

The Perfect Gun

Sean Williams

Out on the freeway, it might have been 1986. It might have been Los Angeles or any other big, American city during rush-hour, with cars banked up like beached dinosaurs, bleating their frustration and snarling noxious fumes into the brown-blue air. It might have been Earth.

What it *was*, was hot, so I rolled down the window of my '54 Chevy and reached out to snatch a snippet of oven-dry wind. The air was dead calm, like that moment when a body's lungs have finished breathing out and everything waits to see whether they're going to breathe in again. Time itself was frozen in its tracks, pole-axed by a solid blow either seventy years away or five centuries ago, depending on where you stood.

Someone up ahead honked and the line of cars rolled forward. The yellow Nissan in front of me took a left turn to the freeway, and I followed it carefully. Not careful to follow, mind, but careful not to *look* like I was following. There's a big difference, one I'm careful to observe. I may not be the best PI that's ever existed, but I do know my job: which is, as much as anything else, to look the part (or *not* to look it, as in this case), to go through the motions, and to maintain my verisimilitude at all times. If that means tackling peak-hour on a hot day, heading nowhere, then I have to do it.

The guy behind the wheel of the Nissan, if he knew I was shadowing him, didn't try to lose me. All I could see of him was a thatch of brown hair barely rising above the headrest of the driver's seat. He watched the road ahead intently, never allowing himself to be distracted, although his style of driving showed none of that. He was particularly bad, this day, like a kid yet to earn his license: hesitating at green lights, full-stopping instead of giving way, swerving whenever anything came within three yards of his metalwork. Whoever he was, he was new to the city. Of that I was certain, if nothing else.

Despite having tailed him for a week, I knew only a little of his habits. He'd left his hotel at 16:00 precisely, as he had every other day; given his general direction, he might have been heading for either the city centre itself--a field of upraised towers sprawling on my right--or to the hills on the far side of town. But he was nothing if not unpredictable. Five out of seven days he'd just driven nowhere for hours, watching the metropolis thrive around him. Not in the way a tourist does; more as though he didn't believe his eyes but at the same time couldn't get enough of what they were seeing. On the other two days he'd visited the museum and the memorials, respectively. When not out and about, he seemed to spend an awful lot of time sleeping: at least six hours a night, as far as I could tell.

And that was all I knew about him. My employers, whoever they were, were keeping their mouths shut. Why, I didn't know, but there had to be a reason. Usually there's something questionable in the air--a crime, an infidelity, a betrayed alliance--and more often than not the question tells me something about the questioners that they would prefer I didn't know.

Curiosity being one of my major traits, I resolved to find the answer. I had to have something to do, apart from simply watching.

We turned onto the freeway five seconds apart, his car accelerating slowly to melt into the tide of the traffic. I dodged a string of network vehicles full of tourists, weaved between their webs of invisible radars and lasers, and settled two cars behind him. Solo driving wasn't encouraged on the freeway, but it

wasn't forbidden either. No car was without its safety overrides. Even if I or the guy I was following wanted to, we'd have been hard-pressed to cause an accident, unless it was with each other; all the other cars would dodge out of danger before we even came close.

The freeway snaked its rumbling way towards the city centre. The wind coming through my window was still warm, but more refreshing than the oppressive stillness of the jam we'd left behind. Slightly bored, I reached down with my right hand, flipped on the radio and skimmed across the dial until I found JJJJ-Digital, the city's most popular station. Request time with Dr Bob was always worth a listen. I caught the tail-end of an old Devo track I hadn't heard for more years than I cared to count. When that had finished, Dr Bob announced a brief birthday dedication--"a real feel-gooder"--and another song came on I didn't recognise.

Trance-like bongos marked time in a reverberant background while a sonorous voice recited weirdness over the top. Not at all my cup of tea, but ear-catching all the same. My left index finger absently tapped along with the rhythm while part of my mind clocked the occasional phrase.

The Perfect Gun leaves in a shadow of perfumes.

The Perfect Gun is an illusion on a surface of memory.

The Perfect Gun is a finger resting on the controls of a broken machine . . .

The guy in the Nissan suddenly slammed on the brakes, causing a mass-swerving of traffic in his vicinity. My automatic collision-avoidance systems took over, swinging me into the next lane to avoid his red-eyed rear before I could react. I ducked back into his lane as soon as I could and watched him closely in my mirrors.

He'd wrenched the wheel to the left and headed for the median strip. I did likewise, cursing. If he was trying to blow my cover, then he had succeeded. Whatever his game was, I had to stop to check it out. I'd be carried away by the traffic within seconds if I didn't.

The Nissan bumped onto the strip and jerked to a halt in a cloud of dust. One hundred yards further up the road, my Chevy imitated it. I put it in reverse and backed up towards him. He didn't seem to notice. He just got out of the car, holding something in both hands that I couldn't quite make out.

When I had halved the distance, however, it suddenly clicked. He was holding a gun. I crouched lower in the seat, just in case, and slowed my arse-forward approach. Still he didn't see me. He staggered away from the Nissan and fell to his knees. He raised the pistol.

The Perfect Gun crouches to intercept shadows . . .

I turned my head away the instant he fired, but caught enough to fix the view in my mind forever: his open mouth swallowing the barrel, his hands clutching the grip like a drowning man, the sudden flash and kick and the widening of his eyes, the blossoming of red petals as though the back of his head had sprouted a dark and malignant flower . . .

Traffic stops for no man, but it seemed to slow for a moment then, as time once again dragged its heels. I braked hard, threw the car into Park and opened the door. The man I'd been following hit the dirt before I even made it to my feet, but I ran anyway.

The spread-eagled body lay in a widening pool of blood, eyes open and staring at the tainted sky. His face, the first time I had seen it up close, looked older than I had expected, much like Peter Lorre's had, late in his career. The back of his head was a bloody mess. Nonetheless, I kicked the gun away with the toe of my boot when I was within reach and felt for a pulse. Nothing. The guy really was dead.

"Shit." Whoever my employers were, they probably weren't going to be pleased. At the very best, I was out of a job. Without moving fast, I'd never know why.

I went through his pockets for papers, came away empty-handed. He was as anonymous in death as he had been in life--but not, I hoped, forever. Reaching into an inner pocket of my jeans, I removed a small, plastic capsule and scraped a sample of skin from the back of his left wrist.

Then I turned to his car. The radio was blaring the same request show I'd been listening to, although the song had finished, whatever it had been.

"Have a nice day, y'all," said Dr Bob.

I thanked him, although I doubted very much I would, and called the cops.

The Twentieth Century: a nice place for a holiday, but you wouldn't want to live there. Or die there, for that matter. Very few people I knew did *either*.

The city possessed a permanent population of nine hundred thousand, plus a transient population of nearly seven million. Many of the transients went native for a few months, until they tired of it and returned to their careers, castes and communities elsewhere in the System. If you were a tourist, the difference between regular citizen and 'temporary native' was sometimes hard to pick, but the regulars always knew. We were the ones who had stopped asking questions and just got on with it. We're the ones with roles to play.

Me, I'd worked the city for five years, having come here originally to stay with a friend, not to sight-see. Something about the city sucked me in: its fecundity of people, ideas and lifestyles perhaps; the sense of going up a down escalator; the pre-Trouble experimentation; and the intermingled gloom and optimism. All this, probably, and more. I loved it.

There'd been a vacancy for a Private Investigator that no one had applied for. Having always loved the Bogarts, Cagneys and Robinsons of the period, I figured I could do it. The persona wasn't complex--a mix of cynicism and clichè, with a compulsory penchant for overcoats--and the job itself wasn't dangerous. Borrowing a name from an old book, I bought a hat and went to work. Most of my cases involved unfaithful spouses, fraudulent insurance claimants, AWOL contractors and so on--but rarely anything truly sinister, which the rate of pay reflected. Comfortable work, all in all, role-playing in an historical sub-genre I'd always loved. Sometimes the limitations of my job frustrated me; more often they didn't. It's all just part of the game--part of life in C20, the city without a name. And only the most stringent movie buff would criticize me if I strayed on the odd occasion from the *film noir* ideal.

So I stayed, stuck like a fly in the amber of the Twentieth Century, more or less. But when I say 'stuck', I mean willingly stuck--and when I say 'more or less', I mean the city, not me.

Take Police HQ for example: a big concrete block of a building with linoleum floors and ink-stained wooden desks, complete with ceiling fans and hand-held phones that ring incessantly. Frosted glass doorways and hatstands. And people everywhere--shouting, crying, demanding, pleading. A scene of chaos lifted straight from the 1950s.

The anomalies are hidden deeper in the building, but they're there. Fax machines and modems in the communications room, video surveillance equipment for the traffic maintenance department, a complex forensic lab *circa* 2110 on the first floor. Standard police weaponry includes plastic bullets, Colt 45s, stun-guns and laser-sights; it's up to the cops which they use, depending on the mode they prefer. Just like every department of the city, personal preference reigns, provided the individual doesn't exceed the envelope and gets the job done.

With just that in mind, I stepped into the Dep's private office and closed the door behind me.

Bob Tasker stood one rung below the Police Commissioner himself; no one knew his exact title, so he went by the nick-name 'the Dep'. A big, balding man with a bristling moustache, he sported a brown suit from the waist down (I never once saw him with the jacket on), the open-neck look and a peroxide-blond secretary called Sharon who was apparently addicted to chewing-gum. If he didn't have a phone in one hand, he usually had hold of a hot dog. On this particular day, he had neither. He was expecting me.

"Court." He waved me to a seat and leaned back into his own, his belly expanding as though he'd been inflated. "You're the one with the stiff."

"So the girls say," I shot back automatically, but without smiling. The day's events had left me feeling flatter than usual. "What a mess."

"You said it." The Dep lifted a thick manila folder with one hand and a grimace. I'd filed the report with a detective not two hours earlier. "We haven't had a suicide for so long, I forget what to do with them."

I nodded sympathetically and rolled a cigarette. The city's death-rate was zero, barring accidents, which were rare, and the most serious crime on the books was grievous assault. There wasn't any drug-running either, although the illegal importation of prohibited technology--known as 'packing'--had taken its place. Without murder or pushing to keep him busy, the Dep had an easier job than any of his genuine

counterparts, long ago, but that didn't stop him from looking harried. That was his function, after all.

"Any idea who he was?" I asked, lighting the smoke with a wooden match.

"The car was rented under the name of Wallace Derringer, and his description matches the one the attendant gave us." The Dep shrugged. "But he had no papers on him. I was hoping you might be able to tell us more. You were tailing him, right?"

"Yeah, Bob, but you know how it works: photo, hotel, orders, and that's it. Don't call us, we'll call you."

"You put a trace on their calls?"

"Are you kidding? That's illegal."

The Dep smiled. "Between us, Court."

I smiled back. "A different pay-phone every time. Different voice, too. When I ran the tapes through a stress-tester, they came out clean. Maybe too clean. An AI or something is my guess."

The Dep nodded, folded his hands across his expansive stomach. "AIs are expensive," he said.

"Time-share," I responded. I'd considered that too. "Twenty minutes a day isn't going to bankrupt anyone."

"Perhaps. Heard from them since?"

"I haven't been home to take any calls, but my answering service is clear. Maybe they know already.

Word spreads fast about this sort of thing."

"Ain't that the truth." The Dep grunted, swung forward in the seat until his elbows rested on the desk. "It's already hit the bulletin-boards. We need to have some sort of statement ready for the morning papers or else it's gonna look like we're holding something back." He spread his hands. "But what can we say?"

I shrugged. "The autopsy might help."

"Yeah. We'll see what his genome tells us, when the forensic report arrives." The Dep leaned even further forward, eyeballing me over his jowls. "Until then, you'll notify me if anything comes up?"

"Sure, Bob." I crossed my heart and lied through my teeth. The last thing I intended to do was give information to the cops, and he knew it. I owed it to my profession, if not to myself. That was why I hadn't told him about the tissue sample I'd taken from the dead man that morning. "You've got my word on that."

"Good. Thanks." The Dep eyed me for a long moment, then motioned ambiguously towards the ceiling.

"This whole thing stinks, Court. If you're gonna follow it, be careful."

"Don't be wet, Bob." I tried to act nonchalant. "What makes you say that?"

He shook his head slightly and tapped the intercom on his desk. "Sharon?"

"Yes, sir?" The secretary's voice issued from the tinny speaker, a blonde voice if ever there was one.

Behind her, the throaty roar of an evaporative air-conditioner, deafeningly loud, filled the office. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Show Mr Welles out," said the Dep. "And turn that fucking thing off!"

"But *Bobby*," came back the whine. "It's *hot*."

"Maybe she should wear less," I suggested, and left.

From the 47th floor of the Genotek Building, reclining comfortably in a leather chair at the edge of the viewing platform, you can almost see the curve of the Bubble; camouflaged well by the skyline and the foothills to the west, but there all the same. Occasionally, auroral lights flash behind the hills as magnetic foils guide ships to and from C20's 'airport', but otherwise the sky is clear of humanity's handiwork. Jupiter was riding high, that night. Above the horizon and to my left were the twin stars of Earth and Luna, blue and white, huddling close for warmth in the cold-spattered star-scape. None of the other planets were visible to my untrained eye, and C20 has no moon, of course.

Her smell alerted me an instant before the sound of her footsteps crossed the platform. A mixture of lilac and honey with a touch of musk. Her scent was a lure, and she knew how it hooked me. But I didn't turn, not even when her hand fell on my shoulder and her hair brushed my ear.

"Hi, Court," she whispered. "Twice in one day. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"Let's just say you've got something I want." I turned then, and our noses touched; she was so close I could have kissed her. "But it ain't what you think, sweetheart."

"Hm." She leaned away with a smile and a rustle of fabric. "That remains to be seen."

I smiled back, enjoying the game at least as much as she did. Marilyn Delibes, one of the city's leading genetic technicians, was pure Nineties knockout from head to foot, dressed to kill in a blouse-jacket-skirt-and-heels combo that might on the one hand have been sensible office-wear, but on the other left no doubts as to the exact number of her X chromosomes. She stood about five-two on the old scale (the one I prefer), with shoulder-length golden hair and green eyes; her mouth, like the rest of her, was narrow without being severe, and curled like a question-mark when she smiled. She wore make-up the way it should be; I watched her apply it once, and I'll be damned if I could spot the difference afterwards, except that she looked *better*.

"The ID?" I prompted.

"Dinner?" she shot back.

I made a show of reluctance. "An hour is all I can give you. I've got work to do, you know."

"My place?"

"Uh-uh. Not after last time."

"Ganesha's, then."

"Done." I stood and offered her my arm. "Let's go."

The transition from sterile foyer to city street was shocking, as always. Inside had been cool, calm and encapsulated, whereas outside reeked of movement, emotions and compromise, *circa* 1980. Cars honked, voices called, music blared; lights flashed, signs blinked, eyes stared and looked away. Quite a contrast to the pastel work-stations and soothing silence of Marilyn's preferred work-place.

Which is why, I guess, we'd never made a big deal out of being *together*. In the untogether sense of the word.

Ganesha's Indian Restaurant offered everything from noodles to vat-grown elephant. I chose something spicy and fairly conservative; Marilyn walked the path of terminal gourmet junkie, as she always did. But for recom dieting drugs and regular exercise, she'd have weighed four hundred pounds. Luckily, her idiom allowed the sort of choice less-modern women had been denied.

We flirted amiably over our main course, until I prompted again:

"The ID, Marilyn?"

"Oh, yeah." She nudged a strand of noodle on its way down with one well-manicured finger. "I did what you asked. Don't I always?"

"You're a doll."

"I'm a *what*?" She rolled her eyes. "Kill the act and speak to me like a human being or you can do your own damned research."

I sighed and mentally shrugged out of the overcoat. "All right. You've got yourself a--I mean, you have my full agreement on that. Now tell me what you found."

She primped for a moment, enjoying the small victory, then said: "Nothing. The sequence from the sample isn't in the Civil records."

"None of them?"

"Not one. Whoever this guy is, or was, the city doesn't know him."

"But that's impossible, isn't it? I mean, to get here you have to check in at least twice, and there's no way to fake a passport these days. Is there?"

She shook her head. "There isn't. Take my word for it."

"Well, then."

"But the test was clear. His ID isn't registered."

I stirred the remainder of my meal. "You only checked Civil Records. What about Commercial?"

"I didn't look."

"Why not?"

"Why should I? Who is this guy? Some sort of construct?" She started to look curious, then, which I didn't like. "Are you tracing industrial espionage?"

I shook my head, although part of me was beginning to wonder. "Would you check Commercial for me?"

"I don't know, Court. It is illegal, after all."

"Technically, yes. I won't tell if you won't. Please?"

"Okay, okay. But I'll need to retype the tissue. Commercial uses different techniques to Civil Records. Civil converts the sample to messenger RNA, thereby mapping the coding exons only, whereas Commercial tracks the entire primary transcript, introns and all --"

"Right." I waved her silent; the technical stuff leaves me cold. "I get the picture; I owe you a big favour. I'll pay you back one day, I promise."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

At least I had the good grace to look embarrassed; she understood me better than the Dep ever did.

"My promise isn't worth squat, right?"

"You said it." She returned to her meal, apparently satisfied by the admission of guilt. "It goes with the job, I hear."

We finished our meals in silence, lost in private thoughts. I didn't know for sure what was on her mind, although I had a pretty good idea, but I knew exactly what was on mine:

A non-existent man--the same man I myself had inexplicably been paid to follow--commits suicide on a freeway for no apparent reason. How did he get into the city, and why did he come here in the first place? Did he shoot himself *because* I was following him? Or was there more to it than that?

This whole thing stinks . . .

Had I needed any incentive to investigate the suicide, that would have been enough. Bob Tasker smelled a rat too big to chase himself; how could I not be curious? That he'd also warned me to be careful didn't matter. I could look after myself.

He might have saved his breath, though. I'd been on the case hours before he'd asked to see me.

When Marilyn and I finished, we split the bill fifty-fifty and went our separate ways: she back to work and me deeper into the city. Whatever it was we had between us, it was easy to resist that night. Every time I closed my eyes I saw the terrible flower unfolding from the dead man's skull.

Who *was* he?

For that question, at least, I had a loose end to follow, apart from the matter of the ID. I figured that if anyone knew anything about the guy in the Nissan then my employers surely did. They hadn't paid two hundred dollars a day to give me a little fresh air, that was for certain. They must have had a reason for wanting him watched, and all I had to do was find it, and them.

Whoever *they* were.

The Zealot lived downtown, behind an underground club called the "Jack-in-a-Box". A regular, muffled thumping issued through the walls as I approached the concealed door in the venue's rear alleyway--a wild mix of techno and hard-core rap; alien signals from an alien time. Me, I prefer smoky jazz, Coltrane or Moore, especially after a quiet night with Marilyn.

I tapped on the door and waited patiently. Eventually, a small portal opened at about chest-height in the brick wall, into which I stuck my hand. A flickering of lasers scanned my prints, my genetic pattern and my invisible ID tattoo before beeping in satisfaction. A shadowy light-cloak--illegal in C20--enfolded me, hiding my movements from prying eyes, and the door slid open.

I stepped inside and walked along a bare, grey corridor to the inner door. More complex instruments scanned my body for weapons and bugs; their feathery touch made my skin crawl.

"Please disarm," said a voice, obviously artificial. I tugged out my service revolver and placed it into a slot by the speaker grille. The slot closed with a hiss and the inner door opened.

The Zealot's home was dark, perpetually ill-lit by LEDs, VDUs and holographic tanks lifted from the early Twenty-First Century and subsequently modified. Technology crowded on all sides, like the trunks of trees in a rainforest; wire and light cables snaked like vines from trunk to trunk, vanishing behind consoles and black boxes. The place had the look of a voodoo workshop somewhere off the South American track. But the weirdest thing about it was the Zealot himself.

He wasn't wearing his mask, and the cold, silver skeleton of his facial reconstruct glittered in the dim light. From left cheekbone to temple, his face was a metal skull, complete with red-glowing artificial eye. But even with the mask, he was a weird sight to my C20-adapted eyes: grey skin rolled back in hairless

waves from his forehead to the nape of his neck; his nose flared wide above a lipless mouth and pointed chin. His one good eye was gold in colour, and bloodshot.

Unlike most people in C20, the Zealot maintained his caste-form with something akin to pride. To preserve the illusion of the Twentieth Century, most of the city's occupants underwent gentle biomod therapy before arrival, enough to mask the more obvious divergences of the castes from the pre-Trouble Human Ideal. Even so, there was no hiding the truth buried in genetic codes. Marilyn still retained something of the Lyonesse in the shape of her eyes, and I could tell by looking in the mirror how much of my Algonquin ancestry showed through lightened skin. But no one I knew, apart from the Zealot, went to the trouble of reversing the biomod entirely and restoring his body to its former state.

Why he did it was anyone's guess. I thought privately that he enjoyed being different. In his line of business, looking weird--and even a touch sinister--was good advertising.

"Courtney Welles," he said, swivelling to face me. "How's your credit?"

"Much recovered, thanks, from my last visit." I took off my hat and dropped it on a chair.

"Glad to hear it." The Zealot--whose real name had long been expunged from Civil files--smiled. His teeth *didn't* glitter in the gloomy light, and somehow that was worse than if they did. "How can I help you?"

"Information," I said, stating the obvious. That was his speciality. "I'm trying to trace someone."

"The suicide?" he asked.

I didn't act surprised, and, in truth, I wasn't. Not really. The Zealot always seemed to know everything that happened in the city. "What can you tell me about him?"

"More than you want to know, I imagine. For a price."

"How much?"

He quoted a figure that made my pulse race. The somewhat disreputable nature of my profession almost demanded that I use packers to ferret information, but the wage kept me honest, more often than not. I bit down on the naive hope that he might give it to me on credit. "Another time, maybe. When I win the lottery. What I need now is a bank trace."

"Which bank?"

"United."

"And whose account?"

"Mine."

The Zealot raised an eyebrow. "An expensive way to obtain a statement."

"I've received three unlabelled deposits in the last ten days. I need to know who they came from. Can you tell me that?"

"Of course." The Zealot looked disappointed. "Is that all?"

"No. I also need the autopsy report on the suicide. The coroner's office has had the body for a few hours now. The findings must be due soon."

"True." He folded two slender hands on his lap. "I can obtain this for you, although it will be difficult."

I winced. 'Difficult', when uttered by the Zealot, usually meant 'expensive'. "How difficult?"

"Two thousand dollars--plus the bank statement, say two and a half."

"Deal." The price was high, but less than I'd expected. "How soon?"

"It'll be in your 'frame tonight."

"Thanks." I nodded. "You're a good man."

We exchanged pleasantries and idle gossip for a few minutes once the deal was done. The Zealot maintained a closer relationship with his customers than many of the other packers in the city, and I always enjoyed talking to him, if only on the off-chance he might let something juicy slip.

On this occasion, he told me that one of the interstellar colonies had intercepted an unidentified probe out in deep space, some months back. The rumour mills were speculating about the possibility of alien contact, but no one had confirmed or denied anything. The probe itself, and its discoverers, had themselves disappeared, leaving a vast info-void waiting to be filled. In lieu of facts, speculations were becoming wild.

None of this, of course, had been reported in the papers and b-boards of C20. Way outside our jurisdiction. It intrigued me, though, and started me thinking. My opinion leaned towards space-junk left behind by humans on one of our many surges outward from the System, but the Zealot disagreed. "You don't find junk by accident in deep space," he said. "You either run over it, and die in the process, or go out looking for it. So it can't be junk." "Or aliens either," I added. "Unless they came looking for *us*." "Perhaps," concurred the Zealot, his red eye winking, and we left it at that.

I was home when the data began rolling in. Things move pretty fast once they pick up momentum. Between Marilyn and the Zealot, I'd hoped for at least something to clarify the situation. What I got for my trouble, though, was more than I'd bargained for.

I lived in the Old Quarter, in an apartment on the top floor of a small building nestled in the middle of a thatch of 'scrapers. The view was nice, with lots of lights, but hardly breath-taking, so I'd concentrated on the interior instead, making my rooms as pleasant as possible on a shoe-string budget. Polished wood, vat-grown leather and plenty of books camouflaged (I hoped) the hi-tech office that my home operated as, at times.

The only area outside of my house that I really bothered with was the garden. The roof was divided in two between the apartment and a small yard. Trees and grasses managed quite well on the paper-thin allowance of soil and light they received in the city, and it gave me somewhere to relax. I'd even set up a small tribe of Hess machines to provide a natural ambience when the sun fell. On this particular night, I was leaning in my doorway, listening to their electronic cheeps and chirrups and thinking quietly to myself, running over everything I'd seen that day.

The first thing I'd done upon returning home was download the information stored in my implants. My optic and auditory nerves had been 'bugged' by one of the Zealot's backyard techs some years ago. Despite the fact that the implants were (a) illegal in the city and (b) contrary to my chosen idiom, their obvious benefits made them essential to any form of investigative work. They allowed me to record everything I saw and heard for up to an hour at a time, then replay it later via the PC I kept hidden behind the lid of my mahogany writing-desk.

I'd hoped to discover a clue I'd missed at the scene of the suicide itself. But despite scanning through those vital minutes several times--from the moment the guy in the Nissan had swerved to the arrival of the police--I'd found nothing. All I'd gained was an increased dislike for the song that had been on the radio at the time. Familiarity really does breed contempt, and I'd heard that song so many times by the end that I could it recite it by heart.

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*The Perfect Gun is a door someone opened.
The Perfect Gun implies that there are others behind it.
The Perfect Gun is a dark intention . . .*

The words echoed the suspicion, deep in my gut, that something was afoot, but only hindered my search for the truth by distracting me from the details. Whatever the Perfect Gun was, it eluded me completely.

The phone buzzed for my attention, its racket silencing the sound-sensitive Hess machines. The tiny devices had been programmed to interpret foreign noises as 'predators', and still hadn't grown accustomed to the phone.

I hurried back inside and hit the Receive button on the console. No voice, no sound, just a coded request for permission to transmit data. I turned to my PC and keyed the modem's scrambler. The influx of data took less than a second.

Opening up a simple word-processor, I settled back to browse. The bank statement was the first item to greet me, confirming my guess that the squirt had come from the Zealot.

26	11	44865472-001 4	ATM DEBIT/UAC	40.50	
27	11	11758215-099 9	KAS CREDIT/JOB	600.00	*
28	11	33531325-001 8	UAC DEBIT	75.00	
29	11	50078691-001 4	ATM DEBIT/UAC	30.00	
29	11	08225455-077 3	TRF DEBIT/ASG	49.30	
30	11	11758215-099 9	KAS CREDIT/JOB	600.00	*
01	12	00000111-001 1	INT CREDIT	17.98	
01	12	33531326-001 8	EFT DEBIT	45.00	
02	12	44865472-001 4	ATM DEBIT/UAC	137.65	
02	12	00000654-999 9	FEE DEBIT	1.63	
03	12	11758215-099 9	KAS CREDIT/JOB	600.00	*
04	12	11758215-099 9	KAS CREDIT/JOB	2000.00	*

Although dismayed by the usual predominance of debits over credits, the four large deposits certainly cheered me up. The fourth itself was a mystery, though. I hadn't used my account that day, so wasn't aware that I'd received such a large sum from my employers. Why? Was this their way of telling me my services were no longer required? Or was it a warning?

Be happy with the bonus,

little man, and forget about everything, fast.

Having some experience with bank lists, I recognised the JOB abbreviation as belonging to the Jordan Ordinary Bank, one of the smaller 'multi-nationals' in the city. Taking the account number of the creditor and running it through an old account-list I'd appropriated for a client some years ago took little more than a second or two. When the search had finished, the screen displayed a single record:

11758215-0999-441-564581123: Kamen & Subsidiaries, Inc. Clarkesville, SSU

Kamen & Subsidiaries. I'd never heard of them--but, seeing they were based on Clarkesville, the main bubble on Triton, that didn't seem unlikely. Why they were paying good money to tag some guy in C20, millions of miles away, remained a mystery.

I resolved to dig some more, later, and scrolled through the remainder of the file. The coroner's preliminary report on the body of the suicide was next, and last. Much of it was dull and involved a high percentage of medical terms I had to look up in a dictionary. It wasn't until the end that I found

something unexpected.

Somehow, the police had succeeded where Marilyn had failed and located an ID for the dead man. His name matched that on the car-rental contract: Wallace

Derringer. No other information was given, apart from an approximate age: mid-forties. No bruises, no wounds apart from a single, self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head and a slight scratch on his left wrist (where I'd taken the tissue sample). The lack of injury suggested that he had not been coerced; flash-burns from the muzzle of the gun further corroborated my eye-witness account.

Suicide. On the surface of it, nothing could have been simpler--except no one committed suicide any more. Not even in C20. If life in the city didn't agree with you, you moved elsewhere, to C19 or any of the other habitats. Failing that, you rejoined the rest of humanity and travelled to the stars. Failing *that*, you might *then* blow yourself away. But not here, not at the beginning of your journey.

Unless . . . The germ of a thought nagged. Perhaps it wasn't the beginning of the journey after all, but the end.

I had barely thought this when I spotted something odd. Halfway down the tenth page, in the middle of a long discussion about the dead man's physical condition, was a cross-section of Derringer's skull.

If I hadn't seen similar scans before, before I moved to C20, I wouldn't have noticed it. I would have glanced at the picture and moved on, missing one crucial piece of evidence that either had been overlooked as unimportant by the coroner, or deliberately buried in the data.

Wallace Derringer's skull had been empty, even before the gunshot. Mostly. Apart from a thin, outer layer of cerebrum and the central walnuts of cerebellum, pons varolii, thalamus and corpus callosum, his brain had contained little more than fluid. Much like severe symptoms of encephalitis--except that *that* possibility could be ruled out. Even in C20, although only just, medical technology was able to regrow the tissues of the brain. Had he been truly encephalitic he would have been treated here; for a severe case he would have been shipped elsewhere. And a severe case of brain damage would not have gone unnoticed. Which could mean only one thing.

Wallace Derringer wasn't a man at all. He was a *savant*.

I skimmed through the rest of the report, hoping to find further evidence but not really expecting to. The scan of the skull must have been required by law in the case of a gunshot wound to the head, or else it wouldn't have been there at all. If the coroner had deliberately covered up the abnormal data, any other potential evidence would be omitted, or similarly fudged.

And sure enough, I found nothing further.

The suicide had been a *savant* then, not Wallace Derringer--which changed things dramatically. The growing and training of organic robots was outlawed in C20, the required technology being way too advanced. Cloned from the host's donor cells, fast-bred in a vat reactor, then modified to ensure a minimal intelligence, it would have been identical to the host in almost every respect, trained to follow a few rudimentary routines--like simple phrases, gestures, behaviours--and set loose in C20. With me on its tail.

I remembered how badly 'Derringer' had driven that day. The substitute must have stepped into the real Derringer's shoes that morning, primed to lead me on a wild goose chase for almost an hour. *Savants* were unreliable robots at best, so I assumed that the suicide routine had lain dormant until an external

trigger had set it off somehow. Then it had killed itself.

Why? So I, Kamen & Subs and the police would assume that the real Derringer was dead. Obviously.

I stared at the cutaway of the *savant's* skull, aware of a depth of conspiracy widening around me. The coroner, at least, had to be involved, for covering the facts after the event; the people who had grown the *savant*, then triggered the suicide; Kamen & Subs for having me tail Derringer in the first place; and Derringer himself, whoever he was and whyever he was so important. Whatever it was he was involved in, it had to be big.

I had come no closer to unravelling the mystery. If anything, my fool questions had made it magnitudes worse. But I was hooked, now more than ever. And the last thing a PI does is turn from an interesting case. God knows, life is boring enough without doing that.

Thirty minutes later, while I was still grappling with the mystery, my phone buzzed again. Half-annoyed at having my train of thought broken, I keyed the Receive button.

"What?"

"Hi, cheerful," said Marilyn, her face smiling out of the glowing flatscreen.

"Remember me?"

I returned her smile. "Yeah, sorry. I was doing something, and you kinda interrupted me."

"Well, she can wait." Her smile slipped a notch. "I ran that second test."

"Good girl. What did you find?"

"I'm sorry, Court. This guy, whoever he is, just doesn't exist as far as the city's concerned."

That seemed reasonable, in hindsight. After all, the cadaver I'd lifted the sample from was a genetically modified *savant*, not the real Derringer whose complete code would be on file. But then I thought of the coroner's report, with its positive ID, and decided not to mention it. "Do you have the full sequence?"

"Sure do. I'll squirt it to you while we talk. In the meantime, I want to ask you something."

I glanced at the PC to make sure it was receiving the data, then turned back to her. "Sure, darling. Go ahead."

"What do you know about this guy?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because his genome is abnormal, radically so."

I leaned forward, interested. "In what way?"

"In every way. When the ID match failed, I ran it through a CP algorithm to pinpoint its overall structure, but that didn't work either. He doesn't belong to any of the castes, Court. What is he? A mutant?"

"I don't know," I answered, hoping she'd read the naked honesty in my voice.

"If I knew that I'd be half way to solving the problem."

Her smile had slipped completely by this time. "I'm worried you're getting yourself involved in something, Court. I mean, what if someone's dragged out the old weapons, or invented new ones . . . ?"

She didn't finish the thought, and she didn't need to. My mind had raced ahead on its own. Over five hundred years had passed since the days of the Trouble and the genetic plagues that had swept the Earth, but the race-memory still hurt. Every child born today carries within it the legacy of war stamped

indelibly on its genes.

No one really knows who started it, or what purpose it was suppose to achieve, but the family of morpholytic viruses had had terrible consequences. Genetic terrorism on a massive scale, it had spread like wildfire. The techniques used to control it included viral reagents and genocide; its social effects included chaos, warfare and starvation: the end of civilisation for almost a century.

With dozens of competing viral strains vying for human cells with natural forms of diptheria, HIV and ebola, plus radiation and chemical poisons leaking into the biosphere, death from cancer reached plague proportions in the summer of 2052. Literally no one was unaffected. In twenty years, the population of the Earth shrank to less than fifty percent of its former, bloated high--and the plagues hadn't even finished their work. A more subtle form of cancer was spreading, twisting genes and warping the face of humanity itself. The human genome, the original and so-called Ideal, had been twisted from true. Of the children born during the time of the Trouble, only twenty-five percent survived, and many of these were gross mutations, unable to reproduce. The remainder were sports, twisted by the plagues until they barely resembled their parents. When the sports bred, they bred a second generation of sports.

And then their grandparents died.

The Human Ideal died with them. Not even a record of the whole genome survived, it having been destroyed along with most of the other electronic records of the old world. In its place came new strains of humanity: the castes, differing from the Ideal in a vast number of ways. Interbreeding led to further sports, until finally the genepool settled down, or the viruses died, leaving the face of humanity irrevocably altered.

The Trouble lasted almost fifty years, from 2052 to 2099. And I guess that explains why there has never been a C21. C20's official envelope is 1932 - 2125, covering the best of the Twentieth Century's culture and as much of the Twenty-First's as can be tolerated. Beyond that point--well, who wants to visit a world characterized by plague, famine and war?

The fact that humanity survived says a lot for the resilience of the race. The sports inherited the ruins their ancestors left behind and fashioned from them a new, truly multicultural society over the following century. It must have been tempting to lay the blame for the carnage on previous generations, but instead the new human breeds retained a measure of reverence for the Ideal, especially while the global civilisation was returning from savagery. The ruins contained old footage--films, documentaries, educational programs and so on. Elder humanity came to resemble angels, in literature, song and legend.

From their skins inward, the sports knew what they were--near-aliens--and idealized the old accordingly.

This reverence, in part, resulted in the habitats--like C20 and its sisters--where the sports play-acted at being Ideal. The most recent energy- and resource-rich human society--my society, the one I had left behind to live in the city--had conquered the stars and could afford to reflect on the past through rose-coloured glasses if it wanted to.

So, if Wallace Derringer's genome differed from that of the castes, the descendants of the sports, then that meant that he was a new mutation. And a new mutation suggested new viruses, and a return of the Trouble. No wonder, I thought, that someone was going to a lot of trouble to cover him up. If word got out, there was no telling what could happen.

All this flashed through my mind in about five seconds.

"Wait," I said, more to myself than to her. "We're making a mountain out of a molehill, here."

"Maybe not, Court. Think about it. All it takes is for someone to stumble across a cache of the virus that the clean-up overlooked; some leftover from the Trouble--a missile warhead, perhaps, floating in orbit or further out. It breaks loose, infects someone, and --"

"No." I raised a hand to silence her. "I don't buy it. You could never keep it secret. We would have heard something, surely . . ." I stopped in mid-sentence, stunned by a sudden thought. "Oh, shit."

"What?" Marilyn waved her hand to attract my attention. "What is it?"

"Something the Zealot said. It might be nothing, but --"

Before I could finish, the screen blacked-out. Frowning, I thumped the phone's casing and poked the Receive button.

"Marilyn? Can you hear me? Marilyn?"

Dead. Not even a disconnected signal. I tried calling another number, but that didn't work either. And when I stood to check the cables leading to the wall, I noticed that something else was missing.

The Hess machines were silent.

Instantly alert, I scrambled across my study to my holster and fished out the revolver I'd carried for years and never used. I never intended to either, but just holding it made me feel more secure, although the wooden grip in my sweaty palm reminded me again of the song.

The Perfect Gun is perfect sadism, at least as a method.

Only my heartbeat broke the silence as I inched through my apartment to the door that led onto the roof. There I turned out the lights in the kitchen and waited for my eyes to adjust.

Outside, the night was dark and still, lit only by the lights of the 'scrapers above and on every side. One of the Hess machines cheeped, and was answered by others, and gradually the night reassumed its usual, reassuring ambience. But

the fact remained that something had made a noise in the yard;

something had

scared the Hess machines into silence.

I slowly swung the back door open with my left hand, holding the gun before me in my right, and took a step outside. I took a second step forward and closed the door behind me.

In the corner of my eye, something moved. Before I could flinch away, a numbing blow knocked the gun from my hand, sending it spinning across the concrete path. Another pushed me from the door.

As I stumbled, I turned to face my attacker--but saw no one.

A third shove sent me sprawling heavily to my hands and knees on the grass. A

boot pressed me further down. I rolled over when the pressure eased, and caught a subtle movement to my left: little more than a shadow among shadows, visible only as a distortion in the air as it passed in front of the 'scraper across the street. I lost it almost immediately, and crawled cautiously away from where I had last seen it.

It was, of course, my invisible opponent.

"Whoever you are," I said, trying to sound more confident than I actually felt, "you'd better have a damn good reason for using a cloak."

Someone laughed out of thin air, startlingly close. A gloved hand grabbed the back of my collar and hauled me to my feet. Before I could twist and grab my assailant, another shove sent me face-down into the dirt.

"Or else?" asked the voice.

I crawled towards the fallen revolver, but unseen hands swept it away, into the air. It hovered at waist-height, pointed in my direction.

"All right, that's enough." I stopped struggling, out of options. "If you want to fight dirty, I give in."

"Sensible." The chirruping of the Hess machines had ceased again. The only sounds on the roof were our voices and the distant rumble of engines from the street below. My eyes followed the floating gun as though tied to the barrel by invisible string.

"So now what?"

"We talk." The air behind the gun darkened, blurred, and became a man. His cloak, now dormant, looked like a matte-grey jumpsuit, complete with hood. Not one inch of him was exposed, but I could tell just from the smell of him that he was from outside C20. The smell, and the cloak itself.

"Go on, then. Talk."

"Wallace Derringer died of suicide," said my assailant. His voice was soft, but deep. He should have been doing voice-overs. "That's all you need to know."

"Oh? And why's that?"

"Because I say so."

"I see." I frowned deeply, as though seriously considering the possibility that I might abandon the case. "And what if I don't believe you?"

"You will." The masked man paused for effect. "We have the woman."

"What woman?"

"Marilyn Delibes."

I froze. "You're lying, pal," I bluffed.

"We traced her calls after she accessed the genome records, and monitored her conversations. When she transmitted the genome to you, we moved."

"I don't believe you."

The man chuckled again. "Is that so, 'cheerful'?"

I sagged back onto the shallow earth. Unarmed, I had no chance of overpowering a man in a light-cloak; even if his intentions weren't to kill me in cold blood, all he had to do was switch the device back on and I would be at his mercy again. And the problem of Marilyn still remained. I don't play the sap for anyone, but the thought of her coming to harm as a result of my work made my stomach sink.

Something nudged my left arm. I glanced down in surprise, then realised it was only one of the Hess machines, wandering across the dirt along its nowhere path. Its plastic casing, as wide across as my fist, rotated as it tried to negotiate the obstacle of my body; its stereoscopic 'ears' swivelled from side to side in confusion. I felt a strong sympathy for the poor creature, machine though it was; lost, confused, and out of its depth; we had a lot in common.

If only, I thought, there was some way we could help each other . . .

I sat up to let the machine continue on its way under my back, praying the sudden rebirth of hope didn't show on my face. All I had to do was stall for a minute. "What do you want?" I asked the man in the cloak.

"Your data, the original tissue sample, and a guarantee of silence from you and anyone else involved."

"Or else?" It felt good throwing the clichè back at him, but not as good as the antennae of the Hess machine creeping slowly across my shirt, below me.

Just a little further . . .

"My employers will use any means necessary to guarantee their security. If that means killing you and Ms Delibes, then so be it."

"Really?" I decided to risk plugging for information. "Your employers. That would be Kamen and Subsidiaries, right?"

The hired gun hesitated. "What is this, Mr Welles? Some sort of game?"

"No." The Hess machine brushed my right hand. I moved my arm, as though shifting my weight, and wrapped my fingers around the base of the machine.

"Don't crowd me. I just want to make certain that you really mean it . . ."

I threw the Hess machine at his face. His reflexes took over as I'd hoped they would, making him raise both his hands to ward it off. Before the gun could come back down, my shoulder ploughed into his stomach, blowing the air out of him.

We went down in an undignified heap, half on the garden and half on the concrete path bordering it. He had an inch or two on me, but I'd gambled on the initial surprise giving me an edge. Which it did, but not for long.

Between trying to keep the gun from pointing at me and doing my best to stay on top of him, I was at a marked disadvantage.

I drove an elbow into his tender stomach and was gratified to hear the air whoof out of him again. A fist connected with the side of my head, dazing me

for a moment. My grip on his gun hand slipped, but caught again before he could swing the weapon to bear. I risked my balance to drive a knee into his groin, and his spasm of pain caught me awkwardly. I hit the ground next to

him, scrambling to get my arm around his throat and twist him away. He struggled furiously, clubbing at my head with the butt of the gun.

He must have squeezed the trigger a little too tightly, then. It discharged, startling us both and sending a bullet ricocheting off the wall of my apartment. He grunted with surprise, obviously unused to the recoil and noise of such primitive weaponry. While he was distracted, I put a hand on either side of his head and banged it *hard* onto the concrete path, twice.

He became still, and I rolled away, testing my bruised parts for any serious injuries. With a grunt of effort, I clambered to my feet and made sure that he was okay, too. Association with two deaths in as many days wouldn't look good on my record. His pulse was steady, which was good enough for me. Pausing only to return the fallen Hess machine to its patch of grass, where it cheeped nervously and wandered away, I dragged my unconscious opponent into the house.

Stripped of the cloak, he became a little less daunting; just a man, although a little older than I'd expected. His naked caste-form--with the black, hairless skin and slightly deep-set eyes of a Bhuto pure-blood--looked out of place though, tied to my bed. That, and the weird bulges down his neck, across his temples and around his ears.

Implants, I thought; just as illegal as mine but no doubt a thousand times more powerful. For all I knew, they had already broadcast a plea for help. He would be sure to do so himself, when he eventually awoke. Exactly how much time I had, I didn't know, but I knew it wouldn't be long. I had to get out of there.

I delayed long enough to don the cloak--which, thankfully, was a size too large rather than a size too small--and download the data pertinent to the case into the phone's detachable personal digital assistant. Then I shrugged an overcoat over the cloak, slipped the PDA into a pocket, reloaded the gun and slipped out of the building by the back entrance.

Out on the street, I kept to the shadows. It wouldn't do, I knew, to be picked up for possessing illegal tech by some passing cop. No one in their right mind would believe my story. Hi-tech assassins lurking in roof-top gardens, Marilyn kidnapped, a non-existent man committing suicide, and the possible return of the Trouble--even I wasn't convinced. To make a reasonable case, and to find

Marilyn, I needed more information.

And there was only one place in the city I could be sure to find it, albeit at a price.

The alley behind the "Jack-in-a-Box" was deserted, as always. I waited nervously for the Zealot's automated sentries to go through their routine, and reluctantly handed over the gun to get through the inner door. When it finally opened, I burst into the inner sanctum like a man on fire.

The Zealot turned to face me. "Courtney Welles, back for more. What are you now, a conspicuous consumer?"

"I need your help," I said. "They've got Marilyn."

He frowned. "Who have?"

"Kamen & Subsidiaries, or whoever the hell they really are. That space junk you were telling me about must have been some old warhead, left behind after the Trouble." I handed him the PDA. "There's a genetic code on there. A mutation. I gotta know what it's all about so we can --"

"I already offered you a price," interrupted the Zealot, raising his eyebrows.

"You did?" Then I remembered: the lottery figure. "You *knew* about this?"

"Some, not all. More than you, obviously, if *that's* what you believe." The Zealot shifted in his seat. "I didn't know, however, that you had recently acquired such a valuable piece of clothing."

I glanced down at the cloak that covered my extremities, recognizing the hungry look in the Zealot's one good eye. "You want it? It's yours. Just help me find Marilyn, or tell me what's going on."

"The latter I cannot do. But the former . . . well, that depends on how well they've hidden her. Where was she when you last saw her?"

I thought back to the call. The background had been blurred, but familiar.

"Her office. The Genotek building."

"How long ago?"

"An hour and a half, maybe more."

"Hmm." The Zealot leaned over the mess of equipment and screens that acted as his desk. He closed his eyes, using implants to process instructions and data much faster than any mechanical interface could. "The building was evacuated eighty-five minutes ago. A fire on the forty-seventh floor apparently; no casualties."

Despair and exhaustion rolled over me in a wave. "They could have gone anywhere."

"Perhaps not. I am searching civil records for her movements to see if she has crossed any official paths since then." I waited for an eternity while he thought silently to his toys. Then: "Yes. I have her."

I almost kissed him. "Where?"

"Unless the data has misled me, she appears to be home."

"Her home?"

"Working on her computer as we speak."

I swallowed my excitement. "It could be a trap."

"Quite possibly." The Zealot opened his red eye and pinned me under its glowing stare.

I had little choice. Standing, I shrugged out of the overcoat, preparing to relieve myself of the cloak as payment for his services.

"No." The Zealot raised his hand. "Give it to me after. I can wait a day or two."

"Thanks, but I don't like to owe you."

"I know." The Zealot smiled. "I don't like you to owe me either. But life gets boring here at times, looking out at the world and never acting. A little involvement does wonders, sometimes."

I smiled back, my nervousness returning now that I had a definite direction if not an actual plan. Grateful both for his generosity and his confidence, I put the overcoat back on. "Okay. I'd better get moving, then."

"Wait. Don't forget this." The Zealot picked up the PDA and gave it back to me. "Replay your recording of Derringer's death, carefully, and it will tell you something."

"How do you know that?"

The Zealot's smile widened. "I lifted it from your PC several hours ago." I should have guessed. Raising the PDA in a brisk wave, I headed back through his security airlock and out into the night.

Incongruous as it sounds, I hailed a taxi to take me the rest of the way to Marilyn's house. I needed to rest, for one, and to avoid public scrutiny, for two. The open streets made me nervous, knowing that there might be other assassins looking for me. Every casual glance made me flinch.

So I caught a cab and paid cash in advance, plus a generous tip. To avoid the driver seeing the cloak, I sat in the rear seat. After a minute of restless staring at streets flowing by and itching where the fabric of the cloak rubbed through my clothes, I took the PDA out of my pocket and followed the Zealot's final words of advice.

The recording of Derringer's death lasted less than five minutes. I skimmed through it twice with the volume down, but saw nothing new. With the volume up, likewise. And there was that song again, to annoy the hell out of me, right when I needed it. Thinking about the real Derringer, and his cloned *savant*, one line in particular stood out:

*The Perfect Gun is neither my shadow, nor my double,
nor my half, nor another myself . . .*

Which was curiously appropriate, but not enough to genuinely prick my interest. The fifth time I played it through was just a formality; I'd already given up hope of finding anything new. The recording rolled on to the end while I stared out the window, almost choking on frustration.

And so it was that I caught the dedication.

As I--the recorded I, whose eyes I was seeing through--bent to study the corpse and steal a piece of its cooling flesh, the song played itself out in the background, coming from the speakers in the car hired by the real Wallace Derringer.

*The Perfect Gun is half of a destiny.
The Perfect Gun has nothing to do before dying.
The Perfect Gun leaves an exquisite corpse.*

With one last patter of bongos the song faded out, and Dr Bob, JJJJ's request DJ, came back on the air.

"Well, folks, there you have it. 'Dali's Handgun' by that perennial favourite, MC 900ft Jesus. And what better song could a man wish for on his birthday?"

Have a nice day, y'all."

I sat upright on the seat, feeling the familiar stirrings of a hunch. A birthday dedication? From whom? And why such an unusual song? Trying not to get my hopes up, I scrolled the recording back to the beginning, to the time some minutes *before* the murder, when the song had begun. The view through my recorded eyes scanned the road ahead and the back of the *savant's* car with monotonous regularity. Nothing had happened yet to arouse my alarm. The old Devo song that I hadn't heard for years faded out, and Dr Bob came on the air.

"Now we have a real feel-gooder. Perhaps you'd care to explain it yourself, listener? Hello? Who would you like to dedicate your request to?" A man, in his mid-forties by the sound of him and with an unusual accent, came on the line. "Um, yeah. I'd like to dedicate this to my brother." "Your brother, huh?" Dr Bob managed to squeeze a stupid, toothy grin down the airwaves. "And why would that be?" "It's, uh, his birthday today. This is his song."

"Ain't that sweet, folks? Tell us how old he is, Wal, and his name, so they can all wish him a happy birthday with you. Wal? Are you still there, Wal?" Dr Bob's aural smile tightened perceptibly. "Shoot, sorry, Wal. We seem to have lost you. But that won't stop us playing your request, right? From Wal to Wal's brother: the happiest of birthdays, and may you have many more!"

I fell back into the seat as the song started. *Neither my shadow, not my double, nor my half . . . nothing to do before dying . . . an exquisite corpse . . .* The words were too appropriate to be a coincidence. *From Wal to Wal's brother!* I could hardly believe it, even though I knew it was the answer I'd been looking for: The *song* had triggered the *savant's* suicide routine, and Wallace Derringer himself had pulled the trigger.

It didn't make any sense.

The cab came to a sudden halt, and I glanced up, startled, imagining police blockades or armed assassins holding up the car. Instead, I saw the glass and aluminium facade of Marilyn's building. The cab had arrived.

Instructing the driver to keep moving past, then around the block, I kept a close eye out for anyone acting suspicious. Naturally, I saw no one. The cab dropped me off in an alley not far from the building's rear entrance, where I stashed the PDA and wrapped my coat around my waist. Making sure the cloak was secure at my wrists, ankles and throat, I hit the switch on the belt and disappeared from sight.

Marilyn's room was on the sixth floor. Not a penthouse or anything special, but sufficiently large for her needs. She preferred stark, simplistic designs--lots of metal and glass, very slick, like a doctor's surgery with carpet. I tried not to imagine what was happening to her in there, focussing instead on the times I had stayed with her, concentrating on the way it normally was and letting the anger percolate through. I vowed that if we came through this I wouldn't let anything so petty as a difference in idiom keep us apart any longer.

Corny, I know. Blame it on the view through the hood, which took a little getting used to.

The building seemed unnaturally deserted as I crept through the maintenance corridors, until I found an old analog clock. The time was almost three in the morning. No wonder it was quiet. But why, then, was Marilyn accessing the

Genotek network as though nothing untoward had happened?
Thanking fortune that I had brought my key-ring--on which dangled the key to her apartment--I caught the elevator to the floor above hers, then back-tracked to the stairwell. I passed no one along the way, for which I was also grateful. Light-cloaks work best at night, against a mottled background; not even the advanced tech allowed outside C20 could provide a perfect magic coat. The corridors, although dimly lit, were too narrow for me to avoid detection at close range.

I eased open the door from the stairwell to her level, and shut it behind me as quietly as I could. Her room lay to my right, along a corridor branching off from the one in which I found myself. I approached the corner with caution, peering around it to survey the territory before daring to approach.

Seated on a chair outside her room was a security guard. I retreated, stumped for the moment. I couldn't possibly creep close enough to disarm the guard. She would be sure to see me and raise the alarm. And if I ran, the sound of my feet on the carpet would give me away instead. My revolver was useless in this instance; it would attract attention even more effectively than my cloaked figure. Besides, I didn't want to kill anyone in cold blood, especially while the possibility remained that I could be mistaken. Marilyn might conceivably have evaded her pursuers and arranged for a guard to watch her back during the night.

I didn't believe it for a second, but couldn't afford to take the chance.

Which left me with only one option.

Stepping back from the corner, I reached for the belt and switched off the cloak. Taking a deep breath, I strolled past the entrance to Marilyn's corridor, glanced up to notice the guard at the same time she noticed me, waved nonchalantly, and continued on my way. When I was out of sight, I counted to three.

"Hey!" I followed my exclamation with a grunt of pain, and a stamp on the carpeted floor loud enough for her to hear.

With my back against the wall, I switched the cloak on and listened for the guard's footsteps. Having just faked a maybe-convincing attack on an innocent resident of the building, I hoped she'd be professional enough to at least check it out. For all she knew, it might have been *me* on the warpath.

She fell for it. As her head inched around the corner, I grabbed her and knocked her out as quietly as I could, feeling bad while I did it. She was, after all, just doing her job.

Leaving her in a comfortable position, I ducked around the corner and headed for Marilyn's doorway. I'd taken barely five steps when the door opened and someone leaned out.

I froze for an instant, then started to run. Whoever it was and for whatever reason they'd chosen that moment to peer out of the room, I knew they'd see me before long--a blurry but humanoid shape creeping down the corridor like some sort of paranoid ghost. Better that I gained as much ground as I could before they took action.

The person in the doorway looked both ways--away from me first, then right at me. Her eyes widened in shock, and so did mine.

Marilyn!

Before I could react in any sensible way, she retreated into the room and pulled the door shut behind her. The lock clicked loudly as I reached it, and I fumbled the keys as I pulled them from my pocket. The key-ring dropped at my

feet, and I bent down to pick it up.

As I did so, the door unlocked and opened again, and someone else emerged. With my head low to the ground, I didn't have time to recognise him. And he didn't see me either, looking over me as he was, not expecting me to be crouching at his feet.

I put all my weight behind me as I leapt for his throat. He fell back through the doorway, and I followed him inside, slapping a hand at the light switch as we passed through the doorway, plunging the narrow passage into darkness. While he was off-balance, I pushed him again. He grabbed at the fabric of the cloak and tugged me with him. Locked in an ungainly embrace, we staggered down the hallway and into Marilyn's dining room, where he stumbled and fell. I landed on top him, dragged down by his weight, my left hand still locked tight around his throat. With my right, I reached for the revolver.

"Don't move!" said a voice from behind me. "I have a gun, and although I can't see you, exactly, I have a pretty good idea where you are."

I looked over my shoulder at Marilyn. She stood on the far side of the room, pointing a small pistol in my general direction. Even at a time like this, I couldn't help but notice how her eyes failed to meet mine. It made her look uncertain, even ashamed. Even when I realised that this was because she couldn't see my eyes, the feeling lingered.

"Let him go," she said, tightening her finger on the trigger. "I'm not afraid to fire."

"Marilyn," I said, keeping my grip on the man beneath me but not shifting my eyes from hers. "It's me. Court."

She hesitated. "What?"

"I've come to rescue you. We have to get away."

"From what?"

"From . . ." It was my turn to hesitate. The man beneath me gurgled, and for the first time I actually looked at his face.

The man I held by the throat was Wallace Derringer.

I climbed off him, but pulled the revolver from my pocket and made sure he could see it peeking out of the cloak. Glancing from him to Marilyn, I stepped back in confusion.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"Stay back." Marilyn kept the pistol trained on my insubstantial figure.

"Don't come any closer until I'm sure it's you. This could be a trick."

"A trick?" I almost laughed. "Jeez, sweetheart, you know I only come around here when there's a damn good reason."

Some of the tension eased out of her. "Only you'd say something like that."

"So let's move." I reached for her hand. "The guard won't stay out of the picture for long. We need to get away from here before --"

"What the hell are you talking about, Court? I don't want to leave. This is my home."

"But they're holding you prisoner here!" I glanced at Derringer, then at the rest of the room. Somewhat belatedly, I realised how empty it was. "Aren't they?"

"No! Why should they? I'm on their side, you idiot!"

I must have stared at her in amazement for a full minute before Derringer stepped between us.

"I think your young friend has taken a wrong turn somewhere," he said, rubbing

at his throat. His was the voice from the radio, its unique accent unmistakable; plus the same Peter Lorre face of the *savant*, with slightly bulging eyes and curly brown hair. He turned to me and held out his hands.

"I'm unarmed. Marilyn has the only weapon in the room, apart from yours.

Switch off the cloak and we can talk."

Numbly, I obeyed. Marilyn moved past me to close the door. "The guard," I said, breaking my silence at last. "She's out in the hallway, around the corner."

"I'll get her," said Derringer.

"No." I waved him back with the barrel of the revolver. "You do it, Marilyn.

You're strong enough."

Her eyes flashed with anger, then softened. She understood what I was saying.

Although I still felt ill at ease about the whole situation, at least I trusted her enough to let her out of my sight. Whatever her reasons, I knew her well enough to know that she wasn't a *femme fatale*. Hopefully.

When she returned, dragging the unconscious guard behind her, she gestured that I should sit. I did so, letting the gun dangle between my legs, at ease but still alert.

"You first, Court," Marilyn said. I noticed she'd put her pistol aside.

"Where'd you get the cloak, and what makes you think I need rescuing?"

I explained what had happened to me since her call had been disconnected: the hired Bhuto killer on my rooftop, the threats he had made and his request for my data.

"Did he actually say that he was from Kamen?" interrupted Derringer. The mention of the killer had made him nervous, I could tell.

"Not as such, but --"

"Well, he can't have been. There are no employees of Kamen in the city. He must have been from the opposition. They've been trying to track me for weeks, and must have sent him to find out how much you knew."

"The 'opposition'?"

"ICI, Caer Jolson, RobelTech--any of a number of bigger biotech firms. The stakes are high enough to make such a risk worthwhile."

Marilyn waved him silent. "Go on, Court. Finish it."

I did so, explaining quickly how I had overpowered the killer, stolen his cloak and fled through the city to the Zealot. Derringer listened to my theory of the Trouble and the old warhead--originally Marilyn's theory--with restless interest before finally interrupting again.

"This Zealot . . . he supports your interpretation of the evidence?"

Now that I thought about exactly what the Zealot had said, I had to say that he didn't. "Why? Am I wrong?"

"Just slightly."

"How? Tell me. I want answers, pal."

"No." He stood. "We don't have time. Your friend, the Bhuto assassin, must have notified his allies by now. There might be more of them in the city. I can't afford to take the risk that they've followed you here."

"Fair point, I guess. Where do you suggest we go?"

"I have a safe-house on the east side. If we can make it there --"

The phone rang, interrupting him.

"Don't answer it," I said, as Marilyn reached for the handset. Her answering machine clicked in on the third ring. We waited in silence, but whoever it was didn't leave a message.

I'd humoured Derringer before, but this convinced me. So early in the morning, anyone calling must have had a damned good reason, one worth leaving a message at least.

"That's it. We're outa here." I also stood, clicking the cloak on. "We can talk on the way. Derringer, you go first."

Marilyn grabbed her purse and keys and made sure the guard was comfortable.

The three of us left the room and walked in wary indian-file along the corridor, to the elevator. Derringer hit the Down button and waited impatiently as the nearest carriage descended from a higher floor. His nervous energy was contagious, although I for one wasn't sure exactly what he was running from.

"I guess it's my turn," Marilyn said, her eyes roaming the near-invisible shimmer of my visage. "When the phone went dead at the office, I tried to call you back, but your line was disconnected. Then Wallace came into my office. He'd bypassed the security, so I had no idea who he was. I thought he was from the police, although he wasn't armed. I told him what I knew, and what I'd guessed. He called Kamen on Clarkesville, and they became quite upset."

"They thought the secret had leaked," said Derringer. "Like the hired gun who came for you, they've been monitoring the Commercial datapool on the off-chance someone saw through the suicide. When Marilyn ran the *savant's* sequence through it, it triggered alarms. Kamen traced the search back to its source, however, and sent me in, while the opposition waited to see who else was involved. Obviously, they assumed that Marilyn was already working for Kamen, and could not be compromised. You on the other hand could be bluffed into believing that they held her hostage . . ."

"Yeah, I get the picture," I said, accepting the theory that I had been tricked with poor grace. The doors pinged open, sparing me further embarrassment, and we filed inside. Derringer pressed the button for the lobby.

"When Kamen's team realised that I'd already spent some time mapping the genome," continued Marilyn, "they arranged a diversion to get me out of the building, and suggested we swap information. In short, they offered me a job. And I said yes."

"Just like that?"

"She knew too much already," said Derringer. "Genotek is a subsidiary of Kamen. The simplest way to keep her quiet was to have her on the project; let her study me for a while. The lure of the full genome was enough to ensure her silence and enlist her help, once I explained what it really was."

"And that is?"

Marilyn glanced at Derringer, who shrugged. "I guess that's my story."

Before he could continue, the lift doors opened on the lobby--which had been completely empty of life the last time I'd seen it. The four dozen or so uniformed police who now filled it turned at the sound of the doors. I could tell from the look in their eyes and the way their guns started to come up at seeing us that they weren't a welcoming party.

"Back!" I stabbed at the lift's controls as a voice bellowed for us to stop. The doors slid shut. I pushed buttons at random. Someone pounded on the doors outside as the carriage began to rise.

Marilyn's face was pale. "Police?"

"I guess there must be some misunderstanding." I couldn't help the light sarcasm. The cops and I had never gotten on well, but never this badly. "Or someone knows more about this than I do, and tipped them off."

"We've done nothing illegal," said Derringer. "I swear. If I only had time to explain --"

The emergency phone rang once, and I picked it up.

"Hello?"

"This is Sergeant McCallan speaking," said the gruff voice on the other end. "We have the building surrounded. Come out with your hands up or face the consequences."

I didn't believe it at first. It was just too much, even for C20. "This is a joke, right?"
"No joke, pal," said the cop, even more frostily than before. "You're in the shit right up to your goddamn eyebrows."

"Okay." I swallowed my doubts. "Then listen, McCallan: my name is Courtney Welles, PD license number MLK44210. You're barking up the wrong tree. Whoever you're after, it ain't us."

"The information I have says otherwise. Are you coming out, or are we going to have to come in there after you?"

"I don't know," I replied, trying to sound casual and finding it hard; ham or no, this guy meant what he was saying. The lift stopped at the fourth floor, but I indicated for the others to stay where they were.

The doors closed again and we continued upwards. "It's a big building," I said into the phone.

"Resistance is useless, Welles. You're only making things worse for yourselves."

"Yeah, maybe." While I talked, I pushed every button from the tenth floor to the roof. "That depends on what we're supposed to have done, doesn't it?"

"You want the charges? How about conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, importation of prohibited technology, unauthorized use of private and civil records, the manufacture of morpholytic viruses --"

"The manufacture of *what*? Who told you that?"

"If you surrender, you'll have the right to a public appeal." McCallan's tone hardened. "You have five minutes before we shut down the lifts."

"Now, why would you want to do that?" I put my hand over the receiver and turned to face the others.

"They think we're going to start another plague. Is there any truth to that?"

"No." Derringer shook his head. "Absolutely not."

"Marilyn?" I noticed that she'd hesitated slightly.

"It's a possibility, I guess," she said. "I'm sure someone's considered it. But not the sort of plague we were talking about before, Court." Her eyes were wide, pleading with me to believe her. "They'd need a virus capable of carrying specific genes to the germ-line cells, not generate random transgenic mutations like in the Trouble. And Wallace's partners, the ones with Kamen, never said anything about that."

"The opposition has fed the police a worst-case scenario," said Derringer. "They're trying to spark a panic. It won't hold up in court, but the information will be made public knowledge in the process, and Kamen will lose its edge over the others. That's what the opposition wants. The hint of a plague is just a way to get the police moving fast."

I studied them both carefully. Marilyn I knew I could trust. If she said that a plague was only a possibility, not a definite aim of the company, then I had to believe her. But Derringer? Unlike Marilyn, I hardly knew him, his motivations or his origins. The more I saw of him, the more he reminded me of actors in old movies, not just Peter Lorre specifically. In a strange way, he didn't seem to be acting. That didn't mean I could trust him, but it was interesting.

Either way, I had to make a decision. Again, I chose to follow Marilyn's lead, for better or for worse.

"Whatever you say." I hung up the phone on McCallan's squeaking voice, knowing that further argument was pointless; the guy's big chance had finally arrived, and he obviously didn't intend to blow it, worse luck. The lift slid to a halt on the ninth floor. "Did you bring your mobile, Marilyn?"

She glanced in her purse. "Yes. But it's an early model; it won't work in here. The signal's not strong enough."

"I know." Before the doors could close, I gestured that we should leave the lift. The phone rang again as it continued upwards. "We caught the boys in blue off-guard. They've given us five minutes before they shut down the lifts. That means they're not in position yet. If I can talk to Bob Tasker before then, we should come out of this in one piece." I jogged to the stairwell while I talked, and took us down a floor and back to the lifts to confuse the trail.

"You know where you're taking us, Court?" Marilyn's hand on my half-visible arm felt like a vice. Her corporate Nineties calm wasn't up to this sort of stress.

"Yeah. That's my job, ain't it?" I tried to sound confident, in character, although what I had was only half a plan. All the exits from the building led through the lobby, which left only two ways to get into clear air for the phone to work. One was by breaking into a room and leaning out a window. But that meant

involving someone else, and I didn't want to do that if I could avoid it. That left us with only one option, the one I was currently following.

If my predecessors, all the PIs from five hundred years ago, had had any choice, I knew they would have done the same.

We headed for the roof.

Marilyn's building had sixty-seven floors, and the lifts were fairly slow. As soon as McCallan and his goons were in position, covering all the lower floors, stairwells and shafts, I knew they'd kill the power, whether the five minutes were up or not. I guessed we had a couple of minutes left, maybe.

As the carriage ascended, I ran the situation through my mind a thousand times: what to do if the roof was empty when we arrived, if the police had staked it out already, if the lift jammed half-way there, if either Marilyn or Derringer was injured. Five minutes on the phone to the Dep would see us clear, I knew, but getting that five minutes was the problem. I considered asking whether Derringer's ally in the coroner's office could be of help, but quickly discarded the idea. Having someone else to talk to in the police department didn't solve the basic problem--which was getting in contact with the department in the first place--and I still wasn't sure how far I could trust him.

"I've been thinking," Derringer said as we passed the fortieth floor. "You said you left the Bhuto assassin tied up at your place, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"He must have called the police, then. That suggests he's the only one in the city, otherwise there'd be more of his kind here."

"That makes sense." I felt relieved. One of the worst scenarios I'd considered involved a hoard of invisible assassins chasing us through the building. "So?"

"So how did he know where to send them?"

That stopped me. I'd left the Bhuto securely bound. Even if he'd woken up the moment I'd walked out the door, it would have taken him at least five minutes to work free. I had been long gone by then, so he couldn't have followed me. "Well, I guess he knew Marilyn was involved, and --"

"We smoke-screened her out of Genotek minutes after you were cut off." Derringer shook his head.

"And she made no other calls when she got home."

"They traced her home address, then."

"Sure, but how could he know *for certain* we were here? And why did he wait until *you* arrived?"

I scratched my ear and thought about it. The Bhuto might have taken a lucky guess that I'd come to Marilyn's, but it didn't seem likely. You don't summon C20's finest on an off-chance. He must have followed me some other way.

"Damn," I said, the realisation finally hitting home. "The cloak."

"Exactly. It has a homing device attached. Best we get rid of it, eh?"

I switched it off and unclipped the belt, cursing my stupidity. The Bhuto had caught me off-guard not just once that night, but twice. I felt like a county sheriff up against a mafia boss: all good intentions but lacking in class.

As I slipped out of the sleeves and rolled the thick fabric down my legs, the lift shuddered to a halt. With a flicker, the lights went out.

Caught off-balance, I fell to the floor. "Did anyone notice what level we're on?"

"Sixty-four, I think," said Marilyn, as she helped pull the cloak off my legs.

"Could be worse." When I was free, I climbed to my feet, unwound my overcoat from around my waist and slipped it on. The familiar fabric across my shoulders felt more comfortable than the alien technology of the cloak. Part of me breathed a sigh of relief: all I needed now was a hat to complete my usual ensemble. "Folks, let's get the doors open."

The carriage had come to a halt between floors. We had just enough room to reach down to the next level, lever the doors apart and wriggle through the narrow gap. I went last, stopping only to throw the bundled cloak down the elevator shaft. I held no illusions that it would throw off pursuit for long, but the gesture felt good.

While I checked my revolver, Marilyn slipped the mobile phone into the pocket of my coat and tweaked my ear. Her hands shook slightly, not enough to notice except by touching. I wanted to hold her, but knew she'd only resent the gesture.

"You actually look like you know what you're doing," she said.

"Sure, darling." I kissed her on the chin, and glanced at Derringer. "*The Perfect Gun is sufficient unto the day, right?*"

He didn't smile back. "I chose the song because of another line: *An idealist without taking part in any ideal*' That's me. I just want to be left alone, to live my life as I wish."

"Who's stopping you?"

"Everyone." He grimaced. "It's only a matter of time before they find us."

I agreed. "So let's get it over with."

With Marilyn close by my side, we climbed the stairs to the top floor and eased the door open. Clear as an office at Christmas. I had only a vague idea where to go, but figured there'd be several doors leading to the roof. One would be enough. And one phone call would see us the rest of the way.

The door we were looking for was at the top of a flight of six metal steps, marked 'Authorized Access Only'. It was unlocked.

I grabbed the handle and pulled the door inwards. It swung open with a metallic rasp and creak of rusty hinges. I went through in a hunched run, trying to cover all directions at once, just in case someone was waiting. When I'd decided the area was clear, I waved for the others to follow.

For all the varying styles of architecture in the city, the roof might have belonged to any one of a hundred buildings. Enormous air-conditioning outlets squatted like a forest of oddly-shaped mushrooms with fans spinning warm air into the night; rough concrete stepped irregularly into the distance, marred by patches of oil; two fat smoke-stacks belched clouds at the wind, which blew them back in tatters towards us. To complete the picture, a light but cold rain was falling.

With a shrug, I turned up the collar of my overcoat and thought warm thoughts, acutely conscious of the height of the building full of cops below me and the unfeeling sky above.

We headed away from the door and the echoes of its hinges. As I ran, I tugged the mobile phone out of my coat pocket and dialled Bob Tasker's private number. We reached the summit of a blocky, concrete mountain near the lift housings as the phone started to ring at his end.

We stood with our backs inward at the centre of a small space, surrounded by pipes. Marilyn still had her pistol and was keeping her eyes peeled. Derringer likewise watched the shadows warily. I kept the revolver ready, just in case.

Someone picked up the phone on the third ring. "Hello?"

The voice conjured images of dark-rooted, yellow hair with a hint of lipstick pink around the edge.

"Sharon? This is Courtney Welles. Get me Bob."

"I'm sorry, Mr Welles, but he's off-duty at the moment --"

"This is an emergency, sister. Get him on the phone or I'll make sure his wife finds out what he gets up to while she's out of town."

The phone clinked down. I could hear her calling in the background. "Bobby? *Bobby?* Get out of the tub. That Welles guy says it's important!"

I waited impatiently for the Dep to come. Wind blew shreds of mist and smoke across the deserted building-top, sending shadows rolling unpredictably. Derringer's back against my own was nervous, twitching every time mine did.

"Bob Tasker speaking," said the phone, finally. "This'd better be good, Court."

"It is, Bob. I'm *this* close to solving the case, but someone's given your boys a bum steer. Me and a couple of others are holed up in a building on the south side with a whole platoon baying at our heels.

You gotta call 'em off."

"Who's in charge down there?"

"I spoke to someone called McCallan."

"I know Jeff, Court. He's a good man. You sure he's got it wrong?"

"Positive. Another interested party fed him some line about --"

The sudden crack of an energy weapon made me flinch automatically. A bolt of accelerated protons flashed over our heads, sending chips of concrete exploding in a shower of yellow light from the stack behind us. Judging by the shot's split-second trajectory, it appeared to have come from my left, although

I hadn't been looking the right way to pin it down exactly.

I fired back and started to run before stopping to think, and was half-way to cover before looking back to check on the others. Marilyn was moving in a low but fast shuffle for shelter to my left, while

Derringer's head showed from behind a stack ten yards from where we had been standing. We'd scattered quite effectively for a bunch of amateurs.

Another bolt cracked the night open, this time aimed over my head, reminding me that I was still foolishly exposed. A second warning shot, luckily. This time I caught the angle of the shot, and could trace it back to its source.

Ducking behind the lift housing, I began to circle back. In one hand, I cocked the revolver; in the other, the phone squawked to itself. I whispered into it as I ran.

"You hear that, Bob? That's a P-24 Helsinger, if I'm not mistaken. Eight-shot proton weapon. Way beyond the envelope and still accelerating. You see what we're up against?"

"I hear." Tasker sounded impressed, and more than a little nervous. "I'll get onto McCallan and find out what's going on."

"You do that. And keep the line open. If we're all murdered, at least we'll have an aural witness."

I tucked the phone into my coat and scurried across the scuffed concrete. A bullet from Marilyn's pistol ricocheted off the wall to my left. I dodged in the direction of the gunshot, running from stack to stack like a mutant crab hell-bent on finding the sea.

A moving shadow, darker than the rest, caught my eye as it slipped across a gap ahead of me. Black body armour, long physique, lithe confidence: the Bhuto assassin. If he saw me, he didn't stop to say hello. I ducked to my right to curve around him and found myself in a dead-end of hissing pipes and gauges.

I back-tracked hastily, trying to watch every inch of cover within sight of me. Someone scuffled to my right, and I saw Marilyn dodge from one duct to another. A third bolt of energy split the sky, aimed upwards. Not warning us this time, just getting our attention.

"It's not too late," called the Bhuto, when the echoes of the shot had faded. The direction of his voice changed as he spoke. "The door is open behind me. I have disabled the lifts to prevent the police from interfering, but the stairwells are clear. I swear none of you will come to harm, should you choose to leave."

I ducked my head and crawled along a pipe hugging the concrete floor, trying to decide how much of his announcement was bluff. "None of us?" I called back.

"Except Derringer, of course."

Yellow fire exploded by my head, and I nearly jumped out of my skin and over the pipe. The shot came from behind me, although I'd swear he'd been in front of me when he spoke. If nothing else, I had to admire--and attempt to emulate--the man's speed.

I scrambled on hands and knees towards a tangle of pipes. A fifth shot--I was counting--blew a chunk of concrete the size of my fist out of the floor by my leg. The sixth took the nail off my right index finger. The seventh shot missed by a good two feet or so, but forced me to the far side of the juncture of pipes.

Facing me was no less than three yards of empty space.

Desperation draws a fine line between the stupid and the brave. I ground my teeth together and prepared to run for it.

"Hey! Hey, over here!" I froze in mid-step as Marilyn shouted--at me, I first thought. "Hey! Hey!"

The energy weapon whiplashed at something I couldn't see. Eight shots, in all. Then: "For God's sake, Court--run while he's reloading!"

I did as I was told, weaving across the open space towards the nearest available cover. The echoing silence between shots was filled with the scuffling of feet. I caught another glimpse of Marilyn dodging between pipes with the Bhuto not far behind. Breaking cover again, I pounded towards him, waving my

arms to return the favour. The Bhuto glanced at me long enough for Marilyn to scurry away.

He didn't give me enough time to approach, however. Reaching beneath his armour, he produced another power-pack for his weapon and opened its contacts with his teeth. Tossing the spent pack casually aside, he clicked the new pack into place and turned his sights on where I'd been standing. But I was long gone. Hidden in a tangle of pipes, I watched him curse silently and dodge away, moving like a gazelle on crack, much too fast for me to risk snapping off a shot. A trained combat soldier, no doubt about it. Probably high on PCP or whatever they called it these days out in the 'real' world. I'd have to be careful; one-on-one, even without the Helsing eight-shot, and without the element of surprise I'd enjoyed earlier, he'd pound me into the ground.

The relatively long glimpse of him had told me something else, though, apart from that I should be wary of him: he wasn't wearing full armour. Three-quarters of his body was invulnerable to all but a bullet at close range, but his hands and lower face were exposed. Maybe the rest of the armour hadn't squeaked through customs, or else he'd known it would slow him down. Whatever. He had his weak spots, and for that I was grateful. All I had to do was get close enough to capitalize on them.

He didn't waste his breath bargaining with us again. I stayed put for a while, hoping Marilyn and Derringer would have the sense to do the same. If I'd convinced the Dep that we were in trouble, then help could already be on the way. It was just a matter of sitting tight and waiting for the cavalry. A couple of minutes passed like hours. Occasionally I heard movement, but nothing nearby. I'd chosen my hiding place well. The only thing I needed was Marilyn with me and I could have waited all night. But the lifts didn't come back on; their housings remained stonily silent. Maybe the Bhuto hadn't been bluffing when he'd said he, not the cops, had immobilized them.

Without warning, a scuffle erupted on the far side of the building. Two pistol shots sent sparks flying off the building's lonely satellite dish; Marilyn's gun. I might have heard the beginning of a scream, but couldn't be certain. I ached to move, to find out what was going on, but couldn't afford to run blindly into a trap. The scuffling ceased, and silence fell as abruptly as it had lifted, then the Bhuto's voice rang out again:

"Okay, Welles. I really have Delibes this time. If you want her, bring me Derringer."

I scrambled from my hiding place and crawled along the concrete floor near the roof's walled edge, then around the corner to near where the Bhuto had spoken. As I inched past an air-conditioning duct, another scuffle broke out, this time to my left, not far away. I peered past the duct, and looked down. The Bhuto had Marilyn by one wrist and was holding her face-forward against a wall. Something dark had been tied around her mouth, making it impossible for her to talk. While I watched, she kicked backwards at him and missed. He wrenched her arm up her back, making her gasp.

"Welles? I'm waiting."

I wriggled into a better position and slid the barrel of the pistol around the edge of the duct.

He either heard me or saw me, I don't know which. But I wasn't even close to getting a bead on him when he suddenly raised his head and snapped off a hip-shot that came close to blowing my right temple clean off.

"I mean it, Welles." His voice followed me as I slithered away. "If I don't have Derringer in five minutes, I'll kill Delibes and come after you both myself."

With all thoughts of sneaking up on him stopped in their tracks, I concentrated on putting a healthy distance between us. I needed to think, to plan something--anything--and fast. Who knew what the Bhuto would do if he felt pressed for time, or if the cavalry chose this moment to arrive?

As I scampered along a narrow gap between two concrete walls, arms reached out of an air-duct and grabbed me around the shoulders. Before I knew it, I'd been dragged inside with a hand over my mouth.

The hand was determined to keep me quiet. I twisted to catch sight of my assailant, and stopped struggling. To my immense relief, it was only Derringer.

"Getcha paws off me, pal," I grunted, shrugging free. "You hear what he said? He's got Marilyn and --"

"I heard. You'll think of something, I'm sure." Derringer smiled at me, then nodded out at the roof.

"You're in your element, you know."

"What?" I took a deep breath and adjusted my coat without realizing I was doing it, then grasped what he meant. I'd already noted the irony back in the lift. "Yeah, Hitchcock would've loved it."

"Except I doubt that our enemy will prove, in this case, to be a delightful young French girl." Derringer's shook his head regretfully. "And I'm no John Robie."

That startled me. "You've seen *To Catch A Thief*?"

"A dozen times. One of my favourites. And *White Heat*, *The Big Sleep*, *Key Largo*, all that."

"When? I mean, where? You're from outside the city, aren't you?"

"Sure. In a sense. I saw them on video when I was young." His smile returned. "About five hundred years ago."

I stared at him, and decided he was pulling my leg. "For such an old man, you don't seem too worried about what's going on."

Derringer's eyes drifted back to the roof; the grim set to his face returned. "He won't kill me. I know that much."

"Oh?"

"He can't afford to. Genome analysis is ten times more difficult without a live subject. A carcass would be worse than useless to his employers."

He seemed to mean it. I guess that explained why, of the two of us, he was the one not panicking.

Adding to my long list of woes, my injured finger had started to throb. "And what about Marilyn?"

"That's the problem. I can't stand back and let you two get killed over me. That wouldn't be civilized."

"I'm glad to hear it. Any suggestions?"

"I'm afraid not. Astrograd didn't offer a course in this sort of thing."

Astrograd. That rang a bell, albeit a distant one. At any other time or place I might have pursued the conversation to find out what the hell I was fighting for. And he wanted to talk; I could tell that much. If it wasn't for his lousy sense of timing . . .

He opened his mouth to say something more, but I held up a hand. He'd given me an idea.

"Yes. That's it. You keep on talking, Wal." I fished the phone out of my pocket and gave it to him. "Into this. Head across the roof, towards the lift complex. I'll be about ten yards behind you."

Derringer's eyes twinkled. "You're going to lure him out?"

"Try to. I'll be able to move more freely under the cover of your voice. We'll see what happens if he plays ball. At the very least you'll be giving the Dep all the information he needs to make up his mind."

And me, I added silently to myself. "You're positive he won't kill you?"

"Fairly."

"But not a hundred percent." I gave him the revolver and made sure it was cocked. "Take this, then, and don't be afraid to use it. Just make sure it's him you're firing at, not me."

Before he could protest--and I could tell he was about to--I slipped out of the duct and hurried across the roof. From the vantage point of a labouring air-conditioning stack, I watched as Derringer's head appeared from the duct and looked around.

"Ahem." He cleared his throat nervously and adjusted his shirt to keep out the wind. He stepped out of the niche, paused to gather his breath, and started to talk:

"How old would you say I am?" he began, addressing empty air. "Late forties? Maybe fifty? Well, biologically, you'd be right. But from Earth's point of view, I'm five hundred and twenty-three next month.

Relativistically, four hundred and seventy. Remarkably well-preserved, don't you think?"

He wandered aimlessly towards the centre of the roof, the gun dangling from his left hand as though he didn't know what to do with it. He probably didn't. I followed him at a discrete distance, keeping carefully to the shadows. Part of my mind monitored what he was saying and, although I watched him carefully while the tale unfolded, nothing I saw indicated that he might be lying.

I guess, by that stage, I was the only one on the roof who didn't know.

"It starts in the late Twentieth Century," he went on, "when I was born. Nineteen eighty-six, to be exact. I grew up in Los Angeles, the city on which C20 is loosely based. I studied physics and engineering in college, then applied for a position with NASA, the old space agency, in 2012. The astronaut program was looking for volunteers. To my amazement, I was accepted."

"I flew a few shuttle runs to the Moon and Mars between 2020 and 2028, then received a promotion to the hypersleep corps. I began to train for a new mission, along with eleven other men and women. This time, we weren't going to another planet or another satellite; we were going to the stars."

He casually negotiated a maze of pipes with his eyes seeing times long-gone. "The single-pilot atomic-pulse probes had finally been ratified by the Earth government. Twelve of them were built and tested outside the orbit of Saturn. The pilots came from limited backgrounds: no families, no remaining parents; nothing to leave behind. In fact, my mother was still alive, but had been in a state of dementia for the last ten years so my ties to Earth were negligible.

"On the fourteenth of May, 2047, we left. My target star was Arcturus. The mission portfolio called for me to spend fifty years in cold-sleep, to awake when the probe reached its destination, to perform a year's survey of the system, then to return. One hundred years, more or less, is how long I expected to be away. Certainly no longer."

Something moved above me, and I froze. The black shape of the Bhuto assassin passed overhead, with Marilyn draped over his shoulder, kicking and grunting. Too close for comfort, but too far away for me to do anything, either. I regretted giving the gun to Derringer, although I'd really had no choice. Better to go against the Bhuto with nothing but fists than make an ally a sitting duck. If Sam Spade could do it, I reasoned, then so could I.

Moments later, the Bhuto passed again, and I realised what he was doing: circling Derringer like a hawk, waiting for me to try something. As the spirals narrowed, he could be reasonably certain that I'd either left or gone to ground. When he reached the centre, he'd have Derringer all to himself.

If Derringer realised what was going on, he made no sign. His monologue drifted on.

"The guidance system failed somewhere between Sol and Arcturus. The probe never decelerated, flew right through the system and out the other side. It would have travelled forever, had Kamen's team not found me. When they did, they captured the probe and thawed me from hypersleep. I thought I'd been captured by aliens until they told me what had happened. Even then, I wasn't sure whether to be grateful or not."

He paused to take a breath and look up at the stars. "My world was gone. The culture shock was worse than anything I'd imagined. Five centuries! Even with the Trouble and other setbacks, it was still too long.

They brought me to one of the colonies, and then to Earth, but there was nowhere I found familiar.

Everything had changed so dramatically. I knew I'd never find a place I could call home." He looked back down, and for the first time I felt sorry for him. Standing still in a relatively empty space near the centre of the roof, he looked quite the saddest thing I've ever seen.

The Bhuto had stopped circling. He'd either spotted me or was ready to make his move. I couldn't stay still any longer. Under the cover of Derringer's voice, I followed my earlier route, to my left, at a tangent to the Bhuto's circling path. Five yards ahead, the concrete edifice of the lift complex jutted from the roof, under the cover of which I hoped to get closer to Derringer.

"Eventually, they agreed to send me here," he went on, "to C20, the closest thing to my old home. In exchange for the rights to my genome, they helped me prepare the *savant* and arranged things with the coroner's office, understanding that I wanted to disappear, to return to a normal life as an anonymous citizen. We set you up as a witness, Court--me and Kamen--not expecting you to guess the truth. I'm sorry. We shouldn't have used you like that--but I couldn't stand the pressure. I was afraid of being mobbed when word got out, as it was sure to, eventually. I had to disappear from the records. And my 'suicide' would help Kamen too, I knew, by covering my trail, keeping the competitors at bay just a little longer. Now that they're getting close though, I don't know what to do."

He sat down on a pipe. "If I had it over again, I'd do it differently. If I hadn't got into the probe, and Kamen hadn't come after me, I wouldn't be here now. People wouldn't be in danger because of me. Because of my genome." He laughed bitterly. "And you know? That's the worst thing of all. I can't even call my DNA my own any more. I sold it like I would an old car. They said they wanted it, that's why they'd come to rescue me--and I figured, what the hell? What use was it to me now? Just another clapped-out piece of junk left over from a world that's been dead for years. Dead and gone, like Los Angeles, NASA, and me . . ."

I stopped in my tracks. Suddenly, it clicked. Everything fell into place: the space-junk, the mutant genome, Marilyn's defection, the way all and sundry wanted Wallace Derringer to themselves, and Derringer himself. The pieces of the jigsaw had been right there in front of me, and I'd failed to put them together until the last moment.

What was it he'd he said? *Until they told me what had happened, I thought I'd been captured by aliens . . .*

The realisation was blinding. Had the Bhuto not chosen that moment to make his move, there's no telling what damn-fool thing I might have done.

"Wallace Derringer," boomed a voice above me and to my right, not far from where I'd been hidden a moment ago. "Please put down the weapon and come quietly. I have no wish to harm you." Derringer raised his head. I couldn't see the Bhuto, but obviously he could. "No. I don't belong to you." "Rights of property are not an issue here. I have come to collect you. My employers demand it, and I am honour-bound to comply."

"Crap." Derringer spat noisily onto the concrete floor. "You're a mercenary. Whatever they're paying you, Kamen will double it."

The Bhuto leapt down from the pipe on which he'd been standing. Marilyn still dangled over his shoulder and, judging by the way she struggled, the undignified way in which she'd been handled had done nothing to improve her temper. Neither her weight nor her mute protests seemed to cause him any difficulty, however, as he stepped slowly closer to Derringer.

"I don't have time to bargain," he said, and it was only then that I consciously noted something which had been bugging me for least a minute, just below the threshold of my hearing: the sound of a helicopter, drawing nearer. Bob Tasker had obviously heard Derringer's little speech and called for reinforcements.

Either that, or it was a routine traffic patrol about to get more than it expected.

The Bhuto stopped four yards from Derringer and three from me, the black proton weapon, with its ugly double-muzzle shaped like a plastic pig's snout, held tightly in one hand. His smooth, too-perfect voice hardly changed as he pronounced his ultimatum: "If you don't put down the gun I will shoot Delibes now. This is your final chance."

Derringer stiffened. He let the phone clatter to the floor. I could tell by the cornered look in his eyes that he was about to do something stupid.

Sure enough, the barrel of the revolver twitched, quavered uncertainly, then started to come up. I burst from my hiding place and sprinted at the Bhuto, arms outstretched in a crude football tackle, just like I'd seen on old TV. Anything to distract him--*both* of them. I'd gone a whole step before I realised that something was wrong.

My revolver, in Derringer's hand, was aimed not at the Bhuto, but at Derringer's own head.

Time slowed as I, beyond the point of no return, took the second step. The Bhuto's weapon lifted towards the revolver in Derringer's hand, started to come towards me, then drifted back to its original target. His finger tightened on the trigger as I crashed into his chest for the second time that day. Yellow energy flared from the black muzzle, and all four of us hit the dirt--me, the Bhuto assassin, Marilyn, and Derringer.

Concrete is harder than grass and a thin layer of soil, and the impact stunned me long enough for the Bhuto to get to his feet. When my eyes cleared, he was standing over me like some God of the Underworld, clad entirely in black. In his hand was the weapon. All I could do was stare up at him and the muzzle of the gun.

Then, with a roar of blades and tormented air, the helicopter rose above the lip of the building, strafing the roof with a searchlight. The Bhuto turned from the hip to face it, taken by surprise. I thought for a moment that I was saved--but he just raised the weapon and fired it at the chopper. The shot missed, but came close enough to give the pilot second thoughts. Tipping at an awkward angle, the chopper ducked away, leaving me alone with my nemesis.

The game was up, and the Bhuto knew it. There was no way, now, that the police were going to let him out of the building alive. Not after he had fired at them. But he had time for one last gesture of defiance before going down, like any proper bad guy. The gun looked into my eyes and I swore that, no matter

how badly I had failed at being a PI, I wouldn't blink.

"You fool," he spat. "This was none of your business. It didn't have to end this way."

I wasn't in the mood for arguing so I just lay there, with the cold concrete under my back and sixty-seven floors of apartments between me and the ground. Something warm trickled across my fingertips. Part of me reckoned it felt like blood, but couldn't know for certain unless I looked. And so it wasn't my own, what did it matter? If it wasn't mine now, it soon would be. Or maybe he'd already shot me while my mind wandered, and I simply hadn't caught up yet. Either way, I knew I was as good as dead.

But the Bhuto was right, and I was wrong. It didn't have to end that way. Not quite.

Something small and white flashed across his exposed chin, connecting with a heavy crunch of teeth and bone. I hardly noticed the arm attached to it as the Bhuto staggered backwards a step and fell to his knees. So intent had he and I been on our little tableau that neither of us had seen it coming.

Not daring to believe what was happening I watched, stunned, as Marilyn drew back for another swing--and dropped the Bhuto cold with her second blow.

"Take *that*, you sonofabitch," she gasped, her mouth raw from where the makeshift gag had rubbed her skin. "Use me for a hostage, will you? God *damn* you!"

I clambered to my feet and stopped her from kicking him. The Bhuto rolled onto his side, dead to the world, as I took her in my arms. She resisted my embrace for a moment, then clutched at me, tight. Her fury gradually became sobs.

"Jesus, Court," she gasped. "I thought you were going to get us all *killed*."

I patted her head and held her close. "If it's any consolation, sweetheart, so did I." Mixed with amazement at the strength of her blow was a certain jealousy: knocking out the bad guy with a blow to the jaw was supposed to be *my* job, not hers. But it had been done, and that was the main thing.

Someone moaned from behind her, and I pushed her aside, thinking the Bhuto had awoken. But he hadn't: it was Derringer. When I noticed the pool of blood he was lying in, the same pool I had been lying in moments ago, I hurried to his side.

"Wal?" I touched his sweat-sheened face. "Wal? Are you okay?"

"My shoulder." He tried to move, but the pain made him fall back with a grunt.

I bent to check the wound. An ugly hole marked where the assassin's weapon had struck. Raw flesh bled profusely where heat hadn't instantly cauterized it. In my mind's eye I saw the gun flash as I knocked the assassin to the ground: the Bhuto had been aiming at the gun, but I had knocked him off-target. "This is my stupid fault, Wal. I'm sorry."

"No." He clutched for my hand, and gripped it tight. "You tried to save me--might even have succeeded . . ." He gasped and closed his eyes.

"What do you mean, 'might'?" I protested. "You're not going to die. You've got heaps to get on with. You're going to be the biggest celebrity ever when word gets out."

He grimaced. "Great."

"You *can't* die," I repeated as Marilyn joined me at my side. "Not after everything you've been through. All your training, the probe, the hypersleep . . ."

He opened one eye and stared at me. "Do you know what . . . that means?"

"Finally. You left Earth in 2047, before the viruses and the Trouble. You're --"

"Human . . . yes." Derringer smiled slightly. Behind the smile lay an enduring grief, which was worse in its way than any physical pain. "The last pure-blood human left in the universe . . ."

His face sagged as I lowered his head gently onto my lap, and again I was struck by his resemblance to actors in old films. Not just skin-deep, but right through to the bones. In my arms lay the one person in C20 who wasn't hiding a caste-form behind biocosmetics, the one true citizen we all tried to emulate. The rattle of the chopper rose cautiously above the level of the roof and a voice warned us not to move. I felt Marilyn's arms encircle my waist. Her cheek pressed into my neck and I could tell that she was crying again.

"Top o' the world, Ma," Derringer whispered, and passed out.

"That's not quite true," Marilyn added, two days later. We were having dinner together in Mario's,

nursing one dislocated knuckle, one missing fingernail, one sprained back and an assortment of bruises between the two of us.

"What do you mean, precious?"

"The 'last human left in the universe' business. Only nine of the old star-probes returned to Earth, not counting Wallace's. That means there are still two left out there, somewhere." She scowled prettily. "And don't call me 'precious'. You know I hate it."

I mulled this over while I chewed on a mouthful of pasta.

Wallace Derringer had disappeared again. After the chopper had picked us up and whisked him away for emergency surgery, Marilyn and I had gone back to my place to hit the hay, confident in the knowledge that he was in the best hands. When we tried to contact him in hospital the next morning, however, we were told politely but firmly that he had gone elsewhere. Kamen's team in Clarkesville denied knowing where he was, when asked, but I had my doubts.

Marilyn suspected he was undergoing facial reconstruction to avoid being recognised when the news broke, which made sense. It wasn't the authorities or the papers that worried him, though. It was the general public. Who knew how they'd react when they learned that the Human Ideal had returned to them, only to kill himself on a freeway in C20, as the official story still went? If someone saw him walking the streets, alive . . .

Maybe that was why Kamen and Subsidiaries had put me on a retainer: to act as a bodyguard when Derringer officially returned from the dead. I made a mental note to contact the Zealot soon, to find out where he'd got to. The sooner I started, I figured, the better, if only for my curiosity's sake. All I had to do was find a way to explain the loss of the light-cloak, and I could begin.

Meanwhile, the analysis of his genome continued. It wouldn't take long, with Marilyn working on it, to survey the differences between the Ideal and the various caste-forms abounding in human society. The difficulty lay in what those differences meant. Even after hundreds of years of research, the genetic sequence held more mysteries than ever.

Only when the analysis was complete and made public would the arguments begin over what to do with it. A new plague of transgenic viruses to reverse the Trouble certainly wasn't impossible, as Marilyn had said, although unlikely. More probable was the reintroduction of Derringer's ancient stock into the genepool, just to see what happened. A new caste, as it were. Especially if there were others like him out there somewhere. Either way, the big picture was going to change.

On a more personal level, with the Bhuto behind bars, Wallace presumably safe, and Marilyn and I restored to our usual differences in routine, life looked pretty good.

"He's sterile, you know."

I looked up from my meal in surprise. Marilyn's statement echoed my earlier thoughts with uncanny accuracy. "Who, Wal?"

"Who else?"

"That's a shame," I said, imagining the consternation of his minders. All those years in the probe, I guessed, being battered by cosmic rays, must have had some effect on him. How would Kamen ever learn if he could breed true without a measure of healthy sperm? Unless . . .

"What about the *savant*?"

"That was the main reason they grew it, Court. Only later did they decide to use it to help Wallace escape. For a month before, they extracted samples."

"And now they're looking for surrogates?"

"Yes." She avoided my eyes, and I knew that whatever it was she'd been hiding was about to come out.

"Court, I'm thinking of applying."

I gaped at her, stunned. "You're what?"

"Why not? I'm a woman, *and* an employee of Kamen & Subsidiaries. There's nothing stopping me."

"Jesus." I put down my spoon, all appetite--and anachronisms--gone.

"Please, Court, don't get upset. It's just a thought, a possibility I can't ignore: to raise the first human child in half a millennium. Think about it, at least."

"But . . ." *What about us?* I wanted to ask, but stopped myself in time. This didn't have to affect our

relationship at all, and from her point of view it certainly wouldn't. In her vision of the Twentieth Century, surrogate gestations in living or artificial wombs were not uncommon occurrences. It was only my habit of mind--that of a PI from the 1940s--that felt threatened by the thought.

Besides, I reasoned, it wouldn't be Derringer's child. Not emotionally. I asked myself how it would feel to *father* the first truly human child in five hundred years . . . And she'd asked me first. That counted for something, surely?

As we left the restaurant and headed out into the city that might have been Los Angeles or any other big, American metropolis *circa* 1980, but wasn't, I couldn't help wondering what Derringer thought of it. How did the only survivor of the time my world had tried to recreate regard the illusion? I realised for the first time that not once had he said what he thought. Nor had he expressed any sadness at the demise of his world--just regret. Which, I figured, was a far more sensible emotion, and one I tried to emulate.

The Perfect Gun, as the song says, *is not in the habit of saluting the dead*.

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