

THE DEMON TRAP

Peter F. Hamilton

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Prolific British writer Peter F. Hamilton has sold to Inter-zone, In Dreams, New Worlds, Fears, and elsewhere. He sold his first novel, Mindstar Rising, in 1993, and quickly followed it up with two sequels, A Quantum Murder and The Nano Flower. Hamilton’s first three books didn’t attract a great deal of attention on this side of the Atlantic, at least, but that changed dramatically with the publication of his next novel, The Reality Dysfunction, a huge modern Space Opera (it needed to be divided into two volumes for publication in the United States) that was itself only the start of a projected trilogy of staggering size and scope, the Night’s Dawn trilogy, with the first volume followed by others of equal heft and ambition (and also raced up genre best-seller lists), The Neutronium Alchemist and The Naked God. The Night’s Dawn trilogy put Hamilton on the map as one of the major players in the expanding subgenre of the New Space Opera, along with writers such as Iain Banks, Dan Simmons, Paul McAuley, Gregory Benford, Alastair Reynolds, and others; it was successful enough that a regular SF publisher later issued Hamilton’s reference guide to the complex universe of the trilogy, The Confederation Handbook, the kind of thing that’s usually done as a small-press title, if it’s done at all. Hamilton’s other books include the novels Misspent Youth, Fallen Dragon, Pandora’s Star; a collection, A Second Chance at Eden; and a novella chapbook, Watching Trees Grow. His most recent book is a new novel, Judas Unchained. Coming up is a new collection, The Dreaming Void.

Here he takes us to the fabulous Confederation universe, to a place where you can take a commuter train to the stars, for a tense investigation of an act of terrorism whose ultimate implications turn out to be very far-reaching indeed.

[VERSION HISTORY]

v1.0 by the N.E.R.D's. Page numbers removed, paragraphs joined, formatted and spell checked. A full read through is required.

v1.1 by the N.E.R.D's. A full read through has been completed.

WHAT HAPPENED

Nova Zealand was the world chosen for the massacre for exactly the same reason that the party of youthful Dynasty members had chosen it as their funtime holiday destination. It barely qualified as H-congruous, capable of supporting human habitation; but that bad geophysics gave it some astonishing scenery that simply begged to be exploited by extreme sports enthusiasts. There was a small population without any real industrial base; its commerce was the leisure industry. Yet in case of a genuine emergency, the Intersolar Commonwealth with all its fabulous medical and technical resources was only a single fast train ride away.

The trains came in at Compression Space Transport’s planetary station on the north side of the capital, Ridgeview (population 43,000). They arrived through a wormhole that provided a direct link back to

EdenBurg, an industrial planet, owned by the Halgarth Dynasty, and one of the major junctions in CST's interstellar transport monopoly. None of the trains went any farther than the station; Nova Zealand didn't have the kind of road and rail network common to most Commonwealth worlds. All medium- and long-distance travel was by plane.

It was midmorning when the train from Hifornia pulled in at the station. The first three carriages were for passengers, while the last two were vehicle carriers. Once it drew to a halt, large metal doors on the vehicle carriages retracted and ramps extended out from the platform. The sound of highly tuned engines firing up was unusual enough to turn the heads of the ordinary passengers as they disembarked. Five customized cars growled their way out onto the ramp. The first was a glowing orange Jaguar roadster, with faint blue flames stuttering out of its exhaust pipes as the engine revved. With a final roar of power, it sped off the bottom of the ramp with a showy wheel spin. Second was a silver Cadillac that was half bonnet, with front scimitar fins and a rear variable-camber spoiler; then came an eight-wheeled stretch limo; followed by a hundred-year-old V-class Mercedes; and finally, a brutish Lexus AT PowerSport, hydroskis retracted against its burnished gold sides.

The convoy raced off out of the station, a show of casual affluence and arrogance that brought grimaces of contempt from those watching. After a discrete minute, the rest of the party's vehicles slid quietly out of the carriage; seven long luxury vans that carried the necessary domestic staff and assistants, along with luggage and sports equipment. The Dynasty members never traveled without their home comforts close by.

Ridgeview's airport was five miles from the planetary station, a disappointingly short journey for the owners of the custom cars, hardly far enough for them to jostle and race along the road. They drove over to the waiting Siddeley-Lockheed CP-450, a subsonic cargo/passenger combi plane operated by a local tour company. Inside the vast cargo hold, electromuscle dampers curved out of the floor to secure the fancy cars. Doors opened, and the brash young things sauntered out, filling the air with overloud taunts and calls to each other. Their girlfriends accompanied them, tall slender beauties, terribly young to be dressed in such sensual couture. Stewardesses smiled impassively at the braying sexual harassment they were casually subjected to, and showed their haughty passengers to the upper deck's Imperial Cabin.

The vans purred smoothly into the plane. Staff found their seats in the mid-deck lounge. Within ten minutes, the big rear doors swung shut and the plane taxied onto the runway.

Ridgeview air traffic control cleared them for takeoff to Nova Zealand's arctic continent. It was a nine-hour flight that would take them to the notorious Fire Plain, a hundred-kilometer circle of wet swamps just short of the pole itself, whose abnormal climate was created by a ring wall of active volcanoes. Visitors to the resort could watch glowing lava flowing into the constricting cliff of the polar glacier, spurting out phenomenal jets of superheated steam all the way up to the ionosphere, while down in the weird wetlands of giant ferns, huge dangerous creatures left over from an earlier geological era wallowed in the mud and ate anything that moved.

The Siddeley-Lockheed CP-450 rose into the air, folding its undercarriage away neatly. It curved toward the north through a clear azure sky, bright blue-white sunlight shining on its green fuselage. Below it, the harsh scrub desert fell away to the sea in long rumpled folds and sharp ravines.

Five minutes after takeoff, the plane was climbing through ten thousand feet as the pilot watched the flight management array throttle the duct fans back to cruise power, at which point one of the Dynasty heirs decided it was time to renew his membership of the mile-high club. It wasn't in his nature to retire discreetly to the washroom. The rest of the party gathered round his reclining couch to cheer as his obedient girlfriend stripped off. Scandalized stewardesses peeked from the galley, trying not to giggle.

A red star alert flared in the pilot's virtual vision. The plane's array was issuing a proximity alarm. It took the pilot a shocked couple of seconds to analyze the data that the radar was presenting him with. An object barely a meter long was streaking toward them at mach five. Disbelief froze him for another second as he struggled to admit that he was seeing a missile. He managed to yell: "Mayday!" into the open channel as he slammed his hands down onto the manual control pads. For someone who hadn't physically flown a plane for over two decades, he managed his evasion maneuver remarkably well, ramming on the power and initiating a steep dive. It delayed impact by a good *three* seconds, long enough for everyone on board to realize that something was disastrously wrong.

The missile struck the fuselage just below the port wing root. Not even modern superstrength materials could withstand the blast. The wing was ripped off, sending the fuselage into a fast spin. It began to disintegrate immediately, scattering fragments and bodies as it plummeted out of the sky.

Before the first pieces even hit the ground, a shotgun message entered the Unisphere, attempting to infiltrate the address stores of every person who had an access code—about ninety-live percent of the human race. The carrier format was new enough to avoid the majority of commercial sentinels, though the Unisphere's node management programs soon adapted to the intruder and blocked its progress. Before that happened, it managed to reach several billion people who were annoyed to find the small file slipping into their stores. Most were unisphere-savvy enough to have their e-butlers delete the pest. Those that did open it were shown a simple text.

The Free Merioneth Forces announce the eradication of more Dynasty parasites. Our team on Nova Zealand have today successfully struck against our oppressors. Until our planet is liberated from the financial bonds that the Dynasty leaders have shackled it with, our campaign will continue.

We urge all Dynasty members to exert your influence and compel your leaders negotiate with our government. Failure to comply with our requests for freedom and dignity will result in the further elimination of your worthless kind. We will no longer tolerate our taxes being spent to uphold your decadent lifestyle.

Senior investigator Paula Myo's e-butler deleted the shotgun as soon as it reached her Unisphere interface; it was the newest adaptive version with a real-time update facility to the Serious Crimes Directorate RI, so it knew what it was dealing with. At the time, she was trying to be polite with the decorator who was gazing around the lounge of her new apartment, shaking his head as if he'd been confronted with restoring the Sistine Chapel.

"Next month?" he suggested with a typical Gallic shrug.

Paula was only surprised that he wasn't wearing a beret and smoking a cigarette; he'd certainly polished the rest of the Parisian indifference routine to stereotype perfection. "That's fine." She'd been in the apartment a week, and even she acknowledged it needed sprucing up. It wasn't much: bathroom, bedroom, and a lounge with a tiny kitchen alcove. The building was a typical Paris block, centuries-old, with a pleasant central courtyard. She really didn't care about the aesthetics. All that counted was its proximity to the office.

"What color scheme?" he inquired.

"Oh... whatever: white."

"White?" From his blatant dismay she must have deliberately insulted his French ancestry all the way back to the royal era.

“Yes.” A priority communication icon popped up into her virtual vision. She touched it with a virtual hand she’d customized to a red skeletal outline; her physical fingers twitched in mimicry as parallel nerve impulses ran along the organic circuitry tattoos on her wrist.

“Grade one case coming in,” Christabel Agatha Halgarth said. “The Director wants us on it immediately.”

“On my way in,” Paula replied.

“No, don’t. I’m going for a car now; I’ll pick you up. Three minutes.”

“All right, transfer the case files over.” Paula dismissed the decorator. Perhaps it was because of her carefully controlled mix of Filipino and European genes, which had given her such a delightful face that he assumed he could bluster and intimidate as he usually did with single female clients. The stare she gave him froze the protest after just a couple of words. He nodded compliance and retreated, counting himself lucky she hadn’t actually said anything.

Paula pulled on a gray suit jacket and picked up her small shoulder bag, moving instinctively as the files from the Directorate slipped into her virtual vision. She read the scant details on the plane crash as she hurried down the worn stone stairs to the courtyard below.

One of the Directorate’s dark sedans pulled up outside the block’s main entrance. The gull wing door pivoted forward, and Paula got in. Christabel was sitting on the rear bench, a brunette with an Asian ancestry a lot stronger than Paula’s clinic-manufactured heritage. She was Paula’s deputy; they’d known each other since their training academy days.

“Wow, you look great,” Christabel enthused. “Positively jailbait. I’d forgotten how pretty you are when you’re young. You shouldn’t wait so long between rejuvenations.”

“I can’t spare the time,” Paula said automatically. Her hand went up to sweep her raven hair away from her face. With rejuvenation returning her biological age to late adolescence, her hair had grown very thick again. Every time, she was tempted to have it trimmed to a shorter style. But this fitted her, along with the simple-cut business suit and plain black shoes she always wore to work, defining what she was. It was as much her identity as her modified genes.

“Welcome back,” Christabel said with a knowing smile. “How are your inserts settling in?”

Paula held up a hand, flexing the fingers. The OCTattoos were invisible against her skin. It was still a relatively new technology, with development houses finding new applications each year. The ones she’d had before rejuvenation were a lot cruder; they’d been eradicated by her treatment, so the last week had been spent at a Directorate facility augmenting her body with the new generation of insert gadgets.

“A couple of glitches left. I’m due a final formatting session on Saturday. Things have come a long way since I had my last installation.”

Christabel held up her own hand. Threads of intense blue light appeared, pulsing along her fingers. “You didn’t fancy the latest versions then? Function and fashion combined. Not bad, huh? I paid for the customization myself. I can get you a good deal if you like. I’ve still got contacts in my Dynasty.”

Paula gave the glowing strands a curt look. “No thank you.”

Christabel laughed.

“We don’t seem to have much on the Free Merioneth Forces,” Paula said as she continued to open case files.

“No. They’re relatively new. Emerged while you were in rejuvenation. This is their fourth strike in five months. Very effective. We haven’t arrested anyone yet.”

* * * * *

The Directorate sedan drove across Paris to the huge CST station, where it boarded a trans-Earth loop train, taking it through a series of wormholes linking the old world’s major cities. From Paris, the loop led to Madrid, then London, before crossing the Atlantic to New York; four more stops, and twenty minutes later, the train pulled in at the massive LA galactic station, where they drove over to the Intersolar terminal and onto a direct train to EdenBurg.

Eighty minutes after Paula got into the sedan, it was driving off a vehicle carriage at the same platform that the Dynasty party had used less than three hours earlier. The car’s array took them around the Ridgeview ring road, and out across the scrub desert to the north. Paula watched in surprise as a group of wild camels sauntered across the hard-packed sands. They’d been gene-modified to digest the local cacti-equivalent vegetation, but even so it was a harsh environment. After five miles, the track vanished, and the suspension rose up to cope with the rocky ground.

“Hope you brought a hat,” Christabel said. She was squinting out the window at the blazing noon sun. Ridgeview was about as far south as the planet’s climate would allow. After another couple of hundred miles the scrub desert gave way to true desolation. Nova Zealand’s entire equatorial zone was bare rock, baked by the intense blue-white star; the heat even repelled clouds, leaving the land in a permanent shadowless summer where the daily air temperature rose far above boiling point.

The crash site perimeter was still being established by the local police. Wreckage had so far been spotted over seven square miles. The Directorate car delivered them to a cluster of police vehicles parked together above a wide sandy gully. Helicopters droned slowly through the clear sky above.

Paula reluctantly dug a wide-brimmed hat from her little bag. The door opened, and she immediately held her breath as oppressively hot air swept in.

“Hellfire,” Christabel groaned. “Literally.”

They climbed out. Paula put on a pair of sunglasses that opaqued up to their highest level. Then she took her jacket off, feeling sweat prickle her bare arms. The arid desert air was burning its way down her throat, drying her sinuses.

“Wouldn’t do that if I was you,” a man told them. He was dressed in a loose Arabic-style robe with a deep white hood. “Detective Captain Aidan Winkal,” he said as he offered his hand.

“Paula Myo.”

“I’ve heard of you, Investigator. But seriously, if you haven’t put on screening membrane, five minutes’ exposure in this sunlight will burn your skin down to the bone.”

“Okay.” She put the jacket back on.

“Come on, I’ve got our mobile situation office set up.”

It was a big old van with the Ridgeview police logo emblazoned on the side. Five tall heat-dump fins sprouted out of the roof, glowing a faint rose-pink. Inside, the air was thankfully cool. A bench table down one side was cluttered with various desktop arrays operated by Winkal’s colleagues. Screens and small holographic portals relayed various images from the helicopters and jeeps covering the site.

“What procedures are you following?” Paula asked.

Aidan Winkal had pulled his hood back to reveal a weathered face with silver-fox hair cut short. He appeared hesitant. “Look, we’re not exactly used to this kind of thing, you know.”

“We’re not here to criticize,” Paula assured him. “We both want the same thing, to catch the people responsible. The Directorate will assume responsibility for tracking down the group that did this. But site control and recovery is all yours. Now tell me what you’re doing, and we’ll be happy to provide advice.”

“Okay, thanks. We’re trying to map the debris area. The larger sections of fuselage are easy enough to find, and so far we’ve picked up thirty-seven personal emergency beacons. My squads are escorting medical teams out to them. The bodies we’ve located so far... they’re not intact, you know.”

“I understand. However, their memorycells should be able to survive the impact. They’re designed to withstand a lot worse than this.”

“Sure.”

“We have a Directorate forensic team en route. Some of their sensor systems will be able to help your search. I’ll assign them as soon as we’ve identified and recovered the missile. Have you located the launch site yet?”

“No. I’m concentrating on the crash, finding those poor people. We’re still trying to build a full passenger list.”

“Fair enough. Christabel and I will work out where it was fired from. I’ll need complete access to the plane’s memory. Have you found it yet?”

“Yes. It never lost contact with the Unisphere. We know where it is, but we haven’t actually collected it yet. I encrypted the channel and restricted access.”

“Good. I’d also like to see the CST station closed to both inbound and outbound trains. We can do without the reporters who are undoubtedly on their way. Secondly, there’s a chance the team that fired the missile is still on the planet. If so, I’d like them confined here.”

“I, er, don’t really have that authority. I don’t even think our prime minister does.”

“I’ll contact my chief right away. But you’ll need to post some officers at the station. It might turn ugly once the trains stop running.”

“Okay.”

* * * * *

Paula and Christabel claimed a couple of fold-out chairs at the rear of the van, and got Aidan to open the restricted channel to the plane’s memory. Using the radar data to backtrack the missile’s trajectory was easy enough; it had come from a point approximately a quarter mile from the coast, five miles outside Kidgeview.

“Wouldn’t take long to get to the city ring road from there,” Christabel exclaimed as she reviewed a local map in her virtual vision.

“Pull Ridgeview’s traffic management records,” Paula told her. “Find out what vehicles if any joined the road from outside this morning. I’ll also want the air traffic records scrutinizing. They might have flown

out.”

“Right away.”

“What kind of orbital surveillance have you got here?” Paula asked Aidan.

“Eight low orbit satellites for geophysical observation,” he told her. “The resolution isn’t good. You could see the Siddeley-Lockheed, and most houses; but a car would be hard to make out, and individual people are too small.”

“Okay. We’ll see what kind of images the Directorate RI can pull out of the raw data. Right now, we need to get out to the launch site. This sun is degrading our evidence by the minute. Can you give me a helicopter, please?”

* * * * *

The Directorate forensic team arrived in time to join them on the helicopter. Aidan Winkal also elected to come with them. As the coast slipped into view through the cabin window, he shook his head in bemusement. “I just got word from the station,” he called above the rotor noise. “CST has suspended the train service to EdenBurg. Your Directorate has a lot of clout.”

“Three of the holiday party were Sheldon Dynasty members,” Paula said. “That’ll speed things up a little.”

Aidan nodded in understanding.

Christabel leaned in close to Paula. “I give it ten minutes before *someone’s* here to help.”

Paula gazed down at the coastline. “You think it will be that long?”

“I’ve already had two calls from the Halgarth security office. Any assistance we need—”

They circled the zone Paula had identified, seeing nothing but shingle and rock. A scan from the helicopter’s radar didn’t add anything. Paula’s optical inserts were giving her an infrared picture. Every surface was radiant with heat as it basked in the fierce sunlight. “Anything?” she asked Nalcol, the forensics officer who was with them. He was sitting next to the open side door, aiming a specialist array at the ground.

“A spectral of an unusual airborne carbon residual. Could be the launch booster. Don’t know for sure. But we’ll need to land clear. I don’t want the downwash to screw up evidence.”

The pilot put them down three hundred yards away.

Paula, Christabel, and Aidan followed Nalcol and his assistant toward the area where the carbon residue had spread. The forensic people were sweeping their arrays at everything as they went. A little pack of bots crawled along beside them, like foot-long caterpillars with thin antenna strands stroking the ground as they went.

“No sign of any vehicle tracks,” Christabel said.

“Tough to see on this terrain,” Paula said. Her toe nudged some of the flat shingle. “If Nalcol confirms this as the launch point, we’ll seal it off and bring in the rest of the team.”

“This is going to be a tough one,” Christabel said, shielding her eyes as she scanned the gray-blue sea. The land sloped down toward it like a giant beach. “They didn’t leave much for us.”

“Actually, this isolation helps us a great deal,” Paula said. “When we get back to Paris, I want you to put together a team to track down who knew the Dynasty members had booked their holiday here. Get a profile on everyone from the Fire Plain resort staff through the tour company they use, and, most important, the entourage. I want to know if any of them have left recently. Then there’s the girlfriends, one-night stands, other friends—their families, connections. It’ll be a big list, but finite. Cross-reference for any connection to Merioneth.”

Christabel let out a soft whistle. “I’ll assign Basker to lead it. He’s good at data analysis.”

“Fine.” A sound made Paula look up, pushing back her wide hat. “Oh, hello.”

A small black helicopter was approaching the launch zone, flying low and fast.

“That’s not one of ours,” Aidan said in annoyance. “How did it get flight clearance? This is a designated restricted zone.”

Paula held back on her smile. The poor police captain sounded quite indignant. “A word of advice, Captain,” she said as the new helicopter landed beside theirs. “This is where you get to play with the big boys. If you haven’t done this before, don’t try to claim jurisdiction on any aspect of this investigation. You really do have to work with them.”

“Uh huh,” Aiden spat onto the stones. “And if I don’t?”

“Your career is over. It’s not blatant, but it is effective. If you *really* annoy them, then you won’t have much of a life after your next few rejuvenations either.”

“And you just let them walk all over your investigations, do you?”

“No,” Paula said. “There are boundaries, and, with me, they know where they stand. But I’ve spent decades building that political coverage. You haven’t.”

A man climbed down out of the helicopter as the blades slowed. He was dressed in a robe similar to the one Aidan wore, except he was like the captain’s younger, smarter, richer brother.

“Nelson Sheldon,” Christabel muttered. “Impressive. Third generation down from Nigel himself.”

Paula nodded appreciatively. Nelson was one of the five deputy managers of the Sheldon Dynasty security service, heading up the external threat division. She’d met him on three Directorate cases when their respective interests overlapped; each time, he’d been the total professional, and very diplomatic. Rumor had it that he’d be chief within fifty years.

“Captain,” Nelson said politely, and offered his hand to Aidan. “I apologize for the interruption, but as you can imagine, my family is deeply distressed by this appalling attack on our members. I’m here to offer whatever support you need, practical or political.”

There was a moment of hesitation. Then Aidan shook the proffered hand. “Understood,” he said. “All of it.”

“Ah,” Nelson smiled. “The ladies have been telling tales about me. Christabel, nice to see you again. Paula, you look amazing. You’ll have to tell me which clinic you use to rejuvenate in.”

“Sorry about your people,” Paula said.

“Thank you.” Nelson’s expression hardened. “They’ll be relieved, of course. Everyone on the plane will

be, no matter what their insurance status. We owe them that much.”

“We’d appreciate a complete list of passengers,” Aidan said. “I need to know the full makeup of the entourage to help recovery.”

“You’ve got it. I’ll liaise with the other Dynasties for you.”

The four of them stood together, watching the methodical movements of the forensic duo and the pack of specialist bots.

“So what’s the story with your three?” Paula asked. “Anyone special?”

“Hell no,” Nelson said. “They’re fifth and sixth generation. Standard-issue brats who were busy pissing away their trust funds. Never done a day’s work in their lives. Honestly, the new generations are a real disaster area. As far as I know, it was the same for the Brandt boy and the Mandela. There was nothing important about them other than that they’re Dynasty and goddamn easy targets.”

“They were important in terms of propaganda for Free Merioneth,” Christabel said.

“Yeah. All this crap about their taxes paying for little tits like our useless descendants is hitting a nerve. You know how financially integrated the Commonwealth planets are. It costs a frigging fortune just to begin settlement these days, and as for building up a decent technoindustrial infrastructure, well... Any planet starting up today is looking to be paying off those costs for the next two and a half centuries-minimum.”

“And the Dynasties control the finance houses,” Paula observed.

“Along with Earth’s Grand Families,” Nelson said in a defensive tone. “They haven’t been targeted, please note. Not yet, anyway.”

“So the start-up costs go back to you, along with interest payments.”

“That’s the way the universe works, Investigator.”

“I can see the emotive force behind targeting the young Dynasty members. We’ve all seen their antics, or accessed Unisphere reports on it. There’s not a lot of sympathy out there for them.”

“The rich never have any sympathy,” Nelson said. “I can live with that. But it doesn’t mean you can go around slaughtering them—us!—to advance your political goal. In any case, there were only five Dynasty members on that plane, out of a hundred and thirty people.”

“I wasn’t agreeing with them,” Paula said. “I’m just trying to understand the motivation.”

“I’d have said it was justification, not motivation,” Aidan said. They all turned to look at him. He shrugged. “Everyone knows they’re not going to win, right? Government does not negotiate with terrorists. That’s been public policy number one since before people ever left Earth. It’s not going to change now. So this is just an excuse to give your psychosis full head. Serial killing taken to the next level.”

“Could be,” Paula said cautiously. Something about the case was bothering her. As Aidan said, the motivation wasn’t quite right. But as to the result of Free Merioneth’s actions, there was no mistake. Their criminality was her primary concern. Her motivation. Which was unbreakable. Her mind-set was aligned through psychoneural profiling, a genetic science comprehensively banned throughout the Commonwealth. The resolution of justice was built into her genes, along with a few other little traits like

obsessive-compulsive behavior, which people were extremely uncomfortable with. Paula wasn't. She'd always been perfectly content with what she was. She also quite enjoyed the irony of being a senior Commonwealth law enforcement officer, while technically being illegal on every planet except one—her birthworld, Huxley's Haven, or as the rest of the Commonwealth called it: the Hive.

"Found something," Nalcol called. He was kneeling beside a tough-looking wizened bush cactus, touching the ground with peripheral sensors on his array. Three of the bots were stationary next to the plant's stem, probing its leathery skin. "Could be a urine patch," he said as they gathered around. "Someone from the missile team probably relieved themselves." He pushed a long transparent probe deeper, collecting samples in its spoon-shaped tip.

"Are you certain?" Paula couldn't see any hint of moisture in the crumbly ocher soil. *But then, why send a human out here when a bot is perfectly capable of firing a missile?*

"This goddamned sun," Nalcol complained. "It's evaporating the fluid rapidly, which is how we detected it. The effervescence cloud is distinct to our sensors. But it doesn't leave much to work with." Various graphic displays danced across the array's little screen. "Yep, here we go. Viable DNA. I can get you a positive fingerprint from this."

"Thanks," Christabel said. "What about the missile exhaust?"

"Definite. It's an oxidized carbon trace, with aluminum and several other accelerant compounds."

"What type?"

"All I can tell you is: very crude. No one reported seeing a chemical exhaust, not at altitude, so I'm guessing it incorporated a basic hyperram: an intake nozzle that compresses air, which is then heated with electron injection or high-frequency induction before squirting that hot air out the back like a rocket exhaust. But you need a booster to get it up to operational speed to start with. Solid chemicals are a primitive but effective method of initial acceleration. Nobody builds that kind of thing anymore. At least, not the commercial armament companies."

"You mean it was homemade?" Nelson asked.

"Probably. Most of the components you'd need are widely available. It just needs a bit of skill to put them together."

"That would take some organization."

"Fanatics do that well," Paula said. "But surely a beam weapon would be more effective, and completely untraceable? Every planet in the Commonwealth produces them."

Nalcol stared up into the hot sky. "Not for this range. That kind of power rating is more specialist. Easier to trace."

"What did the earlier attacks use?" Aidan asked.

"The first two were booby-trapped cars, with standard augmented explosives," Nelson said. "The third was arson in a block of flats in Leithpool, with the fire escapes sabotaged. That killed twenty-three—and only three were Dynasty."

"Two of whom were Halgarths," Christabel said. "The Merioneth team have moved up a level with this."

"This wasn't a team," Paula said. She was looking down-slope to the small waves washing ashore. "You

only need one person to launch a missile like this. That gives minimum exposure to the rest of the organization. It's also easier for one person to get out. Aidan, how far are we from Ridgeview by sea?"

He gestured at a distant headland. "About seven miles to the docks. There are some marinas closer, though."

"The terrain between here and the ring road is bad," Paula said. "Even if you were on a dirt bike it would take too long, and there's too much that could go wrong. Fall off, puncture, whatever. Let's pull up the satellite imagery and check for a boat."

* * * * *

The helicopters took them back to the police situation van. Paula sent Nalcol on to Ridgeview. "If we find a boat, I want samples from it," she told him.

Christabel sat down in front of a spare desktop array as soon as they were back inside the van and started to call up the satellite images. Paula stood at the back, watching her.

"She's good at this," she told Nelson as she pulled her hat off and dabbed at the sweat on her brow. Her hair was hanging limp against her brow and cheeks. Nelson handed her a cup of water from the cooler tower. They both sipped eagerly as Christabel began flicking through images, muttering instructions to the Directorate's RI. "Thank you for shutting down the station," Paula said quietly.

"The least we could do."

"I do require the suspect to stand trial. That means no Unfortunate accidents. I will not permit that."

Nelson was watching one of the screens showing two medics leaning over a bloody chunk of gore, inserting surgical tools. "The Sheldon Dynasty has every confidence in you, Paula. That's official. But the perpetrators must be removed from society. The Dynasty will not have its members picked off in this fashion; ideologues must be made to understand that."

"It will happen. However, I will only be going after the team responsible for the actual attacks. Unless we discover complicity or a funding link with their political wing, the rest of the movement will remain untouched by the Directorate. They have a right to free speech no matter how unpleasant their views."

"I am aware of article one in the constitution, thank you. Nigel helped draft it. Leave the politicians to us."

"I still don't understand the point of it," Paula said. "Merioneth is barely self-sufficient. They need continuing investment. They must know that."

"Ideologues aren't rational people."

"A convenient label for us. But--"

"Got a boat!" Christabel shouted out. Everyone in the van craned for a look at her screens. The satellite image wasn't good. It showed the coast next to the launch site, land and sea dividing the screen in half. A small clump of gray pixels formed a blob in the center. "Time code checks," Christabel said. "This is fifteen minutes prior to the crash." The image changed as the satellite slid along its orbit, showing the coastline further to the east. There was little overlap; the boat was right on the edge of the screen.

"We're going to lose it," Nelson said. "This satellite is moving too quickly. It won't be overhead after the launch. When's the next pass?"

Christable consulted a display. “There’s another satellite coming up in forty-two minutes. So we’ve got no coverage during the launch. I guess they worked that out, too.”

“I don’t need to see them fire the missile,” Paula said. “I just needed confirmation it was a boat. Aidan, get me access to every camera in every marina in Ridgeview. I want the image files from fifteen minutes before the launch to now. Find me a boat coming in. If they took a direct route it’ll be about twenty minutes after the attack. Christabel, start there.”

Aidan slipped into the seat next to Christabel and used his police authorization to establish links into the city’s marinas.

“How many trains left between then and now?” Paula asked Nelson.

“Seven.”

“Get the station camera records ready for access.”

“Way ahead of you,” he grinned. “I’m pulling up passenger carriage camera files as well.”

It took Christabel another eight minutes to find a boat mooring at the Larsie marina. A man in a yellow shirt stepped off. “Here we go,” she said with a trill of excitement as the camera observed him walk along the wooden quay used by Danney’s Boat Hire. She froze an image as he was just short of the camera, revealing the round face of a man in his late forties, with flesh starting to build up under his cheeks and around his chin. Dark skin, with stubble. Thinning gray-brown hair dangled out of his blue cap. His yellow shirt was open at the neck, revealing a dark necklace cord.

“Nalcol, get over to the Larsie marina,” Paula said. “We’ve found the boat. Captain, call up the hire company office; tell them it’s impounded. It must not be cleaned.”

“You got it,” Aidan said.

“Nelson, transfer the station files to our RI. It’ll run visual recognition on that face. Christabel, get into the hire company’s records. Who paid for the boat?”

“Yes, boss.”

The Directorate RI took ninety seconds to review every camera record from the station, running each face through a recognition program to identify the man on the marina.

“There he is,” Paula exclaimed contentedly as the largest screen in the situation van showed their suspect strolling down the main platform to a waiting train, still wearing his yellow shirt. The timeline was thirty-seven minutes after the attack. They watched the RI follow him through the cameras until he was sitting in a carriage on an express train heading for Earth. The train moved out of the station.

“Let’s go,” Paula said.

* * * * *

The three of them took Nelson’s helicopter back to the station. There was a train already waiting to leave, packed full of passengers angry at the delay. Paula, Christabel, and Nelson hurried into the first-class cabin and it left immediately, trundling along the track to the big wormhole generator half a mile beyond the marshaling yard. Once it was through, it made an unscheduled stop at a small service platform in EdenBurg’s vast terminal. They transferred over to an express heading for Earth.

Nalcol called as they reached the platform. "DNA match confirmed," he told Paula. "The man on the boat was the one who took a leak at the launch site."

"Send the file back to Paris," she told him. "Find his profile."

"He bought his train ticket with a onetime account," Nelson told them. "Untraceable. But we've followed him through LA galactic. He caught a trans-Earth loop and got off at Sydney an hour ago. Caught a taxi."

"Leave that to us," Paula said. "The Directorate can track him."

They sat back as the express accelerated out of EdenBurg. Five minutes later it was pulling into LA galactic.

"Basker just called," Christabel said. "We've got a positive identification; visual corresponding to DNA. Dimitros Fiech. Address in Sydney. Works for Colliac Fak, a software development company. He's a sales rep, so he travels around a lot. Oh, get this, Colliac's Leisure Division supplies software to the travel industry, including the resort at Fire Plain."

They left the express and started to run through the vast terminal to the platforms serving the trans-Earth loop. "Mine his background," Paula told Christabel, then put a call in to the Directorate's Sydney office. "I want a tactical team armored up and ready when we arrive. Have a helicopter pick us up at the station."

"Yes, ma'am," the duty officer replied. "The suspect's taxi dropped him at the Wilkinson Tower off Penfold. We have two officers there now. As far as we know, he's still inside."

"Good work. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"I'd like to observe, please," Nelson said.

"Yes," Paula said. "But that's all."

"I know."

* * * * *

The loop train took them to Mexico City, followed by Rio, down to Buenos Aires, and then over the ocean to Sydney. A Directorate helicopter was sitting on the station security division pad, rotors spinning idly.

Paula and Christabel started putting on their armor as it lifted into the dark sky cloaking the city. Nelson watched enviously.

"If you do need back up-" he said.

"Then the city police will be happy to provide it," Paula said.

He sighed and gave up.

The ancient harbor bridge was illuminated in orange and blue holographic outlines as they flew in parallel to it. A wall of skyscrapers punctured the cityscape behind Circular Quay, their surface illuminations throwing cold monochrome light down onto the deserted nighttime streets below. They landed on the roof of the fifty-story Wilkinson Tower. Five of the Directorate's tactical team were waiting for them.

"Stay here," Paula ordered Nelson as she hopped down onto the roof.

Dimitros Fiech's apartment was on the thirteenth floor, looking inland. The Directorate team was evacuating the residents above and below.

"Fiech is a legend," Christabel said as the elevator opened on the thirteenth floor. Three tactical team members were waiting for them, dressed in black armor and holding big ion pistols.

"Basker validates an eighteen-month employment record with Colliac Fak. Fiech's CV and general background are false. It'll withstand a standard employment agency search, but our RI burned right through it. Records were inserted, referees are false. He's a genuine undercover agent for someone, all right."

"Thanks," Paula said. Her red virtual finger touched a communication icon, opening a secure link to the tactical team. "Be aware, we confirm target is hostile. He has access to weapons and does not hesitate to open fire. Civilians are not safe. Squad sergeant?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Can you immobilize him?"

"We've got a nerve jangler drone, but we'll have to blow the door open to get it in there. We don't know if it's reinforced."

"Has he rigged the approach?"

"No sensors detected in the corridor."

"All right, let's go. Be careful." Paula called up feeds from the cameras on the suits of the entry team, seeing jerky images of the corridor as they hurried along. The wooden door to Fiech's apartment was painted a dull green. They gathered around it and quickly rolled an explosive tape along the edges. One camera showed the drone being held ready, a small triangle of gray plastic.

"Go!" the squad sergeant ordered.

The explosive tape detonated, shattering the wooden door. The remnants crashed inward. Suit sensors went active, cutting through the smoke and dust, producing a sharp black-and-white image. The drone streaked in. Icons blinked green and amber, showing that the nerve jangler field was active. Theoretically, it would stun Fiech's nervous system, giving the team time to get in and cover him before he could go for any weapons. Unless he was ready and protected.

The icons turned blue and the entry team charged in. Fiech was sprawled on a couch in the living room, still wearing the yellow shirt Paula had seen through so many camera images. His head was flung back, hanging over the edge of the cushions as his limbs shook from the aftermath of the jangle. Drool leaked out of his gaping mouth.

Paula was running down the corridor, turning the corner. The wreckage of the door was in front of her. Four more team members were charging through it into the apartment. She followed them in. Fiech was still spread out across the couch. One of the suited figures was pressing an ion pistol to his temple. The second was providing cover. The remainder spread out through the apartment, guns held ready, sensors on full power, scanning ahead.

"Clear," the squad sergeant called.

Fiech was given a full deep scan. His body had a few inserts and a couple of OCTattoos, simple Unisphere interfaces, and a standard memorycell, none of them combat grade. They turned him over and

secured his wrists. Two ion pistols remained trained on him. He was white and shaking now, on the verge of vomiting.

Paula removed her helmet, shaking out her hair. Fiech gave her a terrified stare.

“It’s going to be rough on you,” Paula said. “Even if you cooperate, memory reading is never pleasant. But if you give us the names and structure of your movement, we can keep it to a minimum. We’ll just verify your information. Trust me, it’s worth it.”

Fiech started sobbing, tears tricking down his cheeks. “What the fuck is happening?” he wailed. “What is going on?”

Paula gave him a contemptuous look. She’d expected more professionalism. “Take him down to the office. Prep him for a memory read. I’ll run it myself.”

A whimpering Fiech was dragged past her. Christabel came into the apartment, taking her helmet off to look round. “I’ll get forensics in, rip this place apart.”

“Sure.” A formality, Paula knew. The apartment was part of his cover, it’d be clean.

“Hell of a first day back, boss. What are you going to do tomorrow?”

WHAT I KNOW HAPPENED

I was up early that morning, just like bloody always these days. Damn company is squeezing its staff to husks, always raising our performance targets. You can’t keep doing that year after year, people can only do so much.

Anyway... the first wave of commuters was buzzing about on the streets when I left the tower lobby. Poor bastards. Just like me. Squeezed on all sides. You can see it in their null expressions. All that effort and angst etched into their faces, and it was only five past seven.

I walked down O’Connell Street to the underground metro station. It’s steep ground just behind Sydney harbor, and the skyscrapers are so high you don’t see sunlight that time of the morning. Some of my fellow sufferers were gulping down Bean There coffee from plastic cups. I hate that. Food on the run gives me really bad indigestion.

The metro station has a direct line to the CST station on the south side of the city. It took eleven minutes. Three longer than usual. Every bugger is conspiring to make my life worse.

I missed the first train to Wessex. Typical. So I waited on the big platform, with its white wing roof. Me and two hundred others. Time was, I used to be excited just being in CST’s Sydney station. Think of it. Out there past the end of the platform there’s eighteen wormhole generators, each one with tracks leading to a different phase one world. One line goes to Wessex, the junction to phase two space, with another twelve worlds beyond that. They’re going to open five more in the next three years. All that opportunity, the potential out there, and what does my life amount to? Bugger all. Corporate drone, that’s me. Worlds aren’t new starts and fresh hope, all that crap in the brochures. I’ve been to all of them. They’re just more developments that I’ve got to flog Colliac Fak’s bloody software to. We’re covering every H-congruous planet in the galaxy with concrete; building little nests with a window we can look at the neighboring squalid skyscraper with. Yeah, we’re a really progressive species, us humans.

So I got the next train to Wessex. Standard class coach, and I just managed to grab a seat next to a window. Beat some woman to it, who looked real pissed at me when I slipped in ahead of her. *Gotta*

learn, lady. Survival of the fittest on this route. Every route, every day.

The Wessex station made its Sydney cousin look small. Three big passenger terminals with gold and scarlet roofs curving high over twenty platforms apiece; you could probably fit my apartment skyscraper inside one of them. And a marshaling yard that sprawled over fifteen square miles, a giant zoo of cybernetic machines and warehouses.

I had to switch terminals for the train out to Ormal—that's a five-minute trip on a pedwalk—then I had to find the right platform. The insert that provides my virtual vision has interface problems now, so the guidance icons I was picking up from the station management array were blurred. Nearly misread the damn thing. Finished up on platform 11B waiting with a big crowd for the train. These people weren't so stressed and desperate as the ones back in Sydney. More prosperous types, with suits a lot more expensive than mine. They had neat little leather designer arrays edged in gold or platinum tucked into the top pockets. You could see their fingers flicking about minutely as they shunted icons around their high-rez virtual vision. I even saw a few of those new OCtattoos, the ones that light up, tracing colorful lines across their skin. One woman had green and blue spirals on her cheeks.

The carriage wasn't so crowded, so I got a seat by a window again. I guess most of my fellow travelers were up in first class. Trip to Ormal was a simple eight minutes. We rolled out from the end of the platform and across the marshaling yard. I could see the row of wormhole generators up ahead like a metallic cliff, bloody huge great rectangular buildings side by side with a wormhole gateway at the end, like the mouth of an old-fashioned train tunnel. Only these had light shining out of them: alien suns spreading a multitude of subtle shades across the rusting jumble of the marshaling yard.

Our train headed straight for a pink-tinged hole, and I felt the tingle of the pressure curtain across my skin as we passed through. Then we were rolling along a couple of miles of track surrounded by open countryside with strange bulbous gray and white trees before we reached the CST planetary station.

Harwood's Hill, the capital, was small, barely half a million people. But it was beautiful, one of those places that had banned combustion engines. It was spread across a big slope that rose up out of a freshwater sea, with green spaces outnumbering buildings five to one. If I could afford it, I'd probably move there. You knew this world was making an effort to get things *right*. But it cost to grab a chunk of a dormitory planet for the upper middle classes. For Christ's sake, real estate here was more expensive than back on Earth.

My train had arrived late evening. I took a taxi out to the airport, using the company card. Even the taxi cost more than the return train fare. I watched the yachts out on the lake, trying not to be all sour and envious. There must have been hundreds coming into port, their sails all lit up by the sinking sun. Didn't anyone in this city work?

The flight to Essendyne was another three hours. At the other end, the airport was little more than a flat patch of grass with a strip of enzyme-bonded concrete down the middle, like it was left over from an experimental road building project.

Essendyne itself was a little town of stylish houses at the end of a valley. The surrounding mountains were impressive, too. In winter, they have over a meter of snow. It is perfect for skiers.

I took another taxi out to the resort, a forty-minute ride. The place was only half-finished, with the main building a mass of scaffolding crawling with construction bots. Some of the cabins had roofs, but the insides weren't fitted. I got that shitty sinking feeling as soon as we arrived. The office had told me the whole thing was in its final stage of completion, with the staff busy getting ready for guests. All that was left to do was a bit of landscaping. Complete crap.

The taxi dropped me outside the site manager's office. She wasn't available, some crisis out there among the scaffolding with a malfunctioning bot. Her assistant had the grace to look embarrassed as he explained that the handover date had been put back three months. It was difficult to get the materials out to Essendyne from the nearest train station, a two hours' drive away along a narrow road. No one from the resort company was even on site, let alone available to meet me.

Fucking pricks! Nobody back in Sydney had even bothered to check. Bastard scum! So I'd wasted an entire day on a trip to a client that didn't even exist yet. I wanted to bill the dicks back home for the commission I'd lost and the expenses I'd built up.

The taxi took me back to the airport. And, of course, the plane back to Harwood's Hill didn't leave for another five hours. I hit the bar in the concourse—a grand way to describe a hut with a glass wall. After an hour, when the anger was really peaking, I called Sydney and told the dick of an office manager what I thought of him. I didn't wait for him to say anything back. I cut the channel and got my e-butler to block all incoming calls. There was a seafood bistro next to the bar. I went in and tried some of the local food. Not bad. Waitress was kind of pretty, too. Then I went back to the bar.

I remember one of the stewardesses helping me onto the plane. Great-looking chick with flaming red hair and a cute smile. I told her so, too. Then we took off and I was poorly. She helped clean it up. I slept the rest of the flight.

Harwood's Hill was a grind. Strange city, small hours of the morning, with a mother monster hangover. Took a taxi to the CST station. Managed to find a little store that was still open and bought some cleaner tabs. I don't take them often—they're worse than the hangover if you ask me—but they do only last an hour before your body stabilizes. I was back in Sydney by then. Cold, depressed, with bones that ached. Couldn't eat, and felt really hungry thanks to the cleaners. And absolutely fuck all to show for my time.

I went home. Bugger the expense, I took a taxi. I was kind of surprised my company card was still working by then. You know I thought that was my low point. Then the bloody next thing I know, the police are blowing up my door. I don't know what they hit me with when they stormed in, but it was like my whole body was on fire. I just wanted to die. I mean, how could the universe *do* this to me?

WHAT THE COURT DECIDED

It was the biggest case ever to be heard in a Nova Zealand court; in fact, it was the biggest anything to happen on Nova Zealand, period. Reporters from every Unisphere news show flooded into Ridgeview, with their companies block-booking entire hotels. Those unable to snag a room had to park their mobile homes on the ring road, where they were jostled by curious camels brought to the planet by Bedouins eager to re-create their ancient culture out in the freedom of the vast deserts. While in town, the narrow streets with their broad white canvas awnings rapidly became clogged by giant mobile studio trucks.

Paula was given a room in the city Attorney's office. It was cramped, with desks shoved against the wall and a noisy water tower, but better than trying to catch a train in each day.

When the case was opened in front of Judge Jeroen, Paula was surprised when the defense lawyer, Ms. Toi, entered a plea of not guilty.

"Is she going for some kind of technicality?" Paula whispered to Stephan Dorge, the Directorate's prosecutor.

"I don't see how," he whispered back. "They didn't ask for a deal."

"What about the memory deposition?"

“Nah, we can prove it’s an implant.”

When Paula looked at Ms. Toi, she thought the lawyer seemed uncomfortable.

Prosecution opened with the forensic evidence from the launch site. There was the DNA match between Dimitros Fiech and the urine sample. Skin analysis taken at the Directorate’s Sydney office immediately after the arrest revealed traces of the missile’s chemical rocket booster exhaust on his arms and face; there were also plume traces on his yellow shirt. The jury was shown camera pictures from the Larsie marina and Ridgeview’s CST station. Additional corroboration was skin-cell DNA taken from the boat.

“The evidence that places Dimitros Fiech at the launch site is incontrovertible,” Stephan Dorge concluded. “He fired the missile that killed a hundred and thirty-eight people. And for what? To push his perverted ideological platform.”

In the docks, Dimitros Fiech shook his head in disbelief.

Defense called Paula Myo. “I’d like to concentrate on the deposition of Dimitros Fiech’s memory on the day concerned,” Ms. Toi said. “You ran the memory read yourself, did you not?”

“I did,” Paula said. “They contained no recollection of the missile launch. We believe false memories of his day on Ormal were inserted at the same time his true memory of the attack was erased.”

“False memories? You mean someone created them in a studio like a Full Sensory drama?”

“No. An accomplice went to Ormal in his place to provide an alibi. That experience was recorded, then loaded into Fiech’s brain.”

“You believe someone like the defendant went to Ormal. How do you know it wasn’t him?”

“Because he was on Nova Zealand firing the missile.”

“But the person, the *personality*, sitting here in this courtroom today did not fire the missile, did he?”

Paula gave the defense lawyer a small smile. “Nice try. The defendant’s personality arranged for the current memory to be implanted; therefore he is what he wants to be.”

“But what he is now is not the original personality?”

“Who knows? There is no test that I’m aware of for identifying personality; in any case, as any first-year psychology student will tell you, personality is fluid. It changes as you age. Some say it matures. Just because you don’t remember committing a crime doesn’t mean you’re innocent of it. That precedent was established when the first memory erasure techniques were developed. The Justice Directorate suspension chambers are full of criminals who removed inconvenient incriminating memories. I’d point out that Fiech has erased his entire life prior to joining the Colliac Fak company, which has very neatly blocked our investigation into the Free Merioneth movement, and we all know what that’s led to in the last six months. To me such behavior is the personality trait of a real fanatic.”

“Objection,” Ms. Toi exclaimed. “Speculation. I want that struck from the record.”

“You asked for my opinion on his personality,” Paula countered.

“I’ll allow it to stand for the moment,” Judge Jeroen said. “It was a legitimate answer to your line of questioning, defense.”

“Your Honor.” Ms. Toi bowed to the judge. “Investigator, you said that memory erasure is common

when a crime has been committed.”

“That is correct.”

“Have you ever known alternative memory for the time of the crime to be implanted?”

“I haven’t come across it before, although the technique is relatively straightforward. You just need a colleague like the one Fiech had to record his day.”

“So if I implanted the memory of firing the missile into your brain, would that make you guilty?”

“No. Because I didn’t *do* it. The rest of the physical evidence would support that.”

“So, in fact, Investigator, this boils down to two sets of opposing evidence. Both equally valid.”

“Valid but not of equal credibility. That is correct.”

“Please describe to the court the efforts that you undertook to establish that the person on Ormal was not Dimitros Fiech.”

“I retraced the route myself, and interviewed everyone he remembered encountering. Security camera images were recovered and analyzed.”

“What did they show?”

“A man with similar facial features to Dimitros Fiech traveled to Ormal. We assumed he underwent a cellular reprofiling treatment”

“But you can’t prove it. The man sitting here in the dock could have been the one on Ormal, and his made-up doppelganger could have fired the missile on Nova Zealand. Am I right?”

“No. Under my instruction, a Directorate forensic officer analyzed the seat cover on the plane that flew from Essendyne back to Harwood’s Hill. It had been cleaned, but we found large traces of vomit containing DNA. It did not correspond to Dimitros Fiech’s DNA, yet it was the seat he remembers using and being sick on. It wasn’t him on Ormal.”

Ms. Toi gave Paula a startled look. “I see. Thank you, Investigator.”

“No!” Dimitros Fiech yelled. “No, you can’t believe that. I didn’t do it! Damn you, I didn’t!” He turned to the jury and gave them a wild stare. “It wasn’t me. I wasn’t there. I *know* I wasn’t!”

Judge Jeroen banged his gavel. “Be seated, Mr. Fiech.”

“I’m being framed!” He turned to Ms. Toi. “Do something!”

She winced.

Paula quietly left the witness stand as Fiech continued his tirade. Two large court officers moved forward into the dock as the judge banged his gavel repeatedly.

* * * * *

After another day and a half of evidence, the jury retired. They took an hour to reach their verdict of guilty. Judge Jeroen sentenced Dimitros Fiech to two thousand seven hundred and sixty years’ life suspension, twenty years for each of the people who suffered bodyloss in the crash.

* * * * *

Paula was packing her bag when Aidan Winkal rapped his knuckles on the office door. "Hello," she said.

He grinned. "I just came to say good-bye."

"That's very kind of you, Aidan. You've handled yourself well while we were putting this case together, and I know this hasn't been easy. I expect your Chief will be promoting you."

"Probably. I gather Christabel got her promotion."

"Yes. Chief investigator at last. I'll miss her. There'll be a party in Paris tonight when we get back. You're welcome to join us."

He scratched at his short hair. "Go to Paris just for a party. That's a real city-dweller thing. An Earth city."

"Come on, you're not such a small-town boy. I'd dance with you."

"I can't believe how thorough you were. I really thought the defense was going to nail you with that question about evidence from Ormal. I guess she didn't realize how methodical you are."

Paula shrugged and dropped her spare jacket into the bag. "It's what I do. I have to be certain for myself. And Ms. Toi should have known, I'm notorious enough for my diligence. He was badly represented."

"So you're convinced he did it?"

"The Dimitros Fiech sitting in the dock this morning was the physical person who launched the missile. I have no doubt of that."

"Now there you go, see: a real lawyer's answer."

"I concede defense did have a point about what constitutes a whole person. Body and memory are the two halves of being human."

"But Fiech's memory of the attack has been wiped. It's over. We got what we could of him."

She smiled reassuringly. "Yes, we did. And he got the sentence he deserved."

Christabel and Nelson appeared behind Aidan. Neither looked as jubilant as they should have done. Aidan gave Paula an uncomfortable smile. "I'll leave you guys to it."

"Try and get there tonight," Paula told him. "I meant it about that dance."

A sheepish Aidan shuffled out past Christabel, who did her best not to laugh at his schoolboyish delight.

"Is he really your type?" Christabel asked.

"I don't have a type," Paula said. "But he is an honest policeman. I value that."

Nelson looked at Christabel, then Paula. Took a breath. "Anyway... I'm also here to deliver my Dynasty's thanks. We appreciate the effort involved in securing the verdict."

"You're welcome," Paula said. "It's a shame we couldn't use Fiech to uncover his co-conspirators, but that memory wipe was very efficient. There is nothing left of his life prior to his arrival in Sydney for that

job. Until we finally arrest the entire Free Merioneth Forces, we're not going to find out who he is."

"Was," Christabel corrected.

Nelson's expression turned bitter. He made a show of closing the door. "That's unlikely to happen. Not now."

"What do you mean?" Christabel asked.

"Confidentially: my Dynasty, along with several others, has agreed that Merioneth will become an Isolated world."

Paula let out a hiss of exasperation. She'd suspected something like this would happen. The last few months, while they'd assembled the case against Dimitros Fiech, had seen the Free Merioneth campaign expand to alarming proportions. After the Nova Zealand plane, the movement had been steadily refining their operations, developing into more sophisticated assassins. The results were dramatic. Their targets were now dispatched with cool efficiency, and the number of collateral casualties was significantly reduced. In the last twelve attacks, thirty-nine Dynasty members had suffered complete bodyloss. The new generations were now running very scared, with few of them leaving their mansions on the private family worlds. "You gave in," she said in frustration.

"We couldn't afford it," Nelson said with equal chagrin. "The cost of providing upgraded security for every member of every Dynasty was completely unrealistic. Far beyond writing off the investment costs in Merioneth."

"There's more at stake here than money," an annoyed Christabel snapped.

"I know that," Nelson said. "Of course, it won't appear to be any kind of climb down. We wouldn't allow that. We negotiated the terms of Isolation with the new Nationalist Party that sprung up on Merioneth. The terrorists stop their attacks, and in a couple of years we close the wormhole. They'll be on their own. Forever."

"It'll come back to bite you," Paula said. "You've shown your opponents a weakness. It can be used every time someone wants a concession out of a Dynasty."

"That was one of the reasons we agreed," Nelson said.

"I don't understand."

"We don't have other opponents, not in this category. The Intersolar Commonwealth is a relatively civilized place. Sure, we can all disagree with each other; politicians on half of the planets we've got aren't speaking to the other half; but there's only a tiny minority who want to leave, and an even smaller number who resort to violence to obtain their ends. This whole succession notion is ridiculous. An Isolated planet will never benefit from the advances the rest of us make. Their social and economic development will be stunted; hell, Merioneth will probably regress. When we announce that the wormhole is to be closed, we're expecting a lot of Merioneth's ordinary residents will rush back to the Commonwealth before Isolation begins. Our analysts have reviewed this; they're not sure Merioneth will even be able to maintain basic rejuvenation technology levels, not in the short-to-medium term. I sure as hell wouldn't want to live there. Body-loss will become death again."

"And the Dynasties consider that a big plus point," Christabel reasoned. "Anyone who doesn't like the Dynasties and what they represent will be free to emigrate to Merioneth."

"Then we slam the door shut behind them," Nelson said. "It'll be a bolt hole for malcontents the

Commonwealth over. Everyone is better off afterward.”

“An old-fashioned pressure valve for hotheads,” Paula muttered.

“So the Dynasty leaders decided,” he admitted. “It still galls me that the real culprits behind the attacks won’t be brought to justice. But that’s a political price, and it gets set far above our heads.”

* * * * *

The club was underneath a twenty-second-century retro-Napoleonic building on the Left Bank. It was chic enough, though there were far more expensive places in Paris, but aside from Christabel herself, no one from the Serious Crimes Directorate office could afford an evening partying with the truly wealthy Grand Family members who colonized such establishments-and Christabel never pushed her heritage on anyone. Until tonight.

It was dark inside the annular vault, a gloom punctured by holographic blobs oscillating with naughty subliminal vibrations. Paula flinched as she walked down the stairs to the floor; the sound system was like a derated sonic weapon. Glass galleries enlivened by violet light ran around the high stone walls at two levels, linked by curving glass stairs. People thronged along them, Paris’s eternal clique of bohemians, wearing clothes of semi-organic fabric embossed with elaborate patterns that merged seamlessly into the vivid OCTattoos on their skin. It was hard to tell what was fabric and what was flesh. Feathers were the current merging trend, curving fronds longer than ostrich quills that sprouted from the spine. Six months ago, it had been membrane petals. Several men displayed their plumage as Paula walked by, having it fan out on either side of their shoulders like wings. One was pure angel white, with a divine body to match. She smiled modestly and walked on, immune to such raffish peacocks.

Christabel was close to the bar inside the central circle of pillars, knocking back a tall glass of Ritz Pimms. Her lips were microlayered gold. Whenever a hologram floated across her, they sparkled dazzlingly.

“You made it!” she shouted at Paula. Paula snagged a glass from a waitress. “Cheers!”

“Is he here?”

Paula shrugged, pretending not to understand. But there was a specific reason she was wearing a traditional little black dress with a semi-organic hem that swirled about of its own volition. In her newly youthful body, it made her look hot, and she knew it. Several junior investigators were staring in a way they’d never dare back at the office. “Congratulations,” Paula said. “Traitor.”

Christabel laughed. “I’ve served my time. And I made chief investigator on merit alone. That’s what I needed. For myself if not the Dynasty.”

“You’ll be a loss to the Directorate.”

Christabel leaned in a fraction. “The Dynasty is going to need me. Our entire concept of security is going to have to be revised, thanks to our idiot founders giving in to Merioneth. I heard that everyone is now pouring funds into researching personal-sized force-field generators. And they’re all beefing up the defenses on our private worlds.”

“Typical. So am I allowed to ask what department you’re joining?”

“Deputy manager EdenBurg protection.”

“Wow. Big field.”

“Yeah. Give me a couple of decades and I’ll make it to chief of the division. After that…” She trailed off and drained her glass.

“You’ll be locking horns with Nelson.”

“Nhaaa. He’s too smart. We’ll get on, at that level you have to.”

“Speaking of which-”

“Of course. We’ll dataswap. Happy to. Unless dear old grandma Heather actually kills someone—then I’ll be helping to cover her arse.”

“It’s not your Dynasty’s founder I’m interested in.”

“Oh?” Christabel plucked another glass from the bar.

Paula thought that she looked defensive. *How quickly alliances shift.* “If you get the chance to access your Dynasty’s file on the Merioneth Isolation, I’d appreciate a summary.”

“That kind of thing never gets put in a file, as you well know. What are you looking for? We got Fiech, for God’s sake. Two and a half millennia in oblivion! It doesn’t get better than that.”

“Why did he do it?”

“What?”

“I don’t understand his motivation.”

“To liberate Merioneth from Dynasty oppression,” Christabel recited viciously. “And the bastards won!”

“Yes, they did, but *Fiech* didn’t. He was utterly committed to his cause, so much so that he perpetrates one of the worst atrocities in modern history. One that almost killed his precious movement stone dead. People were repelled by what he did. Even his old colleagues realized that was too much, which is why they quickly got professional. That’s how they won. Continuing to wipe out the Dynasty kids and keep bystander body-loss to an absolute minimum was smart. It bought pressure to bear exactly where it was needed. Yet Fiech will never see the end result, he’ll never live on his free, liberated Merioneth. Motivated people simply don’t commit suicide, which is effectively what he’s done. By the time he comes out of suspension, the Commonwealth won’t be recognizable, even if it still exists. Damn it, we’ll probably all be post-physical by then. He’s sacrificed himself for something he’ll never know. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Fanatics never make any real sense to anyone except themselves. Don’t look for logic here, you’ll only be disappointed.”

“There *was* logic behind this. I just don’t understand it yet. And that bothers me. It means we’ve overlooked something. Whoever set this up expended a huge amount of effort. The Directorate ran checks on every planetary medical database in the Commonwealth. Nobody has any record of the doppelganger’s DNA, which is extremely unusual for this day and age. The nearest we can do is identify family traits; he has ancestry within a mix of Celtic, Northern Spanish, and Saudi ethnicities. We found what we believe is a possible cousin on Piura; it was certainly the closest genetic match. But the poor girl didn’t recognize Dimitros. I ran her family tree as best I could, but if he’s on it, I couldn’t tell. We just don’t know who he is. If we can’t find out, then he’s either the most important man in the Merioneth independence movement, or an absolute nobody. I don’t believe either.”

“Maybe you’re right with the first one, and his pals in the Free Merioneth Forces are planning on springing him out of suspension just before CST shuts the wormhole.”

“Not going to happen. Nothing and nobody can break into the Justice Directorate suspension facility.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Paula saw a nervous-looking Aidan appear at the top of the Main. She smiled. “What I always do; keep the file open, solve the case properly.”

Christabel followed her gaze. “Of course, you always get your man.”

“Yes. Always.”

WHAT PAULA FOUND OUT

Nelson Sheldon was right about the timing. Twenty-one months after Fiech’s court case, and three weeks after a planetary referendum officially denounced as a shambolic farce by Intersolar observers, the senator from Merioneth stood up in the Commonwealth Senate to declare that her planet was regretfully withdrawing from the Intersolar Commonwealth to “pursue our future independently.” The Speaker wished her well, and there was a chilly silence as the Merioneth delegation dramatically walked out of the full chamber. CST immediately announced that the wormhole link to Merioneth would be withdrawn in three months, leaving enough time for anyone on the planet who didn’t wish to be Isolated to return to the Commonwealth.

Out of a population of seventeen million, the number wanting to remain part of the Commonwealth was just over nine million. It took an awful lot of trains running round the clock to bring them out. Which made travel to Merioneth extremely easy, with an inbound train arriving every ten minutes. When Paula caught a train to Baransly, the capital, three weeks before the wormhole was due to be shut, she was the only passenger in first class. Most of the carriages were vehicle carriers. Emigres favored big trucks crammed full with their possessions. Local shipping companies were charging a fortune to transport containers of larger items. And the emergent national government was getting difficult about letting industrial machinery leave. The latest batch of restrictions covered all types of agribots; a lot of farmers were heading back to the Commonwealth.

Paula stared out of the long window as they emerged through the wormhole’s pressure curtain. It was winter outside, with flecks of snow drifting through an iron-gray sky. The landscape here outside the capital was arranged into neat fields given over entirely to row after row of some vine equivalent, with brown leafless stems stretched along wire frames. Hundreds of small agribots rolled slowly down the lines, their ply-plastic tentacles pruning the vines back to their regulation two-meter length.

Baransly itself was a sprawl of housing estates and industrial zones clustered around a commercial center that had already started to put up skyscrapers. The architecture was a little bleak and functional perhaps, but the city’s size was an excellent example of successful development for a world that had only been open to settlement for eighty years.

By the time the train reached the marshaling yard outside the station, there were signs of law and order beginning to break down. Streets were clogged with abandoned cars and vans. The crates and boxes that they’d carried were now strewn everywhere, broken open to spill their contents onto the icy enzyme-bonded concrete. It was as if the goods of a hundred department stores had been scattered across the district by a real live cargo cult god. Gangs of kids and some adults were foraging the bounty. Then the train drew into the marshaling yard itself, and Paula’s view of the city vanished behind walls of

metal containers stacked taller than the surrounding buildings, all waiting shipment out. Men in thick jackets with the Merioneth Nationalist Party logo on their sleeves patrolled the aisles.

The train drew in at one of the ten platforms under the cover of a sweeping green crystal canopy. Every square meter of the platforms and concourse was occupied by a bad-tempered crowd. Armor-clad CST security guards patrolled along narrow clearways, their angler guns carried prominently.

Paula slipped off the carriage to be greeted by Byron Lacrosh, chief aide to the prime minister, Svein Moalem, who was also leader of the Merioneth Nationalist Party. Byron and an armed police escort guided her down one of the clearways. A large limousine took them from the CST station to the Parliament building along roads that were still being cleared of discarded vehicles. Every few minutes, they passed crews of men and bots lifting cars onto big tow trucks.

“You won’t need to worry about mining any new metal for a few years,” Paula observed.

“Material resources aren’t our prime concern,” Byron Lacrosh said. “We hope to establish a culture that isn’t as technology-based as the Commonwealth.”

“You’re going to go the agrarian route?”

“We favor divorcing ourselves from the consumerist monoculture that dominates the Dynasty-ruled worlds, yes. We don’t shun technology, we just don’t see the necessity to incorporate it in every aspect of life.”

“Appropriate sustainability, then?”

Byron gave her an interested look. “You understand the philosophy?”

“It’s hardly new. My birthworld is based on it.”

“Oh yes, of course. I’d forgotten where you came from, Investigator Myo.”

The Parliament building was a concrete and glass monstrosity, intended as a vigorous statement of a new planet’s identity and prosperity. The result was the kind of design-by-bureaucrat-committee that Paula always found depressing, representing the exact opposite of the ethos it had originally been commissioned to promote.

Svein Moalem’s office was on the fifth floor, with a curving glass wall that opened onto the hanging rose garden-famous locally for its cost overruns and leaky troughs. He sat behind a dark desk made from native kajawood. A broad-shouldered man ten years out of rejuvenation, with a neatly trimmed beard-following current local tradition. His light blue eyes were strongly contrasted with dark skin and mousy hair. Paula saw tiny luminescent green lines flickering along his cheeks to curve around the back of his neck. More OCTattoos shone on his hands. When she ordered her inserts to scan the office, she found a considerable amount of encrypted electromagnetic traffic emanating from him, or, to be exact, from the necklace of flat opals he wore. It was the kind of emission level she usually associated with sensory drama actors, allowing the Unisphere audience to experience their body’s sensations. The two people, a man and a woman sitting in front of his desk, were also broadcasting an unusually large amount of data, from similar necklace arrays. Paula suspected that every aspect of her interview was to be recorded and analyzed. A high-capacity cybersphere node was discreetly incorporated into the floor-to-ceiling bookcase behind the desk, but apart from that and several security sensors, she couldn’t detect any other active hardware. Not that she expected any weapons to be active.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me, Prime Minister,” she said.

Svein Moalem nodded graciously but didn't get up. He gestured to an empty chair directly in front of his desk. "I asked for two representatives from the Attorney General's office to be present."

Paula glanced at the two lawyers flanking her as she sat down. "I'm not here to arrest you. In fact, nobody really knows if the Intersolar Commonwealth has jurisdiction here at the moment. You've declared independence, and we've agreed to recognize it in three weeks' time. Anything between those dates is a very gray legal area."

"Yes, but nonetheless, they will insure my reputation is protected from unfair allegations."

"Allegations are for tabloid shows. I'm only here to ask questions."

The green lines under Moalem's beard scintillated. "As a friend of the Commonwealth, I'm happy to oblige; we have nothing to hide from you. And of course, who can resist your personal notoriety? So let's get started, shall we? I can spare you thirty minutes."

"I am the appointed investigator for the Dimitros Fiech case. Did you know him, Prime Minister?"

"I know of him, sadly. His misguided organization was one of the main inspirations behind setting up our Nationalist Party. Of course, we completely repudiate the use of violence to achieve independence."

"So you didn't know him personally?"

"No. My party's goals were achieved by legitimate democratic ends."

"I accessed the report from the observer team on your referendum. They wouldn't agree."

"Biased vitriol from those who have a vested interest in our continuing dependence and integration with their monoculture."

"Whatever. Fiech and his colleagues proved exceptionally resourceful, and they certainly learned quickly from their mistakes. He is the only member of the Free Merioneth movement we have apprehended so far. What they did required a large amount of money, at the very least. Is your government aware of where that finance originated from?"

"Your pardon, Investigator, but right now the Treasury department has more pressing concerns than examining bank transactions from two years ago. Little matters like making sure we have a valid currency in place for the cutoff. You understand."

"Their money must have originated here."

"I'm sure you're right. If we find out in the next three weeks, we'll be sure to inform your Directorate."

"Could it have come from the same source as your Party's money?"

"We are not dignifying that with an answer," the female lawyer said sternly.

Svein Moalem gave Paula a small mocking shrug to say *Out of my hands*.

"You set up your party after Fiech's organization had already won Isolation from the Dynasties," Paula said.

"Interesting allegation, Investigator." Moalem glanced at the female lawyer. "Do you have proof of this?"

"At the moment, I'm purely interested in motives. As someone who embodies the Isolationist dream, can

you tell me why Fiech sacrificed himself?"

"I'm sure old Earth history is full of martyrs, all neatly documented, if you are that interested. But I suspect he believed as I do. And those who truly believe in the cause of freedom will go to any lengths to see it become reality. I commend his bravery, though, of course, I cannot condone his method."

"Yet his methods secured your goals."

"They helped focus the imaginations and aspirations of everyone on this planet. He woke us up to the oppression we labored under."

"I don't believe the people of this planet are inspired by monstrous violence. Over a hundred and thirty people suffered severe bodyloss on the Nova Zealand plane alone. Your citizens would want justice for them and all the others whose blood was spilled."

"Justice, yes. But we equally disapprove of the vengeance we've seen your Directorate unleash."

"Excuse me?"

"Who did you find guilty of the Nova Zealand crime, Investigator? Not the person who pulled the trigger, at least not the whole person. The man you have in your suspension facility lived a different life on that day. Your prisoner is not guilty of bringing down that aircraft. You hold a prisoner of conscience. A patsy whose sole purpose is to satisfy the masses to the benefit of your political masters."

"Dimitros Fiech committed that crime," Paula said, doing her best to hold her temper in check. She knew that the prime minister was provoking her, trying to throw her off track. "There is no question of that."

"So already we see the difference between your culture's rigid nature and our more liberal, progressive quality. Your laws cannot adapt to new circumstances."

"Fiech's memories are an alibi, nothing more. It's no different from using cellular reprofiling to change your facial features."

"It is completely different; it is his mind. The mind of the person you have suspended knows that he was on Ormal during the crime. You said it yourself in the deposition: He knows his office screwed up sending him there, he knows he paid the taxi fare in Harwood's Hill, he was the person who watched the land roll past through the plane's window, he was angry and frustrated when he arrived at the resort, he tasted the vodka at the airport bar, he fancied the redheaded stewardess who helped him on the plane, he had the hangover. That was Dimitros Fiech. Nobody else. *His* personality. Him! Your imprudent freedom fighter was someone else."

"Who was erased by his colleagues. And I will find them," Paula growled out. "In order to do that, I need to comprehend the psychology behind all of this. So tell me, help mitigate Dimitros Fiech's sentence: Why exactly do you want Isolation? What can you possibly achieve here that requires this drastic severance from the Commonwealth?"

"That's a very long list, Investigator. Starting with removing the contamination of a morally bankrupt, decadent society."

"At the cost of medical benefits? Your industrial capability is going to be reduced drastically."

"Not as much as your propaganda insists. We shall live here peacefully and progress in our own way, a way not dictated by the Dynasties or the Senate. Many people are attracted to such a notion. Millions, actually. Do you really begrudge us such liberty?"

“No. I just don’t see what ideology can’t be pursued within the umbrella of the Commonwealth. It is not as oppressive as your party claims, as *you* are well aware. A great many reduced-technology communities flourish on Commonwealth worlds. What you have engineered here is radical. I’m trying to understand its rationale.”

Svein Moalem sat back in his chair and gave Paula a thoughtful stare, very much the politician trying to convert another wavering voter. “You of all people struggle to understand? Forgive me, but that is hard to believe.”

“Why?”

“You were created and birthed on Huxley’s Haven, the most reviled planet in the Commonwealth. How the illiberal classes hated its founding. A world with everyone genetically predisposed to their job, a society in which everybody has a secure place. It is living proof that alternatives can work. Surely that’s a concept to be welcomed and admired?”

“Its functionality is admirable. However, even I don’t approve of its static nature. Those humans can no longer evolve.”

“Yet they live perfectly happy lives.”

“Yes,” Paula said. “Within the parameters established by the Human Structure Foundation.”

“You would want Huxley’s Haven broken up and abandoned?” He sounded very surprised.

“Certainly not. Its citizens have a right to their existence. It is pure imperialist arrogance for outsiders to propose alteration.”

“You see, Investigator, you make my argument for me! That is your answer. The right to self-determination is a human fundamental. Such a thing is not possible while under the financial hegemony of the Dynasties and Grand Families.”

“Everything comes down to money in the end,” Paula offered.

“Quite.”

“I still can’t believe some abstract ideology is enough for Fiech to sacrifice himself.”

“Hardly abstract.” Moalem waved at the city outside. “His wish has become our reality.”

Paula pursed her lips, following his gesture. “I hope it’s worth it.”

“It is.”

She stood and gave him a small bow. “Thank you for your time, Prime Minister.”

“You’re welcome, Investigator. In fact, I’d like to offer you a place here with us. Our police forces will need a substantial reorganization after the cutoff. Who better to manage that? You are celebrated and respected on every world in the Commonwealth. Your honesty and devotion to justice have broken the hatred and prejudice barrier. In a way, you are what we aspire to be.”

“That’s very flattering, but the answer is no.”

“Why not? Indulge me, please. I am curious. You left Huxley’s Haven, the only one of millions ever to do so. You found the Commonwealth more attractive. Why not us?”

“I didn’t leave,” Paula said, feeling her shoulder muscles tense up. “I was stolen from my birthing clinic. The political activists who took me wanted to make a point in their campaign to ‘liberate’ Huxley’s Haven. Consequently, I was brought up in the Commonwealth. I chose to stay.”

“You found it more desirable than the most secure civilization ever established?”

“I was created to be a police officer; it is what I am. There is more crime in the Commonwealth than on Huxley’s Haven, and it is the culture I was brought up in. It was logical for me to stay. Here I would never lack for challenges.”

“So the activists were right then? The manufactured people of Huxley’s Haven would be able to settle in the Intersolar Commonwealth?”

They could physically settle. Intellectually, I doubt they would be able to integrate. Myself and other police officers are a very small minority of the population. The exceptions. I understand that after my ‘batch,’ the Foundation changed the psychoneural profiling. Huxley’s Haven police officers are no longer as liberal as me—she licked her lips in amusement—a notion that discomforts the Commonwealth even more. Can you imagine a less forgiving version of me, Prime Minister?—

“That’s a tough one, I admit.” Finally he stood, a faint smile on his lips. “Good day, Investigator.”

* * * * *

Two days later, Paula woke up to a call request from Christabel flashing in her virtual vision. She yawned, stretched, and told her maidbot to bring some tea. Then her virtual finger touched Christabel’s green icon.

“You made it back okay,” Christabel said. “I heard it’s getting tough in Baransly. CST asked for a week’s extension before they switch off the wormhole; they’re worried they won’t be able to get everyone out before the cutoff.”

“There’s a lot of people there,” Paula said, remembering the trip back to the CST station, the way her police escort had to force their way to a train for her. “What did the Merioneth government say?”

“No.”

“Figures. Moalem has worked hard to reach this moment. He’s not going to allow anything to stop it now. Especially now.”

“Especially now? Did you get some useful information?”

“Very. He was the alibi memory. Svein Moalem went to Ormal and spent the day living Fiech’s life.”

“What? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“No. I’m not.”

“How do you know that?”

“He fancied a redhead.”

“Come on, talk sense to me.”

“Moalem told me the stewardess on the plane Fiech flew on from Essendyne back to Harwood’s Hill was a redhead. He’s right, too.” Paula closed her eyes, recalling the memories that didn’t belong to her,

the ones she'd read from Fiech's brain. Seeing wavy images of the attractive woman in her neat blue and green uniform, Celtic-red hair all tied up with leather clips. Trying to smile as she supported his body up the stairs, and, amazingly, still calm when she deposited him in his seat and he made a crude drunken pass.

Paula had interviewed the woman a week later as she retraced the alibi, confirming the memory.

"So?" Christabel asked.

"That detail wasn't in the memory deposition filed with the court. I just said a stewardess."

"He could have found out."

Paula pulled the straps of her slip up properly on her shoulders as the maidbot came in with a large breakfast cup of green Assam tea. "Why would he?"

"Because they're obviously all part of the same group of Isolationists. He'd want to know everything connected with the case."

"No, this was a casual detail. I know it was. He was the one on Ormal."

"Oh bloody hell, so now what?"

"Obviously, he has to be arrested. He was a major part of the crime. If he was as deeply involved in the Free Merioneth Forces as I suspect, he could well expose the others with a memory read."

"Not going to happen. There's only two and a half weeks left to Isolation. You'll never get clearance for that. It would take a small army to go in there and arrest their new prime minister. Actually... how come you didn't try while you were there? I know you. You cannot stand back."

"I know. It's engineered into my nature. But the probability of a successful outcome if I'd tried to arrest him on the spot was zero. They would simply have eliminated me."

"So natural self-preservation is stronger than the rest of you after all. That's a relief to know."

"It was simply a decision based on common sense. I am going to arrange a meeting with Nelson. He may be able to secure me the return ability I need to complete the case."

"Damn, that's a long shot."

"Yes, but what else have I got? The Directorate won't be able to lift Moalem from Merioneth."

"I wouldn't count on the Sheldons doing it either. The political fallout would be too great: Lifting someone from an Isolated world and making them stand trial here all because they assassinated Dynasty members. That won't look good for the Dynasties, Paula, not politically. Isolation was the end of this, the deal."

"I know, but Nelson is the best option I've got." She sipped some of the tea. "What were you calling me about?"

"I've been digging around where I shouldn't have, as you asked. I'm not sure how relevant this is now, but the Dynasties know who's been backing the whole Merioneth independence movement."

"Who?"

"Now promise you won't shoot the messenger."

Paula grinned and took another sip. "I won't."

"The Human Structure Foundation."

The surprise made her start. "Damn it!" She struggled not to let the tea spill onto the bed.

"You okay?"

"Yes, yes." Beside her, Aidan stirred at the commotion.

"Look, I can maybe make some inquiries at this end, see if my Dynasty will go along with a covert extraction. The Free Merioneth Forces hurt a lot of Halgarths. Heather was not happy about giving them Isolation. We could put together an operation with the Sheldons."

"That's more like vengeance," Paula said quietly. "Not due process."

"You're running out of options."

"I know. I need to make a few more inquiries about this. I'll get back to you."

Aidan blinked round, lifting his head off the pillow. "Something wrong?"

"No." She ran her hand through his disheveled hair. "Early start, that's all. Something unexpected came up. I've got to take a trip."

"Where to now? Other side of the Commonwealth again?"

"The Caribbean, actually."

* * * * *

The nearest city on the trans-Earth loop was New York. When she arrived at the Newark station, Paula took a cab over to JFK and flew a Directorate hypersonic parallel to the East Coast, then on south to Grenada. The Human Structure Foundation campus occupied a broad stretch of rugged land behind a series of curving beaches whose pale sand was just visible in the low moonlight. A circular white-glass tower formed the center, silhouetted by liquid bifluron tubes embedded in the structure. The long sodium-orange web of streets radiating out from the base revealed the surrounding village of elaborate bungalows. Foundation members didn't reside in any of the island's ordinary towns; in the last century, few ventured out beyond the heavily guarded perimeter strip. It was a micronation of genetic ideologues, despised by just about everyone, yet continuing to operate under Senate-imposed research restrictions, restrictions that had grown ever stronger since the establishment of Huxley's Haven.

Paula was familiar enough with the setup, though she'd never actually visited before. The notion of walking around the place that conceived her-intellectually and physically-was an experience she simply didn't want.

Her plane landed on a circular pad by the tower. Long ply-plastic petals unrolled from the edges to form a protective shell over her little craft. An astonishingly attractive woman named Ophelia escorted her up to Dr. Friland's office on the top floor of the tower. On the way through the atrium lobby, people stopped and stared at Paula. It was three o'clock in the morning local time; the tower should have been deserted. She was used to attention, but this was akin to religious respect. Some looked like they wanted to bow as she walked past. The effect was un-nerving-and she wasn't used to that feeling at all.

"You're the living proof that the concepts for which we stand have been successful," Ophelia murmured

as they walked into the elevator. “There have been many sacrifices down the decades, so please excuse their wonder.”

Paula sucked in her cheeks, unable to meet any of the ardent stares as the elevator doors slid shut.

According to his file, Justin Friland was born toward the end of the twentieth century. Meeting him in the flesh, Paula couldn't tell, and she normally prided herself in spotting the telltale mannerisms of the truly old. He didn't have any. His effusive good nature matched his handsome adolescent appearance perfectly. Like the Foundation members down in the lobby, he gave Paula an incredulous smile as she came into his office.

“Director, I appreciate you seeing me,” Paula said. “Especially at this time of night.”

“Not at all. This is an absolute honor,” he said, shaking her hand too vigorously and beaming a wide smile.

“Thank you,” Paula said gently, and removed her hand from his grip.

“I spent twenty-five years on Huxley's Haven, helping to establish the birthing centers,” Justin Friland said. “And seeing you here is”—he spread his arms out—“astonishing. We never thought one of you could adapt to life offworld.”

“One of *me*?” Paula arched an eyebrow.

“Sorry, sorry! It's just—we took so much shit over the Haven. Even fifty years ago, the perimeter here was surrounded by protesters. However, the days of the ten-thousand-strong mob have long gone. We still do have a hard core camped to the side of our main entrance. They're not... *pleasant* people. My thoughts are still in war mode. My fault.”

“I see.”

“Please, sit down.” He hurried over to a wide couch. “What can I do for you?”

“I need information.”

“Whatever I can provide.” He was nodding enthusiastically as Paula sat beside him.

“There is a rumor that the Foundation financed Merioneth's Isolation.”

“Not us,” Friland said emphatically. He brushed some floppy chestnut hair from his forehead. “However, the Foundation has undergone considerable schism during the last quarter century. I now lead what you'd probably call a Conservative faction.”

“What of the other factions?”

He sighed. “The person you want to talk to is Svein Moalem.”

Paula gave Friland a surprised look. “He's a Foundation member?”

“An ex-colleague, yes. Now the leader of the New Immortals.”

“We didn't know that. We don't have access to Merioneth files now.”

“Wouldn't have done you any good. The New Immortals have coveted their own planet for some time. They did a lot more than simply finance the Isolation revolution on Merioneth. They infiltrated its civil

service quite some time ago. Any records you did access through the Unisphere merely say what they want them to say.”

“And you didn’t feel obliged to tell us this?”

“Us?” Justin Friland smiled faintly.

“The Intersolar Senate. The Serious Crimes Directorate.”

“Ah. Your government? No. Pardon me, Paula. I wasn’t about to come running to the organization that officially condemned my projects as the work of the devil. Besides, up until they started killing Dynasty members, our Immortal brethren didn’t actually do anything illegal. Political shenanigans are perfectly permissible under our oh-so-liberal Intersolar constitution.

Manipulating public data for ideological ends is common practice. I assume you have better statistics than I do on the subject.“

Paula thought about arguing but decided against it. The information might be useful later, if the Directorate decided to press complicity charges against Friland. “The New Immortals?” she asked. “I assume it’s a relevant name. What method have they adopted? And why does it need an Isolated world?”

Julian Friland looked distinctly uncomfortable. “It’s a modified version of today’s re-life memory succession, which eliminates the requirement to rejuvenate a body.”

“Thank you. You’ve just told me nothing.”

“If you suffer bodyloss today, your insurance company grows a clone and downloads your secure memory store into it. Many people regard that as death. It’s a question of continuity, you see. In rejuvenation, your body simply floats in a tank while its DNA is reset. The you that comes out is still the you that went in a year before, so there’s no doubt about originality and identity. What Moalem and his group proposed was operating *continuous* bodies. A mental relay, if you like, with a personality twinned between an old and young version of the same person.”

“So when the old physical body dies, the young one carries on.

“With continuity intact,” Friland emphasized. “I acknowledge the concept is an elegant one.”

“Not entirely original,” Paula said, thinking about the emissions she’d detected coming from Moalem. She frowned, trying to follow the idea through to its conclusion. “Surely, the two bodies would have to be close together. If they started to diverge, see and react to different things, then the personality would also start to fraction.”

“Good point. The New Immortals claimed that was actually a desirable outcome. Moalem decided that a singular personality input-point was a primitive notion. The human mind should be able to expand to encompass many bodyforms, all inputting their experiences to the unifying mind.”

“That has to be unstable. Bipolar disorder and multiple personalities are notoriously erratic.”

“I’ve been through these arguments so many times with Svein. He maintains that inherent mental illness is completely avoidable in these circumstances, that the human mind can evolve in conjunction with its physical environment. The host personality has to be willing and receptive to change, to want to learn how to be different. He’s probably right.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow. You say the Foundation split because of this? I thought you were all about

exploring new forms of human existence.”

“We are. I set up the Foundation to advance humanity through genetic modification. But change in isolation is not a desirable thing. Hence Huxley’s Haven. Not only are its citizens perfectly adjusted to their jobs, the entire society is designed to be stable, so that only the professions and abilities we have allowed for are needed. There are human clerks who make electronics, especially computers, redundant. Engineering is constitutionally fixed to equal early-twentieth-century development, so mechanics are capable of performing all repairs, rather than writing software for maintenance bots. It’s a level that was specifically chosen to give everyone a decent quality of life without dependence on cybernetics. Which is what makes Huxley’s Haven a perfectly integrated society. It doesn’t change because there is no requirement for change. That is what Commonwealth citizens found so disturbing; it’s also why it works. Within the Foundation, we had a very large debate as to whether we should Isolate it once it was established.”

“Why didn’t you? A society like that can only be challenged by an outside force, so why risk continued exposure? There are plenty of idealists even today who would like it stopped.”

“I didn’t believe we had the right. Maybe in a few hundred years’ time, the Haven will choose to isolate itself from what the Intersolar Commonwealth will become. Who knows?”

“And if it starts to fail, you can fix it,” Paula guessed. He had that kind of egotism.

“That’s what the freethinkers are for,” Friland said. “And to a lesser degree, the police such as yourself. All societies should include a mechanism for self-correction.”

“You’re distracting me,” Paula said. “Why the split with the New Immortals?”

“Very well,” Friland said. “I owe you of all people that explanation, if nothing else.”

“How ironic for you, having to explain yourself to your creation!”

“I’m not a Frankenstein, Investigator.”

“Of course not. The split?”

“First, the prospect of a hive mind is one I resist. Call me old-fashioned, but I don’t regard it as a human goal. Yet there is that danger. Svein knows that you need more than two bodies to guarantee life-continuity. The more you have, the higher the personality’s survival probability. There is no theoretical limit. He can possess hundreds, thousands, of bodies. More still. Exponential growth rates are a favorite politician’s scare image, and I don’t like to use it, but something close to exponential expansion is a very real threat in this case. What happens to individual, normal humans if a New Immortal expands its nest of selves? An Immortal by his or her nature becomes focused on survival. That will trigger competition for resources, possibly as bad as it was in the twenty-first century before Ozzie and Nigel developed wormhole technology. Would the singulars survive? Would they be *allowed* to survive? And what about other nest Immortals? One route is merger. The universal monomind. Again, something I instinctively shy away from. Svein was not complimentary about what he perceives as my outdated reactionary thinking.”

“That must have been painful for you.”

“Quite. The other problem I have is the method that the New Immortals have chosen. It is not pure genetic evolution, which is our creed.”

“Now you’ve really lost me.”

“If you have children, Investigator, they will remain true to your nature. They will inherit the genetic and psychoneural profiling that make you the perfect law enforcement officer. We set the traits that make you what you are; they are dominant. Even if all our fabulous society should fall, if the wormholes are closed, the factories break down, electricity cease to flow; if the human race enters into a new age of barbarism-what the Foundation created will remain. Our heritage is written in our genes. When we define an advancement, we incorporate it in our DNA. It can never be lost. An equal science can remove it, but our advances would endure a dark age. Svein’s system will not. He shares his thoughts and memories with his other bodies via the unisphere. He needs OCTattoos and inserts to transmit and receive. He needs clone vats to grow new bodies. His is a cybernetic, technological future. It is a very short step from what he wishes to become to simply downloading your thoughts into a machine, like today’s uniheads do with the SI. After all, a machine can be made far stronger than human flesh. This is not the route I wish the Foundation to go down. At the far end, it is not a human outcome that awaits.”

“Surely, that’s all contrary to the stasis of Huxley’s Haven?”

“The Haven provides us with a proof of concept. We know we can match our genetic and societal requirements synergistically. That sets the stage for our next advances.”

“Which are?” she asked sharply.

“Development along all fronts. Extreme longevity-ultimately, self-rejuvenation. Increased intelligence. Huge disease resistance.”

“Bigger. Stronger. Better,” she murmured.

“Yes. These advances are slowly seeping into the human genome. Parents have baseline procedures carried out on their embryos to give their offspring healthier physiques. Reprofiting is commonplace in rejuvenation tanks, at least for those who can afford it. We are a slow revolution, Paula. People find our long-term aims uncomfortable, but they continue to incorporate our immediate successes into their very selves. Given such development, society will inevitably adapt and evolve. Which is why I reject the obsessional goal of the New Immortals. I will happily continue my rejuvenation treatments every thirty years because they will ultimately be temporary. In four or five hundred years’ time, I will be beginning my senior life span, which will be measured in millennia. Can you imagine what kind of culture that will play host to?”

“Even if I could, I obviously wouldn’t have a place in it. I’m just a halfway stage experiment, remember.”

“Oh no, Paula, you’ve become much more than that. You’ve humbled us by showing how adaptive humanity is. You are an inspiration that we can all exceed our perceived limits.”

“How very lovely for you,” she said acerbically, and stood up.

Justin Friland looked up at her. “What will you do to Svein Moalem now that you know what he is?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied truthfully. “I’m sure I’ll *adapt* my nature somehow, and bring him to justice.”

He smiled sadly. “We’re not adversaries, Paula, not you and me.”

“Not yet. Not quite. But keep on going the way you are, and we’ll wind up facing each other in court. The Senate has strict laws concerning genetic manipulation outside designated human parameters.”

“I know. And I’m very tired of them, which is why we’re finally leaving altogether.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you going to Isolate another world?”

“No, we don’t have to. The Commonwealth is desperate to make a success of Far Away; the Senate spent so much money getting there, they have to justify it to the taxpayer. It’s a blank canvas of a world, thanks to the solar flare that eliminated its indigenous life. My remaining colleagues are moving there with me. The Senate’s authority and its laws are confined to one city; out in the wild, we’ll be free of the petty regulations that restrict us here, and we can design a new biosphere environment to complement whatever enhancements we build into our bodies. The ultimate synergy, eh?”

“That sounds like a project that will keep you occupied for a few decades.”

“We would be honored if you’d join us. You would be an enormously valuable asset to any community, Paula.”

“Thank you, but no. I have work to do in this society.” She started toward the door.

“There could be tens of him by now,” Friland called out after her. “Dozens. You’ll never get them all.”

“Nonetheless, he will face justice. You know that. That’s how you made me.”

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

The countryside outside Baransly was certainly a lot more hospitable in summer. A warm G-class star shone in a deep ocean-blue sky. High wispy clouds laced the horizon ahead as Paula walked down the narrow farm track that cut through the big fields, pushing her lightweight p-bike over the scattered stone. The air was thick and warm, heavy with the sugary scent of the fireflower vine. She knew the name now. It was the district’s main crop. In the summer’s warmth and humidity, the rows of wire frames were transformed into long dunes of vivid crimson flowers with thick yellow stamen. Petals were already starting to crisp and brown at the edges as midsummer approached; in another month, the fruit would ripen to fist-sized globes a dull purple in color. The pulp was a local staple, equivalent to meat-potato, though the fruit could be crushed for oil as well.

She reached the concrete road at the end of the track and straddled the p-bike. There was no traffic. She twisted the throttle and set off toward Baransly’s outskirts, five miles ahead.

The city’s traffic management network was still functioning. It registered her p-bike as she crossed into the official city boundary. By now, she was on Route Two, one of the main highways into the city, with the midafternoon traffic starting to build up around her. She told the network that she wanted Lislie Road and received a route authorization. Her vehicle license had been accepted as current.

Lislie Road was in the middle of a pleasant residential suburb, with small dome-roofed houses grown out of air coral. Paula turned off the tree-shaded road itself onto the broad pavement and started peddling the p-bike. That way, she was no longer monitored by the traffic network. She stopped outside number 62 and wheeled the p-bike up to the front door. It accepted the code she put in and swung open for her.

Nelson Sheldon had paid Terrie Ority, the previous occupant, a handsome sum for his codes, just as he’d paid another Merioneth refugee for a bike license. The preparations had taken over a month. Paula and Nelson had put the operation together on Augusta, the Sheldon Dynasty’s industrial world. It was the first time in nine decades that Paula had taken a holiday from the Directorate. She’d accrued eight years’ leave. The personnel office was delighted-her director curious.

Inside number 62, the air was musty. Terrie Ority was a fussy man-he’d turned off all the power before he left. He had also left behind most of the furniture. Paula switched the air-conditioning back on and ran the taps to cycle the plumbing system. A couple of ancient maidbots were sitting in their alcoves, fully charged, so she ordered them to start cleaning.

She spent the rest of the day establishing her legend identity in the civil and commercial systems. Her bank account was opened and loaded from a card. She registered with several local stores and had food delivered. Then she sat back and accessed the planetary cybersphere, with her e-butler extracting news summaries to build a picture of Merioneth after the wormhole had closed five months earlier.

It was like losing a short, brutal war. With half the population gone, whole towns had been abandoned. New consumer items were hard to find. Not that it mattered, people simply reclaimed and recycled products from deserted homes. Food hadn't quite been rationed in the winter, but a lot of favorites were no longer commercially available. She was interested to see that medical services, including rejuvenation clinics, had been nationalized on a temporary basis, so that they could be reorganized for fair and equal distribution. Whole fleets of bots, especially civic ones, were breaking down; there were too few service and repair companies to keep them functional. Public transport was patchy, with priority given to maintain strategic links. Cars and trucks were also in need of maintenance, but again, there were a huge number of abandoned vehicles that could be utilized. But on the plus side, this summer's crops were going to produce big surpluses-nobody would go hungry. The tidal and hydropower stations were all functioning efficiently. Local currency was stabilizing after months of disastrous inflation. People were starting to adapt to their new life.

She started to research Svein Moalem. He was still prime minister, with his Nationalist Party holding two thirds of the remaining seats in Parliament. There were due to be elections in two years, when the new constituency boundaries had been established. The party had spent the months since Isolation revoking a whole host of "oppressive Commonwealth restrictions," the majority of which were regulations covering genetic modifications and cloning. Helpfully, Moalem's office provided a diary listing events he was due to attend.

The next day, Paula started observing his movements within the city. They were typical of any high-ranking politician. Speeches to civic and community leaders, meetings with party officials. Parliamentary debates. Voter-friendly visits to schools, hospitals, and selected business. Trips to provincial towns.

He had bodyguards, of course, good ones. When he was due at an event, crowds were scanned using feature recognition software to check for repeat observers. The traffic network was analyzed for any vehicle that kept cropping up in his vicinity. If he took a train or plane, passenger lists were reviewed. All well-established midlevel protocols.

As a consequence, she kept her distance, content to follow his routes via some very sophisticated software her e-butler manipulated in the planetary cybersphere.

After a week, she'd confirmed that he would often abandon his official residence next to the Parliament building in favor of a grand private house in Baransley's most exclusive LakeHill district, where the last remaining multimillionaires resided. It was a perfect place for his nest to operate from.

On the eighth night, with her monitor routines confirming his presence at a late-night Cabinet session, Paula broke in.

The perimeter alarm circuits and sensors were utterly ineffectual against her superior software and the active stealth covering of her light-armor suit. She started walking through the formal grounds, tracking the sentinel dogs prowling around. Thickets of local trees provided excellent cover. The house was squatting on the summit of a mound that had been sculpted with high terracing. To Paula's suspicious eye, the mound would be perfect cover for an underground complex.

She climbed the dry-stone wall of the last terrace. Ahead of her, the house was a three-story construction of dark gray stone, crowned with a lantern tower. The lawn between her and the wall was

completely devoid of cover and dotted with sensors. She used her inserts to neutralize several in her path. Her e-butler told her that several motion trackers up on the eves were locking on as she jogged forward. Data traffic in and out of the house began to increase.

Paula scurried up to a large French door and used a compact power blade to cut a circle through the glass. She found herself in a big hall that followed the principals of High Renaissance architecture, with square columns and a vaulting ceiling of decorated panels.

The lights came on when she was halfway to the vast curving stairs at the far end. Five security staff with high-rated maser rifles were lined up behind the polished stone banister.

“Hold it right there.”

More armed security staff scurried in from ground-floor rooms and surrounded her. Their armor suits were a lot heavier than hers. She raised her hands as eleven energy weapons lined up on her, any one of which could probably cut through her protection.

“Do not move. Deactivate all your systems.”

Paula switched the shimmering stealth layer off, then slowly i cached up and removed her helmet. One of the armored figures up on the stairs stood up, lowering his rifle. Paula’s inserts detected a large emission of encrypted data emerging from him, and suppressed a smile.

“Investigator Myo,” he said, taking off his own helmet. There was no resemblance to Svein Moalem in his features and his skin was the pale brown of a North African.

“Correct,” she said. “And whom am I addressing?”

“Agent Volkep. I’m in charge of the prime minister’s security.” He walked down the stairs. Paula’s e-butler told her the nodes in the house had closed their links to the cybersphere. More suppression shielding came on, sealing up the hall from any communication.

“That’s convenient for you,” Paula said archly as Volkep stood in front of her. His expression gave nothing away.

“Take her over to the holding center,” he told the armed squad. “I want a full scan for weapon inserts, and be very thorough. Hell knows what her Directorate equipped her with. Then bring her down to secure facility three. I’ll interrogate her there.”

Two electromuscle-enhanced gauntlets gripped Paula’s arms, almost lifting her off the ground. She turned her head to look at Volkep as she was hauled away across the hall’s marble flooring. “Nice seeing you again, Svein,” she called out loudly.

That brought a flicker of annoyance to his face.

The holding center was a simple concrete room with a cage door and a single medical-style chair in the middle. It was equipped with malmetal restraints.

Four of the armored bodyguards came in with her, powered up and shielded. They ordered her to strip. Paula obediently removed her own armor. “Keep going,” they told her. She pulled off her sweatshirt and slipped her long shorts down her legs. The OCtattoo glowed sapphire and jade on her abdomen, a circle encasing a tight geometry of intersecting curves that undulated slowly. Four gun muzzles lined up on the gentle light.

“What’s that?”

“Sensory booster,” Paula said. “It’s wetwired into my nerves so I can receive a bigger sensation when I’m accessing porn from the Unisphere. Don’t you have them here?”

“Just get the rest of your clothes off, lady.”

She shrugged out of her bra and took her panties off. One of the suited bodyguards dropped all her garments into a big bag and carried it out. Paula was left standing in the cold concrete cell with the remaining three agents.

“Not bad,” one remarked.

“You wouldn’t need a booster for anything with me,” his colleague said. The others laughed.

Paula gazed at his blank shiny helmet and gave a small snort of contempt. Perhaps she had given the secret service agents too much credit after all.

A female technician came in, followed by a trolleybot loaded with sensor equipment. She frowned when she saw Paula’s OCTattoo. “Put her in the chair.”

The malmetal manacles flowed over Paula’s wrists and ankles. Sensor pads were applied to her skin over the twisting luminescence. More scans swept across her limbs and torso. Then her skull was given a thorough examination. The woman took samples of her blood and saliva. Nails were tested for toxins. Even the air she exhaled was sampled for any abnormality.

Finally, the technician nodded at the armored figures. “She’s clean. Her inserts are sophisticated, but they’re all sensors, memory chips, and processor systems; no weapons of any kind. You can take her down to Volkep.”

“So what’s that thing?” one of the agents asked, pointing at Paula’s abdomen.

“Receiver circuitry wired into her spinal cord, just like she said.”

Paula was marched back through the grandiose hall to a room at the back of the house. An elevator took her deep underground. She wasn’t at all surprised when it opened on a junction of corridors. Volkep took over, dismissing the bodyguards. He took Paula by the arm and led her to a simply furnished office. Svein Moalem was waiting there, his opal necklace just visible inside the open collar of his shirt. Two other youths were with him, one obviously a full clone with identical features to Svein, just five years younger, the other having East Asian features; the one thing they had in common was a necklace. Volkep was still in his armor, so she couldn’t tell if he was wearing any kind of array.

“I like the whole underground citadel thing,” Paula said, looking around the office with its drab ceiling and dilapidated couch. “Quite the retro Criminal Mastermind secret headquarters.” Her abdominal OCTattoo showed her that the four of them were exchanging data at a huge rate, all of which originated from the ornamental arrays around their necks. She opened the additional bioneural chips in her cortex and started recording their emissions.

“Why are you here?” Volkep asked.

“I talked to Dr. Friland.”

“Ah,” Svein said, an exclamation simultaneously uttered by his youthful clone.

“You fired the missile on Nova Zealand,” Paula said.

“Well, that’s open to debate.”

“In fact, I suspect your nest *is* the Free Merioneth Forces in their entirety.”

“Not completely. My Foundation colleagues are fully supportive in every respect.”

“I see.”

“Would you like to arrest them as well?”

“I might get around to it.”

“I’m fascinated by how you got here. Did you come back before or after the wormhole closed?”

“After. You killed a lot of Sheldons.”

“Old concept,” the East Asian youth said dismissively. “They’re all alive today.”

“Interesting,” Paula said. “Did you know your inflections are the same?”

Svein walked around in front of her. “Did you know I don’t care? Why are you here? Even with Sheldon support, you can’t possibly expect to snatch all of me back to the Commonwealth. After all, you don’t even know how many of me there are.”

“True. Did you get hot while you waited for the plane to take off? I did while I was out there. That desert has a terrible climate.”

“You’d have to send a small army here for that, and even if Sheldon was determined enough, there’s no guarantee he’d succeed. Were you sent to try to find out how much I’ve grown?”

“I don’t care how many there are in your nest. Was the missile heavy when you lifted up and aimed it at the plane?”

“What do you mean, you don’t care? Why are you here then? Why did you break into my home? Is it to snatch data on me?”

“I have all the data I need. It was the reason for the Isolation that puzzled me. Now that I know it wasn’t a financial or political ethos, it makes perfect sense. Did you build the missile here? Did it kick when you launched it? Was the exhaust plume loud?”

“Not political?” Svein said it, but all four of the nest raised their eyebrows in unison, sharing the same slightly mocking expression. “What could be more political than developing a new kind of life-effectively, a new species?”

“Friland called you obsessional,” Paula said. “I think he’s right. Did you actually watch the plane falling out of the sky? I bet you did. Who could resist that? No matter what type of human you are.”

“Paula”—all four of them assumed a mock-indignant expression—“are you trying to *provoke* me?”

“Did you feel satisfaction when it exploded?”

“Two can play this game. Did Friland tell you we’re related, you and me?” The Svein body grinned.

The Volkep body stood beside Svein. “And he was the original,” Volkep said, tapping Svein on the

shoulder. “Our minds are rooted in the same ancestor, Paula.”

“I didn’t know that,” she admitted. “Were you nervous when you ran back to the boat? That was a weak point. Someone might have seen you.”

“Friland originally funded the Foundation from the clinic he used to run in Granada back in the twenty-first century,” Svein said. “He sold baseline germ treatments to wealthy Westerners whose own countries banned such tinkering. That way, he amassed a massive germ bank. A good percentage of the wealthy and powerful people of the day came to visit at some time and have their children enhanced. Their money and DNA was a good foundation for his Foundation.”

“Standing on Ridgeview station platform waiting for the train, you must have been buzzing on adrenaline,” Paula persisted. “You’d know that I or someone like me would have the trains stopped. You might have been stranded there, with the police closing in. No way to get back to Sydney and establish your alibi.”

“I looked up the records in Granada. Our ancestor is Jeff Baker; apparently, he invented crystal memories. A famous man in his time. A very smart man, too. Friland needed that level of intelligence in his research team, which is why I was created from Baker’s old sperm samples. You, I imagine, require a similar analytical ability. A lot of other sequences were included, which is where we start to diverge, but genetically, he’s equivalent to our grandfather. Which makes us cousins, Paula. We’re family. And you always thought you were unique, isolated, and alone. You’re not, Paula. We not only share flesh, we think the same way.”

“Were you watching when my Directorate team arrested your Fiech body? Some clever little vantage point nearby, perhaps?”

Svein pressed his face up close to Paula, his mouth parting with an angry snarl. “That *obsession* you mock in me is exactly the same one that runs through you, Investigator Myo! Friland didn’t have to sequence it into your genome quite as much as you were led to believe. It’s not artificial, it’s *you*. It’s your heritage. It’s my heritage. It’s what we are. And this is our world. You’re home, Paula. Welcome back.”

She smiled lightly. “I know what I am, and I know where my home is. Good luck finding yours.”

The Svein body took a half step back from her. All four of the nest were frowning in annoyance now. “Why are you here?” they demanded in unison.

“To ensure that the sentence passed on Fiech is carried out in full,” Paula told them.

“I thought it had been,” the Volkep body said coldly.

“It hasn’t been yet, because you made sure that part of you didn’t remember. But memory’s a funny thing, it’s triggered by association. And your mind is *shared*.” Paula gestured around at the empty air. “It’s all around us, if you know how to look.” Her virtual hand touched Nelson’s communication icon.

“I’ve got enough,” she said out loud.

“What-” all four nestlings grunted.

The wormhole opened behind her, expanding out from a micron-wide point to a two-meter circle. Bright light shone through, silhouetting Paula’s naked body. She stepped backward, crossing the threshold to be enveloped by the light. She lost her footing as Augusta’s slightly heavier gravity claimed her, and fell on her arse in a completely undignified manner. Svein and his nestlings never saw that. The wormhole closed the instant she was through.

She was sitting in the middle of the alien environment confinement chamber of the CST Augusta Exploratory Division, a huge dome-shaped chamber with dark radiation-absorptive walls. In front of her was the five-meter-wide blank circle of the wormhole gateway, its gray pseudosubstance emitting strange violet sparkles. Halfway up the curving surface behind her was a broad band of reinforced windows with the big operations center behind it. Nelson Sheldon was pressed up against the superstrength glass, grinning down at her. Behind him, the hundred-strong staff controlling the wormhole were peering over the tops of their tiered rows of consoles, curious and eager to see the conclusion to their oddest operation ever. Tracking her movements on Merioneth and keeping the wormhole close by had stretched the machinery to its limit.

“You okay?” Nelson’s amplified voice boomed down from the ceiling.

“Yeah,” Paula said, climbing to her feet. “I’m okay.”

WHAT I KNOW REALLY HAPPENED

The court guards were utter bastards to me. After that idiot judge passed sentence they dragged me down to the holding cell while I shouted that I was innocent. They just laughed as they slung me inside. I heard them later. Deliberately. They said that the Justice Directorate had developed a suspension system that allows a tiny part of your mind to stay awake during the sentence, so you’re aware of each long year as it passes. It’s part of the punishment, knowing all the opportunities you’ve lost, the life you’ve missed.

Not true. Just another Unisphere myth.

After, they put me down on the bed in the preparation room. No. I’ll be honest. After, they *held* me down. I fought them, *Damnit*, I’m innocent! I was a classic case of someone who went down screaming and kicking. They won’t ever forget me. It took six Directorate orderlies to hold me in place while the malmetal restraints wrapped around my limbs. And after that, I still shouted. I cursed them and their families. I swore vengeance, that in two and a half thousand years I’d become the killer they wrongly thought I was, and I’d hunt down their descendants and torture them to death.

No use. They still infused the drugs. Consciousness faded away.

I woke up. The room that slowly came into focus around me was very similar to the preparation room I’d gone to sleep in. Stupidly, I was bloody grateful that I hadn’t known all that time flowing around me. The waste of my potential lives. But I was alive. Warm. And pleasantly drowsy.

There was something around my neck that seemed familiar somehow, something from the time in my life I’d lost. Icons in my virtual vision were blinking green, showing that the memorycell channels into my neural structure were wide open.

Then that queen bitch Paula Myo came in. I tried to get up to throttle her. That’s when I found I was still restrained, with malmetal coiled around my arms and legs.

“What the fuck is this?” I shouted. My voice was weak.

“I had you woken,” Myo told me. “I have something for you, something you’ve forgotten.”

“What? What is this?”

“You,” she said, and took off her suit jacket. Something was glowing underneath her white cotton blouse. I could see shapes moving.

“Help,” I cried. “Someone. Help me.” The colored shadows on her abdomen began to writhe faster and faster. My virtual icons changed from green to blue, showing incoming impulses.

“What is that?” I whispered in fright.

She glanced down, as if only becoming aware of the light. Her smile made her face ugly. “A kind of prison, I suppose. You know, in ancient times necromancers used to draw pentagrams to trap demons in. They thought that if they were imprisoned, they could use their powers. A very misplaced notion, I suspect. In this case, geometry isn’t important. I simply had to have a large receiving element. Your thoughts are big, after all. But I managed to catch them. Not all of them, just the right ones. Those that were relevant to the crime.”

“My thoughts?” The icons expanded abruptly, wiping out my sight. Then faces emerged through the blue mist. Four of them in some kind of dilapidated room. Faces I knew. Svein. I remembered him. I remembered... *being him*.

I was the one standing in the desert outside Ridgeview while the rest of me lived our life. It was hot out there. Bloody unpleasant, actually. The sun burned my arms and face. I took a leak against some local plant. That way if the forensic team were any good, they’d find it and confirm the Fiech body’s DNA.

Then the air traffic control data playing in my virtual vision showed me that the plane was taxiing to the runway. I took a breath and got the missile ready. A simple thing, really, three of me had built it in the engineering center under the Lake Hill house. Most of the components were off-the-shelf, and the custom ones were easy enough for the bots to manufacture. We built quite a few.

The finished product was a simple blue-gray launch tube over a meter long, with a shoulder saddle and a handle. It was heavy when I rested it on my shoulder; I squatted down on the stony sand to make the weight easier. I could see the big old Siddeley-Lockheed lift into the sky, with its engine rumble faint in the hot desert air. It took what seemed like an age to climb up to its cruise altitude, curving around the city in a wide arc. The passenger list said it was just about full, over a hundred and thirty people. It would be quick. Death in such a fashion always is. And the passenger list confirmed the Dynasty scum were on board. The missile’s sensors locked on. There wasn’t anything else in the sky to confuse them.

I fired the missile. The bloody launch tube slammed into my shoulder. If I hadn’t been bracing myself, it would have knocked me down. The roar of the solid rocket booster was obscenely loud. For a couple of seconds, I was overwhelmed. It was like being hit on the side of the head. Smoke was seething all around me. I crouched, staggered about. Then I recovered enough to stand still and look up into the wide open sky. The hyperram had kicked in, which made the missile just about impossible to see.

I expected the explosion to be bigger. This was just a white pinpoint flash, no fireball. But behind the blaze, the plane started to disintegrate, tumbling out of the sky, dark fragments twirling away from the main body.

There was no way I could move. Actually, my whole nest of bodies froze up as I watched the spectacle. There was something obscenely beautiful about the sight, and better still was the knowledge that *I* had created it. If I could do this, I could do anything! I’d be able to force through Merioneth’s Isolation now. I had the courage and determination.

The first fragments hadn’t even reached the ground when I turned and hurried down to the shore where the boat was anchored. This point was critical. The whole area would be swarming with people. The Unisphere was already flinging out alarms. Rescue crews and police would be dispatched within minutes. And any local citizens nearby would no doubt rush to help. My Volkep body released the warning message into the Unisphere as I reached the shoreline.

After that, it was a quick trip across the sea to Ridgeview. I waited on the station platform for my train back to Earth. It was an eerie experience. Everyone around me was accessing the Unisphere reports of the plane crash. Nobody said anything; they were all too shocked at the disaster just outside town.

When I got back to Sydney, I took a cab straight to the apartment. The rest of me were a pleasant sensation of reassurance as I took the memory wipe drugs. The Volkep body took the array necklace from my neck and smiled proudly. I could feel the connection with myself reducing, darkness replacing the joy and color of my true memories. One contact remained, a single thread of experience: the alibi trip to Ormal. Damn, that stewardess was great-looking. I wish I hadn't been so wrapped up on a mission.

Then I was alone. And the drugs kicked in, and I knew nothing more.

Then I was without one of me. Just for an instant, I felt regret. But I am many. The loss of a single body is irrelevant. That's what I am, a New Immortal. That's *why* I am. I continue even after the loss of one, or more. I *live*.

I was shivering when the glare of color and sensation subsided into simple knowledge. Paula Myo was looking down at me, pulling her suit jacket back on. The flare of activity within her OCTattoo was subsiding.

"Bitch!" I couldn't sense me. For the first time since I nested, I was devoid of myself. One body with a single mind, completely alone.

"Good-bye," said Paula Myo.

"No. No!" A Justice Directorate orderly had entered the loom. He was carrying an infuser. Paula Myo nodded at him.

"Carry on," she ordered.

"Why have you done this to me?" I cried. "This is inhuman!"

She turned in the door, her face blank as she stared at me. "You are the person who committed the crime. The *whole* person, now. This is your sentence. The sentence you tried to avoid. Justice has prevailed."

The orderly pressed the infuser against my neck. I screamed, my mind crying out to the rest of me, to help me, to comfort me. There was no answer.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER

Nelson Sheldon was waiting in the entrance hall of the Justice Directorate as Paula came out of the elevator. "How did it go?" he asked.

"Successfully. The true Dimitros Fiech is now serving his sentence."

"Shame about the rest of him."

"Not really."

"Oh?"

"When suspension was first introduced, the Justice Directorate examined the idea of leaving convicts aware while their bodies slept. It was abandoned almost immediately. The experience was too much like

sensory deprivation. The minds went insane very quickly under such circumstances.“

“So how does that help us?” Nigel asked curiously.

“Dimitros Fiech is now unaware of his predicament. He’ll sleep soundly for the next two and a half millennia, and he’ll be offered extensive therapy when he gets out-assuming the Commonwealth is still around. Meanwhile, on Merioneth-”

“Ah. Svein Moalem’s nest knows part of him is in suspension. And as an Immortal-”

“He’ll endure those two and a half thousand years aware of the Fiech body’s state. The punishment is shared. Or rather, it isn’t, because it’s all his. Just experienced in different ways.”

Nelson smiled. “We can live with that.”

“Good, because I have no intention of returning to Merioneth.”

“Thank you for going in the first place,” Nelson said. “The Dynasty is most grateful. We don’t forget who our friends are.”

Paula grinned back shrewdly. “I’ll remember that.”