

## Five Thrillers by Robert Reed

If anyone ever questioned whether *F&SF* readers are a thoughtful bunch, they'd need only look at our email correspondence from the last six weeks. "You've gone three months without a new Robert Reed story," writes K. V. from Seattle. "Did he fall during one of his running competitions and break his writing hand?" M. L. from Toronto more bluntly said, "I want more Reed!" while a joker we shall not name said, "Did you finally get your hands on those photos Bob Reed was using to blackmail you into publishing his stories?" Worry not, you thoughtful readers—rather than spending his days polishing his new Hugo Award, Mr. Reed has been filling our inventory with several new tales, of which we now bring you five of the most thrilling of 'em.

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### I. The Ill-Fated Mission

Their situation was dire. A chunk of primordial iron had slashed its way through the *Demon Dandy*, crippling the engines and pushing life support to the brink of failure. Even worse, a shotgun blast of shrapnel had shredded one of the ship's two life-pods. The mission engineer, a glum little man who had spent twenty years mining Earth-grazing asteroids, studied the wreckage with an expert eye. There was no sane reason to hope that repairs could be made in time. But on the principle of keeping his staff busy, he ordered the robots and his new assistant to continue their work on the useless pod. Then after investing a few moments cursing God and Luck, the engineer dragged himself to the remnants of the bridge to meet with the *Dandy's* beleaguered captain.

His assistant was a young fellow named Joseph Carroway.

Handsome as a digital hero, with green eyes and an abundance of curly blond hair, Joe was in his early twenties, born to wealthy parents who had endowed their only child with the earliest crop of synthetic human genes. He was a tall, tidy fellow, and he was a gifted athlete as graceful as any dancer, on the Earth or in freefall. According to a dozen respected scales, Joe was also quite intelligent. With an impressed shake of the head, the company psychiatrist had confided that his bountiful talents made him suitable for many kinds of work. But by the same token, that supercharged brain carried certain inherent risks.

Dipping his head in the most charming fashion, he said, "Risks?"

"And I think you know what I'm talking about," she remarked, showing a wary, somewhat flirtatious smile.

"But I don't know," Joe lied.

"And I believe you do," she countered. "Without exception, Mr. Carroway, you have been telling me exactly what I want to hear. And you're very believable, I should add. If I hadn't run the T-scan during our interview, I might have come away believing that you are the most kind, most decent gentleman in the world."

"But I am decent," he argued.

Joe sounded, and looked, exceptionally earnest.

The psychiatrist laughed. A woman in her early fifties, she was an overqualified professional doing routine tasks for a corporation larger and more powerful than most nations. The solar system was being opened to humanity—humanity in all of its forms, old and new. Her only task was to find qualified bodies to do exceptionally dangerous work. The vagaries of this young man's psyche were factors in her assessment. But they weren't the final word. After a moment's reflection, she said, "God. The thing is, you're

beautiful."

Joe smiled and said, "Thank you."

Then with a natural smoothness, he added, "And you are an exceptionally lovely woman."

She laughed, loudly and with a trace of despair, as if aware that she would never again hear such kind words from a young man.

Joe leaned forward and, wearing the perfect smile—a strong winning grin—he told the psychiatrist, "I am a very good person."

"No," she said. "No, Joe, you are not."

Then she sat back in her chair, and with a finger twirling her mousy-brown hair, she confessed, "But dear God, my boy, I really would just love to have you for dinner."

That was five months ago, and now Joe was on board a ship that had been devastated by a mindless piece of iron.

As soon as the engineer left for the bridge, Joe kicked away from the battered escape pod. Both robots quietly reminded him of their orders. Dereliction of duty would leave a black mark on the mission report. But their assignment had no purpose except to keep them busy and Joe distracted. And since arguing with machines served no role, he said nothing, focusing on the only rational course available to him.

The com-line to the bridge was locked, but that was a puzzle easily solved. For the next few minutes, Joe concentrated on a very miserable conversation between the ship's top officers. The best launch window was only a little more than three hours from now. The surviving pod had finite fuel and oxygen. Kilograms and the time demanded by any return voyage were the main problems. Thirty precious seconds were wasted when the captain announced that she would remain behind, forcing the engineer to point out that she was a small person, which meant they would need to find another thirty kilos of mass, at the very least.

Of course both officers could play the hero role, sacrificing themselves to save their crew. But neither mentioned what was painfully obvious. Instead, what mattered was the naming and discarding of a string of increasingly unworkable fixes.

Their conversation stopped when Joe drifted into the bridge.

"I've got two options for you," he announced. "And when it comes down to it, you'll take my second solution."

The captain glanced at her engineer, as if to ask, "Should we listen to this kid?"

In despair, the engineer said, "Tell us, Joe. Quick."

"The fairest answer? We chop off everybody's arms and legs." He smiled and dipped his head as he spoke, pretending to be squeamish. "We'll use the big field laser, since that should cauterize the wounds. Then our robots dope everybody up and shove us onboard the pod. With the robots remaining behind, of course."

Neither officer had considered saving their machines.

"We chop off our own arms?" the engineer whined. "And our legs too?"

"Prosthetics do wonders," Joe pointed out. "Or the company can grow us new limbs. They won't match the originals, but they'll be workable enough."

The officers traded nervous looks.

"What else do you have?" the captain asked.

"One crewmember remains behind."

"We've considered that," the engineer warned. "But there's no decent way to decide who stays and who goes."

"Two of us have enough mass," Joe pointed out. "If either one stays, everybody else escapes."

At six foot and ninety kilos, Joe was easily the largest crewman.

"So you're volunteering?" asked the captain, hope brightening her tiny brown face.

Joe said, "No," with a flat, unaffected voice. "I'm sorry. Did I say anything about volunteers?"

Suddenly the only sound was the thin wind caused by a spaceship suffering a thousand tiny leaks.

One person among the crew was almost as big as Joe.

The engineer whispered, "Danielle."

Both officers winced. Their colleague was an excellent worker and a dear friend, and Danielle also happened to be attractive and popular. Try as they might, they couldn't accept the idea that they would leave her behind, and without her blessing, at that.

Joe had anticipated their response. "But if you had a choice between her and me, you'd happily abandon me. Is that right?"

They didn't answer. But Joe was new to the crew, and when their eyes dropped, they were clearly saying, "Yes."

He took no offense.

With a shrug and a sigh, Joe gave his audience time enough to feel ashamed. Then he looked at the captain, asking, "What about Barnes? He's only ten, maybe eleven kilos lighter than me."

That name caused a brief exchange of glances.

"What are you planning?" asked the engineer.

Joe didn't respond.

"No," the captain told him.

"No?" asked Joe. "No' to what?"

Neither would confess what they were imagining.

Then Joe put on a horrified expression. "Oh, God," he said. "Do you really believe I would consider *that*?"

The engineer defended himself with soft mutters.

Joe's horror dissolved into a piercing stare.

"There are codes to this sort of thing," the captain reminded everybody, including herself. "Commit violence against a fellow crewmember, I don't care who it is ... and you won't come home with us, Mr. Carroway. Is that clear enough for you to understand?"

Joe let her fume. Then with a sly smile, he said, "I'm sorry. I thought we wanted the best way to save as many lives as possible."

Again, the officers glanced at each other.

The young man laughed in a charming but very chilly fashion—a moment that always made empathic souls uneasy. "Let's return to my first plan," he said. "Order everybody into the machine shop, and we'll start carving off body parts."

The captain said, "No," and then looked for a good reason.

The engineer just shrugged, laughing nervously.

"We don't know if that would work," the captain decided. "People could be killed by the trauma."

"And what if we had to fly the pod manually?" the engineer asked. "Without hands, we're just cargo."

An awful option had been excluded, and they could relax slightly.

"Okay," said Joe. "This is what I'm going to do: I'll go talk to Barnes. Give me a few minutes. And if I don't get what we want, then I will stay behind."

"You?" the captain said hopefully.

Joe offered a firm, trustworthy, "Sure."

But when he tallied up everyone's mass, the engineer found trouble. "Even with Barnes gone, we're still five kilos past our limit. And I'd like to give us a bigger margin of error, if I can."

"So," said Joe. "The rest of us give blood."

The captain stared at this odd young man, studying that dense blond hair and those bright hazel eyes.

"Blood," Joe repeated. "As much as we can physically manage. And we can also enjoy a big chemically induced shit before leaving this wreck."

The engineer began massaging the numbers.

Joe matter-of-factly dangled his leg between the officers. "And if we're pressed, I guess I could surrender one of these boys. But my guess is that it won't come to that."

And in the end, it did not.

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Three weeks later, Joe Carroway was sitting in the psychiatrist's office, calmly discussing the tragedy.

"I've read everyone's report," she admitted.

He nodded, and he smiled.

Unlike their last meeting, the woman was striving to maintain a strict professional distance. She couldn't have foreseen what would happen to the *Dandy Demon* or how this employee would respond. But there was the possibility that blame would eventually settle on her, and to save her own flesh, she was determined to learn exactly what Joe and the officers had decided on the bridge.

"Does your face hurt?" she inquired.

"A little bit."

"How many times did he strike you?"

"Ten," Joe offered. "Maybe more."

She winced. "The weapon?"

"A rough piece of iron," he said. "Barnes had a souvenir from the first asteroid he helped work."

Infrared sensors and the hidden T-scanner were observing the subject closely. Examining the telemetry, she asked, "Why did you pick Mr. Barnes?"

"That's in my report."

"Remind me, Joe. What were your reasons?"

"He was big enough to matter."

"And what did the others think about the man?"

"You mean the crew?" Joe shrugged. "He was one of us. Maybe he was quiet and kept to himself—"

"Bullshit."

When he wanted, Joe could produce a shy, boyish grin.

"He was different from the rest of you," the psychiatrist pointed out. "And I'm not talking about his personality."

"You're not," Joe agreed.

She produced images of the dead man. The oldest photograph showed a skinny, homely male in his middle twenties, while the most recent example presented a face that was turning fat—a normal consequence that came with the most intrusive, all-encompassing genetic surgery.

"Your colleague was midway through some very radical genetic surgery."

"He was," Joe agreed.

"He belonged to the Rebirth Movement."

"I'm sorry. What does this have to do with anything?" Joe's tone was serious. Perhaps even offended. "Everybody is human, even if they aren't *sapiens* anymore. Isn't that the way our laws are written?"

"You knew exactly what you were doing, Joe."

He didn't answer.

"You selected Barnes. You picked him because you understood that nobody would stand in your way."

Joe's only response was the trace of a grin at the corners of his mouth.

"Where did you meet with Barnes?"

"In his cabin."

"And what did you say to him?"

"That I loved him," Joe explained. "I told him that I was envious of his courage and vision. Leaving our old species was noble. Was good. I thought that he was intriguing and very beautiful. And I told him that to save his important life, as well as everybody else, I was going to sacrifice myself. I was staying behind with the robots."

"You lied to him."

"Except Barnes believed me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"When you told him you loved him ... did you believe he was gay?"

"He wasn't."

"But if he had been? What would you have done if he was flattered by your advances?"

"Oh, I could have played that game too."

The psychiatrist hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"If Barnes preferred guys, then I would have seduced him. If I'd thought there was enough time, I mean. I would have convinced him to remain behind and save my life. Really, the guy was pretty easy to manipulate, all in all. It wouldn't have taken much to convince him that being the hero was his idea in the first place."

"You could have managed all that?"

Joe considered hard before saying, "If I'd had a few days to work with, sure. Easy. But you're probably right. A couple hours wasn't enough time."

The psychiatrist had stopped watching the telemetry, preferring to stare at the creature sitting across from her.

Quietly, she said, "Okay."

Joe waited patiently.

"What did Mr. Barnes say to you?" she asked. "After you professed your love, how did he react?"

"You're lying." Joe didn't just quote the man, but he sounded like him too. The voice was thick and a little slow, wrapped around vocal chords that were slowly changing their configuration. "You've slept

with every damn woman on this ship,' he told me. 'Except our dyke captain.'"

The psychiatrist's face stiffened slightly.

"Is that true?" she muttered.

Joe gave her a moment. "Is what true?"

"Never mind." She found a new subject to pursue. "Mr. Barnes's cabin was small, wasn't it?"

"The same as everybody's."

"And you were at opposite ends of that room. Is that right?"

"Yes."

By birth, Barnes was a small man, but his Rebirth had given him temporary layers of fat that would have eventually been transformed into new tissues and bones, and even two extra fingers on each of his long, lovely hands. The air inside that cubbyhole had smelled of biology—raw and distinctly strange. But it wasn't an unpleasant odor. Barnes had been drifting beside his bed, and next to him was the image of the creature he wanted to become—a powerful, fur-draped entity with huge golden eyes and a predator's toothy grin. The cabin walls were covered with his possessions, each lashed in place to keep them out of the way. And on the surface of what was arbitrarily considered to be the ceiling, Barnes had painted the motto of the Rebirth movement:

TO BE TRULY HUMAN IS TO BE DIFFERENT.

"Do you want to know what I told him?" asked Joe. "I didn't put this in my report. But after he claimed I was sleeping with those women ... do you know what I said that got him to start pounding on me...?"

The psychiatrist offered a tiny, almost invisible nod.

"I said, 'I'm just playing with those silly bitches. They're toys to me. But you, you're nothing like them. Or like me. You're going to be a spectacular creature. A vision of the future, you lucky shit. And before I die, please, let me blow you. Just to get the taste of another species.'"

She sighed. "All right."

"And that's when I reached for him—"

"You're heterosexual," she complained.

"I was saving lives," Joe responded.

"You were saving your own life."

"And plenty of others, too," he pointed out. Then with a grin, he added, "You don't appreciate what I was prepared to do, Doctor. If it meant saving the rest of us, I was capable of anything."

She once believed that she understood Joe Carroway. But in every possible way, she had underestimated the man sitting before her, including his innate capacity to measure everybody else's nature.

"The crew was waiting in the passageway outside," he mentioned. "With the captain and engineer, they were crowding in close, listening close, trying to hear what would happen. All these good decent souls,

holding their breaths, wondering if I could pull this trick off."

She nodded again.

"They heard the fight, but it took them a couple minutes to force the door's lock. When they got inside, they found Barnes all over me and that lump of iron in his hand." Joe paused before asking, "Do you know how blood looks in space? It forms a thick mist of bright red drops that drift everywhere, sticking to every surface."

"Did Mr. Barnes strike you?"

Joe hesitated, impressed enough to show her an appreciative smile. "What does it say in my report?"

"But it seems to me...." Her voice trailed away. "Maybe you were being honest with me, Joe. When you swore that you would have done anything to save yourself, I should have believed you. So I have to wonder now—what if you grabbed that piece of asteroid and turned it on yourself? Mr. Barnes would have been surprised. For a minute or so, he might have been too stunned to do anything but watch you strike yourself in the face. Then he heard the others breaking in, and he naturally kicked over to you and pulled the weapon from your hand."

"Now why would I admit to any of that?" Joe replied.

Then he shrugged, adding, "But really, when you get down to it, the logistics of what happened aren't important. What matters is that I gave the captain a very good excuse to lock that man up, which was how she cleared her conscience before we could abandon ship."

"The captain doesn't look at this as an excuse," the psychiatrist said.

"No?"

"Barnes was violent, and her conscience rests easy."

Joe asked, "Who ordered every com-system destroyed before we abandoned the *Demon Dandy*? Who left poor Barnes with no way even to call home?"

"Except by then, your colleague was a prisoner, and according to our corporate laws, the captain was obligated to silence the criminal to any potential lawsuits." The woman kept her gaze on Joe. "Somebody had to be left behind, and in the captain's mind, you weren't as guilty as Mr. Barnes."

"I hope not."

"But nobody was half as cold or a tenth as ruthless as you were, Joe."

His expression was untroubled, even serene.

"The captain understands what you are. But in the end, she had no choice but to leave the other man behind."

Joe laughed. "Human or not, Barnes wasn't a very good person. He was mean-spirited and distant, and even if nobody admits it, I promise you: Nobody on the ship has lost two seconds' sleep over what happened there."

The psychiatrist nearly spoke, then hesitated.

Joe leaned forward. "Do you know how it is, Doctor? When you're a kid, there's always something that



you think you're pretty good at. Maybe you're the best on your street, or you're the best at school. But you never know how good you really are. Not until you get out into the big world and see what other people can do. And in the end, we aren't all that special. Not extra clever or pretty or strong. But for a few of us, a very few, there comes a special day when we realize that we aren't just a little good at something. We are great.

"Better than anybody ever, maybe.

"Do you know how that feels, ma'am?"

She sighed deeply. Painfully. "What are you telling me, Joe?"

He leaned back in his chair, absently scratching at the biggest bandage on his iron-battered face. "I'm telling you that I am excellent at sizing people up. Even better than you, and I think you're beginning to appreciate that. But what you call being a borderline psychopath is to me just another part of my bigger, more important talent."

"You're not borderline anything," she said.

He took no offense from the implication. "Here's what we can learn from this particular mess: Most people are secretly bad. Under the proper circumstances, they will gladly turn on one of their own and feel nothing but good about it afterward. But when the stakes are high and the world's going to shit, I can see exactly what needs to be done. Unlike everybody else, I will do the dirtiest work. Which is a rare and rich and remarkable gift, I think."

She took a breath. "Why are you telling me this, Joe?"

"Because I don't want to be a mechanic riding clunky spaceships," he confessed. "And I want your help, Doctor. All right? Will you find me new work ... something that's closer to my talents? Closer to my heart.

"Would you do that for me, pretty lady?"

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## II. Natural Killer

At four in the morning, the animals slept—which was only reasonable since this was a zoo populated entirely by synthetic organisms. Patrons didn't pay for glimpses of furry lumps, formerly wild and now slumbering in some shady corner. What they wanted were spectacular, one-of-a-kind organisms doing breathtaking feats, and doing them in daylight. But high metabolisms had their costs, and that's why the creatures now lay in their cages and grottos, inside glass boxes and private ponds, beautiful eyes closed while young minds dreamed about who-could-say-what.

For the moment, privacy was guaranteed, and that was one fine reason why desperate men would agree to meet in that public place.

Slipping into the zoo unseen brought a certain ironic pleasure too.

But perhaps the most important, at least for Joe, were the possibilities inherent with that unique realm.

A loud, faintly musical voice said, "Stop, Mr. Carroway. Stop where you are, sir. And now please ... lift your arms for us and dance in a very slow circle...."

Joe was in his middle thirties. His rigorously trained body was clad in casual white slacks and a new gray shirt. His face had retained its boyish beauty, a prominent scar creasing the broad forehead and a

several-day growth of beard lending a rough, faintly threadbare quality to his otherwise immaculate appearance. Arms up, he looked rather tired. As he turned slowly, he took deep breaths, allowing several flavors of radiation to wash across his body, reaching into his bones.

"I see three weapons." The voice came from no particular direction. "One at a time, please, lower the weapons and kick each of them toward the fountain. If you will, Mr. Carroway."

A passing shower had left the plaza wet and slick. Joe dropped the Ethiopian machine pistol first, followed by the matching Glocks. Each time he kicked one of the guns, it would spin and skate across the red bricks, each one ending up within a hand's length of the fountain—an astonishing feat, considering the stakes and his own level of exhaustion.

Unarmed, Joe stood alone in the empty plaza.

The fountain had a round black-granite base, buried pumps shoving water up against a perfect sphere of transparent crystal. The sphere was a monstrous, stylized egg. Inside the egg rode a never-to-be-born creature—some giant beast with wide black eyes and gill slits, its tail half-formed and the stubby little limbs looking as though they could turn into arms or legs, or even tentacles. Joe knew the creature was supposed to be blind, but he couldn't shake the impression that the eyes were watching him. He watched the creature slowly roll over and over again, its egg suspended on nothing but a thin chilled layer of very busy water.

Eventually five shapes emerged from behind the fountain.

"Thank you, Mr. Carroway," said the voice. Then the sound system was deactivated, and with a hand to the mouth, one figure shouted, "A little closer, sir. If you will."

That familiar voice accompanied the beckoning arm.

Two figures efficiently disabled Joe's weapons. They were big men, probably Rebirth Neanderthals or some variation on that popular theme. A third man looked like a Brilliance-Boy, his skull tall and deep, stuffed full with a staggering amount of brain tissue. The fourth human was small and slight, held securely by the Brilliance-Boy; even at a distance, she looked decidedly female.

Joe took two steps and paused.

The fifth figure, the one that spoke, approached near enough to show his face. Joe wasn't surprised, but he pretended to be. "Markel? What are you doing here?" He laughed as if nervous. "You're not one of them, are you?"

The man looked as *sapien* as Joe.

With a decidedly human laugh, Markel remarked, "I'm glad to hear that you were fooled, Mr. Carroway. Which of course means that you killed Stanton and Humphrey for no good reason."

Joe said nothing.

"You did come here alone, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Because you took a little longer than I anticipated."

"No I didn't."

"Perhaps not. I could be mistaken."

Markel never admitted to errors. He was a tall fellow, as bald as an egg and not particularly handsome. Which made his disguise all the more effective. The new *Homo* species were always physically attractive, and they were superior athletes, more often than not. Joe had never before met a Rebirth who had gone through the pain and expense and then not bothered to grow some kind of luxurious head of hair as a consequence.

"You have my vial with you, Joseph. Yes?"

"Joe. That's my name." He made a show of patting his chest pocket.

"And the sealed recordings too?"

"Everything you asked for." Joe looked past Markel. "Is that the girl?"

Something about the question amused Markel. "Do you honestly care if she is?"

"Of course I care."

"Enough to trade away everything and earn her safety?"

Joe said nothing.

"I've studied your files, Joseph. I have read the personality evaluations, and I know all about your corporate security work, and even all those wicked sealed records covering the last three years. It is a most impressive career. But nothing about you, sir—nothing in your nature or your history—strikes me as being sentimental. And I cannot believe that this girl matters enough to convince you to make this exchange."

Joe smiled. "Then why did I come here?"

"That's my question too."

Joe waited for a moment, then suggested, "Maybe it's money?"

"Psychopaths always have a price," Markel replied. "Yes, I guessed it would be something on those lines."

Joe reached into his shirt pocket. The vial was diamond, smaller than a pen and only halfway filled with what looked to be a plain white powder. But embossed along the vial's length were the ominous words: natural killer.

"How much do you want for my baby, Joseph?"

"Everything," he said.

"And what does that mean?"

"All the money."

"My wealth? Is that what you're asking for?"

"I'm not asking," Joe said. "Don't be confused, Markel. This is not a negotiation. I am demanding that you and your backers give me every last cent in your coffers. And if not, I will ruin everything that you've

worked to achieve. You sons-of-bitches."

Markel had been born *sapien* and gifted, and his minimal and very secret steps to leave his species behind had served to increase both his mind and his capacity for arrogance. But he was stunned to hear the ultimatum. To make such outrageous demands, and in these circumstances! He couldn't imagine anybody with that much gall. Standing quite still, his long arms at his side, Markel tried to understand why an unarmed man in these desperate circumstances would have any power over him. What wasn't he seeing? No reinforcements were coming; he was certain of that. Outside this tiny circle, nobody knew anything. This *sapien* was bluffing, Markel decided. And with that, he began to breathe again, and he relaxed, announcing, "You're right, this is not a negotiation. And I'm telling you no."

Inside the same shirt pocket was a child's toy—a completely harmless lump of luminescent putty stolen from a passing giftbot. Joe shoved the vial into the bright red plaything, and before Markel could react, he flung both the putty and vial high into the air.

Every eye watched that ruddy patch of light twirl and soften, and then plunge back to the earth.

Beside the plaza was a deep acid-filled moat flanked by a pair of high fences, electrified and bristling with sensors. And on the far side were woods and darkness, plus the single example of a brand new species designed to bring huge crowds through the zoo's front gate.

The Grendel.

"You should not have done that," Markel said with low, furious voice. "I'll just have you killed now and be done with you."

Joe smiled, lifting his empty hands over his head. "Maybe you should kill me. If you're so positive that you can get your precious Killer back."

That's when Joe laughed at the brilliant bastard.

But it was the girl who reacted first, squirming out of the Brilliance-Boy's hands to run straight for her lover.

No one bothered to chase her down.

She stopped short and slapped Joe.

"You idiot," she spat.

He answered her with a tidy left hook.

Then one of the big soldiers shot a tacky round into Joe's chest, pumping in enough current to drop him on the wet bricks, leaving him hovering between consciousness and white-hot misery.

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"You idiot."

The girl repeated herself several times, occasionally adding a dismissive, "Moron," or "Fool," to her invectives. Then as the electricity diminished, she leaned close to his face. "Don't you understand? We were never going to use the bug. We don't want to let it loose. It's just one more way to help make sure you *sapiens* won't declare war on us. Natural Killer is our insurance policy, and that's it."

The pain diminished to a lasting ache. Wincing, Joe struggled to sit up. While he was down, smart-cuffs

had wrapped themselves around his wrists and ankles. The two soldiers and the Brilliance-Boy were standing before the Grendel's large enclosure. They had donned night goggles and were studying the schematics of the zoo, tense voices discussing how best to slip into the cage and recover the prize.

"Joe," she said, "how can you be this stupid?"

"Comes naturally, I guess."

To the eye, the girl was beautiful and purely *sapien*. The long black hair and rich brown skin sparkled in the plaza's light. The word "natural" was a mild insult among the Rebirths. She sat up, lips pouting. Like Markel, the young woman must have endured major revisions of her genetics—far more involved than a few synthetic genes sprinkled about the DNA. Extra pairs of chromosomes were standard among the new humans. But despite rumors that some of the Rebirths were hiding among the naturals, this was the first time Joe had knowingly crossed paths with them.

"I am stupid," he admitted. Then he looked at Markel, adding, "Both of you had me fooled. All along."

That was a lie, but it made Markel smile. Of course he was clever, and of course no one suspected the truth. Behind that grim old face was enough self-esteem to keep him believing that he would survive the night.

The idiot.

Markel and his beautiful assistant glanced at each other.

Then the Brilliance-Boy called out. "We'll use the service entrance to get in," he announced. "Five minutes to circumvent locks and cameras, I should think."

"Do it," Markel told them.

"You'll be all right here?"

The scientist lifted a pistol over his head. "We're fine. Just go. Get my child out of that cage, now!"

That left three people on the plaza, plus the monster locked inside the slowly revolving crystal egg.

"The plague is just an insurance policy, huh?"

Joe threw out the question, and waited.

After a minute, the girl said, "To protect us from people like you, yes."

He put on an injured expression. "Like me? What's that mean?"

She glanced at Markel. In an acid tone, she said, "He showed me your history, Joe. After our first night together...."

"And what did it tell you?"

"When you were on the *Demon Dandy*, you saved yourself by leaving a Rebirth behind. And you did it in a cold, calculating way."

He shrugged, smiled. "What else?"

"After joining the security arm of the corporation, you distinguished yourself as a soldier. Then you went

to work for the U.N., as a contractor, and your expertise has been assassinations."

"Bad men should be killed," Joe said flatly. "Evil should be removed from the world. Get the average person to be honest, and he'll admit that he won't lose any sleep, particularly if the monster is killed with a single clean shot."

"You are horrible," she maintained.

"If I'm so horrible," said Joe, "then do the world a favor. Shoot me in the head."

She began to reach behind her back, then thought better of it.

Markel glanced at both of them, pulling his weapon closer to his body. But nothing seemed urgent, and he returned to keeping watch over the Grendel's enclosure.

"I suppose you noticed," Joe began.

The girl blinked. "Noticed what?"

"In my career, I've killed a respectable number of Rebirths."

The dark eyes stared at him. Very quietly, with sarcasm, she said, "I suppose they were all bad people."

"Drug lords and terrorists, or hired guns in the service of either." Joe shook his head, saying, "Legal murder is easy. Clean, clear-cut. A whole lot more pleasant than the last few weeks have been, I'll admit."

Markel looked at him. "I am curious, Joseph. Who decided you were the ideal person to investigate our little laboratory?"

"You don't have a little lab," said Joe. "There aren't ten or twelve better-equipped facilities when it comes to high-end genetic research."

"There aren't even twelve," the man said, bristling slightly. "Perhaps two or three."

"Well, you wouldn't have found this item in any official file," Joe said. "But a couple months ago, I was leading a team that hit a terror cell in Alberta. Under interrogation, the Rebirth boss started making threats about unleashing something called Natural Killer on us. On the poor helpless *sapiens*. He claimed that we'd be wiped out of existence, and the new species could then take over. Which is their right, he claimed, and as inevitable as the next sunrise."

His audience exchanged looks.

"But that hardly explains how you found your way to me," Markel pointed out.

"There was a trail. Bloody in places, but every corpse pointing in your general direction."

Markel almost spoke. But the creak of a heavy door being opened interrupted him. Somewhere in the back of the Grendel's enclosure, three pairs of goggled eyes were peering out into the jungle and shadow.

"It's an amazing disease," Joe stated. "Natural Killer is."

"Quiet," Markel warned.

But the girl couldn't contain herself. She bent low, whispering, "It is," while trying to burn him with her hateful smile.

"The virus targets old, outmoded stretches of the human genome," Joe continued. "From what I can tell—and I'm no expert in biology, of course—but your extra genes guarantee you wouldn't get anything worse than some wicked flu symptoms out of the bug. Is that about right?"

"A tailored pox phage," she said. "Rapidly mutating, but always fatal to *sapiens* genome."

"So who dreamed up the name?" Joe glanced at Markel and then winked at her. "It was you, wasn't it?"

She sat back, grinning.

"And it's going to save you? From bastards like me, is it?"

"You won't dare lift a hand against us," she told Joe. "As soon as you realize we have this weapon, and that it could conceivably wipe your entire species off the face of the Earth...."

"Smart," he agreed. "Very smart."

From the Grendel enclosure came the sharp soft noise of a gun firing. One quick burst and then two single shots from the same weapon. Then, silence.

Markel lifted his pistol reflexively.

"So when do you Rebirths make your official announcement?" Joe asked. "And how do you handle this kind of event? Hold a news conference? Unless you decide on a demonstration, I suppose. You know, murder an isolated village, or devastate one of the orbital communities. Just to prove to the idiots in the world that you can deliver on your threats."

A voice called from the enclosure: "I have it."

Joe turned in time to see the reddish glow rise off the ground, partly obscured by the strong hand holding it. But as the arm cocked, ready to throw the prize back into the plaza, there was a grunt, almost too soft to be heard. A terrific amount of violence occurred in an instant, without fuss. Then the red glow appeared on a different portion of the jungle floor, and the only sound was the slow lapping of a broad happy tongue.

Markel cursed.

The girl stood up and looked.

Markel called out a name, and nobody answered. And then somebody else fired their weapon in a spray pattern, cutting vegetation and battering the high fence on the far side of the moat.

"I killed it," the second soldier declared. "I'm sure."

The Brilliance-Boy offered a few cautionary words.

"I do feel exceptionally stupid," Joe said. "Tell me again: Why exactly do you need Natural Killer?"

The girl stared at him and then stepped back.

"I didn't know we were waging a real war against you people," he continued. "I guess we keep that a secret, what with our political tricks and PR campaigns. Like when we grant you full citizenship. And the

way we force you to accept the costs and benefits of all the laws granted to human beings everywhere—"

"You hate us," she interrupted. "You despise every last one of us."

Quietly, Joe assured her, "You don't know what I hate."

She stiffened, saying nothing.

"This is the situation. As I see it." Joe paused for a moment. "Inside that one vial, you have a bug that could wipe out your alleged enemies. And by enemies, I mean people that look at you with suspicion and fear. You intend to keep your doomsday disease at the ready, just in case you need it."

"Of course."

"Except you'll have to eventually grow more of it. If you want to keep it as a credible, immediate threat. And you'll have to divide your stocks and store them in scattered, secure locations. Otherwise assholes like me are going to throw the bugs in a pile and burn it all with a torch."

She watched Joe, her sore jaw clamped tight.

"But having stockpiles of Natural Killer brings a different set of problems. Who can trust who not to use it without permission? And the longer this virus exists, the better the chance that the Normals will find effective fixes to keep themselves safe. Vaccines. Quarantine laws. Whatever we need to weather the plague, and of course, give us our chance to take our revenge afterward."

The red glow had not moved. For a full minute, the little jungle had been perfectly, ominously silent.

Markel glanced at Joe and then back at the high fence. He was obviously fighting the urge to shout warnings to the others. That could alert the Grendel. But it took all his will to do nothing.

"You have a great, great weapon," Joe allowed. "But your advantage won't last."

The girl was breathing faster now.

"You know what would be smart? Before the Normals grow aware of your power, you should release the virus. No warnings, no explanations. Do it before we know what hit us, and hope you kill enough of us in the first week that you can permanently gain the upper hand."

"No," Markel said, taking two steps toward the enclosure. "We don't have more than a sample of the virus, and it is just a virus."

"Meaning what?"

"Diseases are like wildfires," he explained. "You watch them burn, and you can't believe that anything would survive the blaze. But afterward there are always islands of green surrounded by scorched forest." The man had given this considerable thought. "Three or four billion *sapiens* might succumb. But that would still leave us in the minority, and we wouldn't be able to handle the retribution."

The girl showed a satisfied smile.

But then Joe said, "Except," and laughed quietly.

The red glow had not moved, and the jungle stood motionless beneath the stars. But Markel had to look back at his prisoner, a new terror pushing away the old.



"What do you mean?" the girl asked. "Except what?"

"You and your boss," Joe said. "And who knows how many thousands of others too. Each one of you looks exactly like us. You sound like us." Then he grinned and smacked his lips, adding, "And you taste like us, too. Which means that your particular species, whatever you call yourselves ... you'll come out of this nightmare better than anybody...."

The girl's eyes opened wide; a pained breath was taken and then held deep.

"Which of course is the central purpose of this gruesome exercise," Joe said. "I'm sure Dr. Markel would have eventually let you in on his dirty secret. The real scheme hiding behind the first, more public plan."

Too astonished to react, Markel stared at the cuffed, unarmed man sitting on the bricks.

"Is this true?" the girl whispered.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the genius managed to shake his head, lying badly when he said, "Of course not. The man is telling you a crazy wild story, dear."

"And you know why he never told you?" Joe asked.

"Shut up," Markel warned.

The girl was carrying a weapon, just as Joe had guessed. From the back of her pants, she pulled out a small pistol, telling Markel, "Let him talk."

"Darling, he's trying to poison you—"

"Shut up," she snapped.

Then to Joe, she asked, "Why didn't he tell me?"

"Because you're a good decent person, or at least you like to think so. And because he knew how to use that quality to get what he wants." Showing a hint of compassion, Joe sighed. "Markel sure knows how to motivate you. First, he makes you sleep with me. And then he shows you my files, convincing you that I can't be trusted or ignored. Which is why you slept with me three more times. Just to keep a close watch over me."

The girl lowered her pistol, and she sobbed and then started to lift the pistol again.

"Put that down," Markel said.

She might have obeyed, given another few moments to think. But Markel shot her three times. He did it quickly and lowered his weapon afterward, astonished that he had done this very awful thing. It took his great mind a long sloppy moment to wrap itself around the idea that he could murder in that particular fashion, that he possessed such brutal, prosaic power. Then he started to lift his gun again, searching for Joe.

But Joe, wrists and feet bound, was already rolling to the dead girl's body. And with her little gun, he put a bullet into Markel's forehead.

The blind, unborn monster watched the drama from inside its crystal egg.

A few moments later, a bloody Brilliance-Boy ran up to the Grendel's fence, and with a joyous holler flung the red putty and diamond vial back onto the plaza. Then he turned and fired twice at shadows

before something monstrous lifted him high, shook him once, and folded him backward before neatly tearing him in two.

\* \* \* \*

### III. The Ticking Bomb

"Goodness," the prisoner muttered. "It's the legend himself."

Joe said nothing.

"Well, now I feel especially terrified." She laughed weakly before coughing, a dark bubble of blood clinging to the split corner of her mouth. Then she closed her eyes for a moment, suppressing her pain as she turned her head to look straight at him. "You must be planning all kinds of horrors," she said. "Savage new ways to break my spirit. To bare my soul."

Gecko slippers gripped the wall. Joe watched the prisoner. He opened his mouth as if to speak but then closed it again, one finger idly scratching a spot behind his left ear.

"I won't be scared," she decided. "This is an honor, having someone this famous assigned to my case. I must be considered an exceptionally important person."

He seemed amused, if just for a moment.

"But I'm not a person, am I? In your eyes, I'm just another animal."

What she was was a long, elegant creature—the ultimate marriage between human traditions and synthetic chromosomes. Four bare arms were restrained with padded loops and pulled straight out from the shockingly naked body. Because hair could be a bother in space, she had none. Because dander was an endless source of dirt in freefall, her skin would peel away periodically, not unlike the worn skin of a cobra. She was smart, but not in the usual ways that the two or three thousand species of Rebirths enhanced their minds. Her true genius lay in social skills. Among the Antfolk, she could instantly recognize every face and recall each name, knowing at least ten thousand nest-mates as thoroughly as two *sapiens* who had been life-long pals. Even among the alien faces of traditional humans, she was a marvel at reading faces, deciphering postures. Every glance taught her something more about her captors. Each careless word gave her room to maneuver. That's why the first team—a pair of low-ranking interrogators, unaware of her importance—was quickly pulled from her case. She had used what was obvious, making a few offhand observations, and in the middle of their second session, the two officers had started to trade insults and then punches.

"A Carroway-worthy moment," had been the unofficial verdict.

A second, more cautious team rode the skyhook up from Quito, and they were wise enough to work their prisoner without actually speaking to her. Solitude and sensory deprivation were the tools of choice. Without adequate stimulation, an Antfolk would crumble. And the method would have worked, except that three or four weeks would have been required. But time was short: Several intelligence sources delivered the same ominous warning. This was not just another low-level prisoner. The Antfolk, named Glory, was important. Maybe essential. Days mattered now, even hours. Which was why a third team went to work immediately, doing their awful best from the reassuring confines of a U.N. bunker set two kilometers beneath the Matterhorn.

That new team consisted of AIs and autodocs with every compassion system deleted. Through the careful manipulation of pain and hallucinogenic narcotics, they managed to dislodge a few nuggets of intelligence as well as a level of hatred and malevolence that they had never before witnessed.

"The bomb is mine," she screamed. "I helped design it, and I helped build it. Antimatter triggers the fusion reaction, and it's compact and efficient, and shielded to where it's nearly invisible. I even selected our target. Believe me ... when my darling detonates, everything is going to change!"

At that point, their prisoner died.

Reviving her wasted precious minutes. But that was ample time for the machines to discuss the obvious possibilities and then calculate various probabilities. In the time remaining, what could be done? And what was impossible? Then without a shred of ego or embarrassment, they contacted one of the only voices that they considered more talented than themselves.

And now Joe stood before the battered prisoner.

Again, he scratched at his ear.

Time hadn't touched him too roughly. He was in his middle forties, but his boyish good looks had been retained through genetics and a sensible indifference to sunshine. Careful eyes would have noticed the fatigue in his body, his motions. A veteran soldier could have recognized the subtle erosion of spirit. And a studied gaze of the kind that an Antfolk would employ would detect signs of weakness and doubt that didn't quite fit when it came to one of the undisputed legends of this exceptionally brutal age.

Joe acted as if there was no hurry. But his heart was beating too fast, his belly roiling with nervous energy. And the corners of his mouth were a little too tight, particularly when he looked as if he wanted to speak.

"What are you going to do with me?" his prisoner inquired.

And again, he scratched at his scalp, something about his skin bothering him to distraction.

She was puzzled, slightly.

"Say something," Glory advised.

"I'm a legend, am I?" The smile was unchanged, bright and full; but behind the polished teeth and bright green eyes was a quality ... some trace of some subtle emotion that the prisoner couldn't quite name.

She was intrigued.

"I know all about you," Glory explained. "I know your career in detail, successes and failures both."

For an instant, Joe looked at the lower pair of arms, following the long bones to where they met within the reconfigured hips.

"Want to hear something ironic?" she asked.

"Always."

"The asteroid you were planning to mine? Back during your brief, eventful career as an astronaut, I mean. It's one of ours now."

"Until your bomb goes boom," he said. "And then that chunk of iron and humanity is going to be destroyed. Along with every other nest of yours, I would guess."

"Dear man. Are you threatening me?"

"You would be the better judge of that."

She managed to laugh. "I'm not particularly worried."

He said nothing.

"Would we take such an enormous risk if we didn't have the means to protect ourselves?"

Joe stared at her for a long while. Then he looked beyond her body, at a random point on the soft white wall. Quietly he asked, "Who am I?"

She didn't understand the question.

"You've seen some little digitals of me. Supposedly you've peeked at my files. But do you know for sure who I am?"

She nearly laughed. "Joseph Carroway."

He closed his eyes.

"Security," he said abruptly. "I need you here. Now."

Whatever was happening, it was interesting. Despite the miseries inflicted on her mind and aching body, the prisoner twisted her long neck, watching three heavily armed soldiers kick their way into her cell.

"This is an emergency," Joe announced. "I need everybody. Your full squad in here now."

The ranking officer was a small woman with the bulging muscles of a steroid hopper. A look of genuine admiration showed in her face. She knew all about Joe Carroway. Who didn't? But her training and regulations held sway. This man might have saved the Earth, on one or several occasions, but she still had the fortitude to remind him, "I can't bring everybody in here. That's against regulations."

Joe nodded.

Sighing, he said, "Then we'll just have to make do."

In an instant, with a smooth, almost beautiful motion, he grabbed the officer's face and broke her jaw and then pulled a weapon from his pocket, shoving the stubby barrel into the nearest face.

The pistol made a soft, almost negligible sound.

The remains of the skull were scattered into the face of the next guard.

He shot that soldier twice and then killed the commanding officer before grabbing up her weapon, using his security code to override its safety and then leaping into the passageway. The prisoner strained at her bonds. Mesmerized, she counted the soft blasts and the shouts, and she stared, trying to see through the spreading fog of blood and shredded brain matter. Then a familiar figure reappeared, moving with commendable grace despite having a body designed to trek across the savannas of Africa.

"We have to go," said Joe. "Now." He was carrying a fresh gun and jumpsuit.

"I don't believe this," she managed.

He cut her bonds and said, "Didn't think you would." Then he paused, just for an instant. "Joe Carroway was captured and killed three years ago, during the Tranquility business. I'm the lucky man they spliced

together to replace that dead asshole."

"You're telling me—?"

"Suit up. Let's go, lady."

"You can't be." She was numb, fighting to understand what was possible, no matter how unlikely. "What species of Rebirth are you?"

"I was an Eagle," he said.

She stared at the face. Never in her life had she tried so hard to slice through skin and eyes, fighting to decipher what was true.

"Suit up," he said again.

"But I don't see—?"

Joe turned suddenly, launching a recoilless bundle out into the hall. The detonation was a soft crack, smart-shards aiming only for armor and flesh. Sparing the critical hull surrounding them.

"We'll have to fight our way to my ship," he warned.

Slowly, with stiff clumsy motions, she dressed herself. As the suit retailored itself to match her body, she said again, "I don't believe you. I don't believe any of this."

Now Joe stared at her.

Hard.

"What do you think, lady?" he asked. "You rewrote your own biology in a thousand crazy ways. But one of your brothers—a proud Eagle— isn't able to reshape himself? He can't take on the face of your worst enemy? He can't steal the dead man's memories? He is allowed this kind of power, all in a final bid to get revenge for what that miserable shit's done to us?"

She dipped her head.

No, she didn't believe him.

But three hours later, as they were making the long burn out of Earth orbit, a flash of blue light announced the abrupt death of fifty million humans and perhaps half a million innocents.

"A worthy trade," said the man strapped into the seat beside her.

And that was the moment when Glory finally offered two of her hands to join up with one of his, and after that, her other two hands as well.

\* \* \* \*

Her nest was the nearest Antfolk habitat. Waiting at the moon's L5 Lagrange point, the asteroid was a smooth blackish ball, heat-absorbing armor slathered deep over the surface of a fully infested cubic kilometer—a city where thousands of bodies squirmed about in freefall, thriving inside a maze of warm tunnels and airy rooms. Banks of fusion reactors powered factories and the sun-bright lights. Trim, enduring ecosystems created an endless feast of edible gruel and free oxygen. The society was unique, at least within the short rich history of the Rebirths. Communal and technologically adept, this species had accomplished much in a very brief period. That's why it was so easy for them to believe that they alone

now possessed the keys to the universe.

Joe was taken into custody. Into quarantine. Teams drawn from security and medical castes tried to piece together the truth, draining off his blood and running electrodes into his skull, inflicting him with induced emotions and relentless urges to be utterly, perfectly honest.

The Earth's counterassault arrived on schedule—lasers and missiles followed by robot shock troops. But the asteroid's defense network absorbed every blow. Damage was minor, casualties light, and before larger attacks could be organized, the Antfolk sent an ultimatum to the U.N.: One hundred additional fusion devices had been smuggled to the Earth's surface, each now hidden and secured, waiting for any excuse to erupt.

For the good of humankind, the Antfolk were claiming dominion over everything that lay beyond the Earth's atmosphere. Orbital facilities and the lunar cities would be permitted, but only if reasonable rents were paid. Other demands included nationhood status for each of the Rebirth species, reimbursements for all past wrongs, and within the next year, the total and permanent dismantling of the United Nations.

Both sides declared a ragged truce.

Eight days later, Joe was released from his cell, guards escorting him along a tunnel marked by pheromones and infrared signatures. Glory was waiting, wearing her best gown and a wide, hopeful smile. The Antfolk man beside her seemed less sure. He was a giant hairless creature. Leader of the nest's political caste, he glared at the muscular *sapien*, and with a cool smooth voice said, "The tunnel before you splits, Mr. Carroway. Which way will you travel?"

"What are my choices?" asked the prisoner.

"Death now," the man promised. "Or death in some ill-defined future."

"I think I prefer the future," he said. Then he glanced at Glory, meeting her worried smile with a wink and slight nod.

The look that Glory shot her superior was filled with meaning and hope.

"I don't relish the idea of trusting you," the man confessed. "But every story you've told us, with words and genetics, has been confirmed by every available source. You were once a man named Magnificent. We see traces of your original DNA inside what used to be Joseph Carroway. It seems that our old enemy was indeed taken prisoner during the Luna Revolt. The Eagles were a talented bunch. They may well have camouflaged you inside Mr. Carroway's body and substance. A sorry thing that the species was exterminated—save for you, of course. But once this new war is finished, I promise you: my people will reconstitute yours as well as your culture, to the best of our considerable abilities."

Joe dipped his head. "I can only hope to see that day, sir."

The man had giant white eyes and tiny blond teeth. Watching the prisoner did no good; he could not read this man's soul. So he turned to Glory, prompting her with the almost invisible flick of a finger.

She told Joe, "The U.N. attack was almost exactly as you expected it to be, and your advice proved extremely useful. Thank you."

Joe showed a smug little smile.

"And you've told us a lot we didn't know," Glory continued. "Those ten agents on Pallas. The Deimos booby trap. And how the U.N. would go about searching for the rest of our nuclear devices."

"Are your bombs safe?"

She glanced at her superior, finding encouragement in some little twitch of the face. Then she said, "Yes."

"Do you want to know their locations?" the man asked Joe.

"No."

Then in the next breath, Joe added, "And I hope you don't know that either, sir. You're too much of a target, should somebody grab you up."

"More good advice," the man replied.

That was the instant when Joe realized that he wouldn't be executed as a precaution. More than three years of careful preparation had led to this: The intricate back-story and genetic trickery were his ideas. Carrying off every aspect of this project, from the Eagle's identity to his heightened capacity to read bodies and voices, was the end result of hard training. Hundreds of specialists, all AIs, had helped produce the new Joseph Carroway. And then each one of those machines was wiped stupid and melted to an anonymous slag.

On that day when he dreamed up this outrageous plan, the Antfolk were still just one of a dozen Rebirths that might or might not cause trouble someday.

Nobody could have planned for these last weeks.

Killing the guards to free the woman was an inspiration and a necessity, and he never bothered to question it. One hundred fusion bombs were scattered across a helpless, highly vulnerable planet, and setting them off would mean billions dead, and perhaps civilization too. Sacrificing a few soldiers to protect the rest of the world was a plan born of simple, pure mathematics.

The Antfolk man coughed softly. "From this point on, Joe ... or should I call you Magnificent?"

With an appealing smile, he said, "I've grown attached to Joe."

The other two laughed gently. Then the man said, "For now, you are my personal guest. And except for security bracelets and a bomblet planted inside your skull, you will be given the freedoms and responsibilities expected of all worthy visitors."

"Then I am grateful," said Joe. "Thank you to your nation and to your good species, sir. Thank you so much."

\* \* \* \*

The truce was shattered with one desperate assault—three brigades of shock troops riding inside untested star-drive boosters, supported by every weapon system and reconfigured com-laser available to the U.N. The cost was twenty thousand dead *sapiens* and a little less than a trillion dollars. One platoon managed to insert itself inside Joe's nest, but when the invaders grabbed the nursery and a thousand young hostages, he distinguished himself by helping plan and then lead the counterstrike. All accounts made him the hero. He killed several of the enemy, and alone, he managed to disable the warhead that would have shattered their little world. But even the most grateful mother insisted on looking at their savior with detached pleasure. Trust was impossible. Joe's face was too strange, his reputation far too familiar. Pheromones delivered the mandatory thanks, and there were a few cold gestures wishing the hero well. But there were insults too, directed at him and at the long lovely woman who was by now sleeping with him.

In retribution for that final attack, the Antfolk detonated a second nuclear weapon, shearing off one slope of the Hawai'i volcano and killing eight million with the resulting tsunami.

Nine days later, the U.N. collapsed, reformed from the wreckage and then shattered again before the next dawn. What rose from that sorry wreckage enjoyed both the laws to control every aspect of the mother world and the mandate to beg for their enemies' mercy.

The giants in the sky demanded, and subsequently won, each of their original terms.

For another three months, Joe lived inside the little asteroid, enduring a never-subtle shunning.

Then higher powers learned of his plight and intervened. For the next four years, he traveled widely across the new empire, always in the company of Glory, the two of them meeting an array of leaders, scientists, and soldiers—that last group as suspicious as any, but ever eager to learn whatever little tricks the famous Carroway might share with them.

To the end, Joe remained under constant observation. Glory made daily reports about his behaviors and her own expert impressions. Their relationship originally began under orders from Pallas, but when she realized that they might well remain joined until one or both died, she discovered, to her considerable surprise, that she wasn't displeased with her fate.

In the vernacular of her species, she had floated into love ... and so what if the object of her affections was an apish goon?

During their journey, they visited twenty little worlds, plus Pallas and Ceres and Vesta. The man beside her was never out of character. He was intense and occasionally funny, and he was quick to learn and astute with his observations about life inside the various nests. Because it would be important for the last member of a species, Joe pushed hard for the resurrection of the fabled Eagles. Final permission came just as he and Glory were about to travel to outer moons of Jupiter. Three tedious, painful days were spent inside the finest biogenic lab in the solar system. Samples of bone and marrow and fat and blood were cultured, and delicate machines rapidly separated what had been Joe from the key traces of the creature that had been dubbed Magnificent.

A long voyage demands large velocities, which was why the transport ship made an initial high-gee burn. The crew and passengers were strapped into elaborate crash seats, their blood laced with comfort drugs, eyes and minds distracted by immersion masks. Six hours after they leaped clear of Vesta, Joe disabled each of his tracking bracelets and the bomblet inside his head, and then he slipped out of his seat, fighting the terrific acceleration as he worked his way to the bridge.

The transport was an enormous, utterly modern spaceship. The watch officer was on the bridge, stretched out in his own crash seat. Instantly suspicious and without even the odor of politeness, he demanded that his important passenger leave at once. Joe smiled for a moment. Then he turned without complaint or hesitation, showing his broad back to the spidery fellow before he climbed out of view.

What killed the officer was a fleck of dust carrying microchines—a fleet of tiny devices that attacked essential genes found inside the Antfolk metabolism, causing a choking sensation, vomiting and soon death.

Joe returned to the bridge and sent a brief, heavily coded message to the Earth. Then he did a cursory job of destroying the ship's security systems. With luck, he had earned himself a few hours of peace. But when he returned to his cabin, Glory was gone. She had pulled herself out her seat, or somebody had roused her. For a moment, he touched the deep padding, allowing the sheets to wrap around his arm and hand, and he carefully measured the heat left behind by her long, lovely body.



"Too bad," he muttered.

The transport carried five fully equipped lifepods. Working fast, Joe killed the hangar's robots and both of the resident mechanics. He dressed in the only pressure suit configured for his body and crippled all but one of the pods. His plan was to flee without fuss. The pods had potent engines and were almost impossible to track. There was no need for more corpses and mayhem. But he wanted a back-up plan, that's what he was working on when the ship's engines abruptly cut out.

A few minutes later, an armed team crawled into the hangar through a random vent.

There was no reason to fight, since Joe was certain to lose.

Instead he surrendered his homemade weapons and looked past the nervous crew, finding the lovely hairless face that he knew better than his own.

"What did you tell them?" Glory asked.

"Tell who?"

"Your people," she said. "The Earth."

Glory didn't expect answers, much less any honest words. But the simple fact was that whatever he said now and did now was inconsequential: Joe would survive or die in this cold realm, but what happened next would change nothing that was about to happen elsewhere.

"Your little home nest," he began.

She drifted forward, and then hesitated.

"It will be dead soon," he promised. "And nothing can be done to save it."

"Is there a bomb?"

"No," he said. "A microchine plague. I brought it with me when I snatched you away, Glory. It was hiding inside my bones."

"But you were tested," she said.

"Not well enough."

"We hunted for diseases," she insisted. "Agents. Toxins. We have the best minds anywhere, and we searched you inside and out ... and found nothing remotely dangerous."

He watched the wind leak out of her. Then very quietly, Joe admitted, "You might have the best minds. And best by a long ways. But we have a lot more brains down on the Earth, and I promise, a few of us are a good deal meaner than even you could ever be."

Enduring torture, Glory never looked this frail or sad.

Joe continued. "Every world you've taken me to is contaminated. I made certain of that. And since you managed to set off two bombs on my world, the plan is to obliterate two of your worlds. After that, if you refuse to surrender, it's fair to guess that every bomb and disease on both sides is going to be set free. Then in the end, nobody wins. Ever."

Glory could not look at him.

Joe laughed, aiming to humiliate.

He said, "I don't care how smart or noble you are. Like everybody else, you're nothing but meat and scared brains. And now you've been thrown into a dead-end tunnel, and I am Death standing at the tunnel's mouth.

"The clock is ticking. Can you make the right decision?"

Glory made a tiny, almost invisible motion with her smallest finger, betraying her intentions.

Joe leaped backward. The final working lifepod was open, and he dove inside as its hatch slammed shut, moments before the doomed could manage one respectable shot. Then twenty weapons were firing at a hull designed to shrug off the abuse of meteors and *sapien* weapons. Joe pulled himself into the pilot's ill-fitting chair, and once he was strapped down, he triggered his just-finished booby trap.

The fuel onboard two other pods exploded.

With a silent flash of light, the transport shattered, spilling its contents across the black and frigid wilderness.

\* \* \* \*

#### IV. The Assassin

"Eat," the voice insisted. "Don't our dead heroes deserve their feast?"

"So that's what I am?"

"A hero? Absolutely, my friend!"

"I meant that I'm dead." Joe looked across the table, measuring his host—an imposing Chinese-Indian male wearing the perfect suit and a face conditioned to convey wisdom and serene authority. "I realize that I got lost for a time," he admitted. "But I never felt particularly deceased."

"Perhaps that's how the dead perceive their lot. Yes?"

Joe nodded amiably, and using his stronger arm, stabbed at his meal. Even in lunar gravity, every motion was an effort.

"Are your rehabilitations going well?"

"They tell me that I'm making some progress."

"Modesty doesn't suit you, my friend. My sources assure me that you are amazing your trainers. And I think you know that perfectly well."

The meat was brown and sweet, like duck, but without the grease.

"Presently you hold the record, Joe."

Joe looked up again.

"Five and a half years in freefall," said Mr. Li, slowly shaking his head. "Assumed dead, and in your absence, justly honored for the accomplishments of an intense and extremely successful life. I'm sorry no one was actively searching for you, sir. But no Earth-based eye saw the Antfolks' spaceship explode, much less watched the debris scatter. So we had no starting point, and to make matters worse, your pod had a radar signature little bigger than a fist. You were very fortunate to be where you happened to be,

drifting back into the inner solar system. And you were exceptionally lucky to be noticed by that little mining ship. And just imagine your reception if that ship's crew had been anyone but *sapiens*...."

The billionaire let his voice trail away.

Joe had spent years wandering through the solar system, shepherding his food and riding roughshod over his recycling systems. That the lifepod was designed to carry a dozen bodies was critical; he wouldn't have lasted ten months inside a lesser bucket. But the explosion that destroyed the transport damaged the pod, leaving it dumb and deaf. Joe had soon realized that nobody knew where he was, or even that he was. After the first year, he calculated that he might survive for another eight, but it would involve more good luck and hard focus than even he might have been able to summon.

"I want to tell you, Joe. When I learned about your survival, I was thrilled. I turned to my dear wife and my children and told everybody, "This man is a marvel. He is a wonder. A one-in-a-trillion kind of *sapien*.""

Joe laughed quietly.

"Oh, I'm well-studied in Joseph Carroway's life," his host boasted. "After the war, humanity wanted to know who to thank for saving the Earth. That's why the U.N. released portions of your files. Millions of us became amateur scholars. I myself acquired some of the less doctored accounts of your official history. I've also read your five best biographies, and just like every other *sapien*, I have enjoyed your immersion drama—*Warrior on the Ramparts*. As a story, it takes dramatic license with your life. Of course. But *Warrior* was and is a cultural phenomenon, Joe. A stirring tale of courage and bold skill in the midst of wicked, soulless enemies."

Joe set his fork beside the plate.

"After all the misery and death of these last two decades," said Mr. Li, "the world discovered the one man who could be admired, even emulated. A champion for the people."

He said the word "People" with a distinct tone.

Then Mr. Li added, "Even the Rebirths paid to see *Warrior*. Paid to read the books and the sanitized files. Which is nicely ironic, isn't it? Your actions probably saved millions of them. Without your bravery, how many species would be ash and bone today?"

Joe lifted his fork again. A tenth of his life had been spent away from gravity and meaningful exercise. His bones as well as the connecting muscles had withered to where some experts, measuring the damage, cautioned their patient to expect no miracles. It didn't help that cosmic radiation had slashed through the pod's armor and through him. Even now, the effects of malnutrition could be seen in the spidery hands and forearms, and how his own lean meat hung limp on his suddenly ancient bones.

Mr. Li paused for a moment, an observant smile building. Whatever he said next would be important.

Joe interrupted, telling him, "Thank you for the meal, sir."

"And thank you for being who you are, sir."

When Joe left the realm of the living, this man was little more than an average billionaire. But the last five years had been endlessly lucrative for Li Enterprises. Few had more money, and when ambition was thrown into the equation, perhaps no other private citizen wielded the kind of power enjoyed by the man sitting across the little table.

Joe stabbed a buttery carrot.

"Joe?"

He lowered the carrot to the plate.

"Can you guess why I came to the moon? Besides to meet you over dinner, of course."

Joe decided on a shy, self-deprecating smile.

This encouraged his host. "And do you have any idea what I wish to say to you? Any intuitions at all?"

Six weeks ago, Joe had abruptly returned to the living. But it took three weeks to rendezvous with a hospital ship dispatched just for him, and that vessel didn't touch down on the moon until the day before yesterday. Those two crews and his own research had shown Joe what he meant to the human world. He was a hero and a rich but controversial symbol. And he was a polarizing influence in a great debate that still refused to die—an interspecies conflict forever threatening to bring on another terrible war.

Joe knew exactly what the man wanted from him, but he decided to offer a lesser explanation.

"You're a man with enemies," he mentioned.

Mr. Li didn't need to ask, "Who are my enemies?" Both men understood what was being discussed.

"You need somebody qualified in charge of your personal security," Joe suggested.

The idea amused Mr. Li. But he laughed a little too long, perhaps revealing a persistent unease in his own safety. "I have a fine team of private bodyguards," he said at last. "A team of *sapiens* who would throw their lives down to protect mine."

Joe waited.

"Perhaps you aren't aware of this, sir. But our recent tragedies have changed our government. The U.N. presidency now commands a surprising amount of authority. But he, or she, is still elected by adult citizens. A pageant that maintains the very important illusion of a genuine, self-sustaining democracy."

Joe leaned across the table, nodding patiently.

"Within the next few days," said Mr. Li, "I will announce my candidacy for that high office. A few months later, I will win my party's primary elections. But I'm a colorless merchant with an uneventful life story. I need to give the public one good reason to stand in my camp. What I have to find is a recognizable name that will inspire passions on both sides of the issues."

"You need a dead man," Joe said.

"And what do you think about that, sir?"

"That I'm still trapped in that damned pod." Leaning back in his chair, Joe sighed. "I'm starving to death, bored to tears, and dreaming up this insanity just to keep me a little bit sane."

"Sane or not, do you say yes?"

He showed his host a thoughtful expression. Then very quietly, with the tone of a joke, Joe asked, "So which name sits first on the ballot?"

\* \* \* \*

As promised, Mr. Li easily won the Liberty Party's nomination, and with a force-fed sense of drama, the candidate announced his long-secret choice for running mate. By then Joe had recovered enough to endure the Earth's relentless tug. He was carried home by private shuttle, and with braces under his trouser legs and a pair of lovely and strong women at his side, the celebrated war hero strode into an auditorium/madhouse. Every motion had been practiced, every word scripted, yet somehow the passion and heart of the event felt genuine. Supporters and employees of the candidate pushed against one another, fighting for a better look at the running mate. With a natural sense for when to pause and how to wave at the world, Joe's chiseled, scarred face managed to portray that essential mixture of fearlessness and sobriety. Li greeted him with open arms—the only time the two men would ever embrace. Buoyed by the crowd's energy, Joe felt strong, but when he decided to sit, he almost collapsed into his chair. Li was a known quantity; everyone kept watch over the new man. When Joe studied his boss, he used an expression easily confused for admiration. The acceptance speech was ten minutes of carefully crafted theater designed to convey calm resolve wrapped around coded threats. For too long, Li said, their old honorable species had allowed its traditions to be undercut and diluted. When unity mattered, people followed every path. When solidarity was a virtue, evolution and natural selection were replaced by whim and caprice. But the new leadership would right these past wrongs. Good men and good women had died in the great fight, and new heroes were being discovered every day. (Li glanced at his running mate, winning a burst of applause; and Joe nodded at his benefactor, showing pride swirled with modesty.) The speech concluded with a promise for victory in the general election, in another six weeks, and Joe applauded with everyone else. But he stood slowly, as if weak, shaking as an old man might shake.

He was first to offer his hand of congratulations to the candidate.

And he was first to sit again, feigning the aching fatigue that he had earned over these last five years.

\* \* \* \*

Three days later, a lone sniper was killed outside the arena where the controversial running mate was scheduled to appear. Joe's security detail was led by a career police officer, highly qualified and astonishingly efficient. Using a quiet, unperturbed tone, he explained what had happened, showing his boss images of the would-be assassin.

"She's all *sapien*," he mentioned. "But with ties to the Rebirths. A couple lovers, and a lot of politics."

Joe scanned the woman's files as well the pictures. "Was the lady working alone?"

"As far as I can tell, yes. Sir."

"What's this gun?"

"Homemade," the officer explained. "An old Czech design grown in a backyard nano-smelter. She probably thought it would make her hard to trace. And I suppose it would have: An extra ten minutes to track her down through the isotope signatures and chine-marks."

Joe asked, "How accurate?"

"The rifle? Well, with that sight and in competent hands—"

"Her hands, I mean. Was she any good?"

"We don't know yet, sir." The officer relished these occasional conversations. After all, Joe Carroway had saved humanity on at least two separate occasions, and always against very long odds. "I suppose she must have practiced her marksmanship somewhere. But the thing is...."

"What?"

"This barrel isn't as good as it should be. Impurities in the ceramics, and the heat of high-velocity rounds had warped it. Funny as it sounds, the more your killer practiced, the worse her gun would have become."

Joe smiled and nodded.

The officer nodded with him, waiting for the legend to speak.

"It might have helped us," Joe mentioned. "If we'd let her take a shot or two, I mean."

"Help us?"

"In the polls."

The officer stared at him for a long moment. The dry Carroway humor was well known. Was this a worthy example? He studied the man whom he was sworn to defend, and after considerable reflection, the officer decided to laugh weakly and shrug his shoulders. "But what if she got off one lucky shot?"

Joe laughed quietly. "I thought that's what I was saying."

\* \* \* \*

To be alone, Joe took a lover.

The young woman seemed honored and more than a little scared. After passing through security, they met inside his hotel room, and when the great man asked to send a few messages through her links, she happily agreed. Nothing about those messages would mean anything to anybody. But when they reached their destinations, other messages that had waited for years were released, winding their way to the same secure e-vault. Afterward Joe had sex with her, and then she let him fix her a drink that he laced with sedatives. Once she was asleep, he donned arm and leg braces designed for the most demanding physical appearances. Then Joe opened a window, and ten stories above the bright cold city, he climbed out onto the narrow ledge and slipped through the holes that he had punched in the security net.

Half an hour later, shaking from exhaustion, Joe was standing at the end of a long alleyway.

"She was a mistake," he told the shadows.

There was no answer.

"A blunder," he said.

"Was she?" a deep voice asked.

"But you were always a little too good at inspiring others," Joe continued. "Getting people to be eager, making them jump before they were ready."

In the darkness, huge lungs took a deep, lazy breath.

Then the voice mentioned, "I could kill you myself. I could kill you now." It was deep and slow, and the voice always sounded a little amused. Just a little. "No guards protecting you, and from what I see, you aren't carrying more than a couple baby pistols."

Joe said, "That's funny."

Silence.

"I'm not the one you want," he said. "You'd probably settle for me. But think about our history, friend. Look past all the public noise. And now remember everything that's happened between you and me."

Against an old brick wall, a large body stirred. Then the voice said, "Remind me."

Joe mentioned, "Baltimore."

"Yes."

"And Singapore."

"We helped each other there."

"And what about Kiev?"

"I was in a gracious mood. A weak mood, looking back."

Joe smiled. "Regardless of moods, you let me live."

The voice seemed to change, rising from a deeper part of the unseen body. It sounded wetter and very warm, admitting, "I knew what you were, Joe. I understood how you thought, and between us, I felt we had managed an understanding."

"We had that, yes."

"You have always left my species alone."

"No reason not to."

"We weren't any threat to you."

"You've never been in trouble, until now."

"But this man you are helping ... this Li monster ... he is an entirely different kind of creature, I believe...."

Joe said nothing.

"And you are helping him. Don't deny it."

"I won't."

A powerful sigh came from the dark, carrying the smell of raw fish and peppermint.

"Two days from now....," Joe began.

"That would be the Prosperity Conference."

"The monster and I will be together, driving through São Paulo. Inside a secure vehicle, surrounded by several platoons of soldiers."

"I would imagine so."

"Do you know our route?"

"No, as it happens. Do you?"

"Not yet."

The shadows said nothing, and they didn't breathe, and they held themselves still enough that it was possible to believe that they had slipped away entirely.

Then very softly, the voice asked, "When will you learn the route?"

"Tomorrow night."

"But as you say, the level of protection will be considerable."

"So you want things to be easy? Is that it?"

The laugh was smooth, unhurried. "I want to know your intentions, Joe. Having arranged this collision of forces, what will you do? Pretend to fall ill at the last moment? Stand on the curb and offer a hearty wave as your benefactor rolls off to his doom?"

"Who says I won't ride along?"

This time the laugh was louder, confident and honestly amused. "Suppose you learn the route and share it with me. And imagine that despite my logistical nightmares, I have time enough to assemble the essential forces. Am I to understand that you will be riding into that worst kind of trouble?"

"I've survived an ambush or two."

"When you were young. And you still had luck to spend."

Joe said nothing.

"But you do have a reasonable point," the voice continued. "If you aren't riding with the monster, questions will be asked. Doubts will rise. Your character might have to endure some rather hard scrutiny."

"Sure, that's one fine reason to stay with him."

"And another is?"

"You fall short. You can't get to Li in the end. So don't you want to have a second option in place, just in case?"

"What option?"

"Me."

That earned a final long laugh.

"Point taken, my friend. Point taken."

\* \* \* \*

The limousine could have been smaller and less pretentious, but the man strapped into its safest seat would accept nothing less than a rolling castle. And following the same kingly logic, the limousine's armor and its plasma weapons were just short of spectacular. The AI driver was capable of near-miracles, if it decided to flee. But in this vehicle, in most circumstances, the smart tactic would be to stand its ground and fight. One hundred *sapient* soldiers and ten times as many mechanicals were traveling the same street, sweeping for enemies and the possibility of enemies. In any battle, they would count for quite a lot, unless



of course some of them were turned, either through tricks or bribery. Which was as much consideration as Joe gave to the problem of attacking the convoy. Effort wasted was time lost. What mattered was the next ten or eleven minutes and how he handled himself and how he managed to control events within his own limited reach.

Li and two campaign wizards were conferring at the center of the limousine. Polls were a painful topic. They were still critical points behind the frontrunners, and the propaganda wing of his empire was getting worried. Ideas for new campaigns were offered, and then buried. Finally the conversation fell into glowering silences and hard looks at a floor carpeted with cultured white ermine.

That was when Joe unfastened his harness and approached.

Li seemed to notice him. But his assistant—a cold little Swede named Hussein—took the trouble to ask, “What do you need, Mr. Carroway?”

“Just want to offer my opinion,” he said.

“Opinion? About what?”

Joe made a pistol with his hand and pointed it at Hussein, and then he jerked so suddenly that the man flinched.

“What is it, Joe?” asked Li.

“People are idiots,” Joe said.

The candidate looked puzzled, but a moment later, something about those words intrigued him. “In what way?”

“We can't see into the future.”

“We can't?”

“None of us can,” said Joe. He showed a smile, a little wink. “Not even ten seconds ahead, in some cases.”

“Yet we do surprisingly well despite our limitations.” The candidate leaned back, trying to find the smoothest way to dismiss this famous name.

“We can't see tomorrow,” said Joe, “but we are shrewd.”

“People, you mean?”

“Particularly when ten billion of us are thinking hard about the same problem. And that's why you aren't going to win this race. Nobody sees what will happen, but in this case, it's very easy to guess how the Li presidency will play out.”

Hussein bristled.

But Li told him and everyone else to let the man speak.

“You're assuming that I hate these other species,” Joe told him. “In fact, you've counted on it from the start. But the truth is ... I don't have any compelling attachment to *sapiens*. By and large, I am a genuinely amoral creature. While you, sir ... you are a bigot and a genocidal asshole. And should you ever come to power, the solar system has a respectable chance of collapsing into full-scale civil war.”

Li took a moment. Then he pointed out, "In my life, I have killed no one. Not a single Rebirth, or for that matter, a *sapien*."

"Where I have slaughtered thousands," Joe admitted. "And stood aside while millions more died."

"Maybe you are my problem. Perhaps we should drop you from the ticket."

"That is an option," Joe agreed.

"Is this what you wanted to say to me? That you wish to quit?"

Joe gave the man a narrow, hard-to-read smile.

"My life," he said.

"Pardon?" Li asked.

"Early in life, I decided to live as if I was very important. As if I was blessed in remarkable ways. In my hand, I believed, were the keys to a door that would lead to a worthy future, and all that was required of me was that I make hard calculations about matters that always seem to baffle everyone else."

"I'm sorry, Joe. I'm not quite sure—"

"I have always understood that I am the most important person there is, on the Earth or any other world within our reach. And I have always been willing to do or say anything that helps my climb to the summit."

"But how can you be that special? Since that's my place to be!"

Li laughed, and his assistants heartily joined in.

Again, Joe made a pistol with his hand, pointing his index finger at the candidate's face.

"You are a scary individual," Li remarked. Then he tried to wave the man back, looking at no one when he said, "Perhaps a medical need needs to be diagnosed. A little vacation for our dear friend, perhaps."

Hussein gave an agreeable nod.

In the distance, a single soft pop could be heard.

Joe slipped back to his seat.

His security man was sitting beside him. Bothered as well as curious, he asked, "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," said Joe. "Never mind."

Another mild pop was followed by something a little louder, a little nearer.

Just in case, the security man reached for his weapon. But he discovered that his holster was empty now.

Somehow his gun had found its way into Joe's hand.

"Stay close to me," Joe said.

"You know I will," the man muttered weakly.

Then came the flash of a thumb-nuke, followed by the sharp wail of people screaming, begging with Fortune to please show mercy, to please save their glorious, important lives.

\* \* \* \*

## V. World's End

Three terms as President finally ended with an assortment of scandals—little crimes and large ones, plus a series of convenient nondisclosures—and those troubles were followed by the sudden announcement that Joseph Carroway would slide gracefully into retirement. After all that, there was persistent talk about major investigations and unsealing ancient records. Tired allegations refused to die. Could the one-time leader of humanity be guilty of even one tenth of the crimes that he was rumored to have committed? In judicial circles, wise minds discussed the prospects of charging and convicting the Old Man on the most egregious insults to common morality. Politicians screamed for justice without quite defining what justice required. Certain species were loudest in their complaints, but that was to be expected.

What was more surprising, perhaps, were the numbers of pure *sapiens* who blamed the President for every kind of ill. But most of the pain and passion fell on one-time colleagues and allies. Unable to sleep easily, they would sit at home, secretly considering their own complicities in old struggles and more recent deeds, as well as non-deeds and omissions that seemed brilliant at the moment, but now, in different light, looked rather ominous.

In the end, nothing substantial happened.

In the end, the Carroway Magic continued to hold sway.

His successor was a talented and noble soul. No one doubted her passion for peace or the decency of her instincts. And she was the one citizen of the Inhabited Worlds who could sit at a desk and sign one piece of parchment, forgiving crimes and transgressions and mistakes and misjudgments. And then she showed her feline face to the cameras, winning over public opinion by pointing out that trials would take decades, verdicts would be contested for centuries, and every last one of the defendants had been elected and then served every citizen with true skill.

The new president served one six-year term before leaving public life.

Joseph Carroway entered the next race at the last moment, and he won with a staggering seventy percent mandate. But by then the Old Man was exactly that: A slowed, sorry image of his original self, dependent on a talented staff and the natural momentum of a government that achieved the ordinary without fuss or too much controversy.

Fifteen months into Joe's final term, an alien starship entered the solar system. In physical terms, it was a modest machine: Twenty cubic kilometers of metal and diamond wrapped around empty spaces. There seemed to be no crew or pilot. Nor was there a voice offering to explain itself. But its course was clear from the beginning. Moving at nearly one percent of light speed, the Stranger, as it had been dubbed, missed the moon by a few thousand kilometers. Scientists and every telescope studied its configuration, and two nukes were set off in its vicinity—neither close enough to cause damage, it was hoped, but both producing EM pulses that helped create a detailed portrait of what lay inside. Working separately, teams of AI savants found the same awful hypothesis, and a single Antfolk nest dedicated to the most exotic physics proved that hypothesis to everyone's grim satisfaction. By then, the Stranger was passing through the sun's corona, its hull red-hot and its interior awakening. What might have been a hundred thousand year sleep was coming to an end. In less than a minute, this very unwelcome guest had vanished, leaving behind a cloud of ions and a tiny flare that normally would trouble no one, much less spell doom for humankind.

\* \* \* \*

They told Joe what would happen.

His science advisor spoke first, and when there was no obvious reaction on that perpetually calm face, two assistants threw their interpretations of these events at the Old Man. Again, nothing happened. Was he losing his grip finally? This creature who had endured and survived every kind of disaster—was he suddenly lost, at wit's end and such?

But no, he was just letting his elderly mind assemble the puzzle that they had given him.

"How much time?" he asked.

"Ten, maybe twelve minutes," the science advisor claimed. "And then another eight minutes before the radiation and scorching heat reach us."

Others were hoping for a longer delay. As if twenty or thirty minutes would offer some kind of help.

Joe looked out the window, and with a wry smile pointed out, "It is a beautiful day."

In other words, the sun was up, and they were dead.

"How far will the damage extend?" he asked.

Nobody replied.

The Antfolk ambassador was watching from her orbital embassy, tied directly into the President's office. For a multitude of reasons, she despised this *sapien*. But he was the ruler of the Great Nest, and in awful times, she was willing to do or say anything to help him, even if that meant telling him the full, undiluted truth.

"Our small worlds will be vaporized. The big asteroids will melt and seal in the deepest parts of our nests." With a sad gesture of every hand, she added, "Mars is worse off than Earth, what with the terraforming only begun. And soon there won't be any solid surfaces on the Jovian moons."

Joe turned back to his science advisor. "Will the Americas survive?"

"In places, maybe." The man was nearly sobbing. "The flares will finish before the sun rises, and even with the climate shifts and the ash falls, there's a fair chance that the atmosphere will remain breathable."

Joe nodded.

Quietly, firmly, he told everyone, "I want an open line to every world. In thirty seconds."

Before anyone could react, the youngest assistant screamed out, "Why? Why would aliens do this awful thing to us?"

Joe laughed, just for a moment.

Then with a grandfatherly voice, he said, "Because they can. That's why."

\* \* \* \*

"It has been an honor to serve as your President," Joe told an audience of two and then three and then four billion. But most citizens were too busy to watch this unplanned speech—an important element in his gruesome calculations. "But my days are done. The sun has been infiltrated, its hydrogen stolen to use in the manufacture of an amazing bomb, and virtually everybody in the range of my voice will be dead by tomorrow."

"If you are listening to me, listen carefully.

"The only way you will survive in the coming hell is to find those very few people whom you trust most. Do it now. Get to your families, hold hands with your lovers. Whoever you believe will watch your back always. And then you need to search out those who aren't aware of what I am telling you to do.

"Kill those other people.

"Whatever they have of value, take it.

"And store their corpses, if you can. In another week or two, you might relish the extra protein and fat."

He paused, just for a moment.

Then Joe said, "For the next ten generations, you will need to think only about yourselves. Be selfish. Be vicious. Be strong, and do not forget:

"Kindness is a luxury.

"Empathy will be a crippling weakness.

"But in another fifty generations, we can rebuild everything that we have lost here today. I believe that, my friends. Goodness can come again. Decency can flower in any rubble. And in fifty more generations after that, we will reach out to the stars together.

"Keep that thought close tonight, and always.

"One day, we will punish the bastards who did this awful thing to us. But to make that happen, a few of you must find the means to survive!"