face, and glasses. Not worth checking on.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just—I *saw* him every day, and we did *lunch*, and then this happens to him . . ."

APARTMENT HORROR, he read from the Post on her desk. WAREHOUSE VIGILANTES STRIKE AGAIN.

Fucking media ghouls, he thought. The anger was so old it was reflexive. The national networks had picked it up for a couple of days, which meant still *more* pressure on him. A couple of local bottom-feeders had tried to make it a racial incident too, since the first twenty-one victims were all black or Hispanic. Stephen Fischer had quieted that, at least.

Although he had to admit there was more to sensationalize than usual. It wasn't every day that a perp chopped up the body, stuffed it in the fridge, and then lived in the victim's apartment for a week, ordering in Chinese food on the victim's credit card.

Plus fucking the victim before she killed him, he reminded himself—they'd found reddish pubic hairs mixed with Fischer's, traces of his semen.

This is a bad one, he thought. Even without the space cadet parts, it was a very bad one. *We definitely haven't heard the last of Ms. Machete*. He ignored the impossible aspects. There were bodies, there was a suspect, time to wonder about that stuff when he made the collar.

"How long did you know Mr. Fischer?" he asked, when the sobs subsided.

"About two years. I didn't really *know* him. He . . . well, he was on the Equities desk, you know, and

I'm in Analysis. I passed him every day coming in, talked a little, we went to lunch with some mutual friends occasionally."

"Did you know his ex-wife?"

"We met at the office Hanukkah party once. She was a lawyer—that's why they split up."

Carmaggio raised his eyebrows.

"Well, they both had seventy-hour weeks or worse," Jennifer went on. "We all do, but she was with Mikael's, Sung, Lawson & Finkelstein. She got involved with someone at her firm. Said she'd at least see him sometimes."

"Mr. Fischer wasn't, mmm, involved with anyone here? Anyone that you knew of?"

"Steve?" She blew her nose. "No, he wasn't the type. I think."

"No business problems that you knew of, enemies?"

She looked at him, surprise in her red-rimmed eyes. "In *Equities*? God, no, they don't deal with the public."

"Promotion?"

"Nothing special. His people over in *Equities*—"

"—would know more, yes."

"It has to be some awful psychopath, like that Dahmer or whatever his name was." She burst into fresh tears. "In the *fridge*, God."

Carmaggio sighed; for once he more or less agreed with the amateur's take on it. This was going nowhere, although you had to cover all the bases. It was a good thing that the office here didn't have all the details, or they'd be even more hysterical.

"Thank you again, Ms. Feinberg," he said. "Here's my number. If anything occurs to you, anything at all . . ."

She nodded, wiping her nose and taking the card. Carmaggio shrugged into his overcoat and left.

"*De nada*" Jesus said in the corridor, holding up his notebook. Carmaggio nodded. They were working their way steadily through everyone who'd known the victim, and accomplishing squat.

"This isn't an ex-girlfriend or the guy he beat out for the promotion," he said quietly. "Stephen Fischer just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"At least we've got a make."

Tall redhead in a black pantsuit, carrying a duffel bag, no positive ID on race—hell, it could be a fucking transie."

Not according to the DNA, but that had gone crazy anyhow, and he found it even more difficult to believe in a woman doing what this perp had done. And he didn't believe a man could have done it, in the first place.

He looked out the window at the driving snow, falling gray-white into the canyons of New York. Out there in his city was someone who pulled machinery apart to see how it worked, and sat at a computer running up Panix.com bills and eating egg foo yung while a body slowly rotted in the refrigerator.

Someone who killed human beings with the casual precision of a leopard in a flock of sheep.

She'd kill again, and again, until she was stopped. Henry Carmaggio hunched his shoulders and thrust his hands into the pockets of his overcoat.

"Let's get going."

## CHAPTER FOUR

"No, don't turn around," Gwen said quietly.

The man hissed in pain as her fingers clenched on his upper arm. She walked behind him and to the right, down the crowded street. Neon blinked on the wet sidewalks, on the pedestrians in bulky clothing and on the umbrellas many of them carried. She was wearing . . . what was the word? A *tracksuit*. What the advertisement called the World's Finest Cold-Weather Athletic Clothing, with high-laced sports shoes. The clothes were far warmer than she needed, but the jacket had a hood that concealed most of her face, and they were baggy enough to let her body vanish inside.

Few of the crowd looked at her, or at each other. They walked with a hurried, nervous determination that seemed characteristic here; heads slightly bowed, refusing to meet each other's eyes. Wafts of warmer air gusted up out of the subway stations, with a gagging reek of wastes and ozone. Cars splashed rooster-tail fans of dirty water onto the edges of the sidewalks, and sometimes beyond onto the legs of the passersby. Most of the stores sold weirdly primitive electronics, or various sorts of erotic entertainment almost as crude.

At least the rain did a little something in the way of clearing the air.

"Hey, what you want, man?"

He tugged against her grip, and she tightened it in warning. "I want you to do me a favor," she said, keeping her voice pitched several octaves deeper than the natural setting.

To a human's dull ears it would pass well enough for a man's voice, and it was no particular strain for her vocal cords; she could imitate most animals' cries well enough to fool the creatures into killing range.

"This is a C-note," she said, pushing a hundred-dollar bill into his pocket. "I need some papers. A passport."

The man's free hand brought out the folded bill; he peeked down at the edge to verify the amount and then tucked it securely away. She could hear his sub-vocalization, a confused murmur with *cop? cop?* interspersed through it.

"Get me someone who can do the passport, and you get three more like that. Fuck me around and I pull your arm out of your shoulder."

She gave a single heavy tug, not quite enough to dislocate the joint, proud of her quick mastery of the local dialect. The man's scent turned heavier with fear, a salty odor, faintly appealing.

Why me?the human was thinking to himself. And: *Easy money.*

"Easy money," she said soothingly. She wanted him to be afraid, but not so panic-stricken he forgot greed.

It wasn't hard to identify petty criminals; not when you could pick up their speech from many times the distance a human could, and automatically sort multiple conversations for keywords. Scenting the drugs and weapons helped, as well.

"Sure, I take you to Jojo," he said.

He was half lying. *Ah. He probably knows of such an individual, but doesn't plan to deliver.*

"Of course you will," she said. "Right now, and if you try to run away, the arm goes."

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"Bingo," Carmaggio said softly, and spat the gum in his mouth toward a manhole cover.

The back courtyard was cold and slick with the last rain; which kept the smell down, at least. He walked over to the body. *Damn, that's unusual.* You got used to corpses in all sorts of positions; upside down, hanging from things, in beds, in cars. Once he'd had a killing where the girlfriend's body got stuffed into a large sealed crate and *mailed* by the ex-wife to the husband. Who'd fainted, fallen over backward, and killed himself when he opened the crate—and that presented some interesting evidentiary problems.

This one was lying on his stomach, with the forward third of his body propped up against the brick wall of the building. As if he'd run right into it and poured down, like Wile E. Coyote in one of the old Road Runner cartoons.

Carmaggio took his hands out of his pockets and pulled on a pair of gloves. "Another fun night in the Busiest Precinct in the World," he said. A couple of the uniforms and technical people laughed as they went about their business.

They were about a block from Times Square; he could see the reflected lights of the Embassy in a puddle out on the street, beyond the cars and the cordon. At least now the press had had a month to forget the warehouse killings, so he didn't have a flock of black-winged cameramen following him around, flapping and squawking and waiting for something to die. There was a Sbarro's next to the Embassy, which reminded him he hadn't eaten. *I'll get a meatball sandwich afterward,* he decided.

"*Ai, me muero,*" Jesus Rodriguez said, gloving up as well. "You know, there was a time when I thought

"I'd be catching murderers, not spending my days with the bodies."

"Hmmm."

Carmaggio crouched behind the body for a second. Hands were down, resting on the ground palms up. There was a smear of blood on the wet brick, starting about face height for someone the victim's height. He touched a gloved finger to it and rubbed the result with the ball of his thumb; unscientific, he supposed, but it often worked as a rough-and-ready timecheck. Hard to tell, though, with this temperature and all the water oozing out of the brick—God damn all midwinter thaws, anyway, they screwed things up worse than snow. Maybe there was something to this global warming thing; winters had frozen harder when he was a kid.

The initial blood spatter was huge, like an inkblot in one of those old psychologist's tests. More blood in a pool around the base of the wall. Head injuries bled out fast, as bad as a major wound to the chest cavity.

"What do I see in this?" he wondered, stepping back and looking at the blot. "I see someone who had their head shot out of a cannon at a wall, is what I see."

There was nothing around the body but garbage. He crouched again and used a pencil in his left hand to move the ponytail of greasy black hair that covered the victim's neck. *Aha*.

Livid bruises on either side of the spinal column, right above the shoulders. "Look at this," he said.

Jesus joined him. Henry spread his hand as if he were about to take the back of the dead man's neck in it, a straightforward grab with the thumb on the left side. It fit exactly, thumb-mark and four fingers, although from the spacing the hand had been slightly smaller than Carmaggio's.

"What does that say to you?" he asked his partner.

"Perp is right-handed," Jesus said helpfully.

"Oh, funny man."

"Geraldo has nothing to me, *patrón*. I'd say someone put his face to that brick with an extreme quickness."

Henry grunted. "How long?"

Jesus picked up one of the hands by a thumb. There was a purplish sheen to the waxy skin, and a whitish spot appeared when the younger policeman stuck a finger in the livid patch that had lain nearest the ground. The joints of the hand moved freely.

"Hour, maybe two, no more than three."

"Right."

There was a bulletin out with the extremely incomplete description they'd gotten from the restaurant where Fischer had been seen last, but the chances of it doing any good were . . . *Somewhere between nada, zip, and fucking zero*, he thought resignedly. You couldn't pull in every tall redheaded woman within a mile of Times Square.



"All right, let's move him."

Two of the uniforms came forward, and Jesus got out his minicam, speaking softly into the throat mike. Henry whistled.

Teeth dropped out of the shattered mouth as the slack body was lifted free of the bricks. One of the patrol officers swallowed and wobbled a bit, until her partner hissed sharply at her. Broken jaw, mandible pushed right back. All the upper teeth snapped off. Frontal bones pushed in until there was nothing but a glistening mass of pulp, and the forehead had a dished look.

Carmaggio felt a little off himself. *Nothing I could take to court, but it's the same MO*, he thought. The skin along the nape of his neck roughened. *Angel dust?* he mused.

Somethingunnatural was behind this combination of speed and strength and utter savagery.

"Right, let's see if this is who I think it is," he said. He slid a hand inside the dead man's jacket and began checking pockets. "Green cards, blank. Social Security, ditto. Oho, Jojo was getting upscale—passport. Couple of computer disks. Official stationery . . ."

"Jojo?" Jesus said.

"Do-it-while-you-wait Jojo Jackson himself," Carmaggio confirmed. "Aha."

A piece. A .32 revolver in a waist holster, no sights, trigger guard cut away—Jojo had always liked to think of himself as seriously bad; in fact, he'd just been bad. Not a very good documents man, either. Sooner or later something like this was going to happen to him—the means might have been more conventional, but the result was much the same.

There was something a little farther down the alley, too. A scrap of paper flecked with blood and plastered to the wet side of a dumpster. A C-note.

"Somebody might want to bag this," he said mildly. More of the warehouse money.

"Now, why do you come to Jojo?" Jesus said, imitating Carmaggio's voice.

ID. Lots of things you could do with cash, but you needed some ID for most of them. Like moving around, buying airplane tickets, renting a car. Not necessarily very good ID—people just didn't *look* most of the time—but some sort or paper.

"Travel plans," he answered. Wherever the mystery killer was going, it was probably bad news for the recipients . . . but New York could use the breathing space.

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Gwen unfastened her seatbelt and stood. Air flowed in through the door of the airliner, mildly warm. *Welcome to Cali, Colombia*. Welcome to a country that had never even existed in her history; there had been a Republic of Grand Colombia from the 1820s, but that had stretched over all the Andean lands. The smell of burnt kerosene was overwhelming, and she breathed through her mouth to compensate. Outside only the distant mountains were familiar. Friends of hers had estates here, growing coffee and stock and heaven-berries and ganja—in the Domination's timeline. There was a minor liftport and a

settlement nearby, mostly *servus*. This millions-strong monstrosity was almost completely alien, save for a few ancient Spanish churches and public buildings preserved for aesthetics in both histories.

She hefted her bags and followed the crowd to the Customs checkthroughs. Green-uniformed guards with submachine guns slung across their chests waited among the milling crowd. Some of them had guard dogs on leashes. The animals' heads came up as they scented her, tracking back and forth with cocked ears to find where the unfamiliar trace came from. One of them began barking and tugging at his lead, until the policeman quelled him with a sharp order. Passengers surged away from the growling and bared teeth.

Noisy lot, humans, she thought.

Their smell lay heavy in the concourse. It had none of the sharp clean scent of her own species, or the comforting sweetness of *servus*; the harsh feral smell put her teeth on edge. She showed them in a snarl of her own for an instant. It was a good thing that humans couldn't use their noses for anything but keeping their eyes and upper lips apart; if they had a decent sense of smell she'd never have been able to hide. And what they *did* scent, they only noticed subliminally, most of the time. She had been working on her pheromones during the flight. It took a while to adjust them upward, although toward the end the cabin staff and several passengers had been hovering around her seat—without knowing exactly why, of course. She smiled as she handed her forged passport to the clerk.

He was only a pace away across the desk. His brown skin flushed as he looked up at her. She took off her sunglasses and tucked them into a pocket, smiling as she met his eyes. The Colombian swallowed and put a hand to the collar of his shirt.

"Welcome to Colombia," he said mechanically.

"Why, thank you," she said, smiling more widely. The forged passport rested between the fingers of her right hand. "It looks like a lovely country."

"Ah . . . your Spanish is excellent," he stammered. Several of the other clerks were looking at him oddly; he straightened and cleared his throat.

"Thank you," Gwen said.

It wasn't difficult to learn, when you had an eidetic memory; just read a grammar and spend a few days listening to Spanish-language television, of which New York had plenty, and practice a little. She probably had a Puerto Rican accent.

"Ah, purpose of visit?"

"Business," she said. To be precise, laundering \$970,100 in American currency, but no need to go into details. Some contacts with the local criminal classes might also be useful.

"How long do you expect to remain in Colombia?"

"About a month."

Drops of sweat were rolling down the clerk's face. The men at the other desks were glancing over again and again. *Hmmm. Perhaps a little too much on the pheromones.*

"Your papers, please, and put the luggage here."

She put the suitcase on the flat surface and handed him the passport. He dropped it to the desk and opened it, reaching for his stamp.

That he hesitated only an instant when he saw the ten hundred-dollar bills folded inside the passport said a good deal for his nerves and self-control, especially when you remembered the effects of the pheromones. The standing desk had a wooden rim around it; the bills vanished into a drawer.

Thump. The stamp went down on her passport, and the clerk opened the suitcase and gave the clothes inside a cursory inspection. The money was underneath the folded garments, in neat bundles wrapped in plain paper and sealed with tape.

"Enjoy your stay, Señora Smith," the clerk said. He hesitated, then went on: "If you need assistance . . ." and slipped a piece of paper across the desk. With his name and address on it.

She palmed it. "I'll certainly remember your kind offer, Señor Gaitán," she said.

The man looked after her as she walked away, until a supervisor came by and cleared his throat. She continued slowly, thinking. A hotel, of course. Then . . .

"Gwen!"

"Why, hello, Dolores," Gwen said.

One of the flight attendants; Dolores Ospina Pastrana. They'd chatted on the plane, although of course she hadn't understood exactly why this particular *yanqui* was so interesting, so charismatic. The stewardess was pulling her luggage along on a wheeled carryall, looking trim and efficient in her blue uniform. She fidgeted with the handle,

"Do you have a ride?"

Gwen smiled, white teeth flashing. "Why, no, I don't. Thank you for the offer; I hope it isn't an inconvenience."

"No, no, I'm off duty for the next three days."

"That's wonderful," Gwen said, smiling more broadly. Her nostrils flared slightly. "Perhaps you could show me some of the sights."

She didn't intend to stay in Colombia long, and a native guide would certainly help her get started more quickly. The evidence could always be disposed of, one way or another.

"It's a lovely city," Dolores said. "But it can be dangerous for an outsider."

Gwen chuckled. "Let's go. I'm sure you can shield me from the perils of ignorance."

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"Who *did* you say you were with?" Mary Chen asked, stepping in front of the personable young man before he could pass through.

"We're with the Federal government, Dr. Chen," he said, with a frank, open smile.

He was wearing a nondescript dark suit and raincoat; so was his friend. They were both six-footers, one young and dark, the other fortysomething, heavy, and graying blond; the older man looked like an athlete gone very slightly to seed, or a lawyer who spent a couple of nights a week at the gym. He carried something like an attache case, only considerably larger. Unlike his younger companion, he didn't smile.

"Well, that's you and a couple of hundred thousand others, even under this administration," Chen said. "What does the Federal government want with medical evidence being held in an ongoing investigation?"

Nobody waltzes into my *office like this!* It might not be much of an office; cluttered, with a couple of spider plants on top of the filing cabinets, and smelling faintly of disinfectant from downstairs, but it was her turf.

The young man laughed easily, eyes crinkling. "We're with an executive agency," he said. "And it's not an ongoing investigation anymore. Since it's a closed file, I'm sure you won't object . . ."

"Great, an executive agency. FBI, CIA, NSA, Bureau of Indian Affairs, NASA, what?"

He reached into his jacket. "The City wants full cooperation," he said gently, and extended a handful of documents.

She read raising her brows. "Impressive." It was; including two heavy hitters in the NYPD. "Unfortunately, you don't seem to have noticed that I'm a medical examiner—and we're appointed by the courts. We're not part of the police department."

She handed the sheaf of paper back. Mary Chen had spent a good deal of the last twenty years around police officers; long enough to recognize the very slight bulge below the young man's left armpit. Icy certainty paralyzed her mind for an instant. These *were* Feds of some sort; it would be deeply stupid to make a claim she could refute with a simple phone call. And they were serious. Some sort of Federal cop, or more likely spooks; FBI would have been more open about who they were.

The older one stepped by her and put his carrying case on the desk. He pressed the buttons on a digital lock and snapped the catches open with his thumbs, the metallic *click* loud in the little room. Much of the space inside was insulation, leaving just enough for an arm. A very large arm.

"Look," she began. "If you think I'm going to sit still for this, you're very much mistaken."

The young man's smile didn't waver. He reached a black-gloved hand inside his jacket and produced another folded paper.

"Dr. Chen, this is a national security matter," he said. She snorted.

"If you'll take a moment to think about it, you'll realize that that's not just a phrase to shut you up. We're nearly into the twenty-first century, and pretty soon genetics are going to be as important to our security as electronics have been for the past few decades. You *must* realize something of how sensitive this matter is, or you wouldn't have kept it as quiet as you have—nothing to the press, no publicity, just a few friends of yours at the university, nothing on paper. That's fine, but this needs to be studied by top people. We can provide the facilities. You can't; with all due respect, you're a forensic pathologist, not a research geneticist. No offense."

"None taken," she said between clenched teeth.

Before she could continue, the man handed over the letter.

"The United States needs to keep its technological edge," he said earnestly. "Otherwise, our influence goes; and it's an influence for good, well beyond our borders."

The paper was an official document, but not from the American government. The language was Vietnamese; in the upper right-hand corner was an identity photograph of her aunt Edelle. Who was still in Hue . . . in a Vietnam growing even more hostile to its ethnic-Chinese minority since the naval clashes over those damned islands. Not that it had ever been very friendly.

"I didn't even know she was still alive," Chen whispered.

Gloved fingers plucked the document out of her hand. *A promise*, she realized. Hanoi was *extremely* anxious to stay on Washington's good side these days. *Possibly a threat*. More probably just a promise.

She turned her head aside. "In the cold storage," she said.

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Claire Finch had been with the FBI for three years now. She'd never seen her superior as angry as he was now; a cold, grim rage that crackled through the office despite the expressionless set of his face.

"The investigation's being canceled," he said.

"Twenty-odd murders, and it's *canceled*?"

"Not our jurisdiction." John Dowding rose and walked over to the window, looking down at the Washington street.

"The Fischer was a kidnapping-murder."

"Nope. He went back to his apartment voluntarily."

"She used his panix.com account illegally—that *is* our turf."

"Not according to the memo," he said over his shoulder.

"What about the DNA sample from the skin and hair?"

"The sample's been removed from Quantico. The records have been removed. Just between you and me, that . . . arm . . . thing, whatever, has been quietly spirited away too. And the people who were working on it have been told it's a matter of national security. Not that anyone would listen to them with the evidence."

Finch shook her head. "This stinks, sir."

"Stinks of Langley, possibly the NSA," he said. "They took a look at the genetics and they panicked. If someone is that far ahead of us, it is a crisis."

"Not as much of a crisis as it was to Stephen Fischer," she said tartly.

"Granted." Dowding's long, bony face nodded. "And this doesn't look like an espionage situation to me—and it'd be our affair if it was."

Not theirs personally—they were with the Behavioral Sciences section—but counterespionage within the borders of the U.S. was a Bureau function. A distinction more often observed in the breach than the observance, true, but the Bureau was about as likely to relinquish its jurisdiction as a pit bull was to give up a marrow bone.

Finch bit at her lower lip. "Sir, generally if the Other People tried to take something like this away from us, the Director would tell them to go pee up a rope."

Dowding leaned back in his swivel chair and tapped the knuckles of one hand with a pen. "Exactly. So the truth about this evidence must be so terrifying that the Director or someone just below his level *wants* to hand it over to somebody else."

"I have a bad feeling about this, sir," she said.

Dowding nodded. "Finch, I trust you."

She looked up, startled. He was holding a disk in his hand, one of the new read-write opticals. "This is that DNA report on the skin samples that Quantico did," he said.

They shared a glance. The powers-that-be hadn't really grasped how difficult it was to get rid of every copy of inconvenient data, yet.

"Here's what we're going to do," he said. "Strictly off the record, of course. I think our highly-unusual mystery suspect will be back . . ."

\*\*\*

The *Parque de Calzado* wasn't much, Gwen decided. A few tall palm trees, a rectangle of grass cut by a St. Georges cross of tessellated brick pavement, and a central fountain. Around it were apartment buildings in the hideous style the humans seemed to like, boxy things of steel-reinforced concrete; nobody in the Domination's timeline had ever built anything like them, except as factories or warehouses. Here they were residences, including Dolores's, where she'd holed up for the past three days.

It was also quite dark, now.

"Gwen, this park is . . . this is not a safe place," Dolores pleaded.

"Even less so, now that I'm in it," she chuckled.

The air bore a confusion of scents; mostly bad, but not as much so as New York. The temperature was quite pleasant as night fell; a fair number of people were out strolling. Fewer and fewer as she led the ex-stewardess away into the back streets.

"Gwen—"

She stopped, impatient, and gripped the Colombian by her upper arm, jerking her close. "Dolores," she said quietly, staring into her eyes. "Let's get one thing settled about this relationship, right from the start. *I'm in charge*. Understand?"

"I—" She could hear the others' heart accelerate, smell the acrid tinge of fear in her sweat. Pupils dilated.

"I understand."

"Good. Shall I send you back to the apartment?"

No, the Colombian subvocalized. *Not alone, not now*. She shook her head.

"Good." *I don't want you on your own for long, not for a couple of weeks yet*. It would take that long to get her settled in and accepting the situation. The alternative was to snap her neck, but that would be wasteful; besides that, she was likable.

"Now, let's keep going. Do you know the Rule of Seven?"

"No. Seven?" Dolores was trying to keep the quaver out of her voice, Gwen noted with approval.

"Nobody is more than seven acquaintances away from anyone else. For instance, you know this Señor Mondragón—"

"Just his name, from the papers. I don't know such people."

That seemed to be a general attitude here in Cali. People who did know such people or said they did had a tendency to vanish.

"—and someone we meet will know someone who knows someone, and we'll be led to Señor Mondragón, soon enough."

Why does she want to meet a criminal?

"Because I have some business to conduct, *mi amiga*. Now shut up."

Gwen patted her gently on the back to take the sting out of the words. She *had* been very useful, and it was a great relief to finally have her biological needs taken care of on a civilized basis. If something of a strain for Dolores at first.

They had wandered into an alleyway; dark enough that it was a little dim even to Gwen's eyes, and Dolores was blundering along in a literally blind panic. It stank as well, of cat-piss and less savory odors, starting with spoiled garbage. Gwen smiled, her ears cocked forward a little. Two sets of heartbeats, they were accelerating as she and the Colombian walked down the cracked and slimy pavement. Two shapes spreading out, black silhouettes outlined against the slightly brighter street beyond. A light flared under a heavy brown acne-scarred face as one lit a cigarette. Dolores whimpered slightly, but kept to her position in Gwen's wake.

The short man's face looked a little puzzled as the women kept coming toward him. His companion was four inches taller and much heavier; a blank bovine expression over shoulders and belly that stretched the grubby white cotton of his T-shirt.

" *One for each of us*," the short man whispered aside to his friend. Aloud:

"Good evening, ladies! You shouldn't be wandering alone around here. Perhaps we can help you."

"I think you can," Gwen said, smiling. "We're looking for a Señor Mondragón."

Both the men stiffened slightly; she watched the play of muscles around mouth and eyes, listened to the involuntary intake of breath. Not enough for a human to notice, but meaningful. Both men recognized the name, of course; but their fright was direct and personal. Fear produced anger.

"Shut up, *puta*. Miguel, you take the other one."

"I don't think so," Gwen said, as he reached past her for Dolores.

She grabbed the wrist; it was thick, a thin layer of blubber over solid muscle and bone. A quick jerk, and the big man stumbled forward, sending his lighter companion spinning aside to crash into the flaking stucco of the alley's wall. At the same time she squeezed, feeling the small bones of the wrist grate and splinter under her grip. The man gave an incredulous grunt, eyes and mouth flaring open in three O's of surprise. She jerked again, bracing her feet—he was heavier than she, even though she weighed over a hundred and ninety pounds, much more than a human of her size. When a lighter object reacted against a heavier, the lighter tended to move regardless of energy outputs; it was a matter of leverage, not strength.

He stumbled again, to his knees. Gwen pivoted on her left heel and kicked with her right, into his throat, releasing her hold as the blow impacted. The body snapped backward several meters and fell limp, head lying back between the shoulderblades. She took a deep breath and stepped closer to the survivor; he was standing with his hand half under the tail of his zippered jacket, eyes bulging in shock.

"Miguel?" he said, halfway between a croak and a whisper.

Humans are slow, she thought. *Not just their reaction time, but their ability to assimilate data.*

"Miguel is dead," she said. "Now, I need some information."

The hand came out with a knife, curved and sharp, moving quite quickly for a human. Gwen swayed her upper body back just enough for the cutting edge to miss as it ripped upward, her hand snapping out to grab and span the other's fist where it clenched around the hilt. She continued the natural path of the weapon until the point touched the man's throat just below the angle of the jaw. For a long moment they stayed locked, a trickle of blood running down his throat from the knifepoint. His pulse fluttered on the edge of shock and then steadied a little; there was an irritating edge to his scent, a hint of metabolic wrongness. *Some sort of drug interfering with the metabolism*, she decided.

"Who *are* you?" he shrieked. "What are you doing?"

"What I'm doing," Gwen said, leaning a little closer and increasing the pressure of the steel, "depends on you. If you're not cooperative, I'm going to torture some information out of you and then kill you. If you were better looking and didn't smell so bad, I'd rape you first. Or you can tell me what I want to know."

" *Si, si*, anything you want to know, lady, anything! Look, I know where you can get kilos, the real thing, cheap, I'll—"

"That's my boy!" Gwen said cheerfully, patting him on the cheek with her free hand. His made vague



pawing motions at the air. "Now, Señor Mondragón."

"Oh, Jesus and His Mother, *no soy nadie*, I don't know him."

"But you know someone who knows someone, don't you, little one?" she said softly.

The drops of blood flowing down his neck became a steady trickle. Tears and mucus from eyes and nose joined them. Unconsciously his right arm kept trying to jerk the knife away from his throat, but she controlled the surges without allowing more than a quiver in the metal.

"*Si*, I know Pedro, Don Pedro, and he—"

Gwen waited until the babbling began to repeat *itself*. "That's all," she said, and pushed with quick, savage force.

The knife slid through neck and throat and into the small man's mouth, then crunched into the bones of the palate. She pushed a little harder, and there was a yielding crackle as it slid into the brain. The body arched in spasm, a thin trickling whine blowing out of clenched teeth, then slid to the ground, voided, and died. Gwen sighed and turned.

Dolores was backed against the wall, hands pressed to either side of her head, her mouth trembling. Trembling with terror and a dreadful reluctant excitement.

Ah, Gwen thought. *Got to watch the pheromones.*

"Come on," she said soothingly. "Enough outdoor work for one night."

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"You make me tired. Just *looking* at you makes me tired, Carmaggio."

Looking at you generally makes me want to puke, Captain, Carmaggio thought. He could feel the back of his neck flush, which was usually a bad sign; probably Captain McLeish could see the thought printed across his face like an LCD display. McLeish smirked and leaned back in the swivel chair behind his desk; there were pictures of himself with several commissioners and mayors on the walls, and a slight smell of old socks. He looked Carmaggio up and down, letting the contrast between the other man's rumpled off-the-rack and his own beautifully tailored suit speak for itself. He was in better shape than Carmaggio, too, which the tucked waist showed off quite well.

Looks like a pimp, Carmaggio thought. Right down to the cool-dude side whiskers, although at least he didn't have letters shaved into his 'fro.

It wasn't that he had anything against blacks. Not after Happy Lewis saved his ass that time he didn't see the claymore; he'd made a private resolution right then and there not to use the word "eggplant" for anything but vegetables ever again.

It was askissers and fuckups he didn't like. McLeish was a prime example of both, in his considered opinion. How he'd gotten as far as he had only God and the Echelons Beyond Reality who *thought* they were God knew. *Welcome to the wonderful world of the civil service.* He was profoundly glad that they'd found out ulcers were caused by bacteria, not stomach acid—because every time he had to report to McLeish, he got a couple of cupfuls of the original patented bile spewed out into his gut.

"We've got twenty-three homicides, Captain. With all due respect—"

"How many *thousand* homicides do we have in this shitty city, Carmaggio? You've got no evidence to put a solid link between them, and nothing new has turned up in six months. It's spring—wake up and smell the roses. Serial killers don't stop. That's what our great good friends at Federal Bullshit Incorporated keep telling us."

"Yeah, they *don't* stop. Not permanently. If we let this one go—"

"They've already gotten away." The *you dumb guinea bastard* was unspoken but plain. "Not to mention the FBI say they don't want to hear about it anymore; and whose idea was it to call in Quantico, in the first place? This is not, for your information, some pissant little two-sheriff town without its own forensics department."

Carmaggio felt the flush spreading from the back of his neck to his ears.

"Maybe the tooth fairy did it, Carmaggio. Maybe that Jew cunt at Primary Belway Securities was the one who offed Fischer."

Maybe Jojo beat his own head in against that wall because he realized he'd never be President, Henry thought, as his superior went on:

"And maybe you don't have enough work to do. You want me to put a few more on your docket? Didn't you have a court appearance today?"

"Yessir."

He didn't slam the door as he left. There *hadn't* been any more action on the file, and there *was* a lot of other work to do. He'd long ago resigned himself to the fact that he'd retire not much above his present rank; interviews like this were simply a symptom of that. People got to the top of the greasy pole largely because they wanted to, real bad—sometimes so they could do the job, more often not. He did this lousy job because he wanted to, not to get a better office. Shits like the captain regarded actual police work as a distraction from more important matters.

Whether or not the captain thought it was too much trouble to bother with, they'd be hearing from this particular perp again, closed file or no closed file.

Or somebody would be hearing about them. *This isn't the sort that goes somewhere and hides.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

The tropical sun was a flat glare on the surface of the water. The compressor on the barge throbbed tirelessly, pumping water down a thick tube to blow sand off the bottom thirty feet below; that made the sea around them turgid, greenish compared to the usual turquoise of the waters off Abaco. They were

eighty miles southwest of Marsh Harbor, not far from Mores Island; that flat sandy speck of land was just visible, but nothing else marred the circle of sky and sea except the barge and its attendant boats. There was a silty undertone to the usual sea-salt smell, faint beneath the diesel stink of the exhaust.

Captain John Lowe looked at the water in disgust, then back at the woman who'd chartered his outfit, in puzzlement. *Nothing here to find.* Sure, there were plenty of wrecks around the Abacos, all over the Bahamas—the archipelago was famous for it. But these waters had been searched bare, long ago.

The money's good. He'd insisted on getting it up front and in cash. There was a lot of that sort of business in the Bahamas, and a tradition of not asking too many questions. The country lived off being an offshore tax shelter even more than it did from tourism and the . . . unregistered transit trade. An old tradition: Conchy Joes like him had always been smugglers, from cocaine back through Prohibition rum boats and Civil War blockade runners, and before that wreckers and pirates.

Crazy bitch.

She stood at the rail of the boat, looking over at the floats that marked where the divers were working. *Crazy, and I can't figure her.* He couldn't even decide whether she was white or not. She'd darkened up considerably since they started, to milk chocolate color, but the tan seemed to go all over—he had a good view, with the loose cotton shorts and sleeveless singlet she was wearing. The green eyes and red hair were genuine, though. Her papers said Colombian, but the accent was American—South Carolina, maybe, or Louisiana, hard to place, despite the pretty *latina* secretary she had hanging around. The body said American too, the fitness-freak look, like some of the richer women tourists. Not very bulgy, but every muscle precisely delineated, moving under the smooth skin like machined steel in oil.

Nice tits, though. And no bra. Maybe a hundred and forty pounds, a little more.

One of the standing bets had been whether or not she was queer. That was settled up when Jamie Simms had been seen coming out of her cabana back in Marsh Harbor at six in the morning, but the young deckhand had steadfastly refused all details. That was odd, because everyone had expected a stroke-by-stroke description, and he'd screamed at them to stop asking and then quit the job. Damned odd.

Lowe moved up to stand beside her. "How much longer?" he said.

"Until it's found," she replied. Her voice was soft and pleasant, rather deep, but the tone expected instant obedience.

He gritted his teeth. Sure, she was paying, but there wasn't enough money in the world to make him swallow that much longer.

"It's your three hundred thousand," he said. And the meter was still running. Next week it would be four hundred thousand.

She didn't bother to reply.

Lowe felt the bottom drop out of his gut when the diver surfaced, tearing off his mask and waving something in the air. It looked like a black lump at this distance—exactly the black of corroded silver.

"Silver," she said. "Silver ingots and coin, gold ingots and chains, and a bronze casket full of emeralds. After your government takes its cut, probably about eight million dollars' worth." She smiled slightly.

"Aren't you sorry you insisted on a flat fee instead of a percentage of the take?"

Lowe pulled off his hat, knotting it in one ham fist, and took a step toward her. She'd offered him a quarter share and he'd laughed in her face, and she'd given him the same damned smile then. *I'm going to knock her* —.

The green eyes narrowed slightly, and he stopped; stopped: as if he had run into a wall of ice.

"Not even in your dreams," she whispered.

He coughed to cover his confusion. "How? How the fuck did you know?"

She turned her head back to the divers. Two more had surfaced, and the first was dancing around the deck of the barge.

"I knew what, and where," she said. "Then I checked to see if anyone had found it. Nobody had. Therefore it had to be here."

She went on, still looking out over the water. "I'm doubling your fee, Captain Lowe. I'll probably need your services again, and your nephew the pilot."

That put a different face on things. "Happy to oblige, ma'am."

"Just remember this," she said. "What I say I can do, I can do. Those who get in my way will regret it. Those who help me can expect to get rich. Very rich. Wealth, and great power . . ."

She turned and smiled at him. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Captain Lowe."

Another face altogether. He made a sweeping bow, grinning back. "*Happy*to oblige, ma'am."

Crazy bitch of a woman. But crazy like a fox.

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"Very satisfactory," Gwen said.

Thomas Cairstens lifted his glass and clinked it against hers.

Woman of the hour, he thought, as he smiled at Gwen, although she'd managed to evade the Nassau press with delicate skill—giving them just enough to prevent a feeding frenzy. Lost pirate treasure stories were an overnight sensation. The foreign press had dropped it a week ago, although she'd become well known locally.

The dining room of Greycliff was emptying out, as the Friday evening moved toward midnight and the clientele made for bed or nightspot. The fans turned lazily overhead, and the air smelled of flowers from the small yard outside as well as of traffic from West Hill Street, muffled by the high whitewashed wall of limestone blocks that fronted the restaurant. The room itself smelled of good food and expensive perfumes. A bit of a guilty pleasure, but one he allowed himself after a profitable deal.

She pushed a check across the table at him. "For Greenpeace," she said.

Tom looked down at it and raised his brows before he tucked it into his jacket pocket. *A hundred thousand. Not too shabby.*

"I didn't know you were an environmentalist," he said. She'd been all business while he handled the incorporation of IngolfTech.

"I'm anti-stupidity," she replied coolly. She was dressed simply, in a cream-colored linen dress that brought out her café-au-lait complexion and the brilliant green eyes; an emerald dragon brooch closed the high neck.

"In a hundred years or less, this planet's going to collapse—it might even become uninhabitable," she went on.

He nodded grimly, turning the wineglass in his hands. "That's why I got into Greenpeace in California," he said.

"Why did you get out?"

He put the glass down and met her eyes. *Compelling. God, that's an attractive woman.* He wasn't normally very receptive to feminine charms, but there was the occasional exception. Gwendolyn Ingolfsson just didn't *feel* like a woman, though. Or quite like anyone he'd ever met. *Smart, too. How did she know about me?* When she was there, you just didn't *notice* anyone else.

"Because it wasn't doing any good," he went on. "Not Greenpeace or Earth First, or any of the others. We were putting Band-Aids on cancers at best. More often, we were just provoking backlash. Earth First couldn't think of anything better to do than try and get poor dumb loggers fired. I'd have joined the ecoterrorists, *if* I thought they'd accomplish anything. Detroit can produce bulldozers a lot faster than anyone can blow them up, though."

"So you gave up and came to the Bahamas to practice corporate law," she said.

He nodded his head jerkily. He'd gone a little further into the fringes than that, which made the move advisable until things quieted down, but it was essentially true. His parents had helped; Dad had real pull, enough to square his work permit with the Bahamian government. It was stupid not to take advantage of family connections if you had them. There were more lawyers in Nassau than sharks in the waters offshore, but he'd done well.

"Sure. Why not dance on the deck if the Titanic's going down?" *And what a depressing subject for a dinner date.*

Gwen leaned forward, fixing his eyes with hers. "Imagine a world," she said softly, almost whispering, forcing him to lean closer to hear, "where the population of Earth is five hundred million and stable, not seven billion and rising. Where not an ounce of fossil fuel is burned. No mines, no factories, no fission reactors or coal-burning plants, no tankers full of oil. The sea and the skies and the land swarm with life, and whole continents are nature preserves."

He jerked his head away. "That's not funny."

"No, it's not funny. But it's *possible*, given the right technology and the right management."

"And we'll never get there from here," he said, feeling anger mount. "Look, what's the *point* of this?"

She smiled and pulled a featureless black rectangle the size of a credit card out of her bag.

"Yes, this civilization is never going to do that," she agreed, and ran a fingernail down its side.

The card opened out, and opened again, until it was the size of a hardcover book. The surface was black in a way he'd never seen before, as if it drank every photon that impacted on it and reflected nothing. A hole in the table, thinner than a sheet of paper and completely rigid. She touched the side, and the background noise faded quickly to nothing. He looked around in startlement; they were off in one corner, near the tall windows, but he could see mouths moving in talk, silverware in use. Everything was dead silent, like a video with the sound control turned off.

"What is that thing?" he said. His voice sounded slightly flat in the perfect silence, as if in a room with absorptive baffles on the walls.

"It's the equivalent of a file-folder," Gwen replied. "For old-fashioned types like me who don't like to just close their eyes and downlink from the Web through their transducers for an image. Now, we were discussing the potential future of civilization."

Tom felt sweat break out on his forehead and trickle clammily down his flanks, more than the Bahamian night could account for. He reached for his wineglass and drank. It was no easy thing, to have your ordinary life suddenly touched by strangeness.

"Go ahead," he said softly.

"A planetary surface is a bad place for an industrial economy," she went on. "You could have gotten out of that trap, but it's probably too late now, and certainly will be in another generation."

Tom shook his head. "Technofixes wouldn't solve our problems. It's in the nature of humanity to foul its nest. We'd have to change human nature: that's why I gave up."

"I'm glad you said that," Gwen said, her smile growing broader. "You agree then, that humans aren't fit to be in charge here?"

"What's the alternative—a Dolphin Liberation Front?" he replied.

She tapped the black rectangle. "Look."

He glanced down. The surface of the square . . . vanished. It wasn't a screen; the view through it had full depth, exactly like a window. He reached out and touched it with an involuntary reflex. It was completely smooth and neutral in temperature.

"This is Haiti," she said.

He knew Haiti; the wasted, eroded hills barren as the Sahara, the pitiful starving people, hardly a tree or an animal besides goats left west of the Dominican border.

This showed tropical rainforest, lush and untouched, the view sweeping down mountain valleys where mist hung in ragged tatters from the great trees. A spray of birds went by, feathers gaudy; he could hear their cries, faint and raucous. The view swept down to the coast. Here were people, squares of sugarcane, a hillside terraced and planted to glossy-leaved bushes he recognized as coffee. Workers with

hand tools or simple machines were busy among them. The view moved closer; he could see they were brown-skinned, stocky and muscular, well-clothed. One laughed as he heaved a full basket onto a floating platform. In the middle distance a white stone building covered in purple bougainvillea stood on a hillside amid gardens. Beyond it was Port-au-Prince harbor. There was no city, no teeming antheap of ragged peasant refugees. Just a few buildings half-lost amid greenery, a stone wharf, and a schooner tied to it.

And a big skeletal structure, like a dish of impossibly rigid rope.

"That's the orbital power receptor," Gwen said. "Now, the Yangtze Gorges."

The great river ran unbound through tall beautiful cliffs, no sign of the giant concrete dam the Chinese had used to tame the wild water.

"Great plains, North America—near what you'd call Fargo."

Tall grass, stretching from horizon to horizon. And across it buffalo unnumbered, in clumps and herds of thousands each. The horned heads lifted in mild curiosity; there was a stir, and a pack of great gray lobo wolves trotted through, twenty strong.

"Bitterfield, eastern Germany."

He knew that, too; one of the worst chemical-waste nightmares left by the old East German regime. The picture showed a stream flowing through thick poplar forest. Behind it were oaks, huge and moss-grown. He heard the chuckle of water, the cries of birds, wind in the branches. The view moved through them at walking pace, pausing at a wildcat on a tree limb, at a sounder of wild boar, in a sun-dappled meadow clearing where an aurochs raised its head in majesty. Its bellow filled his ears.

"The Aral Sea."

Which had disappeared almost altogether, leaving salt flats poisoned with insecticide—the legacy of the old Soviet Union's insane irrigation megaprojects.

The window into a world that wasn't showed white-caps on blue water.

"The delta of the Syr Darya, where it empties into the Aral." A huge marsh. Through the reeds and onto a firmer island moved striped deadliness, a Siberian tiger. Waterfowl rose from the water in honking thousands, enough to cast shadow on the great predator.

"Paris."

No Eiffel Tower, although Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe still stood. The air was crystal. From overhead, he could see that the medieval core remained, Notre Dame, the radial roadways laid out in Napoleon III's time. None of the great sprawl of suburbs he knew; Versailles stood alone among its ordered gardens. Dense forest and open parkland stretched from the outskirts; occasionally a building would rise above them, usually roofed in green copper. The roadways were grassy turf. Foot traffic was pedestrians, or small machines that floated soundlessly beneath their passengers. Aircraft moved through the air above, elongated teardrop shapes and blunt wedges moving without visible support; a colorful hot-air balloon drifted among them.

"The Serengeti, looking northeast."

A herd of hundreds of elephants, moving with slow ponderous dignity through a landscape of lion-colored grass and scattered flat-topped thorn trees. His eyes darted about; lions, giraffe, antelope, a dozen rhino . . . Snow-topped Kilimanjaro rose like an empress in the distance. Beyond it was something new, something alien: a great pillar stretching up into the sky until it turned into a curving thread, vanishing in the blue.

"What's that?" he asked, hearing his voice shake.

"The Kenia beanstalk—think of it as a tower or a cable reaching from Low Earth Orbit to the surface." She touched the edge of the window. "And this is the Valles Marineris, on Mars."

The sky was a faded blue, with a hint of pink. The view was on the edge of a reddish cliff, overlooking a vast expanse of deep-blue water five hundred feet or more below; miles distant across it the edge of another cliff showed. The waves were like none he had ever seen, taller and thinner in section than water could support. While he watched a whale breached, soaring out of the sea until only its tail was under the surface. A blue whale, and huge. It crashed back with a mountainous spray of surf. The view tilted downward, showing a city dropping in terraces from the cliff-face. The buildings were white or soft pastels, built with domes and arches and pillared colonnades, connected with roadways of colored stone or sweeping staircases. Gardens surrounded every building and lined the streets.

Just below him stood a group of people. *People like Gwen*. He recognized a likeness in some of them. Racial? Tall, with a slender muscularity, light-eyed, their hair shades of blond or red. Some of them wore tunics or robes; others only tight briefs. Those near-naked ones were being fitted with gossamer gliding wings on frameworks thinner than thread but steel-rigid. The helpers were of a subtly different type, shorter, trim and healthy but without the sinewy tigerish look of the first variety.

One of the figures strapping wings to her arms, he realized suddenly, *was* Gwen—but her skin was milk-pale, not the Indian-brown he saw across from him. She launched herself off the cliff edge, dived, then began to scull upward like one of Da Vinci's ornithopters.

"Yes, that's me. A few years ago on my personal world-line. My skin tone adjusts automatically to the ambient sunlight, all over," she explained.

The flyers exploded from their perch in a rainbow of colors. Condors glided along the cliff face, among the men and women.

"One last one. Venus, north polar region."

No greenery this time. Desert and rock, under a scourging wind. The sky was a deep greenish-blue, thick with clouds; he could see a vast pale disk in it, like a moon but too regular, touching one edge on the horizon and occupying a quarter-section arc of the heavens. In the foreground people walked, in thin pressure-suits and bubble helmets. Machines floated by, or rolled on huge wheels of spun thread; further away something enormous lifted into the sky and vanished upward with a trail of vapor and a thunder-rumble that shook the earth. There was a sense of thick, glimmering heat about the picture, almost palpable.

"The temperature in polar winter is down to about forty degrees—that's Celsius—but the air's still unbreathable, will be for another century. The circular object is an orbiting mirror, reflecting away sunlight. Mars was relatively easy; we just heated it up with mirrors and dumped comets and pieces of the gas-giant moons on the surface, then started the biologicals. Venus had too *much* atmosphere, we



used tailored algae and then—never mind."

"Turn it back to Earth," he whispered. She did; this time to a seal colony, huge and thunderous with their barking cries. "Is it true? Is it true?"

Gwen tapped at the edge of the viewscreen. "If you can match this on Earth today, I'm the greatest liar since Thomas Jefferson," she said coldly, and tapped again. Once more there was nothing but a thin sheet of nonreflective black.

Cairstens buried his face in his hands and wept, quietly and passionately. Their table was in a discreet corner; nobody noticed until he was done, and then Gwen signaled a waiter over.

"Vodka and orange juice," she said. "Another brandy for me."

The man gulped his drink in two mouthfuls. "You're from . . . from the future? You came to save us?"

"A future. 2442 A.D., to be exact; or the four hundred forty-second year of the Final Society, we'd say. The future of a different past, with the split starting in the mid 1770s, as close as I can tell. I got here by accident; we thought we were experimenting with faster-than-light travel. Moleholes—wormholes, your people call them."

"You're stranded," he said, his voice hoarse. Then he shook his head. "I never dreamed . . . I never thought human beings could be such stewards of the Earth."

"They can't," Gwen replied. "I'm not human."

His head came up. "You could have fooled me."

"I couldn't fool a CAT scan or DNA analysis. Post-human; genetically modified, to about a six percent divergence. *Homo drakensis*, to be precise. Most of it doesn't show, but I'm as different from you as an orangutan."

He nodded slowly. "This is—that's why you asked me that—" With a visible effort: "You think you can bring your people here. And they'll save the Earth."

"Among other things. I warn you, the consequences will be fairly drastic."

His face hardened. "As drastic as losing the ozone layer? Global warming?" He shook his head decisively. "No, it doesn't matter how drastic." Curiously: "How did it happen?"

"Explain to me the overall history of the world for the past six hundred years, in one paragraph or less," Gwen said dryly.

He shrugged. "Yes, of course. But . . . how drastic? What's it like for people, in that world of yours?"

"Peaceful, mainly. No war, no poverty, no sexism, very little crime, no illness except eventual death. Most people work on the land, or at handicrafts, or in domestic pursuits; we could do that by machine, but it's more . . . healthy the other way. The high-tech sector nearly handles itself."

She raised a hand. "It isn't a democratic system. There's a genetic elite; I'm part of that. It's a static culture."

"Yes, yes," Cairstens nodded. "It'd have to be stable, to live in harmony with nature like that; it couldn't be our sort of grasping, wasting greed-society."

His eyes burned. "You need me to help. If this got out, every spook and spy from every government in the world would be fighting to pick your bones. They'd never allow you to contact your people."

She nodded. "I'm going to need a large organization; and a smaller one within it, of men and women who know the truth."

He shook his head again. "I believe it, but I can't believe it."

"Sleep on it. Tomorrow we'll talk again."

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"Another brandy, and some more of that raspberry cheesecake, please," Gwen said.

The waiter smiled and hurried off. Gwen finished the last sip of the VSOP Otard cognac, savoring the uncanny fresh-grape sweetness, the vanilla tang of Limousin oak. Relatives of hers held estates there; the product was surprisingly similar in this universe. One of the drawbacks of her enhancements was that ethanol was metabolized as rapidly as anything else; wine was pure taste, not kick, to a *drakensis*. Four or five brandies did produce a mild effect, though.

Amazing, she thought, running over the conversation with Tom Cairstens. *And every word was the truth*. Even if their response to pheromonal clues was spotty, humans could be manipulated verbally. She could tell exactly what their reaction was to every word, of course—scent aside, listening to their heartbeats and watching the pupil dilation and patterns of heat on the skin—and modify accordingly.

Cairstens was going to be invaluable; she couldn't be everywhere, and it wasn't good tactics to be under human observation too much.

Invaluable provided he didn't go off the rails. It would take him a while to assimilate the data; humans were like that, their conscious and subconscious severely out of synch. How odd it must be, to know something was true and not feel belief in it! Like the way she'd felt for the half-hour after the accident, but all the time. Gwen shuddered slightly. That had been utter nightmare, the closest she'd ever come in all the long years to losing control of herself. No wonder the humans had such trouble maintaining clarity of thought and purpose.

Yes, she'd have to nurture Cairstens along carefully, building up a teacher-acolyte relationship; he had the makings of a fanatic, a True Believer. *Should I take him?* she wondered. So many of these feral humans were just plain *ugly*; it was a bit of a shock. The genetic engineers had eliminated that from the world of the Final Society long ago, along with inconvenient psychological characteristics. Cairstens was an exception, lean and hard, pleasant blue eyes, longish brown hair . . . probably an entertaining mount.

No, not for the present. Human males in this culture had odd ideas about sex and dominance. She'd wait until the parameters of the relationship were well-established, then integrate it as a reinforcement. She'd have to be careful, at that. *Servus* were protected against over-addiction to the stimulus of *drakensis* pheromones, sexual or otherwise. But wild humans were only vulnerable to a few of the more obvious stimuli, fear/dominance, lust/love, the basics—and when they were affected, didn't have any stops.

Gwen sighed. The geneticists who'd designed her species had wanted an aggressive, energetic, territorial breed. The same hormones produced a driving libido as well; that was deep in the primate inheritance, and would have required complete rewiring to change. Normally she didn't mind, but this wasn't the Domination, where body servants expected to do concubine duty as a matter of course. One human wasn't nearly enough—she didn't want to wear Dolores out—and going too long without could produce unfortunate results, like poor Jamie Simms. Not that she'd hurt him—she had better control than that—but he'd had an alarming night. Controlling the need eventually required a counterproductive amount of energy.

What I need is an isolated retreat, she thought. A Household, or as close as this world could come to it. That would be the best base of operations. *And perhaps I should reproduce.*

No other *drakensis* around for gene-merging, of course, but she could clone herself. The technology was simple, not far above this world's level; remove the nucleus of an ovum, replace with cell nucleus, remove the postfetal inhibitors, and stimulate to divide. A human female would do well enough for a brooder. The immune-markers were compatible; that had been built in as a failsafe way back in the early days. For that matter, she had a functional womb herself, if she cared to spend a year to bring it up from standby status.

She pursed her lips in distaste. Now *there* was a perverse thought.

Yes, a child was definitely a possibility. It would be comforting to have another Draka to help out, if the Project took that long.

The cheesecake arrived. "My compliments to the staff," she said, and slipped a fifty into the waiter's hand.

He beamed at her, and Gwen smiled back. She hadn't had this much fun in centuries.

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"*Hunhf*. Twelve."

Henry Carmaggio sat up on the weight bench, wheezing a little and wiping his face with the sweat towel slung around his neck. Any excuse to delay moving from the bench press to the goddamned preacher curls; last year or so they'd set off a twinge in his left shoulder, the place where he'd broken it playing touch football back when he was sixteen. It hadn't hurt since, but now . . .

The gym wasn't very full, for a Saturday afternoon. Enough for the usual heavy smell of sweat, people pumping away at the Nautilus machines, pedaling fast to nowhere on the Life Cycles and going to the same place on foot on the StairMasters. The small windows up along the roof under the outside wall were steamed up, but the big mirrors at the far end were clear enough. They showed one middle-aged cop, a stocky thickset man with heavy shoulders and a waist only a little thicker than the best that could reasonably be expected. Heavy craggy features with a beak nose, hazel eyes, a solid frosting of gray at the temples of hair worn unfashionably short. The shorts and T-shirt he was wearing showed arms and legs corded with muscle and thick with curling black hair; a line of old white scars ran down his left leg from thigh to calf.

One good thing about working up a sweat, he thought. *It takes your mind off itches you can't scratch.* Like the warehouse case. Not just being taken off it, but he hadn't heard zip on the street, either.

Of course, a co-ed gym also reminded you of other itches. On the good side, better than two-thirds of the men here were gay, which reduced the competition. On the bad side, the women tended to be way, way above his income and education bracket. And whatever current theories said should be, that still made a great wonking difference. *And face it, you expected to stay married until you were in a wheelchair.*

He rose, wincing at how his knees crackled, and ambled over to the weights section for the preacher curls. As usual, somebody had put the weight disks back on the stands any old way, meaning you had to heave them around to get the ones you needed to fit on the bar.

"*Patron,*" a voice said.

He started slightly. "Jesus!" he said.

Jesus winced, probably because people had been making jokes about his name ever since the family moved from San Juan to New York when he was three.

"Got a message for you, Lieutenant," he said.

Carmaggio's eyebrows rose. It was Saturday, and he wasn't working the weekend this week.

"Lady wants to talk to you. From the Feds."

Ahhh, he thought, and suddenly the aches in his muscles and the sweat running down his barrel-shaped torso ceased to matter.

"Wants to talk about you-know-what, if you're interested."

"You bet your ass," Carmaggio said softly. His teeth showed. "Bet your ass, *paisano.*"

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"I'm Special Agent Claire Finch," the FBI agent said, sliding into the booth.

Carmaggio sized her up as they shook hands. Finch was small—wouldn't have gotten into law enforcement before the height requirements were removed—and extremely pretty in a businesslike way: reddish-brown hair, fox-sharp face with a hillbilly point to her chin and a very faint trace of mountain accent. Scots-Irish, probably, maybe with a trace of Cherokee: West Virginia, or East Tennessee. He'd had guys from that area in his platoon. One of them had been the best shot he'd ever met.

"Detective Lieutenant Henry Carmaggio," he said.

There was an awkward moment of silence while the waitress brought their coffee: cappuccino; they were north of Canal Street, in an area where Italian was slowly giving way to Asian. He sipped, relishing the familiar bitterness.

"So. You wanted a meet?"

Finch nodded a little jerkily. "Highly unofficial," she said.

Henry grinned. "Your brass doesn't like weird shit either, hey?"

"We—Special Agent Dowding and I, my boss—got the reports on your homicides because there seemed to be a repetitive pattern, might be a serial killer. We put out a flag on it. Sure enough, we got a repetition of the MO."

Henry felt himself tense. "Where?" he whispered.

"Through the DEA. Cali, Colombia."

"Shit, they get twenty homicides a *day* there, sometimes."

"Not this way. A couple of goons cut up—street-soldiers for one of the drug operators. Crushed like dixie cups, killed with their own knives. Then a bank executive, found in his apartment a lot like your Stephen Fischer. And a disappearance, a flight attendant named Dolores Ospina Pastrana. All associated with a woman matching the description of the one seen with Fischer. Operating under the name of Smith."

"That's original," Carmaggio grunted. "Was the bank in Colombia dirty?"

"In *Cali*?" Finch said.

"Point taken," Carmaggio said.

"Outside our jurisdiction," she went on. "And some time ago, now. But you see the implications."

"Money. We've got someone who drops into a major buy, kills twenty men, and walks out with . . . call it a million plus in very dirty bills. They stop over at an apartment for a few hours. Then at another for a week, a killing at each. There *may* have been another—"

"What?" Finch leaned forward.

"Lowlife named Jojo Jackson, down around Times Square. Did false ID, among other things; we found him in an alley. Somebody grabbed him by the back of the neck and slammed his face into the wall, *real* hard.

"I don't like this," Henry went on softly. "I don't like this at all. Because it says *learning*, to me. Learning about things, killing the teacher to clean up, moving on."

"And laundering the money," Finch said, with a tight controlled nod. "Which means that whoever it is now has a million dollars—call it half that after the cut the cleaners take—in untraceable funds."

She cleared her throat. "Its not a serial killer in the conventional sense. Not a drug thing under the DEA's mandate. Not just a homicide."

"It's very fucking strange," Henry said quietly. "Let's stop beating about the bush."

The agent hesitated, tapping her fingers on the linoleum, then came to a decision:

"Our esteemed friends at you-know-where near D.C. grabbed the arm," she said. "My guess is they're studying the hell out of it somewhere and want the lid very firmly in place. Word's come down from above that it's a national security matter. Drop it, forget it, it never happened. The Company and Military

Intelligence have whole sections dedicated to woo-woo stuff; TV to the contrary, the Bureau doesn't."

Henry tapped a finger on the table.

"Who specifically?" he said. "You wouldn't happen to know about a couple of thick-ears, one of 'em twenty-five, brown hair, blue eyes, the other—"

"Andrews and Debrowski," Finch said. "Yes. They're wet-work specialists, operating for a new branch. Bioterrorist threats. Mostly Company people."

"Them," he said. "I would have thought NSA. You might be interested to know that they paid a call on a friend of mine. They weren't real friendly themselves, and they picked up something important."

"It's a joint operation, which is why technically they *do* have domestic jurisdiction. Not that that ever stopped you-know-who from doing you-know-what."

"The Company," Carmaggio said. "Let me tell you about the spooks. Guy I know—this happened back in seventy, I met him years later in a VA hospital, Navajo guy—was in the Special Forces, his unit was up in the Highlands, running a Hmong camp. Seems there was an encryption group, Company people, operating out of the camp. Good men, with some equipment that was high-tech back in those days. They were reading local enemy signal traffic better than Victor C."

Finch's eyes turned intent at the policeman's tone. Carmaggio's voice went low and tight. He'd never been there himself when he was in-country, but he could see it—down to the feel of the heat, the black-pajama'd Montagnards, the long lean pigs rooting among the sandbags, chickens clucking, naked brown kids.

"So they get Elint that the enemy's going to attack the camp. Do they pass it on? No, they do not. They ask permission from Langley. And Langley decides that it's a higher priority to keep the fact that we're—they're—reading the signals secret. So it goes back and forth between Langley and this pissant little firebase for *days*, until the guy in charge of the listening post takes out his .45 and shoots up the radio and tells the Special Forces officer running the place what's coming down—only by then it's real late, and four hours later two battalions of NVA hit their wire. Couple hours after that, they were calling in strikes right on top of their own position."

He forced his fingers to relax on the thick china cup. "The Navajo guy got dusted out with an AK bullet through both knees. And that," he said softly, "is what I think of the spooks. And they're doing it again."

"Isn't it a coincidence," he went on in a lighter tone of voice, "that your people at Quantico can't tell us any more about that skin sample we got from under Marley Man's fingernails, or return it?"

"Yes. Remarkable coincidence. The Bureau didn't object, and normally they wouldn't spit on the Company if they saw 'em dying of thirst in the desert, for fear it would give them the strength to crawl to water."

"And the spooks don't much care about the unsolved homicides, do they?"

The FBI agent cleared her throat and spoke, in her polite, barely accented voice: "We do, Mr. Carmaggio. It may sound strange, but we feel a certain responsibility to the American public. And whatever else we have, it's a pattern killer. I'm not ruling *anything* out, including mutants and space aliens, but whatever it is—it kills."

Carmaggio nodded heavily and finished the lukewarm remnants of his cappuccino. "My gut tells me the pattern's not going to stay down in the land of coffee and nose-candy, either."

"We did . . . retain the DNA pattern when the other people took the skin sample," Finch said. "Unofficially, and just in case. You know the passport setup the Canadians have nowadays?"

"Bring in \$250,000 and get their equivalent of a green card? Yeah. Getting a lot of heavy traffic out of Hong Kong that way."

"It's also a natural setup for various sorts of crime, not to mention espionage, so we have some contacts with the RCMP," Finch said. "My boss called in a favor and had them run a computer check on their applications. They do a DNA fingerprint—just satellite-DNA, not the deep stuff. They didn't see anything strange, but it did match the pattern markers I sent them."

"Ahhh." A vast hunter's satisfaction warmed Carmaggio's belly.

A fax slid across the table to him. He felt his eyebrows rise at the picture. *This* was what had wasted Marley Man? He looked at the high-cheeked sculpted face. *Looker*. Maybe it was his imagination, but there was something *wrong* about it . . .

"Gwendolyn Ingolfsson," he read. "Colombian citizenship . . ."

"Which you can buy retail," Finch said.

Henry shrugged assent. With the amounts of money washing around down there, everyone was dirty and pretty well everything was for sale. The down side of that was that local ID was a trouble-flag to half the police forces on earth. Canadian papers were nearly as easy to get and not nearly as likely to arouse suspicion.

"And resident in the Bahamas," she said. "They don't like people asking questions there, not without very good reasons. We can't do anything; officially that skin sample no longer exists and never did. But . . ."

Another piece of paper followed the picture. The header and signature had been blanked out when it was photocopied, but he recognized the style.

*". . . damage to cranium is congruent with beam weapon. Laser is unlikely due to explosive deformation upon penetration. An energetic-particle or metallic charged-plasma beam, with the latter being the higher probability. Guide mechanism unknown. Effect indicates a power source in the multiple-megawatt scale; the effect could not be duplicated without capacitors and other equipment weighing in the seven- to twelve-tonne range . . ."*

"I'll be goddamned," he said. "It *was* a ray gun. No wonder the spooks are all over it."

Carmaggio leaned back and hooked an ankle over his knee. "Now, Special Agent, that leaves one question. Why exactly are you coming to *me* about all this?"

"They're probably thinking in terms of some foreign connection," Finch said. "We—my boss and I—don't think so. We don't know what, but it doesn't fit espionage."

"The problem with setting up an organization to find bio-terrorists . . ." Carmaggio said.

". . . is that they *will* find bio-terrorists. Whether they're there or not. And my boss is convinced that if they *do* find"—she tapped the picture—"her, they'll try to deal. Sure as fate, they'll try to deal; they want that stuff that badly. The only thing we're confident of is that there'll be more bodies."

They looked at each other for an instant. Somebody had walked into that warehouse and killed twenty armed men with a knife and bare hands. The picture didn't look like someone who could do that . . . but nobody could, anyway.

"Not Rambo on his best day," Carmaggio said, and the FBI agent nodded. "I do not understand this." Finch nodded again.

"We don't need to understand *how*, right now," she said. "What and who will do just fine."

"So we stay in touch," Carmaggio said. "And we get ready; getting those papers smells like preparation for another try at the U.S. to me."

Whatever lived behind those eyes was getting smarter.

Getting ready.

"We can help each other with this," Finch said. It sounded as much like a prayer as a statement.

"I certainly hope so, Ms. Finch," he said. "Because we both need all the help we can get."

He looked down at the picture. The rest of the data on the sheet was probably fiction, but the face was real. The eyes, green and level, with a hint of mockery in them.

## CHAPTER SIX

Immobilized in gel, breathing thick oxygen-rich fluid, Kenneth Lafarge was one with the machine. It was deceptively simple in appearance, an egg two meters long and one-and-a-half at its broadest point. The color was a soft matte black, the material a complex ceramic assembled atom by atom. Inside were the mechanisms that maintained him unknowing as it coasted in through the outer planets to a precisely calculated meeting with the third.

The machine woke him. **approaching Earth/2**, it said/thought, **passive scans reveal no overt enemy presence.**

He activated the exterior sensor feed, and the chill immensity of space snapped into being around him. Below was a view he knew only from ancient holographs and long-distance scans; the blue-white shield of Earth, turning in majesty. Now he was near it, one of less than half a dozen of his people since the Exodus, four centuries before. It was like and unlike Samothrace in the Centauri system. Blue of water, white of cloud, brown-gray-greens of land; more water than his native planet, less land surface, slightly bigger overall, the shapes of the coastlines completely different. Samothrace was a world of many



islands, many continents scattered among shallow seas, none larger than a few million square kilometers.

Earth.

Earth/2, he reminded himself. Four and half centuries before, in a history that was probably very unlike the one that had led to his world.

Input analysis, he commanded.

Data flowed in; from radio and vid broadcasts, from the sparse satellite traffic. *There's a United States here, but no Domination*, he realized. Getting ready for a Presidential election. Amazing. Dozens upon dozens of sovereign countries, few of them large. So *much for the theory that planetary unification is inevitable in an industrialized world*. There was hardly anything in space, which was even more amazing. Plenty of electromagnetic traffic, neutron output from fission plants, the atmosphere showed a *lot* of industrial byproducts, more than anything in the prime line's history. But none of the lunar colonies and orbital habitats his 1995 would have shown, nothing out in deep space or the asteroid belts.

How do they maintain that density of population without materials and energy from space? he thought. From the looks of it, there must be more than five billion people down there; his Earth had never reached even half that, and by the late twentieth century it'd been dependent on space-based inputs.

The first tenuous wisps of atmosphere buffeted the egg. It plunged more steeply, and outside views degraded under ionization and the peeling of layers of ablative covering.

Detection, the machines told him; he could feel the microrays stroking at the outside of the egg, like sun on skin through the linkage. The stealthing would handle it easily; it was quite a primitive system. Not as good as what the Alliance for Democracy had had at the time of the Final War. *Would have had*. This whole multiple-world thing was enough to warp your brain. At a guess, this history hadn't had the sort of relentless competition that had driven technology in his.

Lucky bastards.

Gravity pushed at him, building, even in the liquid cocoon. At sixty thousand meters the drive kicked in, slowing his descent. That many energetic ions ought to cause some sort of a stir, but he doubted they'd know what they were looking at. It lasted exactly twenty seconds, and by then he was moving at only slightly more than the terminal velocity of the half-ton egg. North America opened beneath him, dark with night, starred with cities and roadways.

He felt his throat tighten, emotion unexpected and intense. The ancient homeland, the lost and lovely. His great-great-great-great-grandfather had been born here . . . or at least this was another version of that place. The land of Jefferson, Washington, Douglas, Evrard.

Minutes passed. The machine sensed the proper altitude and the exterior of the egg disintegrated, returning to its primary constituents and dispersing silently on the wind as molecular dust. The wing deployed; he steered it effortlessly on the currents of air toward the cornfield below. It set his feet down between two rows and disappeared itself, a rain of particles far too fine to feel against his skin. He pulled the breatherfilm off his face and spent a moment coughing the liquid out of his lungs.

He was naked in a cornfield in . . . *Illinois*, the comp built into his skull prompted, drawing a map. The same political division here as in his history. *But Mexico and Canada are separate countries*. Events must have diverged early in the nineteenth century; Canada had been annexed to the U.S. in 1812,

Mexico in 1848, Central America and Cuba during the 1850s.

It was fairly chilly, a cold March night; much like the high country around his family's ranch in Galatin State back on Samothrace. He opened the flat case at his feet and took out overalls and boots, both neutral colors with archaic zip fasteners. Nothing there that any detection apparatus would find interesting, but he'd ditch them as soon as possible. The rest of his equipment stayed inside the shielded suitcase, except for a smooth dark oblong he slipped into one pocket. That would shoot a slug of ultracompressed gas, very effective at close range, and not at all conspicuous.

He cocked an ear. Traffic sounds from about two clicks away; a highway, and transport.

Mid-eastern coast, North America. That was all they'd been able to learn about the enemy molehole; that, and that it was probably an accident. Typical Draka brute-force-and-massive-ignorance science, but it could work. If they had the time. He was probably within three or four years of the original penetration, certainly within a decade. No overt sign of the Draka's activity.

The corn rustled about him. A sleeping continent . . . a sleeping world, and something terrible loose in it. A worm in the bud, eating and burrowing and preparing to riddle it with the deadly spawn of the Domination.

He picked up the suitcase and began to walk toward the road.

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Ken Lafarge snapped a fist into the elbow. It broke with an unpleasant crackling sound, and he released the knife hand.

The other two muggers fled down a darkened alley, hauling the injured one along. Ken stooped and picked up the weapon one of them had dropped when snap-kicked in the gut; he turned it over in his hands, ejected the magazine, worked the action and disassembled it.

*A little primitive*, he thought, putting it back together. Semi-automatic slugthrower, no guidance system at all. He reloaded and dropped it into a pocket, then reluctantly added the money from the criminals' wallets he'd taken. They'd probably stolen it themselves.

This section of Chicago was unbelievably shabby and run-down. It *stank*, of urine and uncollected garbage. Everyone else he'd seen here was black—rather like what he'd read about parts of the South, right after the Civil War. Not many blacks had been among the refugees to Samothrace, and the population had homogenized by intermarriage in the centuries since.

Didn't they free the slaves here, or what? he thought, turning and walking north, farther away from the bus station. *Wait a minute. No Domination here, ever.* So there'd been no place for the irreconcilables of the South to go, after whatever version of the Civil War this mutant history contained. That could mean . . . *Wait until you've got the data.*

More of the internal-combustion vehicles passed him along the rain-sodden street, splashing through puddles in the cracked pavement. He stopped beside one that was resting on the bare rims of its tires and popped the hood open, shining a pencil-light on the interior.

Interesting. Spark-ignition piston system. A fuel-air mixer that looked for all the world as if somebody had developed it from a perfume-bulb atomizer. Lots of electrical auxiliaries, and even a compchip

monitoring system. He called up schematics of autosteamer engines from the historical files. Nothing even remotely similar. Oh, this thing would *work*, it probably even had a fairly good thermal efficiency, but it was absurdly overstressed for a civilian road-vehicle at a twentieth-century level of technology. Not to mention the toxic byproducts of high-temperature combustion.

IC piston engines something like this were used for aircraft, he remembered. And sometimes for armored fighting-vehicles, compression-ignition Diesels, although the Draka had used a turbocompound system during the Eurasian War of the 1940s. Road vehicles had always been external-combustion, though—steam, from the early days of powered street transport in the 1820s, closed-cycle Rankin engines by the 1990s.

Lord, you'd have to have had fairly advanced machining to use IC engines in road cars. High temperatures like that required close tolerances and corrosion-resistant materials compared to steam. This one was quite well-made, in a crazy sort of way; he pulled a sensor thread from his suitcase and scanned.

tolerances to within one ten-thousandth of a millimeter, the comp told him. **following alloys—**

He tried to imagine an early-Victorian precursor of the engine before him, and failed. Steam engines had started out heavy and crude, like the first road autosteamers themselves, and gotten gradually better. Steam turbines had powered the first dirigibles and aircraft; then internal combustion had been developed when those ran up against inherent power-to-weight limitations, in the 1870s. By then manufacturing technique had improved enough to make that practical. How on earth could gas engines like this have been developed *first*, though?

He clanged the hood down and started north again. It might have been easier in an honestly weird analogue—something where Vikings had colonized North America, or the South had won the Civil War. There was just enough familiar here to be disorienting. Some sort of cheap hotel for the night, then to a library.

I'll have to investigate before I contact the authorities, obviously, he mused.

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The motel room smelled of disinfectant, but it was spacious compared to quarters on an interstellar spaceship. The window outside showed a vista of wet dark parking lot, an anonymous part of an anonymous town in Ohio. Ken Lafarge had a car outside, two suitcases of local clothing and sundries; even a razor, just in case someone looked over his effects. This paper currency of theirs was childishly easy for his faber to duplicate, and if anyone caught the duplicated serial numbers his money would look *more* authentic than the originals.

Not that anyone seemed likely to check him over. He didn't expect genescans, but there was almost nothing of the structure of identity documents and permits he remembered from history lessons about *his* world's America in the 1990s. These people didn't spend anything on defense, and very little on exploration. No national service, no youth-training camps, an incredible cultural balkanization that destroyed unity and purpose. They were only *now* getting anything like a reusable orbital launcher; by this date in his history, the first interstellar ship was nearly completed. And this Earth was so *poor*, so short of energy and materials, so filthy with the byproducts of horrendously inefficient industries.

But it's not about to be conquered by monsters, he thought grimly. *Not if I do my job.*

Kenneth looked back at the vid— *the television*, he reminded himself. *Too strange. Too much.*

He could understand the standard language well enough; it was far closer to the rather conservative Samothracian dialect of English than the Domination's variety. It was the *context* he couldn't follow. Alien, alien. People in an amphitheater-like room were standing and telling a black woman things about their personal lives . . .

Incest. Child molestation. Sexual combinations even a *Draka* would find disgusting. He sat on the bed and dropped his head into his hands.

All his training and study had been aimed at the twenty-fifth-century Domination. *This mission is a ratfuck waiting to happen. Lousy tradecraft.* His equipment was aimed at that particular setting, too. Elaborate stealthing that he didn't need, and minimal power outputs because he couldn't possibly shoot his way off a hostile, highly-advanced planet. What he needed was brute-force stuff, weapons.

your blood chemistry is at less than 87% of optimum, the AI said in his mind. **indications of shock syndrome and stress, permission to adjust.**

Granted, he thought, and shuddered as a sudden coolness ran over his skin. Breathing slowed, sweat dried. He stripped and dropped to the floor; a hundred two-finger pushups with the weight of his case on his shoulders, stretching, squats, crunches. Better. A shower, and he began to feel like a human being again.

"Let's get to work," he said and snapped off the TV.

He sat by the telephone. Tendrils grew out of the case, pale threads thinning to invisibility. They wove their way into the native instrument. Ken closed his eyes.

The cyberweb formed around him. Scan, he thought. *Eastern North America, five-year intervals, following parameters.*

A long wait, in a floating world of colors. Waiting while the AI poured out through the low, slow bandwidth available, and communicated with machines several orders of magnitude more primitive.

A structure began to grow before his mind's sight, three-dimensional and glowing with colors impossible for waking eyes.

"Interesting," he breathed. "A *distributed* system?"

correct.

The AI wove it backward in time, then forward again to show its growth. About the only commonality it had with the history of cybernetics he knew was that the original set of linkages had been military-inspired.

"No central nexus?"

no. capacity is added incrementally. the basic units are small personal comps with open-access memories and instruction-set parameters.

He whistled silently. "Grotesque," he said. *So many separate processing units!* And so easy to

infiltrate; nothing but a few clumsy password systems and crude encryption codes. This would give any competent counterespionage agency the screaming willies, right back to the beginning of computers—back to the compressed-air-powered mechanical Babbage systems used in the nineteenth century, even.

His attention flashed to an item culled from a database.

new york, january 2, 1995, the machine said. **following details.**

Oddly limited details. Twenty men—petty criminals of some sort—slaughtered. A few pictures. The AI corrected them to 3-D, filled in probabilities in coded order. One with his head blown mostly off.

"Plasma gun," Lafarge breathed softly. "Layer knife."

Stripped metallic ions, superconducting guide coil and power source, flash chamber. Not a sophisticated weapon, in use for centuries—but nothing this world could build without boxcarloads of equipment.

The others had been killed by blunt-injury trauma and the edged weapon. "Typical," he said.

The *drakensis* had reacted with the bloodlust built into the species; and they loved to do it by hand, if they could. Killed everyone there in a single orgasmic burst of slaughter, crushing and ripping bone and organ, tearing the life out of the fragile human bodies.

"Oh, I think you were a startled and unhappy little snake," he said.

Follow the leads. He walked through luminescent tunnels of data. Barriers glowed for instants, then dissolved like sand under his fingers. Like movement in a dream, thick and honey-slow. Things took so *long*.

Ah. Two more killings in New York. A derelict, and a businessman. He grimaced slightly at the details of the last. *It lured him. Used him.* The pheromonal dominance system; the poor primitive would never have known what hit him. Also the snake must have been recovering, getting its mental feet under it—that showed thought and planning, not blind fury.

A description. *Jesus. A female.* He opened his eyes for a moment, returning to the realtime world.

"Damn."

That meant it could reproduce; the techniques were easily within the tech level here. Potentially hundreds, thousands of times, like digger wasp larvae in grubs. He swallowed queasiness and closed his eyes again. No immediate trace. *There.* A skin sample. Data cataracted down the link, built up into a picture.

Know the enemy.

He banished the sharp-featured image, sighing. Three years more time to track down; and with increasing caution. It would have anticipated pursuit, and built safeguards as soon as it could.

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"And you're from another galaxy?"

Ken felt his eyes narrow. "I didn't say that," he said "Don't be absurd. I'm from a planet orbiting Alpha Centauri. It's only 4.2 light-years from here."

"Thattaway, just a bit," the young man said. "Engage."

His partner snorted amusement; he was older than the agent talking to Ken Lafarge, heavier-set, and much less communicative. He was also standing behind the Samothracian, behind and to the left—a posture which made Lafarge extremely uncomfortable, since it put him in a bracket. The office was a cubicle in some unmarked office building northwest of Washington proper. It had the faint ozone smell he was coming to associate with here-and-now bureaucracy, the stink of primitive electronics with loose connections. The rest of it looked very ordinary, under a fluorescent light with an annoying subliminal hum.

He could approve of that commonplace aspect, if nothing else: putting up a huge monolith with some equivalent of *Secret Intelligence Headquarters* on a big sign out front had been a bad habit of some of the old Alliance for Democracy's security agencies. Everything else might change across the centuries, but it remained a constant that this line of work attracted both paranoids and the boyish type who liked to show off their affiliation with powerful clandestine networks. Whatever this organization was, it was keeping the latter under control at least.

"Look—what's your name, anyway?"

"John," the young man said. "John Andrews. This is Clete Debrowski."

"Look, Mr. Andrews, I thought I gave you some pretty convincing data."

Andrews leaned back in his swivel chair. It creaked. John Andrews didn't look heavy, but his frame was packed with solid dense muscle.

"Yup, you did, Mr. Lafarge. You know things you definitely shouldn't; about what went on in New York back in '95, and things from extremely classified databanks."

He leaned forward again, the friendly smile dying away from his face. It had never quite reached his eyes. "So why don't you cut this spaceman shit," he spat. " *Who* are you working for, and *what* is going on?"

"Who do you think?" Lafarge said. *They don't believe me*, he realized. *They seriously don't believe me!*

"We don't know. We don't know who was dealing with those posse hopheads in the warehouse, or how your deal went wrong, or why you were using them—smuggling biohazards, whatever the hell you were doing. Hell, maybe you're working for the Russians; they may not be communists anymore, but they're not all that friendly. We *do* know it was dirty, and we *do* know you're going to tell us all about it."

He laughed. "Unless you beam up really quick."

Ken braced his palms against the arms of his chair. "Mr. Andrews," he said quietly. "If I don't convince you, events will . . . but by then it will be very late, very late indeed. You're gambling with the future of the entire human race."

"And you're not in the offices of the *National Enquirer*," Andrews barked. "Sit down. This administration takes matters of national security seriously, whatever the previous occupants thought."

Debrowski put two heavy hands on Lafarge's shoulders and pushed, using his considerable weight. The thin leather cushion smacked under his buttocks, and the high arms cramped him.

"Mr. Andrews," he said quietly. "I appreciate your position, and I realize you think you're doing your duty. In a sense I'm an American too—"

"Not according to our files," Andrews said. "Your ID is good paper but there's nobody of that age, name or Social Security number. I suggest you stop lying."

"—but the stakes are too high. I can't let you detain me. *It* might well find out."

And if it did while he was immobilized and separated from his equipment, he was a dead man. The planet with him.

Debrowski spoke for the first time. "Let?" he said. "Let us detain you?"

Andrews loosened his tie. "You're on the third floor of a high-security building," he said. "You're *already* detained. I also suggest you start exercising a little realism."

Good advice, Lafarge thought regretfully.

His hands darted up behind his head and closed on Debrowski's ears. *Crack*. The older man's nose smacked into the crown of the Samothracian's head. He bellowed with pain, recoiling backward; then struck down with both hands, a double chop that would have severed his opponent's collarbones like green branches . . . if the situation had been what he assumed.

Time slowed as the net laid along his nerves activated.

First level, he commanded: the biological price was too high for anything more. His bladed palms chopped up and out, thudding into Debrowski's forearms with a meaty, rubbery sensation. He used the momentum to drive himself upward, aiding the powerful spring of his legs and capturing the other man's arms under his own for a second.

*Crack. Crack.* He punched the rear of his head into the other's face again, slightly harder this time. Despite the reinforced bone, that was still a little painful for him, but much more so for Debrowski. The bulky figure toppled away behind him. Andrews was coming erect, his lips moving slowly and the gun coming out from under his arm. Lafarge's time-sensor clocked the movement; remarkable reflexes. The automatic system brought his softsuit flowing out from cuffs and collar to complete its coverage of his body. Cool neutrality insulated his skin, like dipping into dry water; it pressed his short-cropped hair against his scalp.

Transparent, he commanded—no use giving away more than he had to. The locals would see only a slight shimmer over his skin, if they saw anything at all in the heat of the moment. He turned and leaped through the glass door, one foot driving down on the seat of the chair. Glass exploded away from his outstretched fists as his hundred and ninety pounds dove forward. He landed on his hands and front-rolled. The outer office was empty; and now he knew why Andrews had insisted on an evening meeting. Fewer witnesses, when they took his sedated body away to someplace secluded.

Smart boy, he thought. Smart in the day-to-day sense, at least. Pity he didn't have much imagination. Lafarge skidded slightly as he cornered to drive down a corridor between rows of cubicles separated by movable partitions. The disguising shoes gave poor traction; no amount of strength or speed could increase the gripping surface on the soles of his feet. And—

WHACK The 9mm bullet struck the base of his skull. Red-tinged blackness surged in, and the floor came up to strike him. The iron and copper taste of blood filled his mouth as teeth gashed lips or tongue. A diminished *pinnnnnnng* caught at the edge of his attention as the ricochet whined off to lose itself in a computer or potted plant or water cooler. He twitched, fingers scrabbling at the synthetic carpet. The softsuit could sense the bullet coming and turn instantly harder than diamond and more frictionless than liquid mercury on dry ice. It couldn't repeal the law of conservation of momentum. A substantial fraction of the bullet's energy moved his head forward, and his brain surged backward in its bath of fluid as inertia prevented it from moving quite in synch.

Time for concussion later. The combat web dumped chemicals into his carotids and stimulus into the motor centers of his brain. He rose to his knees.

Bang-ptannng. Again and again; the next three shots hit him between the shoulders, ripping the disguising clothes and torquing his body around just enough to see the pistol coming out the shattered office door with Andrews's face snarling behind it. Partitions collapsed as he lurched against them. He scuttled forward like a mechanical crab on hands and knees, the fabric of his trousers ripping with his haste. More shots, none hitting this time; Andrews wavered sideways as Debrowski's body struck him at the waist.

"*Stop that, you stupid fuck!*" Andrews screamed. He snapshot again as Lafarge pistoned up from the floor, running like an Olympic hurdler and leaping desks with a raking stride. "*I've got him, I've—*"

Another shot struck Lafarge in the back of the knee. The softsuit saved the joint from the sideways leverage, but it cost him momentum toward the windows. The rectangle of the gasgun slapped into his palm, thrown forward by the holster. He shot; the windows burst away in a cloud of needles as the slug of ultracompressed air hammered them out of his way like an invisible piledriver. He followed in a soaring leap.

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"He brothk my dose! De bathurd brothk my dose!" Debrowski yelled, as much in rage as pain.

"*Fuckyour nose,*" Andrews shouted.

The wounded man tumbled sideways, knocking over the wastebasket. The younger agent wrenched the door open—both panels of frosted glass were gone in a pile of shards that shifted treacherously underfoot. He went through in a skittering crouch, gun in a two-handed grip, down the aisle to the windows overlooking the parking lot. The bastard's body would *have* to be there. He wasn't necessarily dead; Andrews was fairly sure he'd hit him with at least one round, and a three-story fall onto pavement had to break bones, but doing wet-work you learned how tough the human body could be. He wouldn't be going anywhere, though. Not fast.

"Nothing," he said, with more obscenity in the word than ten minutes' scatology. Then, quietly and with conviction: "Shit."

He holstered his weapon. Alarms were ringing downstairs, and the stairwell doors burst open as a couple of the guards came through. Andrews spread his hands.



"It's Andrews," he said, repeating it in a loud, clear voice.

You couldn't tell what men would do when they came charging into a room expecting a firefight; except that it wouldn't necessarily be what hindsight thought best. When the gunmen straightened up from their crouch he went on:

"Get a medic. Fast. Then get on the horn to the local police, put an APB out on Kenneth Lafarge, the picture's on my desk, armed and dangerous, wanted for assault and attempted murder." His calm broke. "*Move! Now!*"

God alone knew who this fruitloop was really working for. God alone knew what he'd be doing now.

Andrews shuddered slightly. In reaction, and for what might be. The Firm had dozens of scenarios on bio-terrorism, none of them pretty. Whoever had been using the Jamaicans as a conduit knew more about genetic engineering than anyone should; that arm from whatever-the-fuck-it-was proved that. Genetics was low-cost science, much easier to do in a private lab than nuclear weapons, even with plutonium coming out of Russia like piss out of a horse.

He swallowed the sour throat-scraping taste of failure. *Ebola*, he thought. The Ebola virus had nearly gotten out of Africa twice; it was contagious as hell, and had a fatality rate of better than 90 percent. Someone with this group's skills could engineer something like that as they pleased. Give it a year-long incubation period with the victim contagious all the time. Ebola turned your connective tissue into mush . . .

He ejected the magazine of his Glock, snapped in a fresh one and bolstered it, all automatic reflex before he got a cupful of water and went over to kneel by George. The heavy-set man was holding a wad of tissues to his nose and dripping red down a sodden shirt.

"Dink we'll be hearing de randsub deband zoon?"

"Time will tell. At least we've got a clear make on one of them."

And when the ransom demand came, they might have to pay up.

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"These are very fine diamonds, Mr. Smith," the dealer said, laying aside his loupe.

Kenneth Lafarge sat back in the rickety office chair and nodded. The little room was cramped and musty, piled with papers and ledgers; the desk held what this world considered a very up-to-date computer system, and a square of heavy paper with a spill of jewels across it.

"Gem quality, and not listed on the system as prohibited merchandise."

The dealer had a thick accent and wore a skullcap. That seemed to be usual on 47th Street, in this weird analog of New York. The skin between his shoulder blades crawled slightly as he smiled. This wasn't the city that had died in thermonuclear fire in 1999, but his mind's eye still saw those images. Samothrace had passed them down from generation to generation after the Exodus, a heritage of loss and revenge.

"Of course, you understand, without documentation, the price . . ." A delicate shrug from the diamond

dealer.

He nodded. *Plenty more where those came from.* In fact, as long as he had carbon for raw material, any number of them. The suitcase contained a very compact little molecular assembler, well up to such simple tasks.

"Why don't you tell me what you think is reasonable, Mr. Feldman?" he said. It wouldn't do to arouse suspicion by not bargaining.

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Ken replaced the phone with a sigh. No luck with *anyone* at the investment bankers.

Granted, he couldn't give them enough details to show that he was anything but a crank. Yet . . . these people didn't seem to have any healthy paranoia at all!

Futile, he thought. Still, one had to make the effort. These businessmen didn't know what they were getting into.

The sign outside the building read *Smith Computer Services*; the cover was convenient, and it was pathetically easy to fox the IRS machines. Most of the big rooms were full of improvised rigs, cobbled together from local components. The rear of the building held a single spartan bedroom, and a gallery big enough for him to exercise and practice in. The main problem was people trying to buy computer services from him.

He sighed again and turned to a terminal. *Progress?* he asked.

The voice—melded from his implant and the much more capable machine in the suitcase—replied:

very little, the enemy's transducer includes all standard domination counterinfiltration infosets and is being used to protect the local machinery, i will need a direct landlink to penetrate.

Hmmm. *The police?*

as directed, the fbi have received the communication routed from the Canadian authorities, the dispassionate voice in his brain continued. **an agent in receipt of the information has travelled to new york. the other intelligence agencies will be denied access. data relating to your encounter with the two agents will be protected.**

Ken ground his teeth at the memory of the fiasco in Washington. The local police and government were worse than useless. *I have to assume the snake is watching.* It wouldn't be any great problem to put flagging markers in the local infosystems; and there was no way he could keep the natives from using them if he revealed himself. If *it* found out he was here, things could get very bad.

I could put together a laser-triggered fusion weapon, he thought.

contraindicated. probability of earth/1 detection increases asymptotically in that scenario.

Moodily, he took up a sheaf of printout. More research on the divergence point between this line and Earth/1. Even the primitive, rudimentary infoweb of this 1998 had substantial research potential. The AI logged on to the . . . net, they called it . . . and asked questions under a dozen different user IDs.

Definitely the 1770s, he thought. There was a two-year difference in the date the Netherlands entered the War of the Revolution. Some more subtle changes as well; the British seemed to have done slightly better throughout the Revolution here than they had in the history he learned. *Wait a minute. Ferguson.*

Major Patrick Ferguson, according to the printout, had been killed in the British defeat at the battle of King's Mountain in 1779. He called up memory: a Major—later General—Patrick Ferguson had *won* the battle of King's Mountain in 1779. He'd also invented the first workable breech-loading rifle; the Loyalist exiles who founded the Domination-to-Be in southern Africa had used it on the natives there, immortalized it as the Gun That Broke the Tribes. Here, breechloaders hadn't come into common use for seventy years after that.

"Ahh," he said, leafing through the sheaves of printout again.

Here on Earth/2, Ferguson had been badly wounded during the American retreat from Long Island, in 1776; the unit equipped with his new rifle had been broken up. In Earth/1's history, he'd been *slightly* wounded and his riflemen had continued to be a thorn in the American side. In Ken's history, France *and* the Dutch had entered the war against the British in 1779. Here, the Dutch had stayed neutral until 1781. In Earth/1's history, the British had seized the Cape Colony, and used it to resettle the Loyalists and Hessians after the surrender at Yorktown in 1781. Over a hundred thousand of them, joined a little later by the French refugees from the Negro uprising in Santo Domingo.

That had been the seedbed of the Domination—a slave-based caste society of ferocious aggressiveness spreading out over southern Africa in the next generation.

On Earth/2, the Cape remained Dutch for another two generations, and never received the mass migration that started it on the road to world power. Eventually the natives took it over again. The great gold and diamond mines stayed undiscovered for a full century, until the 1880s; in his world they'd been exploited from the 1790s, and financed the industrialization of Africa.

Fascinating. The changes broadened out from there.

It was a more innocent world than his; poorer, more troubled in some respects, backward technologically, but without the monstrous weight of victorious totalitarianism that had crushed his ancestors at the end of the twentieth century.

"And it's up to me to preserve it," he said softly.

The working desk held a printout—flat, in 2-D—of his family back on Samothrace, standing in front of the ranchhouse. Mother, Dad, his sisters, the low sprawling stabilized-adobe structure his ancestor had built when men first came to the Alpha Centauri system, bringing the inheritance of humanity and liberty. He would never see them again; that was something you had to get used to, in the interstellar service—it might change with the molehole technology, but he'd been raised to think in sublight terms. He'd left them to protect them, a parting as final as death.

There was a world of people like them here, though.

Direct attack on the drakensis in its nesting site, he asked.

probability of detection from earth/1 negligible, the machine said, **probability of mission success imponderable due to random factors.**

He leaned back in the swivel chair. *Yes*, he decided. The snake would be getting stronger all the time. It was designed to dominate, to rule, to work through others. The longer he waited, the more layers of innocent—or at least unknowing—true-humans he'd have to wade through to get to it.

It was probably monitoring air traffic. An ocean approach, though . . .

And he'd keep trying the financial people. Maybe one of them would listen to him, in the end.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Florence was a shock, Gwen decided. Mainly because so much was the *same*. The Eurasian War of her 1940s had killed a tenth of humankind and left most of northern Europe beaten flat, to be rebuilt in the conqueror's fashion. Italy had been overrun swiftly and with minimal combat, though. Her grandparents had settled in the country near here in 1946; her human mother was born there in 1954. Gwen had been cloned and implanted in a clinic in Florence, in the 1970s.

"Not far from right . . . here," she mused, shouldering through the crowds.

Still the same low sienna-colored skyline of tile roofs. The white-ribbed red dome of the Cathedral, with Giotto's bell tower; still a church, here. The Palazzo Vecchio, *not* a Security Directorate regional headquarters, here. The same narrow streets. And yet everything so *different* from the city of her youth. Hotter, crowded. Far too many of the absurd stinking ground vehicles; they were monstrosities even in the Americas, insane in this medieval street pattern. Noisy, gabbling, stinking feral humans everywhere, invading her sphere of social space, refusing to give way, some of them even daring to *touch* her. At first it was all she could do not to lash out, forcing her mind to clamp down on her glands. The air was better than New York's, but that was all you could say for it.

"I don't like what they've done with my home," she whispered subvocally.

That was illogical; the Domination's District of Tuscany had never existed here. The Ingolfsson plantation was a village called Radda, and had never known her family's footsteps. In fact, the Ingolfsson who'd founded the line had probably died in Iceland in 1784, rather than arriving in the proto-Domination as a refugee settler.

This mockery of her birthplace still put a subliminal growl in her throat. It might have been better to meet the scientist in Berlin.

No point in delaying. The Locanda Scoti was a moderately good *pensioni* not far from the Duomo, marked only by a plaque marked *P. Scoti*, right across from the Strozzi Palace. Inside was dark and quiet, the furnishings mostly eighteenth century. The staff looked at her with suspicion—she was in hiker's gear, and holding a knapsack—but she ignored them and took the stairs with a quick springy stride.

"Herr Doktor Mueller?" she said, knocking at the door.

There was a single human male inside: middle-aged and not too healthy, she could tell that from the scent and the sounds of breathing and heartbeat. Also the smell of alcohol, some potato distillate.

"Frau Ingolfsson?"

"*Ja.*"

She'd picked up modern German in preparation. It was easier than adjusting to this history's version of Italian, fewer childhood memories to overwrite.

The door opened a crack She pushed it wider, gently but irresistibly, and walked in. The man closed it hastily; within was dark, far too dark to be comfortable for human-norm vision. Papers were scattered over a table, and the bottle of . . . *schnapps*, the label said. She picked it up and drank down six or seven solid swallows. Not bad, if you wanted colorless, tasteless alcohol distilled from root vegetables. Gwen twitched the curtains open. Friedrich Mueller threw a hand up. She waited until the human had stopped blinking and squinting, then squeezed her hand. The thick glass broke with a spatter of liquid and fragments. Then she held the hand before his face.

The German watched silently, blinking, as the cuts closed and blood clotted with inhuman speed. Then she gripped his wrist, put her other hand on his shoulder and lifted, lifted until he was clear of the floor, waited for an instant and then set him down again. After a moment he slumped into a chair and stared at her, cleaning his glasses on his tie and staring at her. She could hear his heart leap, then steady a little erratically.

"I hope you're satisfied," she said. "I could tie that poker in knots, if you wish."

"No," he said slowly. His hand reached for the spot the bottle had occupied, then sank down. "I . . . I was fully convinced by the, the documents and so forth. Impossible to doubt such sums of money as well, and the papers were convincing . . . but this, this is a bit of a shock to me still, you will understand."

Odd creatures, humans, she thought once again. *To believe, and yet not believe.*

"I understand completely," she said soothingly, sitting down across the table from him.

"Another world," he whispered, taking up some of the papers. Among them was X-ray film.

Dr. Friedrich Mueller looked at the transparency. His hands shook and his face shone with lust; not for the woman across the table from him, but for what the film represented.

"These bones . . . they look as if they have *flanges* on them," he said.

"That's effectively what they are," Gwen said.

"Muscle attachments, I suppose," Mueller mumbled to himself. "Very broad area of attachment . . . but wouldn't the leverage be too much structurally?"

"The bone density is higher, as well as being stronger per unit of weight," Gwen said. "That's one reason I'm heavier. Also the muscle tissue itself is different, more fibers; the hemoglobin has a higher oxygen-transport capacity."

"It would have to, even with the added capacity from the larger heart and lungs." tie nodded, and

shuffled through the stack. "This organ, below the lungs, what is it?"

"Auxiliary heart, on standby unless the main is damaged. It keeps the circulation going on a minimal level until the primary organ regenerates."

"Full regeneration?" The German scientist's eyebrows rose. "Of an entire organ?"

"Limbs, organs, nerve and bone," Gwen said cheerfully. "Let's get something better than that swill you were drinking."

She picked up the phone. "A bottle of white and a selection of *antipasti*, please. That'll be cash." They fell silent until the maid had brought it.

"Regenerate unless I'm killed instantly," Gwen went on. "Blowing off enough of my body-mass would do that, or destroying enough of the brain, or cutting my throat back to the neckbone, something of that order." He nodded again, reverently, and returned to his study of the transparencies. "Some of this hardly looks like biological systems at all," he said. "This webbing under the subcutaneous layer . . ."

"That's armor," Gwen said. "It's grown there as single-molecule chains of organo-metallic compounds by a . . . call it a synthetic virus. Damned uncomfortable, while it's being done. There are a number of, hmmm, we call them biomods, done that way."

The German looked up. "Logical," he said. "I should think a good deal of your technology works so, at a molecular-mechanical level."

"Or atomic. Down there, there isn't all that much distinction between a machine and an organism," she said. "It's all chemistry if you get small enough. Or even physics."

He laid his hands on the table and looked at them. "I have spent my entire life in futility, it would seem," he sighed.

"Scarcely," Gwen said with a chuckle, picking an olive out of a bowl. She savored the rich salt-oil taste, crunching the pit for the extra trace of bitterness. Then she went on:

"You could scarcely know someone with my database was going to show up. For that matter, your species is more scientifically creative than mine."

Mueller looked up sharply. "How so?"

"We modified ourselves neurologically before we fully understood the brain-mind interface," she said. "For that matter, we *don't fully* understand it yet. *Drakensis* seem to have less capacity for . . . intuitive leaps than you do, although we've got more g-factor intelligence. Perhaps we oversimplified while trying to eliminate some redundancies."

Mueller frowned. "I am surprised. I would have expected the neural functions to be a thoroughly solved problem—have you not true artificial intelligences?"

"Only by virtually copying brains; and then what you get is a brain in a box, and it's easier to breed them—we can use direct data-transfer with our own minds anyway if we need to link to machinery. In any case, it turns out to be impossible to be significantly more intelligent than the upper curve of the human range."

Mueller rubbed his fingers together. "You cannot increase the computational functions?"

"Yes, but that's irrelevant. You people here are still thinking of brains as organic computers made of neurons, and that's far too coarse a level of metaphor. For one thing, neurons turn out to be only signalling devices. The real information processing in the brain takes place in smaller structures you're just beginning to discover, and at a quantum level. It's non-algorithmic as well. In your terms, the brain isn't a Turing machine."

She extended a hand. "Do we have an agreement, then, Doctor Mueller?"

He took it in his. He was an ugly specimen, flabby and pale and sour-smelling, but the look of worship on his face made it almost agreeable.

"How could I not, and pass up a chance at such information?" he said. "The only thing which puzzles me is why you need the services of . . . of a witchdoctor like me."

"What you know isn't *wrong*, just incomplete," Gwen explained. She crunched a few more olives. "And you will be invaluable integrating my knowledge inconspicuously with the current technostructure here."

"For a while," the German said, his lips tightening.

"The current order hasn't, ah, fully utilized your talents, I know," Gwen said.

Red spots appeared on Mueller's cheeks. "I have been hounded—persecuted—myself and my family . . ." He controlled his breathing.

He'd also been quite important in the scientific bureaucracy before the fall of the East German state. Afterward, trial and unemployment, and an abrupt drop in status and income.

"You'll have nothing to complain of in my service," Gwen said.

"Yes, I would not expect the vulgarity, the penny-pinching of capitalists from a world so advanced."

"Well, we're certainly not capitalistic," Gwen said with a slight smile. "We're not exactly *true communism* either, you understand."

Mueller shrugged and cleaned his glasses again. "That particular faith I have lost some years ago," he said. "A stable order that appreciates my capacities and rewards me fairly, that is all I ask."

"You can expect that," Gwen said sincerely. "You can relocate immediately?"

"As soon as I arrange certain matters with my family," he replied.

Gwen nodded. "There's a house ready and waiting," she said.

"I can hardly wait to begin work," Mueller said, looking down at the sheets of transparent plastic. "The possibilities!"

Gwen looked out over the world.

"Exactly."

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Alice Wayne sat in the waiting room and tried not to shift nervously. After a moment she stood and looked at herself again in the mirror. Nice sensible business suit, blond hair caught back with a clasp. Very light makeup. Emphasize the fresh-faced look, which her Anglo-Irish genes did anyway; you had to play the hand you were dealt. She looked a little younger than twenty-five, which was unfortunate, but what could you do? It was the curse of a snub nose and freckles. Practice a level-eyed look, friendly but businesslike.

She looked around the room; expensive offices, in the best part of Nassau. Leather furniture, and a window overlooking Delancy Street; not quite the center of town, but close. A faint ozone tang of computers, although the only one in sight had been on the receptionist's desk. The waiting room had a long table and prints on the wall, a few discreet magazines in a hardwood rack.

Was it worth the bother of answering the ad? she thought. Then: *I'm not going back to Sydney with my tail between my legs. Not yet.*

"Miss Wayne?" the receptionist asked. She had a Latin American accent. Alice jumped slightly. "This way. They'll see you now."

Alice picked up her attache case and followed her into another room. This one had windows giving onto a balcony, and a working desk in one corner with terminal and all the trimmings. A woman and a man were waiting for her behind a table, with a seat for her on the other side.

The quasi-famous Gwendolyn Ingolfsson. She looked younger than Alice expected, no more than thirty, although she had the sort of sculpted face that is called ageless and does look much the same between the twenties and late middle age. *Natural redhead, naturally slim, filthy rich*, Alice thought. *The sort you hope is a bitch so you won't feel guilty hating her.* Something a little disturbing about the face, foxlike or catlike.

Gwen smiled slightly, an odd closed curve of the lips. Alice had the sudden feeling that the green eyes were looking right through her, and felt herself flush. *Another* drawback to having ancestors from a small foggy island where pink skins were an advantage.

Tom Cairstens. Lawyer, with California written all over him. Casual suit, outdoors tan, not quite as smooth-looking as you'd expect, an undertone of seriousness. *Quite ducky, actually. Not bad at all.*

"Thank you, Dolores. Would you like coffee or tea, Ms. Wayne?" the American asked.

"No thank you." *Damn.* She could tell when a man was impressed with her looks, and he wasn't. *Pity if he's queer.* Why were so many of the best-looking men gay?

"Well." He opened a folder; Alice recognized her resume, and swallowed dryly. "First—"

The inquisition was relentless. Cairstens did the talking; the owner of IngolfTech sat silent, sipping fruit juice through a straw. When the lawyer was finished, Alice could feel herself sweating. She looked up, startled to see how far the shadows had moved.

Cairstens looked at his employer. "Seems suitable," he said. "Of course, so do many of the others."



"I'll take it from here, Tom," she said softly. Her voice was a husky purr, not quite like anything Alice had heard before, accented in a way she couldn't place.

"Now, Ms. Wayne," she said, when the man had left. "Let me summarize. You've got a two-year course in business accounting and administration from a not-very-distinguished institution in Australia. Moderate competence with financial software. Undergraduate degree in life sciences. You moved to Houston, and met—became intimate with—one Carlos Menem. He ran a, shall we say, irregular but profitable air-freight business in which you acted as his assistant and accountant. He had a disagreement with some gentlemen from Cali, Colombia. They repossessed the assets after Mr. Menem's . . . departure. Your green card for the U.S. is no longer valid, your work permit for the Bahamas is running out, and you have no money. Am I correct? Please be frank."

Alice nodded, gripping the arms of her chair and struggling to keep the fear from her face. *Is this it?* No, the Cali boys weren't so indirect. If they wanted her dead, they'd have given her what Carlos got, three bullets in the back of the head. She'd found him slumped over his desk . . . .

"Yes," she said.

"Good. Now, IngolfTech has incorporated here in the Bahamas because the taxes are low and the government . . . not inquisitive about cash flows. You understand?"

"Perfectly, ma'am."

And they want someone who won't talk. It wasn't the sort of job qualification she'd dreamed about back when she was a student, but if it worked, she wouldn't object. *Also someone without local family or ties.* Bloody hell. She might never get an honest job again. On the other hand, honest jobs didn't pay very well.

"I need several executive assistants—not glorified secretaries, real assistants. The workload will be brutal and the holidays nonexistent."

Alice nodded, putting an eager smile on her face. That was about par for the course, in a startup firm. Laziness had never been one of her faults.

"We'll take care of the work permit and start you at fifty thousand a year, American—after taxes, deposited where you please. Plus a stock option that ought to be worth considerably more, in time. Full medical coverage, housing and car provided."

Alice choked and coughed to cover it. *Fifty thousand! After taxes! Stock option!*

"Who do I have to kill?" she blurted. Then, horrified: "I mean—" *For that sort of money, I would kill somebody! I think.*

For the first time, Gwen smiled. She rested her elbows on the table and her chin on linked fingers. "I like your attitude," she said cheerfully. "Now—"

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Gwen raised the ankles higher, holding the legs slightly apart so they wouldn't be bruised in the struggle. The dark water frothed, clear enough to her but ink-black to a human beneath the moonless sky.

Chest-deep in the sea there was no way for the one held this way to bend enough to get their mouth out of the water. The flailing weight rocked her a little, and she dug her toes into the coarse gritty sand; she was more than strong enough to hold, but she weighed less than two hundred pounds, only a little more than her victim. The struggles slowed, ceased. She held on for a minute longer to be sure, then let the legs fall. The body began to sink, lungs filled with water; she pushed it outward, with the ebbing tide, swimming powerfully. After ten minutes she released it, turned back and stroked easily for the shore.

Tom was waiting on the beach, holding out a towel. She took it and began to dry herself off, looking up at the lights of the house a few kilometers down the coast.

"I wish we didn't have to do that," he said somberly.

Gwen pulled on her tunic—it was a dress, actually, but much like the tunics that were day-wear back home. "I do too; Pat was useful. But she just couldn't take the truth; a mistake on my part."

And a good thing she'd had all outgoing traffic monitored. Three long-distance calls to newspapers; none of them past the hints and innuendo stage, thankfully. *My employer is an alien monster from another dimension* wasn't the sort of thing you could say directly to any paper anyone would listen to. They'd assume she was some sort of flake and forget the whole matter.

Tom nodded. "Oh, it was necessary; one life is nothing beside the cause . . . but . . ." He shrugged. "I still regret it."

They turned up the sand, above the line of tide-wrack, under the clacking fronds of the coconut palms. Gwen put her arm around the man's waist to guide him through the night. The heat of his body cast a ghost-pale shadow across the flat silvery reflection of the beach; she could see the warmth of lesser lives scuttling in the undergrowth, and hear the muted clicking of beach crabs. In the house, one of the guards worked the action of his weapon, a faint *chick-chock* across the thousands of meters. The wind was from there; she could smell the individual scents of a dozen humans, the three Doberman guard dogs, wet cement from the construction, cooking, smoke, cooling metal in the vehicles.

She looked up at the multicolored tapestry of ten thousand stars. Thermals were clearer at night, the rising heat of the day fading up into the cool of the upper sky. *Someday*. That was another thing she missed: seeing the stars from beyond atmosphere.

"No sense in repining."

"And no problems from the police," he added. "Not when Captain Lowe's second cousin is in charge." After a moment: "Do you think Lowe will stay bought?"

"He'll have to. It works both ways: 'They're crooks, and here's the payoff they gave me, to prove it' isn't a very practical threat. And we have enough on him, now, to take him down three times over if he tried anything. Not that he will. The parable of the goose that laid the golden eggs is well within his capacities."

"Anyway, there won't be any marks on the body even if the sharks don't get it," Tom said. "We'll report her missing tomorrow."

He sighed. "Who'll replace Pat?"

"Alice Wayne, I think."

She could sense his frown. He didn't like the Australian much.

"She's unprincipled."

"True, but she's also very greedy. And tough, although not too tough to intimidate. It's a useful mixture; we have to work with what's available. I've had her under observation for nearly a year now, after all."

Another sigh. "True, as you put it."

Gwen tightened her grip. "I'll tell her while you're away in California," she said. "By the time you're back, I'll be able to judge how well she's adjusting." She smiled in the darkness. "Come on up to my suite, and we'll say goodbye properly."

The smile grew broader as she heard his heart leap.

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"Fascinating," Mueller said, staring at the screen.

It was showing output from the scanning/tunneling electron microscope.

"Fascinating how *selective* the replacement is. As if the carrier *knew* which section of the DNA strand to travel to."

"Well, it's more a matter of mechanical fit," Gwen said. "Lucky we had the basic transposer model in my bloodstream; that cut five or six years off the development schedule. I wasn't sure they were still active."

Mueller looked up at her, raising his brows.

"From my last retrofit," she said. "Those can take a decade or more; thank the gods I've only had to go through it three times. You have no idea how uncomfortable a whole-organism makeover can be. The algae should be ready, then?"

"It should be," Mueller said cautiously. "I'd like to run a series of tests to make doubly sure. I realize this isn't really *experimental*, of course."

"It is when done on this equipment," she said. "By all means, with failsafes and controls. Keep me posted."

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"It'll cost at least twelve million," Alice said.

Gwen walked past her and stepped out to the veranda. The room was large and pale-colored, full of shadow and light through the tall shuttered french doors, spilling across tile and blond wood and the rattan furniture. Through one that was half-open she could see the terrace and part of the pool, and the slope of lawn down to the palm-fringed beach. The twin-engine seaplane bobbed at the dock there, near the boat; beyond a curve of sail showed against the clear green waters off Andros Island. The staff were still unloading the baggage compartment of the floatplane.

Alice glanced quickly down again, fighting to control her breathing. *You're not in any danger*, she told

herself. Pat had been stupid, like Carlos—and both of them had gotten the same reward for it. Nobody could kill you deader than dead—a superhuman time-traveler or the boys from Cali, it was all the same.

Once you knew, it explained a lot of things about Gwen. *I'm surprised how fast it went down*, she thought. Evidently her gut had believed before her head was informed. It was only a week, and she could sleep without pills again.

"Property in that part of Manhattan's still extremely expensive, ma'am," she went on. "Despite the crash."

"We need that warehouse," Gwen said. "Send the retainer." Without turning, she went on: "What's bothering you, Alice?"

One of the house staff wheeled in a covered lunch tray and then set it out: conch soup and grilled marlin steak and salads. Gwen thanked her in fluent Haitian Creole patois; all the house domestics were from Haiti. The maid smiled whitely and bobbed her head before taking the trolley out.

The staff were all devoted to Gwendolyn, Alice knew. *Why not?* She got them work permits here in the Bahamas, which was like a ticket to heaven compared to their impoverished, violence-plagued homeland; she helped with their families, paid top wages and was unfailingly polite, in a rather distant, lordly way.

They don't know what she is. *God, she scares me.*

"That's a logical response," Gwen said calmly, "I'm a predator, after all, and you're the species I was designed to hunt."

Alice started violently and felt real fear clutch at her stomach. *Can she —*

"No." Gwen smiled, turning from the window. "I can't read your mind. But I can hear anything you subvocalize, and I can smell your emotions, and I can read your body language like a book. Do come have some of this, it's very good. Anyway, there's no need to be *too* frightened. You're mine, now, so I'm obliged to protect you."

Alice sat down across the table. Gwen went on: "Just remember that you're transparent as glass. You can't deceive me any more than you could outwrestle me. Try to lie and you'll make me angry, and believe me, you don't want that."

I wish she hadn't told me.

"It was you or Sally or Edgar, and I do need an executive assistant who knows. Sally's not flexible enough, and Edgar doesn't smell quite right."

She hadn't felt hungry, but the smell of the food made her pick up the fork. As she leaned forward to spear a chunk of the marlin, she smelled something else. Gwen was as fastidious as a cat about cleanliness, but close to there was something different about the faint smell of her sweat, something you only noticed because of the contrast to what you expected. A very slight muskiness. It was oddly soothing, and she felt her heartbeat slow.

The marlin was delicious. If you were a member of the Household you lived like royalty, nothing but the best.

God. And the money's so good. Double pay with her promotion to the inner circle.

Tom Cairstens came in, grinning. He tossed a folder down beside the plates on the table. Gwen laid aside her fork and picked it up, giving it her quick three-second-per-page scan.

"Home is the hunter, home from the hills," the lawyer said. "Hills of Hollywood, at least. That's their offer, basically—but I think they'll go to twenty million and fifteen percent, net, if we wait a little or drop a hint about MGA. Their people have finished examining the holographic projector and they're drooling. It's our biggest deal so far."

"Excellent, Tom," Gwen said. "Remember, though, this is our first non-industrial product, our first direct-to-consumer. We don't want too much publicity, and it's worth money to avoid it; IngolfTech isn't going to be the subject of articles in *Fortune* if I can help it. Also, don't pressure them to front-end it. The cash is a bagatelle; the real money from this will be in the licensing, and we're not in a hurry."

He nodded and inclined his head slightly to Alice.

"Yes, she's been briefed. No problems."

"Welcome to the Household," he said to her. "Marvelous, isn't it?"

Alice made herself smile back. *Oh, God.* "I'm . . . still taking it in, sir."

"Tom."

"Tom. It's, ah, it's a wonderful opportunity, Tom."

The lawyer walked over to Gwen's workstation and stared at the image on the screen. Or half-stared, at least. The other half of his attention was on Gwen. Alice shuddered slightly; she didn't know *why*, but when Gwendolyn Ingolfsson was in the room it was impossible *not* to focus on her, even if you didn't know the truth. Thomas Cairstens was normally a worldly man, used to moving in the monied glamour of the West Coast elite, not easily impressed. The look of sandbaggged awe on his face made Alice shiver again.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing at the screen.

"A fusion reactor," Gwen replied. "Early model. I'm working on adapting it, but it's slow going. This"—she pointed her fork at the workstation; it was linked to the new massively-parallel mainframe—"is about as much use as an abacus. Construction? It's going to be like trying to build a megawatt laser in a blacksmith's forge."

"Everything here must seem very backward," he said humbly.

Gwen shrugged. "The electronics are surprisingly capable, for 1997. Very different, though. We used more analog technology, and we never had all this open architecture—Security would have had kittens at the thought. It was all ROM, read-only memory, for the compinsets, the programs. Still is, come to that."

"Will we need it?" he asked, nodding to the reactor design.

"Oh, certainly. The power requirements can't be met from any sort of capacitor, and those would be too conspicuous in New York anyway."

"A private power station won't?"

"It's not very large—about the size of a two-story house, according to my best estimate. I'll discuss the Paramount proposals with you further at dinner."

He nodded; that was dismissal. Then he turned back for a moment: "Ma'am . . . what's Los Angeles like in your world?"

"Los Angeles?" she said. "There's no city there. Mostly prairie with live oaks, along the coast. Some desert inland, mountain forests, chaparral. Good grizzly country. The settlements are small, some orchards and fields in the more favored spots. I've got a property there, near La Jolla. Wonderful spot for swimming and sailing, and I raise horses."

He shook his head in wonder. "I can't wait until we get the Project rolling. We've dreamed of utopia all these years, and we're finally going to *get* it. Paradise . . ."

Alice moistened her mouth, watching him leave. "He's crazy, isn't he?" she said.

Gwen shook her head. "Just very focused. It's true we'll clean this planet up; we don't shit in our bedrooms, and we put the industry out in space where it belongs. Tom loves redwoods and whales and snail darters . . . Hence, paradise."

She turned, and Alice felt the full impact of the green-eyed stare. In private, with the inner circle, she didn't bother to tone it down.

"It's going to be hell, isn't it?" Alice said quietly, hearing her own Australian accent grow stronger. Images ran through her mind: Nagasaki, the newsreels of Buchenwald, history classes. "Like us and the abos, only worse."

"Concentration camps, you mean? Plagues?" She shook her head indulgently. "No, you can't hurt us, so we won't use extreme measures. We'll conquer you, then domesticate you."

It'll be a long time and the Project may not work. And maybe it won't be so bad.

"You said that the molehole might not work," Alice said. "What then?"

"Then I'll take the planet myself," Gwen said coolly, looking out the window and resting her chin on a palm. "That'd be more difficult, but an interesting challenge, in a way."

And there's only one of her here, Alice thought. *And . . . it's too late for second thoughts, anyway. Even if they all come through, they couldn't be worse than Hitler or Stalin or that awful thing in Cambodia.*

"We'll only kill the ones who resist," Gwen confirmed. "I expect to be put in charge here, and the sky will be the limit for my administrative Household. It really will be a Utopia, of sorts, for the rest. No more wars or terrorism, no more sickness or poverty or famine, no more environmental problems. A highly evolved parasite sees that the host body stays fit; and we're nothing if not highly evolved."

"People will still fight," Alice said. "Some will."

Gwen nodded. "That's humans for you. Of course, they'll only *be* humans in the first generation or so, and we *drakensis* are immortal. We're good at waiting."

Alice paused with the fork halfway to her mouth. Gwen poured more of the chilled white wine from the carafe.

"Not human?" Alice said. The fear welled up a little, then sank.

"No, *Homo sapiens sapiens* is far too risky to have around in large numbers. We'll use a tailored paravirus to alter your heredity to *Homo servus*. Don't worry, it's not a big change, much closer to human than I am. Some neurological alterations, the endocrine system, hormones, the vomeronasal organ. Clean up all the hereditary defects at the same time, cancer, obesity, Alzheimer's disease, and so forth. *Servus* are still people, they've got personalities and thoughts, they just aren't aggressive or rebellious—or not much. It's not like the old days before the change to the New Race, whips and torture and that sort of thing. Not necessary. Why, these days a lot of the *servus* aren't even personally owned, they can even have property, to a certain extent."

She smiled nostalgically. "Very sweet people, actually, and I miss them."

Alice relaxed again. *Odd. I never get as worried when she's around, even though she scares the shit out of me.* If Gwendolyn was typical, they didn't seem cruel, at least. Beautiful, terrifying, awesome, but not sadistic.

"You can tell if *I'm* lying," Alice said. "What am I supposed to do?"

Gwen moved; so swiftly that Alice had no time to jerk away. Suddenly her face was inches from the Australian's.

"Trust me," she said. Alice swallowed and nodded, shuddering slightly as the others eyes gripped hers and held them.

After a moment Gwen returned to her seat: "What's on the agenda?"

"Primary Belway Securities. They're the logical choice for a public offering—did I say something?"

Gwen was grinning to herself. "No, no," she said. "I've had a . . . previous contact with the firm. Go ahead."

"We should sound them out, and set up a preliminary meeting in a few months. Shall I go ahead with it? And where would you like it set up, in New York or Nassau or . . . ?"

"I think we'll have them over here," Gwen said. "A more controlled environment; it'll put us at an advantage—and with investment bankers, you need it. We'll get the hierarchies squared away before we transfer the proceedings to New York." She wrinkled her nose. "Race Spirit, but that place stinks. How you humans manage to breathe in a fog of burnt hydrocarbons and sewage is beyond me."

The servant came and removed the tray, leaving a plate of pastries and a coffee service. Alice looked on in frank envy as Gwen ate; she knew it took six or seven thousand calories a day to maintain the Draka's supercharged metabolism, but it was still aggravating.

Gwen saw her glance. "There's a pill we had, back in our late 1990s," she said. "Metaboline. It adjusted

the basal metabolism to allow humans any level of calorie intake. I'll have some run up."

Alice was smiling as she left.

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"She seems to be working out well," Tom said. He picked a wedge of tomato out of the salad and ate it.

Gwen nodded. "You caught all that?"

"The monitor system is working fine." He glanced out the door after the Australian. "Have you, ah . . . ?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Not yet, I don't want to stress her too heavily. In a day or two."

He shook his head, grinning in admiration. "How do you do it? I'd have sworn she was straight, and I'm not—or not very."

Gwen was paging through the report again. She spoke without looking up:

"Ah, well, both behaviors are latent in any individual human; there's a whole complex of genes that determine which is dominant and to what degree, and they interact with environmental factors at triggering stages in the development process. It's a spectrum, not a binary opposition, even in humans; both are always active in a *drakensis*. Anyway, my pheromones are panspecific—they fill all the receptors in your vomeronasal organ. Think of it as fooling your hypothalamus and limbic system. It doesn't work on all humans, but it will on most. On Alice, certainly; I can scent it, although she doesn't know it yet."

"I won't quarrel with the results," he said. "It seems to take more than one of us to keep up with you."

Her glance lingered on him, and she saw him flush and a light sweat break out across his brow.

"True," she said. "That's a byproduct of the aggression reflex, hormonal. I don't produce much estrogen unless I decide to ovulate; there's another set of hormones—they're somewhat similar in structure to the androgens in your human system—that controls secondary sexual functions in *drakensis*, with only minor differences between the genders . . . . It's complex."

He swallowed and shifted. Gwen listened to his heartbeat increase and inhaled to take his scent.

"The bankers are coming?" he said, changing the subject.

"Yes, in a few months. It's the only way to raise the operating capital we'll need. There shouldn't be any basic difficulties; from their point of view we're a very good prospect for a public stock offering, so we should be ready to get down to serious negotiations by the winter. I want everything very tight by then, Tom. No mistakes, nothing to disturb them. We'll be moving the main locus of our operations to New York, and there'll be far less margin for errors and coverups."

She rose and began to undress. "As for right now . . . take your clothes off, Tom." He smiled and obeyed.

"Your wish is my command." Gwen nodded.



"And kneel to me," she said, putting her palms behind her on the table and leaning her weight on them.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Jennifer Feinberg opened the door of her apartment and put an automatic foot out to block the cat.

"You wouldn't like it out there," she said, swinging it closed and snicking home the multiple locks. "I wish *I* could stay home."

She dumped her attache case on the table, walked into the kitchen to put the water on for tea, and hit the play button on the answering machine.

"Jennifer, this is your mother—"

"Oh, puh- *leez*," she groaned, fast-forwarding.

"Miss Feinberg, I have to speak with you. Could you—"

She hit the *stop* button with a small scream of fear, closing her eyes as the machine rattled on the sofa-side table. *Control your breathing*, she told herself. Her hands were still shaking as she punched the number the policeman had given her into the phone.

"Carmaggio," a voice said.

"This is Feinberg," she managed to say, looking around her apartment.

The heavy December rain was streaking down the windows, and she hadn't had time to turn on the lights. She was sweating under her outdoor coat. The studio smelled of sachet and tea and, very faintly, of cat. It was *home*, but right then it felt very lonely.

"Yes, Ms. Feinberg?" Trained patience on the other end of the line.

"I'm, ah, sorry for calling you so late." *God, that's inane*. It was seven-thirty, and neither of them worked regular hours. "But the same man called me here at home."

"What did he say?"

"The same *thing*, that he has to talk to me about Steven! Look, if he has my home number, he has my *address*. He knows where I *live*."

"We're pretty sure this isn't the perpetrator in the Fischer case, Ms. Feinberg," the detective said soothingly. "But it might be an important lead."

"So *find* him!" she said, and hung up.

Thank God I'm leaving the country, she thought. Three years and she'd *nearly* forgotten the murder. Then someone had to start phoning and reminding her of it, God.

For a few minutes she slumped, then sighed and got up to take off her coat and pour milk in the cat's bowl. She drew the curtains and turned on the CD player: *La Traviata*.

"I should put on an exercise tape," she told herself.

She put her fingers on her stomach and looked at herself in the window. *That's not fat for a woman my age*. Damn all models, anyway. They were mutants, and they unloaded a whole bargeload of guilt on normal people. She was only thirty-four.

The tea was soothing. She touched the answering machine again: "Jennifer, this is your—"

A little of the hot liquid spilled on her fingers as she zipped past the second message from her mother. *Still trying to set me up with accountants*. Marrying her mother had been the only really big mistake of her father's life. The next message was from the office—they must have sent it while she was in the middle of her commute. So much for office hours.

"This is Marlene, Jennifer." The managing director's executive assistant. She should be calling her Ms. Feinberg, but Jennifer didn't like to make a fuss about it. "The boss wants the last stuff on IngolfTech ready by Friday morning."

Oh, and why not forty days of rain while he's at it? There went her evenings for the week.

"Jenny, it's Louisa. Are we still on for lunch Wednesday?"

Do I really want to listen to my best friend's man troubles? Then again, it would be a chance to complain about the sexist pig of a managing director, the crank calls, and the fact that she *didn't* have any man problems right now.

"Okay, lunch with Louisa," she mumbled to herself.

"Ms. Feinberg, you're in danger and the police can't—"

"SHUT UP!" she screamed. The cat took off across the apartment in a tawny blur, and she hit the answering machine hard enough to make her hand hurt. "*Leave me alone!*"

The trip to the Bahamas couldn't come soon enough for her.

Her fingers shook as she punched the detective's number again.

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Government House in Nassau reminded Gwen a little of old buildings in out-of-the-way corners of the Domination: a large square building of pink-stuccoed stone, with a portico on the front supported by four tall pillars. Steps of black and white stone ran down between cast-iron lampstands, ending in a marble statue of Christopher Columbus. Palm and cypress trees gave inadequate shade, and police in white colonial-looking uniforms were directing a heavy foot-traffic of tourists, bureaucrats, and visitors. Gwen stood quietly, scanning the crowds with a steady back-and-forth motion that automatically eliminated

those outside the search parameters.

"Ah," she said. "There they are." Upwind, and she could scent the metal and gun oil of the weapons under their coats. A tang of apprehension from the men, wary but determined. "Punctual."

"What do they want, really?" Dolores asked nervously.

"What we've got, essentially," Gwen replied.

Tom looked at his watch. "At least they didn't keep insisting on having the meeting on American territory."

Gwen nodded. "They're hungry. If we give them some of what they want—and dangle the rest—they'll jump through hoops. Just remember your briefings, and keep calm."

She led her party down the stairs to the statue. The two American agents stood to meet her. Tom looked them over rapidly.

"*Strongarm specialists*," he said subvocally. "*Bad sign*."

"Not necessarily," she replied. "They *do* have that little affray in the warehouse to worry about. It's natural to take precautions."

"John Andrews," the human said, when they stood face to face. "For the United States government."

"Gwendolyn Ingolfsson," she replied. "For IngolfTech." *And the Domination of the Draka*.

He had quite good control, for a human, Gwen decided. He probably used that smile as part of it, immobilizing the small muscles around the mouth and eyes. She took his scent: fear, slight but definite. Not directed at her, so much, as at . . . *ah. He must be afraid of what he thinks I represent*. Gwen was dressed to throw the two Americans off-balance; Italian white-cotton tropical dress with a narrow gold belt, high-strap sandals, sunglasses, a broad straw hat tied with a silken handkerchief dangling in one hand.

"Well, shall we do that lunch thing?" she asked.

Tom strangled a chuckle, and Alice didn't bother. Andrews's answering expression looked painted-on for an instant, then puzzled.

Good, Gwen thought. If the human didn't know what was going on, he'd fall back on pre-scripted versions of what *must* be happening.

The entrance to Greycliff was bustling, well-dressed parties arriving under the pillars of the veranda. She'd chosen it with malice aforethought; it was just across West Hill Street from Government House, and she knew the two American agents would spot the plainclothesmen from the Nassau police hovering in the background. That would probably keep them from trying anything drastic; the great powers of this world were absurdly solicitous of the little fish, by the standards of the history she'd learned and lived. She smiled graciously as they went through the wrought-iron gate in the whitewashed stone wall.

"My associate, Thomas Cairstens," she introduced. "My executive assistant, Alice Wayne; and Dolores Pastrana, personal secretary to the board."

Handshakes all around, and what the computer probe she'd launched told her were the agent's real names. Oddly incomplete files, but possibly the humans were keeping the important bits on hardcopy.

"Shall we go in?"

The maître d'hotel and his assistants were all attention; she and the rest of the IngolfTech staff from the Nassau headquarters were regulars, and exceedingly generous tippers, and she'd sent gifts around at Christmas and Easter. *All part of the process.*

Bright sunlight leaked through the louvered shutters; there was a pleasant hum of conversation and the scent of food. Gwen left the conversation to her humans for the first few minutes, judging and analyzing. Andrews was the dominant of the pair, that was plain. He was looking at her more frequently, puzzled, trying to sense the hierarchy of her group. Cairstens's type he recognized. *Respect, combined with underlying dislike*, she decided. *And he's realizing I really am in charge. He's surprised at that.* She finished her soup and began demolishing the seventeen-ounce pepper steak that followed it; his eyes widened slightly as she ate, and at the side orders of *pommes frites*. Then flicked down to her body and back again. He was having a salad.

Right, he's off-balance enough, she decided, sipping at her wine.

"Thank you for agreeing to this meeting," she said. "I'm most anxious for a cooperative relationship with the American government."

Andrews nodded tightly. "You'll understand we're a bit anxious," he said. "With the current world situation . . ."

She smiled. "You can be fairly certain I'm not working for *Jihad al-Moghrebi*," she pointed out gently. "And besides, isn't that mostly the Europeans' worry?"

Her human ancestors had mostly ground Islam out of existence, back in first century B.F.S. That it was allowed to flourish here was another sign of anarchic disorder. It was a wonder this bunch hadn't wiped themselves out long ago.

"Damned little they're doing about it, except turning back boatloads of refugees," he said. "Shall I be frank?"

"By all means." *And I can believe just as much as I please*, she added to herself.

"We don't know who and what you are, and who you're associated with," he said. "We do know that you have valuable information which shouldn't be allowed to fall into the wrong hands."

Gwen chuckled, a flash of white teeth against the olive tan of her face. "Well, that's all a matter of definition, now isn't it?"

The Americans' bodies tensed unconsciously, their pupils dilating. A fight-or-flight response; they expected bargaining.

"I'll lay my cards on the table," Gwen said. *And you can believe as much as you please.* "I'm not going to tell you my own identity. There are interests who'd be very glad to see me . . . out of the picture."

A fractional nod from Andrews, a subliminal grunt from Debrowski. *Ah. Interesting. That confirmed something they already thought they knew. I must look into that.*

"However, you know my group has international participation."

"Mueller. And Singh. Not a recommendation, considering their records."

"The good doctors aren't in a political mode anymore," she said.

Quite true. They were her serfs, her slaves, albeit favored ones.

"And in any case, this goes well beyond them. We—my group and I—have decided to tap the world of . . . nonconventional science. Outside the orthodox hierarchies, with their fixed ideas of what's possible and what isn't. There's an enormous amount of dross, but every now and then there's a pearl . . . and the pearls have been going to waste for want of a systematic search. With modern information-processing methods and some imagination, such a search is possible."

Andrews ate a forkful of his salad. "Which leaves the question of motivations. Secret international associations interested in cutting-edge technologies, with members associated with dubious regimes and groups"—he glanced aside at Cairstens, who smiled back toothily—"or with no visible pasts at all, well . . ."

Gwen finished her steak. *Ah, just right.* Very faint touch of garlic, and slightly bloody in the middle. She remembered crouching over an elk in a winter storm . . . was it only three years ago, on her personal world-line? Cutting away at the flesh with her obsidian knife, breaking joints with a swift blow of her fist. The hot salt taste of the blood, and strength flowing back into her shivering body as the calories translated into warmth. It had taken her four days to strip the carcass bare; the wolves had shown up on the second, and provided her with a couple of warm furs. This was just as challenging, in its way.

"Our objectives are simple," she said. "Money, a great deal of money, and the power that goes with it." She held up a hand. "Nothing illegitimate. You'll have checked out our contacts with American businesses."

"Yes." Andrews nodded. "You seem to be concentrating on those."

"It's the only game in town," she replied. "Europe's too tightly tied up by established players, and besides, it's too close to the Middle East, and these days . . ." She shrugged. "Asia is xenophobic, and China is stirring that pot too enthusiastically. There are mutual interests."

Andrews moved in smoothly. "Mutual interests require mutual benefits," he said.

"Why, hasn't the United States benefited from IngolfTech's cooperative ventures?" she asked mildly, raising her eyebrows. She also raised a hand, and began to tick off points. "There's the ultradense memory chip we did with Texas Instruments, there's the oil-eating bacteria we're bringing forward with Exxon—if your FDA ever gets off its fat arse—there's the holographic projector . . ."

"Granted. However."

Gwen nodded. *Your government — more particularly your agency within that government— would like some things it could control personally.*

It was startling how similar *drakensis* and human were, in some respects. Factionalism, for instance.

"I understand completely. On the other hand, a cooperative attitude on the part of your government would help immensely, particularly since IngolfTech is planning to move more and more onshore."

She leaned back, nibbling on a pastry, and made a small gesture with her free hand. Tom put his attache case on the table and snapped it open. With an understated flourish he produced a neatly bound folder.

"A token of our sincerity," she said. "Take a look."

Andrews did, with Debrowski leaning over his shoulder. After a moment he grunted, a sound that almost turned into a squeal.

"Is this *serious*?" he asked.

"Entirely. You'll find complete drawings and process data in the disks enclosed at the back. The hardcopy is an outline of the product and its applications."

"But *nobody's* been able to get a superconductor to operate at room temperature—"

"—and this operates up to the ferromagnetic transition temperatures at several hundred degrees, yes. Take a look at the energy densities, by the way."

Primitive stuff, invented about the time she was born, or a little earlier. Still, it would give this world some things it sadly lacked: a moderately efficient way to store electrical energy, for starters.

"For instance, besides transmission lines, you could use this to power electric vehicles with ranges of thousands of miles, and recharge times measured in seconds or minutes. The increased energy efficiencies would make the U.S. completely independent of imported oil. Superconductors could be used as replacements for capacitors, for applications needing surge power."

The agents twitched again, imperceptibly. Surge output was useful for many things; most importantly, lasers and other beam weapons.

Andrews was breathing hard as he read. Gwen amused herself with a daydream of exactly how she'd take him when the time came for the masks to come off. *I'll let him run*, she thought. The scent of his terror would be intoxicating. *Then leap on him*. He'd take a moment to realize just how helpless he was in her hands. Then—

All five of the humans and some of the ones at the nearer tables were reacting to her; her own three knew exactly what was happening to them, which made it harder for them to resist. She clamped down on the secretions. *Tsk. Keep your mind on business*. Besides which, it would be a shame to mark this dress.

Andrews looked up, his face damp with sweat; the lust was there, but directed at the folder in front of him—at the conscious level, at least.

"I thought you were mostly in biotechnology," he said shakily.

"Yes, but this is rather more immediate. With that data you could begin large-scale production immediately. At that *secret* little black-program place you have out in the California desert, for instance."

Debrowski looked up at her sharply. "You know about that?"

"What a lynx you are, Mr. Debrowski," Gwen said dryly. "Nothing gets past you."

Gwen smiled back with bland amiability at his frown, dabbing whipped cream on a kiwi tart and eating it. The smooth-bland-buttery combination of flavors made her close her eyes for a moment of pure pleasure. To complement it she kicked off one of her sandals under the protecting cover of the tablecloth and slid the foot between Dolores's knees. They opened immediately, though the Colombian's face remained a study in concentration as she bent over the notebook computer beside her plate. Gwen stroked the velvety softness of the other's inner thighs while she turned her face to the Americans. It must be terrible to be a human, sense-blind to three quarters of existence, noticing nothing.

"And the quid pro quo?" Andrews asked.

"Simply . . . protection. Let it be known in the appropriate circles that IngolfTech stands well with the government."

"And in return, we get a monopoly?"

Gwen laughed. "I have no intention of selling you the cow," she said. "We will let you milk it, but the beast itself stays beyond your reach."

Andrews looked down again at the folder with its laser-printed text and colored graphs. "This sort of thing can't fall into the wrong hands," he said.

"Exactly," Gwen said. "If IngolfTech released that, the whole world would be in an uproar."

And looking into things it shouldn't and asking questions I can't answer.

"But you *can* handle it. We'll certainly direct anything else of that nature to you; all we want is to be able to commercialize the more . . . conventional innovations that are our stock in trade. We're talking really considerable sums, here, in the immediate to medium term. Billions, enough to make Microsoft look like a mom-and-pop store, as you Yanks say."

Andrews closed the folder, fingers unconsciously caressing it. "We'll certainly be in touch, Ms. Ingolfsson," he said, grinning.

"By all means." She returned his handshake, squeezing just enough to startle him a little.

Tom chuckled and poured another mineral water over the crushed ice and lime in his glass as the Americans left. Their walk quickened as they left Greycliff, turning almost into a trot as they reached the street outside. Gwen raised her own glass in a toast; she smiled over the rim at Dolores with affectionate cruelty.

"Nothing gets by them, eh?" she said.

The Colombian began to laugh, then caught her breath and bent her head and bit her linen napkin. Tom and Alice looked over suddenly, blinked, then burst into chuckles themselves. The Draka gave a final tweak with her prehensile toes and withdrew the foot, wiping it on the inside of the other's skirt.

"I should *think* they'll be in touch," Tom said. "Show those goons a weapon, and they get one on the cat couldn't scratch."

He winked at Dolores, and the woman gave a breathless sigh and dabbed at her forehead. The waiters brought the dessert tray around again, noticing nothing of the byplay. .

Blind, Gwen thought. Humans were absolutely *blind, as* well as scent-deaf. It made them endlessly amusing. This Andrews, for instance, had a diverting sense of his own importance. It would be entertaining, when he realized he was a toy, a plaything.

"Still, it's best we get some other influential contacts in that direction," Gwen said thoughtfully. "Tom, Alice—after we've celebrated for the rest of the afternoon, I want you to firm things up with that communications mogul you've been cultivating. I'd like to have that solid before the bankers arrive, and we've only got three months."

Tom nodded, blotting his lips. "Shall we?" he said, rising.

"By all means."

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"So, you haven't heard back from David yet?" Jennifer Feinberg dumped Nutra-Sweet into the coffee. The radicchio salad looked particularly disgusting today, but that was what the diet said she could have. She speared a forkful moodily and munched. *I want corned beef on rye, with mustard, pickle on the side, order of french fries, and a nice gooey pastry to follow. Fat chance.* Chez Laurence wouldn't have anything so plebeian as corned beef on the menu; their French pastries were divine, though . . . . The little restaurant had a friendly bustle at lunch hour, the more so as the day outside was sleet and ghastliness. Some of the sleet had gotten inside her rubbers.

"David? He said he needed more space."

"If he had any more space, he'd need a spacesuit," Louisa Englestein said.

"Forget David. David is history."

"Your personal history, you should forgive me, is getting to be like the history of Canada—boring."

"You'd rather my life was like the history of, say, Poland?" She swallowed the raddicchio leaf. "Besides, who's got time for a life?"

Louisa did, but then Louisa worked as an assistant curator at the Metropolitan Museum, when she wasn't reading manuscripts for a genre publisher. Both jobs together didn't pay half what Jennifer made, but they didn't amount to an eighty-five-hour week together, either. *And* they didn't leave her feeling like a beaten dishrag at the end of that week.

"The only date I've got is with the police," she said, looking at her fork. *I'm hungry, but I don't want to put that leaf into my face.*

"Police?"

"That slimy whoever-it-is keeps phoning me. I'm talking to the detective again, in case it really is



connected with poor Stephen . . . well, you know."

"What's really bothering you?" Louisa said, patting her hand.

Jennifer looked up. "It's this IngolfTech thing," she said. "I don't know, something doesn't look right."

"A try for a phony flotation?"

"No, the cash flow's there, the *product's* there. It just doesn't smell *right*, somehow. Thirty-year-old women from nowhere don't turn up in the Bahamas, pull off an eight-million-dollar salvage operation—pirate treasure, no less!—and then start successful companies buying and selling patents and licenses. And make a fortune in less than three years. Not in the real world."

"You're going to give a negative report?"

"Not on your life. Not without some facts to back up the gut feeling." She sighed. "Now, tell me about the weekend."

Louisa rolled her eyes. "You're not going to *believe* what happened," she began.

Jennifer settled in to listen. For once, her friend's love-life wasn't completely enthralling. There *was* something rotten in the state of IngolfTech underneath the shiny figures; all her experience said so.

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"God . . . damn . . . it . . . all," Carmaggio said quietly, crumpling the fax and starting to throw it into his office wastepaper basket.

After a moment's thought he tore it up instead, stepping out and down the corridor to the men's room. He tossed the fragments into one of the toilets, paused, then unzipped his fly.

Nice and confidential, and I can show the spooks what I think of them, he thought as he returned to the office.

"What's the news?" Jesus asked.

"You remember Andrews and Debrowski?"

"The two who leaned on Chen?"

The Puerto Rican's narrow dark face flushed slightly. Henry knew exactly how he felt. It was a shitty thing to do, first—no better than blackmail—but that wasn't all. They'd all done some questionable things now and then; you couldn't always operate by the rulebook. It was a matter of turf, as well. Bad enough to have the Feds muscling in on a case you were running; at least the FBI were real cops, and they could be useful for some things. A gang of spooks—who weren't officially supposed to operate on American soil anyway—was another matter entirely. Particularly when their objective seemed to be to stroke the perp, not catch her.

"A little bird from the Feds tells me they got sent to the Bahamas. To visit one Gwendolyn Ingolfsson, head of IngolfTech."

" *Mierda.*"

"Yeah. You know how much chance we've got of pulling in someone who's become a pet of the Powers That Be."

Jesus hesitated for an instant. "We could leak it."

"Damn, that's tempting."

He toyed with the notion for a moment. Headlines, embarrassments, maybe the Blackmail Twins thrown to the wolves as scapegoats—anyone who relied on *their* bosses for backup had better keep a jar of Vaseline handy.

"Nope. Not enough evidence. Hell, *no* evidence. It'd be our word against theirs—and they lie better than we do. Pity about that. I'd love to do it."

Jesus sighed. "And here I was looking forward to interviews. Maybe a book deal, *si*? How I tracked down space aliens and humongous baboons."

Carmaggio snorted. "I'd feel better if we could find the Phone Bandit," he said. "The bastard knows things he shouldn't."

"He's no friend of the cutting lady," Jesus pointed out. "Not from what he's been saying,"

"He's a goddamn ghost, is what he is. And he's bugging people over at Primary Belway Securities again, too."

Jesus grinned. "That nice lady stockbroker—"

"Analyst."

"—analyst been calling you up to complain again?"

"Yeah, and there's nothing I can do. We can't trace the calls, and the case doesn't exist anymore. God damn all hackers, anyway. They can always use the computers better than we can. I don't see how the phone companies make any money at all with these little fuckers hacking into their billing programs and whatnot."

"Why don't you hand her over to the receptionists?" Jesus asked. "The captain, he's not going to be happy if he finds out you're still talking to people about the case."

"Ah, she's not so bad. And she *does* have a legitimate beef. Nothing the captain can do if I want to talk to someone on my own time and ticket. It's a free country."

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"We haven't been able to trace the calls," he said, stirring his coffee. "I'd write it off as a crank, except that he does seem to have some information." Broad spatulate hands spread. "That's about all I can say."

The detective looked a lot like a bear. A *teddy bear*, Jennifer thought. If you could imagine a middle-aged blue-collar Italian teddy bear, that was. She'd always imagined detectives as more . . .

dashing, somehow. Detective Lieutenant Henry Carmaggio looked like a plumber in a suit, a rather wrinkled suit at that.

He looks like he expects me to make a scene, Jennifer thought. Which was something she never did, unless it was necessary and justified.

"Thank you," she said. "Anyway. It's satisfying just to *talk* to someone—in person, I mean. I get all these calls from this lunatic, and then I phone the police and get the runaround."

The detective shrugged. Behind his thick shoulders the window of the little Italian restaurant was fogged with condensation; it was a cold afternoon, freezing rain and slush. Smells of garlic and spices came from the kitchens, wafts that sent saliva spurting into the back of her mouth in a way that no radicchio leaf on earth could do.

"Ms. Feinberg—"

"Jennifer, please."

"Jennifer. One of the many lousy things about my job is the limited number of ways I can help people. People come to the police when something bad has happened to them; and they want us to, hell, put it right. Usually we can't."

"Is that official?" she asked.

Carmaggio laughed, and mimed taking something off his head. "No. *Strictly* no. My official NYPD invisible detective's hat is now off. Matter of fact, I've already clocked out for the day. We're not this reassuring, officially—what with the budget squeeze, it's hard enough to account for our phone bills, much less coffee."

Jennifer chuckled. "It's not that I'm *really* worried, Detective—"

"Henry."

"—Henry. It's just, you know, you can feel sort of vulnerable thinking there's someone *out there*. Especially after what happened with poor Stephen."

Carmaggio sighed. "I know. From my point of view, it's frustrating as hell." He smiled. "Maybe we ought to remember what my grandmother Lucrezia always said."

"What was that?"

"That you get maybe three big breaks in a whole life—but you can eat pasta three times a day." Grinning: "A cousin of mine runs this place, too."

"I shouldn't . . ."

"Hiya, Henry. Who's the girl?" A waitress bustled up with a plate of bruschetta.

Goil. She actually said "*goil*," Jennifer thought, slightly bemused. Even for a middle-aged, thick-armed lady of Neapolitan descent with a mustache, wasn't that a bit Old New York?

"That, Lorenza, is not a girl. It's a *lady*. "

"I shouldn't . . ." she repeated, and took a piece. Tomato, cheese and oregano exploded across her tongue, along with the crusty bread and smooth olive oil. "Oh, well. Who wants to try getting home at seven, anyway. Dutch treat."

Henry nodded. "Sure, no problem."

She took another bite. "This is *good*. "

"The thought of this place kept me alive in the Parrot's Beak," he said. "Its kept me overweight ever since I got back to the World."

Jennifer paused. "You were in Cambodia?" she said.

"Yeah?"

A slight silence fell. Carmaggio hunched a shoulder—slightly defensive even now, she thought. *Probably has visions of me with long straight hair, granny glasses and a sign about LBJ.*

"My brother Maurice was there," she said. His face changed, remembering the picture on her desk. "In the Fifth Cavalry."

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Jennifer belched gently as she snapped home the multiple locks on the inside of her apartment door. "What a nice guy," she mused, as the cat rubbed against her ankles.

It had been a long time since she *ate* that much at one sitting. *Amazing. I pig out on lasagna and crank calls don't worry me anymore.* You heard about great ethnic eateries at moderate prices, but she'd never actually found many. Mind you, the crowd on the Street tended to apply the Universal Dollar Yardstick to restaurants as well. And Henry *was* a nice guy. No getting bent out of shape about her picking up half the bill . . . well, it was scarcely a *date*, but still. He'd even asked if she wanted her phone number back now that the calls from whoever-it-was had stopped; which was a gentleman's way to find out if she wanted to hear from him again. Old-fashioned, but nice.

Mother would have a cow if she knew. Italian, *and* a cop. "Mother, I just had dinner with him, we didn't elope to the Poconos."

Maybe she'd go out with him again. He had a sense of humor, and conversation from something outside the incestuous world she worked in. It beat listening to David talk about his therapist and how he was dealing with his Inner Child. What the Inner Child needed was a good spanking, and anyway she preferred to talk to adults.

## CHAPTER NINE

Well-preserved, if you like them mummified, Thomas Cairstens thought, shaking the woman's hand.

Janeen Amier had been a notable actress in her day, and something of a celebrity in radical circles in the 1960s. Later she'd made a fortune of her own in exercise videos, and then married a much larger one. Now she was just plain lean and stringy, and the effects of too many facelifts were showing; you could see the same face anywhere in L.A. or San Francisco, anywhere money and a losing struggle against time came together. Her husband, Fred Lather was carrying his age better, a trim slender man with a graying mustache. He was the real power here in terms of money and political influence, but everything Cairstens had been able to learn said that his wife was at least half the brains.

"Glad to see you again, Fred," he said. "Janeen."

Fred was, he noticed, in cowboy gear again; well, this *was* a ranch—a buffalo ranch, to be precise; Lather was a fanatic for the beasts when he wasn't doing those Civil War re-creation things. All fieldstone and exposed Ponderosa-pine beams in here, with a fireplace big enough to roast one of Lather's bulls. The communications magnate led them in and poured drinks; white wine all round, Cairstens noticed. Evidently his Western act didn't extend to actually drinking whiskey. *Some evidence of bicoastal civilization surviving*, he thought mordantly, as they got the small talk out of the way.

"Now, what was it you had to say that was so urgent and confidential?" Lather asked.

Cairstens smiled with professional warmth. "Let's be frank, Fred, Janeen—you've both been a little puzzled about IngolfTech, haven't you?"

"I like to see a new company with a progressive attitude," Janeen said.

On Cairstens's advice IngolfTech had made carefully calculated donations to a number of Amier's favorite causes over the past few years. For that matter, they were mostly *his* favorite causes too, or had been back when such things mattered. Fairly soon the fight against tobacco smoking was going to become completely irrelevant. Even nuclear waste wouldn't be much of a concern. If the Project succeeded.

"I am a little puzzled by some of the stuff you've come up with," Lather said. "My technical people are too."

"It's all been satisfactory, I hope."

"That's just it. It's *too* satisfactory." Lather spread his hands. "I know that sounds odd. But there aren't any bugs in any of them. Everything works perfectly; and new products are never that way. There's always teething problems, things that have to be worked out in practice."

"You mean the products we've been selling you work like *finished* products. Like things that've been in widespread use for years."

"Yes, exactly."

"That's because," he said, opening his briefcase, "they have been in use for years."

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"Yeah, well, it wasn't as if I had anything better to do," Henry muttered.

He slowed. The roads to JFK were not at their best on a Saturday afternoon in February, not with sleet added in. Especially once you were off the Van Wyck Expressway, although the layout wasn't as bad as the spilled-spaghetti setup they had at La Guardia, thank God. He peered through the windshield and its sludge of water and ice, then took the right-hand turn in a spray of slush and a long *beeeeeep* from the minivan behind him.

"I still appreciate it, Henry," Jenny said, smiling at him in the mirror. "You're the first person I've known in Manhattan in years who actually has a *car*. Real people, not CEOs."

"Yeah, well, it sort of goes with the job." He grinned. "New experiences—I drive, you get me to go to the opera."

He'd actually enjoyed it, which was a surprise. Although come to think of it, granddad had loved Neapolitan operettas, which wasn't quite the same thing.

"Wish I was going to the Bahamas," he said as they pulled in. "So. Want to catch a movie next week, after you get back?"

His voice was a little too casual. Three dates in a month meant more than *we-get-together-sometimes . . . Christ on a crutch, how can I be worrying about that at a time like this?* Part of being human, he guessed.

"Sure," she said quietly, reaching over to touch him on the arm. "I'd like that."

The weather was a little less ghastly under the overhang. Carmaggio popped the trunk and swung out the driver's door, buttoning his coat. She had a surprising number of bags for a five-day trip, all assembling onto a neat little folding carryall. Efficient.

"Look, Jenny . . . there's something I've got to tell you." She looked up, startled at his tone. He continued:

"This Ingolfsson broa—ah, woman. Her name's come up in my line of work, you know? No charges, but . . ." He spread his hands. "I can't go into details. Let's just say she's been associated with some questionable people down there."

Jennifer nodded, serious. She knew all about confidentiality. He could see she wasn't surprised; well, dealing with offshore Caribbean money probably involved *rumors* of that sort fairly often.

"So watch yourself down there, okay?"

"I will, Henry." She leaned forward and kissed him, a quick touch. "And thanks. Don't worry, nothing happens to investment analysts."

He stood and watched her vanish into the terminal before slamming the trunk shut and dropping back into the driver's seat of the Mazda. She was right.

"Shit, I hope so," he said, waiting with his hand on the keys.

Should I have said something else? What the hell *could* he say: "Your company's prospective client is

some sort of mad-dog inhuman killer with a ray gun who consorts with giant spotted baboons"?

Oh, *great*. That would *really* be convincing. Talk about consigning yourself to the tabloid-reading realms of the trailer trash in one fell swoop.

"The hell of it is, when I come right out and say it I don't believe *myself*," he mumbled.

An airport security guard was looking at him from the shelter of the overhang; probably for taking up too much time at the drop-off. *Fuck you very much too, asshole*, Carmaggio snarled under his breath, pulling out into the laneway.

Jenny wasn't in any danger, anyway. Whatever Ingolfsson was after, right now she seemed to be concentrating on making large amounts of money, serious money, *legitimate* money. You didn't do that by hurting investment analysts; the financial world had a severe aversion to physical violence in its own ranks. The most that could happen would be a heavy swindle and the loss of her job, and he didn't expect that to happen either. Jenny was as bright as anyone he'd ever met, and she knew the twisted rules of her field as well as he knew his.

Carmaggio slammed on the brakes. Sweat broke out on his forehead and clammy under his arms as he felt the greasy skid of the tires on slick pavement. When the car halted he took several deep breaths before restarting the stalled motor; you could get yourself dead easy in this weather, driving with your mind in a fog of worry.

He concentrated on the road with a ferocious effort of will. Occasionally his hand would reach into his coat for cigarettes that weren't there.

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"Whoop!" Gwen said, and caught the falling child.

He had been twelve feet up the coconut palm. A half-scream of terror turned to a giggle. Gwen tossed the slender black form up again, rolled him over her shoulders and tucked him under one arm head-down, grinning toward the ground and the delighted white smile.

"Hey, put me down now!" the boy said in the Haitian Creole patois.

Gwen did, watching with mild affection as he somersaulted off his hands and ran to join a half-dozen other youngsters playing outside a small concrete-block schoolhouse. This section of the property was sand and rock, scrub-covered with a few taller pines or coconuts. It was a fine winter's day, sun bright through the thin foliage overhead, a little over seventy degrees. The brisk sea breeze brought scents of salt, silty mangrove swamp, pine, fresh-cut stone, and human. That was more agreeable now that she was used to it again, although she missed the odors of Draka and *servus*. She walked slowly, bare feet gripping the stone beneath her, savoring a feeling of relaxed well-being.

"You like children?" Tom asked over his shoulder as they walked; he and Alice preceded her down the pathway. She could hear undertones of surprise in the man's voice.

"Children and puppies, yes," Gwen said. "They're among my favorite things."

He nodded thoughtfully. "And wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings, no doubt," he said.

Gwen looked at him, liking his smile. There was no insolence in it, and outright fear was a crude tool of dominance. *I'm getting the knack of dealing with humans*, she thought. Killing them was fairly easy, gross manipulation with terror, bribes or pheromones not too difficult, but really managing them took skill. Centuries of dealing only with *servus* and her own kind had let hers rust, but mining her memories and careful study were bringing it back.

"That's a quotation?"

"From a musical . . . a movie with singing. An unbearably sentimental one."

"It's unhealthy not to like children," she said. "Not good evolutionary strategy. I'm very fond of mine."

"Hard to imagine you having children," Alice said.

"Oh, I only contribute the egg," Gwen said. "We fertilize *in vitro* and transplant the ovum. Sex is recreational and social, for us."

Alice looked back over her shoulder, caught Gwen's eye on her and blushed—thoroughly visible, since the Australian was in bikini and sarong—put a nervous hand to her hair, and glanced away. *Delightful*, Gwen thought. She'd become enthusiastic very quickly. Besides being an efficient administrative assistant.

A splendid pair, she thought, viewing them together. *And they'd make a good breeding combination, when we have time*. They might be past prime reproductive age when this operation was complete; best if she had sperm and egg samples preserved. The *servus* modifications only applied to a minuscule fragment of the archaic-human genome, and there were other qualities here it would be useful to preserve.

She inhaled, catching a feral scent. *Chalmers*, she thought with distaste. *Here again*.

"Ms. Ingolfsson!"

A human hurried up, carrying a clipboard. One of the local officials; and not one of the many that the energetic Captain Lowe had on the payroll. *Lowe's strain I will not preserve*. Even modified. He was useful here and now, though. This other feral wasn't useful even in the short term. A nuisance.

"Dr. Chalmers?" Gwen said politely.

Tom and Alice turned at her back; the plump Bahamian health official goggled a little at the Australian's cleavage, notable even here on an island nation of beach resorts. He reacted to Gwen with a bristling nervousness that stained his white shirt at the armpits despite the mild air. Her sex pheromones were naturally low right now anyway, with her appetites satisfied for the present, and she kept them throttled back. Aggression she let swell a little, watching with a secret amusement as the human's fear-defiance cycle intensified. The Bahamian didn't know what he was sensing, but his subconscious was wiser than his waking mind. It remembered the caves, and the smell of tiger.

"Ms. Ingolfsson, I've completed the health inspection of your Haitians."

Dislike and fear understressed in the word. The Bahamians' contempt for their southern neighbors was well-seasoned with consciousness of their numbers and desperation, and of the difficulty of keeping them out—the more so as the native-born were increasingly unwilling to do the menial work the Haitians accepted gladly.



"Yes?" Gwen arched an eyebrow.

It was a bit frustrating not to simply grab the annoying little human by the neck and arm and pull until he came apart—the image made her smile slightly—but there was a hunter's satisfaction in playing him along, for now. Time enough to rebuke insolence when the beacon was established.

I'll throw him to the ghoulons, Gwen decided, making a mental note. *They like to play with their food.* This planet was inconveniently overpopulated, anyway. She imagined him weeping slow tears of absolute despair as he clung to the top of one of the palms, long wet fangs beneath him, and clawed hands reaching up with mocking slowness. The first scream . . .

"They are *all* in perfect health," Chalmers said.

"Doctor, you seem disappointed," Gwen said. "I'd have thought you'd be pleased—the Bahamas are so particular about tropical diseases."

If the dirty savages were sick, I could deport them, Chalmers thought/subvocalized. *How did she get so many permits?* A human would have seen only a glare.

"I'm sure your government realized the potential of IngolfTech," she said. Quite true; genuine productive enterprise was rare in this banking-smuggling-tourism enclave nation. "And I have high standards for my . . . employees. You've seen our clinic, and we spare no expense."

Also quite true. Even in the Old Domination, her human ancestors had been strict about conditions for their plantation hands; she could remember her mother's pride in that. There was no satisfaction in owning inferior stock.

Chalmers gave a curt nod and strode away, back toward the vehicle park.

Tom was sensitive enough to guess something of her moods by now. She heard him clear his throat.

"Is it wise to bait him like that?" he said. "I know he's only a minor bureaucrat, but this is a small country."

"Indulge me," she said dryly. Tom bowed his head. "No, that's not a criticism; keep telling me when you think I'm making a mistake. We're not infallible."

She cocked her head, focusing on his gestalt. "Yes, I *do* take the whole matter seriously, Tom," she said to his unspoken question. "But remember, I'm designed to actively enjoy conflict and its risks. Speaking of which," she went on, "have the weapons arrived?"

Tom nodded, unhappily. "Young Lowe brought them in on the last flight," he said. "I've had them unpacked and taken to the armory. Vulk says the Haitians he picked are learning quickly—enthusiastic, according to him."

Disgusting thug, he added unconsciously. Tom did not like the man who called himself Vulk Dragovic, but the Serbian was useful.

Gwen made no comment on Tom's subvocalization; it was fair enough, by the American's standards.

"Is it really necessary?"

"It never pays to neglect basics," she said. "We've accumulated substantial wealth and power here, by local standards—industrial espionage can be crude as well as subtle. Besides, it's . . . interesting to have human guards. Reminds me of my childhood."

The Old Domination had used janissaries, slave-soldiers, back before the Last War. There was no need for them in the Final Society, but there was a fascination to recapitulating the technique, even if only on this miniature scale. It was profoundly satisfying to have human slaves not only willing to obey but to fight and die for her.

"Speaking of basics," she went on, "I want another meeting of the inner circle tonight to go over protocols for the American financial group. It would be . . ."

Tom and Alice paled a little at her expression.

". . . *extremely inconvenient* if they were to stumble on anything they shouldn't. Killing them would put a *severe* crimp in the Project."

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Jennifer Feinberg looked out the window of the floatplane. The west coast of the Abacos glittered in the afternoon sun, pinkish-white beaches and palms, tidal marsh, a scrubby olive-green landscape with patches of pine trees standing up from the low bush. Roads were black strings through the countryside, and an occasional tin rooftop showed through. Soon, she told herself. She felt jet-lagged, sandy-eyed and weary after the brief stopover in Nassau.

At least I get a trip to the tropics, she thought. New York had been crazier than usual, this November of 1998. And an excuse to stop worrying whether she'd pass the CFA 2&3 or get shelved for the rest of her life. Henry had been properly envious.

Why am I sitting back here with the secretaries? she wondered again. *I should be up there with the rest of the team.*

There were three of them, Vice-President Coleman, Managing Director Klein, and her, one Series 7 Investment Analyst. *Was he just making tasteless jokes, or was that a pass?* she thought, glowering at the back of the VP's balding head. There were times when she wished she'd stayed in premed instead of switching to economics, but . . . oh, the hell with it: there were assholes in any line of work. Besides, after her father died the money was too short. You had to wait too long in medicine.

She looked out the window again. The clouds on the western horizon were turning crimson and gold, casting a path of light down the waves. Jennifer could see a cluster of people waiting by the long white pier jutting out into the water, and the pools and roofs of a settlement not far away. Several of the buildings looked new.

"Boss, boss, de plane, de plane!" she murmured to herself.

"What's that?" the secretary said, bewildered.

"Never mind," Jennifer replied. That made her feel ancient for a second. *Thirty-four's not old.* The secretary was from Minnesota or somewhere, with those blue eyes that made you think of deep wells.

Empty wells. No *room for brains with all those hair roots*. "Classical reference."

"Ladies an' gentlemen," the pilot's voice said, in his lilting Island accent. "Fasten seat belts an' prepare for *lan din'*."

The hull touched the surface with a skip . . . skip . . . skip motion that was unlike anything Jennifer had ever felt before.

The gullwing hatch of the pilot's compartment opened and the plane was hauled alongside the pier. Fresh warm air gusted in; she held grimly onto her attache case as a swarm of very black men in white shirts and shorts descended on the Americans' luggage. Others handed them out onto the dock, where the IngolfTech greeters waited.

That's the CEO? Jennifer asked herself incredulously. Far too young and blond.

"I'm Alice Wayne, Ms. Ingolfsson's chief executive assistant," the woman said, with an Australian accent. "Please, this way. Everything's waiting for you, and I'm sure you'd like to freshen up before dinner."

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Plenty of boat operators here in Martinique, Ken thought.

The problem was getting one who was . . . flexible . . . enough to do what he wanted but smart enough not to try and rob him and drop the body over the side out beyond the territorial limit.

"You wan' to talk wit me, *blanc?* "

Ken rose and extended his hand over the table. The black man in the sailor's cap looked at it a moment before extending his own. His eyes widened a little when Lafarge matched the crushing grip pressure for pressure. The local was taller than the Samothracian's six-two, and heavier; a bit of a gut bulging the stained T-shirt, but most of it in heavy ropy muscle over his shoulders and arms, hands like callused hams. Many of the other patrons in the little bar had their hair shaved in symbolic patterns, but this man kept his in a plain close crop, with a wisp of beard along acne-scarred, eggplant-colored cheeks.

"You got balls, comin' here."

The voice was soft, accented—the Creole French of the islands that turned "r" into "w," spicing English learned here in the Caribbean.

They sat. There was a slight relaxation among the onlookers, like a pack of junkyard dogs returning to their fleas but keeping the corners of their eyes on a possible meal. Games of dominos and low-voiced conversation resumed; men moved to the bar and back, drank beer and straight rum, listened to the thudding beat of reggae-rap from the machine in the corner. Occasionally someone would walk into the glaring white heat of the afternoon outside, broken only by a sad-looking palm whose fronds rustled dryly, a sound like bones. Despite the warmth many of them were wearing jackets of one sort or another. Sonic and microray scan showed a *lot* of metal: guns, mostly, and ratchet knives. The AI drew a schematic over the room for an instant, outlining the weapons. There were a fair number of cellular phones, too. The air smelled of sweat and sickly-sweet rum, faintly of ganja and mildew.

"I've got business here," Ken said expressionlessly. "I need a boat."

The black leaned back and stuck a toothpick in one corner of his mouth. "You want to fish, maybe? Marlin? I know someone who got a good deep-sea boat."

"I'm not a tourist."

"Funny, *blanc*, you look like one."

Lafarge was wearing a loose colorful shirt, duck trousers and sandals. The shirt was useful in a number of ways, not least for what it let him wear next to his skin.

"I need," he said, "a charter. Wooden boat, doesn't have to be fast. A couple of runs past Andros, in the Bahamas; then a night drop-off inshore, the boat waits for a couple of hours, and back to Miami. No papers, no problems with the police."

Smoky brown eyes regarded him expressionlessly. "You wouldn't be a police-mon, tryin' to *entrap* a businessman, maybe?"

Lafarge grinned mirthlessly; the other man's chair creaked as instinctive reaction tensed his body.

"Fort-de-France police?" he asked. "Would they send me?"

The black relaxed suddenly, with a mirthless chuckle. "*Vwaimen*" that not too likely." Nordic types were wildly conspicuous in this section of town—in most of the island apart from the tourist areas, for that matter. "Maybe you want to step on toes, be cuttin' on other mon's turf, get me killed that way."

Lafarge shook his head. "No boat in to shore, no cargo in or out," he said. "One time, all cash, you walk away."

"Plenty seen me with you now."

Teeth showed between the Samothracian's lips. "I need a man with balls," he said. "Ten thousand on deposit with a bagman; you get it when I get back. I pay your costs upfront."

antoine lavasseur, the AI supplied. A list of criminal convictions followed: mostly in Martinique. A wonder that he was still walking the streets.

false identity, the machine supplied hopefully.

"Andres," Lavasseur said thoughtfully. "Pretty long way, three days, *peut-être*. Staniard town? Kemp's Bay?"

Ken shook his head. "Off the west coast, about halfway between Pine Cay and Williams Island."

The sailor chewed on his toothpick. Suddenly he called out, without moving his basilisk stare from the Samothracian's face:

"Ti' punch!"

The bartender's assistant hurried over; only the best for *this* customer. A bottle of Pere Labat rum went down on the table, chunks of cut lime on a plate, a pitcher of water, a bowl of brown sugar and two reasonably clean glasses. The local occupied himself with the ritual for a moment and then rolled the thick

scratched glass of the tumbler between pink palms.

"Those bank waters, bad sailin', *beaucou'* shoal, reef, spiderhead, coral," he said. "Can' get nobody close, there."

"A mile or two will do fine," Ken said. "I'll be going in alone, swimming."

The toothpick stopped in its migrations. "Either you got balls like brass nuts, *blanc*, our you got *malheuw d'tete*," he said.

"My head's not sad enough to take money on board," Ken said.

This was almost enjoyable, like a historical epic. Better than a neural-link simulacrum, because it not only felt real, it *was*. The hard wooden chair under him, the scarred surface of the table with its stains and chipped paint, the smell of stale tobacco and beer from the man across the table—none of them would dissolve if he told the compweb to end the scenario.

Of course if he got killed, that would be permanent too. Far worse: *defeat* would be real here as well,

Lavasseur took off his cap and threw it on the table. "Bon. We talk about the money."

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Gwen swiveled slightly in her chair, looking at the images in the monitors, picked up from the guest rooms. The three Primary Belway Securities executives, of course. Interesting. Two males in late middle age, and a female, younger—the analyst. It was going to be a challenge, making this all look like legitimate business. Alice was changing for dinner in her room; she looked up and winked at the spyeye.

Gwen smiled. The challenge made her feel good, loose and hungry and alert. That was the problem; the Race had been designed for conquest, and then they'd won so thoroughly that they had to devise artificial stimulants to keep from terminal boredom. This was far more exciting than hunting grizzly bears with spears, combat on levels far beyond the physical. One *drakensis* against six billion humans, with a whole planet for prize . . .

She turned away from the monitors and looked out the tall windows, out over the planet.

"I'm *hungry*," she whispered.

A gluttonous feeling, like an infinite banquet; the promise at last of satisfaction to match the power of her appetites. Appetites for which food and rut were simply symbols.

Closing her eyes, she ran through the dossiers on the three Primary Belway Securities executives. Money, fear, personal glamour—there would be a key to each of them. Probably money; it was the counter in the game they played. She stroked the information, looking for weaknesses and strengths; neurosis, obsession, trauma. At the same time she set herself for the proper phomonal clues; nothing too heavy, of course. Not at first. A tang of apprehension; fear would produce respect. A muted undercurrent of sexual attraction. And dominance; humans would perceive that as personal magnetism. There.

She concentrated for a minute or two, then took a deep open-mouthed breath to test the scent. *Perfect*.

\*\*\*

Jennifer looked at the head of IngolfTech out of the corner of her eyes. It was indecent. Women that good-looking were supposed to be in the profession of being good-looking; it must take hours a day just to keep that figure, especially if she was the early-thirties the records indicated. The surprisingly incomplete records. You could be *born* rich and look like that, or marry the money, but unless you were an actress or model you couldn't *earn* yourself rich and look like that. There wasn't the *time*, on top of a real career. Not unless you had more luck in the genetic lottery than any one human being was due.

"We'll save the numbers for tomorrow morning, I think," Ingolfsson said.

There was a murmur of agreement around the table. The meal had been long, complex and memorable; the dining room was cool and palely elegant, open to the tropical night through tall french doors. The founder of IngolfTech was looking elegant herself, although Jennifer admitted she wasn't overdoing it. The gold and ruby brooch at her neck was the only spectacular item, shaped in the form of a tiny bat-winged dragon, grasping something in its claws.

She went on in the same mellow, purring voice: "Except the basic ones. I came here in '95 with a few hundred thousand dollars. Two months later I had eight million dollars . . . and that might have been luck. Now, by your own conservative estimate, my company has a net worth of one hundred and seventy-eight million dollars, and that *cannot* be luck."

"Ummm . . ." Vice-President Coleman said. "Ah . . . how exactly was your initial financing arranged?"

Gwen smiled with white even teeth. "With respect, Mr. Coleman, that's irrelevant. What *is* relevant is one hundred and seventy-eight million dollars' worth of developments in biotechnology and other fields, every one of them bought, developed, patented, and then sold or licensed by IngolfTech. The patents and contracts are a matter of public record. Our cash flow this year should be better than twenty million from licensing fees *alone*. That's not counting any new products; and believe me, you'll be seeing enough of *those* to assure you of doubling, or possibly trebling that figure."

Jennifer cleared her throat. "Ms. Ingolfsson, I have been going over the figures with some care. Your R&D overheads are . . . well, they're extremely low."

The servants brought in coffee and liqueurs. Gwen nodded and thanked them in some musical language that sounded like French but wasn't; Jennifer couldn't place it. The entrepreneur went on: "That's how you make profits, Ms. Feinberg. Low overheads, high receipts." The green eyes turned on her, and Jennifer felt a sudden prickling over the skin of her face. "My concept isn't complicated; I search out cheap scientific talent—in the former Soviet bloc, in South Asia, elsewhere. There are a lot of very good people there, although they don't have the infrastructure they need. I provide seed money. If the idea looks promising, I buy it—fee-for-service—and develop it to commercial stage. Dr. Mueller and Dr. Singh do, rather."

She nodded at the two heads of research: a pale soft-looking middle-aged German and a lean dark Punjabi.

"Then we sell it."

Director Klein smiled. "Essentially, IngolfTech's main asset is your nose for salable ideas, then, Ms. Ingolfsson."

She nodded coolly. "I wouldn't expect anyone to value that highly without a track record," she said. "That's why I haven't taken the company public to date. However, now we *do* have a track record."

"And a rather impressive one," Klein said genially.

"We'll go into the details tomorrow," she said, lifting her wineglass. "In the meantime—to a long and profitable association between IngolfTech and Primary Belway Securities."

They all raised theirs in return. Gwen's head turned towards Jennifer, and her nostrils flared very slightly. "That's Scheherazade you're wearing, isn't it, Ms. Feinberg?"

Jennifer put her wrist to her face reflexively. "Why, yes," she said, startled. The perfume was barely detectable to *her*, and the IngolfTech CEO was sitting four places away.

Gwen smiled again. "I have a very sensitive nose," she said.

\*\*\*

Adieu foulard, adieu madwas Adieu, gwain d'or, adieu collier-chou Doudou a main li ka pa'ti Helas, helas, c'est pou' toujou' . . .

The clumsy weights of the scuba gear clanked together as Ken walked to the side of the motor-schooner lying nearly motionless under bare poles two miles off the coast. The crew were looking elaborately innocent; Captain Lavasseur stood at the wheel, singing the old Creole folk-song under his breath.

There it is, Ken thought. There were lights; probably the main house, although there was a seaplane dock and a beach chalet. They moved slowly with the gentle sway of the ship; the headlights of a car went by somewhere inland, flickering between trees. He could hear faint music, and a dog barked. The seaplane was docked at the pier, next to a paved landing ramp. So peaceful . . .

Philosophers he'd read on this Earth sometimes doubted that evil was a real or tangible thing, relegating it to a matter of perspective and custom. Samothracians had never had that luxury; they lived in the same universe as the Domination and its masters. *It* waited there: a living, breathing snake. He'd studied them all his adult life, killed—and been killed by—thousands of them in neural-link simulations. *Odd. Only here in another universe have I ever walked the same planet with one.*

Anger was a calm thing; the neural implants wouldn't allow more than that with combat to await. Still . . . *kill it and I save a whole world*, he thought. Repeal the unhealed wound of the Last War.

A sudden thought shocked him. *Kill it and I'm stuck here forever*. Wondering about the future wasn't something you did much of when you'd volunteered for a suicide mission. He filed the thought for later consideration.

"Exactly here," he said to Lavasseur.

The islander tapped the GPS monitor mounted by the binnacle. "Exactly, *blanc*."

The local satellite positioning system was crude by Samothracian standards; back home, the implants everyone had made it impossible *not* to know precisely where you were at all times. It was functional enough for this. Lavasseur's eyes and teeth showed briefly as the display lit them; for the rest the deck

was very dark, only starlight on the waves to glint on rare pieces of metal. The *Mait' Carrefour* was surprisingly clean, but the crew did not go in for polishing the brightwork. Just an innocuous little working boat of the type that still knocked around the out-islands or took an occasional tourist charter . . .

Ken took the rubber-tasting mouthpiece between his teeth and went backward over the rail in the approved local style. A knotted rope dipped down to the bottom a hundred feet below; he stripped off the native gear and bundled it, laying it on the sandy seabed. A quick gesture, and the transparent face-film of his softsuit covered eyes and nose and mouth. He spat the bitter salt of seawater out and rinsed his mouth with fresh. Across his eyes the film adjusted, thickening into a lens that corrected the distortion of seawater and amplified light.

Magnification 5x, he thought/commanded.

In a floating, toe-touching walk reminiscent of a low-gravity asteroid, he began to stride toward shore. The equipment clipped around him was all his own, small and non-metallic and nearly undetectable.

Not as powerful as he'd have liked; given his choice, a miniature antimatter bomb from twenty thousand kilometers would do nicely. Too bad about the bystanders, but worth it considering the stakes. That was exactly what he must not do, of course; far too much noncongruent energy release to be safe, with the Domination's scientists searching the continua. He'd have to do this . . . what was the local's expression?

"Up close and personal," he murmured.

He was walking through coral in a thousand shapes, branched and brain-knobbed, crimson and white and starred with drifting clouds of fish colored like finned orchids. The water carried the grunts, groans, clicking sounds fish made—more were active at night—and the chitinous scuttling noises of the lobsters and sea urchins that marched across the bottom, eye-stalks swiveling to track him. Something heavier and gray swept its tail through the water above, dorsal fin and wicked little eyes, underslung jaw with multiple rows of shearing teeth born on a living torpedo of gristle and sinew. It half-rolled to examine him and then swam on, warned away by the vibrations his softsuit bled into the water.

"Up close and personal," Lafarge said again, with an expression very much like the shark above him.

\*\*\*

Jennifer tossed the pen down. She was too wired to take notes, by hand or on her laptop or the workstation, certainly not in a mood for sleep. Instead she rose and paced restlessly. The main house was old, though recently renovated, a rectangular block of pink-stuccoed coral blocks three stories high, with tall Doric pillars in front. The guests were housed in new wings on either side. Her own suite was three rooms giving out onto a balcony overlooking the rear gardens; bedroom, a sitting room with terminal and multimedia center, and a bathroom that centered on a huge D-shaped sunken tub that looked as if it were carved out of a block of marble. Nothing vulgar, exactly—the fixtures weren't gold or anything—but there was something about the whole place . . .

She looked at the workstation. The electronics were set in smooth panels of tropical hardwood: swing-out keyboards, old-style and an adjustable ergonomic split kind, fax-modem, adjustable thin-section screen on a boom, all the latest. She settled for the speakerphone and punched out a number.

"Hi, Henry. Hope I didn't wake you," she said.



"Nah, I'm a night owl. You okay?"

Despite that, he sounded a little sleepy at first; it was past midnight. But the last words were sharper. *Why did I call Henry, in particular?* she thought. They'd only known each other a couple of months, really—that first time back after Stephen Fischer was killed didn't count. *Does sweetums want a big, stwong man to holdums widdle hand?* she scolded herself. Then again, Henry was a friend . . . and he did have a different perspective on things.

"I'm fine, really. I just wanted to talk."

"Fine by me," Henry said, with a chuckle in his voice. "So, how are things going?"

What do I say? The truth, she supposed. "Fine, but I've got a weird feeling about it," she said slowly. "For one thing, this place is odd. It's too beautiful."

"This lady's rolling in it, from what you said."

"Henry, she's made it all in the last four years. You don't have *time* to collect toys while you do that; believe me, I've known a lot of these entrepreneurial types. They don't do that while they're driving for the top."

"This one does." He was silent for a moment in turn. "There are," he said neutrally, "some very rich people south and west of there. Who *do* go in for toys in a big way."

She thought of a map. South America—Colombia.

"Henry, you don't know anything about IngolfTech and *drugs*, do you?"

Another hesitation. "No, not exactly. And remember where you're calling from."

Oh, Jennifer thought. *Right*. Even more public than a cellular phone.

"No, I really don't think so. It was just a comparison," he said.

"Well, maybe she's just jumping the gun," Jennifer said. "There's Lather and his buffalo ranches, and Trump liked to collect buildings. The other thing is that it's pretty odd to stick a research facility out here in the boondocks. Offshore, yes, there are regulatory advantages, but why Andros Godforsaken Island? It's pretty, but even these days you want to be in closer contact with things, you can't do everything electronically. Why not Nassau? For that matter, there's not much action in the Bahamas except in offshore banking, currencies, that sort of thing. No infrastructure for a high-tech company. So why not someplace in Europe, maybe?"

"Humpf." Henry grunted thoughtfully. "I'll bet Ms. Ingolfsson does a fair bit of traveling, then. You're right, it does look a bit screwy. What's she like?"

Jennifer propped her head in her free hand. "That's what's got me really wondering. Far too good-looking, in a really strange sort of way. Far too . . . charming. Isaac Coleman's as cold-blooded a son of a bitch as you can find on the Street, and she had him eating out of her hand. I can't place her, either; not just that she's got no paper trail, she doesn't *feel* familiar. I'd say old money, probably European, but her accent's as much American as anything. And charisma that feels like bumper-cables clipped onto your ears. Scary, fun in an odd sort of way, but scary."

"Be caref—"

Henry's voice cut off. An instant later, so did the lights.

## CHAPTER TEN

Ken Lafarge came out of the water silently, crawling on his belly. It was deep night, moonless, only the starlight for illumination and the distant exterior lights of the house. The breathing film rolled up from his mouth and nose, contracting smoothly into the thin goggles across his eyes. Those turned the darkness into flat silvery light, as bright as daylight; they would diffuse glare with the same efficiency. The softsuit covered his body, a form-hugging armor that blended seamlessly against the background, mimicking light and thermal signatures. He went over the beach and up into rocky ground covered in scrub. Wherever his softsuit touched the ground it formed momentary pads shaped to grip on the outside, a frictionless surface elsewhere. He eeled through the heavy undergrowth with scarcely a rustle to mark his passage, only a slight sagelike smell of bruised herbage.

Break, human-range, mark, he whispered silently, as he cleared the scrub and moved into open country.

The AI showed him schematic indications of human presence. It helpfully filled in the guard dogs some of the men had with them. There were a round dozen, patrolling the perimeter; the dogs could be a problem, but fortunately the wind was from the interior of the island. He could overhear the guards' periodic check-ins; they were wearing headsets and throat mikes. Ken grinned wryly in the darkness. *Advantages of backwardness.* No trace of comp-control, just radios. If the equipment had been a little more advanced, his would have been able to take it over. The Samothracian rose and moved forward in a smooth jog, feet nearly soundless on the coarse, sandy soil. Fairly soon he'd be into the gardens.

The guards would be hirelings, and chances were that they'd be completely ignorant of what they served. Kenneth Lafarge didn't intend to kill any of them if he could help it, but he wasn't going to let their welfare alter his behavior much one way or another.

The sound warned him: far above human audibility, translated by the earpieces, **sonic barrier, directional.** Well beyond this world's technology, and set for barring human-range. A local would just get very apprehensive as they went through the edge of it, and probably go into convulsions if they tried to cross the line itself.

He backed, sweat prickling under his softsuit in the instant before the covering drank it away. *Close.* He hadn't expected that. *Assume the field's in a linear arrangement, a line of wands . . . .* He came to an iron post, as thick as his thigh and two meters high. That *was* surprising, since the wands for a sonic barrier should be about the thickness and length of a little finger. A scanner thread pulled out of his cuff revealed the reason.

Now that was ingenious. Cobbled together out of indigenous components. Vastly larger than in the prime-line universe, and there was a great big copper cable to carry power rather than a superconducting ring the size of a wedding band to store it. He'd expected the *drakensis* to be smart—they all were—but

it was ingenious as well.

Two can play at that game. There had to be a control system for this, and it would have to be native. Which meant . . .

He reset his earpieces with a mental command and walked quickly up to the post, through the barrier that he felt only as a gentle humming and a tingling through the bones of his skull. A slim tool punched through the cast-iron grillwork that covered it, and a thread of fiber followed. The end of the thread extended filaments the color of ice, growing like crystals in a saturated solution. They worked their way into the circuits of the device and began to trace the connections.

Execute.

\*\*\*

"Our guest—"

Tom Cairstens walked through the door and stopped. The Draka was on the bed, kneeling astride Alice's waist; her fingers were moving up from navel over stomach and on to breasts, moving with a delicate precision he knew very well. Gwen's hair moved as an ear cocked toward him. Alice's head rolled in his direction as well, but her eyes were glassy, mouth open, two red spots high on her cheeks. He moved forward, smiling; the ear had been enough indication of that Gwen wanted him to stay and finish his report; and she expected the Household to learn how to read her wants—to learn quickly and well.

"Our guest Ms. Feinberg is making a call to New York," he said, halting beside the bed.

Beautiful sight, he thought. Partly that was Gwen's effect on him, he knew; idly he wondered if it would be possible to resist it. Not that he wanted to. And he'd become much more appreciative of women in general lately, as opposed to only occasionally. It felt rather odd, but not unpleasant, as an additional interest.

Gwen's face was turned down, watching Alice. Cairstens was used to the Draka's ability to focus on several things at once by now.

"To a friend, evidently. The computer says the number is a New York police detective's, named Henry Carmaggio, but it's definitely a personal call."

"What's she saying?" Gwen asked. Alice whimpered blindly, squirming.

"Just a sort of general uneasiness, but—"

He stopped. Gwen's head flashed up, her face going from relaxed, amused pleasure to hard alertness; then in the same instant to a Gorgon mask of rage, pupils flaring until the green of her eyes vanished in their blackness, lips curling back in an unhuman snarl that showed all of her strong white teeth.

"Intruder!" she shouted, in an astonishing husky roar. It cut through his sudden shock like a bucket of icewater. "Get to the control station. *Now!*"

\*\*\*

intruder.

The word flashed into Gwen's consciousness from her transducer, freighted with overtones of precise meaning. Her head jerked up; her hands continued their motion automatically for an instant, stroking Alice's breasts.

attempted infiltration of subsystem, the half-living machine in her skullbone went on. **very capable system, samothracian compinsets.**

"Well, don't *stop*, " Alice said in a half-whimper. She grabbed for the hands that had been caressing her.

Gwen's hand slapped hers aside, just hard enough to sting. "Intruder!" she barked at Cairstens. "Get to the control station. *Now!* "

She pitched it loud enough to penetrate the dim confusion that seized humans in emergencies.

In her head: **crash the system.**

She'd engineered in as many blocks as she could, but the native comp systems were pathetically easy to penetrate, even to her multipurpose transducer. They weren't just primitive, the open architecture of their core memories was an invitation to takeover. A Samothracian specialist would walk through like a man strolling in his parlor.

give me location.

The lights flickered, went out, then came back on and steadied as the failsafe switched on, a mechanical-relay system outside the computer's loop.

She backflipped from her position astride the Australian girl's hips, stripped the layer knife and plasma gun out of the weapons belt on the armoire and dove out the second-story window. Not worth the few seconds it would take to change into her blacks; although it would be very nice to have a suit of powered infantry armor right now. *Why not wish for an orbital platform, while you're at it?*

She landed in a crouch and leaped again, over the verandah balustrade and down the retaining wall.

Shards of fact appeared in her mind. *Oh, a cunning little human*, she thought—one of the sonic barrier posts.

alert the guards, give the location, order shoot to kill. The transducer could do that, relaying through the primitive radio system in her voice.

The guards ought to distract him a little, at least. No doubt about what he'd come for: her life. A growl rumbled in her chest. Let him take it if he could.

\*\*\*

Damn. Ken snapped off a shot with the needler.

The tiny crystals stitched across the torso of a guard and his dog. Both went flaccid and hit the ground instantly, the anaesthetic shutting down their conscious nervous systems; it was tailored to be fatal for *drakensis*, but it would harmlessly trunk anything else mammalian. The guard was wearing some sort of

heavy goggles, probably a primitive night-sight system. *Double damn.* He'd shifted east and inland to get around the closing semicircle, and now the dogs had winded him. Their barking was harsh and savage, with a guttural undertone of snarls. The beasts had been kill-trained.

Could be worse, he thought, as the barking rose to a frenzied pitch and the dogs were slipped from their chains. *Could be ghoulons.*

Snap. Snap. The needler made a tiny *pfft* sound, like a man hissing quietly between his teeth. *Snap.* *Snap.* The noise died as the dogs went unconscious.

Something else, something crunching through the coarse coral soil with a firm tread, too fast to be natural. *It* was coming. He shuddered as catheters dumped chemicals into his bloodstream, and the synthetic-neurone web overlaid on his nervous system activated. Everything took on a hard, diamond-bright edge. He thought the needler to automatic and lofted an arc of crystal slivers into the darkness on a precise trajectory. Then he dove to the side, landing in a barrel-roll that took him behind an ornamental boulder.

" *Come to me, human!*" A voice shouting out of the night, like a great mellow trumpet of brass and gold. " *Come to me and die!*"

The *drakensis* was definitely a female—very bad news for this world, unless he could kill it quickly, even if it didn't make contact with the Domination back on Earth/1. He called up range and distance on the voice and risked a snapshot around the boulder.

Crack. Plasma bathed his hand. He tossed the needler aside with a reflexive twitch, before the power coil could rupture. The film across his eyes darkened to protect him as it exploded three meters away, gouging a crater in the ground and spattering him with bits of molten glass. *Crack.* Half the coral boulder vanished, lime burning in a white sear of radiance.

Ken came erect in a five-meter leap that carried him into a shallow declivity in the earth. He rolled out of the other side of that and charged, jinking from one patch of dead ground to the next. His hand slid another weapon forward as he ran. A guard leaped up, firing on automatic. His fingers twitched, and the man jarred to a stop as if he'd run into a brick wall. The native very nearly had: a slug of expanding gas like the shock-wave from an explosion. There was a dull heavy *thud.*

\*\*\*

Maybe I should have stopped for my blacks, one corner of Gwen's mind thought—they wouldn't block a serious weapon, but they would shed needler crystals. Some of those had come *far* too close. All the rest of her consciousness was focused forward. The night gleamed with light, stars and diffusion off the sea and heat-pulse in glowing curtains. It rang with sound, and the air was full of scents. It flowed together in her mind . . . *there.*

A darting shape, moving fast. Very fast. But he checked for an instant as a guard cut loose at him. Gwen fired.

Crack. Blue-white light split the darkness, driving her eyes into a protective squint. Radiant fire outlined the figure of a charging man, burning soil and vegetation around him to lime dust and carbon ash as the fields in the soft armor redirected the plasma. He dropped flat and rolled; the second shot skimmed his back and blew a head-sized hole in the soil behind him. He launched himself at her on its heels, meeting a third bolt in midair. Gwen bounded backward.

Something slapped at her like a huge padded fist, tumbling the smooth grace of her leap into a sprawl. *Gas gun*. She kept moving as she struck, ignoring sharp edges gouging at her skin, and fired again underneath her own body in mid-roll. The figure of the Samothracian exploded in brilliant white-on-white outline again, then faded into a blurred darkness that almost perfectly matched the background. She'd seen it spin, though; the gas gun must have ruptured in the plasma flare.

He came down out of the night, heels striking for her torso. She whipped aside, tossing the plasma pistol behind her—at this range the backwash from a discharge would crisp half her body. It would probably also kill the Samothracian, but if they both died he won. Instead she cut left-handed with the layer knife.

A forearm blocked it. The surface of the soft armor turned diamond-hard for an instant, shedding the blade with a whining zing of cloven air. The enemy stumbled backward, but his elbow joint hadn't turned to gravel taking the strain. Biomods, implanted reinforcements to the bone structure—no surprise. A Samothracian cyber-warrior.

He slashed back at her with a blade like a wire outline of a sword that grew out of his gauntlet with avalanche speed; her ears could hear its ultrasonic chitter. *Vibration-knife*. The wind of its passage was an ugly thing across her eyes; it would carve her flesh like gelatin, and even the reinforced bones wouldn't give it much trouble.

She danced free, outside the arc of attack, keeping her arm-long knife up. They struck and parried at each other with blurring speed. Metal and monomolecular thread screamed in protest and lit the night with fat white sparks of density-enhanced steel.

A guard rose and emptied the thirty-five-round clip of his submachine gun into the Samothracian's back. For an instant the entire surface of the softsuit turned rigid as high-tensile steel as it spread the kinetic energy of the bullets. They spanged off into the night with keening shrieks, their velocity little affected by the ultraslick surface. Two struck the gunman, and he dropped to the ground shouting with pain.

Cat-agile, Gwen leaped in and swung two-handed at her enemy's gauntlet. The micron-thick wire of the vibration blade was barely rigid as the armor diverted power to its primary, defensive function. The layer knife was single-molecule diamond and steel with its electron shells collapsed to pack atoms closer together than nature would allow. The wire nicked the blade, but it parted and whipped back into the gauntlet. She caught the wrist under her armpit, levered, threw. The Samothracian's hundred-odd kilos arced through the air headfirst.

She snatched up a boulder twice her weight, to pound him to death in his shell like a lobster. He managed to twist and land on his back, one palm out toward her. Brilliant light flashed; Gwen was blind for an instant. Something struck the rock from the other side, jerking it in her hands three times, *tock-tock-tock*. Two more submachine-guns opened up, hosing the night with tracer bullets; Gwen leaped backward behind a concrete planter, crouching on all fours, blinking and shaking her head. Her eyes teared and then vision returned.

She could hear his footsteps and the faint metallic smell of his equipment, and beneath that the individual pungency of his body-scent, as unique as a fingerprint. He was retreating, back toward the ocean, as more of the guard force closed in on him. They were professionals, and not about to shoot each other by accident, but the volume of fire was building. *There*. He'd broken free and started to run.

" *Cease firing!*" she shouted to the guards, loud enough to shock them into obedience even through their adrenaline-rush.

She scooped the plasma gun off the ground and pursued in a blur of movement, faster than a galloping horse, hurdling planters and benches with headlong grace. The Samothracian stayed ahead of her, just. She braced and fired once as he flung himself into the waves, then again as he entered, hoping against hope that the shockwave through the water would kill. Thunder-crack rolled back from the water, then nothing.

Damn this museum-piece popgun. If she'd been wearing a modern, high-intensity weapon when all this started, it would have punched through the softsuit at least once. She'd been hoping it would overload the defensive field, but no joy. *That'll teach me to carry a four-hundred-year old pistol for sentiment's sake.*

She was panting; she slowed it to deep steady breaths, growling low in her throat with the rage of territorial violation and the need to kill. Her ears sang with the combat hormones coursing through her bloodstream, and she had an urge to throw herself into the sea in pursuit. Heat pulsed from her body.

Don't be ridiculous. She could swim underwater for fifteen minutes or so, but the softsuit could take oxygen out of the water and feed it to the wearer. He could *walk* to Nassau if he wanted to, along the bottom.

It was a minute or two before the guards arrived. Gwen dropped the plasma gun to the sand and covered it with a quick sideways motion of her foot; she remembered to hold the knife inconspicuously down by her side.

"The emergency's over," she said calmly, her voice pitched to spread conviction. They were staring . . .

Oh, the local nudity taboo, she reminded herself. She wasn't wearing anything but a slick film of sweat and some blood.

Gwen snapped her fingers at one of the guards. "Pierre, the jacket."

He handed it over, juggling the sling of his submachine gun. The Haitian was a hulking figure; the battledress fabric came down nearly to her knees. She belted it on and used the motion to retrieve and drop the pistol into one of the patch pockets; there was a slight smell of scorching cloth.

"Is Francois being seen to?" she asked. "Who else is hurt?"

"Philippe," a Dominican said. "Donna, he's dead. Ribs broke."

Several of the guards nodded. That would be the gas gun: very effective at close range; a good thing she'd been jumping when the charge hit her. Two more men panted up.

"Tom, Vulk," Gwen said, then raised her voice: "The rest of you, back to normal rounds. Take the casualties to the clinic. Be alert."

They walked away, murmuring among themselves. She recorded and sorted the conversations for future attention. Humans were extremely good at editing memories to suit their mental frame-of-reference; there were times when she wished she could do that herself. She heard *flare gun* whispered, *flame-thrower*—and more softly, *dupiah*, and *corps-cadavre*. It had been very dark, the whole action had only taken a little over five minutes, and most likely the guards would have the whole thing rationalized by morning.

Vulk Dragovic spoke: "What *was* that?"

She'd hired the Serbian in Santo Domingo, where he'd been vacationing after his previous career went bad. Most of the skills he'd learned in Mostar and Kosovo were relevant to her needs.

"A Samothracian," she said. "I told you about them, although I didn't anticipate one showing up here."

She looked out to sea. Very faintly, an IR heat-smudge marked the western horizon. Probably the boat the enemy infiltrator had swum in from—there were sharks in the water close to shore at night, but that wouldn't be any problem for her enemy, worse luck.

"Damn!" Tom said. "Everything was going so well up to today."

Gwen turned her head. "Tom, everything was *not* going well. Yesterday we had a very dangerous enemy that we didn't know about. Now we know he's here, and a good deal about him."

She examined her layer knife. The nick in the blade was small; she'd grind it out with an industrial-diamond grinding wheel.

"I could have sworn Francois hit him," Vulk said.

"He did—a full clip," Gwen said. "The Samothracian was wearing a softsuit. It's a single molecule, with field-guides and AI controls on the inner surface. When it's struck it redistributes the kinetic energy over the maximum possible surface, like a second skin of very strong steel with a frictionless surface. About . . ."

She paused fractionally to find a comparison that would make sense to the humans. ". . . about as resistant as a light armored car. You can broil or smash the body inside, or punch through with enough energy, but short of that he's invulnerable."

Vulk swore softly in Serb. Gwen went on: "The men did very well; they distracted him and it was crucial. We'll have to reequip the guard-force, though. Full-power semiauto battle rifles with hardpoint ammunition, .50-caliber machine guns, some of those .50-caliber Barrett sniper rifles.

"Tom," she continued, "I crashed the computer; he was hacking into it. Get rid of it, power up the backup and load from the tapes, but sever *all* outside connections. We'll have to use secondaries for those from now on; I'll give you more details in the morning. Go attend to that, and don't forget to check on our guests from New York. Reassure them if any of them noticed; it was dry thunder, or a wedding celebration in the village, or whatever."

"Yes ma'am."

Vulk licked his lips and reholstered the Walther in the shoulder rig he wore over his tailored safari suit. "That one—" He jerked his head toward the ocean. "Is he . . . like you?"

Gwen shook her head. "No, they have what amounts to a religious taboo against serious gene-engineering on their own stock. But he'll have a good deal of very capable equipment which about makes up the difference. A lot of it implanted in his body. Luckily, we know what he doesn't have."

"What's that?" Tom asked.



"No help, or they would have come together. And he doesn't have an antimatter bomb, or he would have used it and this island wouldn't be here now. They don't underestimate us, not anymore." She grinned, and Vulk paled slightly. "We taught them better than that."

"A nuclear weapon?" the Serb said, rubbing a hand over the sandpaper roughness of his blue chin. "Mother of God, that's—there are thousands of people living on Andros." He sounded more respectful than disgusted. Which was not surprising, considering what had happened in Kosovo.

Gwen nodded. "They're not significantly more squeamish than we Draka," she said meditatively. "Although they rationalize it differently. Hmmm. This whole thing smells of a stealth priority. Minimum energies."

She closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating. "Yes. I think I see. The physics . . . he's afraid that use of noncongruent energies will somehow make it easier for the Technical Directorate to home in on us here. And since his people could insert him deliberately, they know more about the molehole technology, and he's probably right to fear that." She smiled again, slow and savage. "That's an advantage."

She looked up at Tom. "There is one important point. Before, we weren't in a hurry. Now we are."

And I should have the fallback ready, she thought. There were a number of strategies open to the enemy; one of them would be to turn the local governments on her.

The answer to that was disposing of the human population, or most of it. Not very difficult, but wasteful . . . and a little too much like fishing with grenades. Boring.

Still, at seventh and last you did what you had to do to win. A suitable plague and a deadman switch would be easy enough to arrange and hold in readiness.

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"Be careful," Henry said. "You—"

The line went *click*, and then it was replaced by the steady hum of a dial tone.

"Shit!"

Carmaggio's thick finger stabbed for the pad, and then he realized that he hadn't the remotest idea of the number in the Bahamas. He glanced at the clock: 12:30. He swore, hauled himself into the bathroom—time, tide, and the bladder waited for no man—and then sank down at the kitchen table with the phone there and a pad and paper. Pushing aside a stack of pizza boxes and some fried rice still in the carton, he began.

"Hello, operator? I was in the middle of a long-distance call, from Andros Island in the Bahamas. I was cut off; can you—no, I *don't* know the number. Yeah, thank *you* very much for fucking nothing, too."

He laid the phone down and ran a hand through his hair, flogging at his mind and feeling the sand in the pipes. A nice juicy one had come up last night, a spousal just-can't-take-it-anymore ballpeen-hammer divorce, and kept him up; this was two days' sleep he was missing, and it got harder past forty. Hell, it got harder past thirty, if he remembered right.

Okay, Jenny used my call-in line. One of the few perks of this job at his level was that it made it easier to

get two phone lines. *That'll catch it if she calls back.*

So . . . area code for Bahamas, no big deal.

"Hello, directory assistance?"

An accent this time. "I'd like the number of IngolfTech Incorporated. No, not the Nassau branch, the headquarters on Andros Island. Thank you."

He jotted it down. Maybe a bit impolite to call this time of night, but fuck that. Five rings.

" *Hello. You have reached IngolfTech Incorporated. Our business hours are—*"

"Shit!"

He slammed the handset down into the receiver. "I can't leave a goddamn message. No fucking way I can let them connect to me. I shouldn't be calling as it is.

"Directory assistance? I'd like the home number for Ms. Gwendolyn Ingolfsson, Andros Island . . . It's unlisted. *Thank* you very much.

"Bitch," he added.

Except that he had to do something; the knowledge was there in his mind, as definite as his own self. He stabbed more keys.

"Jesus? Yeah, I know what time it is. Listen, you still got that plastic piece?"

There was a silence on the other end of the line, and a sleepy woman's voice muttering in Spanish somewhere behind his partner. The gun was a curiosity, a little plastic-and-synthetics one-off they'd picked up a while ago. Technically Department property, but nobody was hurt by it going missing. The former owner had lost an argument; the way you did when your head tried to argue with a rifled shotgun slug at close range; and it hadn't figured in the evidence trail.

The interesting thing about it was that there was no metal except the ammo and the firing pin. It wouldn't activate an airport security scanner, not unless the scanner was set so it'd go off from the bridgework in your teeth.

" *Si*, I've got it."

"I may need to borrow it tomorrow. Sorry about your day off."

"Can I help, *patron?* "

"Yeah, you can cover for me; I may have to take some of that accumulated sick leave. I'll give you the details tomorrow. I just needed to know about the piece so's I could make some plans."

"Go with God."

"Same here."

He set the phone down more thoughtfully. Foreign forces got quite sticky about American cops wading into their jurisdictions—understandable; he wouldn't be entranced himself if some maniac came onto his turf waving a Glock and expecting the local wogs to genuflect. On the other hand, no way he was going to the Bahamas without a piece, if he had to go—he'd have taken an AK, if he could. The memory of what the warehouse and Marley Man's boys had looked like was unpleasantly vivid.

"I'm probably overreacting," he muttered, dumping coffee into the filter. "Jenny's a smart girl." Water gurgled into the pot and he poured it into the machine.

He was still going to be on that plane tomorrow if he hadn't heard something definite and couldn't get through. She was smart, but she didn't know how to handle this sort of situation.

Carmaggio remembered the heavy smell of blood, red meat turning gray with exposure to air in the terrible gaping wounds and smashed skulls, the stink of cooked brain.

If anyone knew how to handle it.

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The lights flickered and came back on, but the telephone was dead; not even a dial tone.

Jennifer spent a moment jiggling the catch. "What the hell? Henry? Henry?"

She looked around. Nothing seemed different. *Calm. Calm down. It was just some sort of power out.* This was the Third World, after all.

"It's also a research facility," she muttered.

Computers and delicate, ongoing experiments that would be disrupted if the power supply went out. IngolfTech certainly had the funds to afford the best; the proof was all around her. She went out onto the balcony; the night was a little cooler, in the high sixties, perhaps, and she rubbed her arms with her hands. And why didn't the phones work?

Jennifer walked down the balcony steps into the garden, feeling her way along the balustrade; there were a few low-intensity blue lights up under the eaves, but they were scarcely brighter than starlight on the fountain that chuckled in its basin of Mexican tile. The pathway was checkerboard colored brick, between flowerbeds and young ornamental trees, leading her feet on toward the lawns and the slope to the sea. She bumped her toe in the openfaced sandals and swore at the sudden sharp pain.

Somebody shouted from the main block to her left. She turned and caught a glimpse of a running figure; shrank back into an alcove in a hedge of dog-rose, sinking down on a stone bench. *What's going on?* More shouting, down by the sea and left—south—away from the floatplane dock.

Crack. She blinked. A sudden blue-white flare of actinic light threw shadows and brightness across the gardens, a bright glare of color from a sheet of bougainvillea climbing a retaining wall to her right. *Lightning?* she thought? But it had come from the *ground*, not the sky—and the sky was clear, a frosted and of stars from horizon to horizon overhead. So clear she had been able to see the colors of the stars, earlier. The noise was like thunder too, only smaller somehow.

Crack. Again the flash of light. And a hammering chatter, flat and undramatic by contrast. "That was a gun!"

She knelt up on the bench and peeked cautiously over the planter that backed it. More flashes and miniature thunderclaps, and more gunfire—a long burst from an automatic weapon. Then silence.

"My God, that *was* a gun! A machine gun!" *Breathe slowly. In. Out.* "We've been caught in a coup or something." Henry's words came back to her. "Oh, my God, we're being attacked by drug runners!"

CNN and the evening news flashed through her mind. WALL STREET FINANCIERS TAKEN HOSTAGE; the *Post* would banner-headline the whole thing. Connie Chung would do a special report. Jennifer's mother would have a seizure.

The pain in her fingers shocked her back into awareness. She had been gripping the coarse coral limestone of the planter hard enough to bruise. In the silence the loudest sound was her own breathing; she forced herself to take slow deep breaths, lowering her head until only her eyes showed over the edge of the planter and the low flowering vine within. From here she could see a corner of the main central block of the house and the darkened approachway and gardens before it. Tensely she waited. Nothing happened, for long enough that the night air cooled the sweat on her skin and brought goosebumps.

I didn't imagine that, she told herself. Then again, she hadn't seen anything except lights, either.

She heard the sound of feet on the crushed oyster-shell of the drive. There was a little more light there, enough to tell that a human figure was coming up from the waterfront. It turned and walked toward her; she shrank back. A man, two; black men, in gray uniforms, and each carrying a weapon. Some exotic-looking thing, one slung across the first man's chest, the other carried at port arms. They passed by ten feet away, heads turning alertly, heavy goggles making their faces insectile in the night.

They looked like soldiers, or policemen. *Or rent-a-cops*, she thought, relaxing slightly. Yes. There had been security guards around earlier in the day dressed like that—although *they* hadn't been carrying machine pistols, or weapons of any sort. The men passed by and moved further from the house, vanishing in the darkness.

More footsteps; lighter this time, and quicker. Another dim figure, this one moving at a quick gliding run. Bare legs flashed in the dim gloaming. *Ingolfsson?* Jennifer wondered. Impossible to tell for sure at this distance, and she—he, whoever—was turning away, toward the main block and the entrance. A few moments later there was another sound. A screech, like nothing so much as a cat out prowling for battle and fornication . . . except that it was far too loud, and somehow the modulation sounded like a voice.

"Weird," she muttered, rising.

Nothing cataclysmic seemed to be happening. She rose, feeling a little foolish as she climbed back through the balcony and firmly shut the french doors. There had to be some sort of rational explanation for all this. *Henry's paranoid, it goes with his job.* He was a dear, but she had to watch out for that us-against-the-world attitude, it was catching.

"Urk!"

Jennifer squeaked and jumped. The knock at the door repeated. She opened it a crack, to see Tom Cairstens smiling urbanely in the corridor outside. *I am not nervous.* She opened the door and stood aside, but the IngolfTech executive shook his head.

"Ms. Feinberg?" he said. "I noticed your lights were still on. Sorry about the noise just now. We've got a

fair number of construction workers down by the new lab extension, and—well, they tend to celebrate a little hard, sometimes. It seems there was a wedding, or a christening, something like that, and the rum flowed a little freely, not to mention the firecrackers. Our security guards have everything under control, no need to call in the local police, even."

"Oh." *I feel silly.* "I thought I heard gunfire. And why did the phones go out?"

"One of the guards let off a few rounds into the air. Bad habits, I'm afraid—they're Haitians, you see, there isn't much local labor available for this sort of work. Good people, loyal as Dobermans, but a bit rough sometimes. One of them drove a backhoe through the cable to our satellite uplink; it's back in order now."

"Oh. I see. Thanks."

"See you tomorrow, Ms. Feinberg."

*I feel really silly.* Drug runners. Terrorists. Hostage-taking. *I watch too much CNN.*

Suddenly she felt sleepy, in reaction to the adrenaline perhaps, or just because it was late; after one, by now.

"Thanks, Mr. Cairstens." As the door closed, she remembered. "Ohmigod. *Henry.* The poor guy got cut off right in the middle of the call."

She dashed over to the phone and punched the number; a voice at the back of her mind noted dryly that she had it memorized by now. Jennifer told the voice to shut up; it sounded unpleasantly like her mother.

A voice growled in her ear on the other end of the line. "Jesus? No problem, I can get the ticket and you can tell the captain—"

"Henry, it's Jenny."

"Shit. Hell, sorry, I mean . . ."

"You were worried." She paused, and said softly: "You were coming *here*, weren't you?" An emergency flight to the Bahamas was not petty cash on a police lieutenant's salary.

A long silence. "Hell, I've got vacation time coming."

"You're a sweet guy, you know that, Henry?"

He snorted. "I'm a worrywort. Look, I don't want to crowd you, okay? I'm not looking over your shoulder or anything."

"Nothing wrong with a little of that." She gave an involuntary yawn. "We did have a little excitement here; it turned out to be some construction workers driving a backhoe around to celebrate something or other."

"Yeah? You can tell me about it when you get back."

"See you. I've got a working breakfast tomorrow . . ."

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Kenneth Lafarge ignored the scuba gear that lay around the end of the knotted rope. Life was one footstep after another, until the cord was in his hands. Balance changed as the softsuit ejected its water ballast and inflated temporary air-cells to make him buoyant. A touch of the hands, and he floated upward along the rope. Weight caught at him, and he fought down a scream as he hauled himself over the railing of the boat. He fought back another as rough hands helped him.

"I'm . . . fine," he gasped, waving aside the crewmen. "Get going, *now*. "

The boatmen were mercenaries; they shrugged and obeyed, leaving him to walk in a straight, slow line to his cabin. The boat's diesel blatted, then settled down to a steady burbling. He opened the door—anyone else trying that would get an unpleasant surprise—and let the softsuit fall to the floor in a thin puddle as he stumbled to the bunk. It collected itself and slithered to the table and up one leg, pouring itself into a container the size of a pocketbook to recharge and repair.

This time he *did* groan between clenched teeth as the air rasped at the burns and bruises that covered most of his skin. His right hand was swelling and red as boiled lobster from the two pointblank hits. According to the techs back home, a softsuit probably couldn't take close-range plasma bolts from a standard Domination hand-weapon. Apparently the United States of Samothrace built its agents better armor than they thought.

Enough better. Just. He staggered to the bunk and fell into it.

The suitcase clicked beneath the bed. He lay panting in the dark, his eyes swimming with the aftermath of the booster chemicals, as tendrils felt their way over and beneath him. They crisscrossed his body in a dense web, creeping into the corners of his eyes, nostrils, mouth. Things pricked his skin, and the pain diminished. Coolness soothed; there was a muted buzzing as dead skin was debrided away and replaced with temporary patches that would speed regrowth. Tentacles thin as wire and stronger than thought manipulated his gun hand.

no serious degradation of function,the AI said with indecent cheerfulness,**you will recover full effectiveness within five days, including metabolic stress from the combat drugs.**

Which took a little off your lifespan every time you used them—but it was better than being dead. His stomach twisted at the memory of the fight. Neural-link simulators could feed in scenarios of what it was like to fight a *drakensis* hand to hand, but there was still a difference when it was for real. His gut heaved again at the memory of the raw strength behind the grip that had spun him through the air, hearing again the guttural snarling of a tiger about to kill.

How can anyone mistake it for a human being?he thought. The face had been like a beast's, too; the sort of expression an antelope would encounter on the very last lion it ever saw.

it was not attempting deception with you,the machine answered pedantically.**presumably it takes more care with the local humans.**

I failed,Ken sighed. His hand tightened toward a fist until the twinges warned him. *I should have killed it!*

a scouting operation,the AI replied.**there will be other opportunities.** After a moment:**sleep.**

Thirty hours to the dropoff point near Miami. He could sleep the entire time. Darkness closed over him, as welcome as his mothers touch.

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Gwen wrapped the weapons in Pierre's jacket and tossed them over the balustrade of her bedroom's exterior terrace eighteen feet above. Then she took two steps and leapt, hands clamping onto the rough coral rock of the balcony and swinging her over. Quicker than going up the stairs, and less likely to cause commotion. And her body craved movement.

Alice was waiting; she gave a jump and squeak of startlement as Gwen appeared. Then her eyes widened at the Draka's appearance. Gwen was still running with sweat, and there were bleeding grazes on her flank and one arm; they clotted with inhuman speed. Her chest heaved as lungs pumped oxygen into the bloodstream. Skin twitched as overprimed muscles sought release. She fought down another snarl.

"What *happened*?" Alice asked, crossing her arms on the breast of her robe in an instinctive gesture of self-protection. The Draka caught an edge of the creamy scent of fear; her mask had slipped a bit under the stress, and the other's subconscious was reacting to what it perceived.

"Bit of an emergency," Gwen replied, watching patterns of heat through the Australian's facial skin. They made her seem to glow from within, like a lantern. "It's over for now. I'll explain later."

"All right," Alice said, dropping her eyes. *Good, she's learning*, the Draka thought She looked good. *Delicious*.

Without looking up: "Do you still want to . . . ?"

Gwen nodded.

"That's fine with me." An uncertain smile. "You *are* very good at it."

"After four-hundred-odd years of practice," Gwen said, advancing, "I should be."

She pulled the blond woman's arms down, then stripped off the robe. Alice shuddered at the musky smell of her sweat, then again as Gwen bent and took a nipple between her lips. She cried out in surprise as the Draka put a hand beneath her buttocks and lifted her smoothly into a fireman's carry across her shoulder. And again as the fingers probed her openings, halfway between a moan and a protest.

"This will be a little different," Gwen said, as she strode easily across the terrace and into the bedroom. "More strenuous."

The scent was intoxicating; she bit at the thigh next to her cheek, just hard enough to draw a squeal.

"I had to go into combat overdrive and didn't have the chance to expend much energy. I'll have the jittering judders for days unless I work it off now."

The squirming within the circle of her arm had no more chance of dislodging itself than it would have from a similar thickness of steel cable; and in any case, it wasn't an attempt to escape. The soft helpless movement was extremely pleasant, like a kitten's paws batting at her hands. It helped flip the savage focus of killmode over into an equally directed urge: lust, but with an edge to it, raw and direct.

She tossed the other down on the bed and climbed onto her, straddling Alice's shoulders and linking hands behind her neck. The Australian's eyes were wide and her mouth trembled slightly. Her heartbeat hammered in Gwen's ears, nearly as rapid as her own pulse. The Draka's thumbs caressed the other's cheeks and the angle of her jaw, then drew her upward as she sank down.

"So play pony for me, Alice."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thomas Cairstens pedaled faster and looked down at the speedometer of the bicycle. *Twenty. For ten miles, the way she was going.* He'd cut across the circle of her course. *Jesus.* Gwen was loping along on the foot-trail beside the laneway, keeping pace without visible strain and hurdling boulders and logs with an easy raking stride. The scent of pine was strong in the cool dawn air, but the flicker of light in the east was bright enough to give a hint of the heat that would come later. The Draka moved through the dappled half-light with a wolf's concentrated economy of motion; he could barely hear her footsteps on the rocky limestone soil. She slowed as they angled back into the gardens, down to a trot and then a walk by the freshwater pool.

He dismounted and stood panting as she shed lead-weighted anklets, bracelets and waist-belt. "Impressive," he said.

Gwen was breathing deeply, and the sweat-wet exercise tunic clung to her. "Ironic," she replied. He raised an eyebrow.

"The way we're designed, we'd be the ultimate terrors in a world where wars were fought with rifles, or better still swords." She nodded toward the bicycle. "But on that, you're nearly as fast as I am; in a car, much faster. I can see in the dark—so can an IR scope. I can do differential equations in my head, but not as well as a computer, not even *your* computers. I've got a built-in drive to fight—and apart from some infantry mopping-up actions at the end of the Last War, it's been about as much use as an udder on a bull for four hundred years. Until now."

"What do you fight in your own world?" he said curiously. "You said it was very peaceful."

"Animals," she said. "Including ones we designed intelligence into, to make them more dangerous. And each other, particularly each other—*drakensis* are *drakensis*'s main cause of death."

She stripped the tunic off over her head and threw the sodden fabric to the stone pavement with a wet *smack*. The swimming pool was fed from a cast-bronze lion's mask set in a semicircle of rough stone blocks. Gwen bent her head into the stream of water from the lion's mouth and drank hugely. Cairstens felt his breath catch at the sight. Naked, she looked far less human; the sleek perfection of long bones and flat-strap muscle was somewhere between machine and animal. He caught the smell of her sweat, like musk mixed with flowery perfume, and gave an involuntary gasp.

Gwen raised her head. Her nostrils flared slightly, taking his scent. "You've been good," she said, and



flicked her hand toward one of the loungers. "But quickly."

His fingers trembled slightly as he dropped his shorts and lay back on the padded deck-chair. He reached behind his head and gripped the framework as Gwen came to stand over him, her mahogany curls outlined against the rising sun.

"Another built-in drive," she said, and straddled him.

Her hands clamped over his. The weight of her body came down on him, always shocking; the denser bone and muscle made it heavier than his, and hot—fever hot with the superactive metabolism. Lips moved across his as her tongue probed his mouth. Her hips moved, and he felt his penis seized and clamped and held in a warm internal grip just short of pain, like a wet heated glove of flesh. The steel frame of the lounge creaked rhythmically as she rode him, harder and harder. She growled with pleasure as she moved, a sound unlike anything he'd ever heard. The musk of her scent and the crushing strength that held and moved him brought an exquisite sense of yielding helplessness. When she stiffened and arched over him he spasmed and cried out in abandon.

Gwen lay on him for a moment, smiling. "Best way to start the day," she said kindly, chucking him under the chin.

Cairstens lay limply. "God, I'm ruined," he said.

"Not at all," Gwen replied, picking him up and tossing him casually overarm into the pool.

He thrashed and sputtered for a moment as she arrowed past him. When he turned, she was standing on the bottom of the deep end looking up at him—the sight was a little eerie, until you remembered she was naturally denser than water. Then she crouched and leapt and barreled by, her wake buffeting him aside. They climbed out and put on beach robes; the maid was there with breakfast, and Alice had brought the files.

"No problems with the Belway people about the other night?"

"Coleman and Klein didn't even wake up, according to the monitors. Feinberg was up, and went out in the garden. I told her it was a minor disturbance among the construction workers, and she bought it."

"She called her policeman friend again," Gwen said. "I wonder just why he was so concerned. We'll have to look into that." She grinned. "I think she's fonder of him than he knows, judging by her behavior in the bath after that."

Alice giggled. "Not quite as much the ice-maiden as she puts on."

"There's no conflict between libido and ambition," Gwen said. "Quite the contrary. Now. It's been a very productive week," she went on thoughtfully, loading her plate with johnnycake and local dishes—fire engine, chicken souse, slices of fresh avocado. She began to feed. "I think we've achieved a preliminary rapport with Primary Belway Securities."

"Got them around your finger, you mean," Alice said.

"Not exactly. Not yet. But their eyes are definitely full of dollar signs," Gwen said. She chewed thoughtfully on a piece of johnnycake. "Pass those grits, please. We'll need a secure line into Belway, somehow . . . definitely a hold on one of their executives."

"Which one did you have in mind?"

"The youngest, Feinberg. She seems to be more mentally flexible; that'll be useful if we can bring her fully on-side eventually. You humans tend to ossify mentally by forty."

"We've got a few months before the action moves to New York," Cairstens pointed out.

Gwen frowned slightly. "Yes, but that damned Samothracian is a complicating factor. I'll have to be very cautious there, with him around."

She murmured something in her native dialect; Cairstens thought he caught *damnyank*, but he couldn't be sure. It was too different from English as he'd been raised to understand it, and she rarely used it.

"You should set up a meeting with Amier and Lather," Cairstens said. "Their influence could be extremely helpful in the U.S. I think I impressed them, but you should consolidate it."

"An excellent suggestion," Gwen said thoughtfully. "Speaking of risks, it's time to prepare a fallback strategy, just in case," she added.

"Just in case what?" he asked.

"Just in case the Samothracian manages to kill me," she said. Cairstens swallowed, feeling his stomach lurch. Alice had the same stricken look. "Oh, don't worry—it's a low probability. But it exists."

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Clone myself," she said. "I had Singh do up a viable embryo, and it's ready for implanting any time."

Cairstens frowned, searching for details; his background in genetics had improved considerably over the past few years, since that was one of IngolfTech's main lines. A clone was a genetic duplicate of the original, a cell-nucleus inserted into an ovum and stimulated to divide. This Earth still couldn't do it with higher animals, but he supposed it was routine in Gwen's timeline.

"But a clone wouldn't have your memories, would it? It wouldn't be *you*."

Gwen tapped herself behind the ear. "Not normally. But I can download a lot to my transducer," she said. "It's quasi-organic itself and the memory's stored holographically; we can extract a piece and implant it *in embryo* at about seven months, that's standard procedure, except that they usually use a blank one. That'll provide a lot of the background. No, it won't be me, a different personality . . . but it'll be fairly close. With the right upbringing, it—she—would be ready to start taking over in about twenty, thirty years. We mature about the same rate you do; the homeostasis doesn't kick in until then. I've drawn up a plan for a schedule of clandestine investments, safe houses, that sort of thing. You can start implementing it after the bankers leave. That way if everything goes sour, the clone can be reared in safety and have a base to start from."

Alice paused with a piece of pineapple on her fork. "Won't it be inconvenient, being pregnant?" she said.

Gwen chuckled. "Not for me, my dear. Not for me."

The Australian's fork dropped to her plate with a clatter. Her face went white around the eyes and

mouth as the Draka reached over to pat her on the cheek.

"Don't worry," she said. "The procedure's painless, and once the embryo implants in the uterus you'll feel fine. Slightly euphoric, in fact. It's all designed that way. Special diet, of course—she'll need more minerals and so forth than a human fetus—but it's not dangerous if you're careful. And I can guarantee that you'll absolutely *adore* the baby. That's built-in too."

Alice stifled a scream. Gwen rose and pulled her to her feet, half-supporting her.

"It's all ready. No time like the present." She stroked the Australian's blond hair. "It's a very special relationship," she said soothingly. "Being a brooder for a Draka, that is. Come on now, don't fuss."

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"Now, we have to keep this under careful control," the head of IngolfTech said.

Jennifer blinked. The sun threw sparkles of metallic brightness back from the water in the concrete holding tank. Sand gritted on the paving stones beneath her sandals. A succession of broad football-field-sized concrete holding tanks stood along the seafront, stepped down one from the other. There was a muted hum of pumps, and a hissing as bubbles rose through the water in the first four tanks; a heavy algae smell rose from them—but this last one was filled with something as transparent as distilled water.

Gwen dipped a glass into it and drank. "Try it," she said.

The Belway Securities executives followed suit. The water was sun-warm but nearly tasteless.

"Four days ago, that was sea water. A tailored algae-bacteria combination—solar-powered, bioengineered desalinization."

"You're serious?" Jennifer blurted. The other two executives looked at her, and she flushed. *Well, at least I'm not following her around with my tongue lolling out*, she thought. *Talk about unprofessional, give me a break.*

"Perfectly serious. The algae extract the sodium from the seawater, encapsulate it, sink to the bottom, then die. You drain the algae from the bottom of the tank, and the fresh water from the top. That's an oversimplification, of course; the technical data is in your briefing kit. Basically the algae produce a carbon-based ion-exchange polymer which holds the sodium and chloride ions in an insoluble chemical bond."

The managing director ran a handkerchief over his balding head. The Australian assistant made a hand motion, and a Haitian servant in a white jacket came forward with a tray of iced lemonade. Jennifer gave the blond a second's attention. Wearing a high-collared dress despite the heat, and looking rather peaked.

Back to business. "EPA approval might be a bit of a problem."

Everyone nodded. Gwen shrugged.

"It's not viable in the open ocean, no resistance to predators; and we built in a cellular failsafe to limit reproduction. Besides sun, it needs sulfur, nitrogen, and ammonia at much higher concentrations than in

the sea. The bubbles"—she nodded toward the tanks—"are aeration. It's a photosynthetic process, of course, so atmospheric carbon compounds are a source and oxygen is a byproduct, just like any other plant life. The necessary nitrogen is taken from the atmosphere via symbiotic nitrogen-fixing bacteria, and two other bacteria also concentrate metallic salts. Incidentally, raw sewage would do fine as a source of bulk nutrients for the process."

"Ah," the managing director said. "And the byproducts?"

"Salts of various types. To be precise, a concentrated saline sludge with organic polymers. There's another process which recycles the sulfur and so forth for reuse, and the rest is chemical feedstock for a number of processes. In fact, the sale price of the byproducts would more than cover the installation costs—you could run this process at a profit *without* using the fresh water, just dumping it back in the ocean.

"But yes," she went on, "regulatory approval—particularly in the U.S.—may take some time. However, think of the potential once it is approved; and in non-American markets, as well. We've had expressions of interest from Saudi Arabia, among others. And Singapore."

"What are the costs?" Coleman said, swallowing.

"Minimal. Building the tanks, pumping, and adding the nutrients to the water. Then add the algae, stir, and wait. We calculate the overall cost to be less than five percent of conventional vacuum distillation or osmotic filter treatments. Cheap enough to replace any but the most abundant natural sources for coastal cities; cheap enough to use for irrigation anywhere under 100 meters above sea level."

Gwen was wearing a fairly conservative outfit, blazer and pleated skirt; she leaned one hand against the rough concrete of a lab building. The vice-president was still having trouble tearing his eyes away. Jennifer frowned in puzzlement. *Yes, he's a leech, but he doesn't let it get in the way of business*, she thought. Coleman evidently thought so too; or perhaps the implications had just begun to sink in, because he straightened and put a hand to his tie.

"Good *God!*" he blurted, staring at the water.

My God, Jennifer thought. *My Greed!*

They all nodded. There were billions in that market, even if the costing estimate was overoptimistic by a factor of ten. If it was anywhere near accurate . . . Los Angeles alone would make the patent holder richer than J. P. Getty had ever been. Anywhere with bright sunlight and a shortage of fresh water. No energy costs, and no expensive tech necessary.

Damn, anyone *could use this*. *Places too primitive for elevators could use this*. She felt her face flush. If it really was cheap enough for irrigation, it could upset economies all over the world. Every low-lying coastal desert in the tropics could become a garden. Israel was importing drinking water by tanker from Europe—now the Negev would become wall-to-wall orange groves and wheatfields. Californians could water their lawns until they turned into rice paddies. Libya would become the Kansas of the Mediterranean.

"You have the patents?" she said, in a tone that held the hush of reverence.

"Pending, and I mean pending everywhere. Full proprietary rights, of course; this was done in-house."

"This looks . . . ah . . . too good to be true."

No *overheads at all! Just send them packets of algae like baker's yeast!* On the other hand, how would you prevent piracy? Forget that, this would be big even *with* piracy. Sit back and collect the royalties. Set them low, really low, so people would be less tempted to cheat, then get your revenue on high volume.

Jennifer looked at the vat of water with a feeling of awe. *I think, she mused, that this may just be the Perfect Investment.* It was a little like finding the Holy Grail.

Gwen nodded. "And things which look too good to be true generally are; however, you can study this to your hearts' content and you'll find nothing but hard, profitable fact."

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Not bad, Lafarge thought. Martinique had places much more upscale than the one where he'd first met Captain Lavasseur. This one looked out over the hills of Fort-de-France with white buildings shining below, the foam-capped purple waves of the Caribbean beyond, mountains behind . . . and nobody was wearing a weapon as far as the AI could tell. He attacked the food with gusto. The *New America* had taken the genetic records of most of Earth's life-forms to Samothrace, but some just hadn't established themselves well. Lobster were among them. The *lagoustines* were delicious.

"You lookin' better," Captain Lavasseur said.

The schooner captain looked a little surprised. *I suppose I looked like death, a few days ago,* Lafarge thought. The local witch-doctors couldn't do anything at all to speed cellular repair.

"Well, I've had an attitude adjustment," Lafarge said. *When I finished kicking myself,* he added silently.

The problem was that he had no training for this at all. Insertion on the Domination's earth was a last-ditch emergency measure, with the agent's lifespan measured in hours or at most days—if he made it to the planetary surface, of course. You couldn't subvert a Draka, or a *servus*, and even the best-trained and prepared agent could only hope to imitate either for one or two brief encounters. Kenneth Lafarge could have survived in the vast wilderness reserves for months, or made a brief heroic attack on a selected target . . . but at infiltrating, suborning, coopting, he was a rank amateur.

"I've decided on a new approach to my business problems," he went on.

Like, I should have had a dozen mercenaries with me. Enough to neutralize the Draka's local servants, at least. That would have allowed him a clearer shot; and there would be no signature of noncongruent energies. Or not nearly so much, at least.

Better late than never. He pushed across a brown paper envelope filled with something pebbly. Lavasseur took off his hat reverently as he accepted it; it wasn't every day that he handled twenty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds.

Odd that a particular arrangement of crystalline carbon was so highly valued. It was so *hard* for these people to make Nature yield what they wanted.

"Anytin' you want done, Antoine Lavasseur will do for you."

"I may take you up on that," Lafarge said. He handed over a business card. "I'll be in touch."

He had two great advantages here. If he *could* convince locals of the truth, it would be easier to get them to cooperate with him. *He* wasn't out to destroy them all.

The other was that the Draka was attempting to build something. All he had to do was destroy.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"Detective Carmaggio," he said, spitting the stick of gum into the wastebasket. It was his direct outside line; you couldn't have your snitches going through a switchboard, it made them nervous.

Sugar-free, he thought with disgust, looking at the crumpled wad of gum. It was like chewing rubber bands. What he really wanted was a smoke. About time to admit that gum didn't help the craving. Jenny didn't like the habit, either.

"It's about the warehouse killings, Detective," the voice on the other end of the line said. "You know what I mean."

Carmaggio brought his feet down from the desk and tapped one shoe onto the *record* pedal.

"Yes, I remember that. What's your name, sir?" The same motion activated the tracer. He kept his tone polite and calm, inviting the man on the other end to keep talking.

"That doesn't matter right now," the voice said.

Hell it doesn't. The usual influx of nutballs—confessing, or offering to reveal various conspiracies, or both—had died down long ago, it was better than three years since the murders. The voice was a man's, not old, Standard American accent, perhaps a hint of Midwestern rasp.

"The murderer's name is Gwendolyn Ingolfsson," it went on. "It—she—is responsible for several other killings. She's currently resident in the Bahamas."

Excitement punched him in the gut. *Closed file, my ass.* This one really knew something. *Maybe she did have help. Maybe they're turning on each other.* He suppressed the speculation; facts first.

"How do you know this, sir?" Rodriguez came in, and Carmaggio made frantic *send a car to the trace address* motions at him.

"That doesn't matter either. What does matter is that she's coming back."

"Yes?"

"Back to New York. If you check, you'll find she's bought up the property where the murders took place, through front companies. She'll be coming to New York shortly, and dealing with an investment

firm named Primary Belway Securities."

The Fischer killing. He'd been with PBS. *Hell, so's Jenny. Hell, she's in the Bahamas.* He suppressed a stab of worry. *Nobody's going to mess with a bunch of investment bankers.*

"It's extremely important that this . . . person not be allowed access to New York," the voice went on.

I am beginning to get seriously pissed off with this turkey, Carmaggio thought. The tone was desperately patient, the way you talked to a slightly retarded child. Plenty of people talked that way to cops; he was used to it. He got the feeling that this bird talked to *everyone* that way, however.

"We're always concerned with the safety of New York and its citizens," he said soothingly. "Why don't you come in and tell us all about it?"

The answer was a chuckle; the first hint there was an actual human being on the other end of the line. "Not until we have an understanding, Lieutenant. I think you've figured out that this is . . . not a usual case, at all. I think you may be ready to understand what's really going on here. But it has to be in a way that doesn't endanger either of us. No contacts that leave any recordings, no involvement of higher authorities, and no meetings in places where we might be under observation."

Yeah, and I have to wear a rubber nose and give the secret handshake, Carmaggio thought. *If he's so paranoid, what does he think this line is?*

"That might be possible, sir. Where should we get in touch?"

"I'll contact you, in a day or two."

"Sir—"

"And Lieutenant . . . anyone in contact with Ingolfsson is in extreme danger."

"All right, you dickhead, I want some answers! Now! Stop bullshitting me or—"

The line went back to the dial tone, with no click of a broken connection. Henry Carmaggio sat looking at the receiver in his hand for a moment, then replaced it with exaggerated care. The alternative was beating it on his desk until the pieces were too small to hold.

"That was *just* the thing I fucking needed to hear," he said. "Jesus, you get the blue-and-white dispatched?"

Jesus Rodriguez's thin brown face came around the doorjamb. "No trace, *patron.*"

"Fuck," Carmaggio said in a weary sigh. The new process was supposed to be automatic, with the number and location of the phone showing up on a map. "Nothing?"

"A glitch. It gives us our own number."

He tapped the pedal again, rewinding the tape. "Let's listen and see if there was anything I missed."

The tape hissed. Carmaggio waited, calmly at first, then with a heavy sinking feeling. There was nothing on it, nothing at all. The weird shit was starting again.

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Kenneth Lafarge bought a soft pretzel with mustard and sat on the edge of the fountain in Washington Square Park. The wounds didn't hurt anymore.

It was a cold raw day, slush and lowering skies. A homeless man shuffled by, fingerless gloves holding two bulging plastic bags. Behind him loomed an off-white mock-French triumphal arch, and behind that a wedding-cake minor skyscraper. Pigeons hunched their wings against the cold. A man in chain-studded leather did too, his pinched gray face stubble-covered and shuttered. Two girls passed, talking and laughing; one wore a nose-stud. Ken smiled at them, at all the pulsing streams of people.

There were nearly as many people in this State of New York as in the whole of Samothrace. *I like it. I couldn't live here permanently, but I like it.* He'd been country-raised, and even the capital city of Jefferson was a manicured garden next to *this*. He remembered green-black tuftbush and Terran sage, riding down a canyon and the skin-winged majesty of a *gruk* arrowing by overhead, eyeing the herd of sheep but wary of his rifle.

"I'd go nuts here in twenty years. But . . ."

His scanner caught traces of conversations, checking for keywords: in Spanish, Chinese, Italian, in African tongues extinct centuries before the Last War in *his* history. Nobody on Samothrace had spoken anything else but English since the first generation of settlement. For that matter, every other language had been dying out on Earth by the end of the twentieth century—by compulsion in the Domination, through market forces and policy in the Alliance for Freedom.

I do like it here. These people were sloppy, restless, childish, self-indulgent. They had no moral seriousness. *But they're alive in a way we never were.* Not even before the Last War. His ancestors' America had been an anxious giant, mobilized for generations against a menace that made the Cold War they'd had here look like a love-feast. Compared to this America his had been grim, puritan, uniform.

He imagined the Square broken and desolate, buildings shattered hulks. A weapons platform hovering in the Manhattan sky with the bat-winged dragon of the Domination blazoned on its side; a wolf-faced ghoulon trooper crouched where he sat, cradling a particle-beam rifle and gnawing on a human arm.

"Never," he said softly, getting to his feet and strolling with his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets. He attracted a few glances. By local standards six-foot, crop-haired blonds with his build in neat business suits were exotic.

The problem was the asymmetry of the positions. Ken looked at the glossy of the Draka's face again; his equipment had extrapolated it to a 3-D image and matched it against the files. This had to be one of the old ones; subtle clues in the bone structure marked it as the first or second generation of *drakensis*. Centuries old, then. Unbelievably experienced. And not limited by fear of detection. It *wanted* to be detected, to call the ghoulish-horde through to feast.

"I can't let that paralyze me," he murmured.

An anchoring beacon wasn't all that difficult to make. The first expedition through a planetary surface-level molehole on Samothrace had managed to cobble one together from the equipment they'd brought. Then they'd broadcast until a new molehole was latched on—giving the USS a whole new Samothrace, in a solar system humans had never visited. As far as they could tell, in *that* continuum Earth



had been scoured free of life sometime in the twenty-first century. Spaceborne instruments could scan a planet fairly closely, even across 4.2 light-years. The oxygen content of *that* Earth's atmosphere had dropped far enough to make it plain even the algae in the oceans were gone.

So the Draka here could mess up the landscape as much as it needed to. The more the better, in fact—it increased the possibility of a unidirectional lock-on by the *drakensis* scientists working from the other side.

I'm only constrained in what I *do*, he thought meditatively.

"How much does this policeman have figured out?" he asked himself.

Once he'd let the locals know, there was no going back. And they'd be exposed; he'd have to push them to the front, give the minimum of backup. The less he interacted directly with the snake, the better. At all costs.

"Well, Lieutenant Carmaggio," he said to himself, "you wanted some answers. I hope you enjoy them."

Kenneth Lafarge smiled. The panhandler who'd been about to approach the slumming businessman turned on his heel and lurched away.

The snake is acting through locals. I can too.

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There were three other people in Carmaggio's apartment: Jesus Rodriguez, Mary Chen, and the FBI agent, Finch. It was cramped in the living room. Unlike a lot of the Department, he believed in living where he worked, which meant paying New York rents for zero space. It was an old four-story walkup, mostly new immigrants from Russia and a few old ladies in black who passed the time of day with him on the stairs in Neapolitan dialect.

"We don't have enough for an arrest," Carmaggio said.

"That's an understatement," Finch said. "Not with the evidence gone into a black hole."

The FBI agent fiddled with the buttons of her jacket and looked out the apartment window; it had a beautiful view of the fire escape on the building next door. "When will she arrive?"

Carmaggio shrugged. "Sometime in the spring, that's the earliest the paperwork will be ready. We don't know if she plans to come here personally at all. I've got a friend in Belway, but I can't badger her for the information. That's the impression I got, though."

He opened a folder. "But this company of Ingolfsson's has bought up or leased a lot of property. Close on twenty million dollars' worth, including the warehouse where Marley Man got wasted."

Silence fell for a long moment. The medical examiner broke it.

"We've got to face up to something," she said. "Henry, Ms. Finch . . . we've got to realize what we're facing."

"Which is?" Henry said. *You're the one with the fancy education. You tell me.*

Chen looked down at her hands, twisting the fingers together. "The genetics . . . nobody can alter mammalian heredity like that. *Nobody*. I did some discreet research. And nobody will be able to do it for a long time; fifty years, conservative estimate."

Henry grunted and looked away. "Hell," he said. "I never even watched *Star Trek* much."

Finch gave a violent shake of her head. "We can't afford to get ourselves caught up on labels," she said. "I think that's what the people at the Other Place—Langley," she amplified, "Bureau slang for Langley—I think that's what they've done. It isn't ours, so it must be the Japanese or whatever. The more layers of committees they have to filter their data through, the more officially acceptable it'll get."

Henry nodded. That was how bureaucracies functioned; they were set up to hammer information into a few acceptable categories, and they did just that—no matter how much violence got done to the data in the process. He'd seen enough men die in Vietnam because the raw intelligence conflicted with the approved version of reality.

"Okay," he said quietly, "we've got *National Enquirer* stuff here, only for real. Does that mean the spooks are right? We should back off and let official channels handle it? Concealing the information we've got is almost certainly an indictable offense."

Jesus Rodriguez spoke. "Like the lady said, I think they'll be looking for the wrong thing. And *patron*—the stakes are high."

Chen looked up. "The . . . whatever it was . . . came armed. They killed and killed again. That doesn't argue for 'we come in peace,' Henry."

Her face went extremely blank. "And I don't care to be blackmailed. That sort of thing was what my parents took a very risky boat trip to avoid. So I'm not altogether convinced of the unarguable wisdom of the duly constituted authorities, right now."

Finch winced slightly. "Since Andrews and Debrowski came back from the Bahamas," she said, looking down at her hands, "there's been a fair amount of traffic that way. At a much higher level. Not those two. Whole delegations."

You didn't send wet-work specialists to negotiate, really. Even the sort of fairly sophisticated wet-workers involved, Amcits and on the official payroll. The accountants must have taken over, and the Government's tame scientists.

"They've clamped down harder than ever, and Dowding's been warned from higher in the Bureau not to even *think* about complaining again. They did some sort of deal, and they're excited about it. Very excited. And scared."

Carmaggio sipped his coffee. "Oh, lovely. Ms. Ingolfsson has become the goose that lays the golden eggs. She's teachers pet."

"Right," he went on. "Now, let's see what we've got and where it gets us. There's that posse warrior with his head blown off at the eyebrows. Weapons are a hobby of mine, and there's nothing that could do it. Some sort of energy gun might. That's what the spooks said. They also said you'd need an eighteen-wheeler load of equipment. Our suspect had something no bigger than a rifle. From the later reports, I'd say it was the size of a handgun, small enough to carry concealed."

Chen pursed her lips. "I can think of several technologies that could produce a knife as thin and sharp and rigid as the one that inflicted the injuries in the warehouse," she said. "And was used to dismember Stephen Fischer. None of them available today, or will be for some time."

"When we've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true," Finch said. Henry looked at her blankly. "Classical reference, sorry. What I mean is, I don't think it's aliens here. The—not exactly the MO—the stuff surrounding the incident is wrong. And the genetic material is human. Human, and animals from Earth."

"We sure of that?"

Chen tapped her own folder. "Extremely. Henry, the odds of a separate evolution producing that type of genetic correspondence is . . . well, getting hit by lightning is a dead certainty, compared to that."

"Time traveler," Finch said.

The words lay heavy in the pause that followed. Henry sighed deeply and ran a hand over his scalp, acutely conscious of the thinning hairs.

"Oh, shit," he said. He held up a hand. "Yeah, I know it's logical, I know it's probably *true*, but we've just bought ourselves a ticket to the funny farm if this ever leaks out to our respective superiors."

The idea lay like lead in his mind. *I've been chasing my own ass on this for three and a half years*, he thought. There simply wasn't any other explanation, nada, zip. Either he forgot the whole thing, or he went with this. And he just couldn't walk away from it. Like Jesus said, the stakes were too high.

"Something else," he said thoughtfully. "Okay, we've got a time traveler." He held up his copy of the Canadian RCMP fax. "A woman. One woman, armed, calling herself Gwendolyn Ingolfsson. And we got the arm of some *thing* with her. What's that suggest?"

"Something went wrong," Jesus said, flicking at his teeth with a thumbnail. "Accident, fuckup, *de nada*."

"Not a woman," Chen corrected. "A female, yes. Related species, but not human. Probably from, ah, the future."

Henry sighed and loosened his tie. "Whatever."

"And she responded with a killing frenzy," Finch said. "That tells us something about the, the time and place she came from."

"Dropping into the middle of Marley Man's posse could send anyone into a frenzy," Henry said thoughtfully. "But the two apartment killings, yeah. Our Ingolfsson is seriously bad in both senses of the word."

Silence fell again. Finch broke it.

"Why buy the warehouse?" she said. "That seems to be important, somehow. Twenty million dollars worth of important. That's more than sentimental-souvenir money."

"We can't tell for sure, but it certainly looks like Ingolfsson *needs* the warehouse somehow."

"I've got—" Henry began.

"—a bad feeling about this, *si* " Jesus completed the sentence. "Unless she just wants to go home."

"Could we count on that?" Henry said. "No, I didn't think so. Let's think about the latest ingredient."

"Mystery Man," Finch said. "He's contacted you several times, me once, and several people at this firm, Primary Belway Securities. He certainly doesn't seem to be operating with Ingolfsson. Trying to screw up her plans, evidently."

"Cop chasing perp?" Jesus said. "They sent someone back here to clean up the accident?"

"That's my gut feeling," Henry agreed. He looked over at Finch; the Medical Examiner wasn't in the same business, but the FBI agent was. "Mystery Man's got some gadgets too."

"Cop is a possibility," Finch said. "Or spook and counter-spook. He isn't necessarily a good guy."

"So far he's made a lot less in the way of footprints," Henry observed thoughtfully. "No trail of bodies, and no fancy gadgets apart from messing with our computers. Assuming he was sent back, you'd expect him to have more fancy stuff."

"But perhaps is more reluctant to use it," Chen said. The others looked at her. "If we have a time traveler, they could be—probably would be—careful about *changing the past*. And we would be the past, to them."

"Ingolfsson doesn't seem too concerned about that," Henry said. "Left a pretty heavy blood trail, and—"

He smacked himself on the forehead. "All that fancy high-tech stuff her company's been selling! *That's* where it came from!"

The future. The theory was starting to look convincing, not just to his head but to his gut, the place where ideas came from. He didn't know whether to be reassured or frightened. *Either I'm adjusting or going nuts.*

"Perhaps she is some sort of criminal under pursuit, then," Chen said, pulling at her lower lip.

Henry made a chopping gesture. "Let's not let the speculation get completely out of hand," he said. "You get too many preconceptions, it can foul up your ability to see things that don't agree with the theory you've built."

The others nodded. "What should we do about it?" Finch said.

"First, Mystery Man indicated he's willing to meet. Yes or no?"

Chen started to speak, but Finch cut her off. "Lieutenant, I don't think we can run this as a democracy. I think you should be in charge."

Christ, on point again, Henry thought. The others nodded.

"All right then. I *will* set up a meet with Mystery Man. When we've got more information from him,

you'll all get to know. Which leaves us with the question of what to do about Ingolfsson."

Silence fell. "Right now, we watch," Henry said. "Right now, we can't pin any of the killings on Ingolfsson. Maybe she'll just vanish in the warehouse, maybe Mystery Man will get her, maybe she'll turn into a good citizen."

"And maybe the horse will learn to sing," Finch said.

Henry *did* recognize that one. He shook his head. "No, there'll be more killings, all right. And *then* we move in. Fuck national security; we'll blow this thing wide open and call in the artillery and nail Ms. Time Traveler to the wall. Fuck the consequences, too. Everyone with me on this?"

A circle of nods. He went on: "You all know what happens to whistle-blowers, don't you? Still willing?"

Nobody spoke. "All right, here's how we'll set it up. We keep everything word-of-mouth; and no more phone calls than we have to. Nothing on computers, absolutely nothing, and that includes notes to ourselves.

"When we move, we'll have to be able to move fast and big. Finch, you get onto your boss and bring him in on this. Chen, get me a list of those friends you've been doing the discreet research with, and we'll talk to a few of them. Jesus and I will sound out a few guys we know in the NYPD. Then we'll—"

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"Hello," Carmaggio said.

The other man ducked his head in a nod and extended his hand. "Kenneth Lafarge," he said.

Henry gave him a once-over. Early thirties, he judged. Close-cut blond hair, blue eyes, a farmboy face—snub-nosed and tanned, square chin. Jock's build, broad shoulders and narrow waist. The hand fit that, slightly callused and very strong. Dressed in a suit and carrying an attache case; sort of like a Norman Rockwell painting of an up-and-coming small town lawyer. Not heeled to Henry's experienced eye . . . *but he might be carrying a mininuke in a tie clip, for all I know. Christ, I wish I wasn't here.* For that matter, he wished all this wasn't happening, period.

Behind them the Mall was nearly empty, bleak and lifeless with winter. It smelled of wet earth, cold water, and traffic. Carmaggio had never liked Washington much: a marble veneer over a cesspit. Which was, he thought, sort of appropriate, all things considered.

"Detective Lieutenant Henry Carmaggio," he replied. *What do you say to a time traveler?*

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me, Detective Carmaggio," the younger man said. "A great deal depends on what we can do."

He spoke ordinary general American, but there was a hint of something underneath it; a formality of phrasing, that indicated it wasn't quite his native speech.

"Yeah," Henry said, hunching his shoulders. They turned and walked beside the gray surface of the Reflecting Pool. "Why here?"

"I'm apprehensive about what capabilities *it* may have in place in New York," Lafarge said. "A little

extra caution never hurts."

"Look, let's be upfront." At the other man's lifted eyebrow: "Let's lay our cards on the table. You're from the future, right?"

The words hung heavy in the air. *Me and the Saucer People*, Carmaggio thought.

Lafarge nodded. "In a way."

"In *what* fucking way?"

The other man made a soothing gesture with both hands. "Four-hundred-forty-odd years in the future, yes. But the future of a different past."

"What?" Henry felt a dull ache begin between his shoulderblades and creep up his neck.

"I'm sorry . . . you know the concept? A battle turns out differently, a war, someone important isn't born, and things are changed?"

Henry nodded. "Lee wins the battle of Gettysburg, something like that?" There was no *end* to the weird shit.

"Yes, exactly. In my case . . . the differences start about 1779. By 1900 my world was very different from yours. By the 1990s, unrecognizable."

"What happened in 1779?"

"The Dutch Republic declared war on the British," Lafarge said. He ran a hand over his hair. "It's a long story. The British lost the war against us—against America—at about the same pace they did here, maybe a little slower. But they won the war against the Dutch, and that's where everything started to go wrong. They took the Cape Colony."

"South Africa?" Henry said. He'd done some research on Africa a few years back, when two branches of the Black Muslims had started killing each other over doctrinal points.

"Yes. After the war, they used it to settle the Loyalists—mostly the ones from the Southern colonies—and their Hessian mercenaries. The settlers they sent enslaved the locals. And they grew, and they grew. A century later the Draka—the colony was renamed after Francis Drake—were already a major power. In the Great War they took most of Asia; then in the Eurasian War, something like your World War Two, they took the rest of Asia and Europe. There was a long cold war between them and us, the Alliance for Democracy, the U.S. and South America and the British, the Australasians, some others. The Final War happened in 1999."

"Wait a minute." Henry squeezed his thumb and forefinger on the bridge of his nose. "Okay, these . . . Draka?" Lafarge nodded. "They were seriously bad, right? Sort of like Nazis?"

"Worse. Smarter. In our world, the Nazis were a poor-man's copy of the Domination—the Domination of the Draka, that's what they called themselves. Call themselves." Lafarge shook his head. "I'm surprised your Nazis were so much like ours. We even had a Hitler, although he didn't look much like yours. Ours was taller, blond, and had an eyepatch . . . never mind."

"Wait a minute," Carmaggio said again. The tension in his neck was worse. "These supernazis, Draka, whatever, they *won* this World War Three, is that what you're saying?"

Lafarge nodded.

"Then who the hell are *you*, the French Resistance?"

"Space travel was commonplace by the time of the Final War," Lafarge said. Henry gritted his teeth at the heavy patience in the younger mans tone. "My ancestors escaped to Alpha Centauri in an experimental interstellar ship—slower than light, of course. There's a habitable planet there, you'll discover it yourselves as soon as you get some really powerful telescopes into orbit."

"Wait a minute—wait right *here*," Henry said.

He wheeled away, working his shoulders, then stopped and looked up at the spire of the Washington Monument. *From the future, from another dimension, and from another fucking planet, too*, he thought. *Jesus wept*. Wasn't someone like Arnold S. supposed to handle this sort of thing? Or a big-titted actress with a pair of glasses on to make her look like a scientist? Some morphing from Industrial Light and Magic to wow the kids, popcorn and Diet Coke. *Shit*. He remembered Stephen Fischer's head in the freezer of his refrigerator. That was all too real. So were the lab reports, so was the arm of that God-knew-what.

"Sorry," he said as he rejoined Lafarge.

"I realize this must all be a considerable shock."

"Do you? Do you realize how fucking consoling that is and how much better it makes me feel?" Henry jammed his hands down into his pockets and walked in silence. "By the way, how do I know you're a good guy yourself? You realize you've got absolutely no proof of anything you've said."

Lafarge shrugged. "If you can match what I'll show you anywhere in 1999," he said, "I'm the greatest liar since Judas Iscariot. As to who's the good guy . . . I'm not the one who left a trail of bodies through your city."

"There is that. There is that. What are we up against?"

"A *drakensis*. The Draka were . . . slavers, degenerates, mass murderers, but they were human. They didn't *want* to be, that was the problem—and they were very, very good at molecular genetics even then, it's how they won the Final War. A hundred years ahead of where you are now, by our 1970s. They created their own version of the Master Race, and it replaced them. Replaced true humanity entirely, here in the Solar System."

"Nothing left but the supermen?"

" *Homo drakensis* and *homo servus*. "

Henry winced. *Servus*. Slave. "That mean what I think it means?" Lafarge nodded grimly. "Tell me about the . . . whatever it is we got."

"It was an accident, if that's any consolation to you. We—the snakes and Samothrace—are developing a . . . faster-than-light drive. But if you do it wrong—and they haven't got the control down yet—you end

up with temporal instead of spatial displacement. I can't explain it to you, I'm a covert-action operative, not a physicist. And you're at least three paradigm shifts, three equivalents of Newton or Einstein, away. Could you explain a computer to a tribesman from New Guinea?"

"I can't even understand the goddamned manuals for PCs *myself*. Okay, what about our bad lady? What can she do?"

"It. Never forget that. It's not human. Do?" Lafarge shrugged. "For a start: it's fast, fast and very strong, with hyperacute senses. Very resistant to damage, reinforced bones, redundant organs, high radiation tolerance, tissue regeneration if it is hurt. Strong enough to rip a human limb from limb, hearing and sight and sense of smell like an animal. Utterly ruthless, fearless, and aggressive, with an inbuilt drive to fight and to dominate everything in its environment. A tiger with the mind of a man. Oh, and it's immortal—doesn't age."

Henry nodded to himself. Something in him wanted to add *what about the blue tights and the cape?* but the scene in the warehouse kept getting in the way. The memory of the heavy stink of blood, and the bodies tossed about like dolls, mangled the way a dog does a rat.

"That's for a start?" he said. "Make me even happier, Lafarge."

"Genius-level intelligence; in your terms, IQ of about 200, 220. Perfect memory. Idiot-savant mental abilities."

"Counting all the spilled matchsticks?" Henry remembered the movie well, although he doubted the killer was anything like Dustin Hoffman.

"Yes. They seem to be a little short on real creativity, but they're extremely smart. And then there's the control mechanisms. For controlling others, that is."

"Wait . . . you mean they can read minds? Hypnotize people?"

"Not quite. It can read body language and sub-vocalizations well enough to make it seem like a mind-reader, though. The control comes from pheromones . . . . You know what they are?"

"What makes the dogs howl when the bitch is in heat?"

Lafarge nodded. "They're more versatile than that. In us, in humans, they're becoming vestigial. The effects are subliminal. A *drakensis* has pheromones that are overpoweringly strong. Their serf race, the *servus*, are completely vulnerable. But on unprotected, unprepared normal humans, the effects can be devastating too. You wouldn't even notice them consciously; you'd just be bowled over by what feels like overwhelming charisma. Pretty soon you'd *want* to do anything the *drakensis* told you to. You'd stay awake nights thinking up ways to please."

"Shit." Henry stopped and sank down on a bench. *Would all this go away if I just hopped the plane back to New York and forgot about it?* Unfortunately, he knew the answer was no. He'd never been good at hiding his head in the sand.

He looked over at Lafarge on the opposite end of the bench. "Why do I get this really shitty feeling about all this? You going to offer us advisors and military aid? Like us and Moscow back in the old days? And sure, it's true we were telling the truth when we said some Third World schmuck was better off taking our guns. But by the time the elephants are finished their proxy war across his back garden, it's



squashed pretty fucking flat."

"It's worse than that. We can't help you directly. The Domination holds the Solar System too firmly. Moleholes—it's the physics, I can't explain it. If the *drakensis* succeeds in making a beacon, they can open a gateway and flood through. You'll have about as much chance as . . . in your terms, as much chance as Australian Aborigines with stone-tipped spears would against helicopter gunships and tanks. The Domination . . . they'll reduce you to domestic animals, playthings, and they'll gene-engineer you into *liking* it. That's one alternative."

"I hope there are others."

"If the *drakensis* can't establish a lock-on beacon here, it'll try to take over the planet by itself."

"Hell, there's only one of her. It, whatever."

"It's immortal, remember, unless it's killed. And it's a female."

"With no males, and a breeding population of one."

Lafarge shook his head. "They don't reproduce the way we do. They implant their fertilized ova in slave wombs—humans will do as well as *servus*."

Henry winced. *Jesus*. "Without a man—"

"Cloning. This is a cancer, an infestation, like maggots in your flesh. You have to get it all, no matter how deep you must cut." Lafarge grinned. "That's the bad news."

"You're the good news, right?" Carmaggio said.

"A big part of it. Myself, my equipment. And *it* has weaknesses. They tend to arrogance and over-confidence, and they're parasites, dependent on their slaves. Not really creative at all. And it's under-equipped, with nothing but its equivalent of street clothing."

"Good we've got you to ride to the rescue."

Lafarge let the sarcasm roll off him; Carmaggio suspected he wasn't long on irony, anyway. *Is it him, or are they all that po-faced where he comes from?*

"No, all I can do is *help* you. I'm incongruent with this reference frame . . . . Think of it this way: I stand out. Every time I do something that makes things different from the way they'd be if I weren't here, there's a . . . blip. An event wave. The enemy get a chance of detecting how-where-when we are."

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't," Carmaggio said.

Well, Chief Wampanoag, the Pilgrim Father said, he thought, *evil spirits hide in the iron tube. When you pull the trigger, they push the lead ball out . . . . Great Thanksgiving turkey, have another cup of mulled cider and now about that little land deal . . . .* He couldn't expect it to make any sense. In a way, that was reassuring. If it *had* made sense in his terms, he'd have doubted it. Four centuries—more, in terms of actual progress. Try explaining electricity to Sir Walter Raleigh.

"What can we do, then?"

"Act on my information. That'll still leave . . . signs . . . but less so. Muffled."

He held up a hand. "I can't direct you. Even *that* would be dangerous."

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"Hey, Jake," the Guard officer said.

"El-tee," Henry Carmaggio replied.

Actually Saunders was a National Guard major these days, but they went back a ways. Back to the delta. Carmaggio had been a plain garden-variety grunt; Saunders started out as a lieutenant and walked out a captain. To be precise, he'd been invalidated out back to the World as a captain, with some exotic Vietnamese rot carried on a punji stake eating his feet. Still a trim little guy, dark—part Indian, from Oklahoma—looking more wrinkled and gray than they all had in '70, but hell, that was a long time ago. A small, smart man with a big nose, blue cracker eyes and a lot of oil money who still wore the uniform sometimes. Probably with as much conviction as he did the inconspicuously well-tailored businessman's suit he had on now.

"What can I do for you?"

Carmaggio looked around the office. *Nice*. At Saunders's level, weekend warriors had to have major pull; which meant their civilian jobs tended to be roughly equivalent to their military rank—and a lot better-paying than regular officers of the same formal status. A secretary came in with coffee in elegant bone-china cups. None of the lingering aroma of old socks and sweat you had down at NYPD headquarters, that was for sure. Pale carpet, pale pastel colors on the walls.

"El-tee—Christ, Mr. Saunders—"

"Bill, Henry."

"Okay, Bill. The first thing you can do for me is promise not to send for the guys with white coats and butterfly nets."

Saunders leaned back in his swivel chair behind the broad desk.

"Okay," he said. Time and money hadn't smoothed much of the East Texas rasp out of his voice. "I'm pretty damn sure you're not here to sell me tickets to the policeman's ball or tell me how you found the Lord. Shoot."

Carmaggio ran a hand through his hair. *Christ on a stick, this is embarrassing.*

"Right. About three and a half years ago, there was a big killing in a disused warehouse, twenty dead."

Saunders frowned. "Yep, remember that one."

"Here's what really happened—"

Twenty minutes later, he sank back in his chair, exhausted enough to let the thick leather upholstery cradle him in its Old Spice-scented comfort. Saunders looked at him silently; Carmaggio waited, sweat

rolling down into the collar of his shirt and making his shoulder holster dig into his skin.

"Henry, that story leaves me one of three alternatives," Saunders said, clipping the end off a cigar. "Smoke?"

"Gave it up."

"Yep. Either you've started using the junk you confiscate, or you're seriously bullshitting me . . . or you're telling the truth. If you're tellin' the truth, you'd better have something to show me. I owe you one, but nobody's going to convince me the Gumbys of the Gods have landed without hard evidence."

The detective met the cold blue eyes. William Saunders might have ears like an old-fashioned milk jug and political ambitions, but he'd also brought his platoon through a year of bad bush with fewer losses and more done than anyone else in the district. He was listening for old times' sake, nothing more.

"Yeah . . . Bill. I realize hearing all this isn't like going through it yourself." A bleak nod answered him. "As it happens," he went on, taking a black rectangle out of his pocket, "I do have something fairly convincing."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I don't know how you do it," Jennifer said.

The last traces of red and gold were dying out of the clouds on the western horizon, and a cool wind blew the gauze curtains through the open glass doors. Gwen sat with her head framed against the lingering remnants of sunset; some freak of the perspective seemed to make her eyes glint for a second as the lights came up automatically.

"Do what, Jenny?" Gwen said.

"Stay so *fresh*," she said. "And never get frazzled or get anything *wrong*."

In this business, nobody was lazy and most were workaholic. Gwendolyn Ingolfsson was . . . demonic, there was no other word for it.

"Ah, well, I just don't need much sleep," she said. "Never did, not more than three or four hours a night."

Oh, great, Jennifer thought. *What a week*. Even by the Street's insane standards, they'd been working like slaves. The other two execs had turned in earlier; she would herself, if she hadn't wimped out and had a nap earlier in the day. But it was about wrapped.

She looked down at some of the documents. There was that seawater thing; another bacteria that fixed nitrogen on the roots of wheat and corn—GeneTech was going *to freak* when someone beat them to that—half a dozen things in thin-film screens, holographic displays, superconductors . . . no doubt about it, IngolfTech really *did* have the assets. Not just blue-sky laboratory stuff, but ready to roll, and three

years of profitability from things already out. The biotech would need a lot of regulatory work, but even those were bankable if you knew they were real. The electronics could go tomorrow—some of it already had, commitments from companies that raised eyebrows all around the table.

"Well, you'll be a natural at an IPO circus," she said to the entrepreneur. "It'll be months before anyone sleeps."

"I expect Tom will be doing a good deal of that," Gwen said. "But yes, it'll be strenuous. Worth it, though—we're all very enthusiastic about the job you've been doing."

The initial float ought to bring in around two hundred million for a twenty-five percent offering at fifty a share, she knew. Say three and a half million shares, two and a half primary and a million and a half secondary founders'. Thirty days, and she could do her report. It was straightforward. Maybe *too* straightforward. As if they were being handed things on a platter; no tangled wires, no sloppy documentation, nothing that would scare anyone.

This was a candy store for venture-capital types; and with half a dozen successful licensing operations already.

"I noticed Ms. Wayne wasn't at the final presentation," Jennifer said. *I really should turn in*. Somehow she didn't feel sleepy, even though everyone had been keeping country hours while the Belway team was here. More prickly and restless. *Hell, it's barely midnight—and we're going back to New York tomorrow afternoon*. Back to sleet, back to slush, back to her cat, who wouldn't forgive her for a week.

She forced down bitterness. *It's been a very successful week*. The problem was that now she had to go back to the workaholic scramble of a semi-upper-middle-class New Yorker's life. Where "life" was two hours of watching PBS between supper and bed, or a squeezed-in night at the opera; lately she might squeeze in a movie with Henry. And Ms. Gwendolyn too-perfect-to-be-true Ingolfsson was going to stay here in this goddamned mansion and pluck the plums of life as she pleased. Give or take a few hectic months while the IPO went through.

Maybe I should *have stayed in med school*. Then again, no. Doctors got even crazier than analysts, and they had to be around sick people all the time.

The secretaries began clearing away the documents.

"Well, that's all that can be done tonight," Gwen said. She stretched and yawned. "Let's get something to eat; and I'm going to go berserk if I don't hear somebody discuss something except due diligence reviews, draft registration statements, and the SEC."

The smile was infectious. Jennifer chuckled. "That's my life you're talking about. Odd to hear someone like you getting bored with business."

"It's a means to an end, as far as I'm concerned. This way."

This way was a small dining room, not the formal one downstairs. There were pictures on the walls; portraits. One of a woman with short blond hair and a face of delicate pointy-chinned beauty, dressed in a flowing off-the-shoulder gown.

"You might say that business doesn't run in my family," Gwen went on. "That's my mother, by the

way—her name was Yolande."

"She looks sort of sad," Jennifer said.

"She had a hard life, in some respects," Gwen answered.

"What *were* your family in, if you don't mind me asking."

"My family? Well, soldiers, a lot of them. Gentleman-farmers, too." They sat and shook out their napkins. "The one thing I do envy you for living in New York," she went on, breaking a roll open, "is the opera and the galleries."

"You're an opera buff?"

"Mostly the older pieces. You know Delibes?"

"The one British Overseas Airways uses for their commercials?"

Gwen looked at her blankly for a second, then smiled. "I'd never thought of it that way," she said. "I had an aunt who was very fond of Delibes, though."

The servants brought in Jamaican jerk-pork soup, then steaks in a brown peppercorn sauce; the talk went from opera to design and back.

Jennifer took a mouthful of the steak. "That *is* good," she said.

"Buffalo," Gwen said. "Hump steak. I've been doing business with a certain TV magnate—he's probably going to be buying in heavily when we do the IPO—and he has a buffalo ranch, sends it over now and then. Nice of him."

That TV magnate? Jennifer asked herself. *Oh-ho*. "It may be blasphemy, but even the seafood here palls after a while."

"Yes," Gwen said. "Every once in a while I like to know that a higher mammal died for my dinner."

"You may not be an entrepreneur by choice," Jennifer said, "but that sounds quite sufficiently predatory of you."

Gwen looked up at her. "Predatory? Oh, you have no *idea*," she said, with a clear husky laugh.

God, she's strange, Jennifer thought, chuckling herself. *Strange, but sort of fun. That charisma should get damned old after a while, but it doesn't. Just less noticeable. Come on, now, girl — where's your envy and resentment?* Gone, it seemed. *She'd make a great salesperson*, Jennifer decided. The "trust me" vibrations were strong enough to do double duty as an oboe in a symphony.

She glanced over at the painting of Yolande Ingolfsson again, then glanced back sharply. The background seemed to be a window-seat at first glance . . . it *was* a window-seat, but the curved glass behind it framed a landscape on the moon, gray and silver and a ragged crater wall. Above that hung the full earth.

"I can see that wasn't done from life," she said.

Gwen glanced over, tilting her face and looking out of the corners of her eyes. "No, I did it from memory," she said.

"You paint?"

"It's a hobby."

In your copious spare time, no doubt, Jennifer thought.

"You find me a little odd, don't you?" Gwen said.

Sharp, too. "A little . . . out of the ordinary," Jennifer said.

"Perhaps I'm an alien invader, then," Gwen said. Her green eyes sparkled. "From another dimension."

Jennifer found herself laughing harder. "Oh, right. And you prowl the back roads of America in your flying saucer, mutilating cows and performing proctologies on rednecks."

Gwen arched her brows. "Proctologies on rednecks?" she said thoughtfully. "Carefully selected rednecks . . . with the right prosthetics . . . perhaps occasionally."

Jennifer choked slightly on a mouthful of wine. "Who's Adonis there?" she asked.

The painting was of a youngish man standing on a vaguely tropical beach; long white-gold hair fell to his broad dark-tanned shoulders. He was wearing only loose duck trousers, and sitting casually on a fallen palm-trunk, looking sleekly muscular and utterly relaxed; if the painting was anything like the person, heads would have turned. *Not a dry seat in the house, as Louisa says*, Jennifer thought.

"Alois, not Adonis. My husband."

The New Yorker set her wineglass down. "You're *married*?" she said. Somehow it was startling, unexpected, like a cat tapdancing. *And I could have sworn Cairstens and she were involved*. At least from the way the Californian carried himself. She imagined Gwen next to the man in the painting. *And I would have thought they were relatives. Maybe a cousin?*

"Was; Alois died . . . some time ago. Sporting accident."

"Oh." *Foot-in-mouth disease, Jennifer*. "I'm sorry."

Gwen sighed and shrugged. "It was some time ago. He—we both—had a taste for dangerous pastimes. If you do that long enough, it'll kill you. I've just been luckier, so far. In fact," she said, "eventually the universe kills everybody; one argument for taking a theistic approach to it, I suppose."

That which kills everybody is God? Jennifer thought. Perhaps not a tactful comment to make. Odd outlook.

"You paint a lot?"

"It relaxes. Let's finish this Merlot off."

"I shouldn't . . ."

"Work's over, you're leaving tomorrow."

"True. There, dead soldier."

The dessert was various tiny pastries of tropical fruits; the pyramid on the serving tray was as colorful as a peacock's tail or a flower market, and she felt almost guilty at disturbing it. Kiwi, mango, mangosteen, sour-sop, and the coffee was Blue Mountain.

"This is the life," she sighed.

Gwen leaned back with her cup in both hands, sipping. "It's a change from shark hunting," she said. "The Wall Street and finny varieties both."

"There are sharks in the water here? What a pity." The beach looked gorgeous, not that she'd had time for swimming. *Visit the tropics and stare at your computer*, she thought. *Sheesh. Bah, humbug.*

"They can be entertaining to hunt, when you feel like spearfishing," Gwen said.

Jennifer looked at her, trying to see if she was serious. "Not the Great White Shark, I hope," she said.

"No." Another of the white grins. "Although I've found some remarkably hostile things coming out of the water at me here," she added. "But enough about me. Tell me what life in New York is like for you."

Later, she stopped herself. "I'm babbling," she said. "You can't possibly want to know about my cat."

"On the contrary," Gwen said, finishing her brandy. "I adore cats. Let's go for a quick swim, then."

Jennifer hesitated. "Not with the sharks, I hope."

"I've got a perfectly good pool here."

She hesitated again. You had to watch out about getting too friendly with clients. On the other hand, why not? Nothing wrong with a swim, and Gwen was nice enough—weird, but nice. Also Klein and Coleman were pills. And she felt restless, as if someone were pricking her skin very lightly with invisible needles. The room swayed a little; she'd exceeded her usual rule of no more than three glasses of Chardonnay or something similar. They walked out to a terrace and down a flight of stairs; the pool was floodlit from below, lined and set among marble tiles and edged with a decoration of colorful Portuguese majolica. Water bubbled from the mouth of a bronze lion, into a rock-edged basin and then into the pool itself.

"Which way's my room?" she asked, a little disoriented. "Got to get my suit."

"Why bother?" Gwen said, stepping out of her clothes. "Nobody here but us girls."

Jennifer gaped as the other hit the water in a perfect arching dive and with hardly a ripple. Her shape eeled down the pool, flashing into and out of the puddles of light thrown by the underwater sconces. She surfaced at the other end, mahogany hair plastered to her head, a flash of teeth and eyes.

"Chicken!" she called.

"Hell with that!" Jennifer called back. To hell with being sober and staid.

Hell with the extra ten pounds, too, she thought. She didn't have anything to prove. Still, she kept her briefs on as she waded down the steps. The water was barely cool to the skin, the stone smooth under her feet as she stood hugging herself. Fingers like steel wire suddenly gripped her ankles. She yelled as they heaved her upwards, catapulting her forward into the middle of the pool with a huge splash that sent water fountaining over the cool white and blue of the marble flooring. She whooped and thrashed her way back to the surface, glaring and sputtering.

"You looked so much like *September Morn*," Gwen said, surfacing not far away.

"Showoff!"

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Carmaggio leaned back in his chair and watched the image of the earth spin slowly over the office table. It was the size of a large beachball, complete down to the swirling patterns of cloud; if you looked carefully at the edge, you could see a slight diffusion, where the atmosphere would scatter light. He peered closer. The detail got better and better as you approached. He had an uneasy feeling that if you whipped out a magnifying glass, tiny little ships and airplanes would be visible in the sky, and with a big enough microscope you could look in a window in a New York office building and see two men sitting on either side of a desk watching a holograph of the Earth . . . .

"I'd like to know how they do that," Bill Saunders said.

There was a slip of something the size of a business card underneath the image, on the businessman's desk table.

"I don't even understand TV, really," the detective said. "But I can switch it on or off. This quadrant," he added, raising his voice a little. "Enlarge."

The sphere vanished, to be replaced by a three-foot-square section. That flashed down and then down again, until they could all see the street outlines of a city; the buildings were perfectly to scale.

"Yep." Bill Saunders looked at the holograph again. "That's pretty damned convincing. You've convinced me, it's that simple."

He sank back in his chair, fingers steepled and eyes closed. *Taking it easier than I did*, Henry thought. But then, he hadn't been easily thrown back in Nam either.

"Okay," the businessman said after a moment. "Why not the government? I've got some pull with them; they owe me. Not least for staying out in '96, that was close."

"Lafarge thinks—and I agree, and our contact with the FBI does too—that we couldn't get anything done quickly. Too much incredulity. And anything the government knew, she'd know. By now she's probably got some influential people working for her."

"Yep," the Texan said again. "But with this, or a few things more, we *could* convince the necessary people. This Ingolfsson, the time traveler, she doesn't have much fancy gear, you say. We send in a Ranger team, and the problem's solved."



Carmaggio shook his head. He could feel sweat break out on his forehead. The more people in the know, the closer to disaster.

"Bill, that's just what we *can't* do. Lafarge says these Draka, they specialize in genetics—that fits what Ingolfsson's been doing with her company; yeah, plenty of electronics, but biotech stuff too."

"That oil-eating bug," Saunders said thoughtfully. "*I figured* that one was too good to be true. But I bought a piece of the action," he added. "Made a fair dollar. So, they're geneticists. So what?"

"So making a plague would be trivial work for her. That's how Lafarge puts it: trivial. They won their version of World War Three with something like that. Something that could wipe out ninety-nine point nine percent of the human race, leaving her to pick up the pieces."

"Judas priest," Saunders said. The words grunted out as if he'd been punched in the belly. He sat silent again for a full minute before barking: "Why hasn't the bitch done it already?"

"These *drakensis*, they're conquerors. As far as I could follow the explanation, they get a major charge out of making people truckle to them. You can't get much groveling time out of a corpse; and it would slow her down considerably, having to make components for her beacon instead of ordering them from working firms. But if Ingolfsson thinks her cover's been blown, she'd do it—Lafarge said he'd bet his life, literally, that something like that is in place right now and ready to roll."

Carmaggio wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Lafarge had had some recordings of what Draka biobombs could do to organisms. Simple death, murderous insanity, hell, some of them had *dissolved*, rotting while still alive and fully conscious . . .

"Damnation, this is like World War Three, only we've got our finger on the button," Saunders said, rising and going to the sideboard. "Speaking of which . . . a nuke? Drastic, but—"

"Lafarge is afraid there's a deadman switch on the bio-weapon," Carmaggio said. "His . . . he's got a computer, says it isn't conscious but does things no organic brain can do. And it says the probability of a fail-safe like that is over ninety percent now that he's here and she knows he's here, given what they know about enemy psychology."

"I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

"I've tried it," Carmaggio said. "Several times since I talked to Lafarge. Doesn't help."

"Good thing you know that, but one won't hurt."

It was Kentucky bourbon; Carmaggio took a swallow of the sour mash and bared his teeth at the mellow bite at the back of his throat. He breathed heat, a little of it seeping into his soul.

"Yeah, El-tee, it just keeps getting worse. First I had a mass murderer, then a mass murderer who could do weird things, and then a time traveler . . . and now I've fallen into the script of a fucking—sorry"—Saunders didn't like swearing—"made-for-TV movie. As long as we don't start getting dreams about a little old black lady living in Kansas . . ."

"Mm-hmmm." Saunders was thinking with his eyes shut again; it emphasized the batlike ears. Then he opened them and looked at the holograph. "Heard about something like this in Hollywood. New gadget. Going to take a lot of expensive equipment, though." He nudged the black rectangle with one finger.

"So we can't call in the government," he said thoughtfully. "What can we do?"

"Play for time," Carmaggio said. "Stall—she evidently needs the warehouse, and she needs a lot of money for whatever she's doing there. Frustrate her without pushing her to use the . . . biobomb. And then when the moment comes, hit hard, take her out before she can do anything."

"Sounds like a longshot."

"Yeah. It is. What else can we do?"

"I'll think about that," Saunders said. "In the meantime, we could use some better intelligence." He paused. "Didn't you say that lady friend of yours who works for PB Securities was down there right now?"

Henry felt the tips of his ears flush slightly. "She's not my lady friend, exactly," he said. "Not yet. And we can't get her to pass information. That's the *last* thing we could do. Evidently it's impossible to lie to a *drakensis*, impossible to hide what you're feeling overall. No, Jenny's safe enough—as long as she doesn't know anything. Ingolfsson needs this stock deal too much to risk anything."

I hope.

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Jennifer tucked her hands into the sleeves of her thick cotton robe. The wall panels of this upper gallery were murals, some still in progress, eight feet tall by twelve between latticed windows. The style was unfamiliar, a high-gloss realism but slightly stylized. Gwen came in, also still in her robe, wrapping a towel around her hair and then moving to the ebony sideboard by the entranceway.

"It just occurred to me," Jennifer said. "Ms. Wayne wasn't at the last presentation."

"Alice is not feeling well, I'm afraid," Gwen said. She smiled with a peculiar closed curve of the lips, her green eyes holding a secret mockery. "Bit of nausea. But we expect her to perk up in a week or so."

"I'm sorry she's ill," Jennifer said politely.

"She's important to our future," Gwen agreed gravely.

"These yours too?" Jennifer asked, nodding toward the walls and accepting a sherry.

"Yes. In the nature of a hobby," Gwen replied.

Jennifer looked at the mural. "What is this?"

The panel showed a street scene. Nineteenth century, perhaps, from the wide skirts of the women and the tall hats of the men; but the men wore swords, extravagantly ruffled shirts, and kept their hair in pony-tails; their coats were gaudily striped. Flowering trees thick with a mist of blue flowers arched over brick sidewalks; pillared houses stood back from the street behind wrought-iron fences and elaborate gardens with a hot, tropical look to them. Moving among the elaborately-clad strollers were blacks, in livery or ragged work-clothes, carrying burdens and pulling handcarts, sweeping the street, all lands of labor.

Some weird part of the Old South? New Orleans? But there were cars on the street among the horse-drawn vehicles, big boxy-looking things with thin smokestacks and high iron-shod wheels.

"It's a historical piece, in a way," Gwen said, moving up behind Jennifer.

The New Yorker shifted uneasily; the head of IngolfTech seemed to radiate heat. She'd noticed that in the pool, an almost unhealthy warmth, like a fever. Obviously it wasn't, though. *I wonder what that scent is she's wearing.* Odd to put on perfume after a swim. *Sort of a musk, but flowery too.* Or was it a scent at all? Something that teased at the edge of perception.

The next mural was a sky view, clouds gilded by the sun. Across them swept the shadows of . . . airships, orca-shaped dirigibles. A fleet of them, dozens, perhaps hundreds. Biplanes were darting among them. Jennifer shook her head. *When did that happen?* The First World War?

A pastoral scene followed, vaguely Italian-looking. Hot sunlight on a dusty white road flanked by pencil cypress; vineyards snaking up a hill, the silvery-green of olives on the next, a line of Maxfield Parrish-blue mountains on the horizon, and a villa on a slope in the middle distance. In the foreground were a man and a woman on horseback, both in high-collared black jackets, boots, fawn trousers, wearing studded-leather belts with knives and heavy automatic pistols bolstered at their waists. They were halted in the shade by the side of the road, leaning on the pommels of their saddles and talking to a group of men and women in peasantish clothing. *Italian, definitely,* Jennifer thought. The costumes were pure *cotadini*, working clothes from three or four generations ago. *But I can't place the context.*

"Tuscany?" she said, nodding.

"Chianti," Gwen replied. "It's a family connection."

"Your family lives there?" Jennifer asked, surprised.

Gwen's name and bone structure were both rather Nordic, despite her coloring. And there was something mid-Atlantic about her accent, sometimes. Of course, a lot of Brits had moved there—it was even called "Chiantishire" occasionally in *European Travel and Life*, which Jennifer read religiously.

"Not . . . now," Gwen said. "More of a . . . tradition."

The last panel was still incomplete, about three-quarters done. Jennifer blinked in surprise. The background was buildings, burning and shattered, under a darkened sky. The foreground was a hillock. Bodies sprawled about it, in unfamiliar uniforms and equipment but with an American-flag shoulder flash. On the hillock was . . . *well, a monster. Alien?* Something that looked like a cross between a gorilla and a wolf, at least. Much of its body was covered by futuristic-looking equipment, armor perhaps; the firelight caught at dull-red fur on the rest, and glinted off its eyes. One clawed foot rested on a human face; a huge curved knife was in one fist, a chunky-looking weapon throwing an iridescent beam in the other. The long jaws were parted in a fanged gape, long tongue lolling like a scarlet banner, serrated teeth gleaming. She could almost hear the bellowing snarl; the thing radiated a lust to kill.

"Now don't tell me *that* is historical," she said, glancing aside and out the tall windows.

"No, not in the present context. Although perhaps it might be someday."

"My God, what an imagination you've got!"

That closed-in smile again. "Actually I'm not very imaginative. It doesn't . . . run in the family, you might say."

Jennifers mouth twisted. "It must have taken a fair amount of imagination to produce all this," she said, waving her free hand.

"No, just intelligence, memory, and application—not at all the same thing," Gwen corrected.

"Ms. Ingolfsson—"

"Gwen."

"Gwen, why do I get the feeling you are bullshitting me?"

"I'm not," she said. "I'm just not telling you enough to understand what I *am* telling you. The information's accurate, but radically incomplete."

Jennifer swung around, a spark of anger in her face. "In other words, you're bullshitting me. Look, I may be only a minor player—"

Gwen put the tips of her fingers on Jennifer's arm. The contact jolted her, a slight but perceptible shock. Her skin prickled again, and she felt flushed, as if she were coming down with the flu. The sensation startled her; she usually had better control of her temper than that.

"That's not necessarily true," Gwen said. She maintained the touch for a moment, then removed it. "I'm something of a judge of . . . human nature, and I think you're going to be a good deal more than a bit player. Otherwise I wouldn't waste time on you."

Jennifer finished the sherry. *And here I thought you wanted me for my body*, she thought sardonically—a suspicion which *had* crossed her mind, for some reason,

"That too," Gwen said tranquilly.

"I didn't say that!" Jennifer blurted in horror. She stared at her glass. Two sherries and a couple of glasses of Chardonnay at dinner; she *couldn't* be that drunk.

"Not very loud," Gwen agreed. "But I've got excellent hearing."

"Look, I'm sorry, that was a joke." Her reputation would be ruined if she offended a client so gratuitously.

The alarm she felt was sluggish, somehow. She felt breathless, as if the Bahamian night was much warmer than it actually was. Sweat trickled down her face, and she could feel a pulse beating in her throat. And there seemed to be a hint of some unfamiliar scent from Gwen, something indescribable, like perfumed meat—except that it was wholly pleasant. Jennifer inhaled more deeply.

Gwen smiled and tapped rhythmically on the rim of her glass. "That's your heartbeat. You seem to be upset about something, Jenny. You don't mind if I call you Jenny, do you?" .

"No," Her tongue felt thick. "My friends call me Jenny." *Why in God's name did I say that?*

"Jenny."

Gwen drifted a little closer, moving with that smooth dancer's gracefulness. Jennifer blinked; the other's green eyes seemed to be enlarging, filling her vision. Something touched her on either side of the neck, a soft light caress. Fingers. Moving with excruciating delicacy, barely touching her skin. Patterns of heat flowed after them.

"Look . . . ah— *please*—I, um, like men."

"Wonderful, that gives us something in common."

The fingers trailed down over her collarbones to the sensitive skin beneath her arms, stroking at the tender areas on the inside of her elbows. Jennifer shuddered, dazed. Lips touched hers; she responded instinctively, raising her face to the kiss. Off-balance, her arms came up and rested on the other's bare back. The skin beneath her hands burned hot, the muscles beneath moving like sheets of living metal. Her eyes jerked open in startlement. Gwen's tongue slid between her teeth.

"Mmmmp!"

I can't believe *I'm doing this!* The only other time she'd ever kissed a woman was once at university as an experiment; she'd been drunk then, and even so it had been about as exciting as kissing an arm.

Gwen leaned back slightly. "Lovely," she said.

"This is unprofessional," Jennifer said.

The top of her robe came down around her shoulders. Gwen's hands cradled her breasts lightly, fingertips brushing over her nipples. She bit back a moan; it was the most sheerly erotic sensation she'd ever felt, the carnal equivalent of a mouthful of chocolate tiramisu. Her knees quivered.

Oh, to hell with it. She put her hands behind Gwen's head and kissed her again.

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For a moment, Jennifer wondered where she was. Then memory avalanched back in.

"Oh, my *God*," she mumbled.

The other half of the big bed was empty; it stood under a ceiling fan, with French doors on three sides leading to shaded galleries. By the quality of the pale light, it was near dawn.

"Good morning, Jenny," Gwen said.

Jennifer flushed and pulled the sheet up under her chin with both hands. Gwen took a glass of orange juice from the wheeled tray and sat on the edge of the bed. She was naked and entirely comfortable with it, something that Jennifer envied a little. *That's not all I envy*, she thought. The head of IngolfTech had a figure like a ballet dancer, except for the thicker arms and neck and the fact that she wasn't flat-chested. *I feel like a slug*.

"Isn't it a little late to be shy?" Gwen asked, offering the glass of juice. "I mean . . ." She inclined her head

toward the sheet. "Been there. Done that."

True enough, Jennifer thought, sitting up and taking the glass. She gave Gwen a quick peck on the lips and looked out the window as she drank.

"You make me feel self-conscious," she said after a moment. *And embarrassed. God.* She remembered more of the details. *I yelled and everything. I never lose control of myself like that.*

"What, about your weight?" Gwen said, and touched her lightly. "Ridiculous. Just pleasantly plump in the right places—what's the word, *zaftig*?"

She rose and belted on a robe, then pulled a medicine jar from a drawer. "But if it really bothers you, I'll put some of these in your purse." She picked it up off the chair—somebody had brought in her clothes, which made Jennifer blush again.

"What's that?" she asked, sipping at the orange juice.

"Metaboline, one of our products. Take one a week for a month, then one every month for a year." She came back and sat cross-legged on the foot of the bed.

Jennifer made a face. "Diet pills?"

"No, it's a metabolic adjustment. Increases your appetite, if anything—eat whatever you please—but it puts your body's static burn up even more." She smiled. "Trust me."

Jennifer blushed again, down to her breasts. Gwen watched with enjoyment, which made the flush worse.

"This isn't . . . ah . . . isn't like me," the New Yorker said, looking out the window.

Gwen made a graceful gesture. "Think of it as a matter of personal chemistry," she said. "No big deal. Besides, it had been a while for you, hadn't it?"

"Yes. You too?"

"No, I don't believe in passing up an opportunity for pleasure," Gwen said. She grinned. "You may have noticed. Come on, let's have a shower and then you can get back to your room before your colleagues wake up."

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"Homesickness," Gwen said thoughtfully, looking down from her perch in the deep window, down to the dock where the Americans had boarded their plane.

That plan was launched, like a javelin—better, like a cunning shipkiller missile, with its own mechanical intelligence. It would strike or miss, and she would act accordingly. Dismiss it.

"I've been realizing how much homesickness must affect you humans."

"More than you?" Alice said from the lounger, looking up from her magazine, *Architectural Digest*.

"Much," Gwen said. "Your lives are so short, and yet this world you've made changes so quickly."

Something—perhaps the way the sun flickered through the bougainvillea on the coral-rock wall outside—prompted a memory.

First century, she thought. Back visiting on Claestum in Tuscany; she'd been . . . yes, a section-director on the Mars project then, glad of a break from space habitats.

Riding down from the hills, with a gralloched deer slung over the pack horse behind her. Rough slopes, the rutted earthen track and the slow clump of hoofs, the panting breath of the hound-beasts at heel. Summer smells of arbutus and thyme, leaf mold, horse, dog, the meaty scent of the deer carcass. Creak of leather and rattle of javelins in the holster before her knee; a flash of shy movement in the bushes, a glimpse of great brown eyes—a faun, still new and rare then. Stabbing flickers of light as she rode out into the valley fields, with the slow warm wind bringing her scents from miles beyond. Through an orchard of gnarled old apple trees—memory within memory, the sloping field new-planted with thin saplings—and into a grain field half reaped, the line of *servus* and the rhythmic flash of their sickles. Crimson poppies among the tall corn, the way the tunics stuck to the workers' flanks, the sweet mild smell of their sweat.

Three centuries ago, she thought. Yet—if only she could breach the wall of universes that separated her from it—nothing essential would have changed. Young oaks would have grown to great trees, the great-great-grandchildren of those reapers would reap the same right-yellow grain in the same fields; the younger cousin who held that land would be at home in the manor. All memory was strong with her kind, but this one had more than vividness. The *impact* was still there, as tangible as the rich taste of the venison roasted with mushrooms, or the cool blue eyes of cousin Cercylas, the turn of his hand as he gestured.

"It's odd to think of you being homesick at all," Alice said.

Gwen looked up at her. Only three weeks since the embryo implant, not enough to alter her scent much. The language of her body had already changed, relaxed, tension draining out of the muscles around her mouth and in her neck day by day. It flattered her, and brought out the ripe-peach texture of her skin.

Also she thinks better when she's calm and happy.

"We're not altogether self-sufficient," she said gently. "We have our families, friends, likes and dislikes. Any social animal gets attached to their framework. For that matter, you're part of mine, now—it's a family relationship, in a way, and a fairly close one."

The Australian looked down at her stomach and traced it with her fingertips. "Yes, I suppose so. Funny I can *remember* being upset about what you were doing to me, but I can't recall the *feeling* anymore. Everything just seems so . . . nice. I'm really looking forward to the birth, and having the baby to raise."

"So am I," said Gwen, uncoiling from the window-niche.

I must see that she has a few of her own, in a couple of years, she thought. *I'll breed her to Tom, perhaps.* Establish a brooder-line for the new infant, as a birth-gift. It would be her first clone, after all; Draka rarely cloned themselves. A little different from the traditional sperm-and-egg or egg-to-egg gene merging.

It was pleasant to be thinking of ordinary domestic matters like this; pleasant and a little premature.

*Wouldn't do to forget this is just a little enclave of normalcy here,* she reminded herself. Beyond that horizon lay a vast feral wilderness to be subdued.

Gwen yawned and stretched. "Back to work No rest for the wicked."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### DOMINATION TIMELINE

#### EARTH/1

February 20, 445th YEAR OF THE FINAL SOCIETY

(2445 A.D.)

Tolya Mkenni had traveled a good deal via the Web—neural induction wasn't quite the same as being there, but it came fairly close. The last three years had been different: *physical* travel not just to the high-caste *servus* resorts of eastern North America but all over the planet on the Project's business, even to Luna. Not least to the clinic in Apollonaris where she'd been given the supreme honor of another lifespan. And now she was bound to Archona itself, to appear before the lords of the State. It was almost as thrilling as it was terrifying. She shifted slightly in the comfortable seat of the transport.

"Mirror," she said.

A space before her turned silver and then showed a three-dimensional image of herself. Not much different from what she'd seen for most of the past eighty years, except that the little signs of age—wrinkles at the corner of her gray eyes, threads of silver in her shoulder-length wheat-blond hair—were gone or going; the tone of her brown skin had turned youthfully resilient. *Another three-quarters of a century,* she thought. *I may see my great-grandchildren born.* Amazing; only a few hundred of her breed had been granted that, in all the centuries of the Final Society. Woven into the left corner of her neat brown tunic was a stylized circle with a gap, symbol of another honor almost as great: Draka-level access to the Web and unlimited personal mobility.

See that you deserve it, she told herself sternly. Aloud: "Visual, external."

Walls and floor vanished from sight around her. Atoms locked in powered stasis, the wedge-shaped hull of the vehicle could not glow with heat. The air around it could, and that was just fading as the speed dropped from orbital to transonic. Below was the huge glittering of the Atlantic, empty save where sails marked pleasure-boats or once where the vast smooth curve of a robot harvester slid by beneath the surface. They passed over the coast, over what had once been the Kalahari desert. The Race had long ago decreed that it be lush green savannah and jungle kept inviolate for the hunting they so savagely adored, empty of habitation save for the crumbled remains of ancient mines.



A minute, and cultivation showed below. Tolya leaned forward with interest; this was the ancient heartland of the Domination, where the destiny of the planet had been hammered out and the Final Society born. Blocks of cropland showed green and dull-gold, between copses of forest and wider expanses of grazing. Widely spaced manor-houses dotted the surface, each with its dependent village of *servus* cottages; but the land showed an archaic network of roads, even the long-disused embankment of a railway. Abandoned cities were woodland also above the ruins of home and forge and factory, some showing a core of habitation still. Air traffic was heavy, dots of silent brightness streaking past her transport.

Archona still stood huge, sprawling along the basin and ridge that separated the great highveldt plateau to the south from the blue distances northward. Twelve million souls had dwelt here when the city was at its height, back in the first century. Even then manufacturing had been moving spaceward, mainly a matter of automaton-machines; population followed more slowly, to Luna and the opening of Mars, the reclamation of the Americas. With the Web, there was little need for clumping together, and *drakensis* had a need for open space even stronger than their human-Draka ancestors. Still, this was the capital of the Solar System, cultural as well as political. Half a million of the Race lived here, many transients; six times that many *servus*, for their masters' multifarious uses and pleasures. Many of the buildings dated back four centuries or more, marble and colonnade and stained-glass domes amid avenue and grove and garden.

"Clearance," the machine said. "Clearance for private pad, Archonal Palace."

The vehicle made a neat curve and then sank downward. The tips of cypress trees dropped by on either side, and then a broad open field snowed. Its surface was a dense tough mat of tiny flowers, blue and white and crimson; when the transport folded down a section of wall into a ramp and formed stairs, she could smell a faint scent of lilac and musk from the blossoms crushed beneath the ten-meter hull. A Draka waited below, in the high-collared black uniform of war. A gesture cut short Tolya's bow.

"Follow."

Tolya obeyed, stepping up onto the thin disk of the floater platform behind him. Even these last years such closeness was rare; she wiped the palms of her hands surreptitiously on the skirt of her tunic and adjusted her belt. The Master must be restricting his presence, since she felt no more than a tinge of the awe/fear/comfort it usually brought. The floater lifted to ankle height and turned, taking them through the field and up a long flight of granite steps flanked by sphinxes. Doors of fretted bronze opened; they slipped through corridor and courtyard and chambers.

I wish I wasn't so nervous, Tolya thought; the artwork and statuary moving by were almost enough to distract her, even now. The floater stopped in one last room, domed in carved rose-colored rock crystal; she stepped off at the silent direction, folded her hands before her and waited. Here at least it was no strain not to look about. The walls were murals in bas-relief, in gold and ivory and precious stones, scenes of the Last War and its aftermath; a Draka hand had executed those depictions of triumphant slaughter, rape, and butchery. It was fitting for the Masters to delight in such things, but hers was a gentler breed.

enter.

A soundless order from her transducer as the tall circular door dilated.

She walked through into a smaller chamber of audience; one central chair carved from a block of jadeite, flanked on either side by three more in a horseshoe-shape; the Domination's winged dragon on

the wall behind, with the slave-chain of mastery and the sword of death in its claws. The light was a little low for *servus* eyes but enough to see the beings who sat at their leopard ease, in long robes of rainbow color or tight uniforms of plain black. She sank to her knees on the pad provided and covered her hands with her eyes, bowing her forehead to the cool marble of the floor.

"I live to serve," she said.

"And you've served us well," the Archon's voice said. "Raise your head."

She sat back on her heels, swallowing. The Draka rested an elbow on the arm of his chair and his chin between thumb and forefinger; red-blond hair framed the hard-cut regular beauty of his face. Even then, her breath caught slightly at the sight of it.

"Exceptionally well, I understand," he went on, turning his head slightly to one side, toward one of his colleagues.

"Brilliant work," the head of the Technical Directorate said in confirmation. "Tolya's made some fundamental breakthroughs; without her, we'd be considerably further behind the enemy than we are."

Tolya shuddered. War flared beyond the orbit of Pluto; the ferals attacked, the claw of a universe cold and cruel, with only the Masters standing between her folk and oblivion.

The Archon made a single spare gesture with his free hand. "You needn't worry excessively," he said. "Its been too long since we had a war, but matters are well in hand . . . more or less. For now."

"For now," the Director of War said dryly. "And aren't you glad now, Alexis, that I and my predecessor insisted on keeping that 'useless' fleet updated and ready for reactivation?"

"Extremely glad, Chryse," Alexis Renston replied. "Gladder still that we had *some* preparation for the moleholes." He turned his eyes back to Tolya. "Legate Rohm informs me that we'll be able to duplicate the Samothracian technique shortly."

"Yes, overlord," Tolya said. "The energy expenditures will be very large, and you understand . . . the enemy will be, ah, watching for the other end of any macrocosmic molehole we send toward the Centauri system. I would advise a staggered series in interstellar space covering most of the distance."

"We'll consider that," the Archon said. "Damnation. At best, a restoration of the stalemate."

"Not necessarily," the Director of Colonization said. "When we've beaten the humans back, it opens the universe to us. We anticipated thousands of millennia to bring the galaxy under the Domination of the Race. This will reduce the timescale by orders of magnitude."

"Something that the Archons of the colony worlds may not be entirely happy about," another Director mused. Since they were completely independent, now.

The Archon shrugged. "Needs must—and they *will* need us to defend against the Samothracians. For that matter, even with faster communications, interstellar government will never be very tightly centralized."

"I agree," the Director of Technics said. "Just because moleholes are fast, doesn't mean they're magic. You still have to expend the same energy for transport you would to put the same mass up to a high

fraction of lightspeed, and over interstellar distances that mounts up. We'll probably end up using star-to-star hops and relaying for really long trips."

"How quickly our perspective changes," the Archon said, tapping his thumb on his chin. He looked back at Tolya. "This, I understand, will apply doubly to inter . . . universal travel."

Tolya bowed agreement. "Overlord, it's not only that a transtemporal molehole in the planetary gravity well will require even more energy to maintain the paramatter holding it open than one completely in the sidereal universe, but that energy has to be expended on a planetary surface. With fluctuations, unpredictable backlashes . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Energies that were a flicker in deep space could represent a planetary catastrophe on an inhabited surface. That was one reason most large-scale industry had long ago moved beyond the atmosphere.

"Plus the risk factor," the Director of Technics said slowly.

The others looked at her. "We're pretty sure there aren't any other technological species near us," she said.

Not unless they'd developed electromagnetic signaling too recently for the light waves to reach Earth, which was always a possibility.

"But we can be *sure*, after what we've discovered, that there are plenty of post-industrial civilizations near us in cross-time," she pointed out. "And we *know* that humans and derived post-humans are capable of developing them. Who's to say we won't run into more than we can handle, if we go exploring paratemporally? For that matter, we might—for all we know—hit a history in which that asteroid didn't hit the planet sixty-five million years ago, and end up fighting a ten-million-year-old civilization of intelligent dinosaurs."

Silence fell for a few moments. Tolya looked down at the hands folded in her lap again. Difficult to believe that anything in the universe could best these splendid predators. Intellectually she knew it might be a possibility, but her heart refused to accept it even as a hypothesis. *Keep your place*, she reminded herself.

"Which leaves," the Director of War said, "the question of what we do about Gwendolyn Ingolfsson."

The Archon's eyes narrowed. "How much in the way of resources would be necessary to continue the search?" he said.

"Overlord," Tolya replied, "no more than we've been using, but not much less. The odds of success are imponderable."

He thought for a moment. "Continue, then. We of the Race have our obligations, and we can afford that much." He smiled. "Especially considering that she held this chair herself, once. Chryse," he went on to the Director of War, "hold a legion in readiness. Inform me instantly of any breakthrough—I'll want to oversee it personally, if possible." He looked from side to side. "I think that brings this matter to a conclusion?"

Nods. He went on to Tolya. "*Serous* Tolya Mkenni," he said formally. "You have served your masters and owners well; better than any other of your kind since we created you."

"I live to serve, overlord."

"True, but we reward great service, nonetheless. You will be given a third life—and you may ask a favor. Not," he went on, "another lifespan beyond that, though. That would be hubristic."

Tolya felt tears of joy filling her eyes; not for the gift so much as for what it symbolized. Every *servus* child for millennia to come would learn *her* name, *her* accomplishment for the glory of the Race and the subject-folk under their protection.

"I—" Her voice caught. "I, I am thankful that I can serve the Race so well, overlord."

"The favor. Ask."

"Glenr Hoben, my lifepartner, overlord . . . if he could be given another life with me also . . ."

The Archon canvassed his peers silently. "Granted."

Tolya bent her forehead to the floor once more. "If the lost one can be found, we will do it, overlords," she promised.

EARTH/2

APRIL 5, 1999.

"Damn," Gwen said mildly, looking down at the socket wrench.

The tough alloy-steel had bent under her impatient tug. Luckily nobody was looking, just now. She braced the tool against a corner and straightened it, before dropping it into the workman's box. *Finished, anyway*. Nobody else could install the power coil and drive-trains, of course.

Fun making them, she thought. Almost like reinventing them, to get Alfvén-wave effects out of the components available. It had been a long time since she worked with her hands on machinery, not since duty on the primitive spaceships of the first century FS. This cobbled-together abortion was actually more advanced, in a sense—momentum-transfer systems hadn't been invented then, they'd still been using antimatter-powered reaction jets, or deuterium—boron-11 fusion pulsedrives.

The welded-steel cylinder was starting to look more like a vehicle inside by now. Conduits filled with cable snaked over every surface in view, and a heavy circlet of six-inch pipe had been mounted around the inner circumference of the hull in the middle of the twenty-meter length, to hold the power coil. Brackets for stamped-aluminum decking were already installed, left up while piping went in below. Curved consoles at the front would hold screens and controls. The air was heavy with the scents of ozone from the welding, with melted flux and phenol and plastics.

Gwen ignored the steel-rung ladder and jumped, hand clamping onto the dogging-lever of the roof hatch and swinging up to crouch on the platform just below it. There was a grateful rush of cooler air as she opened it and stepped up onto the scaffolding. The workmen were returning from their midday break, chattering and picking up their tools. The main contractor came over to her, averting his eyes from the way her sweat plastered the T-shirt to her breasts.

"All completed as ordered, Ms. Ingolfsson," he said. "Your own people shouldn't have any problem with installing the rest of the interior fixtures."

She shook his hand. "Excellent work," she replied. "Our little beauty should be joining the fishes soon."

The man looked at it curiously, the elongated teardrop of high-pressure steel lying in its timber cradle not far from the floatplane dock. Equipment littered sand churned up by heavy trucks, materials brought in from Nassau and even Miami, regardless of expense.

"You'd think you were building a *submarine* here," he said. "Not just an undersea research habitat."

Gwen and the others on the platform laughed with him; even harder, once the outsider had clattered down the steps.

"Lowe," she said. The young man, Captain Lowe's young nephew, came to an almost-attention. "How've you been doing on the simulator?"

"Fine, ma'am," he said. "Be easy, if t'computah is givin' me the right of it."

"Oh, it is." When you could apply thrust in any direction, vehicles did become easier to fly.

"Singh?"

"The onboard systems should be ready in another week," the Sikh said. His normally sour face was even sourer; engineering work was beneath his dignity.

"The flight-control computer is working out well." They'd used a surplus fighter-jet autopilot that the USAF wouldn't miss.

"Good," she said, satisfied. *A bit of an improvisation, but it'll come in handy.* "Lowe, I'll go through the simulator run with you after dinner. Everyone else, get busy."

She stayed, leaning on the railing of the scaffolding. Tom Cairstens lingered a moment. "You seem to be enjoying this," he said.

Gwen nodded. "It's nostalgic," she said. "As well as useful. It's been a long time since I worked with machinery this . . . discrete. Individual metal shapes, separate systems, that sort of thing."

"A bit like building a raft when you're a kid and playing pirate."

She looked at him in slight surprise. *Really quite perceptive, at times,* she thought.

"Exactly."

"How long will it be before Earth's . . . modernized?" he asked.

"That depends on how difficult it is to get things through from the other side," she said thoughtfully. "From what I've been working out on the physics, it'll be quite drastically expensive, even by our standards. Certainly we'll have to ship information and small knocked-down faber—fabricators—through first. And this planet is short of energy and raw materials until space is accessible. Several generations, probably, a long transition period."

"And in the meantime, you get to play with wonderful toys like this," he said, nudging the hull plates.

"What's life but play?" She looked at the metal oblong. "I think I'll call it . . . *Reiver*."

Gwen smiled. "I'll play with this. And with everything."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Not bad," Henry said, dodging the crowds outside the theater.

Neon shone on the slick wet pavement; their breath showed in white puffs. He felt Jenny's hand steal into his and squeeze gently. Carmaggio grinned quietly to himself.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Dating again, at my age," he said.

"At least you got to stop for a while," she said, leaning against him slightly.

A panhandler approached them, opened his mouth, met Carmaggio's eyes and stepped back against the wall.

"How do you *do* that?" she asked.

"They can smell us," he said. "Eau de cop."

The line for the 9:45 showing was already around the block. "Lot of these look too young to have seen the first trilogy," he said.

"Go ahead—make *me* feel old," she said with a chuckle. "I saw the first one eleven times. The man's a magician; how did he ever get Kenneth Branagh to play Obi-Wan?"

"He had to—needed a Brit," Henry said idly.

Relaxed, he thought. *I'm actually feeling relaxed*. A minor miracle, considering what was coming down.

"Not bad space opera," he went on. "Despite the whooshing spaceships."

"I didn't know you liked sci-fi," she said, looking up at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"I've sort of gotten into it a little, lately," he said. "Can't read mysteries, after all."

She gave a gurgling laugh. *Damn, that's one fine woman*, he thought.

"No financial thrillers for me, either," she said.

They walked in companionable silence for a while. Even well east of Broadway the Upper West Side was fairly active on a Saturday night. *Yupper West Side*, he thought. *More sushi joints than Tokyo*. Funny; he'd been a beat cop here back in the seventies, when the area just ahead—Broadway and Amsterdam—had been about as shitty as anywhere on the island. Needle Park, and the name hadn't been a joke. Then almost overnight the renovators hit, and you were up to your ass in boutiques and expensive studio apartments. They turned left again, out toward Riverside Park.

Times like this you can forget what a toilet this town is, he thought. Behind them the towers reared up and disappeared into low mist, shining outlines of crystal and light. The buildings here were older, grande-dame apartment hotels like the Ansonia, terracotta swirls and mansard roofs.

"Did you know," Jennifer said, pointing to the Ansonia, "that Caruso lived there? And Stravinsky, and Toscanini?"

"I do now," Henry said. "Hell, I've even heard of them. Want to get something to eat?"

"Well—" Jennifer said. "Well, actually, if you can stand my attempt at Italian cooking, I have something ready at home. It's not too far."

\*\*\*

"Dead slow," Gwen said.

Lowe grunted in reply. The water outside the TV pickups of the *Reiver* showed dark, ooze from the Hudson estuary welling up below the keel. Billows of gray sediment arched up, barely perceptible against the blackness, falling out of sight like silty snow.

Apart from a low whirl from the ventilation system, the *Reiver* had an eerie quietness. In the control compartment the main light came from below, the glow of the video displays and digital readouts. Three swivel seats met the controls, for pilot and navigator and systems control; a little redundant, but Gwen didn't completely trust the glorified abacus known locally as a computer.

"Six knots," young Lowe said. His toast-brown face looked almost sallow in the bluish glow of the controls. "Depth one hundred meters, bearing six degrees north-northwest."

Gwen turned her chair and looked over to where Dolores was holding the navigators position. "Tracking?"

"The yacht's half a kilometer ahead and dead in line," the Colombian said.

She closed her eyes and monitored the systems through her transducer. The interface was clumsy—the local equipment was pathetically slow in transferring data—but everything seemed to be going well.

"Turn it over," she said to Lowe.

"You have the helm, ma'am."

She slid into the control seat and took the stick. The drive couldn't thrust omnidirectionally, only over an eighty-degree cone to the rear, but that was sufficient. Power was at ninety-eight percent, good for two years of underwater cruising, or several hundred hours of flight; no sign of problems with the superconducting storage coil. *Although I'd hate to have to take this thing out of the atmosphere.* She eased back on the stick, and a slight elevator-rising feeling of increased weight followed. A touch on the pistol-grip accelerator on the control stick brought the speed up to twenty knots, and the *Reiver* broached smoothly through the surface of the Atlantic. Light showed on the pickup screens, the light of stars and moon on the endless waves. A slight pitching disturbed the previous rock-steady motion, sign that the craft was in the grip of powers even greater than the technics she had brought with her from the Domination's timeline.

"Hailing *Andros Adelborn*, " she said.

A rooster-tail of spray fountained backward from the blunt curve of the *Reiver's* bow, surging almost to the forward video pickup. Radar showed no other vessels in the area, except for her own yacht dead ahead. The low shape of the surface ship drew closer quickly, yellow glow from the windows and the blinking navigation lights.

" *Andros Adelborn* here." Tom's voice; yet another Lowe was captain, and the crew were all her own Haitians, men who knew nothing and didn't want to know. "Ready for rendezvous."

Alongside the motor yacht; the *Andros* wasn't very large, no more than eighty feet at the waterline. She still bulked more than the submersible. Gwen throttled back, the yacht keeping pace until both vessels were motionless, rocking in the gentle swell. Then she locked the stick, standing with a slight feeling of reluctance. *Interesting*, she thought. Nothing quite like this had ever been built in her history; by the time Alfvén-wave drives came along, materials technics had already advanced to the molecular-construction level.

"May I come too?" Dolores asked.

Gwen looked over at her absently, then took her scent. *Why not. I'll need somebody for the night.* She nodded.

"Can you handle it?" she asked Lowe.

"In my sleep," the young Bahamian said, grinning brashly. "It's no more trouble than ridin' a scooter."

"It will be in New York harbor," she said dryly. "Take her in extremely slow right in the *Adelborn's* wake, and keep an eye on the sonar. Then down on the bottom and stay there, surface once a day to report. I'll send someone to spell you after a week or so, but I want the *Reiver* ready for emergency use at any moment. No monkeyshines. Understood?"

"Understood, ma'am," Lowe said, standing straight and swallowing. He might be brash, but he wasn't stupid.

She disliked punishing subordinates, even the locals. There was no need, back home. Nobody had to



inflict pain on a *servus* to instill obedience. Humans were another matter, of course, and you did what you had to do to get results. Luckily they were usually frightened enough without direct action. *I miss the servus more and more*, she thought. They had a beautiful, supple, yielding quality that even the best-trained humans couldn't approach. As well as being generally more intelligent.

She ducked through into the open room behind the control cabin; it was rigged as a lounge-cum-communications center. The ladder to the deck-hatch was at the rear, where a bulkhead and corridor marked off a section of cabins and storage areas; the engineering spaces were in the stern. A man sprang to his feet as she entered, moving forward to take one of the consoles.

"*Nueva York*," Dolores murmured. "I always did want to see it."

"We won't be doing much sightseeing," Gwen said. "Too dangerous."

Dolores's darkly pretty face grimaced. "That damned Samothracian! How I wish you'd killed him."

"So do I." With him gone, she wouldn't have to worry or hasten.

Gwen climbed the ladder and pulled the human up after her, standing with her feet braced on the coaming over the hatch. There was no superstructure, nothing to break the curve of the hull except a section of roughened metal to give feet a better grip. The air was chill with the northern spring, cool on her bare arms; cold salt spray touched her lips. The breeze brought a medley of odors: hot metal from the engines of the yacht, human, the distant land—itsself tainted with burnt fuel and chemicals, but still green and earth-yeasty beneath. The joyous high-pitched squeaking of dolphins; their visible warmth was like leaping candles against the darker, cooler water. Heat billows plumed up from the *Reiver* and the *Adelborn*, a glowing background to the light-spectrum outlines. Overhead the stars arched in multicolored splendor, like a frosting of colored jewels across the sky.

She took a deep breath and shouted, a long wordless cry of exultation.

\*\*\*

"A *what*?" Jennifer asked with a crow of laughter.

"A kangaroo," Henry said, grinning back at her. "So help me God, the MPs found 'em halfway back from the Honolulu zoo, hitch-hiking."

"How did they *do* that?"

"We never found out. Both of them were drunk as lords . . . and so was the kangaroo, or so the zoo people claimed."

That had been Gramsci and Dundas. They'd both been killed in that ambush about a week after they got back from the R&R; still, it was a good story, and they wouldn't have grudged him the use of it.

They'd have told him to make his move about now, he thought, as he watched Jennifer's pretty-wholesome face alight with laughter at the other end of the couch. *Christ, this is like being sixteen again*. He'd been married for fifteen years and divorced for two, and he'd just gotten out of the habit. Especially with nice girls—which Jennifer Feinberg was, old-fashioned phrase or not.

The silence stretched slightly as the laughter died.

"You know, Henry," Jennifer said from the other end of the sofa, "one of the things I like about you is that you're a gentleman."

"Thanks," Henry said.

Good thing you kept your hands to yourself. Oh, well, it really was a great dinner. Great dinner, fun time. A relief being with somebody who wasn't a cop but didn't have any hangups about the fact that he was.

He swilled the last of his Chianti around in the bottom of his glass and looked around the room. Not big, no bigger than his, although he shuddered to think what it must cost up here on the Upper West Side. More open, the bedroom just an angled section of the L-shape layout. Books covered most of the walls; a couple of prints, a good sound system with a stack of movie disks for the new Sony flatscreen. A cat staring at him resentfully from the top of a bookcase, hissing occasionally at the invader of its turf. Not too much in the way of frills and furbelows. It smelled like a woman's place, though; of sachet, under the agreeable scents of food.

"Henry, it's a good thing to be a gentleman, but sometimes you can overdo it."

Henry put the glass down on the table and reached for her.

\*\*\*

"Slow," Vulk Dragovic said.

The Serb looked around warily as they walked down the gangplank, his hand inside the pocket of his long overcoat. That was not really necessary, although the New York spring was chilly. The gun within probably wasn't necessary either, but he didn't like taking chances. The darkened wharf was eerily quiet, despite the rumble of noise echoing in from Manhattan's towers. Cranes loomed above them like frozen metallic skeletons.

"Slow, coming in by sea. Why waste days?"

"Boats are harder to trace," Gwen said, coming up beside him. "And airports are easier to watch."

He could see her nostrils flare as she scanned the wharf. All he could smell was the foul water beneath. *She* could probably detect this Samothracian farting two kilometers away.

The green eyes turned toward him slightly. *Fool*, he told himself. Vulk meant *wolf* in his own tongue, but the Draka . . . *Watch what you think, always, always.*

She smiled at him, that slight curved turn of the lips. "Let loose the ants of war," she said.

Vulk turned and snapped an order to two of the Haitian servants. They carefully lowered the crate they had been carrying and opened the top with their prybars. A metallic rustling and clicking sounded within. Gwen's face went blank for a second; he recognized the expression, the look she took on when giving an order through her transducer. Dark six-legged shapes the size of a man's thumbnail poured out of the crate. The Serb pulled a foot back in revulsion as one skittered by him, suppressing an impulse to stamp on it like a bug. It *was* a bug, literally and metaphorically. A tiny self-contained android controlled by a vat-grown, gene-engineered version of an ant's nervous system implanted in a mechanical body. With a few simple imperatives: seek out a power outlet to recharge every five hours, proceed to designated

locations and record, return to base to drop off the data. No transmissions, and virtually undetectable.

The pseudo-insects gathered into clumps and moved away; some into the night under their own power, others to the waiting cars to be driven nearer to their targets.

"It's a pity they can't breed," Alice said.

Vulk looked away from her. The six-month stomach was starting to show, which was disturbing. And the way she kept *smiling* . . .

"Too dangerous," Gwen said. Her head traced across the dock again, scanning. "We had to sterilize an entire habitat-city on the moon once, when we tried that. No way to stop them mutating. Selective pressure wiped out the implanted commands and they branched out on their own."

Vulk shook his head and concentrated on business. "We'd better get set up."

"You and Tom handle it," Gwen said. "I've got a few errands to run, first."

He opened his mouth to protest, then shut it. It was the humans who were in danger without her, not the other way round. One of the Haitians handed her a knapsack, anonymous black nylon to hide weapons and devices not of this world. She slipped her arms through the loops and walked off into the darkness, feet soundless on the concrete.

There were times when he wished he was back in Sarajevo.

\*\*\*

"Hey, mamma, you got the time?"

Gwen turned. There were four of them, none older than twenty. A *damned nuisance*. Kill them all now? On the other hand, she wasn't in *that* much of a hurry.

"It's 12:58, and far too late for you," she said.

There was a moment of shocked silence from the youths. That was *not* in their script for the incident. She smiled at the bewilderment on their faces. Anger started to spice their scents, mixing with the aggression and rut that had been floating to her for twenty minutes, since they began their stalk. Their leader reacted first. *Naturally. He can't be . . . what's the word?* Dissed, that was it. Dissed out by a female, in front of his followers. Her smile grew broader as he pulled out his gun.

Be careful now. A bullet in just the right place could kill her as finally as any human. She'd had friends who'd died because living through the centuries fooled their under-mind into thinking itself immortal. And there *was* no tearing hurry.

She stepped closer to the young man. The street was deserted except for the pack and its chosen prey, streetlights glimmering dimly on wet pavement. He extended the gun, holding it sideways with the butt level with the ground, an odd firing position.

"Crazy bitch!"

Then he screamed. Her fingers closed on the gun and the hand that held it, clamping metal and flesh

together as irresistibly as a vise. The leather of his jacket ripped under her other hand as she held him immobile and slowly, slowly tilted the gun up under his chin. The flesh dimpled under the cold metal. *Sometimes humans can be very disagreeable.* This one's urine smelled bad. His free hand beat at her, and he screamed again as he broke his knuckles on the side of her head.

"Goodbye," she said.

Pumpf. The sound of the shot was muffled. Blood and brain matter spurted from the back of the mugger's head. It splattered into the face of the one behind him, and he clawed at his face, at bone fragments and clots of brain. Gwen reached out and plucked the weapon from his belt, then hit him sharply on the side of the head with the butt. He dropped and sprattled in a final galvanic twitch.

The third was running away into the darkened street, slamming into walls and stumbling in his panic. A plastic garbage can spilled aluminum and trash and a squeaking rat in his wake. Gwen examined the weapon in her hand. It was a Calico, with a helical fifty-round magazine mounted over the barrel and action. Not a bad design, considering the available technology. Nine-millimeter parabellum ammunition. She turned to the last of the pack.

"Better put that down," she said. His pistol dropped from shaking fingers.

"Don't . . . don't hurt me." His voice squeaked a little; he couldn't be much more than sixteen.

"Don't worry," she said. "Now about your friend . . . left knee."

She raised the pistol and fired. Two hundred yards down the roadway, the running man spun to the pavement. It took a moment for his scream to start. The flat elastic crack of the pistol echoed back from the empty brick walls. After a moment he lurched upright, pulling himself along the building.

"Back of the head."

Crack. Gwen buffed the grip and trigger assembly of the gun with her silk handkerchief. Then she chuckled and tucked the barrel into the dead hand of the mugger whose skull she'd crushed with the butt.

"Let them try to figure *that* out," she said, laughing.

The last mugger was staring at her, eyes enormous in the gloom. She reached up and flicked off the bandanna tied around his head. The hair beneath it was black and straight; he had smooth light-brown features and gold earrings in both lobes.

"What . . . what are you?" he asked.

"Your lucky night," she said.

Gwen pulled up the front of her skirt and tucked it into her belt. Then she skinned out of her panties, folding them neatly and dropping them into the pocket of her jacket.

"What you *doing*?" the teenager stammered, backing away as she rubbed herself. His hands came up, palms out.

"Exactly what you planned on doing to me," she said kindly. Her hands flashed out and clamped on his wrists. "Although the mechanics are a little different. But you're actually going to enjoy it, like it or not. Be

good, now."

Gwen used one arm to hold him to her while the other circled his neck and its hand pinned his jaw, putting her scent next to his nose. He shivered and jerked in the immobilizing grip as she kissed him deeply. His mouth quivered when she drew back a little and stripped the leather jacket down over his shoulders. The T-shirt parted like paper under her fingers, and the man's jeans dropped shredded to the ground.

"Oh, you *are* being good," she crooned, taking the stiffening penis in her hand. *Wonderful things, pheromones.* Not to mention the natural state of an adolescent human male, almost as susceptible as a *servus*. "Pity there's no grass, but this has its merits."

She pushed him back against the brick wall and pinned him with weight and strength, just enough to keep him from catching his breath fully, stroking his flanks and legs. Then she rose up on her toes and sank back, gripping him firmly inside her with a thrust of the pelvis and a rippling tug of her vaginal muscles. *Ah.* Rough and hasty, but pleasant. *Very pleasant,* she thought, growling contentedly into his ear as she rocked. His scent was heavy with fear and arousal, his sweat tasting of it; the sound of his heartbeat speeded to a frenzy. The gold earring dangled before her eyes; she lipped it and then bit the gold circlet through, spitting out the severed half. Her tongue explored his ear, and his whole body shuddered. His eyes were rolled half up into their sockets.

"Put your hands on my hips," she said. He obeyed, fumbling and then gripping with a strength that would have bruised a human. "Move to me. That's a good pony, rhythm now, rhythm."

*Ah.* It was a pity she had to hurry. *A long time since I took it this way.* Not since the killsweeps right after the War. *Now.*

Gwen quickened her movements. The boy's buttocks slapped against the brick wall behind him. Then she froze for a long instant, her only movement the heavy internal tug of orgasm. Clenched between her legs and body and the wall, the youth squealed like a dying rabbit and bucked in her grasp. Then he stilled too, gasping harshly, limp.

Gwen sighed, a throaty sound, and stepped back. The boy slid down the wall and lay half-fainting. She crouched beside him, tugging the remnants of his T-shirt free and wiping herself with it. Then she stroked his hair, turning his face around to meet hers. Conscious thought was returning to him, like something floating up through dark water. Thought, and fear.

"Sweet but brief, our little encounter," she said. "I'd like to spend more time riding you, but duty calls. The police will be here soon, and you'd better go. Understand?"

She stood and stepped into her underwear, smoothing down her skirt. The young mugger slid along the wall away from her in a crablike scuttle, then rose. The remains of his jeans pooled around his ankles and nearly tripped him; he kicked free and ran, throwing his shredded leather jacket behind him. Gwen smiled at the winking buttocks and flashing legs, then turned and walked quickly northward.

\*\*\*

"Mmmmm." Henry Carmaggio muttered in his sleep, turning.

Jennifer woke and stretched, sliding out from under his arm. The bedroom was dim, but there was enough of the usual New York night glow from the window to see the pleasantly craggy contours of his

face. She sat for a moment on the edge of the bed, smiling down at him.

"You *really* are a nice guy," she said very softly, before getting up and padding out to the bathroom.

It had been so long she'd forgotten about some of the messier details. *I feel good, though*, she thought. *Reassured, to start with*. The Bahamas just hadn't been like her. It was nice to know her wiring hadn't somehow gotten crossed up at this late date. Not to mention how nice it was just to be with someone again; and to know that he was just as happy about it. *Gwen didn't count. Put it down to happenstance*.

She turned off the bathroom light and eased back into the bedroom, her feet moving in an experienced scuffle—when you owned a black cat that liked to lie in the middle of the way, you learned that. Despite her care, Henry woke when she eased back into the bed.

"Hey, cold feet," he said as they snuggled close. She wrapped them around his. "Hey!"

"Warmth is a good thing," she said into the angle of his neck. "So share some."

"Damn, I find the woman of my dreams and she wants to use me as a heating pad," he grumbled, stroking her back.

After a moment she giggled. "Oh, so it's *true* what they say about Italians! Or are you just happy to see me again?"

"Damn," he said mildly, sounding surprised himself. "Must be something about having a beautiful naked woman in my arms. Even at four in the morning it—"

"Shut *up* and . . . oh, yeah."

\*\*\*

Ten minutes later, the pager in his pants pocket went off. Carmaggio muttered a curse into Jennifer's hair. "Ignore it," she said. *Damned right*, he thought muzzily. He tried, although after a moment he noticed that they were moving in rhythm to the *neep . . . neep*. That ended in a moment of gasping that collapsed into laughter.

"Now you know why so many cops get divorced," he said, kissing her and disentangling himself.

He rooted through the clothes scattered on the floor until he found the instrument, then stumbled to the phone. "This had better be important."

"Yeah, Jesus?" He listened for a moment. "You *sure*?" A resigned sigh. "Yeah, that sounds like it."

He turned to the bed. "Gotta go."

Jennifer wormed her way down farther under the covers, then threw them off and reached for her bathrobe. "Tell me about it tomorrow."

Not if it's like the usual, Henry thought. There were some details nobody was really interested in.

"I'll give you a call."

\*\*\*

There were none of the exterior iron stairways so common here at the rear of Jennifer Feinberg's apartment. That was a minor inconvenience; Gwen reached up and clamped her gloved fingers onto the gaps between the bricks, pulled herself up and took a second handhold, and climbed straight up the wall. The ancient, dirty brick was a little tricky, since she had to be careful not to crumble it beneath her grip. It took her a full two minutes to reach the level of the bathroom window. She bent her ear nearer the window, and sucked air in through nostrils and open mouth.

Ah, probably not a good moment to drop by. Panting, creaking from the bed, and then a series of cries—interrupted by a shrill beeping sound.

"Ignore it." Jennifer's voice, sounding understandably aggrieved. Gwen grinned in the darkness as the sounds began again, to the counterpoint of the electronic signal.

The male eventually got up and turned the instrument off, then moved to the phone. This time Gwen's ears pricked forward in unconscious reflex.

Fast work, Gwen thought, as she listened to the telephone conversation; half with her ears, half with the transponders electronic eavesdropping. *They must have found the bodies already.*

She shifted her fingers' grip on the wet brick outside the bathroom window of the human woman's apartment and hooked the edge of one foot onto the windowsill, still invisible to anyone who didn't put a head outside and look to the right. A trickle of command through her transducer, and a bug walked out of her sleeve onto her palm. Another, and it marched into the sill and began burrowing through a joint. She cocked her ears forward and checked the sound: not really audible to human-range hearing, but she commanded it to go more slowly anyway.

Why was this policeman concerned about Jennifer's business with IngolfTech? He couldn't *know* anything, or if he did he'd been very careful about saying it where anything electronic was listening. He had a reason to be concerned with Jennifer herself, of course: mating instinct. She rather approved of that—a healthy, eugenically sound emotion. Which left the essential question of whether anyone but the government agencies had any notion she was connected with the warehouse killings. The government itself was no great problem, since the dribble of miracles she was feeding them kept them far too greedy to risk killing the golden goose—at least, not for long enough that she could finish the Project.

Still, it was best to be sure. The Samothracian might be interfering.

surveillance, she commanded. **following parameters.**

Also best to be discreet. Public attention was something she did *not* need, or anything that might scare off the investment community. She needed more of their resources to complete the beacon; several hundred million, and about four to six months of time.

The bug had its way with the ancient dried wood of the frame. Gwen closed her eyes for a moment, linking with its rudimentary senses; organic compound eyes for sight, a rudimentary tympanum for sensing air vibrations. Vision scuttled across walls and floors; a protesting hiss sounded as she passed a cat. The animal leaped back, and her 270 degrees of vision surged up a wall and settled on the top of a doorframe. She watched the two humans saying farewell at the doorway with amusement. Such a sentimental species, particularly this culture-group. Although—she inhaled to check the scent—they'd

evidently been having a *very* good time.

The bug settled in. Jennifer stood by her bed, then hugged herself and did a little dance of pleasure; she picked up a large stuffed animal which had been turned face to the wall, kissed it and set it down looking out over her bedroom. Then she yawned. Gwen waited until her breathing and heartbeat settled to regularity before she leapt. Two stories' fall, with her jacket billowing out behind her; she landed on outstretched hands and feet, cushioning the blow until her chin rapped on the pavement, not too hard. The *smack* echoed slightly from the surrounding walls, but a moments frozen alertness showed nobody had noticed.

She rose and began to trot south.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"This one shot himself?"

Mary Chen moved the corpses hand, fingers sure and oddly gentle in their thin-film gloves. There was no stiffness to them; each digit was as limp as a rubber tube filled with slush.

"Not unless he managed to break all the bones in his hand while he did it," she replied. "There's powder burn all around the entry wound under the chin, yes, and there's distortion of the tissues where they flowed away from the pressure."

Most people didn't realize it, but even the spurt of high-velocity gas from a blank round could kill, at short ranges. That was a familiar story to everyone present; there were a few accidentals that way every year, and people trying to make it look accidental. Chen went on:

"The muzzle was in contact with the flesh when the round went off. Somebody wrapped their hand around his, bent his arm back until the gun touched skin, then clamped down hard enough to shatter the bones and pull the trigger."

Henry Carmaggio stuck another stick of gum in his mouth and walked over to the second body. "And this one beat out his own brains with the butt of his gun," he said heavily.

"*Si, patron.* After shooting the other victim," Jesus said, pointing down the street with the hand that held a pencil and a 9mm shell casing atop it. "Nice shooting, two hundred yards—in the dark."

The three of them moved unobtrusively aside, amid the crime-scene bustle, the traffic barriers and blinking lights. Carmaggio inhaled the stale cold smell of dawn, fresher than the body odors of violence.

"Not much doubt as to who *this* was," he said. He looked at the body with the dished-in head. "And she's fucking *laughing* at us. This was a message."

Jesus frowned. "Perhaps. Perhaps a chance thing. I do not think there will be fingerprints or blood types, this time."



Carmaggio shrugged. That *would* be asking too much. They all knew it took a good deal more evidence to haul in a multimillionaire than your ordinary punk: fact of life.

"I wonder what would happen if we just checked the hotels for her name and did an arrest?"

The tall blond man had walked up noiselessly, not making any particular effort to sneak but hard to notice all the same. The counterfeit ID hanging from the lapel of his overcoat were the best Carmaggio had ever seen . . . which was to be expected, of course.

"Bail would be made," Lafarge said quietly. "And then *it* would disappear, and we'd have to start all over again." He frowned. "Unless," he said thoughtfully, "I could kill it while you had it in custody."

Carmaggio forced down an instinctive bristling. Suspects had been known to fall down stairs and be shot while attempting to escape, but not on his watch. *On the other hand, this isn't your ordinary suspect.*

Lafarge held out a scrap of stained T-shirt. "I checked this with my moloscanner."

He nodded toward the brick side of a shuttered electronics store. There was a heap of shredded clothing there. Carmaggio hid a smile behind his hand, rubbing his jaw, taking the scrap. It had an odd musky odor, very faint.

"She actually fucked this gangbanger up against the wall?"

Lafarge flushed. *I think they breed them pretty straightlaced where he comes from*, the detective thought.

"The moloscanner reveals traces of human semen and *drakensis* . . . secretions."

"You can do that on site?" Chen asked enviously. Lafarge shrugged.

"Molecular analysis is fairly simple. My machinery is just much more compact."

"It doesn't help us much," Carmaggio said. "Not admissible evidence." Then he snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute! She left a *witness*."

"*Si*, but that's going to be one difficult *hijo de puta* to find. No witnesses to the incident; sure, we'll get some names of who the deaders ran with, but . . ."

Carmaggio held up a hand and looked at Lafarge. The . . . *man from Dimension X*, the detective thought . . . reached inside his coat. What he pulled out looked like a sheet of stiff paper. On it appeared an adolescent face; Puerto Rican, Carmaggio thought. The bandanna and earring fit the evidence left over by the wall.

"This is the face that goes with his genes. There may be acquired characteristics; scars, perhaps."

"Damn, but I'd like to have that gadget," Carmaggio said mildly. "How does it . . . never mind. Jesus, get this down to the office and see if it matches anyone known to run with the Lords. Then do up copies and have it APB'd."

"Grounds?"

"Material witness . . . no, make it assault, attempted murder, whatever. We'll find him and then do a talk-and-walk."

"It will take some heavy pressure to get one of the Lords to admit a *woman* tore off his clothes and screwed him," Jesus chuckled.

"Then we'll lean on him. Get on to it."

He looked down and noticed he was still smelling the rag of T-shirt. That wasn't the only thing that was happening, either. *Good thing I'm not wearing tight pants*. He grimaced and tossed the cloth aside. *Christ*, he thought uneasily. Suddenly what had happened to the gangbanger didn't seem so funny. Anything that could get a rise out of him tonight, at his age, was definitely bad mojo. He forced down an illogical silly smile.

"If we can find this little shit, we can pull her in," he said. "Manslaughter, at least."

"A good lawyer and she'd walk on that," Jesus pointed out, in police reflex. The NYPD was too overloaded to bother arresting people who had a good chance of getting off. "Self-defense, even if she admitted anything. And *patron*, our credibility would be shit, with a gangbanger's word against a respected businesswoman with government connections."

"There's a forcible rape charge, too," Carmaggio pointed out. "Besides, what we want to do is slow her down and throw off her plans. She's gone to a lot of trouble to build up an image as a respectable businesswoman. This would queer it."

Lafarge shook his head. "Your legal system is not going to make any impression on *it*," he said. "Direct action . . ."

Carmaggio hunched his shoulders. "Our legal system is what we've got," he snapped. "We're going to use it. The alternative is six people with handguns trying an amateur hit. You think that's viable?"

"I don't think you're adjusting to the situation as it is," the Samothracian said carefully.

"I don't think you should assume that this is wog-land," Carmaggio replied. "You know, the place where a white man with a gun can do whatever he wants?"

Lafarge blinked and looked away, ignoring the heavy irony. "I'm doing what I can to trace her operations," he said. "It looks bad. She's ordering components for a reactor."

The three New Yorkers swiveled to face him. "A *nuclear* reactor?" Chen asked incredulously.

"A fusion reactor. Early model, primitive . . . it will weigh about a hundred and fifty tons, in the three hundred megawatt range. Most of the components can be made locally, although nobody would know what it was for."

"How is she going to hide a set of turbines and alternators that large?" Chen asked curiously.

Lafarge shook his head. "I said primitive, not neolithic. Direct transformation of energetic particles to electricity or other input energies."

Carmaggio grunted and scratched at his chin through the heavy morning stubble. "Zoning violation?" he mused.

Chen shrugged. "I'm assuming there would be no way to prove it was anything but lab equipment?" she said.

Lafarge nodded. "Not until it was fired up. Then the neutrino flux would give it away, even to your equipment . . . but that would be too late."

"It would?" Chen said.

"I'm presuming the *drakensis* wouldn't activate the power source until the last set of tests needed on the signaling equipment."

He shrugged. "I'm also assuming it'll get the signaling device right—but under the circumstances, we'd better take the pessimistic interpretation." His head came up. "I'd better go make sure you're not interrupted. I think . . ." He turned and strode away.

\*\*\*

Looping back on your own trail was good tactics. *Although now I wish I'd just outrun those ferals*, Gwen thought as she trotted southward, holding her speed carefully down to that of a human jogger—unusual in this neighborhood at night, but not totally bizarre. Her playfulness had gotten the better of her.

"This is war," she reminded herself. Not recreation, not hunting goblins or grizzly bears for the fun of it.

She slowed, walking through the night streets. There was a gathering of cars at the spot she had turned on the muggers; their heavy chemical stink made it hard to pick up individual scents, even downwind and as close as half a kilometer. Gwen looked around. The buildings were not too high here, mostly flat-roofed and built of brick. She crouched, leapt ten feet upward to clamp her hands on a metal bracket, then swarmed up the side and flipped over the parapet to land on the flat graveled-asphalt surface of the roof. Ventilator shafts and the square man-high covering of a stairwell dotted it. She bent over until the fingertips of her outstretched hands almost brushed the gravel, ran across the roof and leaped again to land atop the stairwell cover with her weight resting on fingers, thumbs, and toes.

Ah. She willed her sight into telescope mode, letting herself sink lower until only the top of her head and her eyes showed. Yes, *that's the policeman*. Her mind enhanced the images, branding close-ups of the faces into her memory and that of her transducer. *Odd about the policeman. He may know about me, but Jennifer certainly doesn't.*

Yes, that's him. The Samothracian was walking away from the flashing lights and huddled humans.

She snarled silently, a thread of saliva dangling from one lip. *Rush them?* She could be down from here in a few seconds, then charge out of the darkness faster than a racehorse, kill, vanish. Cut off the Samothracian's locally-recruited limbs. Literally; the layer knife was ready in the knapsack at her back.

No, too risky. Not while the cyber-warrior was nearby; and besides, there were too many humans there, too many videocameras. The last thing she needed was incontrovertible proof of her own existence flashed out over the news services.

Now, which way had the Samothracian gone? *Ah*. Along her original trail. The problem was that molecular machines could track the drifting particles of scent just as well as a gene-engineered nose. Better, in some respects. And she suspected that the Samothracian would have at least a small faber with him to manufacture what he didn't already have in his covert-operative kit.

Two can play at that game, she thought, reaching into a pocket and pressing the control stud of a small metal oblong. There was no audible hiss, even to her ears, but the molecules drifting out would bind to hers and blanket her scent very effectively. She wrinkled her nose slightly; it was a little like being invisible, the same sort of mental jar you would feel looking down and not seeing yourself.

Gwen leopard-crawled forward to the edge of the roof, filtering the noise background. There. That was the pattern of his walk, two streets over. It was only about ten meters from roof to roof, across the narrow intervening alleyways. She backed halfway across, braced, ran and *leapt*. The soaring was like being in zero-g again, but better, with the wind in her face. The thump of landing was soft as she used legs and arms to spring-cushion the impact, and the background noise was high. This time she kept well back from the edge, relying on nose and hearing and the knowledge of her own path the first time. She'd been high-scent then, sweating from fight and rut; easy for the enemy's sensor to follow.

Wait. Another leap. This time there was a human on the roof, cigarette frozen halfway to his mouth as he stared at her with a yokel gape. She came soaring down out of the night and landed next to him, twitched the tobacco out of his mouth.

"Those things are bad for you. And you didn't see me."

The Samothracian was disappearing into the darkened space beneath a highway, the river just visible to her right. She stuffed her shoes into the knapsack and then turned, slipped her legs over the edge and went down the face of the building in a controlled fall, breaking her momentum with snatch-grabs at cornices and window-ledges. The impact at the bottom was enough to bring a slight grunt, and then she was running lightly on the balls of her feet. Accelerating to full speed, fifty kilometers per hour, arm going back over her shoulder to take the hilt of the layer knife. Downwind from him to her, the slightly *off* scent filling her nose.

Time slowed, awareness expanded. The target was in local clothes, jeans, windbreaker, walking with his hands in his pockets. Undoubtedly wearing the softsuit under the clothes, but not covering his extremities. *One strong cut to the back of the head*. Reinforced bones or no, that would open his skull like topping a hard-boiled egg.

Something, the soft touch of her feet on the pavement or her breathing or the cloven air of her passage itself, warned him. She shrieked a long howling cry of frustration as the layer knife slammed into an upraised arm that shed it with a long *clang-hiss*. Shreds of fabric spattered for yards around, and the jarring impact shuddered up her arm and into the shoulder-joint with a force that would have shattered human bones. The momentum of her 195 pounds threw them both spinning, him backward. She turned the motion into a flying leap that ended behind a concrete barricade.

Crack. White fire lanced into the surface, and light battered her eyes as lime and steel burned. Ozone and combustion products clawed at her nose and throat, burning at her lungs.

Gwen skittered backward in a spider-crawl, over the asphalt, underneath a parked car, further back behind another lip of concrete at the edge of a parking lot. *Possibly I was slightly hasty*, she thought.

Crack, as the car she'd passed under took a bolt of blue-white light. Steel vaporized, the vacuum of

superheated air sucked fuel out into a mist of droplets and exploded. That turned the automobile into a fuel-air bomb of impressive size. Gwen tumbled backward like a scrap of paper in the breeze, twisting to keep the supernal sharpness of the layer knife's edge away from her own skin, thudding painfully into stone and concrete and metal. Her hair singed and stank; cars near the one struck by the energy bolt exploded, and then more in a chain-reaction across the parking lot. A pillar of fire was rising into the night sky, and sirens wailed in the distance. Lights swept up the Hudson under the whirring blades of a helicopter.

A lake of fire and twisted metal lay before her. Gwen spat blood to clear her mouth and resheathed the layer knife, willing away pain. *Nothing really damaged*, she decided after a brief check. Hearing slightly stunned, abrasions and burns that would heal, a little scorching to her upper lungs and bronchi.

Drawing the plasma gun from its sheath would expose it to the Samothracian's sensors, but right now she wanted a weapon with a little more distance effect. She set it to needle-beam and waited, with the water to her back. Earth was cool beneath her.

The enemy came walking through the fire like an eyeless statue of living metal, his armor covering him in a fluid surface the color of mercury lit from within. Scraps of cloth flickered away from the softsuit's perfectly reflective surface in flame and ash. Her first shot struck the ground at his feet, lifting and toppling him backward. The second struck at the weapon in his right hand. The Samothracian curled around it protectively and rolled backwards into the fire, hiding himself in its heat and glow.

Damn.She keyed her transducer:

we've got to stop meeting like this.

A bolt out of the fire, gouging earth into steam near her face. She scuttled down the embankment and snapshot back at the transducer's triangulation-point of where the Samothracian was. He'd have moved too, of course.

the humans will be here momentarily,she went on.**shall we call a temporary truce? their government is more likely to believe my lies than your truth.**

Something small and dense arched out of the spreading pool of burning gasoline. Her wrist moved in a small, precise movement and her finger stroked the trigger, even as her other arm came around to shade her eyes.

The air picked her up and slammed her down again on the ground. The light was bright enough to hurt even through clenched eyelids and the flesh of her arm; that must have been visible all over the city.

Gwen fired again before the flash had died; this time into a large truck still intact at the edge of the lot. The liquid inside was heavy heating oil; it ignited and began to burn as it gushed out, a sweeping wave of thick black liquid four inches high as it poured over the shattered lot. The fire flared up higher, this time spreading a pall of thick tarry smoke.

have you no concern for your fellow humans?she asked, slithering backward.

The mental impression of a voice answered her, cold with rage: *more than you.*

then you must have realized the precautions I could take.

better the planet be depopulated than domesticated.

perhaps i've readied a kill-plague,she answered.**perhaps not. i've already started improving the place; check their fertility rates over the last two years.**

While she spoke silently she had been hyperventilating. *I'll leave him to think about that*, she decided, stripped off the hampering clothes, broke contact and slid backwards into the water.

The dirty liquid closed over her head. Her weight pulled her downward; she sculled gently with the current, heading out deeper and keeping her motions languid to conserve oxygen. If she was careful she had fifteen or twenty minutes before she had to surface to breathe, and he couldn't be sure where she'd entered the river.

Slap. Concussion jarred at her, a huge fist that squeezed at her chest and tried to force the precious air out into the water. She swam deeper and faster, lunging hands forcing the water behind her. The Samothracian was throwing minigrenades into the water. *Slap*. This time her vision blurred. *Slap*. Effort was draining her reserves of oxygen. If she surfaced, he might be in a firing position with the energy gun .

A huge dark shape loomed up out of the river's blackness. Lights blazed out from it suddenly, showing the teardrop hull and the *Reiver* stenciled across the bow. Her arms strained out and hands clamped onto a bracket as the bow-wave buffeted her aside. The hull turned and drove southwards, wrenching at her shoulder-joints. Gwen could hear her heart straining to beat faster as the last oxygen was scavenged out of her blood; when the vehicle surfaced she lay panting for a long minute until the strength returned to her body.

"That was close," she muttered, crawling over the upper curve of the hull and undogging the hatch.

"You all right, ma'am?" Lowe asked.

One of the Haitian crew brought towels and a first-aid box. Gwen waved it aside as she dried herself off; no point in bandaging, when you couldn't get infected and wounds clotted quickly.

"Never better," she said. "Just a little singed and scraped. Jacques, fetch clothing. Lowe, back to the dock."

She looked upward with a slight smile as the *Reiver* canted and turned, imagining her enemy's rage and frustration. Still, that had been too close for comfort. It was time to tighten up a little.

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"I hope this isn't what you call subtle tactics," Carmaggio said grimly.

They were all sitting in a booth, and like nearly everybody else they were watching the TV. Every news channel in the city and the nationals besides were focusing on this one; it wasn't all that often that a section of the West Side went up in a giant ball of flame. The view from the helicopter had been on loop since he got up this morning; so had the interviews with dazed passersby, most of them swearing that ray-guns had set the cars on fire. Of course, a lot of them were also swearing that they'd seen the aliens with the ray-guns getting out of flying saucers, or into submarines in the Hudson.

The helicopter loop came on again. The beginning showed cars exploding across the lot, merging into a

single pillar of flame that buffeted the aircraft until the picture jiggled with the updraft. And there were the little straight-line flashes of light that had everyone talking, flashes ending in explosions.

A talking head came on, some retired military type, pointing to a freeze-frame:

"Definitely rocket launchers," he said. "Or rocket propelled grenades . . ."

"If that dickhead ever saw an RPG fired, I'm the Queen of Siam," Carmaggio said disgustedly.

He *had* seen RPG's fired, far more often than he'd liked, back when.

I want a smoke. If it weren't for Jenny, he thought, he'd bum one right now.

"Firefights with energy weapons are like that," Lafarge said. "I suppose the observers need some sort of explanation to account for what they saw."

"Oh, that's all right then," Carmaggio said. The other man nodded, then looked back at the policeman sharply.

"It attacked me," he said. "I had to take the opportunity." His fist clenched. "I nearly *got* it. Damn, damn, how did it get away underwater?"

On the screen a tiny metallic figure dashed through the flames. A jerky close-up showed it hurling tiny objects into the Hudson. Each time a shock-fractured hemisphere billowed out of the surface as the underwater explosion punched the surface of the river. Then the living statue dove into the water itself . . .

Someone from a nearby booth blew a raspberry. "Hell, I saw better'n that in that *Terminator* flick. Who'd they think they're shitting?"

"I nearly *got* it," Lafarge repeated.

Which gives me a better sense of your *priorities*, Carmaggio thought. The warnings about biological weapons had been real enough, but if this character got a chance to off Ms. Ingolfsson, he'd go for it.

"And I learned that it has already begun bio-bombing," Lafarge said.

"She *what*?" Carmaggio said, freezing with the beer halfway to his mouth. He felt his stomach twist and sweat break out on his forehead.

*I am getting fucking sick of this sensation.*

"Launched a biobomb. Not a lethal one; aimed at fertility. It probably feels the planet is overpopulated. Which it is, but that's no excuse for . . . never mind. I checked. Numbers of third and fourth births have started dropping all over the Earth, in the last two years. The pattern indicates an initial aerosol seeding at major airports in 1997, every continent, followed by rapid spontaneous spread. At a guess, it's a modified rhinovirus—common cold."

"It *sterilizes* people?"

"Women. After the second birth, for about seventy, eighty percent. Most of the rest after the third, and a

very small percentage would be naturally resistant. It works by sensitizing the immune system so that it treats spermatid cells as foreign matter. Very subtle, by your standards. Nothing visibly wrong with the ovulation cycle, and the eggs could be fertilized *in vitro*."

"Urk." Henry finished the beer. He had been a fourth child himself. "Wait a minute; virtually nobody has more than a couple of kids these days. Except the Amish, maybe."

"Not here, but this virus is spreading *everywhere*. In areas with high infant mortality, population growth could go into reverse in a few years."

There was a choked sound from the other side of the table. Henry looked up sharply; Jesus had turned a muddy shade of gray, and his grip on the edge of the table was turning his fingernails white and pink. *Wait a minute*, the older policeman thought. *Yeah, he and the wife were planning on more kids*. He looked away for a moment; there were times when a man needed privacy.

"Now you see what we're dealing with," Lafarge said. "Something that looks at humans as domestic animals—or as wild game to hunt for pleasure."

"Yeah," Henry said carefully. The flush faded from his ears. He'd *known* this sort of thing for a while now, but for some reason that news brought it home. "You okay, Jesus?"

"*Si*," Jesus said tightly. "I think."

"Goddam," Henry said. *We're probably going to have to go for a straightforward attack*. The risk was insane, but so was waiting.

"Well, if you'll excuse me," he said. Amazing how the rituals of daily life continued. "I've got to get some sleep today; hard night's work ahead tomorrow. *And I've got a date*."

Lafarge reached out and touched his arm. That was extremely rare with the Samothracian; Carmaggio stopped.

"Is that Miss Feinberg you're speaking of?" Henry nodded. "I don't want to . . . Please be extremely careful."

"Yeah, I won't let anything drop."

"Not just that. Nobody who's been in the *drakensis's* presence for more than a few hours can be completely trusted. The dominance mechanisms . . ."

Carmaggio freed his arm with a slight jerk "Thanks," he said flatly. "I'll certainly keep that in mind."

"And here's the list of subcontractors and component manufacturer's it's dealing with."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Gwen looked down from the newly-installed overhead office, onto the floor of the warehouse, through air thick with a haze of dust. It was a maze of cables and sections of equipment now; her nose caught the heavy scents of ozone from arc-welders, smells of metal and oils and plastics, underlain with sweat and the omnipresent gasoline stink of the city. Behind her were several thousand feet of pastel-colored post-modernist office space, plus a suite for herself and rooms for staff and guards; all nearly complete.

Very different from the dusty abandonment she'd smelled that first night here. She remembered dropping into the midst of the humans and growled slightly.

The contractor looked at her and frowned. Gwen schooled her features and nodded at him to continue.

"Ms. Ingolfsson, I can build this," he said, tapping the computer screen, "but I'm damned if I know what it'll do."

Much of it was completely beyond local theory; and there were gaps in the CAD data, elements that were being hand-fabricated by Singh and Mueller down in the Bahamas.

Haven't these people ever heard of the concept "*Do as you're told?*" she thought. The contractor went on:

"I don't have the slightest idea what it is. And you'll need a pretty heavy set of capacitors to energize magnets like that."

She smiled without looking around at him. "Just put it together exactly as specified," she said. "It's . . . experimental equipment. We're planning to surprise the competition."

The man's jacket rustled as he shrugged. "It's your money. What I *can't* do is build it in the time-frame you're asking for."

The man took a half pace backward as Gwen's head rotated around to look him full in the eyes. She controlled herself with an effort, and he relaxed slightly, swallowing.

"Those were your own estimates," she said softly. "Why, exactly, are you changing your mind?"

"Look, ma'am, I'm only the prime contractor here. If subcontractors are willing to pay the penalty clause rather than deliver components to me, I can't send out a goon squad to take the stuff."

Gwen felt her hair rise and bristle, her ears lay themselves back. She forced down the reaction. Who else would be ordering rare-earth alloys in this quantity?

"Why are they willing to do that?" she asked, her voice still a deadly monotone.

"Because somebody else is bidding for 'em. Paying so much above market that it's worthwhile to forfeit. And those components are the bottleneck for the whole . . . whatever it is."

"Exactly," Gwen said dryly. "Well, let my people have the data on the defaulters, and I'll see what can be done. In the meantime, press ahead with the things you *can* do. That's all."

He nodded jerkily. "We'll knock off for the day, then."

Gwen stood, with her feet spread and her hands holding her elbows behind her back. "Dolores will see you out."

"The Samothracian?" Tom asked, when the door closed behind the outsider.

"Possibly. Possibly through a local agent. It's ingenious, in its way; but it smells local. Only the Samothracian could have identified the critical elements, of course, and we'll have to check everything that comes in with redoubled care."

She frowned. "I'm really going to have to have a talk with that man. This is becoming annoying."

Alice cleared her throat: "Another health inspector's notice," she said. The bureaucratic paperwork for having so many of the staff living on-site had turned out to be formidable.

The Draka turned and smiled at her. *Lovely scent she has now*, she thought. Almost as mellow as a *servus's*. And a beautiful glow to her skin, as if the being within were shining through the human envelope. She patted the woman on the stomach with a surge of protective affection.

"Somebody's harassing us again," Gwen said, taking the paper from her. "Considering the sweeteners we've spread out, somebody with influence . . . or a great deal of money, or both."

Vulk Dragovic came through the door in time to hear her.

"The enemy?" the security chief said.

"Probably. It's a little subtle for one of them, though." She paused. "Again, he could be acting through local agents. I *did* leave a bit of a trail when I first came through, and no doubt he could convince some others. We know he's contacted some of the local police, although not how much he's told them." Another pause. "We'll have to look into that. There are certain obvious leads . . . that policeman, for instance. The computers don't show anything, but that's meaningless with a Samothracian involved. Meanwhile, get this paperwork squared away."

"I'll see to it," the Californian said, with a weary sigh. "It'd be easier on the west coast, or back in the Bahamas."

"Yes, but the signaler wouldn't *work* in either of those places, probably," she said, handing over the form. "Get right on it, Tom. Vulk, have you finished the postings?"

"Yes," the Serb said, jerking a nod. "All approaches covered. There were some difficulties, but the weapons will be within reach, despite the Americans."

Gwen stretched and rose. "Then that's everything for this evening. Go wait for me in the room, Vulk; I'll be having you tonight."

The Serb's darkly aquiline features flushed as he left the room, a combination of hatred and longing. Alice chuckled, with a touch of malice.

"I don't think Vulk likes being the girl," she said with a sly smile.

Gwen stopped for a moment. Then she laughed. "I see what you mean," she said. "Well, he's just lucky it wasn't a male of my species that got dropped through, isn't he?"

She was still laughing and unbuttoning her jacket as she walked through the door.

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"You're having all that?" Louisa Englestein said.

"Damned right," Jennifer said.

She speared a french fry with her fork and ate it slowly, then took a bite from the pastrami sandwich, savoring the rich flavors. Chez Laurence *did* have them, if you asked. She hummed a little under her breath.

"Don't tell me," Louisa said. "You got laid."

Jennifer looked at a french fry with an elaborate expression of innocence, then ate it, slowly.

"*No*. Not the Italian cop?"

"Henry. And he's more than an ethnic identifier and a job, you know. He's a sweet guy. And smart."

Louisa rolled her eyes. "*Puh-leez*. Sweet? Oi vey gevalt, this is worse than I thought. Think of what your mother would say."

"Don't be sarcastic. He *is* a sweet guy; not only did he call, but roses, no less, today. Pass the ketchup."

Louisa looked at her. "How long have you been off the diet?" she said.

"A few months—since the Bahamas."

"But you've *lost* weight, I'd swear."

"Twelve pounds," Jennifer said, and patted her stomach. All from the right places, too. "And for once, it wasn't a 'tits go to China, tummy stays' loss, either."

"My god, how did you manage that?"

"My secret," she said, and nibbled on a pickle. "I've been working out more." She had, too—somehow she felt more energetic. "Maybe that's what I needed, fuel."

"So, how did the Bahamas turn out? You had a bad feeling about it."

"Strange, Really strange. Like a visit out of the world, somehow. But the money's there. This is going to be *big*, Louisa."

The pastries came, several of them. Louisa watched incredulously as Jennifer bit into one.

"What was the mysterious Ms. Ingolfsson like?"

"Even stranger. Really forceful personality, and die-you-bitch-die gorgeous. In a very odd way . . . sort of like the most dangerous jock elf you ever saw."

"Oh, come on now, Jenny—in Danielle Steel, maybe, you get gorgeous seductresses starting wildly successful companies and making a mint before they're forty. Even in the romances they're mainly in cosmetics."

Jennifer shrugged. *If you only knew how seductive.* There were some things, however, that you didn't tell even your best friends.

"Every once in a while, truth has to be stranger than fiction," she said.

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"Welcome to the Fortress of Solitude," Henry Carmaggio muttered under his breath.

The reception room was empty except for standard office furniture, a stack of used magazines and one of the new voice-recognition computer receptionists. Henry hated them; it was like talking to an answering machine . . . although come to think of it, Lafarge probably had one that could do literary criticism, or even something really difficult like ordering Chinese and making sure the restaurant understood not to add MSG.

"Fortress of Solitude?"

The voice came out of the air. Carmaggio hid a start.

"Local reference," the detective said.

He went through the door behind the desk of the non-existent receptionist and through a corridor flanked by storerooms. Up a flight of iron stairs, and then past a plain bedroom and another, larger space fitted out as a gym. The workroom occupied most of the rear of the building, full of tables and conduits and enigmatic shapes on overhead trackways; Lafarge was bending over a mechanical shape held in a clamp. Something almost familiar lay on a cloth spread across a bench nearby.

"It's a plasma gun," Lafarge said, without looking up from the workbench. "I'm making a number of them."

Henry picked up a finished model, keeping his hands well away from the trigger assembly. It was about the length of a short rifle, with a butt-plate at the rear and a short stubby barrel at the front. He swung it up to his shoulder, and a LCD display just in front of his eye came live. A red dot appeared on the wall, moving as his hands pivoted the weapon.

"This'll bring her down?" he asked.

"Quite effectively. There's a range next door, and a target set up."

Henry took the hint. Lafarge's workroom gave him a mild set of the creeps, anyway. Not that he knew much about laboratory equipment, but he could *recognize* it. A lot of the stuff around him was perfectly ordinary high-tech gear. Among it were . . . differences. Melted-looking apparatus that gave no clue to its function except that things *happened*. One was about the size of an attache case, with flanged pans on either side. The left-hand pan held an assortment of materials: coins, small ingots, bundles of wire. The pile shifted occasionally, as if bits were disappearing from beneath. Something was forming on the other pan, small and complex and precise.

"It's a faber—a fabricator," Lafarge said, following Henry's eyes. He could do that, somehow, without looking up. "Just a portable model. What I wouldn't give for a full-scale industrial type! As it is, I'm using it for the absolute essentials and relying on local components for the rest. I'll be through here in a minute."

The detective walked through into the long target range. A rack held local weapons, mostly highly illegal; a Barrett .50 sniper rifle, assault weapons, a couple of machine guns, high-capacity handguns. Ammunition was stored below. At the other end of the narrow room was a metal plate, with outlines sketched on it. Human figures, for the most part, and something that looked like a giant baboon with a knife.

He brought the plasma weapon to his shoulder. It balanced remarkably well, easy and precise. That put his eye behind what he'd assumed was an optical sight. Instead it was some sort of video display, very clear. The targets leaped up to within apparent arm's length of him, much more brightly lit than the rather dim background.

"Slick," he muttered. He steadied the red dot on the chest of an outline, and his finger stroked the trigger with remembered gentleness.

CRACK

Henry sprang back with a yell, almost dropping the weapon. The sound was stunning in the confined space, but it was the flash that startled him, like close-range lightning. He swore and shook his head, pawing at his eyes and blinking at the afterimages and tears. The air stank of ozone and hot metal, a dry angry smell.

"Sorry," Lafarge said from behind him. "I forgot you didn't have implanted protectors. Here."

He held out a pair of goggles, each eye covered by a hemisphere of some nonreflective material.

"Golly gee, Batman," Henry growled. *If he had any sense of humor, I could resent that remark.* But he didn't, so presumably he really had forgotten.

The goggles were simply a pressure on his face, utterly invisible from the inside. *Not quite*, he decided after an instant. The ambient light level had gone up. He looked over at the target again, squinting . . . and jerked as the point-of-view rushed toward his focus, steadying at about six inches away. A fist-sized hole had been punched in the metal, the edges still glowing a sullen red with the heat. Something paler showed behind.

"What is that stuff?" he asked.

"An absorbent plastic for trapping solid shot, backed by an inch and a half of titanium steel," Lafarge said. "With a ceramic baffle behind that."

Henry's lips shaped a silent whistle as he looked down at the weapon in his hands. "Shit," he said reverently. "Now, that's *firepower*."

He swung it up to his shoulder again. *Line-of-sight*, he thought. That would make aiming dead easy. "What's the range?" he asked.

"Several kilometers, depending on field-strengths in the vicinity."

"This would make infantry work real interesting," Henry mused. "Watch out."

He fired again. CRACK This time the light was only a bar of brightness across his vision. The recoil was a lovetap, about like a .22 rifle. With this sucker you could snipe out tanks and shoot down fighter jets—no lead-off, striking in an absolutely straight line at the speed of light.

"This is sort of like the gun that Ingolfsson's got?"

"Very like, although a little more bulky. Both twenty-first-century designs, quite basic. I analyzed the impacts from the weapon in Bermuda, and it's an antique. Probably *it* was carrying an old model for sentimental reasons, or as a trophy. I did tell you it's one of the first generation of its kind?"

"Yeah," Henry said.

I just shot a fucking ray gun,he thought. Even now, every once in a while it came up and bit him on the ass.

"How many of these have you got?"

"Half a dozen," the man from the future said. "I can make a few more, perhaps twenty or thirty, in the next few weeks. The bottleneck's the components from my faber, and assembly; I have to do that myself. One torso hit with one of these should kill it. And I'm making some backpack shield generators. They'll offer some defense against its hand-weapon."

"That doesn't solve our basic problem," Henry pointed out, putting the plasma rifle down reluctantly. *One shot to the head. Sigh.* It wasn't that simple.

"I have to get at its systems," Lafarge said. "Here, and in the Bahamas. Simultaneously. To do that, I have to either get the *drakensis* out of its nest and immobilized for at least a few days, or I have to get someone on the inside to plant some devices of my own. With that, I can disarm the trigger system for the biobomb, and then we can kill it."

Henry grinned. "Well, kemosabe, your faithful native sidekick may just be able to help you with that."

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Kenneth Lafarge walked through Central Park, his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. The AI scanned again, through the numberless sensors amid the vegetation and life all around him.

no anomalous presences,it said.

I wonder if I'm being foolish?he thought.

Unfortunately, that was not a question the quasientients made of graven atoms could answer. Knowledge and logic they had, even a kind of consciousness, but neither wisdom nor folly. Those, only the non-algorithmic brains of organo-sentients could produce.

He took a deep breath, cold with the late-spring rains. It brought his attention back from the multiple feed of the nanobugs, like closing a thousand eyes. Even with only his own sight, everything had the laser-cut diamond clarity of the overdrive system laid along his neurons. He could hear the *drakensis*

long before he saw it, hear its heartbeat and breathing. When he did see, it was almost shocking. Hardly different from any native human woman, sitting in slacks and roll-necked sweater and long unbuttoned coat. There was a book on the bench beside her.

It certainly looks human now, he thought; then remembered to clamp down on subvocalization.

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Gwen cracked another peanut and flicked the kernel at the squirrel. The beady rodent eyes fastened on her suspiciously, and then it darted closer and scurried away with the nut. There was a raccoon not far away, sleepy but interested.

She leaned back and set the bag of nuts on the bench, crossing her ankles and her arms.

"It?" she said to the tall blond man. "It? Come now. I *am* a female hominid, if not exactly the same species as you. Surely I rate a *she*, at least."

He lowered his head slightly into his broad shoulders, motionless and silent as none of the primitives she'd met here could ever be. She enjoyed the sensation of danger for a second, a subtle pleasure, then sighed at his boulder-solid patience. He'd be thoroughly buffered against pheromonal dominance, of course. His scent was as odd as his body language: human, but with overtones of something else. Almost mechanical, in fact.

"Has it occurred to you," she said, after they had studied each other for a moment, "that our little conflict here is a paradigm for the past six centuries? Six centuries of our own history, that is, not this timeline."

He showed his teeth slightly. "It must be frustrating, never being able to get away from us pestiferous Yankees."

"There is that," she said, inclining her head. "But I was mostly commenting on the futility of it all."

His eyes shifted to the book. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*.

"Odd choice," he said.

"You recognize it?"

"I've looked through the literature here."

"Interesting analysis," Gwen said. "Very acute. Nothing like it in our history, that I have data on; although if someone had come up with this back when, my ancestors would probably have killed him. They were an intolerant lot."

His brows rose. "You aren't?"

"We *drakensis* don't need ideology, much; we've got genetics instead. Our social order is hard-coded into our nervous systems." She saw the distaste on his face, an infinitesimal movement of his facial muscles.

"What is there to discuss?" he asked.

"We're neither of us constrained to obey the dictates of our societies," she said equably. "Even Draka have free will, of a sort."

"You're offering to surrender?"

At that she laughed, a clear warm sound. "No more than you, cyber-warrior. Come now, though; you must be an intelligent man. Why should we extend the feuds of our respective peoples here?"

"Duty."

She nodded. "Consider the implications, though. I've been giving this 'many worlds' matter some serious thought. There are a near-infinite number of variations on possible outcomes. Ones where I never came here; ones where you never came here. Ones where half of me got chopped off by the transition phase shift, like poor Wulfa's arm. Ones where I've already won, ones where *you've* already won."

"In other words, there has to be an alternate where every possible outcome occurs. What of it? That doesn't alter the fact that each of *us* has only one world-line to live on and it's the only one we get. The event wave is deterministic in retrospect."

"A point—yet we live in the present, not retrospectively, and anticipate the future. But it's also true that, practically speaking, nothing we can do here will ever affect our home time-line. Considering the physics . . . there has to be a substantial degree of fuzziness, somehow, in any world-line's location in the universe's wave function. You may well not be from *exactly* the same timeline that I am—if exactly has any meaning, in this situation. And if I succeed in building an anchoring beacon, the world-line I contact may be subtly different from the one I left. I'd probably never know for sure."

The Samothracian went very still, even by contrast with his usual state. *Aha*, Gwen thought. *I hit, with that one*. Her hypothesis on the physics must have been correct. That alone made all this trouble worthwhile.

"Interesting," he said at last. "But why set up a meeting to discuss the obvious?"

"Who else is there to talk to?" Gwen said. "The natives?"

He made an angry gesture with his head. "I might have expected you to underestimate them."

"Because they're human? Not in the least. I don't underestimate *you*, I assure you. I assume you've got some of them working under you—"

"*Withme*," he corrected.

"—as I do. They're often quite intelligent. They just don't have our knowledge base. Look at the way they're wrecking the planet. It'll be uninhabitable in another century, at this rate."

"Only on a straight-line extrapolation. There are feedback mechanisms already at work to correct the negative trends; there usually are in an open system. Overcontrol is hubris. You snakes were always prone to that."

"A judgment call." She sat up. "Here's my point," she said. "You're here to prevent me from contacting the Domination, correct?"



"That's one of my mission priorities," he acknowledged.

"Well, then," she said, "why not divvy the place up ourselves? Easier on the locals than fighting over it. You get the Western Hemisphere, I get the Old World. That means you control my only access to the Domination timeline; and you can't access the one you came through, I'm pretty sure it's way off-planet."

Lafarge snorted. "You really don't understand humans at all, do you? For all that you exterminated them in the Solar System."

Gwen shrugged and tossed a peanut into her mouth. "My parents were human." She smiled at his slight shock. " *Parent*, really. I'm a clone. Yes, I'm that old. I fought in the Final War; I saw your ancestors leaving for Alpha Centauri, and wept with envy . . . .

"I'm not human, but my ancestors were; and what they dreamed, we are. By our natures; but you have more choices. Which is exactly what I'm offering you: a choice."

"To let you wipe out humanity on two-thirds of Earth?"

"Oh, I don't think I'd transform them to *servus*. Not with unaltered humans around in numbers; it wouldn't be fair, they couldn't compete, and I can't start up my own race here in sufficient numbers to protect them. Besides which, humans are a challenge. Have a peanut? No?"

"No," he said. "This is all a game to you, isn't it? Moves and counter-moves and prizes."

"Of course," she said. "I'm *four hundred* years old. Nobody lives that long without gaining a certain degree of detachment. By the way, there's no reason why you shouldn't live that long or longer, here. We're beyond reach of Samothracian law as well as Draka."

He turned on his heel and walked away.

Humans, Gwen thought. "So emotional."

Worth it to get a sense of her enemy. *Strong will*. She'd expected that, but not quite so much so. She crumbled a handful of peanut shell, and tossed the nuts among the squirrels. They squabbled and chattered over the bounty, tails curled up. A bit rigid, though. He should have played it out longer, probed for her weaknesses.

What would I have done if he'd said yes? she wondered. A very low probability . . .

"I'd probably have gone along with it, for a while at least," she murmured. "Would have been enjoyable."

She cast her mind back, reviewing every episode of the past few weeks. *I've made some sort of mistake*, she thought. No definite clue, but the gestalt had been wrong. *Ah* .

A squirrel came close to her feet; she flipped it into the air with a toe and grabbed it in one hand. The tiny heart beat against the skin of her palm, and the little animal squirmed in her grip. She held the tiny face close to hers.

"Be more cautious," she said to it. "It's a dangerous world."

Gwen tossed it underhand. It sailed through the air with its paws spread, landing on a tree about ten

meters away; the gray shape clung for a moment, then vanished upward into the branches.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Dammit, it's my money," Bill Saunders said. "If I want to buy materials you want, that's my business and none of yours."

He glared at the Californian. *Slicker than snot*, he decided. Probably a faggot. Not that he had anything against queers as such, although presumably God didn't approve. There had been one in his company back in Nam who'd been the best hand with an M-60 he'd ever met. He just didn't like this San Franciscan snob. *Who is a traitor*. Not just to the United States, but to the human race.

Tom Cairstens leaned back in the chair across from the desk. "Mr. Saunders—you don't mind if I call you Bill, do you?"

"Yep. I do."

Cairstens's smile didn't falter for an instant. "IngolfTech has done a good deal of mutually profitable business with you. *Why* endanger it? You can't use those components."

"That's proprietary information."

Their smiles were equally fake as Cairstens rose to go.

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"Name's Laureano, and he runs with the Lords," Jesus Rodriguez said. He showed the picture to the barkeeper. "Laureano Gomez. Seen him lately?"

The barkeeper muttered something. It was easy to lose a sound in here; there were probably louder places in East Harlem, but not many. He didn't recognize the group playing, just that it was Puerto Rican, and cranked enough to warp the woofer. *Lot of good talent out there*, he thought. Nice that tight short dresses were back in. That brought a slight stab of guilt. *I'm married, not blind*, he told himself. Lot of very flashy-looking dudes, too. He was a little out of place himself, probably not enough to scream *policía*.

Certainly the boss would stick out if he'd come in himself; there weren't any Anglos here. The smell of sweat and weed was pretty thick, curls of blue smoke drifting up under the ceiling lights. The bartender stared at him silently.

"I can't hear you," Jesus said patiently. "But the health inspectors might."

The barkeeper wasn't the owner, of course, but he wouldn't want to piss him off, either. He jerked his head at a door.

"Stairway's there."

The interior one, at least; somebody might well be watching the outside doors to the aboveground part of the building. There were rooms on the upper floors, hourly and daily rents, real class. He should have backup for this. Instead all he had was the *patron* and the . . . he didn't even like to *think* about Lafarge. The bartender's hand showed him a key: 613.

He went behind the bar and through the doors, touching one finger to his ear. It wasn't necessary to activate the little button, but it made him feel better, somehow.

"I'm going up," he said, in a whisper that didn't move his lips. "He's in 613."

"Be careful," Lafarge's voice answered. It sounded like normal conversation, but he knew nobody else could hear a thing. Shit. "There are at least three other people in those rooms."

"I'm always careful," he answered shortly. "*Patron?*"

"Ready out back," Carmaggio's voice answered.

The stairwell was dark and littered, smelling of urine and ancient dirt. He went up the stairs two at a time, the treads of his shoes making no sound; they looked like dancing leather, but he'd bought ones with composition soles. No sense in slipping at a critical moment. On the sixth floor he took a careful look both ways down the corridor. Nobody, and most of the lights were out. Perfect. He slipped his ID into one hand and the automatic into the other. The door was wood, with an ordinary Yale lock—low security, for New York. He kicked it flat-footed beside the knob, once, twice, and on the third time it flew open.

"*Policía!*" he shouted. "Everybody down, everybody down!"

The girl screamed—they always did. Just the two of them, on the couch, both in their underwear. The man wasn't Laureano—too heavy, a big beefy guy with a wisp of pointed beard. He backed up against the sofa with his hands at shoulder level.

"Hey, chico, no problem. Be cool," he said.

His eyes darted to a chest of drawers by the wall, covered in tossed-off clothes. Probably a piece there, or his stash. The girl was much younger, cowering back on the couch with her hands over her breasts.

"Down, *hijo*. Now."

The man went down. Jesus stooped and cinched his hands behind his back with a set of plastic manacles; great little invention, since you could put them on and tighten them one-handed. The girl stared at him as he went over to the door to the bedroom, standing wide of it.

"Police," he said through it. "Come on out, Laureano. We just want to talk to you a little, is all, homes. Just a talk. Talk about a lady you met."

Four rounds blasted through the door—and through the outer wall of the suite and probably out through the side of the building, possibly through a couple of civilians on the way. The girl on the couch scuttled out the door on her hands and knees, grabbing bits of her clothing as she went and not wasting any more time on screaming.

" *Shit!*"

He curled back into the angle of the two walls beside the door, the hardest place to bear on from the inside of the bedroom. Two voices whimpered from within: women's voices. And the sound of heavy breathing.

"Man, you in trouble now. Don't make it worse. Come out without the piece and you can still walk away from this."

Bambambambam. Whatever Laureano had in there, it had a high-capacity magazine. And he was trying to hit; this grouping was much closer to the hinge of the door, and him. The prisoner over by the couch gave a yelp and Jesus spared him a quick flickering glance. One of the bullets had drawn a line of blood across his buttocks. The detective grinned. *Mierda*. This could get serious, though. Too many civilians around.

The heavyset prisoner was yelling at Laureano too; mostly insults.

"Shut up!" Jesus called.

He lay down and rolled on his back, inching quietly toward the door feet-first. Knees up, shoulders braced . . . *slam* and his heels knocked it open. He used the same motion to flip himself back up on his feet, automatic in a two-handed grip and pointed at the bed. His mouth opened . . .

. . . and closed as he saw Laureano's naked back vanishing out the window.

"He's on his way down, *patron*, " he said.

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"Got him," Carmaggio said in his throat.

A dark shape coming down the rusty iron of the fire escape, into the piles of garbage bags and cans at its base. There was just enough light to see that he was naked; the gun was a black blur in one hand. The sour taste of danger at the back of his mouth was familiar, almost comforting, after the last couple of months. He tucked himself into the doorway, shoulders against the bars that covered the painted-over glass, inhaling the scent of garbage and stale urine. *Eau de Nouveau York*, he thought with a cold smile.

"Freeze, Laureano," he said. Not shouting, but loud and emphatic. "Put the piece down."

Shit!he thought, as fragments of brick spalled into his face. *The little fucker is fast!* The ricochet went *bwannngggg* across the alleyway and struck sparks from something on the other side.

Fast, but not very smart. Feet slapped on pavement, going away. Carmaggio surged out of the doorway, automatic out. He used the old one-handed grip; nothing wrong with the modern two-handed ones, but he stuck with what he'd been trained on.

"Stop!" he shouted, for form's sake.

Crack. The weapon bucked upward in his hand, and the spent shell pinged off iron somewhere to his right. Laureano went over forward as if he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. The detective broke into a

lumbering run on the slimy pavement, gun held down. The fire escape rattled as Jesus plunged downward to join him. The gangbanger was down and squeezing his thigh with both hands as if he could force the ripped muscle and broken bone to unite. Both policemen stayed cautious until Carmaggio had toed the weapon aside. *Glock 17*, he noticed.

"Laureano Gomez, you are under arrest," Carmaggio said, panting slightly. "You have the right to remain silent . . . ."

Actually, he was moaning pretty bad; the blood wasn't pumping the way it would if an artery had been cut, but it was trickling pretty fast. The ambulance should be here soon, though—and he'd have the usual ten miles of paperwork to fill out for a weapons-discharge. Shouldn't be *too* bad, though, what with the way young Laureano had been spraying 9mm from his Glock around. Only one round fired in response, and no fatalities. Speaking of which . . .

"You'd better get back upstairs," he said to Jesus.

"*Si*. Laureano's friends, they don't like him too much, though. Say he's been acting crazy for the past few days, doesn't do anything but fuck like a bunny and beat up on his women. Also there's a quarter of a key of best-quality rock and some *muy malo* guns up there. Everyone's going to be real cooperative, real public-spirited citizens."

The younger man bolstered his weapon and trotted back up the fire escape. A woman came to the exit, holding a bathrobe closed over her chest and peering downward into the darkened alley. When she saw the fallen gangbanger she began to scream Spanish obscenities at Laureano, a shrill counterpoint to the growing wail of sirens. Carmaggio knew enough of the language to follow those—highly imaginative, and mostly directed at the wounded man's putative masculinity.

"Man," the detective said, "I think you're going to be *real* useful."

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"Push, Alice. *Push*. "

"I . . . *am* . . . pushing!" the human gasped.

Gwen stood between her legs. Expecting a brooder to deliver lying down flat on her back was one of the more curious local customs, which she had no intention of following. She'd had a proper birthing couch made. Alice lay with her torso up at a forty-degree angle and her legs out in the braces, body slick with sweat and panting like an engine. Her face knotted and the muscles of her swollen stomach rippled as she labored at her task. A shriek and the baby's head slid free of the birth canal. *Good, no complications*. No real tissue damage, no bleeding worth noting.

Gwen's strong fingers helped with the final heaves. Warm water stood by; she sponged the baby clean and wrapped it. The red infant face squalled, and she felt her heart melt with love. "There, my little one," she whispered. "It's all right. We know what you need." Her nostrils flared to take its scent, a clean sharp odor cutting through the heavy smell of human fluids.

She handed the infant to Tom, who held it dubiously while Gwen and Dr. Mueller saw to Alice and helped her into the waiting bed. The baby was crying again, sharp and demanding, craning its neck from side to side—smaller than a human newborn, but a little more coordinated. Reddish fuzz covered its head, and there was a trace of knowledge in the green eyes; the transducer would already have begun to

trickle knowledge in, slowly and carefully. Neurons would be forming and knitting into patterns in the newborn brain.

"You can leave us now," she said.

The men left the small bedroom. Gwen put the baby to the brooder's breast; Alice gasped once sharply at the strong tugging, then relaxed with a contented little whimper. There were dark circles under her eyes, but she looked down at the small wiggling form with awed wonder.

"My little cuckoo," she said. She sighed and glanced up at Gwen. "That didn't hurt as much as I expected. It was sort of . . . exciting."

"Give us some credit for improving the process," Gwen said.

The brooder would be full of endorphins, to start with. And being smaller, a *drakensis* infant did less damage coming out; the hominid pelvis hadn't adapted to the size of head an intelligent being needed, so the genetic engineers had done it the other way round and given the child a longer growth spurt programmed for immediately after birth.

"God, she's hungry."

"Well, she needs more nutrients than a human baby. Remember to take the diet supplements."

Gwen stroked a finger along the velvety cheek of her daughter, feeling the tiny muscles working against the brooder's nipple. *Take what you need, little one*, she thought. *It's a good start on life.*

"She'll sleep more than a human baby too, at first. You'll be up and around in a day or two, and we'll have a couple of house servants to help you with the details."

"I want to look after her," Alice said softly, a dreamy smile of pleasure turning her lips up. "More than anything."

Good old maternal instinct, Gwen thought, bending down to kiss the human's forehead as her eyes fluttered into sleep. The baby gave a small belch and slept as well with limp infant finality, head cradled on the brooder's chest. Newborns of her race triggered that inborn drive even more powerfully than human babies did, most strongly in the brooder but acting on anyone in close contact over time.

Gwen remembered her own brooder with nostalgia. She had never been quite as close to any other living thing.

"No more games," she said quietly to herself, rising and looking down at the pair. There was too much to protect now. She strode out into the feral world, a cold ferocity running through her with a taste like iron and salt.

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"Yeah, Bill, I realize he threatened your family. No, we can't go after them right away—but Bill, there's some stuff you ought to see at the Fortress of Solitude. We may have to move soon. Meet you there, okay? Okay."

Carmaggio turned away from the phone and back down the corridor, dodging people and sipping at the

lukewarm, oily-bitter coffee in the Styrofoam cup. It tasted about as bad as his mouth, badly in need of a morning toothbrush. For that matter, he could use a shave. *Have to take care of that.* He had the stuff in his locker, the precautions you learned after twenty years of irregular hours.

The interrogation room was plain and simple—one shaded overhead light, a deal table, some recording equipment carefully switched off, and chairs; it smelled of disinfectant, sweat and old cigarettes. Laureano was in orange overalls now, sitting sullen and resentful across the scarred deal surface, still in the hospital wheelchair. The bullet hadn't done more than chip the bone, fortunately. It would be a good while before the gangbanger was doing any sprints, but he could talk.

Luckily he hadn't asked for a lawyer, yet. Jesus was chatting, doing the good cop, offering coffee and cigarettes. Carmaggio came into the room with a carefully brutal expression on his face, and tossed his jacket over the back of a chair. That let Laureano have a good look at the piece that'd shot him.

"Laureano, you little motherfucker, you are in deep, deep shit," he said, turning the chair around and sitting down with his arms braced on the back. "We've got you on trafficking, we've got you on possession of stolen goods—you really ought to've filed the serials on those guns—assault, attempted homicide, on two police officers yet and in front of multiple witnesses. Incidentally, your fat friend Cesar is singing like he was on MTV. He don't like you so much anymore. According to him, he's an angel and you're the turd of turds."

"Hey, Lieutenant," Jesus said. "You don't have to come down hard on Laureano that way. He's not a bad guy."

"Not a bad guy for a pimping, crack-selling little shit who tries to blow cops away," Carmaggio said, enjoying himself. It wasn't often you got the opportunity to be completely truthful, and in a good cause.

Laureano recoiled slightly in his wheelchair, then flinched as it sent a stab of pain through his wounded leg. He was good-looking in a raffish sort of way, but there was a haunted look in his eyes that Carmaggio suspected had little to do with his wound or being in a police station, neither of which were new experiences for him.

"I want my lawyer," he said. "You gonna charge me, you got to give me a lawyer."

Both the policemen smiled. *Yup*, Carmaggio thought. *We would.* Good thing this was the late nineties; a decade or so before, they'd have had to use the juvenile system on little Laureano. Occasionally, legal changes did make things easier on the cops. Not often, but occasionally.

"Hey," Jesus said. "Did we say we were going to charge you?" He turned to Carmaggio. "Lieutenant, we don't really want to charge this guy, do we?"

"Oh, I don't know," Henry said. "Cute young chicken like this, he'll be real popular in stir once they put him in with the general population. He'll be the belle of the ball. Wouldn't want to deprive him of the experience of being sought-after."

That brought a reaction; more of one than Henry had expected. The young Puerto Rican was grimacing, clutching the arms of his wheelchair, sweating until Henry could smell the rank whiff of it. *Not normal.* Hardcases like this were in and out of juvie and then stir all their lives. Laureano had probably done his first killing around the time he lost his cherry. Prison wasn't more than a minor threat.

Jesus brought a cup of water from the cooler. "Here, *chico*, take this. C'mon, you'll feel better."

"I'm no sissy," Laureano said. "Don't you call me no sissy."

"Sure," Henry said. "You're a real man, *muy macho*. That's why you and your friends let a woman kick your ass up by Riverside last month."

Carmaggio tossed a glossy of Gwendolyn Ingolfsson across the table, a take from the prospectus Primary Belway Securities was putting out. The picture spun and settled before the gangbanger's eyes. *That'll probably get a reaction.*

Henry jerked back in surprise as Laureano screamed and tried to leap out of the wheelchair and across the table. The attempt failed as the wounded leg buckled beneath him; he caught at the edge of the table and screamed again as his weight fell against it, this time with pain.

"What the hell's going on in here?"

Captain McLeish broke through the door, watching as Henry and his partner levered the gray-faced suspect back into his wheelchair. His eyes narrowed.

"Carmaggio, that rubber-hose crap doesn't hold up in court, or hadn't you noticed."

Henry rose and dusted off his hands. "Laureano here just got a little excited," he said soothingly. "Neither of us laid a finger on him."

"He bleeding?"

"Nope, just jarred the wound a bit when he tried to get out of the wheelchair. No problem."

Carmaggio let the false smile slide off his face as the door closed behind his superior.

"All right, enough dicking around," he said. Laureano was hunched in the chair, eyes squeezed shut. "Talk, you little shit."

As McLeish had pointed out, beating confessions out of suspects was an exercise in futility, besides being a bad thing in itself. Any halfway decent lawyer could rip your balls off in court if you did anything remotely resembling the old third degree. On the other hand, they weren't trying to get Laureano to confess to a crime himself . . . and even the most modern practice didn't say they had to make him feel good.

"That wasn't a woman," Laureano said in a controlled hiss. "You believe me, it wasn't no woman. It just *looked* like a woman, maybe it was a *bruja*, I don't know, some sort of robot thing. Jose, he . . . She grabbed his gun and *killed* him with it, man, she just turned it around in his hand and blew his brains out. And she killed all the others, and she . . ."

Laureano put his face in his hands and began to sob. "I couldn't *stop* it, man, I couldn't do *anything*, I couldn't *stop* it, she just kept *doing* it and every time afterwards I touch a woman I see *her* and—"

Carmaggio looked away, embarrassed. Nobody should be stripped like that, not even a noxious little vermin like Laureano. Jesus was patting him on the shoulder, lighting his cigarette; he tossed his head toward the door.



Time for the Bad Cop to take a powder, Carmaggio thought, tripping the *record* switch and quietly slipping out of the room. The last thing you wanted to do was distract a talker once the dam had broken. He strongly suspected that this was the first time Laureano had said a word about his little out-of-this-world encounter on the mean streets. *And speaking of taking a powder . . .* Certain things reminded you of your age, and one of them was the bladder. He grinned at his reflection as he dried his hands. A signed, witnessed statement from Little Laureano the Alien's Pet, and they'd have a murder rap to pin on Ms. Ingolfsson. They might not be able to make it stick, of course; they might not even be able to hold her long. Riker's wasn't designed for superhuman time-travelers.

But long enough would do. He remembered the solid heft of the plasma rifle that Lafarge had made. In, out, job done. Time enough to worry about the consequences afterward. Henry Carmaggio had always paced himself by the task at hand, anyway.

He was just outside the door to the interrogation room when the first scream began. Not a long one, just a sharp agonized grunt. Henry flipped the door open and slammed it behind himself.

"What the fuck—"

Jesus had been sitting on the edge of the table, leaning forward sympathetically. He put a hand on Laureano's shoulder when the prisoner doubled over with a squeal of pain.

The second scream was louder, and much longer. Laureano reared up out of his chair, clutching at his stomach. His eyes bulged, whites showing around the rims. Henry started forward, and met an arching spray of blood from the open mouth. Together the two policemen caught the slumping, thrashing figure and lowered it to the floor. The shriek coming out of the gaping mouth was continuous and as nerve-shredding as a nail across a blackboard. Blood spattered, in their faces, on the walls, drops arching as high as the ceiling in slaughterhouse profusion.

Henry grabbed for the young man's chin, trying to stabilize the mouth so he could see where the hemorrhage was coming from. It jerked in his blood-slippery hand as the whole body arched and flailed. A hand caught him alongside the head, stunning him. The chin slid out of his hand, and Laureano bent until only his heels and head were touching the ground. The detective bored back in, shaking off the ringing in his head, but before he could touch the prisoner the whole body went limp with a boneless finality and fecal smell that were all too familiar.

"Dead," he said. "Son of a *bitch*. What—"

The dead man's head lolled. Something moved on the tongue, something that walked on six dainty legs and lifted a metallic head into the light. The dead mouth yawned wide, and a stream of them poured out over lips and teeth in a final gout of blood. One skittered forward, and Henry threw himself back with a shout of loathing, landing on his buttocks halfway across the room. His gun was in his hand, but there was nothing he could shoot at, nothing at all—and Jesus batted at one of the little monstrosities with an equally unthinking reflex.

"*Cristo!*" the younger man shouted.

Something glittering clung to his palm. He shouted again, pain in his tone, and slammed the hand down on the table. The shout turned into a scream when he lifted it again; the head of the *thing* that had killed Laureano was burrowing into his flesh. The legs waved, gripped, pushed.

Carmaggio felt his mind go cool and detached. He scrambled sideways towards the chair with his

jacket, only taking time to come to his feet when another slick-black shape scuttled across the worn boards of the floor. His left hand dove into the inner pocket of the jacket, took out the button-sized black thimble and jammed it into his ear.

"Lafarge! Christ, we're under attack, *get moving*. Little things like bugs, they killed Laureano—"

"Coming."

Henry danced sideways like a bear on a hotplate as a metallic bug skittered toward his foot. He came down with all the weight of his two hundred pounds on his heel, and there was a *crunch* sound and a fat blue spark. He yelled himself as he tottered back; even through the thick leather he could feel the heat, and there was a circular scorchmark on the floor the size of a demitasse.

"Stop that, you're just driving it in like a nail," he shouted at Jesus.

He caught the younger man's hand and shoved the edge of his pistol-barrel against the thing chewing its way into his partner's flesh. Something snagged at the weapon. Tiny legs, clawing for a hold. He twisted hand and gun towards the wall and pulled the trigger.

Crack. The discharge was much louder in a closed room than outdoors. Chunks of plaster flew from the outside wall; there was brick behind that, thank God, and no ricochet either. Tiny bits of metal spattered the wall behind the bullet. Jesus snatched his injured hand away and hugged it to his stomach, cursing. He staggered and nearly fell. Carmaggio grabbed him under the armpit.

"Christ, watch it, there are more of them!"

" *Coming fast. Hold on.*"

"Hold on my *ass*, " Carmaggio barked.

The camcorder mounted on the table went up in a shower of sparks and smoke. Tiny shapes climbed out on the ruined casing, waving their feelers in triumph. More scuttled across the floor. The two detectives went back-to-back, kicking frantically.

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Gwen opened her eyes. The transmission was a meaningless buzz to her transducer, but the origin . . .  
samothracian patterns, the instrument said.

"Damn," she said mildly, cutting her link with the creatures inside the building above.

It wouldn't do at all to have her transducer open like that when Citizen Lafarge showed up. A pity; it would have been satisfying to finish them all off, but she'd made a good start.

The Draka pushed off from the wall of the police station and strode away down the street, whistling quietly and enjoying the mild spring air. For once New York didn't stink quite so badly, which was a relief. *I think I'll take a turn in Central Park*. Not too far away, and a place to rest her eyes.

At the corner she looked over her shoulder and smiled. They were probably *quite* unhappy, back in there.

\*\*\*

They've stopped.

For one long second the crawling things hesitated. Then they turned and retreated; through the spreading film of blood from Laureano's corpse, into the baseboards, down through cracks in the flooring. Carmaggio staggered as the vise released his chest; he felt an insane giggle forcing its way up his throat. He straightened up out of his crouch and tried to reholster his pistol. That took several tries. Jesus was still glaring and waving his, with his hand dripping onto the floor half-covered with the prisoners blood and fluids.

"I think they've stopped," Henry said.

He still jumped at a rustle, but it was only a fragment of tape going *thack* against the ruined recording machine as it spun. When the door burst open he jumped again, then stopped stock still with his hands in plain sight.

Captain McLeish was there, with half a dozen uniforms. They all had their automatics out, trained on him and Jesus.

"Freeze! Freeze right there!" McLeish bellowed. His gun jerked to follow Jesus's movements, and the younger detective laid his own weapon down with elaborate care.

McLeish looked down at Laureano's body. "Shit on fire, Carmaggio," he said softly. "I didn't think even *you* would pull something like this right in the precinct house."

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"That videotape saved your *ass*, Carmaggio," Captain McLeish said.

"Yessir."

Henry watched Laureano die again, watched Jesus and his own image dance around the interrogation room while the body flopped like a gaffed fish. His mouth felt papery dry at the sight, at the memory that came flooding back like a great wave crashing over a seawall and sweeping away men and the works of men. The grainy image was too coarse to show the *thing* crawling out on the dead man's tongue. That was something to be thankful for.

"That and the autopsy. So you didn't shoot the little spic. Not unless one of your bullets has teeth and burrowed from his asshole out his throat, chewing its way along. But you did it somehow. I've known for years there's something weird about you and your faithful fucking Tonto too. If Internal Affairs doesn't pin this on you, I will—one way or another."

At any other time, that might have been a serious threat. Carmaggio stared sightlessly at the pictures on the Captain's walls. The words bellowed at him were no more real, *less* real than the politicians and their smiles.

"You're on suspension—your badge and gun stay *here*, motherfucker. And that goes for your partner, when they let him out of the hospital. Don't think you can go whining to the union. You had a suspect die on your hands. Don't try the press, either, or you'll regret it even more."

"No, sir," Henry said tonelessly.

Badges belonged to the old world, where metallic insects didn't burrow through men's flesh, eating them out from the inside. Right now that was the least of his worries. A gun he could get anytime he needed one. Last night he'd half-seriously considered putting one in his mouth, just for an instant.

"Get out of here, and don't come back until we call you. Get out of this building, get out of my life."

"Yessir."

He walked numbly out of the office, over to his own, went through the motions of getting the essentials out of his desk and responding to the bewildered sympathy of his friends.

Then his hands stopped. *Jenny*. Christ, it'd been bad enough before. And she was *working* with the thing who'd sent the . . . things.

"I've got to get her away from there."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"What's the matter with you, Henry? You'd think I was taking you to an execution, not a party."

"Yeah, well . . . I've been sort of nervous lately."

"I know," Jennifer said quietly, and put a hand on his arm.

He'd told her that Laureano died in a fit. The papers had that much; what was more, she'd believed him without a moment's hesitation. The *Post* was hinting darkly at conspiracies . . .

If they only knew, he thought, as the taxi passed 61st and pulled up in front of the hotel. A doorman hustled out with an umbrella.

He bit back a silent whistle as they went into the lobby. *Upper East Side with a vengeance*, he thought, jarred a little out of his introspection and welcoming the distraction from the icy bile taste of fear. An Art Deco space, full of evening dress and furs as the guests arrived for the reception in the upper ballroom. Brass, cream-colored marble, and bowing flunkies everywhere.

"Come on, it won't be so bad," Jennifer teased gently.

No, it wouldn't, if it was only social stress anxiety, he thought. Right now he felt like one of the guys in those old stories, going into a monster's den with only a bronze sword, and smelling the rot of those who'd tried before. There *was* a monster waiting for him. He had backup—the black button deep in his right ear—but it was still as dangerous as anything he'd ever done.

Everything okay?he asked subvocally, as they walked up the curving staircase.

Standing by,Lafarge whispered. In theory Ingolfsson shouldn't be able to eavesdrop; the Samothracian's equipment had been designed to evade detection back on her home world, where the Draka had every sort of equipment. That was *some* comfort.

He shook loose his shoulders as they walked into the ballroom; no point in shouting how tense he was. His eyes took in the crowd with a jumping, flickering intensity. Financial types; he'd gotten more familiar with them since he'd become involved with Jenny. Old-fashioned portly ones, often with trophy wives several decades junior. Younger ones, male and female, lean and hungry-looking. Hangers-on from the Wall Street equivalent of the *paparazzi*.

"Why, if it isn't Jenny and her new friend," a voice said.

Time seemed to freeze as he turned. The voice was like nothing he'd ever heard, like a musical instrument with an undertone of vibrating bronze. She was taller than him, long-limbed and supple. The face he remembered from the pictures, but *alive*, it seemed to glow somehow from within, more alive than anyone else. Leaf-green eyes narrowed in mocking amusement, full of an ancient, innocent evil. Meeting them was a palpable shock, a physical tingling that ran down to gut and scrotum. Overlaid on it was the memory of insects vomiting out of a dead man's mouth.

He took the offered hand automatically. She smiled as she squeezed. Just enough to hurt a little; it was like having your hand in a velvet-padded clamp of braided metal wires.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," she said.

"Yeah, I bet you have, Ms. Ingolfsson," Henry said.

"Gwen," she said. "Any friend of Jennifer's . . . And there's every reason we should cooperate to our mutual benefit."

Jennifer was looking from one to the other. "Is there something I should know about?" she said, with a little sharpness in her tone. "Have you met?"

"No, no," Gwen said. "I *have* heard of Mr. Carmaggio, of course. And now I have to run. Enjoy yourselves."

Carmaggio drew a deep breath as she walked away, conscious of how his palms were wet and how sweat was trickling down his flanks.

"A bit overwhelming, isn't she?" Jennifer chuckled.

"You could say that," Henry replied grimly. "Jenny, there is something you should know. My place afterwards?"

"Sure," she said, looking after Gwen with a thoughtful frown.

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I hope it wasn't a mistake bringing Henry here,Jennifer thought, as she drifted off to circulate. She *had* to go—it was a business reception, when you came right down to it—and she was damned if she was going

to look like she was ashamed to be seen with him. Particularly now, with that horrible thing happening to him at work. But he did seem nervous. Even if he looked adorable in a tux.

It was a relief to break out into the ballroom, decorated in a fantasy of peacock feathers and draped silk along the walls. The usual mill-and-swirl, with a buffet along one wall, and the other was windows looking out on Central Park to the west. The mood was good, the launch had been a success beyond expectations. She frowned. *Beyond all reasonable expectations*. The way Lather Enterprises had jumped in was ridiculous; they'd had to split two-for-one right in the middle of things. *Talk about overallotment*.

She nibbled at things from the trays, sipped at a glass of Chardonnay, drifted and talked. A hour found her behind a piece of dreadful modern sculpture, out of sight and sound of the rest of the party.

"Well, hello," a voice purred behind her.

She turned, feeling an unaccountable looseness in her knees. *Damn, how does she do that?* Gwen was leaning one arm against the wall.

"I was starting to think you were avoiding me on the 'road show,'" she said. "Three weeks of touring, and hardly a word."

"Ah—" Jennifer hesitated. *I was avoiding you, of course*. "Well, we were all so busy."

"Tell me about it," Gwen said. She chuckled. "And then I thought your SEC would *never* declare the registration statement effective, not to mention the problems with the final prospectus. I thought this was a capitalist country?"

"You wouldn't think so, would you, sometimes."

A silence fell, evidently much more comfortable for Gwen than for her. Jennifer felt her skin itch, as if the room had suddenly gone up ten degrees and brought out a sweat. *Oh, God. Nobody else affects me this way. It's not fair!*

Gwen took a sip from her goblet, breathed the heavy, fruity scent of the brandy. Her head arched to one side slightly, with a play of tendons in her neck.

"All's done, though," she said. "You know, I don't have any murals here, but I do have some fascinating etchings."

Jennifer was excruciatingly conscious of the hangings brushing against her back and calves. She gulped for air. "Ah, that is—God, please—I don't want—"

Gwen swayed back. "Well, there's always tomorrow," she said, not unkindly. "You'll find I'm extremely good at getting my way. Good job on the papers to the bank syndicate." She fished in a small, elegant belt-pouch. "And if you reconsider over the next few days, do drop by—here's the admission code."

Jennifer slumped back against the wall as she left, fighting for calm. *What's happening to me?*

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Damn, Carmaggio thought, repressing a start as Gwen came up to one side of him. *How does she do*

*that? And in heels?*

"I place my feet down instead of tapping them the way you humans do," Gwen replied. "Steel can touch steel without sound, if you put them together without enough impact to start harmonics."

Carmaggio began humming soundlessly in his throat, hunching his head down into his shoulders and glaring. Ingolfsson stood hipshot, one hand holding the snifter and the other on her belt. That reminded him painfully of the fact that there was no belt holster at the small of his back. All things considered, it would have been nothing but a security blanket here, but that wasn't to be despised. *God, what a mantrap*, he thought. If you liked jockettes; not an ounce of spare tissue, except the smooth curve of breasts under the creamy silk. She reminded him of the old story about the statue that had come to life; you just couldn't look away from her. *I wonder what the impact would be like without the pheromone blockers Lafarge gave me?*

Her nostrils expanded slightly for an instant. "Ah, I see our mutual Samothracian friend has been taking precautions with you—it dulls your scent. *And* makes life less pleasant than it might be. You people are scent-blind enough, without making it worse."

"I prefer to be my own man, thank you," Henry said quietly, bracing himself against the force of personality that blazed out at him, as he might have against a physical wind. "And this isn't your place."

"Your own? Or the Samothracian's?"

She raised a slim eyebrow, the movement as coolly precise as everything she did. Habits of observation quirked at him. *She's got no tics*, he realized. *No waste movement. Nothing that isn't to a purpose or deliberate*. It made him feel heavy and clumsy and old, like some dirt-stained *cotadino* in the old country stumbled into a country-house ball.

"Have you," she went on, "ever considered that you might have been sold a bill of goods as to our relative merits? I doubt you'd find Samothracian society very pleasant either, you know."

Henry nodded jerkily. "He isn't trying to take us over. And he hasn't killed anyone here."

"He killed one of my guards, in the Bahamas," Gwen said reasonably. "He'll kill any number of you to get at me. A bit of a fanatic, don't you find? And no sense of humor at all."

Henry thrust down doubts. *She cannot read my mind*. "You've left a trail of bodies from the day you arrived. I'm a cop; it's my job to catch people like you—even when they aren't people."

"Will anyone miss Marley Man and his posse?" Gwen asked.

"You're not the courts. And there's Fischer, God knows how many others."

"Ah, well, that's war for you. You had a war of your own, didn't you, Detective Carmaggio? Didn't any bystanders get killed in that one?"

Henry felt sweat trickling down into his collar. "You're going to be stopped."

"Everyone's the hero in their own story, Lieutenant," Gwen said, smiling and shaking her head. "Think. This might be *my* story—in which case, I'll win, and you are a minor character." She paused, considering. "I *will* win. I've lived nearly half a thousand years, human, and I always *do* win. Don't sacrifice the few

years you have smashing your glass against my iron."

He stayed silent. She nodded. "Yes, I can understand what Jennifer sees in you. Pity if she were hurt, wouldn't it?"

Carmaggio flushed. Then a movement caught his eye. *By God*, he thought. *That's* Captain McLeish, *by God!*

"Yes, a number of you have seen the . . . wisdom of cooperating with me. I could use someone like you in my . . . organization."

He looked into the clear green eyes. "I've done some, ah, questionable things, in my time," he said with quiet finality. "But I've never been on the pad."

She shrugged and turned. "Your choice."

Shaking, Carmaggio emptied his drink. *One more*, he thought. *Then we're out of here. Enough secrecy. Jenny has a right to know what she's facing.*

Even if it scared her shitless and risked her life.

\*\*\*

Carmaggio's apartment was new territory to Jennifer. She'd assumed that was for the usual bachelor reasons; terrible housekeeping, for starters. Instead it was extremely tidy, in a ruled-off way, probably the result of weeks of intensive effort. The smell of wax and cleaner certainly hinted at that. Larger than hers too, although of course it was on Mulberry north of Canal, not the Upper West Side. She looked around as Henry struggled with their coats in an overstuffed closet. A couple of pictures, mostly photos. Family shots, and Henry as a young man stiff and self-conscious in uniform. Quite a few books, looking well-thumbed. A good computer off in a nook by the living room, with a rack of CD-ROMs beside it. A peek into the bedroom showed a folded exercise machine in one corner.

"Henry, there's something I should tell *you*," she began slowly, coming back toward the hallway. *I hate confessions*. How did Catholics do them all the time?

Henry smiled. "Not quite yet, I think. *Activate*."

On the kitchen table lay a black rectangle the size of a business card. When he spoke, a twisting column of light appeared above it—a three-dimensional image, looking like an impossible moving sculpture of liquid.

"I—what *is* that?"

"I don't really know myself," Henry said. She looked over at him, feeling her eyes go wide. "But it's got some interesting qualities."

He spoke to it again. An image of Gwendolyn Ingolfsson appeared over the table: life-size, nude, and utterly indistinguishable from reality, except that it neither breathed nor moved.

"*Shit!*" Jennifer shouted, and scrambled backward.



She lurched into a chair and tottered, arms wind-milling. Carmaggio leaped forward and caught her. An urge to push him away fought with an equally strong desire to cling, until all she could do was stand and shiver. After a while the blackness receded from her eyes.

"Wha . . . what is that?"

"Jenny." She turned and looked into his face. "Until you went to the Bahamas, I didn't have any proof—just some suspicions. And then I couldn't tell you because it'd put you in danger. You've got to understand that first. Understand?"

Jennifer shook herself. *Think, you cow*, she told herself. "I . . . I think so. What does it *mean*?"

Carmaggio took a deep breath. "Okay," he began.

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"Pheromones?"

Jennifer stared at the skeleton the impossible machine was showing, rotating slowly to give an all-around view. She remembered more than enough of her premed studies to know that the *skeleton* was impossible, too. The flanged bones, the high-leverage double-acting joints, the too-large nasal and ear cavities . . .

That isn't a human being. That isn't a human *being*.

"Yeah, pheromones, supercharged variety. Lafarge says they can play games with your head."

"Oh, my *God*," Jennifer said. She put a hand to her mouth. "Oh, my God, I went to *bed* with—"

Suddenly she was up and running, struggling to hold back the bitter-tasting bile. Remembering fever-hot skin tasting of cinnamon and salt, weight that crushed out her breath, a growling chuckle in her ear. Vomit splashed into the bowl as she knelt, heaving and retching uncontrollably; the raw physical misery was a relief, crowding thought away. When she was finally conscious of something else, it was Carmaggio standing beside her with a towel and damp facecloth.

"Here," he said, helping her clean up. "C'mon, sit, get your head down a little, try this."

She washed her mouth out with water and then took a sip of the brandy, sitting on the edge of the bathtub and shivering. A hand rubbed her back and she leaned into it gratefully.

"Don't sweat it," he said gently. "You're not to blame."

"That's just *it*," she said roughly and took another swallow of the brandy. "I thought I was seduced, and I was *drugged*, I was *raped*—and I didn't even know it. I was an accomplice!" She set the glass down carefully. Remembered words fell into place with little mental *click* sounds. "The bitch, the bitch, she was *laughing* at me all along. Laughing. I want her *dead*."

"Well," said Carmaggio, and put his arm around her shoulders. "Yeah, that's the option we've been looking at, actually."

\*\*\*

"I think we have something!" Mueller exclaimed. The words echoed through the huge empty spaces of the warehouse.

It was brightly lit now, with banks of overhead fluorescent lights; the interior was painted white, including the surfaces of the windows. Armed guards stood at intervals on catwalks around the upper interior walls, and another spanned the arch of the building. Below was the great circular ring of the fusion generator, man-high and twenty meters in circumference. Lying within that was another ring almost as large, smooth enigmatic metal with heavy fiber-optic cable junctions at its four corners. The air held a heavy electrical smell, overlain with new paint and hot metal.

The German scientist was standing at a console on the warehouse floor. Above in the glassed-in control chamber Gwen twitched her ears forward to pick up his voice, then glanced over at the display monitors.

"I think you're right," she said. "Get—"

CRACK.

The noise was deafening even here in the control chamber. The tragus clamped automatically across the opening of her ears to protect the sensitive inner mechanisms. Humans screamed down on the floor, clutching their hands to either side of their heads.

From within the center of the inner ring a thread of light too intense to see speared upward, cutting through the roof with hardly even a spark as the steel flashed into its constituent atoms and the atoms were stripped to ions. It was *thinner* than a thread, Gwen realized as she flung up a hand and glanced away, blinking at the line of darkness scored across her sight. She opened the door and stepped out onto the new metal of the catwalk, past a Haitian bawling in panic and fumbling with his heavy Barrett .50 sniper rifle.

Thinner than a thread and utterly rigid. The source was—her mind and transducer did quick calculations—a spot 7.32 meters above the exact center of the inner ring. Head height for her, now that she was out on the catwalk that spanned the transposition circle.

Her breath was fast and heavy; she controlled it, and throttled back the beating of her heart.

Below the thread of energy a spot opened. It swelled outward into a perfect circle a meter wide, and then flashed from silver to transparent.

"Well met," she breathed to the one who stood there. "Glory to the Race."

"Service to the State," Alexis Renston replied. "Sorry for the side effect," he went on, pointing upward to the beam. "Energetic particle byproduct."

The Archon was in a suit of powered infantry armor; it mimicked his form a few millimeters out, flexible as liquid and as strong as anything in the universe, set to a shiny jet-black at the moment. Molded lumps and protrusions told of engines concealed within, and weapons deadly enough to savage whole cities. It slid from face and hands as he tilted his head back slightly to take in Gwen, then glanced around at the interior of the warehouse. Behind him she could see others, and the hulking hyena-ape forms of ghoulouons. The background was Reichart Station, but the forest beyond it had been cleared and the surface smoothed. Machines rested on it, waiting, and more hovered in the sky. The heavy iron was ready.

"I see you haven't been idle," the Archon said.

"Nor have you," she said.

There was a *servus* off to one side, operating some equipment. *Ah, Tolya*. The *servus* physicist looked . . . *younger*. Well, she deserved the ultimate reward.

datadump, she commanded her transducer. There was a barely subliminal hum along her nerves as it sent/received data at a rate far too high for conscious reflection. But it would be there, and here, when needed.

"Timeframe?" she went on, while the machines spoke to each other.

"This molehole is barely at the atomic scale," Renston said. "Proof-of-concept. Scaleup is proceeding rapidly and shouldn't present any problems, provided you keep the beacon in operation. Planetary Archon Ingolfsson," he added. They both wolf-grinned at the essential clarification of status.

"News?"

"The Samothracians attacked, with moleholes in place. We stopped them, but only just. We're making excellent progress on our own moleholes for interstellar travel."

"Gravitational effects . . . slipslide?"

"Exactly. Deeper into the solar gravity well than the Oort, and you go sideways. Very high energy costs, too."

"Acknowledged. I suggest we break off until you can establish full contact. The situation here's a little delicate; the enemy sent an operative through. He'll detect the spike . . . even the *natives* will detect it, and that could be awkward."

"Confirmed," Renston replied. His eyes had a slightly detached look, that of someone reviewing transducer-linked data. "Ahhh, good hunting there, grandmother."

"Very good. See you soon."

CRACK

The thread of intolerable light disappeared, leaving nothing but the ringing in her ears and the memory of heat and light. With it went the holographic window. The humans were babbling and rushing about, some screaming or weeping, others exultant. Gwen stood rock-still; she'd have to see to them, but not in this instant of purest joy.

"I'll see you all, my brothers, my sisters," she whispered. "And we shall hunt together, forever."

\*\*\*

Across New York, static seared radio and television. Instruments jumped and computers stuttered, data scrambled on electromagnetic disks. And nearly a million eyes saw a spike of intolerable fire slamming into the sky above Manhattan, like a line of blue-white light reaching into space and scoring the face of

the moon. For six seconds it hung above the city.

When it ended, darkness fell as overloaded transformers shattered and exploded in fountains of sparks.

\*\*\*

"What the *hell*?"

Carmaggio jumped up from the sofa. Jennifer stayed, but turned her red-rimmed eyes around while her handful of Kleenex fell unnoticed to her lap. The apartment lights flickered wildly, and the telephone rang—a single long note that went on and on. The computer in the corner of the living room switched itself on, flashed *system error*, and died. Then the lights followed with an abrupt finality; but the blackness that followed was only partial. An actinic blue-white light lit it, reflected off buildings and through windows. Thunder boomed in the distance.

Jennifer came to her feet. The two humans clutched at each other. For five long seconds the unnatural lightning-light lasted, until true darkness fell.

"What was that?" she asked.

"The end of the world, unless we're very lucky," Carmaggio said.

He fumbled in his pocket and pushed the tiny button into his ear.

". . . working," Lafarge's voice—or his machine's—sounded. "The enemy has made a breakthrough. It's not a full-scale molehole but we can expect that soon. I'm coming to—"

The door burst open. A man-shape walked through, then lit to cast a background luminescence.

"There's no more time," it said. Glowing material ran like water down its face, revealing Lafarge. "No more time at all."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Work was piling up at the warehouse. There was no more time, and the outer circle of human servants was beginning to suspect something. She'd had to slap one down with a broken skull to get the others into order, of a sort. Gwen's lips lifted from her teeth when her transducer pinged an alarm at the back of her consciousness.

plasma gun discharge, the machine said, **location follows**. The antennas on the roof were big and clumsy, but they worked after a fashion, and the instrument behind her ear could interface with their input.

Gwen snarled, a ripping, guttural sound full of menace. The enemy must have made up a supply of energy weapons—easier for him; he probably had a small faber to do the difficult components. *Ah. Central Park*. Not too far away, and a good enough place to group for an attack. Why the discharge? It

could be a trap; on the other hand, it was also likely that a cobbled-together group of hastily trained humans had poor fire discipline.

how many energy weapons?she asked the machine.

well stealthed,it replied.**indeterminate; not less than five; not more than thirty of the same class as the discharge.**

"Damn," she said aloud.**detection anomalies?**

neural interfacers traces, possible.

She couldn't take a chance on those plasma guns getting any closer. This building was shielded and ran off the power from the fusion generator, but that didn't apply to the surrounding neighborhood. A bad fire or brickwork collapsing on the fragile walls could ruin everything. And the Samothracian was with them.

"Listen."

Her humans looked up; it was safer not to make eye contact with a *drakensis* in the mood indicated by the sounds she'd made, unless you had direct orders.

"Vulk," she said briskly. "Get the perimeter out as we planned. The rest of you, Option Orange."

Tom's strained face turned to her. "What's gone wrong?"

"The Samothracian is desperate. He's armed a number of locals with improvised energy weapons, and we have to assume he's coming after us here. I can't allow that; too much danger to the apparatus, even with the shielding. I'll have to take them out. Hold the fort, and it'll all be over soon."

And if not, this planet gets scoured clean by the biobomb,she added to herself. A nuisance; her household were all immunized, of course, but they'd have to evacuate until bacteria took care of the bodies. Seven-million-odd corpses here in New York alone—a severe sanitation problem—not to mention the longer-term damage industrial spills and runaway nuclear power plants would do to the planet.

Needs must. She stripped and began putting on her blacks, while one of Vulk's men brought the backpack shield generator she'd cobbled together.

"Isn't that risky?" Alice asked. Dolores whimpered slightly, subvocally.

"Yes," Gwen said. "But at this stage, the maximum priority is protecting the signaling apparatus. The child comes second, and myself third."

She shrugged into the backpack; with the metal sheathing to protect it from mechanical damage, it weighed about fifty kilograms. A nuisance, but not enough to slow her down significantly.

"Hold the fort," she said, and trotted briskly away.

\*\*\*

CRACK

"Hell," Carmaggio said.

The oak tree toppled away from him, its trunk blasted into splinters by the bolt from the plasma rifle in his hands. The crash echoed through the park, sinking among the tree trunks. Flames licked up and caught, dancing reddish-gold among splintered wood blasted into kindling-dryness by the energy release. The firelight glittered over bodies and goggled eyes, extra brightness to the enhanced vision equipment from out of time gave him.

The others looked suitably respectful. They'd all practiced in Lafarge's shielded firing-range, but this was a lot more immediate.

He pushed the goggles up on his forehead, and night returned. Blacker night than any he'd ever seen in New York. You didn't realize how much ambient glow there was until it was gone; the stars were out over Central Park, a frosted arch across the sky. It was clear enough to see the *colors* of the stars. Quiet, too. A little traffic noise—not much, with the streetlights dead—and plenty of sirens. *A good thing I'm on suspension*, he thought dryly. *Probably lose my badge if I still had it, for not showing up in an emergency like this.* The policeman's part of his mind was shuddering at the thought of what it was like out there, with power down and communications scrambled.

There were about fifty men and women grouped around him, in the woods just north of the pond and across from Bethesda Fountain. Saunders and his weekend warriors, in camo-patterned Fritz helmets and fatigues, all suited up with Kevlar body armor—much good that would do them. Finch and her boss and some FBI SWAT types. And Jesus Rodriguez and Mary Chen, of course. All with Lafarge's gadgets, shielding and plasma guns; which *would* do some good, and the little ECM pod which was supposed to fool the enemy's instruments into thinking Lafarge was here. He hoped.

Carmaggio took a deep breath of the night air, scented with trees and grass and earth, and now with burning hardwood.

"All right, people," he said. "You all saw that."

He jerked his head toward the Lincoln Tunnel, which was near enough where the spike of fire had thrust into the night sky.

"The bad lady is coming, and we have to hold her here. Otherwise it's all over."

He remembered a running translation he'd heard of a bad Japanese animated feature once—the Admiral up on the screen had talked to the hero for ten minutes, and this guy who knew some Japanese had said: *The fate of the Universe is in your hands, boy. Don't fuck up.*

And Jenny was walking into the tiger's den, with only this diversion to protect her.

"Keep together, keep alert, and don't shoot each other." Another deep breath. "Let's go."

\*\*\*

Jennifer felt numb. *I'm a financial analyst, not a spy*, she told herself as she pushed through a panicked crowd in Lafarge's wake. *Financial analysts don't do this sort of thing.*

Nobody did this sort of thing. She stumbled over something lying on the sidewalk. Somebody. She

looked down; there was just enough starlight to see the reflection on open eyes. Jennifer Feinberg had been born and raised in New York, mostly on Manhattan Island, and she'd prided herself on knowing the city in all its shapes. Until now. All at once there were no more people around her; maybe they'd all gotten sensible, and gone home to hide until things returned to normal.

She caught her breath, panting hard against the feeling of being squeezed beneath the diaphragm. If they—if *she*—didn't do something, there would be no more normal, not ever again.

"*Walpurgisnacht*," she muttered to herself.

Lafarge turned back and put a hand under one arm. She snatched it away. "I'm all right," she said. "Just keep going."

Keep going because if I stop I won't start again.

Financial analysts didn't—God damn it, nobody followed time travelers into deadly peril. That was for the movies. Nobody ended up in bed with genetic super-women, either. Rage ground her teeth together and made the fluttering in her stomach recede. The fear that that column of fire had brought was still there, like a grace-note under the main theme, less personal but just as menacing.

A police car went by, siren wailing and lights blinking. Up ahead the metal bars on an electronics store had been torn loose and figures in hooded sweatsuits were carrying out equipment, laughing and prancing. The beams of their flashlights danced and jiggled with them, sweeping circles of white light over windows dark except for the occasional candle. Shots sounded in the distance, a sudden crackle and then a series of slow deliberate *bang . . . bang* sounds.

One of the figures in sweatsuits turned towards them. A beam stabbed out and Jennifer threw up a hand to shade her squinting eyes. Voices rang harsh, threatening.

Lafarge moved smoothly in front of her. His right hand twitched, and the man with the flashlight folded over and flew backward. He landed in the broken glass and lay utterly limp. His companions hesitated for a moment and then fled. Suddenly the street was filled with silence, quiet enough to hear a roaring murmur of voices not too far away. A helicopter went by overhead, probing downward with its searchlight, then skittered away sideways over the rooftops. Jennifer stumbled again when it was gone.

Without electricity, these canyon streets were *dark*. Dark as a closet with the door closed. She turned, fumbling for the wall. Where was she?

"You'll need this," Lafarge said.

Jennifer fought not to jump and closed her fingers around the warm metal tube he handed her. A flashlight. She turned it on, and nearly dropped it again. The man Lafarge had . . . *shot?* Struck down, anyhow . . . he was staring at her. At the whole world, rather, eyes and mouth open wide and unmoving in the dark-brown face. The light glittered on gold at his throat, on his hands, a puddle of operatic brightness against the deep velvet of the night. She could smell a heavy fecal odor that any New Yorker recognized, but it took her an instant to connect it with what she was seeing. Sphincter relaxation . . .

"You *killed* him," she said, her voice rising toward a squeak before she controlled it.

"He was armed; there was no time for half-measures," Lafarge said impatiently. "This way."

He was off again, head down and shoulders hunched. The posture reminded her hurtfully for a moment of Henry . . . who was God-knew-where in this madhouse of a city. *I desperately want to disbelieve all of this. I want it to have not happened, ever.*

She kept the flashlight on Lafarge's heels. That kept her from running into him when he stopped.

"We're two blocks away, south," he said softly.

He turned, and Jennifer jerked back slightly. The covering over his face had become a perfect nonreflective black that drank the light like blotting paper with ink, the only sign of features a writhing movement where his mouth should be when she shone the light directly on it.

"I have to go to maximum stealthing," he said. Somehow it was doubly horrible, that normal, rather pedantic voice coming out of the black mask. "It has left, but there are fixed sensors in place. This is our window of opportunity, and we've got to make the most of it."

"Why you say 'we,' white man?" she said, and turned on her heel to leave him blinking, baffled, in her wake.

You're *the top of the heap*, she told herself. "That's Ms. Bitch to you, Mister," she said aloud. Her shoulders braced back, and her sensible mid-heel office shoes beat out a tattoo on the sidewalk.

There was nobody in the block ahead. Nobody she could see, at least. The heavy arched wrought-iron door with *IngolfTech Inc.* on it stood over the main entrance to the ex-warehouse, just where it had been since the renovations started.

She'd been in a dozen times or more. Now it felt like the lion cage at the zoo. Her imagination insisted it even *smelled* like the lion cage, a rank predator's odor.

Jennifer stepped up onto the semicircular staircase and pressed the button. The smooth enigmatic object she'd been given to hide was only the size of a thimble and no thicker, lighter than Styrofoam . . . but it seemed to weigh like an anchor as she waited for a reply.

\*\*\*

"What *was* that . . . light thing?" Finch asked.

She was scanning the approaches through the forest with slow, systematic care. Mary Chen was uneasily conscious of the fact that she wasn't trained for anything like this. *Wasn't trained to hunt superhumans, using plasma guns?* she scolded herself. *Who is?*

"How should I know?" she snapped. "I'm a forensic pathologist, not a physicist!" Then, with a slight feeling of guilt: "Sorry. I think it involved some sort of EMP, from the way it wrecked everything electronic."

"Like a nuclear explosion," Finch said thoughtfully.

"I certainly hope not."

They might all be dead from secondary radiation without knowing it, if it *was* like a nuclear explosion. She shivered and reached for the thermos tucked into her backpack; it was cold, for a May night. Thank



God for camping as a hobby; she was used to being out in the country at night, otherwise she'd be completely lost.

Crack.

Blue-white light flashed through the trees, throwing her shape in a momentary cone of shadow over the thermos. She snatched up the weapon instead and fumbled her hand into the grip. The tiny device in her ear spoke, a man's voice, eager and excited.

" *I think I hit—*"

The voice cut off. Through her normal hearing she caught the beginning of a shriek, then silence. Then another scream, a long hideous ululation of fear and agony.

\*\*\*

Gwen stopped the head rolling with a foot and held the body pointed away from her. The blood filled the night with its heady, exciting scent; she licked her lips unconsciously as she stripped the covering off the human's backpack with her hands and layer knife.

What a crazy hybrid, she thought in admiration as she bared the mechanism within.

Lighter and more efficient than the one which had just saved her life. *That* was already growing warm to the touch after a single bolt; the energy absorption factor was only a little over ninety-eight percent. This was much better, the guide coils and controller unit made by a modern faber rather than hand-assembled from purely local parts. Hers was slaved to her transducer, significantly reducing its capacities. What a pity she couldn't take one of these and abandon her own—this was still an elephantine pile of junk by fifth-century Draka or Samothracian standards, but vastly preferable to what she had. Not that she could, of course, any more than she could put one of the communications units in her own ear. She grinned in the dark to think of what would happen *then*. There were more attractive methods of suicide.

Instead she turned to the other human, the one she'd winged—or perhaps she'd broken a few of his ribs; she'd been in a hurry. Without his little goggles the night would be impenetrable murk to him, of course. His eyes were round, starting at every sound as he sat propped against a tree, his legs stretched out before him. He moaned when she whispered in his ear.

"Call for help, man. Call for them to help you."

Instead he tried to reach for a bayonet on his webbing belt. Impatient, Gwen caught the wrist and squeezed with brutal strength.

The scream went on and on as she worked her fingers into the shattered bone.

\*\*\*

"Christ, that's Clarens! He's with Hadelman."

Carmaggio caught at Saunders's arm. "By the numbers, El-tee," he said softly. "We knew she could make a shield if Lafarge could."

Saunders nodded tightly. The cry trilled up into a squeal and then a gasping " *don't . . . don't . . .*" mixed

with sobs.

Henry touched the disk attached to the side of his goggles. A heads-up display projected in front of his eyes, showing vectors and locations.

"This way," he said, and arrows appeared before the sight of every member of the little force. "Enemy's here." Another vector, like a compass needle pointing to the AI's best guess at location. "Lets go."

Spread out in a slight C-shape, they moved forward through the woods. *Back in the jungle*, Carmaggio thought with sour irony. *Back in the bad bush*. Big oaks and hickories, grass and shrubbery beneath, paved pathways—not too much like the Parrot's Beak, really. Except for the feeling in his gut and balls and the back of his neck; and that was different too. He was a lot older, his heart pumping harder in his rib cage.

The humans were moving in a staggered line, half carrying their plasma guns slung and M-16's or H&K's at the ready, half facing the darkness with the energy weapons. They moved at a slow deliberate walk; from what the equipment showed, Ingolfsson wasn't moving away from them. Henry paid attention to his feet. The light amplification was perfect, pretty much like a black-and-white image of a cloudy afternoon, but something was playing hell with his depth perception.

"Where the hell is she?" he whispered to himself. By the display, they ought to be right on top of her.

" *Looking for this?*"

A voice out of the dark, from somewhere above. He pivoted instantly on one heel, his finger squeezing at the trigger as the aimpoint cross from the indicator hung in front of his eyes.

Crack.

A treetop exploded in flame, a fireball in the night. His eyes widened. The beam shouldn't diffuse like that. She *did* have some sort of a shield. He caught a glimpse of a shape spreadeagled as it leaped, and then the vector arrow was quivering between trees. The one he'd hit was going up like a torch, every leaf and branch flash-ignited as the energy of the plasma spread around the circumference of the protective field.

Something arched out of the night at him as streams of tracer and plasma bolts raked the next tree into splinters. Dangerous splinters, from the way somebody was yelling. The object landed with a soggy thump and rolled to his feet.

Saunders recognized it before he did. "Clarens's head." The ex-officer raised his voice instinctively, despite the AI that would relay his words to every ear.

"Hold your fire until you've got a target! Keep moving."

They did. *Goddamn*, Carmaggio thought desperately, trying to follow the dots that marked out the schematic of the action. It was too *much*, too much information, slowing down his reactions—yet without it he'd be helpless. He worked his mouth and spat.

The dot that was Ingolfsson's *probable* location was skittering away ahead of them northward, moving at an estimated speed that raised his brows even now. A cross-country motorbike would be lucky to make that miles-per-hour in close terrain like this. And it was moving off to one side . . . .

"Flank left," he said. "Move!"

The ragged C of dots that marked his comrades started to move. Slowly, too slowly; it was like some computer game where you wrenched at the joystick and got reamed because the figures wouldn't *respond* in time—

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"There—"

Mary Chen jerked at Finch's cry, even more at the stream of green-colored tracer from her submachine-gun. She leveled her plasma weapon, trying to bring the red firing dot on the vector her goggles were supplying. Something was coming out of the night, something moving like a coursing cheetah. Her beam smashed an explosion of steam and shattered rock out of the ground, and then the weapon was slapped out of her hands with a force that sent her spinning around like a top, throwing out her hands to try and keep from falling.

The blow turned her around faster than her own muscles could ever have done. In time to see a black-outlined shape running *up* the trunk of the tree that had been behind her. It had a human outline; she could see that much, and see that it held a weapon shape in its left hand. In its right was something long and slender with an edge of silvered moonlight. Then the run ended in a momentum-driven crouch and the figure leaped out and away from the tree, whirling in midair somersaults with knees drawn up to chest. In a long arch that took it back over their heads.

Help! I've fallen into a Ninja movie and I can't get out! The thought bubbled through her mind as she scrambled to get the plasma gun back.

Finch was snarling and slapping another magazine into her firearm, trying to track the target and jerk back the slide in the same motion.

Chen felt her whirl turn into a stagger that left her groping dizzily for the plasma gun. Something flashed. There was a huge cold impact across her stomach, and her legs dropped out from under her. Her hands felt numb as they groped for the wound, tried to hug the savaged, razor-cut edges of flesh back together and contain the slick wetness that bulged out. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

Finch was off the ground, gripped from behind with an elbow-grip on her neck and an arm about her waist. Her own arms and legs kicked uselessly, the H&K firing off bursts into the night.

A voice hissed, every syllable as distinct as if it were cut from etched glass.

"Where is the Samothracian?"

"*Fuckyou!*" Finch shouted, her fox-sharp features contorted with rage. The hillbilly accent was back, sharp and nasal.

"No time."

The arms wrenched and cast her aside. There was a single squeal, as fierce and shrill as an animal turning in the owl's claws, then the body hit the ground with limp finality.

The figure in black took a long stride toward Chen. The dying woman tried to turn away, but all that moved was her head, rolling loosely to face her other shoulder. She remembered the heel marks on the necks.

Impact. Nothing.

\*\*\*

"Move your ass," Carmaggio shouted. "Face left!"

The vector arrow was pointing back the way they'd come. All the friendly dots turned left and south, scurrying to try and make their formation face the enemy and give mutual support. All except for one dot that kept right on going away, as fast as he or she could move their feet—and Henry couldn't blame whoever it was one little bit. Saunders was cursing under his breath, voice a little shaky; Jesus did the same on his other side.

Sixty seconds since contact. Jesusfucking *Christ*.

A voice rang out from behind a statue-fountain set in a pool.

"*Where's your Samothracian?*" it mocked. If a battle trumpet could live, it would sound like that. Even at this instant, the beauty of it struck him. "*Where's your strong protector now, humans?*"

The sound firmed the attack vector to a brilliant dot. Bullets and a dozen plasma bolts lashed out. Bronze exploded into flying molten gobbets. Several thousand gallons of water also exploded, and the steam burst flung chunks of stone coaming right back in their faces. Something wet splattered Carmaggio over half his body, and a heavy limp weight struck him hard enough to send him staggering. He clutched at it automatically, and found himself holding Jesus Rodriguez—his body, since the top had been clipped off his skull by a knife-edged shard of rock. Bits of the granite still glistened among the pink brain and fragments, and his friend's body shuddered and flapped and bucked in his arms.

He thrust it away with an involuntary shout. Images flitted before his eyes and clawed at his attention.

"Regroup," he called out. The iron calm of his own voice shocked him, at some level far below the clarity that gripped and moved him. "Ten-yard intervals, circle formed on me."

The AI would show everyone where to go, if they kept their heads and did it. They *were* doing it. The enemy vector arrow was a blur, moving around his defensive position. Every now and then someone would shoot at it, but Ingolfsson seemed to know they were shielded against her plasma weapon—

She knows how to use these things and we don't, Carmaggio knew with deadly certainty. *And she's doing a better job of figuring out how to use them against us.*

A rock whined by his head and went *crack* against a tree trunk as it shattered into fragments—not even a superhuman could make an irregular object perfectly accurate. He didn't intend to stand up and see a trial of strength between this Fritz helmet and Ingolfsson's arm, though.

"Hit the dirt. And nail the bitch!"

Bolts lanced out through the woods. Trees toppled. Carmaggio felt a sudden something in his mind, a sensation like a mental *click*. He started to roll still prone, bumped into someone, rolled right over them

despite their squawk of protest. As he did so another plasma bolt lanced out of the darkness, right into the mid-section of the tree he'd been under. The three-foot thickness of hardwood vanished in a meter-wide sphere of magenta fire, and the great crown of the copper beech toppled downwards. It crashed into the middle of their position, branches probing like spears.

Return fire lashed back at the firmed-up vector the bolt provided for the AI. Thudding feet warned him that it didn't stay accurate for long. He was surprised the footfalls were so loud, but you couldn't move a hundred and ninety-five pounds up to greyhound speeds that quickly on soft little tippytoes, he supposed. Carmaggio went up on one knee, the trigger of the plasma gun sweetly responsive under his finger.

Repeated hits or a point-blank hit will overload the shielding, Lafarge's remembered voice said. *When that happens, the shield's energy storage coil will fail catastrophically.*

"And fry the bitch to hell and gone," he snarled under his breath. The sights were steady—

—and a stream of tracer snapping right by his ear with flat stretching *whackwhackwhack* sounds showed somebody had the same idea.

The bolt went wide, snapping out across Central Park—at that angle, it could blast a hole in concrete in one of the apartments over on the Upper West Side. Carmaggio rolled desperately, trying to get a new bead on the running, jinking figure. It was as if they were all standing still, or wading through honey, and she was the only normal person there.

"Shit. Shit, *shit*. "

The vector bead slid right across their circular position. People on the *other* side were shooting after her.

"Fuck, the captain's dead!"

Henry's head whipped around. Three or four of the National Guardsmen were standing shoulder-deep in the fallen beech tree, looking down. He forced himself to his feet and lumbered over. Saunders was lying on his back, and a stub of wood three inches around was through his chest.

"Oh, man, I'm outta here," one of the guardsmen said, backing away, his head shaking in an unconscious rejection of the scene before him. "Oh, man, I'm gone."

" *Shut up!*"

The AI blared it into everyone's ear in a shout that stopped them in their tracks.

"You want to be out there *alone* with that thing?" he went on. "And if you make it home, you want to wait there until it comes for you? Christ, if you're that anxious to die, eat your gun and do it easy and quick!"

Silence fell. "Get your attention back on the job." *Rollcall*, he whispered. Shock made him grunt. Chen, Finch, Jesus, ten more dead. Two run. And all in less than eight minutes.

The men and women faced outward. But the vector arrow had turned to a bead, and the AI drew him a schematic.

"She's going home," Carmaggio whispered. "We did it. I hope." Aloud: "Come on. We've got to get to the warehouse."

He walked toward the waiting vans parked along the edge of Columbus Circle. Past the bodies, past Finch lying like a pretzel, past shattered burning trees. *How many*—Two of the FBI types were kneeling by Dowding's body. He'd never really gotten to know Finch's boss, beyond the depressed-horse expression on his bony face. Now he was lying face-down, with a four-inch-deep cut running diagonally from left shoulderblade to right kidney. That must have happened as she left, running through their position.

The night smelled of death. Eighteen living humans followed him out of the park. None remained but the dead, as they walked toward the killer.

Jenny, he thought.

\*\*\*

"Who's there?" a voice demanded over her head, after she punched in the code.

She pressed the button again. "Jennifer Feinberg for Ms. Ingolfsson," she snapped, putting her palm to the plate beside the door. "She told me to report here in an emergency. Now let me *in*."

A wait, while whoever was behind the video monitor let the computer confirm who she was and bring up its instructions.

Now she lived, or died. If the door didn't open, Lafarge attacked it himself—and he said the chances were better than five-to-one he couldn't defuse the biobomb in time. She closed her eyes and rumbled for a prayer, the first in a very long time.

There was a click "Come through," the speaker said.

She did, into a lobby now dimly lit. Two tall black men stood by either side of the door, looking out through slits. They had rifles, absurdly huge spindly-looking things. Lafarge had said . . . *Barretts. Or something*. They ignored her. The one who'd let her in was a young Latina woman, with a wicked-looking machine pistol slung across her body, incongruous against the chic outfit.

"Hi, Dolores," Jennifer said.

"Buenas noches, Jenny," Dolores Ospina said. "Welcome to the Household. Glad you decided to be sensible." A flash of a smile. "Welcome to the harem, that is to say . . . Come on."

Jennifer forced a sickly grin as the other woman led her down a corridor and into an elevator; the sheer *normalcy* of the closed-down offices was jarring, with plastic covers over the PCs and Post-it notes stuck to desks.

The elevator had glass panels on the other side, and they had a view of the main section of the converted warehouse as they rose. Nothing dramatic, floodlights and a few workers fussing around enigmatic machinery. She recognized Dr. Mueller—*his name should be Mengele*—and the Sikh in their white coats, bent together over a console. The elevator clicked to a stop at the third floor. Armed men patrolled the walkways, or stood around the outer wall in positions barricaded with curved shapes of heavy metal.

"We're parking everyone here," Dolores said, indicating the door of a lounge down the top-floor corridor. "Just until the Mistress gets back, you understand." Excitement sparkled in the dark eyes. "They're actually going to take us through to the Prime Line, while this area gets pacified! I hope we get to see some of it."

"That would be fascinating," Jennifer agreed. *About as fascinating as a tour of Hell, guided by Beelzebub.* "How long?"

"Oh, not more than a couple of hours, she said." Dolores giggled. "And then it'll all be over. We can relax and never worry about anything again, just swim and feast and make love."

"Yes," Jennifer nodded. *Hours. I will not scream. I will not smack this repulsive little slut.*

She was very glad when the lounge door closed; it probably wasn't a very good idea to try and strangle someone with your bare hands when they had an automatic weapon. There were a dozen more in the lounge, and they raised an ironic cheer when she walked in. Jennifer smiled and waved, angling over toward the coffee urn and pastry tray, trying to look natural.

My God, that's Fred Lather! she thought. *Is he in on this? And his wife. My God, I've got five of her exercise tapes.*

Janeen Amier walked over. "Nice to see you again," she said, chattering nervously.

Jennifer took her hand. It felt dry against hers, which was damp with nervous sweat. The ex-actress didn't look nervous; more of an exalted expression.

"Did you know," she said, "did you know, the Mistress says Fred and I did so much, we can be made *young* again?"

That shocked Jennifer; enough that she really saw the aging woman for a moment, instead of her eyes skipping over the face in an unconscious search for danger.

"Young?" she said.

"Young, and beautiful. Gwen herself said," Janeen simpered and blushed, "that we'd be pretty when we were rejuvenated. How I envy you *that* experience."

"Yes," said Jennifer. She felt herself blushing. "Where's the powder room?"

"Just down the hall," Janeen said, skittering back to her husband's side. He was looking a little stunned himself, as if he couldn't quite convince himself that this was really happening.

It not only is *happening*, Jennifer thought grimly, *it's your bloody fault, you idiot.*

She sipped at the coffee and gave the others a quick look. A few politicians, some heavy-duty financial types, a black police officer . . . *My God, that's Henry's boss!* A Somali model married to a British rock star. An odd assortment . . .

"Souvenirs," she muttered. This was a collection of souvenirs. She remembered Gwen's words: *I look after my own.* Some weird sense of obligation, the sort you had to a dog. "And I'll look after myself,

thank you very much."

She set the coffee cup down; it was Limoges; no plastic here. Nobody was standing out in the hall. She pushed open the ladies' and went into a stall.

Embarrassing. But it was the obvious place to hide something internally, and that little bit less likely to be detected, according to the expert. Henry had had the good grace to look embarrassed himself.

"I am going to have a talk with that man, when this is over."

If it got over. The thought heartened her, and she walked out of the room with an air of casual authority. *You belong here. Nobody will suspect you. Just another one of the souvenirs.*

Lafarge had given her a probable location, based on his scouting and her descriptions of what went on here. "Drakensis psychology means the ultimate controls will be near its nesting site." That was just wonderful.

She palmed a featureless black rectangle from her purse, about the size of an old-fashioned cigarette case. Up a flight of stairs, and to a heavy steel door; she must be right under the roof in this section of the warehouse. A single guard, a Haitian. She didn't recognize him, but from the way he looked at her he probably did, perhaps from the Bahamas.

"Sorry, miss," he said, the submachine gun in his hands pointed down. "This off limit."

Jennifer raised the black rectangle with the business end pointed out between thumb and forefinger, and *thought*. There was a heavy tug in her hand. *Whump*. Pressure popped her ears in the confined space, two sharp little pains. The Haitian flipped backward as if punched in the face; his head gonged against the thick door, and he slid downward with his eyes rolling back in his head and blood running from his nose and mouth.

"I had to," she muttered to herself, keeping a fixed stare away from the man as she moved towards the door. "I had to do that."

She pressed the black cone against the electronic lock. *Something* pulled it out of her fingers, the last fraction of an inch. Crackling sounds came from beneath it. The door clicked; when she took the cone off the wall it came away easily, leaving the keypad riddled with tiny holes.

Into the inner sanctum. *Lifestyles of the rich and inhuman*, she thought. A series of big rooms, leading into each other open-plan. An office setup; a gym room with equipment like nothing she'd ever seen, and lead-weighted free weights of ridiculous, cartoon size. Bedroom. Huge curtained bed, and beyond it an elaborate . . . bathroom wasn't really the word. Bathing facility. She walked quickly over to a terminal set beside the bed and opened the cover of the CPU. Even a non-tech type could see that someone had been making heavy modifications; cables attached here and there, new circuit boards. Gingerly, she laid the black thimble down on the exposed equipment.

Tendrils the color of clear ice and thinning off to invisibility *grew* out of the instrument. They waved over the circuit board, hesitated a little, then pounced, burrowing.

Jennifer shuddered. There was something unpleasantly alive about the tendrils, in an insect-like way. Now they were a writhing net over the surface of the computer, and the black thimble was melting away, shrinking and disappearing before her eyes.



"Now to try and get out of here," she said, hurrying through the suite of rooms.

A man was waiting at the door. Medium height, broad-shouldered, ugly-handsome Mediterranean face with a heavy blue-black five o'clock shadow. The cross-draw holster showed under his opened jacket.

"Vulk," she said. "I was just—"

"Just what?" the Serb said. The Walther in his hand moved, and her eyes were drawn to the 9mm opening of the muzzle as if it were a cavern into night.

She moved back as he advanced, two Haitians behind him. He looked behind her.

\*\*\*

intruder,the transducer whispered in Gwen's mind.**central interface units are compromised. attempting to contain.**

The knowledge almost froze her in mid-stride, moving through the enemy formation. Reflex carried her through; she slashed at a last figure as she ran, the layer-knife cleaving flesh as if it were jelly, bone with only a slight catch. Out into the night, dodging trees.

containment will fail in fourteen point seven three minutes,the transducer said.

The non-voice was slower than usual, too much of the quasi-machine's capacity diverted to the link with the human-built computers controlling the fusion plant and gateway.

Self-reproach was bitter as she ran. *Diversion*. One she *had* to respond to, but she shouldn't have stayed once it was plain the Samothracian wasn't there. He'd used the psychology of the Race against her, the tight-focused aggressiveness that had kept her there, killing like a lion in a herd of penned zebra. While the real enemy crept around behind her.

The streets ahead were pitch-black save for the headlights of an occasional car, and there were a fair number of humans abroad. With hormones pouring into her blood at maximum combat-load, she could treat automobiles and pedestrians alike as a series of static encounters. At times she vaulted a moving car, or used a walker as a resilient buffer at a corner, shedding momentum and turning her vector on them the way a billiard ball did on the padded edges of a pool table. Black against black, the passersby saw her only as a glimpse of movement in the night, a flash of light on teeth or the edge of her layer knife, a hurtling weight that left broken bone and torn flesh behind it. The screams were swallowed in the greater turmoil of the nighted city. Once she found a column of armored personnel carriers across an intersection, moving out from some National Guard armory to maintain order in the chaotic streets.

Crock.A plasma bolt slammed into the side of one vehicle, through the thin armor and into the fuel supply. Vaporized fuel sprayed inside the troop compartment and exploded. The turret with its 25mm autocannon flipped straight up, twirling end-over-end. The machine behind the one she'd shot tried to halt and couldn't, ramming into the rear of the burning wreckage. The smell of scorched metal almost overrode the roast-pork stink of burning flesh. Gwen drove through the gap between the wrecked APC and the one ahead of it.

"That ought to slow them a little," she said, to the pulse of her breathing as she ran. Eighteen surviving plasma guns were entirely too many to leave behind her. Most probably the humans were too terrorized

to pursue, but there was no sense in taking chances.

seven minutes.

\*\*\*

shield down.

The AI's voice sounded in his mind. Kenneth Lafarge rose from his crouch atop the roof and pointed a hand.

Ptung. A thread-thin line spun out from the cuff of his softsuit and whipped across the gap, slapping onto the metal of a support on the warehouse roof. He took a coil around a stanchion on the building he stood on, pulling until the monomolecular thread came taut and sank half a finger's width into the steel. Then he applied the solvent; the thread cut off from the spool and merged with the glob of ice-clear material that anchored it there.

There were a half-dozen guards on the warehouse roof, equipped with heavy slug-throwers and native night-sight goggles. He recognized the make of weapon: designed for long-range sniping and to penetrate light metal armor. They would probably punch through his softsuit with a square hit, and certainly do him no good inside even if they didn't. With a slight sigh of regret, he raised the plasma rifle.

Crack. Bits of flesh and metal spattered across the rooftop. The guard's rifle and ammunition exploded with a run of malignant crackles, like heavy firecrackers. Vaporized metal and organic steam blossomed upward. The others went to ground and began firing back. *Brave men*, Lafarge thought. *Not very smart, but brave*. Heavy bullets whipcracked through the air around him, or hammered into brick. Through brick, in most cases; the walls of the apartment building he stood on wouldn't stop hard-point rounds traveling at that speed. Others keened off metal closer to him, with each leaving a red-yellow flash of spark behind it.

He traversed the aimpoint of his weapon toward one set of muzzle flashes. *Crack*. This time the plasma released its energy on the thin sheet metal in front of a rifleman. The man reared up screaming, his face and torso ablaze from the finely-divided molten metal. Still burning, he plunged off the edge of the warehouse roof and into the street like a meteor through the night.

The others broke in horror and fled. Lafarge ignored them. Instead he sprang and hooked an arm and a leg over the thread between the buildings. It cut through the street clothing he wore over the softsuit as if the fabric were air, but the smart-armor gripped it in frictionless diamond-hard runnels. He slid down it in a long arching swoop, rolling over the parapet onto the flat roof and coming erect.

Ten meters away, the glass of a skylight shattered as a heavy bullet struck out from within. Reflex and the AI's prompting brought Lafarge around, weapon rising. Not even a cyber-warrior's reflexes could outmove a .50 round already fired, though. It hit him twice, glancing. The first on his forearm, smashing it aside and making the fingers fly open in reflex. The second impact nicked the plasma rifle.

do not fire, the AI said.

Lafarge looked down. The guide-coil of the barrel was cut. With an angry snarl he cast it aside and signaled for the vibration-knife. That chittered out, a yard of wire outlined in the shape of a sword. He slashed at the tarpaper and sheet metal beneath his feet, sending up goutts of sparks as he savaged the thin galvanized steel.

biobomb subroutine located,the machine told him with infuriating calm.**data follows.**

"Damn, there's a self-destruct sequence!"

Even the *drakensis* wasn't totally insane, then—there was a way to destroy it safely. He levered up a flap of roof and looked down. Fiberboard panels, forming the ceiling of a corridor below, with power lines and ventilation ducts.

"Good." *Initiate biobomb self-destruct sequence.*

initiated, three minutes, counting.

He leaped, relying on his weight to punch through into the space below.

\*\*\*

five minutes,the transducer said.**following peripheral functions lost to enemy infiltration.**

No more than two blocks away. Seconds away. Her lungs stretched, feet hammered. Her human guards were firing from the roof of the warehouse. A plasma bolt arched out from another roof nearby, another, a third. One man plunged down, burning, and the rifle fire stopped. Something large and dark cut the angle between the two buildings in a swooping movement, dropped flat on the roof itself. Gwen's snarl was soundless, but it had the rage of territorial violation behind it.

Hedares!

An object dropped from the roof and clattered at her feet as she reached the front entrance. A flick of the eyes took it in. *Plasma rifle*. Inoperable. She shrugged out of the backpack shield in the same motion; it was scorching-hot anyway, and wouldn't take another hit.

The ozone smell of the fusion reactor and the lingering, crinkling scent of the gateway's byproducts overrode all else in the building. The two guards cried out in relief as she charged through the door.

"Vulk!" she snapped, silencing them.

One pointed. Both followed as best they could.

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"Get *out* of my way!" Carmaggio snarled.

The National Guard officer, under his helmet, looked much younger than the policeman. And much more frightened. The Bradley APC's of his company were still laagered around the wreckage of two burned-out models, with bodybagged shapes lying on the sidewalk. Nervous soldiers crouched in their shadows, fingering M-16's and rocket launchers. Searchlights from the APC's and Humvees played across the tall buildings on either side, probing through the darkness.

Disaster, Henry thought. That was obvious at first glance; you could smell it, too. There was something unique and unmistakable about the stink of human fat cooked out of bodies and pooling under a burned-out armored vehicle. It took him back, in ways he had no desire to remember.

"We're after terrorists," he went on. *Time-traveling extra-dimensional ones*, he added to himself. No sense in stressing this guy out, and no time to explain.

The officer looked at the two National Guard trucks. Carmaggio, in civilian clothes but Army body armor, well splattered with blood. He *might* have enough experience to know what brains looked like flecked out across cloth. The survivors of the FBI SWAT team. Saunders's guardsmen, carrying not only their own assault rifles but odd-looking weapons that would have been more appropriate in the hands of Obi-Wan or the Imperial Stormtroopers.

"Who the hell—"

"FBI," he said. One of the agents was still alert enough to flash ID. "We're after the ones responsible for all this."

"Yes *sir*," the Guardsman said. "We . . . some sort of rocket attack. I lost . . . and we've got no communications, everything's out . . ."

"I know. We're in hot pursuit."

"Need any help?"

Carmaggio's brows went up. That *was* initiative, considering the circumstances. A lot of men would simply wait here until someone official came along and told them what to do.

"Hell yes, Captain." He gave the warehouse address. "Follow me and coordinate."

\*\*\*

Jennifer screamed. Vulk Dragovic smiled as he ripped open her blouse and held up two alligator clips, then licked the metal to improve the connection. Thin wires ran back from them to a small portable transformer set.

"Soon you will sing, Jew bitch," he said quietly. "Sing like a diva."

His face was sweating, but his hands moved with an expert's emotionless skill as he stripped insulation from the wires and connected them to screw clamps on the transformer.

"This produced much good singing in Bosnia," he said conversationally; his Serbian accent was noticeably thicker. "And in Kosovo. All you needed to do to get those Turk-kissing Albanian swine telling you everything you wanted to know was to take their sows and—"

The door slammed open. Jennifer bit back another scream. Gwen was there, but almost unrecognizable. Dressed in loose black, with her short red hair *bristling*. Her teeth showed, and the whites of her eyes in rims all around the iris. The wide eyes flicked to the gas-gun resting on a table in the cluttered storeroom.

"Computer?" she said. Vulk nodded. "Emergency. Samothracian. Upstairs. *Now*."

Jennifer blinked, and Gwen was gone. The Serb and his two Haitian assistants snatched up their weapons and headed for the door after her. Vulk was last, and he hesitated for a second. The fingers of his right hand were moving, and with a sudden chill that made her stomach feel cold and loose she

realized that he was considering killing her right then and there.

"Later," he said.

The door slammed, and she heard his footsteps pounding away down the corridor. The beat of her own blood in her ears sounded louder. She strained against the cord binding her arms behind her and through the lattice of the metal chair; all it did was scrape the skin raw. It took a moment of that before she realized what Ingolfsson had said. Lafarge was loose inside the warehouse.

"Please," she whispered and prayed. "Please."

\*\*\*

Gwen swarmed up the rungs set into the elevator shaft. Below her the twin circles gleamed with their internal heat, almost brighter than the reflected light in the visible spectrum.

three minutes,the transducer said.**all spare capacity diverted to holding reactor and gate functions.**

The lights died. Human voices yelled in panic; guards, Vulk, the roomful of pets on the third floor. The view changed only marginally to her eyes, but it took a few seconds for her followers to remember their night-sight equipment, and that was of primitive local make. The muzzle-flashes of the Barrett sniper rifles firing from behind desks and consoles and pieces of equipment all over the floor of the open section died down. A dark figure rose and darted forward toward the central catwalk. As he went he turned and slashed with his hand. Metal sparked and sang as it parted under the vibration-sword. The whole long weight of the catwalk lurched and shivered as one end of it came unanchored from the walkway that circled the building's interior at this height.

He means to drop it over the reactor and gateway,Gwen knew. To run down its length, snapping through the members that supported it from above.

That much weight of metal crashing down on the equipment would wreck it. And probably wreck any chance of a breakthrough from the Domination's timeline.

Gwen turned, holding her weight up by her renewed grip on the rung, and braced her feet against the wall of the elevator shaft in a horizontal crouch. With a long feline scream of rage she leapt, out across the empty space of the warehouse. *Impact*. Her hands gripped rough metal—*full circle*—and a whiplike surge of the long supple length of her body brought her up onto the shivering, moving surface of the walkway. She was alone on it except for the Samothracian and what scent told her was a cooling human body, cut open to the body cavity. Dolores's body, still clutching her machine pistol.

" *Come to me and die, human!*" she shouted, and charged.

Lafarge turned to meet her. The plasma gun in her hand flashed, *crack-crack-crack*, outlining him in white fire and burning the concealing native clothes to calcined ash. Then she was upon him. Layer knife met vibration-sword. There was no room for footwork on the swaying iron, and they grappled chest to chest.

CRACK

Below and behind them the sky-spearing beam of light appeared again. This time the noise was loud enough to shatter glass. The light seemed to wash through her tissues, turning the conductive fabric of her

blacks searing hot; the slippery surface of the softsuit under her hands went mirrored to reflect the energy. A lance of fire the thickness of a man's thigh speared upward. Below it the great circle of the gateway turned bright at a central point, then expanded outward to the rim. The brightness was like a pool of liquid mercury, rippling, distorting, and reflecting.

"You lose!" Gwen cried.

Her arms closed around the Samothracian. The softsuit had little protection against low-velocity impact, crushing force. His were about her with nearly equal strength. They fell to the walkway, rolling.

"You lose, human!"

Something was forcing its way through the silvery distortion that spanned the gateways circle, the metallic-looking field giving way like water under surface tension. A domed machine was coming through, sleek and black, adjusting its adamantine bulk to fit the ten-meter opening between worlds.

\*\*\*

"Cover us!" Carmaggio shouted.

Fifty-caliber bullets spanged and whinged off the glacis plates and turrets of the APC's as they faced in toward the warehouse. Their 25mm chain-guns and coaxial machine-guns answered, bottle-shaped muzzle-flashes of orange and white fire through the night. Something must be backing the warehouse walls at that point, heavy reinforcement, because the return fire continued. Someone was firing a grenade-launcher back at the National Guard vehicles, a heavy *choonk* . . . *choonk* sound, followed by the cracking detonation of the 40mm grenades. None of the armored fighting vehicles had been damaged, but both the trucks with Saunders's men and the FBI agents were burning. The survivors were around him, crouching in the lee of the armor.

The Bradleys felt huge and solid to him; he'd campaigned with the old M-113's, aluminum boxes. But he remembered what a single plasma bolt from a hand-weapon had done to one: ripped it like a C-rat can under a tread.

There was just no time.

Henry rose over the back deck of the APC and fired three times into the ground floor of the warehouse.

Crack. Crack. Crack. Metal and brick belled outward and upward as heat flashed steel into vapor and shattered the more resistant ceramic of brick into dust. Lime burned as the mortar ignited; lime, and human flesh beyond it.

"*Follow me!*" Carmaggio roared, and ran for the holes his weapon had punched. The fire from the warehouse slackened, stunned, but rounds still kicked up sparks around his feet. A wave of heat from glowing metal and he was through.

"Jenny!" he called.

It was the AI that answered, laying a green strip at his feet. He followed it.

\*\*\*

Jennifer screamed again, half fear and half rage, and lashed out with her feet, the only part of her she could move. The dark figure grunted and staggered back.

"Christ, woman, what'd you do that for?"

She stared. *Henry?* "Henry?"

"Sure. Lemme—"

Hands found hers, and a blade sawed at the cords. "C'mon. Can you walk."

"Watch me *run*," she snapped. "Let's get out of this nightmare."

"I've got nightsight goggles. Here, take my hand."

They ran out into the corridor. That was growing lighter, bright blue-white reflections bouncing around corners and leaving knife-edged shadows. At the corner Henry's grip on her wrist turned to a heavy tug.

"Down."

She fell to the floor, shielding her eyes with her hand against the intolerable white light that came down the long stretch of hall leading to the centrum of the converted warehouse. That left her looking at Henry's face, contorted in a snarl as he aimed. The light didn't seem to be bothering him, through the goggles that covered his eyes like the two halves of a golf ball. He fired, and her hair crinkled from the nearness of the plasma bolts. Again and again, but the sound and light were lost in what was happening a few hundred feet away. "That's all we can do." His hand squeezed hers. "Let's go."

\*\*\*

"*Not . . . this . . . time . . . you . . . don't*," Lafarge gasped in her ear.

The loosened walkway shivered and bucked under them as they lay straining to snap each other's spines. Gwen locked her hand over her wrist and increased the pressure, ignoring the tightness in her own chest. The Samothracian was moving, scrabbling. She tried to lock his leg with hers, but there was no purchase on the slick surface, not without losing her leverage for the crushing hold.

The man's leg went straight. They rolled, toppled. Toward the roaring beam cutting into the night.

"*Not this time!*"

Gwen felt a last snarling howl of frustration escape her as they fell free. Her arms tightened, and reinforced bone cracked and splintered.

A moment of white light. Nothing.

\*\*\*

"Get us the fuck out of here," Carmaggio shouted to the driver, half-throwing Jennifer up the ramp of the APC ahead of him. "Don't argue, just do it!"

The other Bradleys had already gone. Henry didn't know how many of the people who'd followed him

into the warehouse had come out again; he'd sent the message to bug out through Lafarge's little earphones, and that was all he could do.

He crashed to the crowded floor of the Bradley's fighting compartment himself, half-landing on Jenny, gouging his bruised torso on the edges of seats and what felt like half a dozen metal projections. The officer in charge of the APC didn't give him any grief, at least. The diesel grunted and the tracks clattered on pavement even as the winch began cranking the ramp-door at the rear shut. The vehicle ran straight backward, lurching up enough to throw them all to the side as it ran up over the trunk of a parked car and ground it flat. It lurched again as the driver made a reverse turn, then accelerated backward away from the inferno.

Henry and Jennifer clung together. And—

—the interior flux of the fusion generator washed across coils severed by the policeman's plasma bolts. The system might have been able to compensate, but too much computer capacity had been compromised. Failure propagated in a feedback cycle—

—energy released, not into its own spacetime but into the molehole drawing greedily where its mouth protruded into Earth/2's—

—fluxing back through the entropy differential between the timelines—

—and into the vastly more powerful machines anchoring the paramatter that kept the molehole open. Boundaries blurred as it quasi-vibrated through the infinite event waves—

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*And another Carmaggio pushed the remote button, staring at the TV. Nothing else to do but work, and nothing had happened to break the routine in more years than he liked to remember . . .*

*And another Carmaggio rolled the little cart down the alleyway, the stumps of his legs aching with the damp. They'd ached that way every year since he'd gotten out of the VA — since the claymore had smashed every bone below mid-thigh into gravel. He looked down in the cup. Thirty, maybe forty bucks. Enough for a couple of bottles . . .*

*And a thousand thousand Carmaggios blurred back into the singularone that was all reality could contain, the one he would have to live as if it were the singular reality of creation . . .*

\*\*\*

White light shone through every crack and vision block in the Bradley. The armor rang like a cracked gong with heat expansion. It reared up as the wind caught it, teetered, hesitated, dropped back on its tracks with a shattering crackle of broken torsion bars. When he became conscious of anything again, Henry Carmaggio knew he was still clutching Jenny to him, and that her arms were tight around his neck. Her mouth moved, but the words seemed very distant.

" . . . happened?" she said. "What happened?"

"I think—" he began. *Jesus dead. Chen dead. Christ, everyone in that building, and a block around . . .* "I think we won," he said.



"Yeah," she replied, and laid her head back on his chest. Tears dripped down onto the bloodstained Kevlar of the armor vest. "We won."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The coffee tasted bitter, but it was warm. Henry sipped, watching the flames over the intervening rooftops, smelling the reassuringly normal stink of gasoline and ordinary, everyday burning. It was odd, having so much official stuff around and no role for himself. Odd, and fairly pleasant.

There was everything from APC's to fire-engines lining the streets. Even the press had shown up, although the city was still dark; luckily, they didn't seem to have any idea that he was involved. Helicopters went by overhead, and floodlights kept this section brilliant. There were even civilians crowding up to the police barricades where the uniforms kept the curiosity-seekers at bay. He sipped the coffee again, and looked across to where Jennifer sat on a park bench with somebody's jacket around her shoulders. Carmaggio smiled at her, and a faint turn of the lips answered him.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know if it was all real, if I can believe it—or if I can ever forget it."

He crouched to bring their eyes level. "You won't forget it," he said. "But you're tough. You can live with it. Believe me."

"I do."

"Carmaggio?"

Henry turned and stood. So did Jennifer, clutching the coat about her and coming to stand by his side.

"Yup, that's me. And if it isn't Andrews and Debrowski, the Wet-Work Twins."

The two agents were in Army gear, camo BDUs and Kevlar, with officers' sidearms but no insignia. The ones behind them were the genuine article, though, Carmaggio judged; Rangers, at a guess.

Andrews smiled. "If we could talk?" he said.

"Sure," Carmaggio said. Jennifer stiffened, but moved with him to a spot where a little distance and the background roar of engines and voices gave some privacy.

"We'll have to debrief you both in detail," Andrews said. "But let's get one thing straight. It appears—appears—from the . . . information left on our computers by your friend—"

And he was, Carmaggio realized with faint surprise. *Damned if he was a likable sort, but he was a friend and a good one at that.*

"—that we misinterpreted the situation."

"Is that the royal 'we,' Mr. Andrews?" Jennifer asked coldly. "Or are you speaking for—"

Henry laid a hand on her arm. She cast him a doubtful look but shut her mouth with a snap.

"Well, all's well that ends well, hey?" Carmaggio said.

Andrews nodded, still smiling but his eyes narrowing. *That's right*, Henry thought. *I'm not giving you any excuse to use your tame gorilla there.* Debrowski was rubbing at his nose and glaring.

"Matters of national security are involved," the agent continued. "We'll be working out the implications of the technology we've acquired for decades. This incident will have to be handled with discretion. Otherwise it could destabilize the entire country; the entire world, come to that. I'm sure you see the necessity. And since most of the people involved . . ." He shrugged delicately.

"Are dead, yeah," Carmaggio said flatly. *So you can do a Grade-A coverup. I wonder who gets blamed for the explosions?*

Hopefully the *Jihad al-Moghrebi*. They deserved it.

Debrowski stiffened slightly at his tone, then relaxed as the detective looked away.

"Yeah, no sense in getting people excited," Carmaggio said, letting his exhaustion into his voice. "We'll be glad to talk to you. And then maybe we'll take a vacation out of the country?"

"That'd be a good idea," Andrews said. He held out his hand. Henry shook it.

"We?" Jennifer asked sharply, as the two government men made their way through the uniformed crowds.

"We, if you want it that way, Jenny," Carmaggio said. "I had to send you in there."

"I did what I had to do. And you got me out," she replied. "What bugs the *hell* out of me is that those . . . those buffoons get to tie this whole thing up with string and put it in their safety-deposit box."

Henry looked after them, and then back at the woman. "Did I say that?" he said, a slow grin creasing his heavy-featured face. "Did I?"

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"That's all then," the Bahamian lawyer said.

He shook his head at the American couple. "I've never seen anything quite like it in the way of wills, but the documentation's all in order. Net asset value—"

"I'll just take the papers, thank you," the woman said in a sharp, businesslike New York accent. "We've been over all this. Ms. Ingolfsson *did* follow all the formalities, and the probate's concluded."

He shrugged, and handed over the last manila envelope. Jennifer Carmaggio pushed her sunglasses up on her forehead, did a quick check-through and then nodded.

They stood hand-in-hand as the lawyer's car crunched away up the coral-rock driveway, then turned to look at the mansion. The hot Bahamian sun beat down, and the air smelled of sea and pine and sand, huge and clean. The sound of breakers on the reef came faintly over the roof.

"Amazing what Lafarge could do with computers and documents," Henry said, and tasted sweat on his upper lip. He shook his head, trying to make it seem more real. "And he *did* have a sense of humor. He would have loved this."

A tall black man walked up from the house; there was a suspicious set to the way he wore his loose printed shirt. Henry fished in the jacket slung over one shoulder and came out with an envelope. This one bulged pleasantly, crisp hundred-dollar bills.

"Captain Lavasseur," Henry said, extending his hand.

They shook, two big men old enough to forgo boys' games. "I think Mr. Lafarge would have liked you to have this, as well as the retainer."

Antoine Lavasseur took the envelope with a slight, white smile and a very Gallic shrug. "He was some man, him," he said. "But I smell death on him, from the first time." He checked the envelope with a pirate's lack of self-consciousness, and his smile grew broader. " *Bon*. Not too little, for come and watch the house, talk to police for a few weeks."

"You kept the staff from burning it," Jennifer said. "With what's in there, that could be very important—for the whole world."

Another shrug from the sailor. "You need this sort of help again—any sort—you call Antoine Lavasseur."

"We may at that," Carmaggio said. "And now it's all ours," he went on, when the man from Martinique was gone.

"I like to think of it as a trust, Henry," Jennifer said seriously.

He smiled down into her eyes. "That too. No reason we can't enjoy ourselves while we figure out what to do with it, though. Let's go honeymoon."

Hand in hand, they walked under the arched gateway. The ironwork Drakon flared its wings above, its empty eyes staring out into the sun.

## EPILOGUE

Tom Cairstens leaned back from the controls and rubbed red-rimmed eyes. He looked back to where Alice nursed an infant with too much knowledge behind its green gaze.

Three hundred meters down and moving at a three-knot crawl, the *Reiver* ran deep and silent.

Silent, save for a baby's cry.

[front blurb]

#### ADVANCE PRAISE FOR DRAKON

"In a literature of ideas, S.M. Stirling picks up his slingshot and goes hunting the giants: Is absolute evil possible? How would flawed ambivalent human beings deal with it? What is the price of a free society and can it be paid while staying free? What exactly is a 'human' anyway? How much does it take to change history, and how does a change in history change the answers to the other questions? Now in *Drakon* he puts the hardest question of all: what if these monsters of his imagination walked into our world? Who would stand against them? Could anyone?

"And the more frightening question—who would join them?

" *Drakon* might keep you up all night, it might get you into a thousand mental arguments, it might even make your flesh crawl. Every now and then you'll laugh, and it just might break your heart near the end. Stirling has gone after the big ideas and brought them back still struggling. That's what the job of SF is supposed to be—and it's good to see someone do it."

—John Barnes

Author of *MOTHER OF STORMS*

"A splendid, compelling novel. Honest, insightful, taking a sharp look at the forces that dehumanize people, as well as the forces that humanize them."

—William Barton

Author of *DARK SKY LEGION*

"I went through *Drakon* at one sitting, having a great time all the way. Fine characters, both human and not quite; convincing locations; action that cooks . . . quite a lot of things. Don't stand there reading this blurb—buy the book."

—Harry Turtledove

Author of ***GUNS OF THE SOUTH***

[Version History]

Version 1.0—Scanned, OCR'd, spellchecked, and formatted. The first 3 books in the series were republished a few years ago as an omnibus, called *The Domination* . It also contained some lead-in stuff to re-frame the story so that this is the central book. I don't anticipate having a hankering to re-read them for a while, so anybody who wants to do *The Domination* , please do.

Version 2.0 – April 28, 2003—proofread in detail and corrected by The\_Ghiti. If you find errors, please fix, increment version number by 0.1 and re-post.