

## SEPOY FIDELITIES

by Tom Purdom

Tom Purdom reports that his “grandson is a creative writing student at Philadelphia’s highly regarded High School for the Creative and Performing Arts and serves on the tech team that maintains the school’s computers and website. His younger sister writes scripts for a *Buffy* podcast, reads physics books, and makes arcane jokes about her secret Theory of Everything. Science and fiction is obviously a hereditary combination.” Tom’s new story about human and alien interactions is set in the same milieu as his December 1992 novelette, “Sepoy.”

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It had been the last time they would ever make love—and in their case making love was a precise use of language, not a euphemism. Francesca had rolled on her side when Jason had finally broken the bond and he had wrapped himself around her with his arm stretched along the swell of her hip and the long line of her thigh. The heft of her vibrant, competent body was, in its way, just as satisfying as everything that had gone before.

*I was a real mouse when I was a girl, Francesca had told him when they had been sharing their memories of the people they had been. I couldn't hit a ball. Boys thought I looked dull. Nothing changed when I got older. So one day I let myself spend a little time poking around the tucfra recruiting site. And ended up running around in this.*

Jason had found it harder to tell the truth about himself. He still felt like a fraud—like his body was just a facade and the real Jason Jardanell was still a helpless dependent whose muscles had been almost completely useless since they had been devastated by the slackbody virus just after his sixth birthday. He had picked up Francesca once, and tossed her on the bed, just for the sheer joy of knowing he controlled two functioning, professionally developed arms.

“Would you like to play something?” Francesca murmured. “One more time? We’ve still got a few minutes.”

“Is that what you want?”

“If it’s all right with you. This is nice but—”

“Then let’s do it. It might make Byron and the Colonel feel better if they happened to hear any of it. They could tell themselves we’ve been in here making music.”

Francesca giggled. She rolled out of bed and he watched her walk across the bedroom to her dressing room. Her husband had outfitted his mansion with one of the pleasanter luxuries of the rich—a mammoth bedroom with oversized dressing rooms on each side. Each dressing room contained its own bathroom, enormous walk-in closets, a full wall entertainment screen, and all the furniture and appliances a well-heeled husband or wife needed when they wanted to lounge in privacy just a few steps from the conjugal bed.

Michael Gratzhausen had been a shy child, according to Francesca, and he had compensated by working out with personal trainers. Jason eyed the image in his dressing screen every time he passed by the camera and saw himself wrapped in the duplicate of Michael's body the tucfra had given him. He succumbed to the temptation twice this time, once while he was still naked, but he was nagged by the same emotions that had pecked at the moments he had just shared with Francesca. What would the tucfra do with him when this assignment ended? Would he ever walk around in anything this splendid again? Or love a woman as magnificent as Francesca?

They were both wearing businesslike turtlenecks and slacks when they emerged from the dressing rooms. Jason picked up a cello and Francesca sat down at the bedroom fortepiano—the lightly strung early version of the piano that Mozart and Haydn had actually had in mind when they composed.

“Can we give the Shui romance another try?” Jason said. It was a twenty-first century composition, but Tang Shui had written it for the gentler sound of the older instruments. Francesca had never played it before he had encouraged her to run through it with him.

“Whatever you want.”

Jason picked up the bow and drew it along the strings of the cello with Michael's knowledgeable, experienced hands. He spent a minute with his ear to the strings, making his final meticulous adjustments to the tuning. Then he nodded at Francesca and started to ride the long, slow arc of the opening cello part.

“You have a call from Dr. Mineaux,” the house said. “Priority minus one.”

Francesca stopped playing in mid phrase. “*Le métier tristesse de le regimente Dillon.*”

The system responded to the password they had been given for the day and

placed the image of a dapper, bearded man on the bedroom screen.

“I take it you’re both primed for the evening’s adventure,” the man said.

“We’ll be leaving at twenty-two hundred,” Francesca said. “As scheduled.”

She had turned away from the piano and placed her palms on her knees, as if she needed to brace herself. She always seemed to lose some of her poise when she talked to the de facto rulers of Earth—even when they clothed themselves in the bodies of amiable sophisticates.

“Our intelligence indicates there’s only two people in the boathouse, as promised—Dr. Levar and Captain Kelly McMay. We still think you should be prepared for a trap, but it looks like they’ll be the only adversaries you’ll have to worry about. We’ll continue to observe the boathouse until the handover is finished, of course.”

Francesca nodded. They had both decided it was best to say as little as possible when you were talking to the tucfra. You didn’t take chances when you were dealing with people who could choose your next body.

“I’m afraid my superiors are becoming a touch tiresome,” the tucfra officer said. “They’ve asked me to reemphasize our relationship with Dr. Levar. If this does turn out to be a trap—if Dr. Levar fails to keep her end of the bargain—then I think it’s obvious we will no longer be bound by our own pledges.”

The tucfra’s face hardened. “We will accept her capture. Her death would be preferable.”

“I understand,” Francesca said.

“Of course, you’re also supposed to factor in our assessment of Dr. Levar’s mental state. We don’t *know* she’ll kill Michael—and perhaps herself—if she feels cornered, but you will have to assume it’s a possibility. I realize that leaves you with some conflict in your instructions but you can at least take comfort in the fact that my overseers have confidence in your judgment.”

The officer smiled. “Enjoy your evening.”

The screen darkened. Francesca lowered her head and rattled off half a dozen piano notes with her left hand.

“At least he didn’t remind us we’re dispensable,” Jason said.

Their last briefing had laid out their priorities with less ambiguous precision. Michael Gratzhausen's survival was, of course, the uncontested no-questions-asked winner of the number one slot on the list. Michael had to be rescued *alive* and *in good health*. Michael was the indispensable component in the tucfra's plans. He had the kind of personality traits a good ruler should have, in the opinion of their employers. He had been endowed with traits that couldn't be artificially instilled in a human personality without disrupting equally desirable traits such as ordinary human unpredictability.

As for Jason and Francesca—the mission planners had decided Jason should be awarded the second position and Francesca the third. If anything happened, Jason had been informed, he was supposed to ignore the impulses common among males of his species in his cultural sector. He must refrain, no matter how he felt, from any attempt to protect Francesca if that attempt might endanger him. It would take the tucfra twenty-six days to replace him with another version of Michael, the planning officer had explained—long enough the opposition could exploit Michael's unexplained absence and create serious difficulties. Francesca's death would be an inconvenience, but she could always be replaced with a second wife who would provide Michael and his children with the same kind of guidance Francesca had provided.

But that was only a consideration, it seemed, if Jason had to choose between his survival and Francesca's. If he encountered a Michael-Jason choice, then he would, of course, understand that his own demise was the preferable, if regrettable, option. Jason could only replace Michael for a limited time, even if he was inhabiting an exact duplicate of Michael's body. Michael's closer acquaintances were already beginning to notice the "changes" in his personality. Jason had a splendid future as a valued agent of the Tucfra Hegemony, but he wasn't the kind of person who could cope with the long term, sometimes tedious, details of government.

Francesca shrugged. "It looks like it's time we returned to the world, Lieutenant."

"At your service, Major."

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The boat was a coast patrol catamaran—a platform crowded with weapons and crew stations that had been laid across two sleek high-speed hulls. Jason and Francesca had pulled wet suits over their clothes and settled into lounge chairs in

the officers' ready room. Byron Traine and Colonel Wolsner were standing near the starboard windows watching the lights of the casinos and pleasure malls that glittered along the shore.

Byron Traine was wearing the armored dress jacket he usually wore when he was on duty, but he was carrying a bigger sidearm and he had stored the weapon in a bulky shoulder holster he wore outside the jacket. His waist belt held two stubby laser "swords" that had been tucked into gleaming leather sheaths. He looked, as usual, as if he was trying to repress a smile. Byron was a slender, good-natured young man who still acted as if he thought skirmishes and raids were slightly more dangerous versions of the amusement park rides he liked to frequent during his leisure hours.

Jason's own pistol was a large, flat item that had been crammed into a sealed storage pocket on the chest of his wet suit. His laser sword and three sets of spare batteries rested in a smaller pocket.

Francesca smiled. "I hope you won't be *too* disappointed if this all goes off without a hitch, Byron."

Byron turned around and smiled back. He had been placed in command of the special operations squad sitting in the enlisted ready room. It was the first time he had been given command of a combat unit. He had been Michael and Francesca's personal bodyguard for most of the four years he had been a commissioned officer.

"At this point in our adventures," Byron said, "I think a quiet and uneventful boat ride will give me all the entertainment I need."

Colonel Wolsner was carrying his standard-issue Jersey Guard pistol on the standard-issue cross belt rig that came with his standard-issue Jersey Guard duty uniform. He had been one of Francesca's supporters ever since she had made her first appearance in the Commonwealth of Sovereign Jersey and captured Michael's heart. He had believed her influence over Michael was one of the best things that had ever happened to the Gratzhausen family, but his attitude had changed as soon as she had revealed she was a tucfra agent.

*I knew he thought the tucfra are just a bunch of racketeers, Francesca had said. But I didn't expect the contempt I keep picking up. Byron still seems to think I'm the same glamorous figure he's been protecting ever since he got his commission. The Colonel makes me feel like he can look right through my skin and see the real me hiding inside.*

Jason had been surrounded all his life by people who expressed their hatred for the tucfra—and their contempt for *seeps*—as casually as they talked about the weather. Francesca had been born in Florida, to parents who had served the Tucfra Hegemony and retired on comfortable pensions. Jason had grown up in the New England Confederation, under a government that maintained its independence with a fanatic disregard for every other consideration. As a child, he had thought the term *seep* referred to the way tucfra agents oozed through human society like some kind of toxic waste. He had been a teenager when he had discovered it was a corruption of *sepo*y—the name the British had conferred on the native soldiers who had manned the army that held India for the British Empire. There were, as far as anyone could tell, only about two thousand tucfra living in the sealed habitat they had constructed in the Sahara. That handful of aliens—who seemed to be a wandering band of adventurers—had taken control of an entire planet by working through human agents and human institutions, in the same way a few thousand British imperialists had once ruled the teeming millions who inhabited the Indian subcontinent. The tucfra ship had orbited Earth just as the conflicts created by global warming were approaching a peak. Its envoys had descended from the sky in disarmingly human bodies and started peddling technological abatements and recruiting employees. The peace called the Tucfra Hegemony had settled on the Earth before its inhabitants quite understood what had happened. The United Nations had acquired a powerful military force. Major nations had fragmented into harmless political divisions such as the Cooperation of Gandung and the Commonwealth of Sovereign Jersey.

“You could get yourself a new body and volunteer to take the lady’s place,” Colonel Wolsner said. “Don’t your friends in the Sahara keep a few good bodies hanging on racks for overnight use, Mrs. Gratzhausen?”

Francesca maintained her smile. “That’s one of the rumors you hear, Colonel.”

“You didn’t manage to confirm it during your own stay with them?”

Francesca raised her arm off the chair and glanced at the time strip on the back of her glove. Colonel Wolsner didn’t know it, but he was triggering an inhibition that always made Jason feel momentarily confused when it blocked his own responses. The tucfra body transfer technology was one of the subjects their human agents couldn’t talk about—were psychologically *incapable* of talking about.

“Michael Gratzhausen is our first priority,” Francesca said. “We’ve been

told that twice when we got our orders. We're going to get him out for you, colonel. He would be my first priority in any case. But there are no conflicts between my personal desires and the orders we've been given."

"And you will continue your role as Michael's wife."

"If Michael wants me to. It will be up to him. He's a good man—a good husband, a good father, and a good political leader. You know that as well as I do."

"I also know the tucfra have partitioned a great nation into seventeen impotent little pseudo-countries. And commandeered 15 percent of an entire planet's economic output just to support the lifestyle they maintain in their desert paradise."

Francesca settled back in her chair. A hint of a drawl colored her voice—a sure sign she was deliberately maintaining a composed, unprovocative facade. "This isn't the time to get involved in an argument about the rights and wrongs of the Tucfra Hegemony. We're going to bring Michael out. We're going to restore him to his rightful position. You want that. *I* want that. Ninety percent of the people who live under Michael's government would want it, if they knew what we're doing."

Byron nodded. A thin smile slipped across his face. It occurred to Jason that everyone in the room understood who was in charge of this expedition.

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They slipped into the water two miles off shore. It was a long swim, even for people with their bodies, but Francesca had decided it was necessary. Pleasure boats usually stayed within a mile of the shore, and Francesca felt they had to minimize the danger that a boat full of late night revelers might spot their cruiser and wonder why a patrol catamaran had taken up a parking position at such an odd hour.

The waves were only a foot high. Jason could see the stars when he happened to look up, but overall the swim was about as interesting as a long series of laps in a darkened indoor pool. It didn't matter. He had Francesca beside him and he was doing something he couldn't have dreamed of doing just a year ago.

He had taken his first swim two days after the tucfra had given him the body he had inhabited during his training. His trainer, Sergeant Shardi, led him

through a two mile run and finished the session with a plunge into the shallow end of an outdoor pool. Jason had never taken a swimming lesson, but he thrashed across the width of the pool with his best imitation of the swimmers he had seen on TV. Sergeant Shardi let him relax after he finished the second lap and he spent ten minutes hopping around in the water like a schoolboy. He actually did a couple of cannonball dives off the rim of the pool, holding his knees against his chest and raising a splash that would have made him the envy of the kids he had once watched from his wheelchair.

*As far as I'm concerned, Francesca had said, I'm Michael's wife. They gave me the job and I've done it. The information in your briefing was correct—I have become quite fond of him. He may not be the best man for the job he's inherited, but he's a kind, decent man who loves music and pleasure. I'd rather see him running things than a lot of people who may be tougher and more ruthless and all the other things our wonderful Director of Security thinks Michael should be. I've been here for thirteen years and I've done a good job. I wouldn't have done it half as well if I didn't like Michael. And didn't like being married to him.*

The wonderful Director of Security was Michael's stepbrother, Frederick Gratzhausen. According to the original plan set up by the tucfra (or the human bureaucrats who did their planning), Jason had been dispatched to Sovereign Jersey so he could replace Michael for a few weeks and counter a coup Frederick had been developing. Michael would be kept in a safe house until the danger passed and return to his rounds thinking he had spent the time in a pleasant rehab facility while Francesca looked after things at home.

Instead, Jason had arrived at the handover point—a secluded twelveroom weekend “cottage”—and discovered Colonel Wolsner and Lieutenant Trainee slumped across an oversized dining room table sleeping off the effects of one of the stealthier contemporary drugs. Frederick had deposited his stepbrother in his own version of a safe house and Jason and Francesca had spent two months maneuvering against Frederick's underlings while Michael lay in a hospital bed, attached to a tube that could deliver a dose of one of the faster contemporary poisons anytime Eileen Levar opened the right valve.

A guard shark approached them as they entered the artificial lagoon outside the boathouse. The shark was only about six feet long, but it looked like it was half teeth when it rolled onto its back three feet under their bellies.

Francesca broke radio silence. “Can we assume our charming friend Kelly McMay is operating the shark?”



Jason smiled. "It does look like his kind of smile, doesn't it?"

The boathouse had been upgraded during the period when Michael Gratzhausen's grandfather had been establishing his control over the area that had become the Commonwealth of Sovereign Jersey. The boat door was a massive sliding affair that looked as if it could stop any weapon a well-equipped smash-and-grab raiding party would have in its arsenal. The structure above the door was a windowless wall spotted with hatches that obviously concealed gun emplacements.

They had already decided Byron Traine's team couldn't blast through the door if they had to launch an assault. Byron's force would have to land on the beach and pick its way through the automated defenses that protected the beach house from an attack from the land—a process that could take a full quarter hour under the best circumstances, and longer if their adversaries had added a few extra gimmicks to the arrangements depicted in the family databanks.

The door slid open. The shark flashed them another look at its teeth and disappeared into the blackness of the water.

The gap in the doorway was about three feet wide. Francesca stroked ahead of him and Jason let her take the lead. He slipped below the surface just as Francesca's hands dug into the water on the other side of the door. He might have to let her go into danger first, but nobody had told him he had to stay ten strokes behind.

The door rumbled shut. Jason shot to the surface and they lifted their face masks and treaded water back to back.

The docking pool was a big floodlighted rectangle with walkways on three sides. A pleasure boat loomed above them on their left—a sixty-footer, according to the knowledge Jason had acquired when the tucfra had prepared him for life among the elite. Two racy-looking motorboats bobbed on their right. In front of them, about two Olympic laps from their position, two figures were standing in the center of the rear walkway. One of them matched the simulations of Eileen Levar the tucfra had shown them. The other, as promised, was Michael Gratzhausen.

Eileen had two tortoiseshell guardcats sitting in front of her. She was wearing a close-fitting brown beret and a loose lab coat that could have draped over most of the bulges a weapon could produce.

Jason frowned at the man standing on her left. Michael looked as if his captors had been stuffing him with drugs. His shoulders were slumping forward. The face drooping between the shoulders looked slack and listless. Jason was examining the same handsome face and the same broad-shouldered physique he had been admiring in his dressing screen, but he wasn't seeing the verve that had flooded through him from the moment his brain had connected with Michael's glands and muscles.

Francesca's back stiffened. "That's not Michael."

She pulled away from him with the clean, silent strokes he had watched her use when she launched into a sprint during her morning laps.

"It's the copy. *They've brought us the copy.* Stroke for the bow of the first motorboat. We'll climb out there."

Three splashes hit the water. A gray barrier rose out of the deck in front of Eileen. She dropped to one knee and Jason realized she was holding a weapon.

It was a confusing moment. Jason had been prepared for a trap that included aquatic guard animals and he had stopped worrying about that possibility when it had become clear the docking pool was empty. Guard cats were non-aquatic. He had assumed the cats might attack when he and Francesca climbed onto the walkway. He had already started thinking about the best way to cover Francesca when they reached the edge of the pool.

The third splash added to the confusion. They knew Eileen Levar had been developing a copy of Michael. She was an expert in tucfra body transfer technology. The tucfra wanted her neutralized precisely because she was a renegade who had the details of their most powerful technology stored in her head. But a body needed a brain ... a fully stocked, properly trained brain ... the product of eight months of work, the tucfra claimed, even with the advanced techniques Eileen Levar had mastered....

The cats were plowing toward them like a pair of torpedoes. If Eileen Levar could make a copy of Michael, she could obviously transform a pair of guard cats into an aquatic death squad.

Francesca's gun snapped. "Protect yourself," Francesca said. "They're after you. I'll take care of Eileen. You're the one she's aiming for."

Jason's hands were already reaching for the pocket that held the laser sword. He left the pocket sealed and plunged under the surface.

A huge surge flowed through his body. Two long strokes of his arms pulled him three yards below the surface. He was outnumbered three to one but he had the body the tucfra had given him—a body that had capabilities even Michael couldn't imitate.

Francesca was radioing the patrol boat and receiving a broken-up reply that consisted mostly of Byron Traine complaining he was receiving a broken-up message. She rattled out a report anyway, starting with terse sentences that let Jason know she was firing at Eileen and using one of the speed boats for cover.

The light from the boathouse lighting system lit the water with a green glow. The cats stayed on the surface as he slipped toward them from below and he saw them as featureless silhouettes. Their paws were churning the water like motorized paddles.

As a boy, lying in bed with useless muscles, Jason had usually watched the action series that featured female adventurers. He had shied away from male action heroes because they made him feel he was watching someone he might have been—or at least someone a nine-year-old boy could *believe* he might have been. The big exception to his preference for female protagonists had been a mass of muscle who had roamed around Stone Age Africa strangling lions and killing zebras with his bare hands. Konga's feats had been so absurd, even to a nine-year old mind, that Jason had known there wasn't the slightest possibility he could have done such things himself if he had been granted a normal life.

It hadn't occurred to him that he might someday inhabit a body that had been touched up here and there by an alien species that had been remodeling its own bodies for a couple of thousand terrestrial years. In the New England Confederacy, he would have been committing treason if he had expressed a yearning for a *normal* body crafted by the alien despots.

The cats altered their course, one left and one right, and slipped beneath the surface. They were still dark, featureless shapes from Jason's viewpoint but their bodies seemed to elongate. Their hindquarters were wiggling like the sterns of seals.

He pulled his legs underneath him and shot toward the surface with his body upright. Rigid fingers stabbed into the belly of the cat on the left. Feline stomach muscles yielded before the pressure of a bone and muscle spear. He couldn't puncture the cat's skin, but he could crush its soft organs between his fingers and its spine.

His left hand jumped to the animal's right rear leg. His fingers clamped around its ankle. The hand that had just stunned it with pain and internal damage grabbed the leg higher up and applied a twist. Tendons tore. Bones snapped out of joints. Jason bobbed to the surface and sucked in a lungful of air.

The second cat popped up beside him. Claws raked across his legs. A forepaw reached for his head.

He blocked the paw with his left arm and kicked away from the cat. He flipped over backward, spine arched, and started a loop that would, if all went well, end with another upward drive.

The cat came down after him. They met face to face as he was pulling out of his dive and he decided Konga might have had the right idea after all.

It took a little feinting and twisting but he ended up just where he wanted to be, sprawled over the cat's back with his left arm wrapped around its body and his right hand pressing against the bottom of its jaw. The strongest muscleman the human race had produced would be making a huge mistake if he tried to strangle a lion on the open plains. But a human with a tucfra-enhanced body could probably hold a smaller carnivore under water until it drowned.

The cat struggled underneath him. It rolled onto its back—a maneuver that might have done some damage if it had been squeezing him between its weight and solid ground—and he held his body pressed against its spine.

Motion jerked his attention to his left. A big shape loomed out of the underwater murk. Eileen Levar's Michael-puppet reached for him with clumsy sweeps of its arms.

It would have been a laughable opponent if he hadn't been clinging to the cat. The human at the other end of the connection was obviously transmitting direct orders to the double's limbs. She couldn't give its unformed brain a general order like *attack* or *kill* and let it handle the details.

Jason, on the other hand, was trying to defend himself against her maneuvers while he was holding onto a writhing, death-dealing mass that seemed to be taking an exorbitantly long time to drown.

The puppet's arms closed around his ankles. It held itself against him in the same way he was holding onto the cat and he realized the three of them were dropping away from the light.

Francesca was still transmitting a play by play. The barrier in front of Eileen was armored and it seemed to be opaque on Francesca's side and transparent on Eileen's. Eileen could pop up behind it at any point with her weapon trained. Francesca's hopped-up reflexes gave her an edge but so far it seemed to be a standoff. Francesca was firing over the top of the barrier, in the hope she could keep Eileen down, and Eileen was jumping up at random and snapping off hurried shots before Francesca could shoot back.

"I'm forcing her to concentrate on me, Jason. But that's the best I can do."

Francesca could switch to an armor-piercing charge. The Jersey Guard had opted for a controlled-velocity, separate-propellant system for its police weapons. They could set their guns at a low-velocity stun or a high-velocity lethal setting and the gun would calculate the range and inject liquid propellant into the combustion chamber as required. The maximum setting would drive a bullet through most of the armor manufactured on the planet. But each increase in force required a bigger squirt of propellant. Francesca's gun would burn up most of the propellant in its fuel tank if she set it at maximum. And there was no guarantee the bullet would penetrate the barrier anywhere near Eileen.

For Jason, at that moment, Eileen Levar's gun was rapidly becoming a remote consideration. The immediate issue was a decision that was becoming more pressing every second. Should he assume he would still have some oxygen left in his lungs when the cat died? Or should he turn his attention to the thing that was dragging him toward the floor of the docking pool?

He let go of the cat and yielded to an uncontrollable impulse. His hands snapped into position in front of his face, palms outward, and he cowered behind them with his head lowered. The cat made a half turn and did what he had hoped it would do. It decided the air at the surface was more appealing than a few slashes at the impertinent biped who was trying to kill it.

The puppet was holding Jason's legs in a bear hug, with its face pressed against the backs of his calves. Jason had to engage in an exercise in contortionism, but he managed to reach behind him and place his left hand behind the thing's neck while he cupped its chin with his right. Choking wouldn't do the job. He didn't have time. Neither would a thumb in the eye or some other attempt to inflict pain. The puppet might feel the pain, but the woman controlling its actions was comfortably isolated from the responses hammering through its nervous system.

The puppet's grip loosened seconds after Jason snapped its neck. He fought his way free and rose toward the light as if he was ascending into a particularly attractive version of the afterlife.

His brain felt as if it was getting ready to explode but it still responded to the precepts his combat trainers had tattooed on its circuits. He swiveled his head right and left as he broke the surface and saw the cat eyeing him across six feet of low waves. The crack of a gun seemed like a distant, half-understood background noise.

The cat threw back its head. Its mouth dropped open. It thrashed at the air as if it was slapping at an insect and settled into the water.

"Get under water," Francesca ordered. "Get behind the yacht."

Jason plunged beneath the surface. He had to repress every impulse his nerves and glands seemed to be telegraphing. His lungs were still half empty. But he knew he had to move before Eileen Levar fired at him. He was lucky she hadn't locked her sights on him while Francesca was shooting at the cat.

He came up near the bow of the big pleasure boat and yielded to the luxury of sucking in three deep breaths in succession. Their communications net was obviously hopping from frequency to frequency as it dueled with a jamming system. At the moment it seemed to be winning. Byron and his assault team were racing toward the beach. Francesca was telling Byron he should land but he shouldn't attack.

"Don't trigger the defense system," Francesca said. "We haven't seen Kelly. We have to assume he's standing by Michael and she's willing to have him turn the valve. If she's crazy enough to try this, she's crazy enough to try anything."

"We'll beach in about one minute," Byron said.

"Stay open. Don't move unless you know exactly what the situation is. Have you caught your breath yet, Lieutenant?"

"I'm active," Jason said.

"Stay covered. Be prepared to fire when I give the word."

Francesca was already hauling herself onto the walk on the other side of the pool. She actually looked noticeably awkward for one brief moment—an event that was so rare it surprised Jason every time it happened. Then she flowed to her

feet and ran, gun in hand, toward the barrier.

Jason had been removing his own gun from its sealed pocket as he watched her. She was obviously counting on her enhancements, in the same way he had assumed he could tackle the cats with his bare hands.

He thumbed the on switch and a green light advised him the gun was functioning. His left hand clutched the prow of the pleasure boat.

“Select full automatic L3,” Francesca said. “Lay down covering fire.”

Jason shoved two selectors into place. He locked his left hand around his right wrist and sprayed the air over the barrier, right to left, with the gun aimed high. L3 was a low velocity, sublethal load that would keep ricochets to a minimum. Most of the bullets would flatten against the back wall and fall straight down.

Eileen popped up on the right end of the barrier just as he was hammering the other end of his arc. He swung the gun back with his finger glued to the firing button and held it on target until he had exhausted the last drop of propellant in his fuel tank.

The communication system relayed a gasp from Francesca. Jason jerked his head to the right and saw her stumble to the concrete two steps from the barrier.

Eileen was leaning against the barrier staring at the water. A dark stain smeared the front of her lab coat. She wiggled her neck as if she was trying to shake something off and slid behind the barrier.

Jason shoved his gun into its pocket. He hauled himself out of the water and sprinted down the walk.

“Francesca! Can you hear me? Can you still hear?”

Jason had trained with military combat suits that were equipped with state-of-the-art automated first aid systems. The wet suits they had chosen for this operation were standard civilian issue gear, but they housed functions that were supposed to protect you against possibilities like shark attacks or serious cuts. The suit couldn't broadcast a condition report or stiffen around a broken bone, but it could seal a hole and reduce the hemorrhaging from an open wound.

None of the shots he had fired could have ricocheted. The bullet that had brought her down could only have come from one source—the gun Eileen Levar

had been firing at full lethal load since she had first started shooting at them.

The door in the rear wall swung open. A young man in a Jersey Guard uniform stepped through it with his palms raised in front of his chest.

“I think a parley might be in order,” Kelly McMay said. “We seem to have reached an impasse.”

Jason lurched to a stop. Kelly McMay carried himself with a smiling self-confidence that always seemed infinitely more threatening than the mass and muscle displayed by the kind of body Jason inhabited. He was wearing the same dress jacket Byron Traine had sported, but he had discarded the shoulder holster and the weapon belt.

“From what I can see from here,” Kelly said, “Mrs. Gratzhausen appears to be in no immediate danger. I can also give you my assurance your twin is still alive. Dr. Levar invited me to carry out her little threat before she succumbed to her wounds but I felt a delay might benefit both of us.”

“Kill him,” Francesca said. “...now.”

Jason’s head snapped toward the other side of the pool. Francesca’s pronunciation was almost incomprehensible but he had heard all he needed. She was alive. She could hear them talking.

She obviously didn’t understand the situation. Kelly had left the door open behind him. He could slip through it long before Jason could pull out his gun and replace the fuel tank. Even with his enhanced physical abilities, Jason would have to move several steps closer before he could rush the barrier and stop Kelly’s escape unarmed.

“Think about it, body double. I still have your alter ego in my dastardly clutches. Is there any reason why you and I can’t arrange things so you remain in your present position indefinitely? Wealth. Power. A ravishing consort.”

Jason held up his own hands to show they were empty and took a quarter step forward. “With some kind of reward for you, I suppose?”

“I’m offering you an incredibly desirable package. Didn’t your masters give you any training in the art of haggling with the less idealistic members of the opposition? It’s a vital skill.”

\* \* \* \*



Jason's first encounter with Kelly McMay had taken place minutes after he arrived at the Gratzhausen weekend retreat and discovered Michael had disappeared and Byron Traine and Colonel Wolsner were lost in a drugged stupor. Michael's stepbrother had been the instigator of the plot to kidnap Michael but Kelly was the desperado Fredrick Gratzhausen called on when his intrigues turned violent.

The big moment that first time had been a leap from a second story window. A mobile security camera had seen the tall stranger enter the cottage and Kelly and three of his confederates had raced back to the grounds while Jason was waiting for Francesca to respond to his Mayday call. They had cornered Jason in an upstairs recreation room and he had arced across thirty feet of open air, grabbed the lower branch of a tree, and hit the ground with a perfect knees-bent landing before he sprinted for the helicopter hovering over the tennis court. And his first meeting with the woman manipulating the controls.

The second episode had been an ambush on the open sea—a surprise nighttime rush from a speedboat with Kelly leading a reckless attempt to capture Jason before Byron Traine and the crew of the Gratzhausens' second largest party boat could organize a defense. There had been no wonderful moments that time. The battle had degenerated into a confused nighttime skulk and shoot amid the furniture and fittings on the upper deck. Jason had been content to force the boarders to withdraw, but Francesca had been taut with anger when she had realized Kelly's boat was turning into the night with only one casualty belted into its seats. To Jason, Kelly was the kind of athletic, high-testosterone swaggerer he might have been if the virus had left him alone—an accomplished high diver, an aggressive speedboat racer, and a ballroom gallant who could be just as charming, in his way, as Byron Traine. Francesca had been watching Kelly ever since he had joined the Jersey Guard and she considered him a self-centered, unpredictable cynic with no values or loyalties anyone could count on.

Jason shook his head. "It's an interesting idea, Captain. But I'm afraid my *masters* could be a difficult obstacle. They have rigid feelings about people who break their oaths."

"You don't think they would be just as happy with their own slightly revised edition occupying the Gratzhausen mansion?"

"They want the real Michael. They feel he has virtues I seem to lack."

"Suppose we kept Michael alive? As a kind of permanent hostage? How

would they react to that? Wouldn't they bargain with you the way they bargained with Dr. Levar?"

"Kill ... him ... that's ... an ... order..."

Kelly had seen Jason in action, but he seemed to be underestimating Jason's ability to cover distance and clear an obstacle like the barrier. Jason had managed to close the gap by two more half-steps.

"They might be willing to strike a deal," Jason said. "But they wouldn't stop looking for a way to rescue Michael. I couldn't face a single day without wondering if I was going to live to see the end of it."

"But wouldn't it be worth it to spend more time with Mrs. Gratzhausen? Am I supposed to believe you don't feel a prize like that is worth any risk?"

"She's the first person who would turn against me."

"You're sure of that, body double? You don't think your manly charms have lured her from the path of virtue?"

Jason turned his head toward Francesca. And hoped the gesture would draw attention from another forward movement. One more half-step should get him close enough....

Kelly McMay's right hand leaped toward his left cuff. He swung his arm to his right, in a short, deadly arc, and Jason dropped to his hands and knees. The air over his back cracked.

The object in Kelly's hand had been a laser sword—a weapon with an effective range of approximately eleven feet. Kelly hadn't been misjudging Jason's abilities. He had been holding off until he was certain Jason had entered his killing zone.

Jason ripped open the pocket that contained his own sword. There would be a five-second lag while Kelly's weapon recharged. He couldn't draw his gun and reload it in that interval, but he could jerk out his sword and bring it into play.

The term "laser sword" was an obvious misnomer, but it had appealed to the customer base and the original manufacturers had indulged their market's romantic fantasies. You obviously couldn't fence with the thing, in the sense of using it to parry your opponent's attacks. The only resemblance to real fencing was the tendency to use big sweeping arm movements, like the slash of a saber,

or the kind of small, precise wrist movements foil fencers mastered. Other than that, “fencing” with low-powered practice weapons was a picturesque sport that encouraged energetic jumps and split-second dodges.

The sword was essentially a short range self-defense weapon. Its power unit could only deliver six pulses, with a five-second buildup between pulses. An assailant could always evade an attack by backing up—provided, of course, he had room to retreat.

A quick leap backward would have given Jason time to position himself for an attack. Instead, he jumped forward while his hands were still removing his sword from its pocket.

Kelly McMAY stood his ground. He brought his arm down and to the right, like a conductor starting a symphony, and Jason’s augmented reflexes responded with a sideways leap that raised him off the ground just before Kelly’s second pulse swept across the space his ankles had occupied.

Jason brought his own arm up as his soles hit the floor. He glided through another step with his arm extended in front of him.

Kelly had shifted to a crouch. He was focusing on his opponent with the intensity of a soccer goalie preparing for a penalty kick. Jason’s thumb pushed the firing switch and Kelly dropped toward the floor behind the barrier.

Kelly had timed his move like a world class athlete. The beam sliced through empty space. And Jason was holding, once again, a tube that couldn’t do anything useful for another five seconds.

Jason had reveled in the hours he had devoted to practice bouts with non-lethal lasers. He had leaped, rolled, and ducked with the abandon of a boy who had suddenly been given the opportunity to live out all his swashbuckling fantasies.

But that had been a game. He could engage in high-risk maneuvers knowing he would merely set off a buzzer and sacrifice a point if his opponent outfoxed him. Now he couldn’t forget he was facing a weapon that could maim and kill. The energy concentrated in that narrow beam could pierce his wet suit like a knife point and sever tendons and muscles. It could mangle his internal organs as effectively as a small caliber, high velocity bullet.

Kelly, on the other hand, could hide behind the shelter of an armored uniform jacket. The only targets Jason could harm were Kelly’s face, hands, and

lower legs.

He might have leaped over the barrier if this had been a game. He might have gambled he could get in a pulse before Kelly could recover and fire. Instead, he dropped into his own version of a goalie's crouch and waited for Kelly's next move.

Kelly stood up a good three steps out of range. Small, dark goggles covered his eyes. Jason had been concentrating on the door, but Kelly had scurried along behind the barrier toward the other side of the boathouse. Toward Francesca—and the gun lying on the concrete next to her right hand.

"Michael is on the other side of the door," Kelly said. "Run down the hall, smash a few locks on the second floor until you find the right room. You don't really think I'd take advantage of your absence and harm such a rare specimen of human womanhood, do you?"

Francesca was lying on her side, with one leg bent back at the knee. Jason couldn't see any blood on the floor but that was a meaningless indicator. For all he knew, half the blood in her body could be pooling along the inner surface of her wet suit.

Jason didn't think Kelly was vicious. No one could think Kelly was vicious. But he was erratic. He had bounced from bribery to armed assault without a pause. And Kelly was, in the end, under all that ballroom polish, a hoodlum whose primary value to his employers was his cheerful indifference to the harm he inflicted on others.

Wouldn't they all be better off if he eliminated Kelly before he ran through the door and started searching the second floor? Michael would be safe, the tucfra wouldn't have to replace Francesca, he wouldn't have to deal with the possibility Kelly was coming up behind him with a gun.

Jason's legs had started carrying him forward before his brain knew he had made a decision. He charged down the walk with his arm extended. His vision tunneled on the little head and arm movements that would indicate Kelly was about to fire.

He knew it was an emotional response. He knew he had just been rationalizing. It didn't matter. He couldn't leave Francesca unprotected. Kelly had pressed the right button.

Kelly rested his hand on the barrier. He swung himself over the top with an

agility that would have impressed a gymnastic coach and sank to one knee near Francesca. His left hand reached for Francesca's gun.

Francesca's head had settled to the floor but she still had some life in her. Her hand made a sudden convulsive movement. The gun slid across the walk toward the water. It reached the edge butt first and hung there for a long moment before the extra weight tipped it over the side.

Jason thumbed his laser—and saw Kelly roll to the left just as he closed the switch. Kelly snapped off a pulse and Jason responded by sprawling over the barrier and rolling onto the floor on the other side.

He flowed to his feet as soon as his knees touched the floor. His body was functioning as if it had been lifted out of the most unrealistic daydreams he had played with during all the years he had been a blob.

He pivoted over the barrier on one hand. His brain ticked off the seconds since Kelly had pulsed his laser.

Kelly had recovered from his roll and begun to stand up. He lifted his head as Jason came over the barrier and realized he would be outclassed if he tried to go hand-to-hand with the speed and strength of the augmented juggernaut hurtling toward him. He twisted to the left and Jason's switch to unarmed combat ended with a kick that glanced off Kelly's leg.

Kelly's arm shot out. Jason threw up his hand. An optical needle pierced his wet suit and drove through the tissues of his forearm. The pain only lasted a moment. The neutralizing system the tucfra had included in his physiology kicked in on schedule. But the shock gave Kelly time to back up—toward Francesca.

*"Save Michael. That's an order. Save Michael or I'll recommend they dump you back in the body they saved you from."*

Francesca had turned up the volume on her implant. The anger in her voice seared him more than the laser had.

Kelly was crouching near Francesca's feet. The light on his laser blinked to green and he pointed it at Francesca's neck. His left hand stroked her leg.

"What's a seep like, body double? Did they do anything special in that line when they packaged her for our good friend Michael?"

Jason broke for the door with his left arm dangling by his side. He shoved

the handle of the laser into his mouth and pulled off a trick that shot another rush of exhilaration through the fog of confusion and conflicting emotions he was hauling down the walk. His right hand flattened on the top of the wall and he pivoted over the top on his good arm and dropped into a crouch.

He looked back as he galloped through the door. Kelly was pounding down the concrete after him.

He wouldn't have heard a sound if Kelly had used the sword on Francesca. In her state, she wouldn't even scream....

Byron Traine had broken through the jamming once again. Francesca had apparently ordered him to start his assault and his techies were staring at symbols and doing techie things with cursors and menus.

"I think the fifteen-minute estimate may actually be accurate," Byron said. "Can you last another twelve minutes?"

Jason was running down a corridor that ended in a stairway. Eileen had told them Michael was "resting on a bed in a comfortable room" and they had assumed that meant he was confined in a bedroom on the second floor, as Kelly had claimed. The rooms on the first floor were all changing rooms and storage areas.

His next move was obvious. He had to get to Michael before Kelly did. If he couldn't do that, he had to hold Kelly off until Byron and his squad entered the boathouse. If Kelly got control of Eileen's lethal setup, they would all have to back off and let the situation return to the original standoff.

He had kicked the door shut on the run but it only held Kelly for a moment. Jason looked back when he was three steps from the stairs and got another look at the grin he had seen on the face of the guard shark. Kelly's right arm was extended in front of him.

The tucfra combat enhancements had their limits. The pain neutralizers had masked the effects of the awkward stride and the burn on his arm. The drain on Jason's energy had narrowed the gap between his speed and Kelly's. Kelly's laser was about to close it.

Jason's body might be slowing down but his brain was still chugging along at the kind of pace it had started maintaining when it had been the only part of his physical endowment that offered him pleasurable experiences. Should he climb the stairs and make a stand at the top? Should he stay on the first floor and try to

change the battery after his next laser shot? With one hand out of action? While he was being harried by an armed opponent?

His brain apparently decided neither course looked promising. He turned, one step from the bottom of the stairs, and pressed the firing button as he swung the sword into line.

Kelly was moving too fast to stop himself. He ducked under the unexpected sidesweep and fell into a staggering crouch, with his free hand groping for the floor.

It was a good enough response for the decision the logic engine in Jason's head seemed to have made. He dropped his own sword and lunged forward. He couldn't outrun Kelly, but he could still take him on hand to hand, even with one arm out of action.

Kelly's sword flashed. He rolled away from Jason's lurching assault and Jason closed with him as he stood up. Jason's right hand clamped around Kelly's wrist.

It would have been a simple problem if his left arm had been functioning. Hold Kelly's wrist with his right, snatch Kelly's sword with his left. Kelly was slamming a kick into Jason's lower right leg, but Jason's pain blocking reflexes reduced that to a minor nuisance.

He let go of Kelly's wrist and grabbed for the sword. There was a moment when he wasn't sure the glove of his wet suit could maintain a grip on the thing. Then it came free. He responded to Kelly's kicks with a kick of his own and Kelly fell back.

The light on the sword turned green. He turned toward Kelly with his thumb on the button and Kelly scurried out of range.

Jason backed toward the stairs. Kelly pointed at his stomach.

"Take a look at your gut. That hole may look insignificant, but you're probably bleeding all over the lining of that suit."

Jason's heel located the bottom of the staircase. He sank onto the second step and gestured with the sword.

"I've still got this thing, Kelly. You can stand there and wait for me to keel over if you want to. But it's not going to happen."

“It now looks like we’re going to be entering on the first floor,” Byron was saying. “Into the second storage room from the land side, on the east side. You may hear a small explosion.”

“You’re going to sit there and let yourself bleed to death?” Kelly said. “Your masters will be touched.”

“I only have to hold out about ten more minutes. As you are well aware.”

“And what about afterward? Have you thought about that? Even if you last the full ten minutes—isn’t there some possibility you may suffer irreversible brain damage before your rescue party can whisk you to a trauma center? Have I underestimated the powers of tucfra medical technology? Or will they simply replace the damaged brain cells with components they consider more suitable?”

Jason could hear the fatigue in his own voice. Would he slip into unconsciousness without any preliminaries, the way he had fallen into sleep during the years when he had fought off despair by immersing himself in videos and music until he dropped into a few hours of oblivion?

Kelly had taken a step forward while he talked. He was still smiling but the eyes above the smile were watching Jason’s every move.

“Don’t assume you can work your way into rushing range,” Jason said. “I’ll press the button when I know you’re so close I can’t miss.”

“And when will that be?”

“I’ll leave that question open.”

“A wise policy. Has it occurred to you I have full access to the security system? Voice recognition. Password. Implant ID. Think about it. I go upstairs, the security system shuts down the moment I say the magic words, and your friends rush in and hurry you and Mrs. Gratzhausen to the nearest emergency unit.”

“And leave you in possession of Michael.”

“We’ll be right back where we started—minus Dr. Levar’s somewhat capricious contributions, of course. A tactical victory for your side, I would think.”

“You don’t understand the tucfra, Kelly. They’d put us in the same class as Eileen if we did something like that to save ourselves.”



“But you wouldn’t be saving yourself. You’d be saving *her*. You’re not the only paragon whose intellectual powers could be permanently damaged.”

Jason’s eyes blurred. The muscles in his neck slackened.

“We can even reconsider the suggestion I made earlier,” Kelly said. “I wasn’t just talking to lure you to your doom, body double. I admit I had decided my faction would be better off with you dead and Michael still alive, but my little proposal seemed like a reasonable alternative if you seemed receptive. It still has its attractions. I go upstairs, Michael succumbs to a twist of the valve, the rescue party rushes in, and you convince our interstellar lords you did your best and they should keep you here.”

“And arrange a discreet payoff sometime in the future.”

“In the not-too-distant future.”

“You could even remain on good terms with *your* employer.”

“To our Director of Security I would just be a loyal retainer who had carried out his most extreme orders.”

“I’ll offer *you* a deal,” Jason said. “If you stay here, you’ll be outnumbered as soon as my reinforcements arrive. There’s two speedboats sitting out there. Go now and I’ll tell our patrol boat not to fire on you. The speedboat will be yours.”

“A generous offer....”

The speedboat was, in fact, worth enough to keep people like them happy for several years—as Kelly undoubtedly knew. Kelly could sell it. Keep it as a toy. Start an exciting new career as a coastal pirate.

“It’s a sure thing for both of us,” Jason said. “Versus the gamble I won’t last until our rescue party breaks in.”

“And all because you’re afraid of your paymasters.”

“Not quite.”

“There’s something else?”

“You may not believe it, but Francesca and I—-we both believe they’re

doing the right thing. Whatever their motivations. They're pushing us in the right direction. People like Michael—they really are the kind of leaders we need. They'd be shoved aside by people like the conniver you're working for if the tucfra weren't intervening."

Kelly stared at him. "I believe that's the first time I've heard you voice that opinion...."

"We aren't mercenaries. We didn't just sign up for the medical benefits."

Kelly frowned. "Medical benefits, body double? Your conversation takes odd turns."

Jason raised his head. It took a major effort but he knew he had to convince Kelly he could stay conscious until Byron charged to the rescue.

"Take my offer, Captain. Leave here with a boat now—or stay and leave empty handed. If they let you leave."

"You haven't told me about the tucfra medical benefits. I might be looking for a new employer, you know."

Jason's head dropped. He saw Kelly's foot slide forward and raised his hand.

"Stay back ... don't be a fool."

"Is that what they offered you? A handsome, superhuman body? Beautiful women dazzled by your physical endowments? Heroic feats of masculine prowess?"

Jason forced his head up. "Do you remember the slackbody virus?"

Kelly stiffened. "You had *that*?"

"From the time I was six. For twenty-six years."

The tucfra pain control system couldn't repress everything. Most of the area around Jason's stomach felt numb. He wasn't feeling any pain but his brain knew it should feel uneasy.

"That would inspire some gratitude...." Kelly said.

Kelly's face had changed. He had been smiling right up to the moment Jason had mentioned the slackbody virus. They had been fighting for their lives and Kelly had been bantering as if they had just finished an unusually vigorous practice session. The goggles still hid his eyes but the smile had disappeared. Jason could even detect a shift in his facial muscles that could be interpreted to mean there was some danger Kelly might actually be teetering on the edge of sympathy.

What was it like to be a naturally athletic daredevil all your life? Kelly had probably been charming himself into female bedrooms since he had been a teenager. Had there ever been a moment in his life when he had felt physically insecure? Was he visualizing the kind of life Jason had led?

"It isn't just gratitude," Jason said. "I had nothing. Name anything you like—your speedboats, games, women. Think about year after year without a single item on your list."

"And then someone comes along and offers you a life."

"What would you do if you were in my position now, Captain? Wouldn't you sit here until the moment you keeled over dead before you'd go back to *that*? Wouldn't you think nothing mattered—nothing at all—not even Francesca—compared to *that*?"

That wasn't actually true. Jason had made a life for himself, in spite of his illness. He had lived alone, in complete independence, in a computerized apartment that gave him all the care a pair of round the clock human attendants would have given him. He had handled an interesting administrative job and hobnobbed electronically with dozens of friends and colleagues. He had even been visited, now and then, by women who felt sorry for him. But Kelly wouldn't know that. There was no way somebody like Kelly could understand that.

"Take my offer. Take the boat. Don't gamble you can beat somebody with that kind of motivation."

Jason's head slumped. He tried to pull it back up and discovered he couldn't. Energy was flowing out of his body as if the hole in his side was as big as a plate.

"There are legal formalities regarding the ownership of the boat," Kelly said.

"I'll transmit an order as soon as you clear the main door. As Michael. No one will trouble you. You have my word ... as an officer of the Tucfra Hegemony."

Kelly's boots moved backward. Jason raised his head a few degrees and watched him under his eyebrows.

"It's been an interesting evening," Kelly said. "You're a very impressive fellow, whoever you are. I hope your masters appreciate your efforts."

Jason held himself awake until he heard the roar of the speedboat hammering on the walls of the docking pool. The order to transfer the property went out, as promised, just before he let himself drop into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

The tucfra officer looked like all the other tucfra officers Jason had ever talked to—a fit, trim man somewhere between thirty and fifty, but obviously closer to twenty-five from the neck down, whatever his face indicated. This one was clean shaven—unlike most of his compatriots, who tended to sport fancy mustaches and beards.

"Your attempt to help your superior was a serious error, Jason. Her statements make that clear. You could have hotfooted it straight to Michael's bedside once Captain McMay had backed away from the door. Instead, you reacted to his threat to Francesca and chose to engage him in more combat. Out of fear he would harm her."

The officer's face took up half the screen. In the other half, Francesca was lying in a bed that looked as if it was the same kind of generic hospital rig that Jason occupied. She still had a tube in her nose but he couldn't detect any indication she was drugged. She looked tired, not sedated. She hadn't changed her expression when the tucfra had plugged him into the circuit, but that blank, emotionless face was the look she normally adapted when she faced a tucfra....

"Francesca has issued a formal reprimand. Properly, in our opinion. You were given your priorities, Lieutenant. Your emotional entanglement with your superior officer is a trivial matter compared to the life we entrusted to your judgment. Francesca understood that. She told you to disregard her situation and proceed. If Captain McMay had killed you, or inflicted certain kinds of injuries, Michael would still be a hostage. And we would be scrambling to replace you with another duplicate."

Had Francesca's face hardened slightly when the tucfra mentioned the reprimand? Had he seen a flicker in her eyes? It had been two weeks since Jason had last seen her. He knew Michael had returned to his proper role in life. He

knew the public had been told Francesca was recovering from a boating accident. He had even received a visit from Byron Traine. But he had no idea how Francesca felt. There had been no messages. He had hoped Byron was bringing a message, but they had spent most of the visit discussing Byron's regret that he hadn't played a bigger role in such a dashing clash of arms.

"Francesca was herself in the wrong, of course, when she let you become emotionally entangled. Her decision to assault Dr. Levar may have been influenced by her feelings, too. There was some probability, after all, perhaps a very high probability, that Dr. Levar would order Michael killed and Captain McMay would carry out the order."

The tucfra shook his head. "I'm afraid we seriously underestimated your human capacity for developing mate loyalty. It can be a notoriously erratic emotion in your cultural tradition."

The tucfras' sex life had been surrounded by rumor and speculation ever since they had started interacting with humans. For all anyone knew, they might not even have sexes. They always adopted male bodies when they assumed human form, and thousands of human women had visited the Sahara, but their feelings about their sexual partners were a mystery.

What would they do if they expelled him? Would they return him to his old body? Could they be that hardhearted?

He was looking at a personal disaster. And he had to lie here and confront it like a stoic model soldier while he floated in all the turmoil and emotional conflict that seemed to be an inevitable component of a true love affair. Had Francesca reprimanded him because she felt she had to protect herself? She hadn't given him a glance or a quick smile or any other indication of her feelings when she had appeared on the screen.

"I think you can understand the situation we're faced with, Jason. Is this just a temporary aberration? An understandable lapse after all the years you were denied the male-female emotional relationships that dominate the lives of human males in areas influenced by your culture? Or is it something we will have to be concerned about when you receive future assignments? Do you have any thoughts on that?"

Jason hesitated. What would someone who had more experience with the tucfra answer?

“Just tell me what you really think,” the tucfra said. “Don’t try to guess what we’re looking for.”

Jason smiled. “That’s a bit difficult under the circumstances.”

“It’s your best course, Lieutenant.”

He shrugged. “All right. You placed me in the same bed as an extraordinarily attractive woman. A woman who is exceptionally warm and sympathetic in addition. I fell in love with her. How could I have helped it? I would have fallen in love with her even if I’d lived a normal life up to now—even if I’d already had all the emotional involvements most people my age seem to have had.”

He turned toward Francesca. “If you’re afraid I may scramble another mission for the same reason—it’s going to be *harder* for me to fall in love with anyone. I love you, Francesca. I’ll always love you. Everybody I meet from now on will seem pale beside you.”

Did he see the hint of a flash in Francesca’s eyes? She loved him. She had said she loved him. They were two of a kind—two people lost in unsatisfactory lives who had seized what the tucfra had to offer. Couldn’t the alien consciousness hiding behind the tucfra officer’s human face understand that? Was this *creature* so far removed from human feelings he thought an oath could always take priority over the hungers and needs that drew men and women together?

The tucfra nodded. “Well said, Jason. Well said. Do you love Jason, Francesca?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to marry him? Leave your post? Go off somewhere and spend the rest of your life with him?”

“Yes. But I won’t.”

“And why is that?”

“You’ve given me a mission. You can send a substitute—but nobody can understand Michael as well as I do. Nobody else has all the years I’ve spent with him. All the knowledge I’ve accumulated. I’m the best person you can station here.”

“And you love your children, too, right? You want to make sure they take the place we’ve been preparing for them.”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to say goodbye to Jason now?”

“Is he going to be all right?”

“I can’t discuss that.”

Her face softened. “Goodbye, Jason. I do love you. Please believe I love you.”

Francesca vanished. The tucfra officer took over the whole screen.

“I think we can make a decision, Jason. I could pretend we were mulling things over and checking your records and so forth. But that would be pointless. And cruel, too.”

\* \* \* \*

They gave him two months leave, in Michael’s body, with minor cosmetic modifications, in a resort on the coast of Chile. He spent most of his evenings and afternoons with the women he attracted. In the mornings—and some of the evenings—he played a cello he had purchased.

They had told him he could probably keep his musical skill as he moved from body to body in the future. It was a useful recreation and it might even be something they could take advantage of on certain kinds of assignments. He played the same three sonatas over and over, with a program that played the fortepiano accompaniment and adjusted to his personal style in the same way a human accompanist would have responded to it. It was a good program—so good there were times when he felt he could see the person he was playing with.