

Chosen One

A novel of passion and destiny

Francis W. Porretto

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Overture

Let me tell you of the place I love, and I will follow with the story of him whose grace taught me to love it.

Onteora County is a kidney-shaped, semi-rural swatch of central New York State, just about equidistant from Manhattan and Buffalo. It's mostly forest, quiet and green, hot and damp in the summers, cold and snowy in the winters. It has no well-known businesses. It has no tourist attractions. The big apple orchards are mostly further downstate, the Seneca Wine Trail doesn't reach quite this far, and the Finger Lakes vacation trade managed to miss it as well. It's noted for nothing of importance to anyone outside. That's the way we like it.

The county has one city of sorts, also named Onteora, which sits at its center. Although not quite half the size of Rochester and possessing no major assets to speak of, the city dominates the county socially, commercially, and politically. Truth be known, it's not much of a city, but it's what we have.

The economy's not good here. It never has been. Most Onteorans have to work brutally hard to stay level with their bills. There are a few well-to-do families, and one genuinely rich one, the Forslunds, but no one would mistake this for Westchester or the Gold Coast of Long Island.

Just outside the city is Onteora Aviation, the county's one sizable employer. OA is a federal contractor that specializes in advanced equipment for warplanes. Maybe one able-bodied man in five works there. I'm told it's not a bad place to work, if you can stand the jitters that come from having only one customer and knowing you can never have another.

Most Onteorans are Catholics, but you could easily conclude that the Pope doesn't know it. Onteora parish has had the same pastor for nearly half a century, Father Heinrich Schliemann -- yes, he's descended from the archeologist, and he'll tell you all about it if you ask -- and he's been alone in the rectory for most of his tenure. That's right, one priest for a parish of a quarter million souls. He claims it doesn't bother him, but that's what you'd expect him to say. He's a good man, and a very good priest.

I wasn't born or raised here. I wasn't born or raised anywhere. I came to Onteora out of cowardice, thinking I'd found someone to relieve me of a cup I'd lost the stomach to drink.

No, I'm not human, but we needn't discuss that now.

And now I say "we," as if I belonged here, as he does. I roamed the globe for twenty millennia, seeking only to close with my Adversary and die the last death. Another two millennia I spent looking for someone I could train for the contest and trick into taking my place. Yet I am one of them, for now. I have drunk deep of their peace and anonymity, and I say "we" as if I'd been born to their station instead of my own, far more bitter one.

I pass their streets as one of them, watch for the things that make their eyes go wide, listen for the things they say with heightened voices. I walk alongside them, sweat, freeze and complain with them, rejoice at their weddings and mourn for their dead. I know their notables by their first names.

As will you, if you will accompany me. One in particular. Come, walk beside me and learn our streets and our forests. Cock an ear to the secrets that ride our breezes. Don't the leaves seem to be singing? Can't you just make out the words of the hymn that fills our rich green cathedral?

"For, unto us a child is born..."

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Act One: With The Essenes

Toledo Blade

Tradewinds Airways Flight 227 inbound to Westchester Airport was on its final approach, less than a mile and a half from the runway at an altitude of twelve hundred feet, when both its engines failed. Analysts would later determine that a rising flock of crows had been sucked into the turboprops and had fatally clogged the air passages.

The pilot called Mayday at once and configured the stricken aircraft for a hard landing. He knew that, from that altitude and with so little room to maneuver, the survival of his eighty-three passengers lay in the lap of chance. There wasn't even time to dump the fuel. He guided the unpowered craft carefully toward the runway, husbanding his paltry options as best he could. Below, emergency crews scrambled over the airfield, bright yellow vehicles racing along the taxiways in pursuit of the incoming plane.

Despite the lack of thrust, the plane responded well. Until the last it appeared that the fates would be kind.

At a hundred seventy-five feet of altitude and a quarter mile from the runway, an unexpected blast of crosswind knocked the plane's wings askew and yawed it forty degrees to starboard. The pilot pulled too sharply on his yoke, and the hydraulics gave way with a regretful sigh. Flight 227 met the tarmac at a hundred ten knots, with its left wing in the lead.

A ball of flame swelled from the point of impact and engulfed the craft from nose to tail. The plane came apart into several large fragments that skidded and tumbled the length of the runway. The shards burned furiously for more than twenty minutes despite the best efforts of the ground crews. There were no survivors.

Father Heinrich Schliemann was headed to the sacristy to look for his missing watch when he spotted the short, slight figure at the back of the otherwise empty church. A young man knelt at the back row of pews, his head bowed over his folded hands. Even with his face concealed, he stirred Schliemann's sense of the familiar.

Curiosity impelled the pastor of Onteora parish a few steps toward the visitor. As he

approached, the youth's head rose. Dark brown eyes set in a pale, solemn face locked with his own. The young man stood.

My God, it's Louis Redmond.

Schliemann had meant to call upon him after the plane crash, but had been beset by an inexplicable reluctance. A month had passed since the disaster at Westchester Airport, and still he hadn't managed to make a condolence call to the Redmond family home.

His parents never missed a Sunday, but I haven't seen him since Jeannette died.

Schliemann's heart clenched at the thought. Four years earlier, only days into her freshman year at Cornell, the beautiful, brilliant elder sister Louis worshipped had choked to death during a *grand mal* seizure, the first and last of her life. Schliemann hadn't seen him at Our Lady of the Pines since.

Schliemann had asked after Louis only once. His parents had squirmed so uncomfortably that the priest had silently vowed not to do it again. It had been a hard vow to keep; the stubby little machinist and his adoring wife had looked incomplete without their two genius children.

Jacques and Marie Redmond would attend no more Masses at this church, or any other. Their only surviving child, the eighteen-year-old boy of whom they'd been so painfully proud, now faced life alone.

Little about Louis had changed. On the small side all his life, he appeared to have topped out at about five-seven. His thick brown hair still looked permanently tousled. His dark brown eyes were searchlights in a face that glowed with purpose.

"Louis?"

The young man managed a wan smile. "Hello, Father. You caught me."

Schliemann forced back an inappropriate response. "How have you been?"

"About as you'd imagine."

"I've been meaning to come to see you, but...well...the parish, you know. I'm alone in the rectory now. Sometimes it's not easy to make the time."

Sometimes it's not easy to say why you didn't make the time.

Louis nodded and started toward the door. The priest arrested him with a hand to the shoulder.

"Louis, please don't run off. You don't know how glad I am to see you. I'd like to talk with you awhile, if you have the time."

The young man's adam's-apple bobbed. "I'm all right."

Without intending to do so, the priest closed his hand tightly. "I wouldn't doubt it, son. I just want to chat a while. Would you indulge a lonely priest, please?"

Louis nodded. Schliemann laid an arm around his shoulders and shepherded him through the breezeway that connected the church to the rectory.

"We haven't spoken since your confirmation." Schliemann poured coffee for both of them and seated himself on his sofa with his mug clutched in both hands.

Louis sipped from his mug and said nothing.

Perhaps I'd better avoid that subject. "Where will you be going in the fall?"

"Nowhere, Father." Louis hunched forward in the old armchair. "Unless you count heading out to work in the morning."

"But --" *With his intelligence and drive, he could go to any school in the country.*

According to Marie, MIT and RPI were close to blows over him. "Is it a matter of money, Louis? I'd have thought your parents would have provided against an occurrence like this." He was mentally assessing the parish's charitable fund as he trailed off.

Louis shook his head. "They did, Father. I'm not in need. I just don't want to sell the house."

And anyway, Onteora Aviation wants me now, degree or no degree."

"Ah." *Jacques did say he'd been working for them part time.* Schliemann rose and adjusted the blinds on the westward window to ward off the late afternoon glare. "But it's an awfully big deflection from what your plans were before the...before. Have you ever even been outside New York?"

"No, unless it was when I was a baby."

"Well, don't you think you'll be missing out on something that could be a lot of fun?"

As soon as he'd finished the sentence, Schliemann wanted to reel it back. What shone from Louis Redmond's eyes was the exact opposite of fun.

"That's the part I can't afford, Father. I have to get to work as fast as I can."

"Can't afford...?"

Louis grimaced. "The fun. The free time. The opportunities to screw up." He looked about the old sitting room, taking in its details with the concentration of an auditor. "How long do you expect to be alone here?"

The priest smiled. "Is my housekeeping that bad? Not much longer. Do you remember Tony Baldaserra?" Louis nodded. "He's just been ordained. He's asked to be posted here, and I think the archdiocese will allow it."

The teenager stiffened. A swift ghost of sorrow streaked across his face. It was gone almost as soon as it appeared, caught and confined behind the total mastery of himself he'd displayed even as a toddler.

"What happened with Drew MacLachlan?" Louis's expression was back to normal.

"Why do you ask?"

"He just started an internship at OA. Wasn't he headed for St. Benedict's?"

Schliemann swallowed. "I shouldn't talk about it." *I might slip and mention the hopes I had for you.*

Louis drained his mug and set it down. He sat with his eyes lowered and his hands upon his knees for a long silent interval.

Thirty years in holy orders had taught Schliemann to recognize a decision in progress. He held his tongue and let the teenager think.

"Father, the parish used to run a charity kitchen and a grocery delivery service for the elderly, didn't it?"

The tangent set Schliemann back on the sofa. "Yes, Louis, it still does. The kitchen on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the deliveries all the other nights. I've been running shorthanded with both. Would you like to help with one of them?"

The young man nodded solemnly. "Both of them."

Emil Deukmeijian sleepwalked through Monday as he had through every day of the month past, until he collideded with Rolf Svenson coming around the corner from the Engineering Division cafeteria. The tall, angular group leader caught Deukmeijian by the shoulders and peered into his eyes.

"Are you okay, Emil?"

Deukmeijian managed a smile. "More or less." *No worse than last week or the week before, or the week before that. Katrina's still dead.* "How's life been treating you?"

"Fair." Svenson ran a hand through his short blond curls. "Did you hear about Louis?"

"Hm? No, what about him?"

"He's signed on full time. We have him forty hours a week, starting this morning at eight."

"I'll be -- what happened to college?"

Svenson shrugged. "You know how good he is. The company would probably have hired

him even if he'd never finished high school."

"Uh, yeah. Is he still one of yours, or has he been reassigned?"

The group leader grinned wickedly and rubbed his hands together. "Mine, all mine. Of course, around here you can't count on stuff like that, but I'll make good use of him while I've got him."

Fatima Ozgal, secretary to the Aerostructures director, rounded the corner and missed crashing into them by inches. The short, plump young woman's eyes caught Deukmeijian's for a moment, spoke several thick volumes of unreturned longing, and broke away. She hurried down the hall as quickly as her tight skirt and high heels would allow. Svenson noted the silent interplay and bit his lip.

"You know, Emil, if Terry is agreeable, I'd love to have you, too." The group leader forced a grin. "Got a couple of draft choices I could give up."

Deukmeijian shook his head. "He'd never go for it."

"I thought he resented you."

"He does."

"But -- oh, forget it. Just remember I said so, okay?"

"Okay."

Svenson clapped him on the shoulder and ambled off.

Deukmeijian started toward the cafeteria again, stopped, and without knowing why turned and made for the cubicle that had been assigned to Louis Redmond, half a building away.

He found Onteora Aviation's *wunderkind* pounding away at his computer as if each keystroke were a blow in a battle to the death. Deukmeijian leaned against the edge of the gray partition and cleared his throat. "Welcome aboard, Louis."

The youngster started, turned toward his cubicle entrance and grinned. "Hi, Emil. Thought I already was aboard."

"Halfway. Now you're all the way in the boat. I didn't expect it, frankly. What happened to college?"

Louis flipped a hand. "Maybe later. How are things in Tactical Software?"

Deukmeijian shrugged. "Same old same old." He surprised himself with his next sentence. "Not that I care all that much lately."

Why did I say that?

The teenager's eyes narrowed. "Something wrong, Emil?" He waved Deukmeijian at a metal guest chair.

It was the end of Emil Deukmeijian's self-control. He watched himself slide toward the chair as if he were an observer in his own body. He did not choose to sit, but he lowered himself onto the uncomfortable metal seat and hunched over in it. He did not choose to say "Katrina's dead" to Louis, but he said it. He did not choose to weep and cover his eyes, but he did. He said nothing more for a long time as his tears washed over his face and hands.

Louis arrived at the rectory door while Schliemann was scrubbing potatoes. The priest put down the vegetable brush and went to greet him. The teenager had a stranger in tow, a husky young man perhaps a decade older, whose face was an atlas of the lands of pain. The stranger hesitated when he saw the priest, but Louis took him by the elbow and urged him forward.

"Father, this is my friend Emil Deukmeijian. He's volunteered to help us for the evening. Emil, this is Father Heinrich Schliemann, the pastor of Onteora parish." Louis turned a gaze full of command on his companion.

Schliemann held out his hand and Deukmeijian took it. The priest added his other hand and squeezed gently.

"Thank you for coming, Emil. We're always short of help here. By any chance are you a good cook?"

"Uh, no, Father. But I can bus and wash up."

"Well, each to his station, though I suspect our guests are getting a little tired of my cooking. It's broiled chicken, potatoes and broccoli tonight. Louis, would you get started on cleaning the chickens, please?"

"Certainly, Father. Where are they?"

"Piled next to the sink. There are rubber gloves right beside them."

Louis moved off. Schliemann returned his attention to the nervous young man whose hand he had not released.

"You're not one of my parishioners, are you, Emil?"

"Uh, no, Father. Actually, I'm Russian Orthodox...was."

"Was?"

"I don't really practice it."

"Ah. Well, good works know no doctrinal squabbles. Welcome to Our Lady of the Pines. I appreciate your help, even if it's just for tonight." Schliemann guided Deukmeijian down the short hall to the rectory kitchen. "We expect between thirty and fifty guests on any given night, so there's a lot of work, and no surplus of hands. In fact, tonight it's likely to be just you, Louis, and me. Come help me with the potatoes."

No other helpers arrived that evening, but indigents, both individuals and families, began to appear within the hour. Most were street people, shabbily dressed, rank of odor, and just coherent enough to gravitate toward a free meal. A few were people Schliemann knew had fallen on hard times through no fault of their own, and who were straining to right themselves as quickly as they could. These held themselves apart from the larger mass of freeloaders who had no aims in life beyond its perpetuation at minimum effort.

There's no help for it. An open door admits one and all.

It ate at him that so many of the parish's beneficiaries had no higher ambition than to be the recipients of charity. He suspected that contributions to the parish relief effort, both money and labor, had fallen for that reason alone. He forced his mind away from it, concentrated on filling plates and bellies.

Louis said no word the whole time. He served, cleared and cleaned with smooth efficiency. His expression never varied from a bland mask of impersonal hospitality. His friend Emil visibly struggled to control himself as he went about his tasks.

I wonder what image of a charity kitchen he came here with.

It was almost eight PM when one of the guests, an old wino who trundled a ratty baby carriage full of newsprint wherever he went, succumbed to an attack of *delirium tremens*. Emil was clearing the place beside him. The nameless vagrant spasmed, cried out, grabbed at the stunned young man and vomited down his back, then slumped to the floor twitching and shivering.

It wasn't far out of the ordinary. Events that distasteful had occurred many times on the evenings when Schliemann opened the rectory to Onteora's poor. What happened next was unprecedented.

Emil jerked back and crashed into Alice Siebling, a fifty-five-year-old woman who'd lost her home in a foreclosure action after her husband died. She went down, clipped the edge of a table with her head, and screamed shrilly as blood welled from her scalp. The stricken wino began to wail in a pulsing counterpoint to the woman's shrieks. His eyes rolled up to expose pure whites. His arms and legs flailed a jerky drumroll against the linoleum floor. Other vagrants took

up the wino's cry. The cacophony accelerated.

Emil stood paralyzed.

Schliemann set down his basket of dirty dishes and moved toward the convulsing vagrant. Louis stepped in front of him and caught his eyes.

"Help her."

The priest turned to Alice Siebling, fished out his handkerchief and pressed it to her freely flowing scalp wound. Louis dove for the vagrant, pried his jaws open to check for throat obstructions, then wrapped his arms around the old bum and held him in a grip of steel until his cries and thrashing ceased.

Schliemann moved back from the cot. Alice Siebling slept soundly. She probably wouldn't awaken that evening. He'd managed to stanch her bleeding with compresses, gauze and surgical tape. Unless she clawed off the dressings in her sleep, she'd be all right until the morning. The old wino had fled as soon as his attack ceased, before Schliemann could summon a doctor to examine him.

Louis's soft baritone easily penetrated the thin wall that separated the meeting room from the rectory's little guest room.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"He..."

"He *what*? He was on the floor having a fit. You were already as soiled as you were going to get. You jumped away from him as if you thought he might give you rabies. In the process you hurt an innocent woman."

"For God's sake, Louis, I didn't do it on purpose!"

"No, you didn't." Louis's voice was no louder and his tone was no sharper, but the weight of his disapproval snowballed with every syllable. "You didn't have a purpose. You had a revulsion. You let it turn you into a danger to others."

Schliemann stood perfectly still. Alice Siebling snored on, unaffected. There was a long silence from the other side of the wall.

"Did you even ask that woman's name, Emil? It's Alice. Her husband died about three years ago and left her penniless. He'd borrowed the entire cash value of his life insurance and blown it at the race track. She has nothing and no one. She hasn't spent two consecutive nights in the same place in almost two years. The parish provides all her meals and clothing. How'd you like to trade that damp spot on your back for what she has to endure?"

Emil said nothing.

"Even that bum who threw up on you deserved better than you gave him. He's a mess, he can't earn a living, he's alcoholic and mentally defective and smells like a cesspool, but while he's here he's our *guest*, damn it. You backed away from him as if he were less than human."

A man in that condition is less than human, Louis. We just try not to notice.

"Louis," Emil whined, "I just lost my wife."

Schliemann's chest tightened painfully.

"That's why you're here." Each word was a monument to implacability. "If you do this kind of work with attention, it takes you out of yourself. The more things you care about and involve yourself in, the larger you become, and the smaller the part of you that's hurting." Louis paused. "This is how you can get back onto the same planet as the rest of us, Emil. I didn't bring you here for them. This was for you."

There was a soft gasp, followed by a low, hoarse sobbing. Schliemann sank to the floor and sat there, his folded hands pressed to his mouth, until he'd heard the door to the outside open and close twenty minutes later.

Emil Deukmeijian kept to his desk all day Tuesday. He buried himself in his work, in the hope that it would keep his thoughts away from the events of the evening past. His evasions came to an end when Louis stopped by his cubicle, just before five PM.

"Are you going to help me with the deliveries tonight?"

Deukmeijian repressed a cringe. "I don't think it's a good idea." He started to turn back toward his computer. Louis moved up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It's a very good idea, Emil. Don't let last night throw you. Tell you what. You do the driving, and I'll do all the inside work."

Deukmeijian said nothing.

"I'll toss in a cheeseburger and fries."

"Knock it off, Louis." Deukmeijian's eyes darted toward the cubicle entrance. Other Oteora Aviation employees had begun to flow past as the division laid down its tools for the day.

"Come on, Emil." The hand squeezed his shoulder gently. "What, are you going to sit in your apartment and mope? Is that a better program than getting out and doing something for someone else?"

Deukmeijian whirled as his face filled with blood. "I said knock it off!" Louis unhandled him and stepped back. "Who the hell died and made you my therapist? I was supposed to be on that Goddamned plane with her! You can't imagine what that feels like, the way it eats at you from sunrise to sunset and back again. So stop playing camp recreation director and leave me alone!"

Louis's mouth fell open. Behind him, Fatima Ozgal's dark, anxious face peeked around the edge of the partition. She edged forward and tugged on Louis's sleeve.

"Louis, don't." Her heavily accented voice was thick with suppressed tears. "He doesn't want to feel better."

Deukmeijian started to blast her, but his voice stalled in his throat. He turned back to his computer and hunched over it, not to work but to hide from the people who had misguidedly come to do him comfort. Presently they left him alone to wallow in his grief.

Schliemann had put the last of the pots and pans back into the cabinets beneath the cooktop when Louis cranked the taps shut and shook the water from his hands.

He's been awfully quiet all evening.

"Thank you for coming, Louis. Will we be seeing any more of your friend?"

"I expect so, Father." The young man picked up a dishtowel and started to dry the huge heap of plates in the drainer. "Maybe not soon, though."

"I hope he wasn't too upset by Monday."

Louis grinned. "Which part of Monday? The part when he was upchucked on, the part when he knocked Mrs. Siebling down, or the part when I tore him a new asshole?"

"Louis!"

"I knew you were listening, Father." He set down a dry dish and picked up a wet one. "Thank you for not interfering."

Schliemann swallowed what he'd been about to say.

"He was upset," Louis continued, his eyes fixed on the dish in his hands. "And he was upset yesterday, and probably today as well. But not for much longer. When he gets over it, he'll realize that Monday was the only evening this past month that the loss of his wife didn't rule his life. And he'll be back here."

"Louis..." The priest fumbled for words. "You can't trivialize someone else's pain that

way."

The dark eyes turned to meet his own.

"I don't trivialize it, Father. I see it for what it is. Pain of any kind is a sign of danger. You're not supposed to bathe in it. You're supposed to find the cause and treat it. When you're doing it right the pain becomes less, it stops commanding your whole attention. You know that."

I do know it.

"All the same," Schliemann murmured, "you can't force someone to stop mourning just because you think he ought to."

Louis nodded. "I know that too. But I had to try. He dumped it on me. He came to me Monday morning and wept on my desk about his loss. According to a mutual friend, he's been a walking corpse ever since the plane crash. What would you have done?"

"I don't know, Louis. I can't fault your decision. I only know that you can't nag a man out of his grief."

Louis's lips drew thin. "The Jews are more sensible about it than we are. A bereaved Jew's family and friends descend on him, as many as can reach him in the days after his loss. They keep him surrounded with life and love so continuously that the grief is squeezed out of him. He's practically not allowed to be alone until the worst is over and he can cope again."

Schliemann forced himself to ponder it.

"Louis, does he know about --"

"No." The syllable rang with finality.

And he won't learn it from you, Schliemann.

Louis's eyes sheened over. He drew a deep breath and glanced through the kitchen window at the star-flecked satin of the midsummer night.

"There's a woman at work who loves Emil so much that she can hardly look at him without bursting into tears. She's loved him for two years, but of course he was married, to his high school sweetheart, no less, and anyway he's Armenian and she's a Turk, which made the whole idea unthinkable." The cords in Louis's neck tightened. "Now he's a widower, and it's even worse. Just to let herself think about his...availability feels like the worst sort of blasphemy, but there's probably nothing else she *can* think about. If you had to spend the next year as one or the other of them, which would you rather be?"

"How did you find out about all this, Louis?"

The teenager shrugged. "People tell me things, Father. They always have. I don't know why."

The dark brown eyes closed briefly. The intense young face hinted at a legion of secrets closely held, portions of fear and suffering accepted in confidence and locked safely away, keepsakes of agony for unnamed depositors.

"The hard part is knowing your own place in such a thing. He didn't know why I brought him here until I clobbered him with it. It was my job to know, for both of us. But until I gave him his reaming, I couldn't be sure whether I did it for him or for me."

"And which was it?"

One corner of Louis's mouth quirked upward. "Both."

"How," Schliemann whispered, "did a boy your age learn so much about the uses of pain and charity?"

A crease formed on Louis's forehead. He picked up the last dish from the drainer, dried it with a flourish of his towel and laid it atop the stack on the counter.

"The same way you'd learn anything else you can't study, Father. Trial and error. I've made a lot of mistakes this past month, and I expect I'll make a lot more, but this seems to be working."

Without warning the young man's eyes flamed and his face convulsed in unmistakable

grief. Before the pastor could move or speak, Louis reasserted his absolute self-command. It was only a moment before he'd cleared the burning wreckage from his eyes and returned his features to their usual smooth innocence. "Just don't let me get too hard, okay?"

"I won't." Schliemann fingered his Roman collar. "Louis, do you want to talk about any of those...mistakes?"

There was a long silence.

"Maybe at confession, Father. Where do you want me to put the colander?"

"In the cabinet with the pots and pans."

"Oh, of course."

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Intermezzo

The old priest sat back and folded his hands over one drawn-up knee. "I suppose that wasn't quite the beginning, but it was when I ceased to think of him as just a former catechism student." He glanced at the little plate I held. "Would you like another muffin, Mr. Loughlin?"

I smiled. "Yes, thank you. They're very good."

He took the plate to the kitchen and returned with a second corn muffin, broken open at the top, a pat of butter melting into the steaming cleft.

"You weren't overly specific about your relation to him." Schliemann handed me the plate and resumed his seat on the old sofa.

I made an airy gesture. "Protege would cover it." It wouldn't, but being minutely circumstantial wasn't my intention.

"Protege? May I ask in what?"

"A number of things." I paused to bite into the muffin. Rich, hot, and delicately sweet. "I'm an expert in certain fields of planning and management."

"Is Louis going to give up engineering for management? It wouldn't seem to be in his line."

I chuckled. "You know the range of his interests. He could bankrupt any of the popular game shows."

"True." He sipped at his coffee. "You're always pulling him into areas beyond computers, anyway. Or do you not work for OA?"

"No, I'm self-employed. You could say I'm a consultant."

He shook his head. "One of the marvels of this country is the ease with which people go into business for themselves. It's not like that in Europe, you know. But you must tell me, how do the tenets of our faith bear on your relations with Louis?"

I finished the muffin, slid forward to set the plate down on the low coffee table between us, and leaned toward him.

"You're a well read man, Father. You know what's happened to belief in our time. Churches aren't what they were a century or two ago. The major creeds of the West have all gone relativistic and nonjudgmental. What's the catchphrase? 'Whatever's right for you' -- ?"

His expression had turned grave. "Indeed."

"Of the major Christian faiths, only Catholicism and Baptism have put up serious resistance to being reduced to feel-good, do-good social clubs. Even Catholicism has slipped somewhat. Pastors in the fleshpots routinely soft-pedal some of the less popular doctrines to avoid the displeasure of their communicants."

He nodded slowly. "There are advantages to being out here in the backwoods." Little currents of tension ran through his folded hands.

"You don't seem to be affected by that. I was going to ask why."

Schliemann rose from the sofa, went to the westward window and adjusted the blinds. The day was indifferently gray, mildly murky but without the sense of an imminent change in the weather.

"Ask rather why so many of my colleagues are. We all receive the same training. We come to the faith as lovers, forsaking all others to hold it as close as we can. There's nothing in this world for a priest to look forward to, beyond the service of God."

"Promotion to Monsignor?"

He snorted a gentle laugh. "I was offered that, once. I was told I'd have to work in the diocesan office."

His refined Old World features were touched by a moment of humorous remembrance.

"When I was posted here, I was twenty-six years old. I'd been in holy orders barely a month. Father Boileau, my predecessor, had urgently requested retirement and replacement. So I came, and he told me of his flock and its needs.

"Of all that he said those few weeks before he went away, the most important thing was this: 'They need to be challenged, Heinrich. Let their backs go untested, and they never learn how strong they are. Demand no miracles of them, and they never learn what they're capable of. Allow them excuses even once, and from that day forward excuses are all you'll hear.' And he was right.

"So I challenge them. I compromise on nothing. If a parishioner tries to beg off when I assign him a duty, I ask him how deep is his faith, whether he hopes to come to Christ through us, or whether Mass on Sundays might be just a habit for him. If he asks about a possible loophole in some unpleasant stricture, I ask him whether he might be happier in one of the easier sects. And if he falls, and begs forgiveness, and then falls again, and again, I call him to me, and tell him that God's love will enfold even him, but that until he proves himself worthy, Our Lady of the Pines will not."

He fell silent as the play of light through the shifting clouds danced on his face.

"Does it work, Father?"

He turned to me with a smile. "Better than you could imagine. Better than I could say. Have I mentioned Tony Baldaserra to you?"

"Just the name."

He resumed his seat on the sofa. "Make yourself comfortable."

==<O>==

The Blessing Of Water

Father Heinrich Schliemann dried his liver-spotted, faintly palsied hands on the small towel that hung from the base of the font, made the Sign of the Cross and headed for the sacristy. Father Anthony Baldaserra stayed frozen a moment, then rose from his knees and followed.

Tony dashed the copious perspiration from his forehead. Oteora Parish could not afford to air condition its church, and the July heat was a local record for the century. Yet Schliemann had insisted on full ritual garb for the blessing: a full-length alb, stole, and chasuble over all. Though the ceremony took a bare ten minutes, Tony could hardly believe the two of them had endured it and lived. His garments would need to be laundered before he wore them again.

Schliemann began to undress as Tony closed the door behind them. The pastor moved nimbly for his age, and was quickly back in the short-sleeved cotton shirt and light khaki trousers he favored for his private time. Tony wasn't far behind him.

"Father?"

"Yes, Tony?" Schliemann took both sets of vestments and deposited them in the wicker hamper in the corner.

"Do you mind if I have dinner with my family tonight?"

The older priest smiled. "Not at all."

"I was, uh, planning to stay over there tonight, too."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't. Your folks have air conditioning, don't they?"

Schliemann nudged open the door to the breezeway that connected the church and rectory. "Will you take the eight or the nine o'clock Mass tomorrow?"

"Uh, the nine?"

"Fine. Say hello to your mother and Angela for me, would you please?" The two stepped briskly down the passage and into the rectory kitchen. The rectory wasn't air-conditioned either, but a good cross draft and a large ceiling fan helped to mitigate the murderous heat. Schliemann went at once to the refrigerator and withdrew a large pitcher of water.

It's a wonder he let them build the breezeway. But then, the snow can be lethal.

"How about Dominic?"

Tony regretted the words at once. The pastor's eyes fixed themselves on his young companion. He set the pitcher down and clasped his hands before him.

"Will Dominic be at dinner tonight?"

"I expect him to be."

"Do you think he would enjoy hearing from me?"

No. "He might, Father."

Schliemann's answering smile was too knowing. "Over time a cleric learns to recognize his mistakes and concede his failures, Tony."

Tony started to disagree, caught himself and nodded. Schliemann put a hand on his shoulder.

"Enjoy your Friday evening, Tony. Enjoy dinner with your family. Give my regards to anyone who'd be pleased to receive them. And don't fret over what's long past and can't be changed."

The young priest writhed internally at the words. "I thought we were supposed to hold out the hope of salvation to anyone this side of the grave."

The pastor's eyes bespoke a sad wisdom. "That's the theory."

Dominic Baldaserra breezed into his family's apartment as if he'd never left. His parents had never locked their doors, but that wouldn't have stopped him for more than three minutes in any case. He tossed his rucksack into the corner, where it fetched up against the old console television. The place was as always: plastic covers on the couch cushions, plastic runners to protect the carpeting, and yellowing lace doilies on every horizontal surface.

"Yo, Mom?"

A stirring came from the kitchen, and a moment later Francesca Baldaserra scuffed out, enveloped in a long red apron and a garlicky cloud, with her large wooden spoon in her hand.

"You made it." Her tone was little short of a slap in the face. She brandished the spoon as she had when he was a child and it was an instrument of discipline, but he looked down at her from a considerable height these days, and no longer feared it.

He grinned. "You didn't think I'd miss having my birthday dinner with my flesh and blood?"

"Didn't think," she muttered. "I never know what to think with you. Come on in the kitchen." She glared at him, but her rotund form was incapable of projecting menace. "Your

brother and sister are both gonna be here tonight. You behave, you hear?"

He let his eyes grow mockingly wide. "Father Anthony? *Here?* Thank you, dear Lord, for laying Your special blessing upon this humble house!"

Her eyes blazed. For a moment he thought she might hit him with the spoon. He'd have loved for her to try it. He'd get a lot of satisfaction out of taking it from her and snapping it in half. He might not stop there.

"Your papa's in the ground less than a year. You want his ghost to see this?"

Dominic smiled sweetly. "Pop always knew what not to look at. What's for dinner?"

She looked him up and down again, grunted "Sausages," and shuffled back to her kitchen.

Tony's mother bowed her head. "Anthony, you say the grace."

Tony folded his hands and closed his eyes. "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive through Thy bounty. In Christ our Lord, Amen."

"And thank You, dear Lord, for keeping Onteora County well stocked with idiots," Dominic intoned, head bowed over his folded hands. Tony looked up at him in surprise. "Thank You for making them trust those ridiculous Kruger-Smith snap locks, and for never suggesting to them that they shouldn't keep all their valuables in the master bedroom. Your humble servant really appreciates these labor-saving conveniences." He looked up and smiled. "Who's hungry?"

Angela stared at him as if he'd leaped onto the table and dropped his pants. Their mother merely reached for the bowl of vermicelli and forked out a generous helping.

The meal passed in silence until Angela rose to get the coffee. Their mother excused herself and left the kitchen. Dominic bared his teeth at her back.

Tony's mother and sister had given up on the eldest of the Baldaserra children. Surrender wasn't like them, even in the face of overwhelming odds. Yet, despite the rasping pain Dominic inflicted on him at each of their contacts, Tony hadn't given up, and he thought he understood that better.

I'm a priest. I'm not just his younger brother. I have a duty. If the younger brother part gets in the way, I'll put it into storage and just be a priest.

Father Schliemann gave up.

The Father Schliemann he'd known as a child would not have given up.

"How's that little discussion group of yours going, Angie?" Dominic's bright, mocking tone made Tony wince. "Changed the world yet? Changed anything?" Angela sneered at Dominic, but said nothing.

"Angela believes in her cause, Dom. There's no call to belittle her."

Dominic tilted his chair onto its hind legs and laced his fingers behind his head. "You believe in yours, too, kiddo. Got to treat you the same, don't I?"

Tony clenched his jaws.

"Always loved you two, you know. So serious. So determined. You'd think you actually knew how to do something. Something that took balls or talent."

Angela's color rose. She reared back in her chair and started to retort. Tony cut her off.

"Angie's a capable bookkeeper, and she's well liked by her coworkers." He stared at his elder brother, but Dominic refused to meet his eyes, and kept his smile on their sister.

"But no husband yet, right, Angie? Got anything going? A steady boyfriend, maybe? Or does your world-saving use up all your socializing time?"

Angela ground her teeth audibly.

"I kind of figured with the holy roller here out of town these past four years, you'd finally start to make some headway. What they call a window of opportunity. Tony always frightened the boys away with all that praying. Must have rubbed off on you, I guess."

Calm down. It's no worse than usual. All we have to do is not react, and he'll eventually get tired of talking to himself and leave.

"Holy roller's back now. Window's closed. Of course, he doesn't live here any more, but he wouldn't like the neighbors telling stories about the sister of the new parish priest."

Angela rose, poured the dregs of her coffee into the sink, and stalked up the stairs without a word. At last Dominic turned to his brother.

"Funny how the room always clears out so fast after the coffee, ain't it? And you and me the only ones left again."

Tony held his brother's eyes in silence.

"What's it been like, bro? Got your knees broken all the way in yet? You're what now, twenty-six? Figure you'll live to be seventy-five. Pop did. That makes forty-nine more years of praying and spouting crap to fat housewives and beating off into the toilet at night. Hell of a career you've got in front of you, boy. Makes a man proud."

"Sure does," Tony murmured. His resolve not to rise to Dominic's baiting had dissolved in an instant. "Of course, it's not as glamorous as what you do. I don't get to pick locks or force windows. I don't get to poke through other people's belongings looking for something I can fence for five cents on the dollar. I don't get to keep the wonderful hours you keep, or the fabulous company neither. But there are compensations, Dom. I don't have to run like hell when I hear a police siren. I can look my neighbors in the eye, without being reminded of the stuff I glommed from their houses that I haven't got off my hands yet. And I can come to dinner at my mother's and sister's home and not cut them down to my size with nasty remarks, because they don't make *me* feel small."

Dominic Baldaserra leaned across the table, a world of threat in his eyes. His face twitched and the cords of his neck jerked. "You little shit."

For the first time that evening, Tony smiled and meant it.

"Hey, Tony!"

Tony almost dropped his groceries at the sound. He stopped and turned to find Louis Redmond trotting up behind him and smiling brightly.

It was four years since Tony had last seen his young jogging and weightlifting partner. Louis's smooth, solemn face was unchanged except for a faint beard shadow on the underside of the jaw. There was more mass to his torso, but it looked harder than ever. He carried himself a little more formally. Tony could see no other differences.

The old familiar longing surged up from the cellar of his soul at full intensity.

Tony started to set down his sacks of groceries. Louis forestalled him by taking one from his arms and striding toward the rectory door.

"How long have you been back?" Louis appeared unsurprised to find Tony in residence at the rectory.

"About eight weeks now. How come I haven't seen you?"

Louis's face darkened. "I've been away. In Massachusetts."

"Oh. MIT?"

"No." The young man looked away briefly. "I'm at Onteora Aviation now. They've had me at a subcontractor's site these past three months. A place called Wooster Precision."

Tony's eyebrows rose. "Full time?"

Louis nodded. A hint of pain flickered across his face.

I'll have to get the details from Father Schliemann.

It developed that Louis already knew where things went in the rectory kitchen. They exchanged pleasantries about relatives and mutual friends as they worked. Tony found himself

with a multitude of questions that he couldn't quite bring himself to ask.

They coined the phrase "the best and the brightest" to refer to him. He could have gone to any college he wanted. Why did he go to work instead?

When the groceries had been stowed, Tony poured them each a glass of lemonade and gestured to Louis to join him at the kitchen table. Louis hesitated, then pulled out a chair and slid into it. Tony did the same. He cast about for a safe conversational path.

"So tell me about the workaday world. What's it like?"

Louis frowned into his glass. "Different. A lot of compromises. Not a lot of clarity."

Tony took a pull on his lemonade and sat back.

There's something on his mind. He must have come hoping to see Father Schliemann.

It's time to sing for my supper.

He mustered his forces and said, "Something you wanted to talk about?"

Louis's dark brown eyes rose and locked with his. The gaze struck into Tony Baldaserra with an impact that dwarfed everything in his experience but his ordination rite. It was his first contact with the reality and import of ministry, and it rocked him, and Louis had yet to say a word.

Tony had no illusions about himself. He was brighter than most, and more capable, and kinder to his fellow man. He did his best by his loved ones and his vows, in a world where goldbricking, tossing others to the wolves and weaseling around one's given word were generally taken as the norm. He was above average by most of the measures of a man that matter to his fellows.

No one who knew Louis Redmond, certainly not Tony, would demean him as "above average." There might be someone as piercingly intelligent somewhere in the world, or there might not. There might be someone with his laser-like focus and his capacity for sustained effort, or there might not. There might be someone as generous and upright, or there might not.

Probably not. And I just offered to advise him. God, be with me now. I'm going to need You.

"Do you know the phrase 'company town,' Tony?" Louis's voice was almost inaudible.

Tony nodded.

"Onteora comes close. OA employs about twenty percent of the able-bodied men in the county. When OA's wheel hits a rock, the whole county shakes. So keeping OA's path clear has become a priority for a whole lot of people."

"And you've found a rock?"

Louis shook his head. "I am the rock."

"What -- " Tony swallowed his surprise and forced himself back to silence. Louis grinned faintly.

"OA sent me to visit with this subcontractor because the sub wasn't meeting its AQLs or schedules. By a lot."

"What's an AQL?"

"Acceptable quality level. We were getting shoddy work delivered way late, and the whole EL-17 project was endangered by it." Louis sipped at his drink. "Figure three thousand jobs on the line if that one goes down."

"What does an EL-17 do?"

"Battlefield illumination. It's a support plane for night ground actions. Carries a bunch of big halogen tubes and an enormous turbogenerator to power them with."

"A flying night light? Doesn't sound like your kind of job."

Louis grinned crookedly. "Tell me about it. No computers, no software, not even much electronics. So, in keeping with the military's long tradition of detailing blind men to be snipers

and deaf men to work the radios, OA sent me to Wooster to do a fact-finding. A twenty year old kid."

Whatever you are, Louis, you're no kid.

Louis had returned to scowling into his glass. "I turned over a lot of rocks no one expected me to touch. I demanded to see all the records, all the books, and I made threats until I got my way. I think I interviewed everyone in the whole damned company." His hand tightened around the glass. He sipped from it again.

"They were cheating big time, Tony. Channeling EL-17 operating funds to other programs. Using substandard components in delivered subassemblies. Diverting key personnel to other efforts and then continuing to bill OA for their time. There was one guy clocking eighty to ninety hours a week, all to the EL-17, and he was never in the building for the three months I was there. When I braced their project director about it, he said the guy was on a training sabbatical. For three months. Can you believe it?"

Louis's soft voice pulsed with outrage.

"What did your management do when you told them?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"They said there was too much money and too many jobs at stake to take the lid off. They didn't want to risk having the Air Force pull the contract because OA had been unacceptably lax in its subcontractor management." The glass Louis clutched trembled visibly. He drained it, set it down before him, and made a ball of his hands. "I was reminded about those three thousand jobs. I was asked whether I really had the company's best interests at heart. I was told to file my report and go back to my regular responsibilities."

"When was that?"

"Monday."

"Is there anyone above you who might take an interest?"

"Immediately above me? No."

"What about higher-ups?"

Louis shrugged microscopically. "Without the approval of my immediate superiors? I can't even approach them. I'd be flogged in public if I tried to jump the chain of command."

Silence blanketed the rectory kitchen. Louis sat unmoving. Tony fought back his heartache and rotated the problem in his head, seeking a clear moral purchase.

The boy we thought could set the world ablaze someday has become the man who just might do it.

He couldn't live with himself if he did something that cost three thousand uninvolved people their livelihoods. He'd crucify himself over each one. But he can't accept things the way they are, either. Managerial opposition or none.

If he can't find a way out of the dilemma, with all his gifts, how can he expect me to do it? I wish Father Schliemann were here.

"How do you want this to work out, Louis?"

Incredulity spread over Louis's face. "I want those thieving bastards at Wooster indicted, tried, and clapped in jail. I want everyone at OA who knew but didn't do anything about it to lose his job. And I want no harm to come to anyone who wasn't involved. How else should it work out?"

Should.

"How much of that would you compromise on, if you could have the rest?"

Louis's jaw tightened. Despite his rigid control of his demeanor, his trademark intensity,

the monomaniacal resolve to make a proper end of whatever he started, flowed forth from him unchecked. Tony felt himself become lightheaded.

"You know you probably can't have all of it, don't you?"

Words hissed through clenched teeth. "Just now I don't have any of it."

Tony shook his head clear and breathed once deeply. He rose from the table and went to put his glass in the sink, then stood there and stared through the window at the little copse of firs just beyond. The afternoon sky was clear and brilliantly blue. The heat and humidity of the previous day had left town, probably to return at greater strength tomorrow. For that moment, Tony missed them. He would have welcomed the distraction from the waves of desire that pounded at his self-command. He squeezed his eyes shut and hurled words into the breach of his pain.

"You're an immoderate sort, Louis." Though he did his best to gentle them out, the words were tinged with a severity he had not intended. "You want justice to all the points of the compass, and you won't be satisfied with half a loaf. But there's a saying about half a loaf. It's time to put your priorities in order. Decide what's most important and work on that first. Then move to what's next most important, and so on. At the end, you'll know you've done your best. That's all you can hope for."

As soon as the words were out, Tony wanted them back. They were absurdly simplistic. They made light of one of the worst moral dilemmas a man could face: the imperative to do justice thwarted by the imperative not to harm the innocent. He remained at the sink, shoulders raised and face averted from what he had done.

Chair legs scraped faintly across the kitchen floor, followed by quiet footsteps. When Tony turned from the window, Louis Redmond had departed.

Dominic Baldaserra crumpled the containers from his hamburger and fries, stretched out as best he could in the back seat of his car, and pulled a baseball cap down over his eyes. It was time for his nap. He had to catch some shut-eye in the middle of the afternoon if he was to be at his sharpest once night fell.

He was parked outside the densest part of Oteora, on a seedy side street that dead-ended well short of Grand Avenue. The gutters and sidewalks were strewn irregularly with all manner of garbage, from banana peels to discarded furniture. Many of the cars parked around him had been where they were for months or years, either from inoperability or abandonment. Most of the nearby buildings had been condemned. The denizens of the remainder had learned that it was best not to concern themselves with men who slept in parked cars.

For his part, Dominic had learned how to sleep despite nearby pedestrian traffic and the afternoon sun. He dozed lightly, part of his mind still at work on the matter of where to ply his trade once the sun had set.

Some thieves seek riches. Others seek challenges to their skills. Dominic sought only sustenance.

Oteora suited him. Its poor had little to defend, and were philosophical about losing it. Its better-offs were few enough not to stimulate much competition for him, and found more succor in their homeowner's insurance than in the halfhearted efforts of the county police. He knew better than to attack the well secured, privately guarded homes of the county's few rich. As long as he stayed fit and sharp, he could survive here.

Oteora also suited him because it was home to his family. He got more pleasure out of taunting his mother and deriding his siblings than from any other pastime he knew.

At least, he had.

The previous evening's exchange with his younger brother had left him smarting and

frustrated. Tony had scored on him for the first time in his life. He hadn't needed to be particularly clever to do it. Physical menace hadn't forced him back into the half-kringe that suited him best. He'd merely crossed his arms and smiled. He didn't seem to care whether Dominic swung at him or not. It was enough to make a man wonder where he'd gone wrong.

The holy roller had grown enough of a spine to defy his outlaw older brother. Through the haze that surrounded Dominic's somnolent brain, the memory poked tips of sharpened steel that pricked him willy-nilly back to full consciousness.

Dominic's pride demanded retribution. Retribution there would be. All that remained was to decide on the form.

"What should I have told him?"

Father Schliemann grinned ruefully. "Do you seriously think I'd have done better than you did?"

Tony winced. "I'd hope so. All I had in me was a platitude."

The older priest's eyes were kind. "Sometimes that's all you're going to have, Tony. Don't flog yourself over it. Counseling Louis is likely to be difficult no matter what the occasion."

Tony had expected the pastor to disapprove of what he'd said, to have an elaborate alternative ready for use that Tony would feel an idiot for not seeing. Louis's visit and sudden departure had left him off balance. Schliemann's attempt to soothe him detached him part way from reality.

The rectory kitchen seemed to have filled with a faint haze. It glittered at the edge of perception in the light from the overhead fixture. Tony balled his hands on the table before him and tried to compose himself.

"I can see some of the reasons, I guess. But I wasn't ready for it, and I thought I ought to have been. Does it get easier as you...gain experience, Father?"

Schliemann grinned again. "You meant 'as you get older,' didn't you? In some ways, it does. In others, quite the reverse." The pastor of Onteora parish reached across the table, gently pried the younger man's hands apart, and folded them between his own.

"We are the vicars of Christ, Tony. Not Christ Himself. We struggle with the lightest of our duties, because He who defined them for us set a far higher standard than mere mortals could ever meet. But mere mortals are all we have. The Church must make do until the Second Coming."

A sheen formed on the eyes of the man who had defined the priesthood for Tony Baldaserra.

"Louis is unlike other men. You should know that, you've known him almost as long as I have. When his sister died, he was only fourteen years old, and he was already the brightest, most mature individual I knew. Today...Tony, he's challenged every notion I ever had about human limitations. I don't know what purpose God has in mind for someone so potent, but I do know that, whatever it is, it's something I could never fulfill. If you had to be more intelligent and more responsible than he is to advise him, who in the world could do it?"

"We who do God's work can't afford to compare ourselves to our brothers in Christ. Our ability to help them doesn't depend on our being brighter than they are, or more worldly wise, or even more moral. It depends on remaining humble, on holding fast to the eternal truths we've made the core of our lives, and reminding them of those truths when they lose their way. We have nothing else to offer, except love."

The old priest squeezed the young one's hands. "And that you have in full measure, Tony. I've known it since you were a boy. Believe me, Louis knows it too. No matter what you said to him, if it had your love in it, it had to be alright."

Tony bowed his head.

Tony woke to the distant but distinct ringing of the rectory telephone. He struggled awake and glanced at the bedside clock. The numerals were bright against the pre-dawn gloom: 4:15 AM. He levered himself out of bed, shrugged awkwardly into his robe and descended the stairs as fast as he dared. The phone continued to ring.

"Hello?"

"Tony?" His sister's voice trilled tears and fright.

"Uh, yeah, Angie, what's the matter?"

"We've been robbed."

"What? But you were home last night, weren't you?"

"Of course!"

"Someone broke in while you were sleeping?" His skin crawled at the thought.

Angela sniffled. "There's a lot of stuff missing. Everything small and valuable. All our silver, Mom's little stash of two-dollar bills, even Pop's collection of fountain pens."

"But that was...never mind. How's Mom?"

"On the edge." Angela's voice suggested that she wasn't far from it herself. Tony tried to marshal his wits.

"Tony?" Behind him, Father Schliemann stood in the middle of the staircase with questions in his eyes. "Is everything alright?"

He hesitated, then nodded, a quick jerk that had more *hold it till later* in it than any other message. The pastor seemed to understand; he pulled his robe tight around him and reascended the stairs, his tread whisper-soft.

"Tony?" The note of fear in Angela's voice crescendoed.

"Uh, sorry. Look, sis, it's going to be okay. I'll be there in an hour. Just sit tight and try to keep Mom from popping a gasket until then."

"Okay. Hurry, Tony, please?"

"I will."

Francesca Baldaserra's apartment was almost as orderly as it always was. That was the strange part.

Tony poked through the common areas and constructed an inventory of the missing items. His mother and sister sat together on the old flowered sofa, holding hands. As he searched through the drawers and cabinets, the two women muttered softly to one another, exchanging reassurances, imprecations, and guesses. It was all they could do to restrain themselves from leaping into full-fledged hysterics.

After most of an hour, Tony was satisfied. Everything that had had a realizable value in the underworld was gone, and more. Everything that held memories of their late father. Everything that might be considered a family keepsake. Every photograph of any member of the Baldaserra family, living or dead.

Dominic did this.

His elder brother had signed his name to the deed by taking the family photos. When Dominic laughed at his father's remonstrances about his decision to live in the dark, Guglielmo Baldaserra had made a ceremony. He'd piled the family's photo albums on the kitchen table, removed every photo that had Dominic in it, dumped them into the kitchen sink, and set them on fire.

It was the last time Tony could remember seeing shock on Dominic's face. It was the last time Dominic dined with the family during their father's life.

He's decided to take his revenge on those of us that are still alive. But why now? Could the reproof I dealt him Friday have stung him that deeply?

What do I do?

The telephone rang.

The Baldaserra women jerked in their seats. Tony held up a hand toward them and snatched up the handset.

"Hello."

"Looking for something, bro?" Dominic's voice was at its mocking best.

"I think I just stopped looking. What the hell is this about, Dom?"

"About?" The word dripped with injury. "You pissed on me from a great height night before last, little brother. Smiled and waved your little thing in my face. Do you really have to ask what this is about?"

"Oh, I see. You decided that, since I wouldn't kowtow to you, you'd take your pique out on your mother and sister." Tony thrust aside all his restraint. "Excellent choice, Dom. A real display of courage. Exactly what I would have expected from a man's man like you. What's next? Going to start pistol-whipping the checkout girls at the Quik-Stop?" He clutched the handset as if to crush it in his fist.

"Want 'em back, bro?" Dominic's voice had grown taut. "They can have all of it but the cash. I haven't destroyed anything...yet."

"What's the price, you unmitigated bastard?"

"Oh, nothing much." Dominic began to chuckle. "All you have to do is meet me at the nine o'clock Mass. At the Offertory. Up front, by the communion rail. And beg my pardon, nice and loud so everyone can hear it. And then kiss my hairy naked ass."

A red veil dropped over Tony Baldaserra's sight. The world telescoped down to the hatred that thundered in his brain and the smooth plastic circle pressed to his ear. He quivered with the will to rend and crush.

"You be there, Dom," he whispered. "You be there. I'll take care of your ass for you. Oh my, yes I will. You can count on it."

The connection broke.

Dominic slammed the handset back into its cradle, grabbed his rucksack and dumped its contents onto the street. The Baldaserra keepsakes spilled onto the concrete around the phone booth. One of the albums bounced on its spine and fell open. Photographs fluttered away on the morning breeze.

Anyone who wants this shit can have it. I don't.

He looked about to see if he were being observed, then strode off toward Our Lady of the Pines, four blocks away.

Little faggot wants an exclamation point. That's what he'll get.

As always, the front door to the church was open.

Tony crossed to the church via the breezeway. It was time for the regular check of the altar and vestments, so that all would be ready for the eight o'clock Mass.

He still boiled inside, but he had no idea what to do about it. Dominic didn't have a regular address. The odds were long against him showing his face at their mother's apartment again. Siccing the cops on him would bring no gain.

Seethe as he would, Tony had to give the round to his elder brother.

The sacristy was dim and pleasantly cool. Tony opened the chifforobe where the vestments were kept, extracted them one by one for inspection, and replaced them as they passed.

A ghost of sound drifted in from the main chamber. He backed away from the cabinet and whipped his head around. There was no one else in the little room. The door into the church proper was closed and locked.

Heedless of the dread mounting within him, he unlocked the inner door and eased it open. The crack of the latch as it disengaged echoed unnaturally in the hall of worship.

Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. The morning light filtered through the stained glass windows to paint elongated kaleidoscopic patterns on the pews and the altar. Nothing moved except the slow dance of colors.

Tony slid into the room and approached the altar. Automatically, he dropped to one knee before it and made the Sign of the Cross.

Quick footsteps sounded behind him. Before he could rise, a heavy hand lashed across the back of his head. The impact pitched him to the floor as green and yellow stars skittered across his eyes.

He unscrambled his wits painfully, struggled to rise and turn toward the blow. His attacker was the only person it could possibly have been.

"How's God, bro? Doing you right? Pulling your little pudding for sassing your big brother?" Dominic wore a smile of contempt and triumph.

Tony regained his feet and squared up to his brother. "My big brother has developed a taste for striking the undefended, I see." The red tinge returned to the edges of his vision. It thickened and deepened as he spoke. "It suits you, Dom. A man makes his way in the world by his wits and his skill. But you're not a man, are you?" Dominic's eyes and nostrils flared, and Tony pressed on with impetuous glee. "You're a thieving, sniveling, backstabbing *coward*."

Dominic screamed murder to the skies and charged.

Tony had thought himself ready for the attack. He wasn't. He'd believed himself physically able to cope with his elder brother, given his lifelong concentration on fitness and the dissolute habits Dominic had indulged. He wasn't. Dominic tossed him around the church like a rag doll, bounced him alternately from the rows of pews, kicked him in the ribs and back when he fell and smashed him across the face with a forearm when he tried to rise.

By the time Dominic took him under the shoulders and hauled him to his feet before the font, his will to fight had dissolved in an ocean of pain. When Dominic plunged his head into the holy water and pressed it down with all the force in his arms, Tony did not struggle. The surcease of death had become a consummation devoutly to be wished.

The legions of darkness sang a song of fulfillment in Dominic's brain. He did not look up as the front door to the church opened. All that mattered to him was quenching his brother's life and watching it spill onto the floor at his feet.

Powerful twin impacts speared into his kidneys. He screamed shrilly, released his brother and went to his knees. Tony's limp form slumped and slid along the pedestal of the font, to collapse in a heap at its base.

Dominic staggered about to confront whoever had waylaid him. The intruder was a young man, younger than his despised brother. He was short, perhaps five-seven. He held no weapon. He stood at ease, as if there were no threat to be dealt with anywhere nearby, but his face burned with a rage that would only be quenched in blood.

"You're Tony's brother Dominic, aren't you?" The voice was soft and wondering.

"Yeah." Dominic's voice was rough to his own ears. "Who the fuck are you?"

"A communicant." An edge formed on the words, frost to defy the July heat. "You aren't. Therefore you don't belong here. Get on your feet and get out. Now."

"Or what?" Dominic's own anger was returning fast.

Show this twerp what happens when you hit Dominic Baldaserra from behind.

He lunged upright and hurled himself at the young man.

His outstretched hands closed on nothing. Before he could reorient himself the intruder was upon him, a buzzsaw of demonic fury.

A barrage of kicks executed at an impossible speed battered Dominic from shoulders to knees. Savage blows rained over him without respite, cross-stitching him like a platoon of jackhammers. A final thrust kick to his solar plexus emptied his lungs and hurled him into the last pew. He slid to the floor.

The intruder advanced. Killing rage lit his features.

Hands locked onto the waistband of Dominic's jeans and pulled him vertical. A moment later he was being whirled around like a TV wrestler on the losing end of a staged battle.

It didn't last long. The hands released him, and his path became linear once again. He crashed into the tall outer doors of the church with an impact that shook the rafters and snapped several of his ribs.

A bright wave of agony washed over him. He gasped, bunched his muscles against the pain and tried vainly to rise. The wave redoubled, crashed down on his addled brain and took his consciousness from him.

"Tony?"

A beloved voice was calling Tony Baldaserra back from the fringe of the endless dark. His back pressed painfully against the base of the font. Strong hands held his head and gently slapped his face. He turned reluctantly away from the beckoning oblivion and returned to the world.

The interloper who had saved his life peered down into his eyes with concern, concentrating oddly on one eye at a time. It took a moment for Tony to figure out why.

He's checking for signs of a concussion.

It was the last rational thought Tony would have for quite a while. He lurched forward, onto his knees. His arms rose of their own accord, wrapped themselves around Louis Redmond and pulled him close.

Louis held him as he sobbed his way back from the grave.

The next three days passed slowly. Tony needed rest and time alone. Father Schliemann saw to it that he got plenty of both. They made their morning devotions together and took their meals together, but apart from that Tony remained in his room. The pastor saw to the needs of the parish alone while the younger priest convalesced.

Angela came to call on Wednesday morning. He told her what had occurred, without editing it at all. She held his hand and listened in silence, nodded at the end, kissed his cheek and went home.

No one spoke to him of Dominic.

"What was Louis doing there so early?"

"He's always there early, Tony. He comes about half an hour before the first Mass, every day."

"Did anyone call the police?"

Schliemann shook his head. "There was no need. Dominic hadn't taken anything from the church, and Louis had disciplined him quite effectively. The hospital said he didn't have one square inch of unbruised skin."

Tony fingered his tuna sandwich and said nothing.

"How are your mother and sister, Tony?"

"Stunned. With everything that's gone down between us, they still couldn't imagine anything like this."

Schliemann raised an eyebrow. "From Dominic?"

Tony shook his head. "From me."

The pastor pursed his lips and fell silent.

"Father, would you think ill of me if I transferred to another parish?"

Schliemann's gaze sharpened. He sat fully upright. "Are you quite sure that's what you want, Tony?"

"No, not yet. But I've been thinking about it, and it might...help with a few things."

The pastor reached across the table to take Tony's hands between his own, the mannerism that had been his signature for more than thirty years.

"Dominic won't be back, Tony. I wish you'd been with us when we dropped him at Oteora General. Louis actually promised to kill him if he didn't get out of Oteora and stay out. Louis Redmond, who's never told a lie in his life." A tremor ran through their joined hands. "I almost lost it then and there. He had me confess him as soon as we got back here."

Tony said nothing. Schliemann leaned forward and peered into his face. Tony resisted the urge to avert his pastor's gaze.

"It's Louis, isn't it?"

Tony nodded.

"You aren't --"

"No, Father. But if I want it to stay that way, I have to put some distance between us." Tony blinked back tears. "He's too much for me."

Schliemann nodded and looked away. He released Tony's hands.

"He solved his problem at work, did you know that?"

It was enough to divert Tony from his descent into grief, and he was happy to follow it. "No, how?"

Schliemann grinned. "Blackmail. He went to his vice-president, showed him the evidence, and told him that he could either press charges or face them as a passive accessory. The fellow folded on the spot."

"What about all the intervening layers of management he couldn't jump over?"

"They were all present, Tony. He brought them together and leveled the same threat at all of them. A federal grand jury got the evidence yesterday morning. Indictments are already coming down." The pastor rose from the table and went to the kitchen's end window. "The Air Force has already announced its intention to keep OA as prime contractor on the EL-17. The company might get a corporate citation for integrity."

Tony's heart surged painfully in his chest.

He forsook perfect justice and concentrated on the essentials. He wanted to see those executives scraped out of the company like the insides of a jack'o'lantern. Instead he put himself at legal and professional risk to protect three thousand jobs. Other people's jobs.

I guess I did my job.

"I can't be near him again, Father. You know what it could cost me."

Schliemann's grin faded. He nodded again, stuck his hands in his pockets and stared out the window.

"He loves you, you know."

"I know. Just not the way I love him."

"He knows."

Blood rushed into Tony Baldaserra's face. "You told him?"

The pastor shook his head.

"But --"

"He's known for a long time."

Tony filled his lungs to deny it, fell silent instead.

Of course he has.

"You have no idea how highly he thinks of you, Tony. To him, you're the sun, the moon and the stars. He's missed you terribly."

"He'll understand, Father."

"Yes, he will."

Tony dragged his weary body upright and took his dish to the sink. The sink was clean and empty. He'd thought Schliemann would welcome the chance to share his burdens with another priest, especially a young, fit one who could relieve him of the physical chores the old rectory demanded. That might well have been, but it was plain that the pastor was still equal to any task.

"Would you like to bless some fresh holy water, Father?"

Schliemann shook his head. "No need."

"But --"

"There's quite a lot in the font, Tony."

"With my blood in it!"

Another shake. "Come see."

They crossed to the church and went to stand before the font. There were no stains of any kind on the basin or its base. The water in it sparkled clean and pure in the noon light. Tony could almost see God's grace clinging to the surface of the pool.

Tony shook his head in wonder. "I nearly drowned in there."

Schliemann's answering smile was kind and just slightly mysterious.

"In all the history of the Church, there's not one recorded instance of anyone drowning in holy water, Tony. I expect it will remain that way to the end of the world. Now let's go back and talk about where you'd like to transfer to."

==<O>==

Intermezzo

I laid a hand on the rim of the smooth plaster basin. "Here?"

Schliemann nodded. "Tony's in Rockville Center now. Dominic hasn't been seen in Oteora since."

I could imagine. No one who had command of his faculties would willingly face that light in Louis's eyes a second time.

Schliemann ambled about the little church, eyes and hands caressing as he went. A sacred image, the altar rail, the back of a pew. The Oteora pastorate had been his life. Wherever he looked, memories flocked, waiting for him to call them back.

I could wish to have the memories of such a life, nestled with all the others. To remain in one place so long has never been given to me.

"It's a beautiful old church," I said.

He looked up and smiled. "Not that old, really. It was built in the eighteen-eighties. The practice then was to build a new church in the style of the great old ones, as far as could be managed given the limitations of size and budget. I understand that the designer of this one took its basic plan from a cathedral in Belgium."

I surveyed the vault of the arch, the way narthex flowed into nave, the compelling

convergence of the floor plan on the altar pedestal at the front, and recognized it at once.
Louvain.

"How do you manage it all alone?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

I waved at our surroundings. "Cleaning, repairs, all the chores of the parish. You said you were alone here."

He nodded. "For the past fifteen years. My parishioners are good people. They think of Our Lady of the Pines as their church, not mine. They maintain it."

"Still, it can't be easy, one priest for the whole county."

A glint of humor appeared in his eyes. "How many priests have you known, Mr. Loughlin?"

"A fair number. Why?"

"How many were weaklings, by whatever standards you hold?"

"Hm. I see your point. Made of tougher stuff?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps we're sustained by our vocations. We work deep into our seventies at least, and most further still." He turned to look at the altar. "It's not an occupation for the lazy or the particular."

It was clear that he'd wanted Louis for the cloth, but Jeannette Redmond's death had turned the teenager down another path. It must have been a mighty blow to both of them.

"What do you think of Louis's chosen trade, Father?"

Schliemann's jaw tightened. "I suppose that as long as he was determined to stay in Oteora, it was about the best he could do."

"You condemn weapon-making?"

"Not at all. Weapons are liberating tools. Without weapons, the biggest and least scrupled will always have their way with the rest of us. But Louis's is a great mind. He could have done whatever he chose to do. To become just one more engineer among many was a trivial application of his gifts."

"Not enough challenge for someone of his powers?"

"His intellectual powers, no. Though he has had some...interesting times at OA."

The priest moved down the rows of benches to the next-to-last and stood before it.

"Once there was a man who was sick unto death. His wife came to Mass here every day to pray for his recovery. Catholics do that, you know."

I nodded.

"And there was a beautiful young woman with a therapy of her own, and a handsome young man with some personality problems who caught her eye, and then there was Louis."

==<O>==

De Mortuis

Rolf Svenson leveled eyes filled with disbelief at his department director.

"No skills at all?"

Joseph Brendel shook his head.

"What schooling has he had?"

"Two years at Harvard."

"Studying...?"

"Liberal arts." Brendel started to hunch over the mounds of paper that concealed his desk. Svenson thrust himself from the plush leather guest chair and planted his palms on the desk.

Brendel flinched back into his seat.

"What am I supposed to do with him, Joe?"

Brendel shrugged. "Whatever you think is best. He'll get paid the same no matter what sort of scut work you put him to."

"Joe!"

"Give me a break, Rolf." Brendel scowled. "I wasn't given a choice in the matter, and you're the only software group leader with an open slot. Just keep him out of my hair until he gets bored enough to leave. Is it that much to ask?"

"You know it is." Svenson heard the edge on his voice, but could do nothing to soften it. "My team is the best in the company. You can't shoehorn this playboy dilettante into it and not cause trouble." He began to tick points off on his fingers. "They expected someone of their caliber, someone who can hold his head up in fast company. They'll want to know why a useless rich kid is being given a chair every other software engineer in the company would kill to have. And they'll kill *me* if I ask them to carry him!"

Brendel didn't respond. His eyes had closed and his breathing had become labored. Both his hands went to his abdomen and clutched it as his face mottled with blood.

Svenson's indignation ebbed away.

"Is it getting worse?"

Brendel grinned without opening his eyes. "Hard to say."

How can I argue with a man in his condition?

"I'm sorry, Joe. I forget sometimes."

The software director's eyes cracked open. "It's okay."

Svenson pondered in the sudden silence.

It's less of a problem for him than for me, but he wouldn't have done it if he had a better choice. He's not a coward. He just needs his job.

The office was still except for the rasp of Joseph Brendel's breath as he fought down the pain from the pancreatic cancer that, by all odds, would soon take his life. Svenson ground his teeth together and swallowed his pride.

"Okay. Okay. I'll find something to do with him." Svenson drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, and straightened up. "Can you keep his uncle out of my hair?"

Brendel's eyes opened. Some of the pain bled out of his expression. "I don't know. I'll try."

"When will he show up?"

Brendel glanced at his watch, and Svenson stiffened again.

"Is he already on the payroll?"

"I expected him here half an hour ago, Rolf."

"Shit."

Hadley Benton Holloway ambled through the Onteora Aviation Engineering Center as casually as he might walk through a public park. He knew he was awaited. He knew he was late. He chose not to let it trouble him.

He strolled into Joseph Brendel's outer office and presented the beautiful young secretary-receptionist with a carefree smile. She straightened slightly in her seat and regarded him intently.

"I think Joe's waiting for me. I'm Ben Holloway."

Without taking her eyes off him, she lifted the handset of her phone and pressed a button.

"Mr. Brendel? There's a Ben Holloway here to see you."

There was a muted response. She set down the handset and produced a meaningless business-quality smile.

"You can go in, Mr. Holloway." Her eyes flicked toward the inner office door. He tipped a nonexistent cap to her and did so.

The tall, nattily attired young man who sauntered through Brendel's door looked like the archetype of the idle rich boy, too sophisticated to be concerned about anything and too well placed in the world to make room for the concerns of others. Svenson immediately wanted to be anywhere else.

Brendel rose from his chair. "Welcome to Onteora Aviation, Mr. Holloway."

Holloway slumped into the unoccupied guest chair without waiting to be invited. Brendel's eyebrows rose, but he made no comment. He resumed his own seat.

Holloway jerked his head toward Svenson. "Who's this?"

Svenson clamped his lips shut.

"This is your supervisor, Mr. Holloway." Brendel's diction acquired a monitory edge. "The man you'll be taking orders from and reporting to for the present and foreseeable future. His name is Rolf Svenson."

Svenson turned and offered his own hand to Holloway. Holloway didn't budge. After several seconds of motionless silence, Svenson let his hand fall to his side. Holloway smirked.

It's going to be worse than I imagined.

"Mr. Svenson will be assigning you your duties and evaluating your performance, Mr. Holloway." The edge on the words grew sharper as Brendel spoke, though he allowed no emotion into his face. "It would be wise of you to be polite to him."

Holloway's look of marginal amusement was undisturbed.

Brendel stared hard at the young man for several seconds. Svenson began to wonder if his boss might not be growing some extra backbone on the spot.

The moment passed. Brendel sighed, a slow leak of air to convey resignation in the face of a hopeless task. Svenson held his peace.

"Rolf, would you show Mr. Holloway to his cubicle, please?"

Svenson nodded and headed for the door without bothering to check whether his new charge was behind him.

Svenson rounded the corner toward the Simulations area and collided with Louis Redmond coming the other way. Svenson's tall, lanky frame folded comically around Louis's compact one as they bounced off the gray fabric corridor wall. The two disentangled themselves and giggled in chorus as Ben Holloway looked on.

"Ben, meet Louis Redmond. He's my main man. You're likely to learn a lot from him. Louis, meet Ben Holloway. He's joining us in Simulations as of today."

Louis produced his usual friendly grin and stuck out his hand. Holloway produced a superior smile. His hands remained in his pockets.

It took a moment for Louis to realize that his hand was destined to hang there unmet. He lowered it and turned a darkened gaze on Svenson.

"Any relation to Floyd Holloway?"

As Svenson opened his mouth, Holloway said, "His brother Carl's eldest son."

Louis didn't turn toward the young aristocrat. Svenson watched unquiet threads of suspicion coil behind the *wunderkind's* eyes and knit into certainty.

"How's Joe doing?"

Svenson shook his head.

Louis briefly gripped Svenson by the arm. "We'll talk about it later." A quick, coolly assessing glance at Holloway, and he was gone.

Svenson stalked to the cubicle that would be Ben Holloway's until he chose to relieve OA of his presence. At the entrance, he turned toward Holloway and jerked a hand toward the desk chair, then dropped into the metal guest chair.

Holloway flinched, the first sign of engagement Svenson had seen from him. He sidled toward the desk chair, pulled it out and sat gingerly in it. His eyes had become cautious, as if events had drifted away from his expectations and he'd decided to pay full attention until they were back on track.

"Do you have some reason for your rudeness, Mr. Holloway? Or does it just come naturally to you?"

Holloway's supercilious smile returned.

"I choose my associates carefully, Rolf. I take my time about it. If I decide you've made the cut, I'll let you know."

Svenson had little real experience with anger. The tide that poured through him induced a surge of vertigo that made him glad he'd sat. He leaned back, closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath.

"That's very nice of you, Ben. I'll make sure to mention it to my wife tonight. I'm sure she'll be pleased. But let's get a couple of things straight." He rose and looked down at his new subordinate from his full height. "You can treat me however you like. I think I have your measure now, and I don't take offense at the actions of churls." Holloway's face flushed and his eyes narrowed. "But I'd advise you to be civil toward the rest of the people you'll be working with. Especially Louis. You're what, about twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six." The words dripped acid.

Svenson nodded. "Louis is twenty-four. He's been working here since he was sixteen. He has no enemies, Ben. None. It's not considered wise to slight him." Svenson warmed to his subject. "In fact, there's no one in the division who gets more respect. There's no one in the whole company with a higher reputation. You could live ten thousand years and never be the man he is. God help you if you say or do anything that costs us his services."

Holloway's face had gone crimson. "Are you threatening me, *Rolf*?"

Svenson laughed. "Me? Threaten my division vice-president's nephew? Heaven forbid! No, *Ben*, I'm warning you. I doubt I'll get any use out of you. I also doubt you'll be here long. But I don't doubt that you'll piss off a great many people before you go. You have the talent for it. And a man headed toward his own destruction should know it." He made to leave, stopped, and scowled once more at the young man. "I'll be back a little later with something suited to your aptitudes and your attitude."

Svenson strode away before Holloway could reply.

Floyd Holloway leaned over the table. "Are you serious? Clerical work?"

His nephew nodded. He wore an expression of mortal insult barely endured. "Said it was the one thing he needed done that suited both my aptitudes and my attitude."

The executive's blood rushed to his head. A roaring built in his ears. The delicious stuffed trout that sat before him, the carafe of fine French wine, the beauty of the main salon of Grucci's Gardens around him, had become insignificant. He set his utensils down on his plate and tried to compose himself.

"Does he know about your software experience?"

Some of the outrage faded from his nephew's countenance. "I assume Brendel told him."

"But you don't know for certain."

"...no..." Ben Holloway bent over his coq au vin, neglected until then, and began to shovel it briskly into his mouth.

In all honesty, a couple of years revising spreadsheets at Potter, Stearns isn't likely to qualify him for much at OA. Perhaps it's best not to press.

"What was it he disliked about your attitude?"

The petulance returned to his nephew's face. He straightened and swallowed jerkily. His fork clacked against the rim of his plate as he laid it down. "He introduced me to one of his other flunkies, and he took offense when I didn't fall to my knees. Said I needed to learn respect." A snort. "As if he knew what respect should look like."

An unpleasant prickling awoke at the back of Floyd Holloway's neck. "Who was the group member?"

His nephew scowled and shrugged. "Louis somebody. I wasn't listening very hard."
Holloway nodded. "I see."

Svenson cast a disapproving eye on Louis's lunch. "Do you ever eat anything but tuna on whole wheat?"

Louis grinned. "Now and then. When I can get pumpernickel."

"Gahh." Svenson lifted his turkey sandwich and took a large bite. The division's late lunch group milled around them, buying sandwiches and beverages from the cafeteria vending machines, fetching napkins and condiments, choosing tables and exchanging gossip. The gabble provided a fine cover under which to hold their conversation. Svenson would rather have held it behind a closed door, but he didn't have one.

"When did Joe spring the new guy on you?"

Svenson swallowed. "This morning."

"He must have figured you'd find a way to prevent it if he gave you time to think it over."
Well, he knew I'd try, anyway.

"You know the shape he's in, Louis. I wasn't about to give him a hard time."

The young engineer's eyes became solemn. "No improvement at all?"

Svenson shook his head minutely. "He won't be with us long."

And that bastard Holloway knows he couldn't even afford his pain pills without the company medical insurance.

A fresh surge of anger poured through him. The unwanted newcomer had already demonstrated his capacity for insult. He could do Svenson's group a great deal of damage with a few well-chosen words.

"Louis, you don't have a problem with this, do you?"

"Of course I do." Louis crammed the remainder of his sandwich into his mouth and chewed furiously while Svenson tried to restart his heart. He was straining to string together a set of assurances when Louis swallowed and held up a hand.

"I don't have a problem with you, Rolf. I have a problem with the situation, and I might have one with him if he doesn't start acting like a human being. But you got cornered. You had no choice. The whole group is in the boat with you."

Svenson's head of anxious steam bled away as quickly as it had mounted. "Thank you, Louis. I guess I didn't really need to ask, did I?"

"No, you didn't." Louis grinned. "But I gave you a thrill there, didn't I?"

Svenson chuckled. "You sure did."

The younger man leaned over the table. Svenson stretched forward in response. Louis whispered, "What do you expect to do with him?"

Svenson tried but failed to keep the evil grin off his face. He looked quickly to each side for eavesdroppers. "Well, right now I've got him alphabetizing files."

Louis's eyes went wide. "Paper files? The archives from the basement?"

"Yup."

"And when he's done?"

"Then he gets to take them to the incinerator."

Louis's entire being lit with astonished delight. "You *fiend!*"

"Why, thank you."

Joseph Brendel pushed away his corned beef and hunched over the medicine ball of pain and nausea that lodged under his ribs. All his muscles had clenched against the assault from within. He kept his eyes closed and pressed his fists to his stomach, struggled to hold down its contents, prayed for relief.

The painkillers had stopped working several days before. Dr. Accardi had said they would. He'd stressed the importance of returning to the hospital when the pain became continuous. The sole remaining anodyne would leave Brendel unable to look after himself.

But he wasn't ready to yield.

Deborah Brendel believed her husband was winning, slowly but inexorably fighting off the malignancy and returning to health. She prayed for him aloud every night, and no doubt at Mass each morning. He never showed pain in her presence, or the children's. He never talked about his illness at all. He never allowed her to learn that the thrice-weekly chemotherapy sessions she believed were healing him had been discontinued more than two months ago, on Accardi's advice. Though she could no longer bring herself to touch him, he would have done anything to keep the light of hope burning in her eyes.

There might not be anything more he could do. He couldn't work if he were always doubled over in pain. He'd be unable to drive. Even if he were driven to and from the plant, he'd be unable to leave his desk. Yet to allow the horror to return to Deborah's face would be much worse.

His office door creaked open and a pair of high heels clicked through. He marshaled his resources and forced himself upright as the tall, graceful form of Jeanne Sheltenham, his secretary-receptionist of three weeks' standing, approached his desk. She spread a handful of pink message slips on his blotter, caught his eyes and held them. He tried his best to smile.

"I thought you were going out to lunch."

"I changed my mind. Can I get you anything?"

His eyes tried to jam themselves shut again. He held them open by force of will. "No, thank you, Jeanne. It will pass."

She studied him a moment more, then went to the door, eased it closed and flipped the lock tab on the knob. He frowned in puzzlement as she stepped around his desk to his side. His agony was displaced by confusion as her fingers ruffled his wispy brown hair and trailed down his cheek.

"What are you --"

"Shhh." She repeated the tender gesture. Her face was curiously still. "I know a little about this. Yvette told me you were in pain. Do you know how I lost Donald?"

The young beauty's widowhood was well known in the division, but no one had ever mentioned the reason to him. The talk among the men was always about who was currently striving in vain to catch her eye. From the hour Floyd Holloway first assigned her to cover Yvette Hamelin's maternity leave, his outer office had risen sharply in popularity, to his private amusement. He shook his head.

"Liver cancer." Her voice caught on the phrase and sank near to a whisper. "He didn't want to die in a hospital, and I didn't want him to spend his last days away from me. When the pain got too bad for the drugs, we started trying...other things. A couple of them seemed to work."

She rotated his chair to face her and sank to her knees before him. His brain whirled with confusion. "May I try one of them on you?"

He could not speak.

Her hands went to the zipper of his trousers. He sat rigidly still as she drew out his organ. Her fingers brought him swiftly to full tumescence. Deborah's face swelled to fill his mind's eye.

"My wife..." His voice failed him.

Her eyes lit with affection and transcendent knowledge, the elemental wisdom of women that men cannot share. "She wouldn't want you to suffer, would she?" She bent to her task, and her light brown hair cascaded down to curtain his lap.

A moment later he had ceased to think at all. His hands went to the sides of her face and caressed it in gratitude and love. The pain that had emasculated him became an irrelevant memory, faded and was forgotten.

Svenson tapped on the edge of the cubicle wall. Louis started in his seat and jerked himself around to face the group leader.

"What's up, Rolf?"

"Meeting. Brendel wants to see us."

"Now?"

"Now."

Louis was out of his chair and halfway to the stairwell before Svenson could turn around.

As much as Svenson liked Joe Brendel, he didn't like it when the director called him to Mahogany Row. It was too effective a reminder of how little status he commanded, how paltry a price he'd accepted for his soul. Brendel always showed him the utmost courtesy, but each summons left an aftertaste of humiliation. Awareness of Brendel's terminal illness had stifled what spunk Svenson might have exhibited. The business with Holloway's nephew had left him seething under a need to assert himself that had yet to find an outlet.

Louis strode briskly beside him, taking the stairs two at a time. If the young engineer could sense his group leader's internal chafing, he kept it to himself.

Ben Holloway was in Brendel's office when they arrived, slumped in one of the leather guest chairs, legs extended before him like a vacationer taking his ease on the sundeck of a cruise ship. He didn't rise, didn't turn.

Brendel rose and waved the two of them at the remaining chair. Louis deeded it to Svenson with a minute toss of his head. Brendel waited in visible discomfort as Svenson sat. Louis took up station behind him.

"We've made it to the final round of the Dazzler proposal." Brendel forced a smile that wouldn't have fooled a blind man. "But the Air Force hit us with a new requirement for the big cookoff. They want to see our software run against their EBA suite before they'll fund the construction of a prototype."

Svenson drew a sharp breath. Louis stood immobile, face solemn and arms crossed over his chest.

"I know we've been holding off getting friendly with that system, but this is probably the make-or-break point for the Dazzler contract. If we decline to mate to the EBA net, and Thomson agrees, we'll lose the project on that basis alone."

"So you want Simulations to take charge of the interface," Louis said.

Brendel nodded. "Tactical doesn't have half your expertise with federated systems. I've already braced Terry Arkham. He's agreeable."

"No, really?" Svenson snorted a laugh. "What an incredible surprise."

Brendel frowned. He sat forward in his chair, cocked an eyebrow at Svenson and waited.

Svenson started to expostulate, collected himself and kept silent.

"What's involved, Joe?" Louis's voice was as soft as always, but every syllable rang perfectly clear.

Ben Holloway remained bonelessly immobile.

Brendel shrugged. "You'll have to get the latest interface specs from the EBA office in Colorado Springs. You'll have to study the interface specs for the drone's jammers and write a modulation layer to convert the tactical software's output to use the EBA interface. What else?"

Louis nodded and folded his arms across his chest. "And Mr. Holloway here? How is he involved?"

Svenson stiffened.

He's decided to force it all into the open, and nothing I could say would divert him.

Brendel's smile weakened. "Ben's background makes him a natural choice for liaison to the EBA office."

Ben Holloway bestowed a condescending smirk and a nod on Louis Redmond. Svenson's heart began to pound.

Louis nodded again. His expression of focused gravity did not waver. "I see. Did you arrive at that assignment yourself, Joe? Or did Floyd announce it to you?"

If the young engineer had produced a stun grenade, pulled the pin and tossed it onto Brendel's desk, he would not have caused a greater uproar. Brendel and Holloway rose from their seats as one, shouting in angry counterpoint. Svenson lunged forward to stand between them and Louis. Soon he was shouting himself, not to make himself understood above the others, but to keep anyone from being clearly heard. In the heat of the moment either Brendel or Holloway might say something irreparable, something that could not be unsaid.

Louis stood unaffected, arms still crossed over his chest, as steady and silent as a statue.

The office door opened and Jeanne Sheltenham strode in. The four men turned to face her, and the tumult ceased.

"Is something wrong, Joe?" A crease formed on her forehead. "Do you gentlemen need anything? Coffee?"

The secretary's quietly formal manner snapped them back to decorum. Simply by standing there and waiting for an explanation, eyes wide and expectant, she drew the heat from the room and absorbed it into her. Svenson could feel the tempers subside around him.

Louis grinned. "Pacifiers, maybe." A nervous laugh circled the office. "It's okay, Jeanne. Just a minor difference over some personnel decisions."

Jeanne looked hard at her boss. Brendel nodded. She retreated and closed the office door gently behind her.

Louis turned to face the others. "Sit down, guys. We have a few more things to hash out before Rolf and I return to our regularly scheduled programming."

Brendel started to sputter. Louis gave him the Redmond glare. It was a look Louis was known for, that combined his full and solemn attention with an unmistakable message that its object was at once making an ass of himself and wasting Louis's time. The software director caught himself, waved Ben Holloway back into his seat, and resumed his own.

"This is going to make things harder, Joe. Has the Air Force started discussing a deadline with upper management yet?"

Ben Holloway, who had not quite resettled himself in his chair, rose from it again. His face was tight with insult. "If you persist in these gratuitous --"

Louis didn't turn toward him. "Sit down, Ben."

"Who the hell do you --"

The Redmond glare, blinding as the noonday sun, swung to shine on the young aristocrat. It

plugged Holloway's stream of invective like a custom-fitted gag. "Mr. Holloway, I'm sure that in the circles that bred you, you're a really, really big deal, people bowing and doors opening whenever you waltz by, but around here you're *nothing*, you're less functional than a doorstop, so plant your ass in that chair and *learn your place!*"

In that moment, Genghis Khan could not have faced Louis down. Certainly Ben Holloway could not. He slumped into his seat, face white with shock, lips moving but no sound coming from them.

Brendel's face had gone slack. Louis peered at him, seeking an indication that he might be in crisis. Apparently he saw none.

"This is going to slow us down, Joe. Someone will have to shadow Ben here, make sure we get all the data we need and all the access reaching the finals entitles us to, *and* make sure he doesn't accidentally trade the company jewels for an old shoe." Louis looked dubiously at Svenson. "Rolf, I assume you'd rather I stayed in the office for this. We're going to be tight on time as it is."

Svenson nodded.

"Then I suggest that Joe get Terry Arkham to lend us one of his people for the duration. Call it an advance payment for our services. Maybe Emil Deukmejian. He's sharp, it won't take long to bring him up to speed, and he'll know if we're missing a piece before we start to assemble the puzzle."

Brendel started to speak, cut himself off and nodded. Louis looked pointedly at Svenson. The group leader rose and followed his subordinate out of the office.

A confrontation with Floyd Holloway was to be expected. What was surprising was that the executive allowed two full days to pass before summoning Svenson and Louis to him.

The office of Onteora Aviation's vice president for research and development was a tastefully luxurious suite. The anteroom was done in beige fabrics and light woods, everything of the highest quality. A long leather sofa invited visitors to refresh themselves in its embrace. The carpet was thick and soft, a delight to both the eye and the foot. The beautiful young woman who adorned the secretary's desk could liquefy the bones of any man who came within fifty yards, with no more than a smile.

The inner sanctum was arranged like that of a successful lawyer. Low-slung barrister's bookcases were interleaved with tall etageres. The bookcases held thick tomes on finance, marketing, and white-collar management. The etageres were filled with awards and abstract *objets d'art*. Unnoticeable in a far corner, until one was commanded to notice it, was a mahogany wet bar. A handful of bottles rested on its surface. The value of their contents rivaled the price of a new car.

At the large desk that commanded the room, hands folded before him on its immaculate surface, sat Floyd Holloway. His demeanor, accented by the deep parallel grooves in his long, narrow face, connoted an implacable severity and an age much greater than his fifty years. In him there was no trace of the insouciance of his nephew. In Svenson's eleven years with the company, he had never seen Holloway smile.

Holloway did not rise from his desk as his guests entered. He did not invite them to sit. They did not. When they halted before him, he scowled at them for several seconds before he spoke a word.

"I understand," he rasped, "that you've got a problem with having my nephew work on the Dazzler finals with you." His eyes flicked between Svenson and Louis, warning of dire retribution to whoever might offer him cheek.

Svenson could not bring himself to speak. Louis stood mute, hands in his pockets, the

suggestion of a smile playing along his lips.

"Mr. Redmond? Am I to hear no contribution of wisdom from the man who humiliated Ben in front of his department director?"

"What kind of wisdom are you prepared to accept, Mr. Holloway?" Louis's voice was as soft as always. Yet there was an undertone there, a swelling note just beneath the words, that sang of a great bull preparing for a contest of strength.

Holloway's eyes grew hard. "Would you outline your objections to working with Ben Holloway on the Dazzler project for me, please?"

"I have no objections at all," Louis said, "so long as you don't expect us to defy the laws of nature for you."

Holloway's nostrils flared. "What do you mean by that, young man?"

Louis smiled. "I mean, Mr. Holloway, that no power on Earth can make your nephew competent for the responsibility you picked for him in time to do us any good. With him as our liaison, we're going to have to go to the Air Force three times as often as necessary for the information we need. Sometimes we won't know what we don't know until it's too late to make repairs. That will put us behind Thomson Aeronautics by several lengths. Loss of the contract is a virtual guarantee."

Anger lit the executive's lined face. He sat upright in his chair. "Are you telling me you can't do your job, young man?"

Louis's smile was undisturbed. "No, Mr. Holloway. I'm telling you that your nephew can't do his."

Holloway's face flushed the deepest crimson Svenson had ever seen.

"It's really quite simple, Mr. Holloway. Either give us a real liaison from Projects or Tactical Software, or lose the contract. Production on Dazzler is supposed to break half a billion dollars in the first year. How do you like the prospect of having your nephew's pride cost OA that much money? Right out in front of God and everybody?"

"But I notice that Ben isn't here today. Is it his pride that's at issue, or yours? Are you so determined to force him in where he doesn't belong that you'll allow him to sully your reputation with a preventable disaster? I'd have thought our little showdown over the EL-17 would have taught you the futility of hiding from unpleasant facts."

Holloway rose from his seat. His arms trembled visibly as he pushed himself out of his chair. Svenson wanted to hide under the carpet. Louis's smile was still firmly in place.

"You think you won something with that stroke, don't you? You have a great deal of confidence in your position, Mr. Redmond. But a strong sense of confidence is nearly always misplaced. Ben Holloway will be the company's liaison to the Air Force for Dazzler. You'll get no loan of personnel from Projects, Tactical Software, or anywhere else. Now go back to your desk and learn to cope."

Louis snorted a gentle laugh. "Whatever you say, Mr. Holloway. But word will get around. And don't think you can prevent it by firing me. Your adventure in nepotism is already the talk of the division."

Holloway's head moved back and forth once. "I wouldn't dream of firing you, Mr. Redmond. That would only let you off the hook. Now get out of my office, both of you."

They did.

"What did he mean by that 'off the hook' business?"

Louis hunched forward in Svenson's metal guest chair and planted his elbows on his knees. "It means he knows me better than I thought."

Svenson studied the young engineer with heightened concentration.

He won't go limp on them. His pride is too great for that. He'll pull the contract out of the fire for OA, no matter what it takes out of him. And the Holloways will be the beneficiaries. So will I.

"Is there anything I can do?" Nothing was apparent, but Louis might have thought of something, or might yet.

Louis shook his head. "We have to suck a river through a soda straw. It's not within the possible."

Eight years he's worked for me. He's never said anything's impossible. I'd have sworn nothing was, for him.

The office was unusually hushed for a Friday afternoon. Svenson could easily have imagined that he and Louis were alone in the building. The bustle of engineers and support staff going about their business should have been higher than average as they strove to clear their agendas before the weekend, just as Svenson would soon do before he left for his.

"Can you try not to sweat it for the weekend, Louis?"

The young engineer looked up at him with questioning eyes. "Sure, why?"

Svenson choked off the urge to explain. "Leave it to me."

A theatrical cough came from the entrance to Ben Holloway's cubicle. He lowered his newspaper to determine the source. Rolf Svenson's tall, gaunt frame leaned against the edge of the partition. He stood with his arms folded over his chest, eyes unfathomable.

"Yes?"

Svenson's face twitched. "Am I interrupting your reading schedule, Ben? I was hoping you could spare a few minutes for actual work."

Holloway's first impulse was to blow the group leader off with a supercilious rejoinder and return to his previous pursuits. Something in Svenson's stance, or perhaps in his visage, caught his attention and deflected his riposte. He set down his paper and sat upright.

"I'd gotten the impression that you didn't think I was good for anything."

Svenson lowered himself into Holloway's guest chair. "Are there many people who think that?"

Holloway managed to hold his tongue against the pressure of his rising temper. Svenson saw the exertion of effort, and nodded his approval.

"More to the point," Svenson murmured, "are you one of them?"

Holloway's mouth dropped open. His hands curled into fists in his lap. Svenson's eyes, still opaque, were steady upon him.

"I assume you have a reason for this...line of inquiry."

Svenson nodded. "I do. And it's not to humiliate or provoke you. You've been assigned a responsibility that will affect the whole company dramatically. There's a half-billion dollar contract riding on it, and maybe four or five thousand layoffs if we don't bring it home.

"You know what Louis and I were planning to do about it. We were going to team you with the sharpest help we could get you. Whenever a technical subject arose, your shadow would field the questions and make sure you weren't left to drift. That way we'd be certain to get all the data we needed, and you'd never be exposed as ignorant in front of the procurement brass.

"Well, your uncle has just torpedoed that. He's decided you're going to do it alone. No technical support at your elbow." Svenson leaned toward him. "Think about that, Ben. Think about being naked in front of an audience. Fill the audience with your enemies and give each of them a gun. It'll feel about the same."

Whatever his failings, Ben Holloway's imagination worked perfectly well. There had been a knot of anxiety in his belly since the disastrous conference in Brendel's office. It began to ooze

images composed from his most secret fears.

"What do you want me to do?" The quaver in his voice was unmistakable.

Svenson looked away. The muscles in his bony face writhed in a conflict Holloway could not interpret.

"Let me train you."

Holloway emitted a burst of bitter laughter. "What do you think you have to work with, Rolf? I'm not even a college graduate. And now you're going to make me into an Instant Engineer, Just Add Plane Tickets?"

Svenson shook his head. "No chance of that. But I can bring you up to speed on the Dazzler proposal and the EBA system we have to connect to. I can help you to compose a playbook for the technical conferences you'll be attending, try to script out as many of the scenarios as possible, so you can study for them. I can keep you on an umbilicus, phone contact several times a day, and buttress you as much as possible from here. It might be enough. But I'll need your willing cooperation or it'll all go to hell."

Holloway clenched his jaws. It wasn't an inviting program. But the prospect of being exposed as an ignorant young fool before military officers who'd sent men to their deaths, and might do so again, was worse.

And Uncle Floyd didn't have a problem with it.

"Does my uncle know about this?"

Another shake of the head. "No. And he won't learn it from me."

The quiet determination in Rolf Svenson's voice cracked through the ice around Holloway's brain. A new vision blossomed in his mind's eye. He saw himself tackling a job of complexity, a job that required sustained concentration and intelligent effort, and doing it well. He saw himself decoupling from the protective offices of his elder relatives, making his own decisions, standing on his own. He saw himself gaining the respect of men of substance, well-regarded men, men with achievements of their own. Men like Rolf Svenson.

"When do we start?"

Svenson rose and waved toward the stairwell. "Let's go see Joe."

Ben Holloway followed Svenson into Joe Brendel's outer office. As they entered, Jeanne Sheltenham was seating herself at the receptionist's desk. Svenson approached her and flicked a hand at the inner office door.

"Is Joe in, Jeanne?"

She took a moment to answer. Her color was unusually high, and she seemed to have difficulty with her breathing. Finally she nodded and punched a button on her phone.

"Yes, Jeanne?"

"Mr. Svenson is here to see you."

"Rolf?" There was a brief pause and a rustling sound Holloway couldn't identify. "Send him in."

She looked up at the group leader and nodded toward Brendel's sanctum.

Svenson turned to Holloway. "Maybe I should do this alone, Ben."

Holloway thought a moment, then shrugged. "I'll be here." His eyes darted of their own toward Jeanne. Svenson grinned and let himself into Joseph Brendel's inner office.

Holloway allowed himself to slouch onto the anteroom sofa. The magazines on the end table were all trade publications for engineers; he could comprehend nothing he saw in any of them. After a couple of minutes of fruitless page turning, he pushed them aside and made up his mind to wait. His eyes drooped partially closed.

"Having a hard time settling in?"

The question drew him back to full consciousness. The secretary was looking directly at him, regarding him with a species of curiosity he'd seen before. He shrugged.

"Joe said you were likely to have it a little rough at first. I hope you've made a friend or two, at least."

The wide brown eyes were warmer than usual for such a casual query. Her flush had not receded. It deepened as he inspected her face.

Rich, handsome, and born to a privileged family, Ben Holloway had been the target of a goodly number of young women in his quarter century. He knew the signs. Jeanne Sheltenham wasn't making small talk. Hers was conversation with a purpose.

She looked to be a few years older than he. No matter. She was a notable beauty, and he was not immune to her charm. He rose from the sofa and perched himself on the corner of her desk.

"Well, I think I might have botched my first few days, but things have been looking a trifle better this morning. Got any suggestions?"

They were still chatting with a welcome warmth when Svenson and Brendel emerged from the inner office. Holloway looked up to see the software department director's face go stiff. Brendel's eyes locked onto Holloway's. He strode slowly forward, his shoulders thrust back unnaturally.

"Do you think you're equal to the program Mr. Svenson has laid out for you, Mr. Holloway?" Every word was formed with a diction coach's precision.

Holloway unperched himself from Jeanne's desk and drew himself straight. "I hope to be. We haven't discussed it in detail yet."

A cold smile. "You'd better get started. I'd say you won't have much free time for the next few weeks." He shook his head slowly and glanced sideways at Jeanne. "No, not much free time at all." He pivoted and returned to his office. The door closed behind him with an unusually loud report.

Svenson stared at the closed inner door as if it had been slammed in his face. Holloway edged toward him and asked, "What the hell was that about?"

The group leader's eyes flicked toward the secretary. "We'll talk about it downstairs." He nodded toward the outer door. "Let's get moving. See you later, Jeanne."

Jeanne Sheltenham was staring at Brendel's inner door too. She made no reply.

"So what's a Dazzler?"

Svenson pulled an easel-sized pad of blank paper out from behind his desk and slapped it down on the working surface. He grabbed a pen and sketched a line drawing of a seacoast, with planes approaching it. Holloway followed his movements closely.

"When an attack force approaches enemy territory, the game becomes a struggle over information. The defenders want to know how large the force is, what kind of planes are in it, how far away they are, and so forth. The attackers want to deny that data to them. Every little bit of it has immense value to the defense. Lethal value, the kind that kills pilots and defeats invasions.

"The defenders have three main tools for gathering the data: intelligence, radar, and bare naked eyeballs looking up at the sky. We don't worry about intelligence. That's the DIS's job. And we can't do much about the bare naked eyeballs until our forces get close enough to shoot them out. But radar's another matter.

"The Air Force has a plane that jams radar transmissions." Svenson drew a series of divergent rays from one of the attack planes, showed them blanketing the seacoast. "It does a

pretty good job, too. Problem is, it's expensive, it's easy to shoot down, and the people who fly it need a lot of very special training. So the Pentagon is interested in a substitute. Right now the thinking is that a pilotless drone could be the answer...if it were cheap enough, and worked well enough."

The group leader had acquired an unusual animation. His face appeared lit from within, as if a fire fed by some unnameable fuel burned behind his pale blue eyes. The look of transport unsettled Ben Holloway. It was the first time he'd confronted a man in love with his work.

"Computer systems haven't done well at this job in the past. It was too easy for a human radar operator to spoof a jamming computer with random changes of modes. The computer would treat each change of mode as the appearance of a new threat radar, and would start to build a database entry for it. A couple hundred of those would saturate the system. Only recently have we begun to build the kind of adaptive software that can follow a radar beam by tracking multiple criteria simultaneously." Svenson smiled. "Some of the people we've got on the problem are just about the brightest people on Earth. So we think we have a shot at it now. But proving that we've done it will require that we mate our prototype to the Air Force's Electronic Battle Assessment suite, and that's where we come in."

"That's the EBA gizmo I've got to bone up on?"

Svenson nodded. "The very same. It's a clever gadget, simulates a large group of threat radars and hits the jamming system with changes at a speed no human operator can match. But to level out differences in approach among vendors, and to make the test a really severe one, EBA talks to the system under test through a group of special interfaces that are much different from the ones the jamming software would use in the real Dazzler drone. Our group will have to modify the jamming software to deal with EBA through those interfaces. You'll be our point man, getting all the specifics on how it's done, and passing our questions and the Air Force's answers back and forth."

"Well..." Holloway scratched his head. "If it's nothing more than that, couldn't they just compile all that stuff into a book and hand it to you?"

Svenson scowled. "Yes, they could. But they're the customer and we're the vendor. We have to make them happy, not the other way around. They've decided not to publish that book, so we have to provide a human representative to gather the specs and make them comprehensible to us. And if we fail, there's no one else to sell the product to."

It was a degree of exposure Holloway would never have courted for himself, even if he'd been a qualified engineer. But he'd accepted the job.

"Could you tell me a little about how the software is going to work? Not the tech stuff, just the kind of windy generalities a non-engineer could understand."

Svenson squinted. "Why do you want to know, Ben?"

"It might help me to be credible to the blue-suiters when we're together in the trenches."

The group leader shook his head. "They're not expected to ask. In fact, they're not allowed to know, both for the sake of an objective test and to protect OA's proprietary technologies. And I wouldn't use that trench idiom with an Air Force officer. Their hands never touch dirt."

"Oh. Okay. But how about a little sop to a layman's curiosity?"

Svenson looked off for a moment. "Well, I *could* tell you..."

Holloway leaned forward.

"...but then I'd have to kill you." The group leader's face twisted into a juvenile grin.

Holloway groaned and smacked himself on the forehead. "I walked into that one, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Thanks. Now let's get busy on your script." Svenson pulled a spiral-bound notebook toward him and started to scribble in it.

"Rolf?"

"Hm?"

"That business upstairs with Joe?"

All the mirth departed from Svenson's bony countenance. "Some executives become very possessive about their secretaries, Ben."

Holloway's brow furrowed. "Do you mean --"

"I mean nothing. And you should keep that firmly in mind."

The waiter set the plate of Hungarian goulash before Ben Holloway and awaited his approval. Holloway nodded distantly and reached for his utensils.

"Are Svenson and the rest treating you any better?" Floyd Holloway peered down his nose at his nephew.

"Yes, thanks. A lot better since the Dazzler project got properly under way." Ben lifted a spoonful of the goulash to his lips. The aroma of the rich dark sauce filled his head as he savored his first mouthful. As with everything served at Grucci's Gardens, it was delightful. The furious pace that Svenson had set for him over the week past had left him no time for such indulgences.

"Glad to hear it. I suppose even prima donnas like them will concede to reality once it's been made inescapable." The elder Holloway forked up a bite of lobster salad. "I've been laying some groundwork with Anders Forslund these past two weeks. He's assured me that there'll be a place for you in Finance before long. You won't be stuck with the slide-rule types forever." He allowed himself a thin, barely perceptible smile.

The goulash turned to ashes in Ben's mouth. He laid his tablespoon carefully on the rim of his plate as he struggled to conceal his reaction.

"Were you planning to ask my preferences before you arranged my transfer?"

Floyd Holloway's embryonic smile vanished and his gaze sharpened. "So now you choose to sneer at my efforts on your behalf, nephew?"

The restaurant seemed to have gone silent. "Did it occur to you," Ben said, measuring out each word, "that given time, I might adapt to the position I'd been given? That I might actually come to like it?"

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Ben? Would you really turn down a position in the Finance office to stay in a department where you're despised? Where I had to whack your supervisor over the snout to get him to take you seriously?"

Ben Holloway sat back in his chair.

I'm not really capable of contributing in either spot. But Rolf treats me with some respect. Like a potential asset. Not like you.

"You have a way of springing things on me, uncle. That's okay for birthday presents and such, but we're talking careers now. I have to think about this for myself. Besides, doesn't Rolf deserve a little notice before you pull me out of his group? I haven't been there three weeks yet."

"I should think," his uncle replied in a biting monotone, "that he'd be glad to see you go."

Because in his place, you would be.

"It might not be as simple as you think, Uncle Floyd." Despite a desire to lash out that dwarfed any impulse he'd ever known, Ben Holloway kept his words even and his tone pleasant. "He's put a lot of effort into preparing me for the liaison duties you picked for me, and it's going well. And a good thing, too. Everyone else in the group is out of his mind with work."

"Faugh." Floyd Holloway pushed his plate aside and swiped at his mouth with his napkin. "You won't be out front alone when the action begins, youngster. Svenson or one of his toadies will be at your elbow the whole way. That Redmond punk, most likely. Svenson thinks he's the reincarnation of Albert Einstein."

Because if it were your project, you'd never trust this important a role to an unfledged

young idler like me.

Ben Holloway dropped his face into his hands.

"God," he hissed, "how I hate myself."

Floyd Holloway leaned across the table and stared balefully at his nephew. "What was it you just said, Ben?"

"Nothing."

"Louis?"

The young engineer jerked his chair about. He frowned as he confronted Ben Holloway.

"Something I can do for you, Ben?"

Holloway had not comprehended his need to speak privately with Louis Redmond, only that it was strong enough to propel him there through a thick wall of reluctance.

"May I have a moment of your time?"

Redmond squinted at him briefly. He punched a series of commands into his computer, waited a moment for the screen to go blank, and waved Holloway into a guest chair. Holloway took it and tried to order his thoughts.

"Rolf relies on you quite a lot, doesn't he?"

Redmond shrugged. "I do what he tells me."

"If someone as sharp as Rolf thought that much of me, I'd think I was a genius."

Redmond said nothing.

"And I'd probably be pretty unpleasant to be around."

Still nothing.

"But it wouldn't be an excuse for the way I treated you when we met. Nothing would. I want to apologize for that."

A surprise-tinged grin appeared on Redmond's face. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. You know how new I am to all this. I understand about one word in twenty." Holloway suppressed an urge to fidget. "Most of it goes right over my head. Like how the responsibilities get distributed."

Redmond flicked a hand. "We each do what we're best at."

"And you're best at this."

Redmond nodded.

"It doesn't bother you to get your marching orders from people who could never do what you do?"

The young engineer's grin became wider. "Should it?"

"Well..."

Redmond chuckled and rose from his chair. He studied the gray fabric wall of his cubicle for a moment, then leaned back against the edge of his desk.

"They can't do what I do -- well, maybe Rolf could -- but I *wouldn't* do what they do. In business, people are placed both for their skills and their willingness to accept responsibilities. Rolf accepts responsibility for the productivity and well-being of the whole Simulations group. For that, he gets a title and a bigger cubicle than this one. Joe Brendel accepts responsibility for the whole Software department. For that, he gets a bigger title, a secretary, and an office with a door." Muscles quivered in the young face. "Your uncle accepts responsibility for the whole Engineering division. For that, he gets a really big title and wood furniture. I might disagree with some of his decisions, but he takes the heat for them, not me."

"You don't like him, do you?"

Redmond's mouth tightened. He looked away.

It isn't hard to understand.

"I know you didn't like it when he jammed me in here. I'm trying to understand why the group is being so supportive now. You in particular. If our positions were reversed, I doubt I could even remain civil to you."

A hint of humor returned to Louis Redmond's features.

"We have a job to do, Ben. Mostly we concentrate on that. And I'd say you think too little of yourself." Holloway started to reply, but Redmond held up a hand. "That's better than the reverse. And it will pass. But the important part is this: stay concentrated on the work, and the rest of us will fall all over ourselves to get you what you need. Just let us know what that is, okay?"

Holloway nodded and fled with his rising embarrassment.

The time flew by at a speed Ben Holloway had not expected. Svenson kept his desk piled high with documents. Some were summaries of the Dazzler operational concept, prepared for marketing or publicity uses. Some were design overviews of the approach the Tactical programmers had taken to the problem. Some were sheaves of notes on simulation and testing, scribbled in the group leader's barely decipherable hand. The technical complexity of the material might not have registered on an engineer's radar, but it taxed Ben's naked native intelligence to its limits. The need to concentrate pulled him into a trance state, numbed him to the advance of the hour. Each day for two weeks, closing time came as a surprise.

When, at five forty-five on his third Friday afternoon as an OA employee, Jeanne Sheltenham's hand descended softly upon his shoulder, Holloway practically leaped from his chair. She pulled away in equal surprise.

"Are you sure you're not an engineer?"

Holloway's brow wrinkled. "Why do you ask?"

"Because they all concentrate like that. I've never seen anyone else who does."

He chuckled. "Oh. Okay. No, I'm not an engineer." He darted a glance at the window that looked out at the parking lot. Dusk was stealing over the campus, and there were few cars remaining. "I'm a tired pretender who's only just noticed the time and is pleased to see your smiling face. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

That made the smile brighten visibly.

"Do you suppose you might be able to tear yourself away? There's a restaurant three blocks from here that makes really nice broiled flounder."

The wide brown eyes were devoid of guile.

Uncle Floyd wouldn't like it.

"My dear," he said as he rose and reached for his jacket, "I am yours to command."

It wasn't a particularly exalted eatery. Nothing to challenge Grucci's Gardens, anyway. The dining salon was tarted up in a mock-nautical motif. Gaffs and life rings festooned the walls, and tattered nets sagged from the ceiling. As absurd as it looked this far inland, it wouldn't have looked much better near the ocean. The waiters wore red polo shirts and white aprons, and the menu was a typewritten sheet in a plastic folder. The other diners were a louder, less refined crowd than Ben was accustomed to, and he'd been given a napkin with a hole in it. But the flounder was good, and there was an acceptably crisp Chablis to go with it, and the young woman across from him rested her eyes on his in a way that made him agreeably lightheaded.

"What's it like to be keeper of the secrets of the company's powerful?"

"What do you mean?" Jeanne dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. No color printed onto the off-white cotton. The deep red of her lips was natural.

"Isn't that what a secretary does? Keep the secrets locked away?"

She smiled sheepishly. "I guess so. But they don't have that many. At least not interesting ones." A hint of mischief entered her eyes. "I can tell you one, though." She leaned forward. He leaned to meet her, expectations rising.

"Your uncle can't balance his checkbook."

He chuckled and sat back. "Not news to me, Jeanne. The whole family knows it. But keep it under your hat while you're in the office, would you please?"

"Of course." She stirred her fork across the bare surface of her plate. "This has been very nice. Do you suppose..." She lowered her face, swallowed, and met his eyes again. "Do you suppose we could do this again?"

His eyebrows rose. "Certainly. Why not?"

Spots of color formed against her cheekbones. "You've been very nice. I don't want to get you in trouble."

Holloway started to reassure her, stopped himself.

Wrong Side Of The Tracks syndrome strikes again. There's a new victim every twenty-three seconds. And I managed to forget for two whole hours.

"I'm twenty-six, Jeanne. My parents haven't tried to supervise my dating for eight years now. Not that I'd listen to anything negative they said about you."

Jeanne's face went momentarily blank. She blinked once, looked down at the table and laid her palms flat against it.

"I meant with Joe."

It caught him by surprise. He fumbled for a response, but she continued on.

"I've only been with him a few weeks. His regular secretary left to have a baby. Your uncle pulled me out of my regular assignment in the Projects office to put me with him, just before you started at OA. But we've gotten to be close."

This was a different sort of lightheadedness, the kind that comes when the world starts to spin in reverse. He pushed his plate aside and leaned toward the young woman.

"Do you and he have a relationship?"

She flinched, and he scurried mentally for a way to retract the question.

"It's not what you think, Ben. Joe's very sick. He's a good man in a bad state, and I'm able to make him feel a little better, now and then. So I do. But I saw the way he looked at us yesterday." The full lips drew tight. "If we're going to start seeing one another, I have to ask you to make room for him. He doesn't have a lot of time left."

The floor of the universe dropped out from under him.

Ben guided his little Mercedes to the curb, set the parking brake, and turned to his passenger. Jeanne had both hands on the clasp of her purse, clutching it with unnecessary force. Her tension had mounted visibly as they approached the Lakeshore Vistas condominium complex, as if she expected to confront something unpleasant when she got there. He scanned the area, but could see nothing that looked like a threat. The complex was adequately, if not lavishly, lit. A guard sat in plain view in the gatehouse, peering down at his lap, probably reading a magazine. There were no other human figures in sight.

"Would you like me to see you to your door?"

A slight shake of the head. "The security guards don't like walk-ins. I'll be all right." She hesitated, then slid her purse onto the floor of the car and turned awkwardly in her seat to face him. "Thank you for dinner."

She reached for him and planted her lips against his. The kiss was dry, sisterly-chaste, and lasted only a second or two, but it set his blood to singing. She'd retracted herself and retrieved her purse before he could encircle her with his arms.

"Don't worry about anything, Ben. I'll see you at the office on Monday, okay?"

He swallowed hard and tried to compose himself. "Okay."

She smiled and reached for the door latch. "Good night."

She swung the car door shut as quietly as she could, and strode briskly up the walk toward a large, two-story brick building about seventy yards past the gate. The guard looked up from his magazine. She pulled a card from her purse and flashed it at him. He nodded, and she continued on.

At the entrance to the building a tall male figure in a windbreaker stepped out of the darkness to confront her. She stepped back, and words passed between them. Ben could not hear them clearly. Presently Jeanne thrust a hand into her purse, withdrew something and offered it to the dark figure. He accepted it, thrust it into his pocket, and stepped out of her path. She let herself into her home as the interloper faded into the shadows whence he'd come.

The door of Floyd Holloway's inner office opened without warning. The executive looked up in annoyance, ready to fillet and fry whoever had so presumed. He was confused by Ben's sudden appearance. The younger Holloway strode past the matched leather guest chairs, planted his fists on the desk and glowered down at his uncle.

"What is it, nephew?"

"Was Jeanne a bribe to Joe Brendel to get me in here?"

Ben's tone was like a blow to the face.

"What makes you think I had to bribe a subordinate to get him to do as he'd been told, Ben? Do I seem that weak to you?"

The riposte threw Ben Holloway offstride.

"No...but why her? She told me she wasn't idle when you reassigned her. Why didn't you pull someone out of the steno pool?"

Floyd Holloway drew a deep breath and measured it out to a count of ten.

"You are asking for information I have no right to give you. Jeanne Sheltenham is filling in for another director-level secretary who's on maternity leave. When that other secretary returns, Mrs. Sheltenham will go back to her previous position in the Projects office. That's all I can tell you, and at that it's more than you're entitled to know."

Ben's face, thundercloud dark when he entered, had filled with confusion.

"Did it have anything to do with Joe being terminally ill?"

The executive sat quietly for a long moment.

"I see you've learned things that aren't supposed to be common knowledge. Joseph Brendel is one of this company's best middle managers, and he's entitled to his privacy. Whoever told you he was ill violated a confidence. If I find out who it was, that person will not enjoy my trust a second time."

Ben staggered back from the desk.

"Did you think we routinely publicize our employees' personal troubles, Ben? It's hard enough to keep good men in this field without stripping them naked in front of their coworkers. What kind of workforce would we have left if a man couldn't keep an intimate matter like that to himself?"

The young man's mouth fell open. Holloway waited.

"I'm sorry, uncle. I thought -- "

"I don't care to hear what you thought. Go back to your desk and think it there." The executive grabbed a sheaf of papers from his in-box and pointedly gave his attention to them.

Ben Holloway let himself out of his uncle's office. The door closed soundlessly behind

him.

"Think you're ready?" Svenson peered into Ben Holloway's eyes.

Holloway shook his head gently. "No. But it's time to go." He nodded toward the two large suitcases at his feet. "I'm bringing everything. I tabbed it all up with little sticky notes. I'll bring it with me to every meeting, and I don't care who says what about it. I'll call time out at every chance I get. And if I get really lost, I'll be on the phone to you in a hot second."

Every hour of Ben Holloway's studies had made him quieter and less assertive. With his flight to Washington less than two hours from takeoff, his face writhed almost continuously with anxiety.

They'd been over every conceptual byway, every jargon term, every foreseeable aspect of the briefing on the EBA suite and the adaptations it might require of OA's jamming software. For Rolf, it had been a review of everything he knew about the Air Force's approach to simulation and evaluation. For Ben, it had been an exercise in memorization, though he'd comprehended more than either of them had expected. They'd filled three large spiral notebooks with definitions, concepts, and decision trees with which to chart a course through the lectures and discussions to come.

There was no time left for further preparation. If Svenson was to do anything more to calm the young man's nerves, he had to do it now.

"You're going to be okay, Ben. The nerves are normal. I felt that way myself, the first time I had to do what you're doing."

Holloway grinned without humor. "I'll try to remember that."

Beyond Holloway's cubicle, the office bustled in its usual hushed way. Engineers and support staff came, went, and held quick, slurred conversations in the corridors. The work of the Engineering Center had not come to a halt because Ben Holloway was about to set out on a liaison trip. Most of the division's personnel, including many whose livelihoods depended on the success of his mission, were unaware of the imminence of his departure.

Svenson wanted badly to ask Ben if his uncle had stopped by to wish him well. He dared not.

"Did your cash advance come through?"

Holloway nodded. "They gave me a company credit card, too. I didn't expect that."

You should have. Your uncle should have told you. "I was worried about the advance. It can take Accounting a little while to process a request for cash. They don't like it."

Holloway grinned again. "All's well that ends well." His eyes flicked to the little clock on his desk. "Just about time to go. Any last minute instructions?"

Svenson pondered. He was about to issue another stream of gentle platitudes when Louis Redmond came around the partition wall. Holloway started in surprise, and straightened in his seat.

"When do you take off, Ben?" The young engineer's face was curiously intense.

"About an hour and a half."

Louis nodded. "Are you ready to do us proud?"

Svenson held his tongue.

The handful of words seemed to hypnotize Ben Holloway. His eyes locked to those of Louis Redmond. Something supremely private flowed between them.

At last Ben rose from his chair. He folded his hands before him and looked down solemnly at Louis. "You'll get my best. If that makes you proud, so be it. If not...oh, hell, I don't know. Just answer the phone when it rings, okay?"

Louis's gaze remained rock steady.

"Count on it." He snatched a pad of note slips from next to Ben's phone, scribbled upon it briefly, and handed the top sheet to Ben. "Don't lose this."

Holloway squinted down at the little yellow slip. "Because...?"

"It's my home number."

Ben's head rose with a jerk. "Are you sure about this, Louis?"

Louis nodded. "If you need anything and I'm not here, that's where I'll be."

Ben's throat worked. He started to speak, stopped, and stuck out his hand instead.

Louis took the proffered hand and shook it firmly. Ben turned quickly away, grabbed his suitcases and hurried down the corridor.

Joseph Brendel stood at his office window, hands folded behind his back, and watched Ben Holloway board the taxi that would bear him off to Westchester Airport.

The driver put Holloway's bags into the trunk of the cab as the young aristocrat watched, as if the cabbie were a liveried footman out of a Victorian comedy of manners. He waited until the driver was there to open and hold the door for him before he boarded the cab. The cabbie swung the door shut with brisk efficiency, slipped back into the driver's seat and gunned the engine. As the car passed through OA's main gate and turned onto Forslund Avenue, Brendel felt a final loosening of tension.

All this and remission too.

The pain had disappeared. Ten days earlier, he'd simply awoken without it. He'd run in terror to Oteora General, certain it was a harbinger, the final signpost before his exit from life. But the X-rays they took as he lay stiff with panic showed the mass around his pancreas to be less than half its previous size. The followup two days ago had shown it smaller yet. The doctors had no explanation.

While Svenson and Redmond labored to turn an arrogant young fool into a silk purse fit to catch and bring back technical wisdom, his body had worked a miracle of its own.

He smiled, returned to his desk, and pressed the button that activated the intercom to his secretary.

"Jeanne."

"Yes, Joe?"

"Are you terribly busy?"

"...no..."

"Perhaps you could help me with something that's just popped up?"

He released the intercom button before she could reply.

A moment later, Jeanne came through the inner office door and closed it carefully behind her. She looked at him at first anxiously, then with simple puzzlement.

"You don't look like you're in pain."

He sat back in his chair and allowed his smile to expand across his face. "Do I need to be?"

He'd expected the remark to call forth her own impish, slightly naughty smile. It did not. She stood at the door, looking directly into his eyes, for the better part of a minute.

"You've got a wife, Joe."

Something with sharp nails took a double handful of his stomach.

"Yes, I do. A wife who won't even admit that I'm sick but refuses to touch me anyway. And two grown children who haven't been back to see me since I was diagnosed. When did they enter into your decision making, Jeanne?"

She gazed into his eyes in silence for a long time.

"Maybe they haven't."

She turned and slipped out the door before he could reply.

The conference room was long, narrow and low-ceilinged. It was nearly filled by a conference table of similar proportions. Three flawlessly groomed middle-aged men in dark suits, attache cases open before them, Thomson Aerospace corporate logos on the badges at their lapels, looked up as Ben entered. The corporal who'd led him there waved a hand at the table and closed the door behind him.

Ben lugged his overstuffed valises to an unoccupied seat and dropped into it. He fumbled his top-level playbook out of one briefcase and set it carefully before him. Breakfast sat high and heavy in his stomach. Waves of tension-driven fatigue lapped at the shore of his consciousness. He held it off as best he could.

Everything Rolf could think of. Everything Louis could think of. Now we'll see.

The door opened again, and a captain and two lieutenants, all resplendent in the dress blue uniforms of the United States Air Force, entered in file. They took seats across from the contractors' personnel and flipped open their Pentagon-standard folios almost in unison. Each uncapped a throwaway ballpoint pen and made a brief note at the top of his pad.

Ben Holloway had been around high-ranking military brass many times. His family's long involvement in the defense contracting world had exposed him to enough generals and admirals that their gold stars and braid no longer impressed him. He could not explain to himself why the three officers who sat across from him, the oldest perhaps five years his senior, made him feel so far out of his depth.

The captain, whose nametag read Earnhart, raised his eyes to the contractors' party and smiled formally.

"We have no set agenda or sequence of presentation for this meeting. It's for your convenience. We'll try to answer whatever questions you have here and now. Those we can't, we'll put to our development staff in Colorado Springs in a teleconference tomorrow. Who'd like to begin?"

Jesus. They expect to wrap this up in only two days?

"Captain Earnhart," Ben said, relieved not to hear his voice tremble, "will we have access to your expertise after this meeting is over? I'd hate to think my colleagues in New York might be hamstrung because I forgot to ask a question."

The Thomson party looked askance at him, plainly wondering why he'd needed to ask. Earnhart's eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. "Of course you will, Mr...Holloway?"

Ben nodded.

"This is just to brief you in as thoroughly as possible in a short time, so you can get your engineering teams off the ground. Both my liaison group here in Washington and the tech boys in Colorado will be available by phone for the duration of the proposal period."

The relief that shot through Ben brought him near to a faint. He held himself as upright as he could manage in the plush conference room chair, drew his ballpoint pen from his inner jacket pocket, and opened his playbook to the first of Svenson's decision trees. The root question was highlighted in red.

"Thank you, Captain. Well, for starters, has the Air Force remained with the old ten-base-T interface standard, or will we be able to talk to EBA over a hundred-base-TX line?"

The lieutenant on the right, whose nametag read Donizetti, replied, "That depends on which interface you mean."

Ben peered down the page before him. "Both the navigation interface and the evaluation interface, please."

Donizetti nodded. "The nav interface is still ten-base-T. For the eval stream, we've upgraded to hundred-base-TX. We hope the added bandwidth will allow us to do a real-time

evaluation on the jamming commands."

Ben made two checkmarks in his playbook. At the edge of his vision, the Thomson men, none of whom had yet spoken, were all scribbling furiously.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Now, as to the Layer Three requirements, will we be speaking UDP or TCP?"

The phone refused to ring.

All day Svenson had sat at his desk as immovably as if he'd been chained to it. He tried to work, but his eyes and thoughts kept drifting to the telephone. It was nearly five PM, and Holloway had yet to call for the first time.

Has he been calling Louis?

Svenson wanted desperately to buzz Louis and ask, but he didn't dare to tie up the phone for even that long.

He has to call when they wrap up for the day. Just to let us know the meeting's adjourned, if nothing else.

Christ, I brought two children into the world with less agita than this.

A cough from the entrance to his cubicle nearly stopped his heart. He lurched out of his chair and whirled to find Louis and Jeanne Sheltenham staring at him in amusement.

"Everything all right, Rolf?" Louis's mock-innocent look invited a punch in the nose. Jeanne stood there confused, not sure what to make of the byplay.

"Fine," Svenson growled. "I don't suppose you've heard from our prodigal son today? You remember, the one we stuffed full of buzzwords and sent to Washington to slay dragons?"

"Well, no." Louis looked off for a measured three seconds. "But Jeanne has."

"*WHAT?* When? Is he in some kind of trouble?"

Svenson's visitors giggled in tandem. "Calm down, Rolf," Louis said. "The meeting broke up half an hour ago. He's already back at his hotel. Said everything went according to your plan."

"But --"

"Seems the Air Force decided to let the contractor reps carry the ball. There was no formal presentation, just lots of questions and answers."

"But --"

"And the Thomson guys let Ben drive for the whole trip. He said they didn't ask one question of their own, just wrote down the answers to the ones he asked. Said they seemed even more lost than he'd expected to be."

Svenson's muscles all slackened at once. He fell backward into his chair as the implications blossomed in his head.

"He was able to stick to the playbook," he breathed.

Louis nodded. "There'll be a telecon tomorrow to clean up three or four items that they had to refer to Colorado Springs. He'll be back in the office Thursday morning. You and I can stop worrying." The young engineer glanced at his watch. He seemed to be counting down to something. "And, Rolf..."

Svenson braced himself afresh. "Yes?"

The phone rang. Svenson spun and snatched the handset from its cradle.

"Svenson."

"Go home to your family and get some rest," Ben Holloway droned into his ear. "You look like hell."

Floyd Holloway was preparing to leave his office for the day. He was scheduled to meet with his investment counselor later that evening, and his thoughts were already far distant from

the affairs of Onteora Aviation's Engineering Division.

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Holloway?"

"Yes, Adele?"

"Louis Redmond would like to see you."

It set Holloway back in his chair.

If he's here to crow about some gaffe Ben's committed at the Pentagon, I'd just as soon not hear about it.

But what if Ben's in trouble?

"Send him in, please."

The door opened a split second later, and the man whom Holloway detested most thoroughly in the world came through it.

"What is it, young man?"

Redmond's face twitched at the contemptuous address. Holloway smiled inwardly.

"Your nephew," Redmond said formally, "has spent the entire day dealing with Air Force specialists as Onteora Aviation's liaison on the Dazzler program, entirely without technical assistance. Would you like to know how your little adventure in nepotism has worked out?"

Holloway restrained his anxieties and waited. Redmond's chest rose and fell once, and he smiled.

"He's made us proud, Mr. Holloway. He came through big time. Pick your favorite sports analogy. He hit a grand-slam homer. He ran the ball back a hundred yards for a touchdown. He scored a hat trick in three minutes flat. He'll be back here Thursday morning with everything we need. I have no idea how you knew he could do it, but you were right and I was wrong. Please accept my apologies."

Holloway took a moment to slow his heart and breathing. Redmond watched him steadily.

"Thank you, Mr. Redmond. Accepted."

"Not that we didn't have a few nervous moments over it," Redmond said. "It took three weeks of damned hard work, weeks Rolf had to take from his regular responsibilities. Ben had to work harder than anyone I've ever seen. But that's beside the point now. Ben's earned his place in the group. Rolf and I are going to see if we can turn him into a real software engineer. I think we can do it. He has the smarts, and he has the desire. I think he'll make us all even prouder, given time."

Holloway shook his head without thinking, and Redmond's eyes immediately flared to their widest stops.

"Why not?"

"I've arranged for Ben to transfer to the Finance office this coming week." Holloway flipped a hand. "I never intended him to remain in engineering."

In the momentary silence, Holloway could almost hear the pressure building in the young engineer's veins.

"You'll do no such thing, Mr. Holloway. Ben is staying with us."

Floyd Holloway was unaccustomed to taking orders. That he'd been given one by a detested subordinate less than half his age was slow to sink in.

"What did you just say?"

"You're going to leave Ben where he is." Redmond planted his fists on the desk and brought his face level with Holloway's. "You're going to let him manage his career here all -- by -- himself." He elongated each word. "I will not let you destroy what he's earned. If you interfere with him in any way, from this instant to the day he leaves OA, I will make it my personal mission to ruin you professionally."

That brought Holloway out of his chair. "You think you can threaten me, you little snot?"

Redmond was unshaken by the backblast. His glare was a shaft of the hardest steel.

"If my short-term memory is accurate, I just did. If my long-term memory is accurate, it's not the first time. I mean it, Mr. Holloway. Mess with Ben's career here and you will face the worst I can dish out."

He turned and left before Holloway could order him out.

They'd finished their entrees two hours ago. Dessert and coffee were memories. The restaurant had emptied of all its other guests, but the four from Onteora Aviation lingered on. They chaffed and japed at one another like a group of lodge brethren deep in their cups, but not one had had more than a single glass of wine. The firing point for their laughter was absurdly low. The waiters stayed well back from their table, a little uneasy about the abundant gaiety of the group, but unable to avoid feeling a touch of it themselves.

At the center of the celebration, soaring on a wave of elation and relief too great to snare in a net of words, was Ben Holloway.

A wave of triumph had borne him aloft from the moment he'd stepped out of the Pentagon and into the sunlight. It had carried him back to his hotel, onto the plane home and down onto the tarmac at Westchester Airport. It wasn't for having led the mini-conference as if he were an engineer trained and seasoned. It wasn't for his modest achievement in bringing home the data Svenson's group needed. It was for not having let Rolf and Louis down.

Svenson sat at his left, his long pale face adorned with an uncharacteristic flush and a grin of delight. Jeanne sat at his right, her eyes luminous, her hand curled loosely around his own, a contact Ben would rather soil himself than interrupt. Across the table, for three hours an inexhaustible fount of stories, jokes, and outrageous puns, voluble and witty far beyond his reputation, was Louis.

The *you done good* in the young engineer's dark brown eyes was recompense enough for a thousand such enterprises.

I'm one of them now.

Is this what it's like to face live fire and live?

I don't care. This is where I want to be. These are the people I want to be with.

At twenty-six years of age, Ben Holloway had found his family. That he hoped to bed down with one of them before the night was through did nothing to lessen his sense of homecoming.

Rolf and Louis think they can make me an engineer. They're crazy, but so what? They want me with them. I'll do whatever they ask.

He glanced at Jeanne. She squeezed his hand. He squeezed back.

Sorry, Joe. It's my turn now.

He bathed in their warmth and acceptance, a man parched near to extinction who had stumbled all unknowing upon the fountain of life.

"Ben, you don't have to --"

"Yes, I do." Ben pulled the Mercedes to a stop before the Lakeshore Vistas gatehouse. The guard looked out at the unfamiliar car, rose from his chair and approached them. Ben rolled down his window and smiled at the elderly man. The insignia of Lawrence Patrols Security Services flashed from the left breast of his jacket. A holstered automatic rode low on his right hip.

"Sir?"

Ben smiled formally. "Mrs. Sheltenham lives here."

The guard's eyes moved to Jeanne. She fumbled in her purse and produced the plastic card

that identified her as a resident. The guard's gaze barely brushed over it before it swerved back to her face.

"Is everything all right, ma'am?"

She nodded quickly, her smile unnaturally bright.

The guard planted his hands on the windowjamb and looked Ben slowly up and down with an insolence that tested his endurance.

"Is everything all right, *Officer*? Or do I have a button undone?"

The guard's mouth twitched. "Save your lip, sonny. This isn't your turf. We have our own rules here. What the lady tells you to do, you do. Got me?" One hand left the windowsill and drifted back toward the holstered gun.

Heat spread through Ben Holloway's chest. He pushed open his door, forcing the guard back, rose and answered the man's contemptuous stare with the coldest, most superior smile in his repertoire.

The guard's confidence broke. He heaved himself back, returned to the gatehouse and lifted the gate rail to allow the Mercedes to pass through.

Ben reseated himself and gunned the engine, his blood fizzing. He pulled the little car up to the curb before Jeanne's building and was out and at her door before she could release herself from her seatbelt.

The fright in her eyes as he pulled open her door and offered her his hand confirmed his worst suspicions. High heels alone could not explain why she wobbled and staggered as she arose. Nothing could explain the way she panned the complex repeatedly, as if she expected to be attacked at any moment. Nothing but fear.

He took her hand and pulled her gently alongside him toward the building door, watching as unobtrusively as he could for the approach of danger. As they reached the front steps, a tall, husky figure in a light nylon jacket stepped from behind the shrubbery that surrounded the building and blocked their way.

The young man before them kept both hands in the pockets of his jacket. Cold eyes set in a colder face counted them and assessed their garments.

"Ten."

"Excuse me?" Ben automatically pulled Jeanne behind him to shield her with his body.

The young man squinted. "Ten to get in." One hand squirmed in his windbreaker pocket.

Ben snorted. "I think not." He started forward, despite a considerable backward pull from Jeanne. The hand came out of the windbreaker, something metallic in its grip.

"Ain't gettin' in without you give me ten, mother." The young thug's face remained still. His fingers played over the oblong object he held at his side.

Adrenaline poured into Ben Holloway's veins once more. A brassy laugh burst from his chest. "You see that gatehouse over there, moron? The man in there has a gun. Loaded, I expect. You want me to trot over there and bring him back to do our negotiating for us?" His hand clamped down hard upon Jeanne's, commanding her to stillness.

The thug's face was cold no more. His lips drew back from his teeth in a jungle snarl, the ancient announcement of challenge common to all carnivores. For a split instant, Ben quailed inside. Almost, he dug for his wallet.

The thug slid smoothly toward the edge of the little landing as if headed back to the concealment of the shrubs. Ben inclined his head in his most patrician fashion, stepped forward with Jeanne in tow, and put his hand to the knob of the vestibule door.

The penetration was low on his left, just above the rim of his pelvis. The metal of the blade was frigid as it entered his body. Apart from the initial prick, there was very little pain, but the onset of shock from the violation of his kidney was immediate. He felt the crosswise stroke that

severed his spine as a dull pressure against his skin, no more. The hand in which he held Jeanne's hand went slack at once. Jeanne screamed shrilly as he fell forward and his body slid sluglike down the length of the door.

It was when he flopped onto his back that the agony began.

The night closed in at the edges of his vision, rapidly reducing it to a reversed-telescope view of the mugger as he raced into the darkness. The disk of sight shrank at once to a single pulsing dot of light, then winked out forever.

Brendel arrived in his office at half-past ten. He summoned Rolf and Louis at once, without even a pause to shed his jacket. Within five minutes they were standing before him. He perched himself on the edge of his desk and against all his inclinations assumed his most somber expression.

"What is it, Joe?" Svenson's face was tight. Louis looked poker-faced, as if he suspected why they were there but needed Brendel to confirm it.

Doesn't matter.

"I've just come from Jeanne Sheltenham's apartment." It took all his strength to hold down an eruption of glee. "Ben Holloway was seeing her home last night when he was attacked by an unknown assailant with a knife. He died of his wounds just after midnight. Jeanne witnessed it all." He paused. "I don't think she'll be in for a few days."

The group leader paled so completely that the collar of his white dress shirt looked gray by contrast. He fell into a guest chair by sheer luck as his muscles failed him.

"So that's why she wasn't at Mass this morning," Louis murmured.

Brendel was taken by surprise. "Who? Jeanne?"

The engineer nodded. "She's at the seven-o'clock Mass at Our Lady of The Pines just about every morning. Usually sits with your wife."

The first drops of uncertainty trickled over Brendel's dark joy.

"Well, that's as may be. Rolf, did the lad turn over all his notes from the Dazzler conference?"

Svenson's eyes rose to meet Brendel's, but he said nothing. The horror in his face was bottomless.

"It's not a good time, Joe." Louis had not seated himself. He stood with his hands twitching at his sides and the suggestion of outrage in his eyes.

Brendel shrugged. The prickle at the back of his neck suggested that there was more afoot than he was prepared for.

"Life goes on, Louis. Just as long as you guys have the info you need, we can all get back to work. And of course, Rolf has his slot back. Let me know when you want to resume the interviews and I'll alert HR."

"Is that what you plan to say to Floyd, Joe?" Every word from Louis's mouth was edged with sawteeth. "Life goes on, we're going to bag the contract, so don't let a murdered nephew throw you off your stride?"

"Of course not. But the work of the division isn't going to come to a halt because we lost an employee. If you have what you need, we can stay in motion, and that's got to be my main concern. That's where my responsibilities lie. Besides," and the smile inside him forced its way out despite his efforts, "which would you rather have in the group, Ben Holloway or a real engineer?"

Louis closed on him so swiftly that he seemed to have teleported across the room. The young engineer's hands clutched the fabric of Brendel's shirt and pressed him backward, as if to break him in half over the edge of his desk. Brendel clawed at Louis's wrists, to no avail. The

room lit from the incandescent fury in the *wunderkind's* face.

"You are not," he grated, "to take Ben Holloway's name in your mouth ever again." Louis pressed him back still harder. "For any reason, or none. In my hearing, or elsewhere. Do you understand me?"

"Louis --" Svenson tried to interject.

"Shut up, Rolf. *Do you understand me, Joe?*"

Joseph Brendel looked into Louis Redmond's eyes and saw his death there.

"Louis," Svenson whispered, "he's a sick man."

Louis shook with the force of his rage. "I know."

He released Brendel's shirtfront, pivoted and strode out of the office.

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Act Two: In The Desert

Bargains

Georges Chennault steepled his hands and looked pointedly at his daughter Vivienne, who immediately did the same and bowed her head.

"Lord, for Thy bounty which we are about to enjoy" he intoned, "we pray Thee make us truly grateful. In Christ Our Lord, amen."

"Amen," she echoed, then darted a look sideways at Louis before he opened his eyes and raised his face to the others. The young man appeared unaware of her attention.

He's not old or geeky. Concepcion's just jealous.

"Vivienne?" She turned to find her father holding the bowl of mashed potatoes out to her with an amused smile. She reddened, accepted it and measured out a tablespoon into her plate, then passed it to Louis. He took it with a low murmur of thanks.

"Why do you say grace in English when Louis is here, Papa?"

Her father lifted a slab of roast beef from the platter at the center of the table and flopped it onto his dish. "Courtesy to our guest, cherie."

"But --"

"One does not speak an unknown tongue in the presence of a guest, cherie. Not even when one is talking to God." He poured a small avalanche of buttered peas next to the beef.

But he does speak French.

Another side look at Louis caught the twinkle of his eye. If she would hold her questions for now, she would have an explanation later. Her father said no more, and for a while they concentrated on their dinners. In the darkly paneled, high-ceilinged Chennault dining room, the silence was warm and comfortable.

They were near to finished when her father said, "I fear we will soon be seeing Mrs. Lackland."

Louis set down his fork. "Not doing well, Georges?"

"Not at all. She is listless. I think she has lost her will."

"But not unwell."

"Not in the body, no."

Louis looked down at his plate. "She's right by the plant. I could stop in to see her a couple of times a day, if you think it would help."

Her father toyed with his potatoes.

"It would not matter, Louis. She is without Henry, now." Her father aligned his fingertips carefully along the table's edge. "Neither you nor I can provide her with a reason to live."

Louis bit his lip. "It would still be the considerate thing to do, wouldn't it?"

Her father's dove-gray eyes softened with sad knowledge. "Try it on Monday, and then tell me what you think." He turned to Vivienne. "Would you help with dessert, cherie?"

Vivienne dabbed at her mouth and thrust her chair back from the table with a screech that made both men wince. "I'll get it, Papa. You stay put."

"But the coffee --"

"It's already set up." She whizzed around the table, snatched up the dinner plates, and shouldered through the swinging door into their little kitchen.

She unloaded the little glass bowls from the old refrigerator onto a silver serving tray and peeled off the plastic wrap. The aroma of coffee liqueur rose at once to her nostrils, and she smiled. Her father had been surprised at the suggestion, for the sweet, sticky confection didn't really go with roast beef, but she knew it was Louis's favorite.

She returned to the dining room with her head and shoulders held back and the tray thrust forward like an award presentation. Her father's lips curved upward, but he said nothing as she centered a bowl on each placemat and slid quickly back into her seat.

Louis's eyes widened. He leaned over his portion and took a long, appreciative sniff. "Tiramisu. From Iacone's?"

Vivienne held her tongue. Her father said, "No, Vivienne made it herself, yesterday evening. Happy twenty-fifth birthday, Louis."

Vivienne clapped her hands and giggled in delight as a bright red flush spread over Louis Redmond's neck and face.

"Why haven't you told Papa you can speak French?"

Louis looked up from his sinkful of soapy dishes and grinned. "What makes you think I haven't?"

She ceased to dry the platter she held and stared at him.

"Your Papa has excellent manners, Viv. What they used to call continental manners." He rinsed a plate and deposited it in the wire rack before her. "I'm sure he speaks French to you, now and then when you're alone, but at other times he speaks English, out of love for his new country and respect for its people."

Jorge and Concepcion's parents never said a word in English the whole time I was there.

"Is that manners? To show respect?"

Louis felt through the dishwasher for any items he'd missed. He found none, pulled the plug at the bottom of the cast-iron sink and ran clear water into the basin to hurry out the cloudy.

"That's a big part of it. But there are other parts too. Conventions about what's proper, that have nothing to do with respect for others, but a lot to do with upholding tradition. Like saying grace before you eat. Or, if you're not religious but you're with people who are, waiting until they've finished saying grace before you pick up your fork." He rinsed his hands in the stream from the faucet, twisted the taps shut and reached for the dishtowel.

She started to scamper from the kitchen, expecting him to follow, but he took a moment to wipe down the tiled counter and arrange the dishtowel neatly on its hanger before he did.

Two men could hardly appear less alike than Louis Redmond and Georges Chennault. Vivienne's father was tall and broad-shouldered, craggy of face and brooding of aspect, an intuitively proper fit to his somber trade. Louis was short and slender almost to frailty, had features so soft that they almost disappeared beneath his piercing, miss-nothing eyes, and seemed never to be without a smile.

Yet the similarities went much deeper. Both men exuded a commanding presence. Both were perfectionists, keepers of stratospheric standards. Both were physically powerful, graceful beyond expectation, and possessed endurance equal to any trial. Both lived with the memory of enormous personal loss, and bore it in silence. The thoroughly masculine bond between them was like a living thing.

She wished she could believe that Louis might some day come to their home as much for the pleasure of her company as for love of her father.

Will he be here much longer? I have to get upstairs. Jorge didn't say when to expect him. But then, he wouldn't.

As heavily crushed as she'd been on Louis since the day they'd met seven years ago, Concepcion's brother Jorge was...more exciting, somehow. His dark features and loose limbed, flamboyant carriage could not differ more from Louis's pallor and bodily discipline. A year ahead of her in age but a year behind her in school, kingpin of an insolent little clique every teacher strove to avoid, he exuded an air of the forbidden, of exotic pleasures indulged in defiance of others' views. He and his cronies pushed the school's rules about dress, grooming and behavior all the way to the edge, and sometimes a little beyond. His every word and gesture expressed a carefree disdain for learning, for his teachers and classmates, for anyone's opinions but his own.

When last she'd visited Concepcion, he'd caught her, as if by chance, alone in their bedroom hallway, and had backed her against the wall. His rawboned masculine presence had stopped her voice. His look of heavy-lidded menace had softened her resistance. The languid, careless path his finger traced over her eyebrows, down the bridge of her nose, and across her lips had melted it completely. Then and there, with Concepcion waiting downstairs, she'd allowed him liberties an eighth-grade girl wasn't even supposed to think about.

Tonight, he would expect to go further. Much further. He hadn't said so, but she could sense it.

"Wear lipstick," he'd said. "I like the feel of it when I kiss a girl. I like to know that I've mussed her makeup, so that she has to get away and fix herself up before anyone else sees her." He laughed, a quick coarse jolt of sound. "Maybe she has to fix more than her makeup, hey?"

Jorge was certain he could extract her from the house through her bedroom window, her father none the wiser. Her thrill of anticipation for a night of unforeseeable adventures clashed with her desire to remain in Louis's company for as long as he was there to visit.

But Louis would be there the following Saturday. Her father always brought him home from the mortuary on Saturday nights, and most Sundays as well. That gave Jorge an edge. Why that should be was a question she wasn't happy to contemplate. Why Louis Redmond, who always made her feel like a princess at a grand ball, should want to spend his birthday with a stodgy old funeral director and his gawky, bashful fourteen-year-old daughter, was another.

Vivienne laid the spoon in her empty cereal bowl, wiped her lips and marshaled her courage. "Papa?"

"Hm?" Her father looked around the edge of his morning newspaper.

"I think I would like to start helping with the business."

For a moment, Georges Chennault's face went completely blank. He laid the paper down and flattened his palms against the table. He had the look of a man with a difficult problem, who was bothered by not knowing why he had it.

"What brings this on, cherie?"

"My friends all have part-time jobs now. Concepcion has begun working on weekends, with her mother. They all talk about work as if it were the most exciting thing in the world, and I

must keep still because I have nothing to offer."

His eyes lingered on hers for a few seconds. She knew he was pondering whether she'd given him her true reason.

"So," he said, "For your friends, what sort of work? Clerks in stores or waiters in fast-food places? Concepcion's mother cleans other people's houses, does she not? Perhaps the boys mow lawns? It's all very well, cherie, but it's not quite what I do. I think you would find that distasteful."

"Do you find it distasteful, Papa?"

His mouth tightened and his thumbs curled around the thick rim of the old aluminum table. "It is my trade, and my father's and grandfather's. I was raised in it. You were not."

There were rumblings of danger beneath the words, as if he were asking her under his breath to abandon the subject.

"It is our family's business, no? Is it wrong that I should have a part in the family's business?"

"Cherie, it is not something to aspire to. You have other gifts. I have hopes for you to --"

"Papa," she pressed, "it is honest work, and necessary. You have said so. Must I shun what you do to support us, as if I were somehow better than you?"

Her father closed his eyes, took a long, deep breath, and rose from the table.

"Cherie," he said slowly, "if you truly wish to do this, I will not say no to you. In truth, I would be glad of the help. But I tell you again, you will not care for the work. Much of it tests even my stomach, and I have done it for more than thirty years."

He stood silent as she thought.

Jorge had pulled her through her bedroom window, packed her into his beaten-up old Mustang, and whirled her around the county. He'd toured her through a world she hadn't known existed, a world of strutting young men in T-shirts and jeans who convened on street corners and in cul-de-sacs. They chain-smoked and drank from bottles of cheap wine concealed by paper bags as they spoke of vendettas, grievances nurtured, battles fought or soon to come. Most were accompanied by girls near to her own age: hard girls, garishly made-up, heavily perfumed, garbed in tight, boldly colored clothing that revealed more of their bodies than any of her friends, even Concepcion, would think decent. For all their brittle glamour, they clutched their boyfriends' arms or waists continuously and kept silent while the boys boasted and swore.

At every stop, in every gathering, the eyes of the boys crawled over her figure, though she was far more modestly covered than the girls that had come with them. The girls examined her with suspicion that verged on outright hostility. She stayed close to Jorge and said nothing to anyone. Jorge's wandering hands, making freer with her body in public than she'd have allowed him in private, was a small price to pay for the sense of protection from his friends.

Well after one AM, when the little streetcorner societies had exhausted their energies at last, he drove her out to a secluded part of Mill Neck Road, walked her into a little copse of trees nearby, and tried to undress her.

She stifled a scream, and he grinned, probably taking her agitation for mere virginal nervousness, entirely to be expected. When she twisted away from him, she took him genuinely by surprise. It was not a good surprise. He'd cursed her in guttural Spanish, choice oaths about her hygiene and station in life, and tried force.

She was terrified at the thought of what Concepcion would say at school on Monday. She'd furrowed Jorge's face too deeply for him to conceal. He'd been lucky to keep his eyes. Surely Concepcion would learn that it was her best friend who'd done it to him.

She was more terrified at the thought of ever again being alone with Jorge.

"Papa," she said, "I must."

Her father's eyes widened a fraction. He waited a moment for her to expand, but she kept silent. At last he nodded.

"Then it shall be so. When do you want to start, cherie?"

She swallowed. "Today."

"And what," he mused as if to himself, "shall I pay you?"

"Why not the same as Louis, Papa?"

The corner of Georges Chennault's mouth lifted into a smirk of private knowledge. "No, not that much, I think. We can discuss it afterward."

Louis burst through the mortuary door, snatched a white lab coat from the rack of hooks on the wall and slithered into it before he noticed Vivienne's presence. When he did, it stopped him cold.

"Georges?"

"Yes, Louis?" Vivienne could hear strain in her father's voice.

"Is this a good idea?" His eyes darted from father to daughter and back. What little color he usually had in his face was entirely absent.

"Vivienne has requested it, Louis. By the end of the day, she may wish she hadn't, but for now, we have another pair of hands to help us."

The muscles in Louis's face writhed. It was plain that he didn't approve.

"How many today?"

"Four. Cherie," her father said, "you will wash, and clothe, and do cosmetics. That is all done here." He waved at the long, granite-surfaced table with the inset sink that dominated the bleak white room. "You should not go into the next room. Not today. If we are both in there and you need one of us, knock on the door, and we will come out to assist you. Do you understand me?"

She nodded. "Yes, Papa."

Ever since he'd conceded her the privilege of helping him, she'd said nothing but "yes" to him. Yet he looked unhappier than she'd ever seen him. Louis looked worse.

Her father nodded gravely. "Let us be about it, then."

"Cherie," Georges murmured, "Leave your lab coat here."

Vivienne halted at the door and looked back at her father with eyes crimson and puffed from a day's weeping.

There was neither judgment nor reproach in his face. He simply waited for her to understand what he had said. She slipped the coat off her shoulders and hung it on a vacant hook, then dropped her hand onto the doorknob and pulled. The door seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. Louis and her father followed her in silence.

The sun had set. The evening wind stirred briefly, scraped at her cheeks and rubbed her swollen eyes a little rawer. She hunched forward, denying the wind her face, and plodded through the gloom down the little concrete path, hidden by two rows of thick, high rosebushes, that connected the mortuary to the Chennault home.

Papa does it every day. Louis every Saturday and most Sundays. How do they stand it?

Simply to wash the corpses had taken all the nerve she possessed. Their silence, their immobility, the limpness of their limbs under her hands made it impossible for her to pretend that they were anything but what they were. The job required a surprising amount of strength, all that she had, and sometimes a bit more.

To dress them was worse. Their unrelieved, sandbag-like weight -- at last she understood what was meant by *dead* weight -- had proved impossible for her to manage without assistance.

The weight and the total flaccidity had caused one body to slip from her quivering arms as she strained to slip it into a burial jacket. It fell from the table and slid to the floor like a two-hundred-pound sack of jelly, and she screamed in sudden terror. Louis came running at once. He hoisted the corpse back onto the table without a word, then held her till she calmed. Between the two of them they completed the task.

Louis didn't leave her side, after that.

Worst of all was the cosmetics. She understood makeup, had used it herself for nearly two years, and knew its powers and limitations, or so she'd thought. How little she had really known! For hours she strove to paint life into those empty faces, to put peace into their cheeks and curve their mouths in contentment, so that their loved ones could look at them without shame or fright or survivor's guilt. It could not be done. When the last of the day's clients was finally behind her, and she allowed the brush to fall from her hand, the sense of release was so awful, and so complete, as to leave her dumb.

Louis said not a word the whole time. He seemed to know what sort of help she would need before she did. His steady hands, his surprising strength, and his infallible balance were always deployed just so, ready for every need.

She would have given all she had to be spared the sight of the grief that haunted his dark brown eyes.

She let herself in ahead of the others and ran up the stairs to her bedroom. She had the door closed behind her and her face buried in her pink and white pillows before she allowed any sound to escape her. Only then did she release the whimper that had been building in her all day.

Some time later there was a gentle knock on the door. She raised herself from her prone position, tucked her legs beneath her and said "Come in."

It was Louis. He stood there in silence, looking drained of words, for perhaps a minute.

"Are you all right?"

She tried a smile, shook her head and beckoned him in. He sidled toward her, sat beside her on her bed, clasped his hands in his lap.

"Do you want to talk about it? I'll try not to say anything stupid."

The storm of guilty terror she'd suppressed surged forward and came near to breaking her. It twisted her face, denied her all privacy. Louis saw it.

"There's no way to prepare for it, Viv. Don't flog yourself. You did very well. Your father and I are both proud of you."

"How, how do you stand it?" It was a low, tearful croak.

He grimaced. "Practice helps, a little. I doubt you'd ever get completely numb. I've been helping your father for seven years and it still gets to me. Especially when I recognize a client."

"Is that often?"

"It happens now and then. Onteora's not a big place. Viv," he said, "there's something you ought to know."

A fresh thrill of alarm ran through her. She held herself rigidly still while he chose his words.

"When your mother died, her sisters -- your aunts -- tried to take you away from your father and back to France. They were vehement that a young girl shouldn't be raised here, in the shadow of death, by a man whose life was spent ministering to the dead and the bereaved. They nearly got a judge to agree with them. Georges had to fight them with everything he had, which wasn't much. Losing your mother had debilitated him terribly.

"Part of what he had to do to keep you with him was to promise them that he'd keep you out of the business. In exchange for that, they agreed to let him raise you without interference. That's why you haven't seen them since then. He's feared ever since that they'd try to take you

again. In return for his promise, he's insisted that they stay completely away."

He paused and waited until she met his eyes.

"If they were to learn about today, they'd be back here in a flash, determined to rescue you from a fate worse than death. They might succeed this time. That's what your father risked today, by letting you help."

"Then...why?"

A wan smile. "Because he thinks you're old enough to make your own decisions. Because you're his only family now, and he'd rather drive off a cliff than take the slightest chance of alienating you. Because he loves you."

She was trying to frame another question when the rock burst her window.

Louis's head snapped around at the instant of impact. He immediately grabbed her and pulled her under him. Bits of broken glass showered around them. A second rock added a lesser cascade of glass shards. From below came a guttural stream of jeering Spanish.

Louis pulled her upright and examined her quickly.

"Stay here."

He was out the door and streaking down the stairs before she found her voice.

A moment later, the sound of a heavy thud came from below. It was followed by a shrill scream and a torrent of curses in two languages. There was a sharp crack of flesh against flesh, and another, and the cursing braked to a halt.

Vivienne crept to the shattered window and peered down at a remarkable tableau.

The outside lights had been turned on. The light played over three figures: her father, Louis, and Jorge, whom Louis held by his shirtfront about a foot off the ground. Jorge's arms dangled at his sides. His usual smirking sneer was nowhere in evidence. His face was bright red from impact on both sides. He appeared to be in terror of his life.

Words passed between Louis and Jorge, but too softly for her to make out. After several unintelligible exchanges, Jorge nodded violently, as if he were desperate to convince Louis of something. Presently Louis lowered the boy to the ground and released him, and he streaked off through the fir trees to the west.

Vivienne ran down the stairs and found the two men closing the kitchen door behind them. Her father locked the door and doused the outside lights.

"Papa --"

Georges Chennault pulled at the lapels of his jacket and settled it around him. "Cherie, that was Concepcion Ibanez's brother Jorge, was it not?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Why would he have come here to cause trouble?"

Louis looked discreetly away. Vivienne composed herself.

"We had a disagreement, Papa."

Her father's chin lifted slightly. "So. Will this disagreement have further consequences?"

"I...don't think so."

Her father looked into her eyes for a long, uncomfortable moment.

"Very well. I think the events of the evening have concluded. Louis has handled the matter for us. But you must take care not to let disagreements with school friends involve this household in the future. Is so much clear?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Good. Louis," he said, "perhaps Vivienne and I should dine alone tonight. Would that trouble you?"

"Why, no, Georges." Louis sent a quick glance her way. "I have a lot to do at home, and work tomorrow, so perhaps it's for the best anyway. You enjoy your evening, and I'll see you

next Saturday."

"*Bon soir.*" Georges let him out, and locked the door once again. "And now, cherie, let us see to your window."

Vivienne scooped up the last of her asparagus, chewed and swallowed hastily, took her plate in her hands and surged toward the kitchen.

"Cherie."

She halted. Her father, his plate still half full of chicken and couscous, regarded her with a knowing smile. It brought heat to her face.

"I was, ah, going to start cleaning up."

"There is time. Sit." He gestured her back into her chair and waited until she had settled.

"Concepcion's brother is not much like her, is he?" He forked up a morsel of chicken.

"No, Papa."

"A little wild, a little rough?"

She nodded.

"Perhaps he is in need of seasoning? Not the right sort of boyfriend for a young lady, just yet?"

If flesh could ignite from its own fires, hers would have. "Perhaps, Papa."

Her father nodded and pushed himself back from the table a little way.

"I am told there is a night society, of young men who gather in dark places to preen and boast in Spanish while the rest of Onteora is in bed. I would guess that Jorge is a part of this. Am I right, cherie?"

She nodded. Her father noted her downcast eyes and nodded in response.

"It cannot be good for their studies. It would not be good for yours."

"Papa --"

He quelled her with a single raised finger. "No need, cherie. I know the Ibanez family somewhat. They have made a fetish of their son. They will not speak harshly to him, much less raise a hand to correct him. And so he and others who have been similarly mistreated hold themselves above the rest of us, with our foolishness about courtesy and respect and rules."

A shadow passed over his face. "I know the attraction such a group can exert upon a young and impressionable girl, yet unsure of her own value, who wants to be accepted more than anything else in the world. Vivienne," he continued in his most formal tone, "you may associate with Concepcion if it pleases you, but I will not have this other element in your life, so long as you live under this roof. Are we agreed?"

The words were hardly severe, and her father's gaze was only mildly monitory, not the flashing harbinger of wrath he could display to someone who'd elicited his full ire. Yet together, they left her about three inches tall, unworthy to sit in polite company.

"Yes, Papa."

His eyes lingered on hers a moment more.

"Good. Now, what arrangements shall we make for your services at Homely Rest? May I count upon you for afternoons, or only weekends?"

The change of subject briefly jarred the words out of her. He waited patiently.

"Papa, do you really want me there?"

A nod. "I told you I would be glad of the help. Louis cannot join me on weekdays. And there is always more to do than I can cope with alone."

"But I was...I..."

His eyes returned to their familiar depths of kindness.

"You believe you failed me today, because Louis came out to help you?"

She said nothing.

"We both expected it, cherie. The work is difficult at best. Louis thought you did well. Of course, if you would rather not try again, I will understand."

Her insides became a cauldron of fear. Fear of ever again touching a dead body. Fear of losing her father's respect. Fear of what Louis would say when he learned of her defection. Had the room filled with ghosts, all of them shrieking and lashing their chains against the paneled walls, she could not have feared more.

Concepcion's face had twisted into a mask of disgust when she described the filth the worst of her mother's clients left for them to deal with, once a week. Concepcion could not have imagined this.

Jorge and his swaggering friends would have drowned her in raucous laughter. Jorge, whose swarthy features, the marks she'd put on them still livid, had gone rigid with fear when confronted by Louis's superior force, would not have kept his breakfast five minutes.

Louis thought I did well.

She did not doubt that Louis had said exactly that. She could not doubt that he had meant it.

"Papa," she murmured, "what of the bargain?"

His eyebrows rose. "With your aunts, you mean? Louis told you about it?"

She nodded.

He stared at the table as he chose his words.

"You are fourteen years old, cherie. I think you are old enough for this choice. If you want to work alongside me, you shall. Estelle and Monique will swallow their objections. Their agreement was with me. It does not bind you. Are you willing to do this?"

She hesitated, then nodded. He smiled faintly.

"Good. Then all that remains is to settle on payment."

"Are you sure you want to pay me for this, Papa?"

"Of course! Aren't your friends paid for the work they do?"

"But..." She forced it away. "Then let it be what Louis gets."

He grinned and shook his head. "No, Vivienne."

"Half?"

He leaned forward and laid one warm, age-gnarled hand over hers. "I do not pay Louis, cherie. I never have."

"What?"

The hand squeezed. "I served Louis's sister Jeannette when you were just a little girl. When his parents died, there were no remains to be dealt with. He came to me shortly afterward and asked if he might work at Homely Rest, as a volunteer. He wanted nothing for his labor. He would not discuss it, merely asked to help. I said yes."

The shadow returned to Georges Chennault's face. The muscles around his eyes and mouth worked in minute patterns of remembrance, love, and sorrow.

"When your mother died, Louis made all the arrangements. He would not permit me to assist him. I stood at the graveside, nothing more. Afterward, we returned here and talked of our losses.

"He told me that his family had been the greatest blessing of his life. He could not live a single day without thinking of them, and grieving for them. He came to me hoping it might somehow ease him to work with the dead, to familiarize himself with the relentless pace of mortality. Perhaps it has.

"But I knew there was more, Vivienne. I'd seen it before, and no doubt I shall see it again, and you after me. Louis wanted to strike a bargain with God. He hoped that in return for ministering to the dead, God would agree not to deprive him of any more loved ones, spare him

any further loss."

The gray eyes slid closed.

"Did it work, Papa?"

"One cannot bargain with God, chérie."

Of course not.

"And perhaps not with a daughter, Papa." Her father's eyes opened, questioning. "I insist that you pay me *twice* what you pay your other assistant. And if he gets a raise," she said through a grin, "I'll expect one too."

"But --"

"No buts, Papa! It is our family's business. Pay me now, and there will be that much less of a dowry for Louis when I am of age, no?"

A light of realization dawned in Georges Chennault's face.

"You will have to work hard, Vivienne. Louis will be much pursued, if he is not already."

She squeezed his hand, rose from the table at last and gathered up their dishes.

"I know."

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Intermezzo

"Of course," Schliemann said as he stripped off his gardener's gloves, "nothing ever came of it. Vivienne went off to college in California, and hasn't returned home since, not even for a Christmas visit. Georges no longer speaks of her."

He stooped and picked up his little tray of tools, stopped, turned, and genuflected awkwardly before the large, rose-girdled statue of the Blessed Virgin around whose base he'd been weeding. We went silently back to the rectory kitchen and seated ourselves at the long oak table.

"Coffee?" he said.

"Yes, thanks."

He poured mugs full from the huge pot he seldom allowed to rest, and passed one to me.

"Father, do you suppose that if she'd stayed in Onteora, she could have bagged him after all?"

The priest smiled faintly. "Her chances would have been no worse than anyone else's. Possibly a trifle better. Louis was very fond of her."

Louis had long since ceased to labor in the Chennault mortuary. Georges Chennault had sold the funeral home and retired on the proceeds not long after Vivienne left for college. He'd become forbiddingly dark and silent. Louis looked in on him now and then, but something had departed from him with his daughter, something Louis's affections couldn't replace.

I knew the syndrome. I had never had a family of the natural kind. I'd acquired my loved ones by choice and with considerable effort. There was an intensity to blood relations, a pre-conscious intimacy, that willed affinities could never equal.

"La coeur a ses raisons," I murmured.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, Father. 'The heart has its reasons that the reason cannot know.' I worry over him. I might do less of it if he had a keeper."

Schliemann chuckled. "We all would. All of us who love him. He's quite impossible, you know. He adopts every hurt creature he sees, hurls himself into the most alarming situations on their behalf, takes risks no rational man would take, and never, ever explains. Does he think he's

indestructible?"

I thought at once of his sojourn to the city, winced at the memory, and said, "No, Father. Many other things, but never that."

==<O>==

Aliens

Kevin Conway gathered his colleagues by eye and said, "Are we done here?"

Rolf Svenson remained silent. Louis Redmond's gaze moved to engage that of Dr. Thomas Turner, Sentry Munitions's world-renowned aerodynamics specialist. The managers that flanked Turner seemed to draw slightly away as Louis's attention settled on him.

"Are you quite sure these dynamics equations are the way you want them?" The young engineer held up a viewgraph and cocked an eyebrow.

The Sentry engineer, who'd entered the meeting brimming with affable assurance, appeared shaken by the question. He grimaced, looked randomly about the little conference room, and produced a hesitant shrug. "What can I say? They're based on an airframe that's virtually identical to the one we've proposed. We reanalyzed them against the fuselage differences, and they still look okay. Just don't set them in concrete, so that if we have to correct them later, we can."

"You should bear in mind, Tom," Louis said, "that if they're wrong, and the feel of the simulator turns off the test pilots who do the evaluation, it'll be Sentry's problem, not OA's."

The Sentry managers sat up straight at that. Conway, desperate to free himself from his swivel chair and escape the sterility of that windowless pastel blue room, became uneasy. "Louis, maybe this isn't the time --"

Without looking at Conway, Louis held up a hand, palm toward him.

How the hell did Morrison expect me to cope with him?

He glanced at Svenson. The group leader made the smallest of gestures, hardly lifting his fingers from the table, to counsel forbearance.

Though at twenty-nine Conway was fourteen years Svenson's junior, as the Aerostructures Department representative he was formally the head of the OA delegation. Svenson had accepted his secondary status without comment, and had deferred to Conway in all things. Louis, true to his reputation, did exactly as he thought best at all times, without concern for rank or protocol.

Turner's expression had been shorn of all confidence. "What do you want me to say, Louis?"

"I want you to say," Louis said, "that you've given these equations the thought they deserve. I want you to say that you're going to go back into your lab tomorrow and look at them again. I want you to say that you did *not* simply scavenge them from the F/B-6 simulator and present them to us as the fruits of an extensive analysis that you didn't actually conduct."

One of the Sentry managers cleared his throat and leaned forward. Before he could utter a word, Louis speared him with a glare that thrust him back into his seat.

I have got to learn how he does that.

When Turner spoke again, his voice vibrated with contrition.

"I'll look at them again. I'll call you Monday, no later. I promise."

Louis nodded. "Then we're done here."

The meeting adjourned.

Conway looked at his watch. "We've got quite a lot of day left. Anyone want to run around

the city for a while?"

The fresh air and sunlight were a tonic to Conway. Two days in close conference with Sentry's people had left him feeling he'd been sentenced to life in a prison of pastel conference rooms filled with worn swivel chairs, scarred oblong tables and stale air. The bustling pastiche of the Flushing streets was invigorating by contrast. Not even the stink from the ubiquitous panel trucks and diesel ten-wheelers that dominated the daytime traffic could dent his elation at his escape into the open. He filled his massive chest with the crisp air and turned a rejuvenated grin on Svenson.

"I grew up here. If you want, I can show you the sights. Ever toured Manhattan, Rolf?"

"Once, about fifteen years ago. Louis?"

The young engineer shook his head.

"Great place to knock around, if you have nothing pressing," Conway said. "No driving necessary, either. A subway token will get you within a two block walk of anywhere you want to go. You guys game?"

"Suits me," Svenson said. Conway's eyes moved to Louis. The youngest member of the group looked mildly pained. Conway wondered if he was in some kind of distress.

"You want to head back right away, Louis?"

"No..." Louis looked down the boulevard. "I'm just not big on cities. But if you put a bookstore on the itinerary, I'll go along."

Conway smiled broadly. "My friend, this is your lucky day. Ever heard of Beltran and Whately's?"

"Of course. Who hasn't?"

"Their largest store is at Thirty-Fourth and Fifth. Over a quarter million titles. Might keep *you* busy for as much as half an hour."

Louis's eyes went wide. "Deal."

"Done. Rolf, what about you?"

Svenson bit his lip. "Do we have time to get to the Statue of Liberty?"

"Plenty. Let's go, guys!"

They hadn't yet reached the subway station nearest to Sentry Munitions' complex when Conway began to feel afraid.

Either his memory was faulty, or the city had changed greatly in the years he'd been away. He didn't remember the strange, ill-fitting garb the youngsters all wore, nor the oddly colored makeup, nor the bizarre hairstyles and piercings they affected. He didn't remember the deathmatch blare of boom boxes mounted on windowsills, stoops and shoulders, each screeching something obnoxious that possessed neither melody nor harmony, no two emitting the same noise. He didn't remember the dirt, the smells, or the casual discourtesy of the ubiquitous mobs.

Conway didn't fear for himself. His size deterred most improprieties, and his physical competence had always been sufficient to deal with the remainder. He could shrug off most of the lesser nuisances. He worried for Rolf and Louis.

Rolf looked as if he were straining not to notice a million different things. Whenever Conway watched the older man's face for more than a second, he could see Rolf's eyes cutting didoes to avoid staring: at a multiply pierced young woman in skin-tight satin leggings and a belly-baring blouse, who traded loud, profane taunts with a group of gangbangers in colors, combs stuck in their hair like axes and weapons jutting from their pockets; at a derelict who lay insensible on the sidewalk, his eyes open to the sky but no consciousness in them, while pedestrians streamed over and around him as if he were invisible; at a gaggle of ragged teenagers, two of them shoeless, one hugely pregnant, who squatted in the doorway of a

tenement and squabbled over a crack pipe; at a skeletally gaunt man with wispy white hair, his calves bare below the hem of his raincoat, who grabbed at passers-by and strove mightily to convince them that the end was nigh.

Louis was the really scary one. The *wunderkind's* face said nothing at all. His was the expression of a man deep in an analytical trance, computing whys and hows. Conway didn't know him well, but he was reputed throughout OA to be a genius, and as headlong a man as had ever lived. Every time his eyes locked onto something, Conway wanted to interpose himself, lest Louis decide to fix it and get them all into the soup.

This was my idea.

There was no comfort in that.

At least the ferry out to Bedloe Island was untouched by the freak show the rest of the city had become.

Whatever time had done to the rest of New York, it hadn't touched Lady Liberty.

The giant metal statue was as Conway remembered it. The crowds that flowed around its majestic base were far quieter, and far more conventional, than the mobs through which the three engineers had come that day. Even the children, of which there were no few, were awed by Frederic Bartholdi's century-old creation.

Conway had expected that they would enter and climb to the summit, to view the New York skyline and the confluence of its waterways from that inspiring height. He strode directly for the portal at the base, and only stopped when he realized that neither Louis nor Rolf was with him.

Rolf had stopped dead only a few yards from the ferry. He stood with his head tipped back and his arms at his sides, staring at the statue as if transfixed. Tears trickled down his face. Louis stood a little way off, hands clasped before him, one eye on his group leader as he scanned the rest of the throng.

Conway slid his hands into his pockets, sidled up to Louis and faced the statue. "Is he all right?"

Louis nodded. "He's first generation. This means a lot to him."

"His parents were...?"

"Swedes. Came over in the forties, then went back a few years ago, God knows why. He went to visit them the year before last. It's bad over there."

"Bad how?"

"Communist."

Conway's eyebrows rose. "Sweden? I'd always thought it was a lot like here."

Louis's dark eyes apprised him silently of his error.

"But they let you out if you want to go, don't they?"

Louis nodded. "That they do."

A handful of others had noticed their little tableau. A middle-aged man in an orange windbreaker pointed Svenson out to his two small sons. The boys didn't laugh. They looked at the emotion-struck man, then back at the statue, and followed their father inside. An elderly nun made the Sign of the Cross and moved silently past. Two teenage girls in bright colors slid around him, approached Conway to ask if his friend was okay, and moved on when he nodded.

Louis moved up to Svenson's side, laid a hand on the older man's bicep and squeezed. It broke Svenson's trance. He jerked his gaze away from the statue and looked down at his young subordinate with a sheepish affection. He didn't bother to wipe his face.

"Think we should get going, Rolf?"

Svenson nodded.

Beltran and Whately's Manhattan bookstore was reputed to be the largest in the world. From the entrance, it appeared limitless. There had been renovations since Conway's last visit, nine years earlier, that had enhanced its sense of infinite sweep. The high ceilings, the stately rows of shelves, store employees moving deftly among them to neaten and restock, the murmurs of patrons mixing with the gentle strains of a Bach partita from above, lifted it above the category of a mere commercial establishment.

Conway hung back to watch Louis's reaction to the huge store. He wasn't disappointed. Louis halted in the entrance, head whipping back and forth to take in the vista, as if he couldn't believe that anyone would create such a thing.

From over Conway's right shoulder came Svenson's whisper. "I expected him to want to see Saint Patrick's, but this actually makes more sense."

"He's that big a reader?"

Svenson chuckled. "Ever been to his house?"

"No."

"His personal library makes the public one in town look like the tag end of a garage sale."

"Where does he do his shopping?"

"By mail, mostly."

Louis broke his paralysis and scampered into the aisles. He darted back and forth among Fiction, Current Events, World History, Biography, Education, Games and Sports, and Technical and Reference, picking up books in each, flipping through them, reshelving them carefully, muttering to himself all the while. Other customers looked askance at him as he passed, a few with frowns, far more with wry grins of agreement.

Conway and Svenson laughed in unison and started after him.

"Louis, it's time we were heading out."

The younger man looked up at Conway with pleading eyes. "Do we have to?"

Conway nodded. "It's a five hour drive, and I'd like to be home by midnight."

Louis grimaced. "I haven't gotten to Religion and Philosophy yet. Oh, well." He hefted two large plastic baskets, each overfilled with books of all descriptions, and trudged toward the checkout area at the front of the store. Conway, his single selection tucked under his arm, pulled in behind Louis as he selected a cashier's line and added himself to it.

"Where's Rolf?"

"Outside. He went out for some fresh air." *After telling me to be sure to keep an eye on you.* "You know, Louis, this place will still be here the next time you visit."

"There won't be a next time, Kevin."

"What? Why not?"

"I can't stand it here."

"*What?*" The customers ahead of them in line glanced inquiringly at them.

"Not this store, the city." Louis jerked his chin at the panorama beyond the store's front windows. A squalling, fractious river of humanity flowed past, as various as anywhere they'd been that day. The noise and commotion were muted by the thick slab of glass, but Conway had no difficulty recalling it. He'd take the memory of those endless thundering boom boxes to his grave.

I guess my resistance is down.

"Be a pity if you never got to finish your shopping, wouldn't it?"

Louis grinned wanly. "They have a catalog."

A commotion began at the front of their line. A young woman shouted profanities at a clerk who'd refused to accept her credit card. The clerk, herself a young woman, was near to losing her temper when a security guard intervened. He spoke softly to the irate customer and laid a hand on her arm; she shook it off and redirected her imprecations at him. His expression froze. His second grip on her allowed no evasion. He squired her to the front door, still spitting fury, and thrust her out. The line slid forward with a murmur of relief.

Louis shook his head. "Here, of all places."

"Does stuff like that offend you?"

The younger man snorted. "It's not just offensive, it's stupid. What can the clerk do about a credit card the store doesn't accept? Why heap abuse on someone who has nothing to do with your problems?"

"You're making too much sense, Louis. That's just what angry people do. You're talking like someone who just dropped from the moon."

Louis turned to face him. The young engineer's gaze was pained, as if he'd discovered an unpleasant task for which he was the only logical choice.

"Do you really want to let *them* define normality, Kevin?"

Conway's chest became tight. "Well, no, but you have to admit that standards are different here."

Louis's expression of distaste hardened. Conway cringed inside. He groped for an explanation he wasn't sure existed. Louis relieved him of the necessity.

"Not mine."

They checked out in silence.

The arrival of dusk brought a surreal cast to the city. Even in the subway tunnels, the departure of daylight bestowed a new ominousness on New York.

The three Onteorans hardly spoke on the train back to Flushing. Svenson clung to his strap and continued to scan passers-by as if he expected to be attacked at any moment. Louis gripped a center support pole with one hand and an enormous bag of books with the other. He looked as if he were about to fall asleep standing up. Conway kept his thoughts to himself.

I'll be as glad to be back in Oteora as they will. This isn't where I want to be any more.

The city had been an exciting, variegated environment for him while he grew up. As big and capable as he was, he hadn't feared it. He'd never felt much distaste even for its grimmest features. Five years of college in Rochester and four at work at OA had altered the relationship. Whether it was because of the city's descent into degeneracy or his own acquisition of more discriminating tastes, he could not say. He wasn't sure he could trust his memories that far.

Work in particular had introduced him to a new kind of man. He'd thought he carried himself well, and by city and college standards he did. Yet there were men around him at OA that had made him feel coltish and crude. Not all of them, but a healthy fraction. In their poise and self-assurance, they were more than enough to set the standards of the company culture, standards whose violation they would not tolerate.

He'd used a four-letter word at one of his first meetings, and white-haired old Harry Toussaint, his supervisor, had immediately whisked him out of the room to reprove him. He'd failed to hold a door for a secretary, and Rolf Svenson had swooped down on him as if he'd thrust his hand under her skirt. He'd allowed a coworker who'd irritated him to stumble on a subproject for lack of information he could have supplied, and gentle, fatherly Dick Orloff, he of the endless fishing charters and football pools, had blistered him in public for not supporting his colleague.

It wasn't all about standards of propriety. Among his coworkers were some whose

consideration and generosity rose to world-class levels. They extended themselves mightily, did deeds of magnanimity quietly and without seeking the approval of others. They never spoke of it, were embarrassed to be confronted about it, but it was nonetheless real.

Conway's size, his intellect, and his easy way with people had led him to think of himself as a person of stature while he was still young, but the men of Onteora Aviation had shown him how much growing he had left to do. OA had completed his maturation.

Or maybe not. I've got a way to go before I can do what Louis did at Sentry. No-status engineers do not routinely challenge internationally famous technical authorities with Ph.Ds.

They stepped out of the train and descended from the platform to find the city entirely dark. It was of no moment. The streets around them were quiet, and Conway knew the area well. His van was only four blocks away, behind the high, well guarded fences of Sentry Munitions's secured campus.

Halfway to the Sentry main gate, a disturbance arose to deflect them. Scuffling sounds and grunts of pain rang out from an alley between two squat commercial buildings. Louis stopped, turned toward the noises, and made for their source with Svenson and Conway in his wake.

There were four figures in the alley, all young men. One sat on a crate, picking at his nails with an unidentifiable instrument as he watched the others. Another had a full nelson armlock on the third, whom the fourth pummeled about the lower torso with short, vicious punches. All of them wore colors.

Across the street stood two large men in dark clothing, not doing anything, not headed anywhere, merely talking to one another. They glanced over at the newcomers, then at the alley, and returned to their private exchange.

Before the meaning of the scene had registered upon Conway's brain with full clarity, Louis dropped his bag of books and broke into an all-out sprint.

"Hey!"

Louis didn't slow. He crashed at full speed into the standing trio and sent all of them to the alley floor.

Louis was upright again before any of the others could rise. One of the two assailants hurled himself at the interloper. Louis sent him crashing senseless to earth with a savage side kick. The other rose more carefully, pulled something from a hip pocket, and came at Louis in a street fighter's crouch.

Svenson started toward the conflict, and stopped. Conway found that he could not move. The two large men broke from their conversation and trotted past him, shouting unintelligibly. They stopped about twenty feet from the scene of combat, still shouting.

The crouching thug sprang. Metal glinted in his hand. He swept crossways at Louis, who edged back just out of reach. Another sweep, another retreat for the young Onteoran. On the third slice, Louis corkscrewed around the swing, grabbed the knife hand, planted a foot under the thug's arm, yanked with one and thrust with the other.

The thug dropped his knife and shrilled out a scream of agony. Louis released him, and he fell to the ground clutching his arm and whimpering for mercy.

The seated figure had risen and approached Louis quietly from behind. With a casual thrust, he planted the blade he'd been using to clean his nails in Louis's left side, then yanked it free. The young engineer stiffened and slumped to the ground.

Svenson screamed.

The dark-clad figures, apparently plainclothes cops, finally decided to intervene. One shoved the thug who had just shivved Louis against the alley wall, a forearm across his throat. The other squatted to inspect the bodies on the ground, with evident unconcern for their condition.

Svenson charged into the tableau. Conway loped in behind him. The squatting cop rose, swept back his jacket and dropped a hand onto his holster. Svenson paid the cop no mind. He bent to Louis's form and tried awkwardly to hoist him into a shoulder carry. Conway nudged him aside and took the job from him. Svenson staggered back, saw the cops watching and went to confront the one who'd been fondling his weapon.

"Where's the nearest hospital?"

The cop went pale, as if Svenson had shoved the muzzle of a gun into his face. He stammered briefly before Conway interjected.

"I know where it is, Rolf. Come on!"

The two set off into the dark, as the two bemused New York City cops gaped at their backs.

Conway and Svenson both rose as the surgeon approached.

"Your friend is in recovery. He'll be fine. No damage to internal organs, just a hole in the lath muscle that sewed up neatly. A day or two on his back, and he'll be right as rain."

Svenson said at once, "How long before he can travel safely?"

The surgeon frowned. "He should have two days' bed rest before he does anything more than walk to the bathroom, but if you arrange an ambulance, he's fit to travel already. Do you have some compelling reason to move him?"

Svenson's face spasmed. "We most certainly do. Come on, Kevin."

"Wait a second, Rolf!"

Svenson bathed him in a glare of rage.

"No waiting, Kevin. No seconds, no time, no stopping, no way! Those were gang members he attacked. The police watching them didn't do a damn thing until Louis intervened. We're getting him out of this pesthole right now. Get your van to the front door, set the back seat so Louis can lie down, and meet me back here. And don't give any of our names to anyone." He strode toward the recovery room at once. The surgeon watched him with sagging jaw.

Conway did as he was told.

When Conway parked his van and reentered the hospital, he found the two cops from the alley at the admission desk. Shield folders dangled from their jacket pockets. They spread to block his progress. The nurse-receptionist seated at the console looked back and forth among the three of them as if she feared violence.

"Got some travel plans, big guy?" The larger cop planted his fists on his hips.

"Well...uh...our friend is out of surgery and we're driving him back home."

The cop snorted. "Not likely. There's a detective lieutenant up there with him now. I'd say the three of you are gonna be guests of the city for a few days." He cocked an eyebrow. "Where's home?"

Conway swallowed. "Onteora County."

"I see." The cop chuckled. His colleague folded his arms over his chest and shook his head in derision. "Not New Yorkers, eh? We should have known."

Something hot and insistent flowered in Kevin Conway's chest. It seemed to swell him beyond his normal size. He stared down at the two policemen with a cold smile. The cops' smiles vanished.

"Yes, you should. Where we come from, we don't stand around watching while juvenile delinquents beat one another to death, the way you do here. Not even those of us who don't carry badges and guns." A swing of his head, and he'd committed both cops' shield numbers to memory. "Now, officer 88362, do we have any official business with one another? Or do I have some with you, officer 67323?"

The receptionist laid a finger on an inconspicuous button at the side of her switchboard. The cops muttered and allowed him to pass.

In the vestibule to the recovery area, a thick-bodied man in a beige trenchcoat was arguing with Svenson, gesticulating as he spoke. Hospital personnel of various stations stood around the two and listened openly. Svenson's eyes flicked briefly toward Conway, then returned to the trenchcoated figure.

"I'm telling you, your friend can't leave these premises, Mister."

"Stop us if you can, detective. As soon as our transportation is ready, we're out of here."

"He inflicted a serious injury on one of those young men."

Svenson nodded. "I saw it. What would your point be?"

The trenchcoated man grimaced. "You can't take him out of here until the DA's office determines whether it's going to file against him. Suppose the boy dies? There could be a felony murder charge."

Svenson shrugged. "That 'boy' has nothing worse than a dislocated shoulder, and you know it. He was committing a major felony under the eyes of two of your officers, who did absolutely nothing about it until my friend stepped in. Tell me, detective, did my friend's intervention somehow raise the value of that young prick's life? Or are you just embarrassed that a civilian from out of town had to show your men what their jobs are?"

The periphery of doctors, nurses, and orderlies gasped in unison.

The detective was hampered in his attempt to lower menacingly at Svenson by the Onteoran's greater height, but he tried it anyway. "Mister, you'd better give me your name, *and* your friend's name, before I decide this has gotten out of hand."

Svenson's ice-blue eyes brightened and his lips curled back from his teeth. "Shove it up your ass, Detective DeLacey. If you have a reason to arrest him, or me, use it now. Otherwise, we're homeward bound. Come on, Kevin."

Conway followed him into a sparsely furnished, brightly lit recovery room. In the bed, propped up on several thick pillows and covered with a light blue blanket, was Louis. His eyes were closed. A short, pale-faced nurse stood at Louis's side, her hand around his wrist.

Svenson asked, "Are his vitals stable?"

She nodded.

"Good. Get us a gurney. He's leaving now."

The nurse scurried out without argument. An orderly wheeled a gurney up to the side of the bed less than a minute later. He started toward the sleeping engineer, but Svenson stopped him.

"We'll take care of this part, friend. Kevin?"

They slid their wounded colleague delicately out of his sickbed and onto the padded gurney surface. Louis did not waken. Svenson immediately took the rail and pushed for the exit. The crowd outside parted to let them pass.

"Did you know he could do that?" Conway kept his eyes on the endless ribbon of the New York State Thruway, uncoiling in the darkness ahead.

"No."

Beneath the grunted syllable, Conway could plainly hear *I should have known*.

"Any danger that the wound might open?"

"None," Svenson said. "You didn't see the compression bandage they put on him. He could probably pole-vault from here to Onteora without stressing those sutures. Just get us home." He turned to stare out the side window into the blackness. Louis's gentle snore buzzed irregularly from the back of the van.

"I'm sorry, Rolf."

"Hm? For what?"

"This was my fault. I should have driven us home when the meeting broke up."

"Don't talk nonsense, Kevin. If one of us could have foreseen this, it would have been me. I've worked with him for ten years."

"Can't be easy."

"Why do you say that?"

"Look at him. Five-seven, maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, and he charges three armed gangbangers on their home turf. A guy who'll do that will do anything."

"Yeah." Svenson's voice had become husky. Conway darted a glance at the older man.

Though the cabin of the van was dim, the bony planes of his face glittered with tears.

We left Lady Liberty a good stretch behind us.

"What's the matter, Rolf?"

Svenson was slow to answer.

"Look at him? Look at *us*, Kevin. I'm six-four, one eighty-eight. You're what, six-two, maybe two-fifteen?"

"Two-twenty."

"And what did we do when he made his play?"

"We stood and watched."

"Yeah." Svenson twisted in his seat and craned his head to peer at Louis's sleeping form.

"Are we men, Kevin?" His voice cracked as he said it.

Conway gave the question its due. He thought about the cops at the alley, who'd done no more than they while the battle raged, but followed them belatedly to the hospital to confront him with threats and scorn. He thought about the blustering detective, whom Svenson had defied without hesitation. He thought about Svenson's unwillingness to let Louis Redmond lie helpless in enemy territory an instant longer than necessary. He loaded these things into his mental balances and tried, in full humility, to weigh them against their defaults.

"I think we are, Rolf. Maybe not perfect, but we qualify. I don't know about him, though."

"What? How can you --"

"He's from Mars, I think. Or maybe Alpha Centauri. Somewhere with higher standards, anyway."

"Yeah." Svenson let his body relax into his seat. "Think he'll give me a hard time about leaving his clothes behind?"

"Naah. You went back and got his books, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"That's what he'll care about. Trust me."

==<O>==

Intermezzo

Schliemann's eyes were saucers of disbelief.

"I never heard about that."

I nodded. "He's reticent about it. I'm sure you can understand why."

"But you weren't there, were you? How did you learn about it?"

I curled my fingers around my empty mug and pondered how much I should tell him. I bore a certain responsibility for him and his brethren in the cloth. Besides, he was a thoroughly admirable person, not someone I'd want to disconcert. Given his importance to Louis, I'd rather cut my throat than upset him.

Granted, three days after I'd cut my throat, I'd be gamboling about as if it had never happened, but the principle is what counts.

"I've known him a long time, Father. The things he does don't all become general knowledge. There are some that I know about that even he thinks are private to him."

It was a shock to him to learn that he wasn't the closest of Louis's confidants. Louis had told him so much, had held him so close over the years, that the assumption of ultimate intimacy had come unconsciously to him. Besides, he was a priest, Louis's confessor.

He regarded me as if wondering afresh what sort of creature he'd admitted to his house. It couldn't be helped. There were things I could not allow him to know. There were other things he would not learn yet, and not from me.

"He'd be unhappy about having his privacy compromised," he said.

I inclined my head. "He would. I trust you don't intend to tell him that."

Schliemann rose and moved about the rectory kitchen in the manner of one whose nerves have been awakened by uncertainty. He stopped before the northern window, put his hand to the blinds as if to adjust them, then let it fall.

"I've told you much without troubling you for why you wanted to know it. When you introduced yourself, it seemed plain that you already knew him quite well, perhaps as well as I. Now I find myself wondering whether I've been taken in. I wouldn't like to learn that."

"You haven't been taken in, Father." There was no one on Earth more concerned with Louis's well-being than I, but I didn't relish the thought of explaining the wherefores of it. To him, at any rate. "I just wanted some background to help me understand a few of his decisions."

He folded his arms across his chest and studied me with an expression of judgment withheld. "Which decisions would those be?"

"Not to marry and have children, for one."

The doubt in his face softened.

"I used to wonder about that myself. After I'd thought about his history of loss for awhile, I stopped wondering."

"No more capacity for pain?"

The old priest shook his head slowly. "Not that, Mr. Loughlin. Never that. No more desire to inflict it."

It was the last piece of the puzzle.

I rose, circled the table, and held out my hand. He took it in both of his.

"Thank you, Father. You've been very generous with your time."

He didn't answer at once. He was as unique in his way as Louis was in his, a natural shepherd who'd withstood a great and nameless fear for the most precious of his flock, and had begun to feel the waning of his years. He struggled to hold it in, but it leaked out in a final whispered command.

"Look after him."

==<O>==

Commoners And Kings

Louis hadn't been able to look away from her through most of the Mass. At a glance, she was unremarkable. Late thirties, vaguely pretty, figure beginning to sag under the weight that accumulates in domesticity. She was garbed in a faded yellow pantsuit that was probably her Sunday best, and appeared perfectly composed. Her glowering hulk of a husband sat on her far side. Throughout the hour-long ritual, she never missed a beat. No emotion showed on her face.

The heavy layer of makeup she'd applied hadn't quite concealed the thick red slash of swelling that ran from her left ear to the point of her chin.

It was plainly a whip welt. She'd been struck with something flexible, something thin enough to leave a track that clearly defined, but not thin enough to cut, strong enough to have pressed deep into her face, but not strong enough to break the bones that lay beneath. It might have been a wire coat hanger, or a length of electrical cord.

Her husband noticed Louis's attention toward the end of the ceremony, and stared back in fury. Louis's gaze didn't waver.

The husband pulled her along behind him as the crowd exited. Louis caught them at the church steps and neatly cut them out of the throng. By simple physical assertion, just an unobtrusive body block, he maneuvered them onto a flag of the concrete apron from which they couldn't escape without forcing their way past him or jumping several feet down to the lawn.

"How are you, Lois?" His eyes commanded an honest response.

Before she could speak, her husband clamped a large hand on her shoulder and launched a string of expletives that would have shocked a longshoreman. He tried to push past.

Louis planted a hand on the husband's chest and shoved him back. He was easily six inches taller than Louis and seventy pounds heavier, but he made no second attempt to leave. New fires kindled in his face.

"Did he hit you again?"

She didn't speak, didn't nod, but there was no way to remove the admission from her eyes.

Louis's gaze swung slowly to the husband.

"Gavin," he said conversationally, "I've told you what I'd do if I caught you beating her again. What made you think I wouldn't notice? Are you really that stupid?"

Gavin DuBreuill's lips slid back from his teeth. His hands became fists, but whatever wisdom he possessed kept them at his sides.

Father Schliemann emerged from the church, saw the little triangle, and hurried toward them.

"Louis, what --"

"Father," he said, still in that level, unstressed tone, "I'd like you to take Mrs. DuBreuill over to the rectory and give her breakfast. Would you do that for me, please? Gavin and I have some matters to settle."

The heat seemed to drain from the July morning.

Schliemann swallowed and said "Certainly, Louis." He took Lois DuBreuill's arm and led her away at once. The woman glanced back once at her husband, with a strange mixture of deliverance and terror.

Louis's eyes remained on the husband the whole time.

"Go home, Gavin. Get out of that suit. I'll give you an hour. You'd better be at home when I come for you. If you're not, I'll turn this entire county upside down if I have to, and I'll deal with you wherever I find you, as God is my witness. If I *don't* find you, you'd better pray that I never lay eyes on you again."

He turned and stalked away. Above his cheap navy blue suit, Gavin DuBreuill's face blanched to a skull white.

And I, who had watched and listened from the shade of the little stand of maples that flanked Our Lady of the Pines, made a mental check mark and moved to the threshold of decision.

It was an ordinary July evening in Oteora: hot, damp, the air too still, the black gnats too numerous. Most of the city's residents had retreated behind closed doors and powered up their air

conditioners, then turned their television sets up high to mask the compressor noise. On an unlit street in the abandoned part of the city, Joseph Follett and Lafayette Buskey were enjoying a special pleasure, raping a teenage girl who had wandered onto their turf.

They had cut away her jeans and panties, stuffed the scraps of the panties into her mouth, and bound them there with a double winding of packing tape. Buskey knelt on her arms and held a knife to her throat while Follett violated her at his leisure. They had changed places once already. Perhaps they would do so again before the fun was over. Neither had bothered to conceal or disguise his face.

They had been at it perhaps ten minutes when a quiet patter of footsteps from the far end of the street alerted the merrymakers that they were not alone. Both looked up to see the onrush of a short, slight figure, bearing down upon them.

Buskey had turned toward the sound but had not yet risen when Louis braked and planted. His right foot lashed out in a powerful placekicker's arc and caught Buskey squarely beneath the jaw. The snap of Buskey's spine resounded the length of the street. He flipped backwards and lay on the sidewalk, twitching spasmodically.

Follett pulled away from the girl and drew his own knife. Louis turned to face him.

"Keep back, motherfucker."

Louis made no reply. He advanced.

Follett dropped into a knife-fighter's crouch. He kept both hands well out in front of him, daring Louis to come within slashing distance. Louis halted and watched him, apparently relaxed.

"So this is your idea of a high old time, eh, asshole?" Louis's voice was soft. The darkness concealed his face. "Wait till some defenseless girl wanders by, take her down, rape her a few times, then gut her like a deer? Not much to take home from it, though. Not like a Grand Avenue mugging or a good B and E."

The young tough snarled. "What do you know about B and E?"

Louis's eyebrows rose. "Isn't that how you make your living?" He gestured at Follett's crotch. "I mean, that thing dangling from your fly isn't big enough for you to make it as a gigolo."

Upon being reminded that his dick was still hanging out of his jeans, Follett looked down at his crotch.

Louis whirled and kicked again. His toe caught the elbow of Follett's knife arm. The elbow cracked and bent the wrong way, and the knife flew from the hand that held it. The young thug spun and dropped to the pavement with a piercing shriek, clawing at the rough asphalt.

Louis stepped forward to stand over his victim. Stray rays from the headlights of a car on a connecting street revealed his expression. It was that perfection of rage that resembles perfect calm.

"Well, so much for the muggings and B and Es. Think you can make a living as a rapist? I mean, you're going to need a new helper and all. Maybe two or three. Big nut to carry."

He straddled Follett's body and lowered himself to a squat, all but sitting on the thug's belly.

"Who the fuck are you, man? You got no business here!" Follett's voice was an agonized hiss.

Louis pursed his lips. "Business? No. I was just out for a walk, and it went on a little longer and farther than I intended. I don't get into the city much. It's not my favorite place. But here I am, and here you are, and thereby hangs a tale."

He sighed. "I knew you were going to kill that girl when you were done with her. If I hadn't been sure of that, maybe I would have handled it another way. Or maybe not. Not that it matters

now. May God have mercy on your worthless soul."

Follett's pain had not displaced all his fear and hatred. He surged in a last attempt to throw his assailant off him as he scrabbled for his knife.

Louis's right hand arrowed at Follett's face. The heel of that hand crashed into the bridge of Follett's nose, driving the bone into his forebrain with the impact of a well-thrown spear. The rapist's body spasmed once and was still.

Louis waited for perhaps a minute, peering into the slack face for any indication that the body might still house life. When he was satisfied, he pulled the jeans off Follett's corpse and brought them to the girl, who had remained where she'd been held. She seemed about sixteen, not especially pretty, and frightened beyond all ability to respond. Carefully, he pulled the makeshift gag from her mouth.

"Where do you live?"

"Eighty-two Devlin Boulevard," the girl whispered.

He bent to help her stand, then offered her the jeans. "I'll take you home. Sorry I have nothing else to cover you with."

She clung to him and began to keen. He coaxed her into the jeans, closed the fly and buttoned them at her waist, rolled up the legs so that she could walk, and escorted her down the street, one arm around her shoulders.

The body of Joe Follett lay still in the middle of the street. On the sidewalk, the body of Lafe Buskey twitched at lengthening intervals as the life seeped out of it.

When the girl was safely home, Louis walked mechanically back to his own house, stripped off his clothing, climbed into bed and wept in the darkness until exhaustion swallowed him.

I had seen and heard it all. I had no more doubt in me. It would be he.

Louis came home late the following evening. He climbed out of his truck and plodded up the concrete path to his front door as if he'd be good for nothing else that day. I knew better. When he was about ten feet away, I allowed him to see me.

"Good evening, Louis."

His head snapped up and the light flared in his eyes. With all the study I'd made of him, it still thrilled me to see that rush of brilliant awareness, that surge of life and power, overtake his whole being. He would be the prize of my career.

He dropped his briefcase and stared at me.

"Who are you?"

I said nothing.

"What do you want from me?" The words sang with challenge.

I rose from my seat on his front steps and smiled.

"Your soul."

It didn't throw him. His stare sharpened and traced my features. They all did that. I could feel him trying to deduce my age, my physical capacities, and my intentions.

No one can guess my age. The human mind isn't capable of absorbing that datum and remaining sane. My physical prowess, like his, is well concealed. Even I seldom know my intentions, these days.

He didn't move, but his hair-trigger readiness remained.

"You're on my stoop." Each word was a trumpet call. "Declare yourself before I throw you into the street."

I nodded. "Throw me into the street."

He charged.

He was faster than I, and stronger. I knew these things. I knew his style better than he did. The magnitude of his physical gifts had caused his technique to plateau at a fairly crude level. An eyeblink later he was supine on his lawn, chest heaving as he struggled to refill his lungs.

I folded my arms across my chest. "Would you like to try that again?"

He rose from the ground, shook his neck and shoulders, and charged again, so suddenly that I almost wasn't prepared.

I sideslipped, armlocked him as he passed and used his speed to spin him around and over me. I threw him hard, deliberately ramming him into the earth. A normal man would be crippled by the impact. Louis Redmond would not.

He was, however, persuaded not to attack me again.

I lowered myself to the grass, sat beside him and waited silently for rationality to return to his dark brown eyes. He elbowed himself up and stared at me with frank curiosity.

"You're very good, Louis. There aren't many who could take you. But you suffered a serious wound recently, because you became overconfident in the middle of a fight, didn't you?"

My knowledge shook him, though he tried to hide it. His head moved up and down about half an inch.

"Sometimes it's not enough to be quick and strong. Do you ever carry a weapon of any kind?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He levered himself up to a sitting position. "It's illegal most places."

"And you let that stop you? Knowing that no one who lives outside the law would care a farthing about it?"

He said nothing.

I leaned over and tapped him on the forehead with a finger. He blinked.

"You're always armed with that. But you haven't learned to use it, or you'd be bristling with weapons wherever you went. These are dark times. You can't simply trust to your gifts. Especially given some of the things you've taken on yourself. Your grandparents were Quebecois, weren't they?"

He nodded.

"Do you know what your name means?"

"No."

"Louis is Old French for 'warrior.' Redmond is an Anglicized condensation of *roi de monde*."

"King of the world? Warrior-king of the world?"

I nodded. "Quite a noble title, isn't it?"

He said nothing, eyes steady on mine.

"Would you like to be worthy of it?"

He surged to his feet. I did the same. He made a show of panning the street from one end to the other.

"Where's the mountain?" he said.

"What mountain?"

"Aren't we supposed to do this at the top of a tall mountain? I can hardly see Onteora, much less all the kingdoms of the world."

I laughed. "Wrong precedent, Louis."

"You said you wanted my soul."

"I do. But it's not a *quid pro quo*. I expect you'll give it to me in fee simple when we've completed your training."

He stiffened. There was a great pride in him. Why shouldn't there be? In his twenty-eight years, no one had ever risen to his level at anything that mattered to him. He could study humility twenty-four hours a day for the rest of his life and not change that. Yet here was a stranger, a nameless acquaintance of twenty minutes' duration, offering to train him as if he were a neophyte.

Of course, the nameless stranger had just done what no one else in his life had ever done: defeated him in hand-to-hand combat. Twice.

The evening gloom collected around us. The neighborhood, so sparsely built that no other home could be seen from his front knoll, was perfectly quiet.

This was the man I wanted. Down all the centuries, no other had impressed me with his raw quality as Louis Redmond had. If I had his measure, he would exceed my own powers before we were through.

"What's your name?"

I inclined my head. "Malcolm Loughlin."

"And what does *that* mean?"

"Nothing at all. Loughlin means 'of the lake' in Scots Gaelic, of course, but it's not my original name and has nothing to do with my ancestry, so put no significance on it. It's just what I go by today."

"And you propose to train me? In what?"

"In how not to be thrashed by someone who hasn't your strength or speed, for one. You worked hard for those muscles. Your reflexes and kinetics are like nothing I've ever seen. With the right tactics, you could defeat a whole battalion singlehanded. Why let all that go to waste?"

A ripple ran along his jawline. "And then?"

"One step at a time. But ultimately, to be what your name makes you."

I waited, but he restrained any other question. I could feel them lodged under his tongue, held there by iron will.

I have known many iron-willed men. They are my raw materials. Most have broken in my hands. Others have bent double and mocked me with their failure, until I cast them back into the forge. A rare few have stood straight. Six in two thousand years.

This one would not break, nor bend.

He clambered to his feet, and I joined him.

"Why?" he said.

They always ask, and I always answer. But not truthfully.

"Because of what you could be. You have what it takes. I could teach you the rest of what you need to know. Because it would be a terrible thing to bury what I know, when you could put it to good use."

"At what?"

I counted to five.

"At being warrior-king of the world," I said.

His stillness was so complete that I felt a need to fidget. I, who had held perfectly still for swords, knives, and bullets beyond count. Once a spear.

"Because of my name?"

I laughed. "No. That's just a bonus."

"Then why?"

"I told you."

"For my soul."

"Yes."

"And what will I owe you for this?"

I braced myself internally. "Obedience."

His eyes might have widened a millimeter. Or perhaps not. "How far?"

"This far. When we're together, what I tell you to do, you do. When we're not together, what I've told you not to do, you don't. Without questions, mental reservations, or chiseling at the margins, until I say you can go."

He looked away for a moment, then hit me with the full force of his gaze.

"You can't --"

"I know. I won't."

His curiosity had the better of him, then. It was my most reliable lure. With him, it was likely the only one that would work. I had told him just enough that he had to learn my motives or go completely, gothically mad.

"When would we start?"

"Whenever you like."

The corners of his mouth lifted.

"Come inside."

It went on for three years. I'm not going to transcribe all the particulars of three years' training.

I pressed him hard, physically and mentally. I should say that he let me press him hard, as hard as I could. He never resisted, never questioned the program, never asked for a respite; quite the reverse.

He was studying me. He had accepted my tutelage to study me.

I'm used to being inscrutable. It's a deliberate choice. I've had to execute so many of my proteges that it's unthinkable that I should reveal myself to them. I simply can't afford to surrender that tactical advantage.

He studied me in the only effective way: through what and how I taught him. I'd known he would. And he learned far more than I liked.

Yet I revealed more to him than I'd ever shown a cadet. I would begin a lesson, five minutes later he would demonstrate complete mastery of the topic, and he would look at me with *Well?* shining from his eyes. It wasn't a request for praise. Before I knew it, I'd be showing him something else, like as not something I'd previously resolved to keep to myself. With nothing but his ability, his unlimited cooperation, and that gently sardonic gaze, he squeezed me dry.

I even let him learn where I lived.

We covered everything. Unarmed combat in two dozen styles and innumerable contexts, until I could no longer overcome him even when I caught him from behind, in the dark, and completely by surprise. Armed combat with everything from pointed sticks to machine guns. Tactical analysis. Strategic planning. The politics of war. He ate it all.

I helped him to arm himself. He hadn't owned as much as a pocket knife when we met. He hadn't felt a need. In truth, he could probably have stood off an infantry platoon with nothing but his hands, but I couldn't let him continue that way. There were risks ahead that he couldn't conceive, and that I didn't dare describe to him.

I watched him every waking moment of the day. He never learned of it, but then, that's one of my specialties. And I saw only what I had already seen: superlative power, unfathomable brilliance, and steely restraint.

I kept telling myself that he could be dangerous to me. And I kept rushing forward into areas of my expertise that I'd intended to conceal. At the last, what remained to me were the two tools no human had ever mastered: invisibility and command.

I wasn't sure those would stay hidden at the bottom of my bag of tricks forever, but for

three years I managed to keep them there. And each day we met, and I taught him more of what I'd learned of the bloodiest of human pastimes, and he absorbed it and went on.

And I became ashamed.

Louis liked to walk. He'd walk several miles at a stretch for the sheer pleasure of it. Any excuse was good enough to set him off. If I and his other involvements had allowed him the time, he might have walked fifty or a hundred miles in an ordinary week.

It was hardest for me to shadow him when he walked. Part of that was my fault. I'd trained his natural alertness to a peak that threatened my invisibility. Still, I never let him go anywhere but the lavatory without me.

One night about a year after we began, he set out for a nearby convenience store with no warning. I pulled my ego in all the way and walked in his footsteps, three and a half miles to a Quik-Stop where he bought milk, coffee and bread.

The checkout line was unusually long when he joined it. It took several minutes before he was next to be served. At that point a short, heavily made up blonde girl perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, a carton of doughnuts in her hand, tried to slither in front of him without so much as a smile.

Louis extended his arm and prevented it.

The girl reeled back, her face contorted, and she started to scream obscenities. Louis regarded her with no discernible emotion.

A large young man lumbered up, sloppily dressed, with long, unkempt hair and the hint of a spare tire around his middle. He listened to the girl's imprecations for a few seconds, then snarled and cocked an arm to backhand Louis across the face.

I tensed. Louis dropped his goods and moved with speed and precision.

The young tough said "urk," or something like that, and found himself pressed against the dairy case. A hand was clamped onto his windpipe. Another hand pressed paralyzingly deep into his solar plexus. He pawed at the intruding digits to no effect as his face turned red and then slate blue from oxygen deprivation.

The other shoppers fell back. The clerk at the register reached for the phone.

"Has anyone told you lately that you're an idiot?" Louis's voice was as soft as a baby's breath. "You attacked a man who was minding his own business, in front of a crowd and four security cameras, just because he kept your girlfriend from jumping ahead of him in line. But the guy you attacked, who just happens to be half your size, reduced you to helplessness, and now the store has a lovely memento of it on video tape. Have you done this before?"

The kid shook his head as much as Louis's pincering fingers would permit.

"Well, are you a terminal case, or have I convinced you not to do it again?"

Louis relaxed his grip on the kid's throat enough to allow him a hoarse whisper of "yes, sir."

"You're sure? Because I'm in no hurry."

Fear flooded into the boy's face. Louis allowed himself a tiny smile, then released his pressure. The kid hung there for a moment before he slid down the glass panel and sat on the grimy tiled floor.

Louis looked down at him for a moment, then returned to the wide-eyed young woman who'd started the commotion. He took her chin in his hand, forced her to meet his eyes, and held them until crimson showed through her heavy makeup. The other patrons buzzed briefly.

"Don't do that again, miss."

He released her, gathered up his goods, inspected them for damage, and pushed them under the gaze of the white-faced clerk.

"I want you to go armed from now on."

Louis raised himself off the grass onto his knuckles and scooted a few inches toward where I sat. The sun had dropped behind his house, and the temperature was beginning to dip. We'd been sparring at full combat intensity for the previous two hours and were both coated with sweat. "With what?"

"Your Beretta would be best, but any kind of gun would be better than none at all."

"I can't bring a gun to work, Malcolm. It's against federal regulations."

"I know. Do it anyway."

His eyebrows came together. "No."

"What was that you just said?"

"I said no."

"That's what I thought I heard. What happened to your promise of obedience?"

He drew up his knees and looped the circle of his arms over them. "I signed an agreement when I took my job that included acknowledging those regs and pledging to abide by them. That supersedes my agreement with you."

"Not if I say it doesn't."

He said nothing.

"Louis, you are far too precious to me to go out into the world naked every day." His eyes widened at that. "Whenever you leave home, I want you to carry your Beretta, fully loaded and with a spare clip at that. Don't make me get nasty about it."

He grinned. "Malcolm, do you remember our first conversation?"

"Word for word."

"So do I. Play it back. I remember saying 'You can't,' at which point you interrupted me and said 'I know, I won't.' What did you think I was about to say? Ski through a revolving door? Strike a match on a bar of soap?"

I'd known what he was about to say. That was why I'd interrupted him.

"If you'd had mental reservations about doing as I told you, you should have made them more explicit. This bargain of ours might not have been struck if I'd known."

He waited.

"I insist, Louis."

"Insist away. The answer is still no. When it doesn't violate my morals, my standards or my given word, I'll do as you say. You'll have to be content with that."

"And if I'm not?"

"That's not my problem."

I stood. "You think not?"

He cracked his knuckles slowly and thoroughly, then dropped back onto the grass with his fingers laced behind his head.

"Loom all you like, Malcolm. If I mean that much to you -- and God alone knows why that should be -- then you can't threaten me in a meaningful way. And if I don't, then take your best shot and we'll find out how much I've really learned."

His loose-limbed posture told me which of the possibilities he credited.

"So?"

"Very much so. Order me around as you please, but I have rules of my own, and by now you should know what they are. I won't break them no matter how vigorously you insist."

I eased myself down to the grass again. Though the air had grown chill and we were clad only in T-shirts and shorts, neither of us would derail that conversation out of physical discomfort. I'd engaged him too intimately. He was learning too much.

"All right. Tell me about these morals and standards of yours, so I'll know how far I can trust you."

His grin vanished and his eyes hardened.

"Ever heard of the Ten Commandments, Malcolm?"

I nodded.

"Add to them that I take my work and my word seriously. Think you can deal with that?"

"It seems I'll have to. So, what other collections of absurd rules composed by irrelevant people have you sworn to uphold?"

I almost had him, then. He had excellent control of himself, but I know where all the buttons are, and there are some no one else knows how to push.

"None come to mind at the moment. But you must have something in mind for me to be so concerned. Are you getting close to telling me?"

His smirk tested *my* control, for the first time in a millennium.

I stood, brushed my hands off on my shorts, and faced into the glimmer of sunset from beyond his house.

"Not today."

I am weary.

The years have blended into a smooth, opaque paste. I have lost the count. Not that I ever gave it much attention.

It is not memory that fails with age, but the ability to correlate memories, to weave the threads of remembrance back into the pattern they made as they were spun. As the correlations dissolve, so also do the motives and rationales that drove one to act, to accept uncertainty, to stake all on a single turn of the wheel. Unraveled adventures float in the mind like gossamer swirled by the breeze, tangling the thoughts and teasing at the reason until one must choose between a purposeful present and a kaleidoscope past. One may never know thereafter whether one's motives have changed with time.

Of course I remember what I was sent to do. I can do it, but I will not. I have drunk too deeply of the life of this world. Even the pale shade of it that falls across my eyes is too riotously bright, too glorious in its revolving cacophony, for me to let it go.

It was not always that way. For twenty millennia I had sought only to close with Tiran and make an end to us both, the only end two Brothers of the Realm could ever meet. I had fought, and died, and rose to hunt him again, more than two hundred times. That count has slipped away as well.

Since Golgotha, I have clung to the possibility that a human might be able to take my place. I have sought champions, and I have trained them, and nine times out of ten I have had to end their lives. Not that it was a service they'd requested of me.

It seems humans cannot endure the gift of power. It warps them, or rots them from within. When they rise too far above their fellows, they cease to believe they have fellows. Nine out of ten of my proteges have fallen to that disease, and shortly thereafter to my hand. I never teach them everything.

Except for Louis.

Even before I came to him, he'd been mighty beyond the reach of his race. Whatever he wanted for himself, great or small, he could easily have had. Nothing could stop him from closing his hand on whatever he desired.

Only himself. Only his impenetrable self-command, that was proof against all the enticements of the world. Only his network of affections for a myriad of damaged souls who nursed upon his strength and virtue. Only his incomprehensible love for this central New York

hinterland of trees and rutted roads and infinite silence.

It was this pearl beyond price that I proposed to sacrifice in my place.

For a year I contemplated it as I taught him, two years, three, and I could no longer form the concept. Yet I could not assume the mission onto my own shoulders again. I had lessened too much.

Any good king's most ardent desire is to lay down his scepter and doff his robes, lose himself among the commoners, and cease to be great. Yet if he is truly good, he cannot press his crown onto another's brow.

I retained too much decency to do what I wanted. If Louis's luck held, by the time I'd shed my constraints, he would be safely dead and beyond my reach.

There came a day when I felt I had to forge onward or give up.

We had been sparring for about an hour, in the exercise room he'd built in his basement. He, with his penchant for economy, had sought out the cheapest used equipment he could find. On my first visit I had decreed that the oldest equipment be replaced, and the rough concrete floor be covered from wall to wall with the best shock-absorbing mats available, regardless of the expense. He bridled, but he did as I said.

We sat on those mats, about five feet apart. I was in Turk position; he sat propped on backthrust arms, his knees drawn up before him. There was a film of sweat on his face, but he breathed easily and showed no fatigue.

"I haven't taught you much lately," I said.

"The sparring's still good. Use it or lose it."

"True, but I can't shake the feeling that you're holding back on me."

His eyebrows rose.

"You're quicker and stronger than you let yourself be when we spar. I shouldn't last as long as I usually do."

His deadpan remained. "You want me to throw you faster and harder?"

"Use it or lose it, Louis. But my point is that you're beyond me now. What we do down here is just a modest workout for you." I rose. "Time to move on. Let me show you what I brought you."

I fetched the cloth-wrapped bundle that I'd propped in the corner when we arrived and brought it to him, stretched across my palms. He rose to his feet, and I handed it to him.

"Unwrap it carefully."

He did, and his eyes grew wide.

The saber gleamed in the muted light. I'd spent a lot of time and effort sharpening and polishing it.

It was a plain weapon, not one you'd expect to see in the hand of a king. There was only the barest tracing on the faintly curved blade. The guard bell was a plain steel basket, without ornamentation. The hilt was a seven inch length of oak, darkened with age but firm to the touch. There was only a hint of a pommel, a slight swell of the hilt at its very end.

"What is this?"

"A sword. Your sword."

A hint of alarm compressed his eyes. "What do you expect me to do with it?"

I shrugged. "Whatever you think appropriate. But a king should have a sword. By the way," I said, "it was first worn by Louis the Ninth of France when he was the Dauphin, though he set it aside for a useless jeweled monstrosity when he ascended the throne."

Time braked to a stop as confusion spun his thoughts.

"I don't know how to use it," he murmured.

"Easily fixed. I do."

"But why, Malcolm?"

I stepped back, turned a little away from those pleading eyes.

"Like it or not, you're a king. You don't know what that means yet. You haven't a sense for the scope of it. But you must learn. Your life, and the lives of many others, will turn on how well you learn it." I paused and gathered my forces. "What is a king, Louis?"

He stood there with the sword dangling from his hand. "A ruler. A leader. A warlord."

"More. All of that, but more. The sword is an ancient symbol for justice. Back when the function of nobility was better understood, a king never sat his throne without his sword to hand. If he was to treat with the envoy of another king, it would be at his side. If he was to dispense justice, it would be across his knees. Why do you suppose that was, Louis?"

He stood silent for a few seconds.

"Symbolic of the force at his command, I guess."

I shook my head gently.

"Not just symbolic. A true king, whose throne belonged to him by more than the right of inheritance, led his own troops and slew malefactors by his own hand. The sword was a reminder of the privilege of wielding force, but it was there to be used as well."

His hands clenched and unclenched in time to his thoughts. I knew what they had to be.

"The age of kings is far behind us, Malcolm."

"It never ended. Men worthy of the role became too few to maintain the institution."

"And I'm...worthy?"

If he wasn't, then no worthy man had ever lived, but I couldn't tell him that.

"There's a gulf running through the world, Louis. On one side are the commoners, the little men who bear tools, tend their gardens, and keep the world running. On the other are the nobles, who see far and dare much, and sometimes risk all they have, that the realm be preserved and the commoner continue undisturbed in his portion. There's no shortage of either, except for the highest of the nobles, the men of unbreakable will and moral vision, for whom justice is a commitment deeper than life itself."

His face had begun to twitch. He'd heard all he could stand to hear, and perhaps more. I decided to cap the pressure.

"Kings have refused their crowns many times, Louis. You might do as much, though it would sadden me to see it. But you could break that sword over your knee, change your name, and run ten thousand miles to hide where no one could know you, and it wouldn't lessen what you are and were born to be." I gestured at the sword. "Keep it near you."

The Onteora summer is near to unendurable; likewise the winter. Yet there is a period of about three weeks in May, and another in October, when all is as it should be. The air is warm and the ground soft, the breezes are light and barely kissed with moisture, and the life that slept dreamless in the rich black earth wakens and stretches toward the caress of the sun.

Louis liked to be in the woods at those times. His property bordered on a substantial forest that ran half the length of the county. When he had the time and the weather was right, he would walk it from top to bottom and back again. It was the greatest of his pleasures, and the greatest of my trials.

Several of his charities lived along the borders of those woods. He would call on his charges seemingly at random to ask how things were going for them. If all was well, he would pass a few minutes in small talk before he continued on. If not, he would put his hand to whatever required it.

The DuBreuills lived in a "mobile home community," a trailer park to the rest of the world,

on the northeastern edge of the forest. It was an older community, whose occupants were almost all retirees with little to their names. The DuBreuills were an exception.

Louis hadn't called on them in two weeks. Usually, when he did, Mrs. DuBreuill would answer the door, step out and yank it shut behind her, and they would chat in the open, until Louis had satisfied himself that all was, if not well, then at least acceptable. The amount of effort she put into convincing him of it was tragic.

On one occasion Gavin DuBreuill answered the door. The way his face reddened when he beheld Louis was an alarm that should have been heard across the state. He tried to shut the door in Louis's face. Louis didn't permit it.

On the final visit, there was no one to answer the door. The DuBreuills' trailer was cordoned with yellow police-line tape. Gavin was already in custody.

A neighbor, a gnarled old man who rubbed his nicotine-stained fingers together incessantly as he spoke, told Louis of the events of the evening past. When the account was finished, my shaken protege murmured thanks, shook the old man's hand, and headed back into the woods, leaving his informant gaping in confusion at his back.

Louis walked nearly a mile before his knees gave out and pitched him to the forest floor in a world-shaking convulsion of horror and grief.

"It didn't have to happen."

I waited. He'd told me the story two hours earlier. He'd sat there in his kitchen, silent and motionless, ever since. I'd almost despaired of getting him to talk at all.

"I should have ruined him. I should have put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life."

"As I recall, you nearly did."

His head jerked up. "How did you know?"

I drained my coffee and shoved the mug aside. "What do you think brought you to my attention?"

"I didn't see you."

I smiled.

He rose from the table and went to the kitchen window, leaned on the sill and stared through the gloom at the lilacs and azaleas that adorned the northern run of his fence.

"You were wrong, Malcolm. Kings haven't died off. The world has just raised the qualifications to a level no one can reach. You'd have to have a heart of stone just to deal with Onteora."

"Justice is seldom perfect, Louis. Nor is it always possible to make it perfect. Tell me something: have you ever taken a life?"

He whirled, color flooding into his deathly pale face.

"Have you?"

"A human life?" he croaked.

"That's the only kind a king concerns himself with."

He started to answer, but the words caught in his throat. He stumbled over it once, twice, then slumped back into his seat at the table and clutched at his temples.

"If you have," I said as gently as I could, "then you know the dilemma. There is no way to restore the victims of certain kinds of abuses. Murder. Torture. Rape. Nothing works, not vengeance, not money, not time and not love. But the thing has to be dealt with all the same. You do it, and you point to it, and the world learns that as long as you're alive and capable, there are some lines that it's death to cross. And you learn that punishing the worst offenses takes nearly as much from a king as from the miscreants he executes."

The ghosts behind his eyes wrestled me for his soul.

"My religion..."

"Speaks of eternal life, doesn't it?"

He stared at me in that assessing way from our first encounter.

"If you believe it, then you believe that God has the final word. And every religion, not just yours, preaches the importance of justice." I rose. It was time for him to be alone. "Let God do His job, Louis. Yours is hard enough."

I let myself out.

There was no more I could teach him, except for the skills I'd resolved to keep to myself as protection against him. I wanted to release him from his bond to me, as protection against backsliding on my part. But I had made him too puissant. I had created a problem for myself.

Power does corrupt. The rights and dignity of others shrink in the mind's eye, until they seem like trivial specks upon the map of one's plans, to be moved or erased as necessary. I'd seen no counterexamples, except for him.

Despite all the time I'd spent studying him, at a range so close that we might have been wearing the same skin, I still couldn't accept that he was what he appeared. Perhaps the evil I've seen has ruined me.

Yet, if I was not deluded, he was something new. His quality was plain and open. He did not hide, and he did not strut. He bore his extraordinary polymathic power, not in the swollen-ego style that lesser men take upon themselves at their petty attainments, but with the humility of a knight on a sacred quest.

In the twenty millennia since Evoy injected me into his Creation to pursue Tiran, I'd seen nothing that compared to this boy from the woods of Ontario County. He was all the promise of humanity, fulfilled at last.

Every jolt of pain, every unkind cut that fate visited upon him, or on anyone he had chosen to love, pierced me as it did him. Whenever I allowed myself to see him whole, my own destiny, for which I'd planned to substitute him, ceased to seem significant.

And still I could not trust him.

"Do you want me to teach you how to use your sword?"

"No, Malcolm, I don't think that will be necessary." He shoveled vegetable peels and wrappers into his little garbage can, then shoved it into the space beneath his kitchen sink. "Would you like some more coffee?"

"Yes, thanks."

He poured my mug full, topped off his own, and sat at the table once more. We had sparred away the evening, and had eaten a light meal in the warmth of his kitchen. A fine autumn night was upon us, full and soft.

"You didn't really intend for me to carry that thing around, did you?"

I grunted. "No. It was mostly a prop for the lecture that went with it."

"Are we done, then? You haven't had any new material for me in quite a while."

You are, but I'm not, I didn't say. Instead, I nodded and sipped at my mug. He pushed his aside, laced his fingers together and leaned forward to peer at me. It was a difficult inspection to bear.

"You did all this for a reason," he murmured. "I owe you for it. I was fair to middling before you came along, but nothing like this. Do you plan to ride off into the sunset and leave me feeling obligated to you forever, or are we going to settle up?"

"Settle up how, Louis?"

He closed his eyes briefly and drew a deep breath.

"There's a job to do, isn't there?"

I said nothing.

"Something really nasty that you wanted help with, right?"

"No, Louis."

"Malcolm, I know you."

He did. It was incontestable.

"You mean you think you know me." That was incontestable too. "How old would you say I am, Louis?"

He grimaced. "When we met, I'd have taken you for my age, or a few years more. But that can't be. You're many times as old as the oldest man I know. Possibly as old as recorded history."

He was wrong. I'm much older than that. But for all his penetration, I didn't expect him to have seen so deeply into me. I'd grown too used to being inscrutable.

"On what do you base this...estimate?"

He smiled and tilted his chair back.

"Would you say I have a specialty, Malcolm?"

I thought about it.

"If by a specialty you mean something you do appreciably better than anything else you do, then the answer is no, because you do everything well. If you mean something you do appreciably better than anyone else around you, then the answer is still no, because you do everything better than anyone I've ever known."

His mouth dropped open and his chair tilted back to normal with a thump. For the first time in three years, I'd managed to take him by surprise.

"I...Thank you. I didn't --"

"Forget it, Louis. You were about to tell me what your specialty is."

He took a moment to compose himself.

"Learning. I have some basic assets, but what I get the most horsepower out of is that I know how to tackle a new body of knowledge. That includes the ability to tell about how long it will take to become proficient in a new field.

"Malcolm, you know far too much to have learned it all in one normal lifetime. Combat. Warfare. History. Sociology. Philosophy. Economics. Politics. Ethics. I've put my heart and soul into it, but I've only glimpsed the edges of what you know. You've lived several centuries at least."

He paused. He was waiting for me to tell him how long I'd lived. I didn't oblige him.

"So you have to have some kind of purpose. A man dies without a purpose. A purpose strong enough to keep you alive that long must be as vivid and powerful as the sun. And if you weren't really grooming me to be king of the world, which we both know is a little absurd, then you had to have something else in mind."

And there it was. For of course, I had.

"Don't call my highest ambitions absurd without a smile, youngster," I rasped. "You are fit to be what your name makes you. You might never sit a throne. You might never have the accolades of the unwashed. You might" *stay here in the woods forever, unknown to anyone but me* "renounce the world entirely and live out your years in a cave. It would change nothing. You are my successor."

I had not said those words to any other man. They were a spike through the wheel of time, around which time would pivot forevermore. Could I have unsaid them, could I unsay them today, I would not.

Louis's eyes were tinged with sadness.

"You are king of the world, Malcolm?"

I rose from the table, trying not to tremble visibly.

"You have said it, not I. Fetch your sword."

"Why?"

"We're going for a walk."

He looked awkward, and embarrassed, and indefinably *right* with the old saber in its leather scabbard slapping against his hip.

I'd belted it on him myself, shown him how to draw it, where the balance point was, how to thrust it and swing it so that he wouldn't be in more danger from it than his target was. He listened with his usual concentration, then slid the weapon into its sheath and waited silently for me to lead him off.

He stayed at my side, unspeaking, for the whole three-mile jaunt into the city of Onteora. Once or twice I caught the flash of curiosity in his eyes. He knew the route and where it led. He had to be remembering the events that had sealed my decision, the dual executions he didn't know I'd witnessed.

I led him through the abandoned part of the city with some care, determined not to be noticed until the proper moment. It was a dark and grimy place, a lightless, thinly traveled viaduct for filth and squalor.

Once immigrants had flooded into this region, eager for the jobs in the new factories, at wages undreamed of in the lands of their birth. Tenements had risen overnight to house the waves of new Americans. At all hours the streets had bustled and hummed with energy, enterprise of all sorts, and the kind of community that comes from growing families, high hopes, and a vision of a bright future.

Not anymore.

The streets were littered with an extraordinary variety of trash: discarded furniture, abandoned cars, heaps of old newspaper too sodden even to stir in the breeze. Vegetable peels, paper and plastic wrappers, bottles and cans filled the gutters. Heavily stained clothes flapped and fluttered from pendulous electric lines and rusted wire fences. At one corner someone had left a battered old wooden commode, complete with privacy enclosure. It had been used. Many times.

The few people on those streets were engaged in forbidden commerce or theft, apart from ourselves.

Louis held his tongue and followed me. We threaded our path along those streets for more than an hour until I found what I had hoped for.

Two teenagers were concluding a drug transaction in the shallow depression of a tenement doorway. Both were short, slight, and dark of skin. It looked like they were handling marijuana.

I put out a hand, and Louis halted. Three other young men, much larger, were approaching from the west. Two carried baseball bats, and one held a black iron poker.

The three newcomers closed on the transactors with evident purpose. One of the two noticed them before the other. Panic blossomed on his face. He threw his newly purchased drugs to the pavement, turned tail and ran for his life. There was no pursuit.

The other only noticed the approach of danger when no possibility of flight remained.

He looked up, strangely passive, as the lead thug's baseball bat lanced into his stomach and doubled him over. The attacker yanked the bat back, shoved it under the boy's chin, and forced him upright again, though his hands remained clamped to his middle.

"You got no license to deal around here," the thug growled.

The other two approached with their weapons raised to strike. Louis's sword hissed out of its sheath. He strode forward, holding it at a loose garde.

"Excuse me."

Three heads turned to face my protege. All three faces were blank with surprise.

"If I ask you nicely not to harm that boy any further, will you be nice and just go away? Or will I have to lop off your heads?"

That singing note, the cry of challenge, was in his voice again.

The three seemed to reach their decision simultaneously. They charged as one.

It was over in seconds. Louis struck the first one unconscious with the flat of his blade. He disarmed the poker-wielder with a spiral bind and flick, whirled and sank an elbow into his solar plexus. The leader's bat was slashed out of his hands. Louis swung the point of the saber to the thug's adam's-apple and backed him against the tenement wall. The boy Louis had rescued slid to the ground, hugging himself and whimpering.

Apparently I didn't need to teach him how to use his sword.

"So many idiots, so little time." Louis looked up into the thug's broad face with puzzlement written across his own features. "Are you as stupid as you look? Am I going to have to turn you into cold cuts to keep you from doing this again?"

The thug shook his head. "Didn't want to. Had orders."

Louis let his eyebrows rise. "And if you get more orders?" He pressed the point of the sword just a little more firmly into the hollow below the young man's vocal chords.

"No, sir."

"Louis," I said softly, "we both know better. Take one of his hands. At least his boss won't be able to use him for dirty work any more."

"Shut up, Malcolm." Louis's eyes stayed locked on his captive. The boy's hands retreated behind his back.

With no warning, Louis swung the tip of the blade away from the thug's throat and down to the sidewalk.

"Get out of here."

The thug was paralyzed at his parole. In another instant, he would have lit off down the street, his mission and his comrades forgotten. But there was more I had to know. I would learn it then and there, or never.

I allowed my ego to expand to the walls of the universe and brought forth the Voice.

"Stop."

The thug froze. Louis turned and fixed on me.

"Malcolm, what are you doing?"

It was the first surprise. He shouldn't have been able to speak. It rocked my concentration.

I raised a hand, leveled it at the thug, and summoned the full arrogance of my Essence, the demeanor of ultimate command that would brook no resistance.

"Kill him."

Louis began to quake. Tremors passed from his head all the way to his feet, and rattled his sword against the sidewalk. He stood that way, my command and his defiance locked in mortal combat in his nervous system, for about ten seconds.

He opened his hands, and the sword clattered to the concrete. The tremors vanished.

"No." The word was drop-forged steel. "Go for it yourself if you want, but I don't promise not to try to stop you."

The rigidity seeped out of the thug's posture. His eyes flicked first to my face, then to Louis's.

"Go!" Louis shouted.

And the boy was off.

Louis walked toward me slowly. His features were lit with the same flame of rage I'd seen

on that night three years earlier, but now I was its object.

"Who do you think you are, to *order* me to kill another human being? What entitles you to command that from me?"

He stopped with his nose almost against my own.

"Yes, I've killed. I may do so again someday. But not because you or anyone else commands it, no matter how much brass you put into it. You can have your bloody sword back, if you think it entitles you to that. But walk away from me slowly, Malcolm, because if you raise a hand to me, as God is my witness I'll break it off and shove it up your ass."

I stood perfectly still.

No one, not even he, can sustain that pitch of anger for very long. I waited and watched the fires fade behind his eyes. When they'd been banked, he went to the boy who'd suffered the assault and hauled him to his feet, checked him for serious injury, and sent him careening down the street with a contemptuous shove before he returned to where I stood.

"What was that voice you used?"

I allowed the tension to seep out of my muscles. "I'll teach it to you. Not tonight."

He nodded, retrieved the sword and returned it to its scabbard, and strode off whence we had come. I watched him recede into the night and disappear.

"Go," I whispered to the darkness. "Live long and well. I give you back your life."

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Act Three: Ministry

Good Guys

"You asked Louis Redmond out?" The furrows on Katie Guynemer's forehead threatened to crack her foundation makeup.

Celeste Holmgren nodded. "For Friday evening."

"And he said yes?"

Celeste looked from side to side, to see if anyone else in the cafeteria were listening. "Yes, he did." *After he got over being thunderstruck.* "Why?"

Katie shook her head in disbelief. Her long brown curls rippled like willow branches in a breeze. "Silly, the man is unapproachable. There are women here who are afraid even to speak to him...men, too."

Well, I approached him and lived to talk about it. "Why? Does he eat babies for breakfast or something?"

Katie's face did something that was part smile and part grimace. "No, but...Silly, you've only been here a few months. Have you ever heard the way they talk about him? He's practically a god here."

Celeste sat back in the hard plastic chair, the second half of her tuna on rye forgotten. If Katie were trying to warn her off Louis, she'd picked a strange way to do it. Still, Celeste wanted any information she could get. She was too new to Onteora Aviation to disregard any source of information about her colleagues in engineering, even if it ultimately reduced to gossip. Katie, secretary to special projects director Roger Morrison for the past six years, was a potential gold mine.

"I was at a meeting with him and Allan Reardon last Friday about the new radar system." She kept her tone casual. "He's impressive. He said very little, but you could tell he never misses

anything. He shut Reardon down a couple of times with just a few words. I got the feeling he could have whatever he wants around here."

Katie giggled. "You don't know the half of it, Silly. Reardon's only got that job because Louis doesn't want it."

"Huh?"

"Louis Redmond is the uncrowned king of the engineering division." Katie shivered. "Team leaders have gotten into fights in the hallways over who's going to get him next. He picks his own projects. You know Rolf Svenson?"

"The Simulations group leader? Louis used to report to him, didn't he?"

Katie nodded. "A couple of years back, Allan asked Rolf whether he needed seven or eight people for the Dazzler lab. Rolf said thanks, he'd just take Louis. Allan laughed and said no, he didn't want to overstaff the project!"

Well, I already knew he was good.

"Is he a good guy?"

Katie's animation disappeared. She fidgeted with a saltcellar. "He doesn't socialize with anyone here, Silly. Well, maybe a little with Rolf. When he's here, he's all business."

"Maybe that's why people are afraid of him."

Katie stared at the saltcellar. Around them, the early-lunch crowd was thinning as Onteora Aviation's employees discarded their leavings and returned to their desks.

"Is there more, Katie?"

The secretary nodded but kept her eyes lowered. Celeste waited.

"Do you know the medical park on Fullerton Boulevard, just outside the city?"

Better than I want to. "Sure, why?"

"He spends a lot of his free time there, Silly. Carrying a big sign."

Celeste's hand rose to her mouth. "Oh."

Their conversation petered out. A few minutes later they parted company and headed for their desks.

Alex Wolfson intercepted Celeste in the corridor. She smiled briefly, held down her irritation, and made to continue on.

"Celeste, are you ever going to --"

She slipped past him and walked as quickly as she could. "Not now, Alex."

"But --"

She resisted the urge to run. "I have a lot to do."

"Celeste!" It was near to a scream, and it halted her. She turned and reluctantly met Alex's gaze. The tall, husky engineer was trembling. His eyes were brimming and his hands were clenched white at his sides. "Why won't you talk to me?"

What would the point be? "It's over, Alex. It didn't work. Give yourself a little time to get used to it. Now let me be." She turned again and hurried on, willfully deaf to the sobs from behind her.

At her desk, Celeste checked her E-mail and found seventeen messages, all from Alex. She read the first one, grimaced, and deleted the rest without opening them.

From the moment Celeste opened her townhouse door to find him in a dark blue suit and brilliantly polished Oxfords, Louis was the soul of courtesy. Yet before they'd reached the restaurant, it was clear that he wasn't socially well traveled. He hesitated over little decisions, like whether to offer her his arm, or whether to order for them both. She took the lead several times, where a more worldly man would not have needed the assistance. He didn't appear to resent it but rather to appreciate it, and it charmed her.

The restaurant was Continental and beautiful, dinner was delicious, and their small talk was unforced and plentiful.

When he'd finished his dessert, he leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together over his midsection. He wore a look of acuity. "So why me?"

She nearly dropped her coffee cup. "Why not you?" *Is this where you open your closet and take me on a guided tour of the skeletons?*

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just not used to female attention, I guess."

She grinned. "We can fix that. Are you having a good time?"

"Yes, very."

"Good. That's the point, in case it whizzed past you."

He chuckled and relaxed. "Software people spend too much time with their computers. After a few years we lose our ability to talk to flesh-and-bloods."

"You haven't had a problem so far."

"That's to your credit, Celeste."

Her face warmed. "Thank you." Their waiter placed the check at Louis's left hand. He laid a credit card on it without looking at it. The waiter whisked it away.

"Eaten here a lot?"

He shook his head. "No, this is the first time. Why?"

Her eyes roamed the restaurant. The decor looked like the work of a major artist. The furnishings and dining appurtenances were of the highest quality. Most of the guests were formally attired. She wished she'd gotten a peek at their bill.

"Where do you usually take your first dates?"

His face went slack for a moment, and she wondered if she might have offended him. Before she could withdraw the question or change the subject, he said "I haven't dated in a long time, Celeste."

How long? And why?

"How did you choose this place?"

He shrugged, his composure apparently restored. "It has a good reputation." The waiter returned with Louis's card and a credit slip. He signed the slip, pocketed the card, and rose. "Shall we go?"

At her door, it was she who was hesitant. He was attractive and powerfully appealing, though he was neither conventionally masculine nor socially assured. He'd been a most pleasant and attentive companion. Yet an imperative inner voice told her that to invite him in would be an error.

He relieved her by taking her hand in a soft clasp and murmuring, "Thank you for a wonderful evening, I'll see you Monday at the office." He glided off into the darkness before she could decide whether to offer him a goodnight kiss.

There were twenty-three messages on her answering machine, all from Alex.

When Celeste arrived at work Monday morning, Katie was on her before the door had closed. "So how did it go?"

Celeste grinned. "We had a very nice time. Join me for lunch and you'll get the gory details."

The secretary looked as if she might explode. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away, babe. Don't forget me."

Celeste's E-mail was jammed with messages from Alex. She deleted them all unread and concentrated on her work. Noon's arrival was brought to her attention by Katie's impatient cough from her cubicle entrance. She grabbed her handbag and followed the secretary through the gray

fabric maze to the plant cafeteria.

They'd consumed a large fraction of their chef's salads when Katie said, "Well? Am I going to have to torture it out of you?"

Celeste chuckled. "You know, when I told you about it last week, you got me all revved up. Had me expecting something ominous. It was just nice, Katie. He's a nice guy. A little inexperienced, but very good to be with, and that's about it."

Katie's eyes narrowed. "How was he in bed?"

Celeste gagged on her mouthful of lettuce. "For Christ's sake, Katie, he was so reserved and proper I was afraid even to kiss him goodnight."

The secretary snorted. "Well, then we'll have to wait to find out how he does on that part of the test."

Test? "Katie, it was just a date. I liked him, I enjoyed myself, but we might never have another one."

Katie's mouth fell open. She searched Celeste's face as if she were looking for evidence of demonic possession.

"Silly, how old are you?"

"I'll be thirty-two next month. So?"

"Come with me." Katie wiped her mouth and rose. Celeste followed her to the secretary's desk outside Allan Reardon's office. Katie went to the departmental files, twirled a combination lock and yanked open a drawer. She riffled briefly among the folders, extracted one and opened it on her desk.

"There. See that?"

Celeste looked down at her own name, personnel grade and salary.

"That's you. Now see this?" She flipped through the pages and stopped at Louis Redmond's. Celeste became uneasy.

"I don't think I'm supposed to see this."

"C'mon, where's the harm? Have a look."

Louis was a few months younger than Celeste, and made nearly twice her salary. The company had offered him a contract in perpetuity the year before, with a no-terminations clause. He'd turned it down.

"After thirty, it's not 'just a date' any more, girlfriend. It's a test. There are three parts: the wallet test, the friends and family test, and the bed test. If he passes the wallet test, two out of three is good enough. If he passes all three, you grab him and fight off the competition with a whip and a chair if you have to. I'd say Louis passes the wallet test, wouldn't you? Now look at this." Katie flipped to her own file entry. "That's me."

Celeste peered reluctantly at Kathleen Guynemer's personnel sheet. Katie was thirty-nine years old, single, and made about sixty percent of what Celeste did.

"After I got divorced and started dating again, I was all raw nerves for a while." The secretary's voice had roughened. "I tried to relax by telling myself it was just for fun. This is what that got me. It's a test, Silly. Don't earn your nickname...the way I did."

It was Wednesday before Celeste bumped into Louis again. He immediately asked if she'd like to have dinner with him again that coming Friday. She agreed without hesitation.

The E-mail notes from Alex continued to pour into her computer. She deleted them unopened. At least there were no more in-person entreaties.

Thursday night, forty-nine days after her last encounter with Alex, she bought a home pregnancy test kit and used it. The dark ring at the bottom of the little tube was distinct and unmistakable.

"What did you think of the movie?" Celeste pulled Louis's arm against her and walked closely alongside him.

He shrugged. "I'm not big on tearjerkers. It was pretty decent entertainment, but I have a feeling they distorted the facts of his life a bit."

"Whose? C. S. Lewis's?"

He nodded. "I have a hard time matching the character in the movie with the things he wrote."

"You've read his books?"

"All of them."

He unlocked the passenger door of his pickup truck and helped her into it. Even with his assistance, her stiletto heels made it a challenge.

When they were in motion, she asked, "Do you have any favorite hobbies?"

"Hm? No, I read a lot, that's about it."

"So, how do you pass the time when you're not at work? Just reading?"

He guided the truck through the gate of her townhouse complex, wheeled into a convenient parking place, and killed the engine. "Well, I do a few other things, but nothing you'd call exciting."

I've got to know before this gets any more serious.

Trying to sound casual and failing completely, she said, "Any causes?"

He turned and looked at her without speaking, then let himself out of the truck and went around to her side to help her out. She took his arm again as they began the walk to her door.

"If you were to take Route 231 through the city, turn south onto Fullerton Boulevard, and stay on it for about half a mile, you'd come to a light industrial area. On the southern edge there's a medical park, just a few one-story buildings that share a parking lot. Most Saturdays when the weather is good, you'd find me standing at the entrance with a sign that says 'Pregnant? Please talk to me first.' "

Katie was right.

"Operation Rescue, Louis?"

He shook his head as they mounted the short flight of concrete steps that stood before her door. "No, I don't much care for that bunch. When they're there, I'm not. This is just me, and sometimes another fellow who feels the way I do."

Instead of unlocking her door at once, she turned to face him. He stood with his hands clasped before him. She could read nothing from his face in the dim moonlight.

"And how is that?"

He looked down briefly. "That abortion is a horrible thing. That it should be a last resort, to save a mother's life, not a first to spare her some inconvenience. That most women who have abortions wouldn't, if they knew how they'd feel afterward." He said it calmly, no strain apparent.

"Are you a Catholic by any chance, Louis?"

He stood a little straighter. "Not by chance, Celeste. By mature choice, and by the grace of God."

Something in the words flicked her on the raw. Scorn poured into her voice. "I see. And of course that 'grace' gives you the right to interfere in the mature choices of women you've never met?"

His eyes flared wide. "I interfere in no one's choices, Miss Holmgren. I force myself on no one. I present information and alternatives. Sometimes it seems as if the rest of society is practically shoving women into abortion clinics, rushing them in with no chance to check other

options or think about what they're doing. I don't block the doors. I stand beside them with an offer of assistance. If that be interference, make the most of it."

He started away, then faced her again. "By the way, you might have the wrong idea about something else as well. I'm not opposed to abortion because I'm a Catholic. Being opposed to abortion is part of what qualifies me to *be* a Catholic. Give that a spin on your mental merry-go-round and see where it gets off. Thanks for your company this evening. I'll see you at the office next week."

He strode off into the darkness before she could reclaim her voice.

The week was a slow one. The flood of unwanted E-mail from Alex continued, but it was a minor thing compared to the sadness Celeste felt over the contretemps with Louis. She'd grown genuinely fond of him, and had begun to toy with possibilities.

The few times she saw Louis in passing, he was reserved but courteous. After one such encounter near Katie's desk, the secretary quizzed Celeste about "how it's going with the two of you," and Celeste changed the subject.

Thursday afternoon, she called the clinic on Fullerton Boulevard and asked for an appointment. The receptionist told her to come by at nine AM on Monday. The girl's voice was so cheerful that she might have been making appointments for manicures, rather than for the termination of pregnancies.

Celeste immediately told her supervisor she wouldn't be in the following Monday, hurried back to her cubicle, and tried not to think about it any further. She didn't succeed.

On Monday morning Celeste bathed and groomed herself with particular care, as if to emphasize to herself that what she was about to do to the unwelcome guest in her womb had nothing to do with the rest of her. She drove mechanically through the city to the medical park, taking no notice of anything she saw along the way. When she saw the Operation Rescue activists at the entrance to the parking lot, each one brandishing a garish placard with an angry slogan, she hunched her shoulders and drove quickly past.

The clinic was clean and briskly professional. From the moment she presented herself at the front desk, the clinicians tried their best to make the whole affair an exercise in routine procedure. No doubt it was routine for them. But she was unprepared for the sense of failure, of emptiness, that followed her out the clinic door and back to her townhouse. She spent the rest of the day blotting tears and counting regrets.

The next morning, she arrived at her cubicle to find Alex there.

"What do you want?" She set her handbag down as he rose from her guest chair.

He looked down on her ominously from his six foot, four inch height. His face was a thundercloud about to erupt. "I saw you at the abortion clinic yesterday."

Her blood froze.

"Whose child was it, Celeste? Was it mine?"

She straightened and stared him full in the eyes. "It was mine, Alex. That's all you need to know. Now get out."

She turned to seat herself in her desk chair, but he clamped an outsized hand on her shoulder and roughly whirled her about. Terror lanced through her at the sight of the madness in his eyes.

"You killed my child, and you haven't even got the guts to admit to it," he whispered. He moved forward slowly, and she retreated until the backs of her thighs were pressed against the edge of her desk. "I've been begging you to let me speak to you for more than a month, and you haven't had the time to respond, but *this* you had plenty of time for. Making room for somebody

else's bastard, maybe?"

She panicked, swung openhanded at his face and connected solidly. As he staggered backward, she tried to bolt past him, and failed. He shoved her back against her desk with a sweep of one arm and raised the other to strike her. She closed her eyes and whimpered, arms raised against the imminent blow.

It did not fall. Instead there was a sound of scuffling and a crash. When she opened her eyes, she found Alex on his back in the corridor. Louis stood between them.

Alex roared and hurled himself at the smaller man. Louis did something blurrily fast with hands and feet, and Alex crashed onto his back again, even more noisily. Before Alex could rise a second time, Louis grabbed a handful of his shirtfront and tossed him ten feet down the corridor with a flick of his arm.

Louis sauntered to where Alex Wolfson lay, hoisted and tossed him down the corridor a second time, and a third. Every other engineer on the floor stood watching.

"That's so you won't think it was some kind of trick."

The older man lay supine, looking up at Louis in obvious fear.

"I want you to imagine an invisible shield, Alex. A shield that nothing can penetrate. The harder you ram into that shield, the harder it bounces you back. Imagine that shield wrapped around this lady, and imagine it getting very angry with you. If you want to keep all your teeth, you'd better not make that shield any angrier. Now get back to your desk before I kick you there."

Alex picked himself up slowly, his eyes riveted to Louis's face. Just before he turned away, his gaze flicked toward Celeste, and Louis spoke again.

"That shield will always be on the job, Alex. Get moving."

Wolfson fled.

"Are you okay?"

Celeste nodded. "Are you going to get in trouble over this?"

Louis grinned. "Management here shows me a certain deference. Let me know if he bothers you again."

"Is there anything you're not good at?"

The grin soured. "Writing begging letters. Changing the subject. Holding my tongue. Never mind that. What's Alex's problem?"

Celeste pressed her joined hands down in her lap and closed her eyes briefly.

"We went out a few times, just after I joined the company. At first he seemed like a good guy, even if he was a little old for me. He seemed flattered that I was willing to be seen with him. But mostly I was just lonely, and it didn't get better, and eventually I made the mistake of sleeping with him."

She paused to allow him to react, but he continued to listen without expression.

"It didn't work out, but he got needy, wouldn't leave me alone. I told him I didn't want to see him any more, and then it really got bad. Piles of E-mail. Phone calls at midnight. Stuff left on my stoop. I guess he saw me yesterday at...at the clinic."

The blood drained from Louis's face. He half-fell into her guest chair as he searched for words.

"You had an abortion?"

She nodded and forced back her tears. "He must have been there with the Operation Rescue people."

Louis shook his head. "Not Alex."

"What makes you so sure?"

"You don't need to hear about it. Was it his baby?"

She wanted to say anything else, but under the power of his gaze the truth forced its way out of her. "Yes."

Louis looked away. He murmured "I thought, maybe just this once," and then trailed off completely.

In that moment, Celeste saw her decision, the circumstances around it, and its consequences woven into a single tapestry of sorrow that wound about her like a burial shroud. She could not shake herself free.

"Would it have been better for me to bear a child, Louis? Would it have been better for me to abandon my career and become a single mother on welfare? Or perhaps I should have married a man I didn't even like, so the baby would have a father at the expense of his mother's happiness?"

Louis sat in silence for a long time, eyes on the floor.

"There were other options, Celeste. I might have offered you one."

Her mouth dropped open. All her anger and pain were shocked out of her.

"You're not serious."

He rose without speaking, grinned wanly at her and made to leave. She surged out of her chair and grabbed his hand.

"Louis, I've been kicking myself around the block for the way I spoke to you on our last date. I'm sorrier than I can say. If I ever meant anything in my life, I mean this now. I want you to know that it's not too late for us to try again."

A spasm blended from innumerable emotions crossed Louis Redmond's face. What it left behind was the purest desolation.

"Yes, it is."

He squeezed her hand one last time and departed.

==<O>==

Intermezzo

He came to visit me not long afterward.

I'm usually able to tell when someone is walking in my forest. It's not an organized sort of sense, just a subliminal detector that somehow reads the tremors in the trees and alerts me that my borders have been crossed.

When I know someone's coming, I don't wait indoors. I can't. I donned a jacket, stepped out the "front" door of my trailer, and waited on the little wooden landing until I saw him emerge from the treeline.

He looked unwell, not in the body but in the spirit. His face was slack and his mouth hung partway open. I could hear his breathing when he was still ten yards away. He tramped through the remnants of the spring snow as if he had lost his strength, or his will to use it.

"What's up, Louis?"

Even his shrug spoke of a bone-deep weariness. "Nothing. Out for a walk. Are you busy?" I am never busy, as he reckons it. "Not at the moment. Coffee?"

"Sure."

We went inside, fetched coffee and sat at my dinette table. It's about large enough to set a TV dinner on and still have room for the salt and pepper service, but I don't need more.

"Are things not going well?" I said.

"No, no real changes. Life goes on."

That it does. "You don't look your best."

"I know." He wrapped his hands around his mug and hunched over it, as if he sought words it wouldn't take too much effort to speak.

I've never been happy to wait, but I have learned to wait for him. It has never been time wasted.

"They're killing themselves, Malcolm."

"Who is?"

He jerked an arm at nothing. "All of them. All the ones you thought I could protect." The mug quivered in his hand.

"How so, Louis?"

He told me the story of Celeste and Alex and their baby. When he wound down, he waited for me to tell him he was wrong, in whole or in part. I had nothing to say. He was right.

Tiran discovered long ago that the path to victory was to enlist humans in their own destruction. He could never make murderers out of a large enough fraction of humanity to ensure the demise of all. So he set out to make them suicides.

One doesn't simply say to a healthy, vital man, "Have you considered the advantages of being dead lately?" One must be indirect. One must give one's target a taste for death, introduce him first to the little deaths, the caesuras of reason that numb the conscience and erode the soul. Drunkenness. Drugs. Immersion in an unthinking mob. Spectacles of destruction and animalistic displays of lust. The sacrifice of the unborn.

With each little death humans have embraced, Tiran has moved a step closer to his goal. Vast numbers of them are addicted to these oblivions now, and more yield to them daily. Meanwhile, "leaders" filled with pride and devoid of scruple rise to the levers of power, where they create conflicts among men that will allow them to pose as statesmen and peacemakers, while their minions maim and slaughter and spare not.

Tiran's instruments are envy and fear, and he plays them with the skill of a virtuoso.

Before me sat the crown of Evoy's creation, the highest child of his race. The torrent of sorrow that had coursed through his life would have swept any other man into irremediable despair. He'd reached out to save innumerable wounded and terrified creatures, and watched nearly all of them wither and die in his hands. He'd poured forth his powers without stint, and had reaped next to nothing.

The strain had begun to tell on him.

I could not use him as I'd intended, but I could no more allow him to misuse himself. Yet it would not serve to tell Louis Redmond that the evil galloping through the world was not his problem. It was a sentiment he'd reject as he heard it.

I had to connect with what powered him, pull it forward and make it bear him up.

"Louis," I said a little unsteadily, "you've taken a lot on your shoulders if you think you can save them from themselves. It's insanity to think that that's your duty."

He looked at me dubiously.

"As I recall, someone else undertook that job, quite a long time ago. Ever since, it's been up to each of us to use the chance we'd been given, hasn't it?"

He allowed me the barest nod.

"What did Job say, when the torments were at their worst?"

A shadow of confusion flitted across his face.

"When he'd lost everything, all his goods, his house, his friends and family too? His neighbors gathered to chastise him as he stood in the ruins, certain that he'd earned his tribulations, and how did he reply to them?"

Louis's eyes slid closed. "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the

latter day upon the earth.' "

"Do you?"

He didn't reply, but he straightened in his seat. Something shifted behind his eyes, despair sliding away to make room for the return of hope. He seemed to firm up as I watched.

Presently he rose, put his mug in the sink, clapped me on the shoulder with a grin and left me there alone. And I, who had suffered every torture flesh can be made to feel, who had died more than two hundred times, who had led armies of tens of thousands as they butchered their way through Asia and Europe, wept for the second time in my life.

The greater part of the Book of Job is a true story. The happy ending is fiction.

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Champions

"Yo, T.T."

Tanya Taliaferro looked up from the most recent edition of Onteora Aviation's approved vendors list. Jake Axthelm stood in her doorway with his characteristic cat-that-ate-the-canary grin. "What's up, Jake?"

Axthelm's eyes gleamed wickedly. "Me, but I'll be nice and save it for later. Think you might be game for something kinky tonight?"

She smirked at the handsome young buyer. "Remember who you're talking to. What most guys mean by kinky doesn't even show up on my radar screen."

Axthelm's mouth twisted into an even naughtier grin. "This'll burn it out. I told you about Jody Erling, didn't I?"

"The busty little redhead who thinks she's a witch, right?"

He nodded. "Well, her mentor in the Craft came out from California to visit with her. I met him last night."

"Him? I thought witches had to be women."

He shook his head. "Era of equal opportunity. This guy is some hot stuff. Built like Mr. Universe. Got that dark broody thing going for him, too. And Jody says he swings."

Oho. "Gotcha. Does Jody swing?"

"From both sides of the plate, babe." He planted his fists on her desk and leered down at her. His eyes traced her breasts with neither pretense nor embarrassment. "Into it?"

"Stop drooling on my paperwork. Ask them over. We'll see who can hit the high hard one. Now let me get some work done, or else."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Or else what?"

The purchasing manager unfolded her long, shapely body from her chair, planted her fists against Axthelm's fists, and fitted her forehead and nose against his. Her tongue flicked out, laved his lips and returned home in an instant.

"Or else I jam the door shut, rip off your drawers and drain you so limp you won't even be able to drive home, much less hold up your end of the party tonight. Get your ass out of my office before I decide it's a good idea anyway."

He laughed and complied.

The Honorable Eric Lazear, Representative from the Fifty-Second California Congressional District, strode into Stephen Sumner's office, seated himself in the leather guest chair and crossed one leg over the other as if he owned the entire building. His athletic physique, boyish features and thick auburn hair bespoke an ascent through the political world that had

begun young and had never been checked. He carried not a single item of business: no briefcase, no folio, no day-timer, no laptop computer, not even a cellular phone. Sumner noted that his suit jacket had been carefully tailored not to ride over his torso, even when he clasped his hands behind his head. He thought about rising and offering his hand, decided against it.

"Good afternoon, Congressman. What can OA do for you?"

"Decent weather would be a start." Lazear indicated the snows piling up around OA's Administration building with a toss of his head. "No wonder so many of your people have been moving to my state. How do you stand it?"

"Central New Yorkers are a special breed, Congressman --"

"Call me Eric, please."

"-- you can't live here if you're uncomfortable with a couple of feet of snow, or gale force winds, or roads you can ice skate on. After a while, you get to prefer it this way."

Lazear snorted and shook his head. "No accounting for it." His eyes traveled the room, inventorying Sumner's furniture and *objets d'art*. "So, where do the negotiations stand with General Aeronautics?"

Sumner smiled formally. "The figures are good, but there are still two approvals to be secured before we can ink the contract."

The politician sat forward. "Which offices are giving you a hard time?"

"Not Pentagon approvals. It's our in-house process that isn't quite finished. GA's satellite transceiver and its proposal for the avionics mounting system are still under study."

There was a moment's silence.

"Do you expect any problems, Steve?"

I don't recall inviting you to call me Steve.

"I expect the analysis of the mounting system to be completed today. The proposal center will get it tomorrow, most likely. I can check on the satellite unit for you, if you like."

"I like. It's vital to the national security that we get the Condor into full-scale development ASAP."

It's a lot more vital to your constituents.

"Why'd Forslund shove me off onto you, anyway?"

Sumner smiled again. "Washington relations are my job."

"As Chairman of the Executive Committee?"

Sumner pondered an assortment of polite circumlocutions, then decided to drop the bomb.

"Impressive title, isn't it? But it means less than you think. I have no decision-making power to speak of. I can't direct our Projects office or our engineers. I'm just the buffer state that politicians and bureaucrats have to cross before they're allowed access to our real top management or the people who actually build things."

Sumner got more pleasure out of seeing the blood drain from Lazear's features than he'd had in his last five years in business. The politician's knuckles showed white against the heavily padded arms of his chair.

"Let's be candid, Congressman." Lazear frowned at the use of his title. "You're here because GA is the biggest firm in your district. They bid against us to be prime contractor on this bird, and we won. Now they want a piece of the pie as a principal subcontractor. No one here is averse to that, as long as they can deliver on time and within specifications. Our best engineers are making up their minds about that, even as we speak. If they green-light GA's proposals, you'll have an early Christmas present for your constituents. If they don't...well, I hate to be the one to tell you, but there's no appeal over their heads. OA corporate management does not override Engineering Division decisions."

Lazear's face had grown tight. "Never, Mr. Sumner?"

"Not once in forty-four years, Congressman."

"I see." The politician sat back in his chair. "Am I forbidden to speak to them?"

"The engineering teams doing the evaluations? Why, yes, until they report, you're forbidden to speak to them. Afterward I'll see what can be arranged."

Lazear's eyes were polished obsidian stones. "You don't appear to think much of the value of a collaboration with a firm -- and a state -- twice your size, Mr. Sumner."

"To the contrary. It might have immense value. Might. Our engineers will decide."

Kevin Conway winced. "Are you sure, Louis?"

Louis Redmond nodded. "This is not suitable for an assisted-launch aircraft. The design was cribbed from a FOBS reentry vehicle. Look at these fastener lines." The young engineer's finger traced a sharply curving arc across the blueprints between them. "A dozen catapult takeoffs would snap them in half."

Harry Toussaint had told Conway to treat General Aeronautics' submission with the greatest possible respect. He'd also said that Louis would make the final decision, by Floyd Holloway's decree. It appeared that the two objectives weren't compatible.

Why the hell is a software engineer ruling on a design for an avionics mount anyway?

No one had bothered to explain it to him. Harry had simply assigned him to assist Louis, had told him to give his opinions when they were requested and keep them bottled up when they weren't, and had sent him forth.

He's a wizard with a computer. He knows more physics and strength of materials than I do. He's more reliable than the mailman. It would be nice if he showed a little regard for political reality.

"Is there any way we could modify the design to make it suitable?"

Louis squinted up at him, then back at the drawings.

"No. The entire cradle would have to be recast as a one-piece extrusion, which means scrapping the original dies and developing new ones. That would add about thirty million to the NRE figures and eight months to the schedule, which destroys the costings and blows away the only reason we considered GA in the first place." He sat back in his chair and rubbed his temples. "We're going to have to do it ourselves."

Shit.

"Mahogany row is not going to like this, Louis."

Louis's eyes snapped wide. He put his palms flat against the conference table. "The Navy won't like it much if millions of dollars worth of avionics go flying around the fuselage of a combat aircraft while the pilot is trying to keep from getting his head shot off! Look, Kevin," he continued with less inflection, "I know Forslund wanted GA on the team for political reasons, and I know it will be a lot harder to get this through Congress without a California co-developer. But I'm not approving this design. We told them they had time for just one shot, and they blew off their own foot. Whose fault is that?"

"All right, all right. Will you be the bearer of bad tidings, or must I?"

Louis rose, swept up the melange of blueprints and tucked them under his arm, and headed for the door. "It's my report. I'll deliver it."

Thank God for that. "You want to spar tonight, work a little of this off?"

Louis didn't slow down. "Can't tonight. Maybe Wednesday."

"Okay."

Eric Lazear carefully ascended the icy concrete steps of the OA Engineering Center, squared his shoulders, pulled his Congressional ID card from his jacket pocket, and pushed

through the doors. A security guard seated behind a reception fixture looked up, saw the federal identification card where he expected to see a standard OA badge, and rose from his seat.

"Whom shall I call for you, sir?"

Lazear produced a glacial smile. "No one." He brushed past the guard and headed into the stairwell. His pose of assurance had exactly the effect he'd expected. The guard was paralyzed, torn between his duty to detain an inadequately escorted guest and the deference inspired by Lazear's Congressional status, and allowed him to proceed on.

The politician wasn't challenged again until he'd made it to the row of executive offices on the second floor. He was scanning nameplates for a title that might conduce to what he sought, when a tall, gaunt man in his forties with a fringe of gray-blond hair noticed that he had no badge and moved to intercept him.

"Excuse me, where's your escort?"

Lazear stood as erect as he could manage. Even so, the OA employee, whose badge read SVENSON, R., was three or four inches taller than he.

"I'm Congressman Eric Lazear of the fifty-second California district." The politician gave it his most brazen tone. "I'm here to get to the bottom of some irregularities in the subcontracting process that have the Defense Appropriations Committee a bit concerned. Where do I find the Director of Aerostructures?"

Much to Lazear's surprise, Svenson didn't fall to heel.

"Did Director Nyquist meet you downstairs, Congressman?"

Lazear smirked. "Would I be wandering around up here looking for him, unescorted, if he hadn't?"

Svenson's eyes narrowed. "That's what I'm trying to figure out. This is a secured area. For you to be here without an escort cleared for this zone is a violation of several laws, and puts the entire division in jeopardy. One more time, Congressman: did Leo Nyquist meet you downstairs? Please bear in mind that I'll ask him the same question."

Lazear's eyes widened.

"It's not smart to talk that way to a Congressman, bubba. The health and welfare of every man in this building could depend on my vote, some day."

Svenson stared at him in silence for perhaps three seconds before he grabbed Lazear's arm and spun him about. The politician's surprise at being manhandled was so great that Svenson managed to drag him about thirty feet toward the stairwell before he resisted.

"Take your hand off me!"

Lazear gave a furious shake. Svenson hung on and continued to pull him into the stairwell.

Though shorter than the Onteoran, Lazear was younger by a decade and outweighed him by twenty pounds. Once he'd put his full weight into shedding Svenson's grip, there was little the older, lighter man could do about it. That didn't stop him from trying.

When Svenson reached for him again, the politician forsook restraint and lashed out wildly. His fist caught Svenson on the cheekbone and sent him reeling back against the corridor wall. He gasped, put a hand briefly to the point of impact, and closed on Lazear with a hoarse yell.

They grappled for perhaps five seconds before strong hands pulled them apart. The hands belonged to a young man only slightly shorter than Svenson, with a red-blond crewcut, a broad-chested, athletic build, and a badge that read CONWAY, K. The newcomer's eyes flicked wonderingly between the combatants. Behind him, a gaggle of OA employees looked on in astonishment.

"Who is this guy, Rolf?"

Svenson gasped for breath. "Says he's a congressman. No escort."

Conway released his colleague and addressed his full attention to Lazear. "Who are you

and who are you here to see?"

The politician jerked himself free of Conway's grip and drew himself up to his full dignity. "I am Congressman Eric Lazear of California. I'm looking for Aerostructures Director Leo Nyquist. If you value your position, you'll fetch him for me at once. If you don't, I guarantee that you'll never work in defense again."

Conway shook his head. "You can save the threats, Congressman. Rolf, maybe you should get Leo while I babysit our friend, here."

A fresh wave of anger washed over the politician. He was on the edge of charging at the engineer, but could see that the muscular young man was braced for it. Conway saw the change in his body language and smiled.

"Whatever you thought you were doing, Congressman, you f...you blew it big time."

"How dare you --"

"Shut up." The command in Conway's voice stopped Lazear in mid-expletive. "Rolf Svenson is one of the best respected engineers at OA, *and* he's my friend, *and* you hit him hard enough to draw blood." A large hand took hold of Lazear's lapel. "That's all the slack you get. One more word, one more *twitch* out of you before Leo arrives, and your district will be holding a by-election."

Lazear shut up.

They gathered in Floyd Holloway's office. There were no smiles in evidence.

Holloway himself looked as if he'd rather have been in a dentist's chair. The way he pressed his lips into the smallest possible shape suggested that he feared he might wake up in one. Lazear and Aerostructures Department Director Leo Nyquist sat in the two guest chairs before Holloway's desk. Conway and Svenson sat side by side on the little divan at the far end of the room.

"Congressman," Holloway grated, "as much as we appreciate your interest in how we do business here, we can't have unescorted outsiders wandering around in secured areas. I'd have expected a member of Congress to understand that."

Lazear leaned forward, the light of battle in his eyes.

"No? Can you 'have' the Defense Appropriations Committee conduct an official investigation into your vendor approval and subcontracting practices?"

The temperature of the room plunged to an arctic level.

"The Honorable Eric Lazear," Holloway intoned as if announcing the politician's arrival at a formal party. "Republican, of the fifty-second district of California. You're in your second term, reelected against token opposition. Thirty-six years old, unmarried and childless. Previously a California state senator. LL.D. from Stanford Law, twelfth in a class of four hundred thirty. The largest donor to your re-election campaign was the company PAC of General Aeronautics of California, also in the fifty-second district. Three point three million dollars."

Lazear snarled, "So?"

Holloway's narrow, deeply lined face gave birth to a frigid smile. "Need I mention that you are *not* a member of the Defense Appropriations Committee?"

The politician stiffened as if he'd grabbed a live wire. "I never said I was."

Holloway pulled open a drawer, extracted a cassette recorder and laid it on his desktop. It was operating. The recording light glowed steadily.

"You will find, Congressman, that the officers and agents of this firm are quite careful in their dealings with outsiders, especially persons from our nation's capital. In forty-four years as a premier aerospace engineering house, OA has yet to incur a major scandal. We believe that our corporate policy of keeping outsiders away from our working teams is essential to continuing

that record into the future. Did Steve Sumner tell you that you'd be given access to the evaluation teams?"

Lazear hesitated. "I don't recall that he said anything about it."

Another icy smile. "How odd. He told me that he'd forbidden you to approach them, quite explicitly. Steve is an able man, and I'm disinclined to doubt his word."

Holloway rose from his seat. "Leo, my apologies for dragging you away from your duties. Congressman Lazear, the guard at the front desk of this building will be instructed to deny you access unless an officer of OA is willing to meet you there. It happens that I am the only corporate officer in this building. Do I make myself clear?"

Silence.

Holloway's eyes moved past Lazear to the divan behind him. "But perhaps we can send you home happy. Mr. Conway, refresh my memory, please: who are the leads on the evaluation teams for the General Aeronautics proposals?"

"Louis Redmond on the avionics support cradle, Drew MacLachlan on the satellite transceiver."

Holloway thumbed his intercom. "Miss Passalacqua, please have Louis Redmond, Andrew MacLachlan, and Tanya Taliaferro report to my office." He looked back at Eric Lazear. "Bear with us a moment, please. This won't take long."

Tanya hunched her shoulders together and pulled her chin as close to her chest as she could manage. The winter wind swirled relentlessly on the OA campus, turning the fine, dry snow into a torment for unprotected eyes and making the two-hundred-yard walk from Administration to the Engineering Center a test of fortitude no matter how heavily one dressed. Her stylish lambskin coat, which fell only to mid-thigh, was adequate covering for the fifty feet from her reserved parking space to the front door of the Administration building, but left much to be desired for any longer trek, especially when the wind blew.

At least the pavement's been plowed.

Her head hadn't entirely cleared from the night before. Jody had proved to be everything Jake said: tight bodied, pliable, and utterly without inhibition. Her mentor Grover was a dark and muscular hunk straight out of a fantasy novel. The four of them had gone through a fifth of tequila, two ounces of grass and quite a few chapters of the Kama Sutra before exhaustion set in. Tanya had managed a bare three hours of sleep.

Yeah, but what a way to spend an evening. Maybe I'll take up witchcraft.

I've never seen Jake like that before. Never would have guessed he was bi. But maybe he didn't know either. Grover's not the kind you say no to, anyway.

Maybe we can do it again tonight, before Grover goes back west. Maybe he's got a few tricks I haven't seen yet. And if not, Jake and I and my chest of toys can make do.

The shiver of anticipation displaced the shivers from the cold. Another evening might be filled, to leave no cracks for the dark thoughts to enter through.

The wooden heels of her boots clicked loudly against the stairs that led to the executive corridor. She turned the corner into Holloway's suite, strode past Adele Passalacqua with a nod, and let herself into the vice-president's inner office. It was full.

She recognized Holloway and Nyquist immediately. The two that sat on the little sofa at the back of the room looked familiar, but she couldn't recall their names. One of them, a young man with a broad, pleasantly open face, a burly build, and a mop of shiny red hair, sat up as she entered and focused his whole attention on her. She pulled in her already flat midsection and stood as straight as she could.

Three unknowns stood before Holloway's desk. One was a short, ordinary looking young

man, with a thick head of brown hair, dark brown eyes and a puzzled frown. The second was tall, unusually slender, and slightly stooped, with dark blue eyes and brown hair that glinted red under the fluorescent light. The third was a handsome, nicely built man in a gorgeously tailored three-piece suit, who stood unnaturally erect and whose eyes were wide with outraged disbelief.

"Congressman Lazear," Holloway said, "This is Tanya Taliaferro, the purchasing manager for subcontractor relations. Miss Taliaferro, I'd like you to meet Eric Lazear, Congressman from the fifty-second California district." He nodded toward the handsome man.

"General Aeronautics," she murmured, and put out her hand. Lazear, who had extended his own, flinched at the words. He swallowed it immediately and bathed her with a searchlight smile.

"Charmed, Miss. Is that everyone, Mr. Holloway?"

Holloway nodded. "Mr. Redmond and Mr. MacLachlan are the engineers you wanted to speak to. Miss Taliaferro will be acting on their recommendations. Miss Taliaferro, would you please describe for the congressman what happens when an Engineering Division evaluation team reaches a decision?"

"Well," she faltered, "they send their final reports to me, and I edit the approved vendors list as necessary. Legal writes the contracts, I initial them for procedural aspects, and after that I'm out of it."

"Are any countersignatures required on those recommendations? Mine or Mr. Nyquist's, for example?"

"Uh, no, sir, not since I started working here. The policy manual says nothing about it."

The vice president nodded again. "So you see, Congressman, the engineers have the final word. That's why we protect them from outside influences. They gather the data they need, they make up their minds, and the company moves on. Mr. MacLachlan," Holloway said in an elevated voice, "bearing in mind that you don't have to submit your report until the end of the week, could you tell us what the substance of it will be?"

The tall, gaunt engineer, star of the electronics department for Tanya's entire tenure at OA, glanced at the congressman and briefly chewed his upper lip. "Well, I'm not perfectly happy with the sideband specifications, but I think the satellite unit will pass, if they mod the second stage of the --"

Holloway cut him off with a wave. "That's quite all right, Mr. MacLachlan, we don't need the details. Mr. Redmond," and again Holloway's voice blared like a medieval herald announcing the arrival of a king, "what about the support web for the avionics? Are you nearing a decision?"

All heads turned to the short young man. Tanya eyed him dubiously.

That's Louis Redmond?

"It won't do," he said. Eric Lazear might have been a janitor for all the attention Redmond accorded him. "Too many axes of vulnerability under acceleration stress. Not suitable for a cat-launched plane."

Lazear winced. The room buzzed with a nondirectional murmur. Holloway waited for it to die away.

"Can it be modified to meet our needs?"

Redmond shook his head.

"Are you telling me," Lazear blared, "that there's no --"

Redmond swiveled. His glare staggered Lazear where he stood. "I'm not telling *you* anything, Congressman." His index finger flicked out to indicate Floyd Holloway. "That's the man I report to. That's the man who signs my paycheck. You're here by his sufferance. You heard my verdict. Now deal with it."

Blood rushed into Lazear's face. His hands balled into fists at his sides. Redmond faced

him with an expression of polite solemnity.

Holloway stared at Lazear until the politician met his gaze. "There's your answer, Congressman. I'm sorry it's not the one you wanted, but these things happen. Miss Taliaferro, would you be kind enough to escort the congressman out to his car?"

"Is your authority really that limited, Miss Taliaferro?"

Tanya nodded without looking up. "When it comes to subcontracts? It sure is. With little stuff, run of the mill office supplies and routine equipment for the labs, I have a lot of latitude, but the engineers *own* the contracting process."

The guard scowled at Lazear as they passed through the lobby. Tanya noted that the congressman's lip curled in response, the disdain of a triumphant opponent for an adversary that had offered too little resistance for good sport.

This guy thinks he's hot shit.

Hell, maybe he is. No one else from Washington ever got into Engineering unescorted.

"I was distressed at Mr. Holloway's attitude toward Congress." Lazear's even baritone pierced her brief reverie. "He talked as if we were a bunch of vultures and con men looking for any opening to exploit a helpless contractor." A fresh layer of ice crunched beneath their feet as they crossed the parking lot. From horizon to horizon, the sky was filled with giant gray clouds, pregnant with snow. "The man should spend a bit more time out of his office. There are honest people in the world who aren't engineers."

"Mr. Holloway isn't an engineer."

Lazear stopped and turned to face her squarely, heedless of the invasive wind that belled out his topcoat.

"What's his background?"

Tanya thought hard. "Business admin, I think. He's been at OA a long time, but as far as I know he's never worked in development, except as a manager." A mighty blast of wind sent a long, deep shiver through her. "Mr. Lazear, could we get out of the open, please?"

He flushed. "Certainly. Would you mind sitting in my car and talking with me for a few minutes more?"

"Sure." They crossed to his rented Cadillac and seated themselves in it. Lazear immediately started the engine and cranked the heater up to full blast. Within seconds the winter chill had begun to fade from Tanya's bones.

"That's better." Lazear pulled off his gloves and rubbed his hands briskly in the stream of heat from the dashboard grille.

"A lot, thanks."

"Ever feel that you're too good for your employer, Tanya?"

Tanya bit back a reply and took a moment to study the politician's face. He had the look of a man who'd thought of a promising new line of attack on a difficult problem.

"I haven't been here that long, Mr. Lazear."

"Eric, please." He smiled. It wasn't the all-stops-out campaign smile he'd shone on her in Holloway's office. It was a calculated smile, more subtext than genuine emotion. It hinted at much but promised nothing.

"You'd be about twenty-eight, am I correct?"

"Twenty-nine."

"A New Yorker all your life?"

She smirked. "Born and raised in Onteora."

Lazear's smile gained an increment of certainty. "And do you feel you're wedded to the purchasing manager's trade?"

"Uh, no. I mean, I do it pretty well, but I can do other things too."

"Such as?"

She shrugged. "Just about anything a company needs."

The politician nodded slowly. "I'd imagine so. You carry yourself like someone who knows her way around the labyrinth, who knows where all the bodies are buried." He paused. "That Redmond fellow seems to think a lot of himself. Is there anything I should know about him?"

Tanya struggled to hide her discomfort. "I couldn't say. He's got a nosebleed reputation, that's all I can tell you."

"Think you could find out anything more between now and...when does he file his report? Friday?"

The stakes were mounting with each word. "I'll ask around, but the Admin types I hang with aren't likely to know much. Engineering's a whole 'nother world."

He nodded. "Have you ever thought of exploring career possibilities outside New York, Tanya?"

She'd known it was coming for several sentences, but it took her breath away anyway.

"Uh, not really. Did you have something in mind?"

He nodded again. His eyes flicked swiftly across her bosom, her legs, and her ringless left hand, and his smile went to full campaign intensity.

"Why don't we discuss it over dinner?"

Conway hung back as Holloway's office emptied. The vice-president noticed and raised his eyebrows.

"Is there some further problem, Mr. Conway?"

Conway stepped toward the door, assured himself that the others had cleared Holloway's reception area, and shut it quietly.

"I have a question, sir."

Holloway stood silent, eyes expectant.

"It's pretty well known around the shop that you and Louis don't get along."

The vice president said nothing.

"But Harry told me it was your decision to have him chair the support web evaluation team." Conway had a spike of unease, as he wondered for the first time whether his supervisor would regard this as a breach of confidence.

Holloway nodded. "Yes, it was. And Mr. Redmond being a software engineer, whereas you are an aerostructures engineer and a project leader to boot, I imagine you'd like to know why."

"Well, yes, sir, I would, if you, uh, I mean, if --"

Holloway gestured toward one of the guest chairs. "Sit down, Mr. Conway."

Conway sat. Holloway resumed his own seat and folded his hands before him.

"I am a senior vice president for a middleweight defense firm. The division I administer bills more than two hundred million dollars per year to the federal government. Does that sound like a lot of money to you?"

Damned right it does. "Of course, sir."

"And all paid to us by a single, irreplaceable customer. Perhaps you'll hazard a guess at what fraction of it is paid out in salary and operating expenses."

Conway closed his eyes and tried to get a purchase on the problem. It proved surprisingly elusive. "Eighty per cent?"

OA's vice president for engineering produced a humorless smirk and shook his head.

"Ninety-seven point nine percent last fiscal year."

Conway's mouth fell open.

"So you can see, we don't have a lot of room for error. An error that placed this division in the red would be marked to my account. It happened once, when I was still new to this position." Holloway's jaws tightened. "Anders Forslund called me into his office and told me that it was the only such year I'd be allowed. He didn't invite me to sit, didn't even look at me. He just told me I'd used up my margin, not to let it happen again, and to get back to work."

Holloway canted back his chair and turned to look out his corner window at the snow swirling over the OA campus below.

"I am not, as you know, an engineer by training, so in technical matters I am completely dependent on those of you who are. But I am a manager, and a good one. The work of the manager lies in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of those he manages, and then deploying them to best advantage.

"Any manager can direct engineers to perform within their fields, Mr. Conway. A good manager learns what else they can do, and uses that as well. A top manager, a manager who consistently puts black ink on his company's bottom line, learns which ones have the gift of being right when they venture beyond their specialties. Have you ever known Mr. Redmond to take the losing side in a technical dispute?"

"Uh, no, sir."

"Nor have I. In point of fact, I've never known him to be wrong about a non-technical matter either. Whenever he and I have held opposite positions, his has turned out to be the right one, whether it was inside his nominal domain of expertise or not. Perhaps I don't like him much, but I can't discount a record like that. So I've ceased to oppose him. Instead, I exploit him."

Holloway turned back to face him squarely. Something beyond amusement glimmered faintly on his austere features. If it hadn't been impossible, Conway would have called it joy.

"You're developing quite a record yourself, Mr. Conway. It's why I agreed to let Mr. Nyquist and Mr. Toussaint make you a project leader at such a young age. Keep it up and your name will go on the list of all-terrain reliables, along with Mr. Redmond's. You'll find yourself pulled into areas that have nothing to do with aerostructures. You won't like it at first. You'll feel unequipped to cope. You'll hesitate to argue your case against men with more experience and more impressive credentials. But you'll do it, when you have a conviction, and you'll be right. You'll help OA amass that precious black ink. And it won't matter a dented copper groat whether anyone likes you or not."

The vice president rose and inclined his head in dismissal. "Now, if I may quote our founder and chief executive officer in one of his more memorable moments, get back to work."

Wednesday morning was even more rugged for Tanya than Tuesday had been. She staggered out of her car and wobbled up the Admin building steps, fighting the harshest winds of the season and wondering what on Earth had moved her to wear a skirt and high heels that day.

She hadn't been at her desk three minutes, hadn't taken her first sip from her coffee, when Jake barged in with resentment painted across his features in broad strokes.

"So how did the 'family emergency' play out?"

She shrugged and looked pointedly down at the papers spread on her desk.

"Leave room for a nice dinner at Grucci's?"

That brought her head up and a blast of color into her cheeks. "Have we got some kind of problem, Jake?"

He perched sidesaddle on the edge of her desk and folded his arms across his chest. His hurt was plainer with every second.

"Look, T.T., any time you want the evening off from me, you just have to say so. I can always find other things to do with my time. But I don't like being lied to so you can cozy up to

some out-of-town prick on an expense account. What is he, a liaison from a subcontractor?"

He must have followed us out of the building and to the restaurant. How much further did he follow us?

I can't take the chance that he doesn't know.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. "His name is Eric Lazear, and he's a Congressman from California. We were talking about the possibility of my joining his Washington staff."

Jake Axthelm's eyes went wide and his hands dropped to his sides. In his astonishment he slid off the edge of her desk, and caught himself barely in time to avoid falling to the floor.

"You...what did he want you to do for him?"

A bolt of fear raced through her.

He can't know about that, unless he sneaked in disguised as my ficus tree and listened to us all night long.

"Nothing, Jake. We met yesterday in Holloway's office. He was impressed with the way I handled some questions he had about our procedures, and he wanted to know whether I'd be willing to move."

Not too far from the truth. And I showed him how willing I was to move, anyway.

The Member from California's fifty-second district had been both enthusiastic and impressive. She had a couple of not-unpleasant aches in intimate places to remind her.

Jake's face shone with a tremulous uncertainty. She couldn't decide what it meant, nor what she wanted it to mean. If he feared for her welfare, it was flattering and warming...but then she'd have to deal with the guilt from having shoved him aside for a stranger. If he feared to lose her, it was amusing and pathetic...but then what could she think of herself for having allowed him to attach himself to her, and for using him nearly every night for eight months to fill her time and scratch her manifold itches?

"Jake..." A wave of vertigo washed over her. She paused, let it pass, and did her best to smile. "Nothing's decided yet. I'm here, you're here, and we're on for tonight, just like always. Do you want to have Jody and Grover over again?"

The tangent seemed to jolt him back toward normality. "Uh, sure, if you're into it. Jody said she and Grover had a ball Monday night."

"When did you talk to her?"

"Last night. Want me to call and invite them again?"

"Sure." She let out a shaky sigh. "But for now I have to work, darlin'. You can see I'm not at my best, so let me have myself to myself for a while, okay?"

Jake's eyes lingered on hers, still tinged with that ambiguous suggestion of fear.

"Okay." He shuffled out and closed her door behind him.

Tanya dropped her head into her hands and tried to think of nothing at all. It didn't work.

At about nine, a knock on Tanya's door jerked her out of her unsuccessful attempts at denial.

"Come in."

The door opened to admit Louis Redmond, two full days before he was due. He had a long shearling coat draped about his shoulders and a large manila envelope in his right hand. He strode forward and offered the envelope to her.

She closed her hand on it tentatively. "The final report on the GA support web proposal?"

He nodded.

"I've never understood why you still have to file these reports when you've rejected the bid."

He shrugged. "Keeps the paper trail straight and clean, I'd guess." He smiled formally and

turned to go. Tanya had a moment of realization that brought her near to panic.

This is the only shot I'm going to get.

"Louis?"

He stopped and turned back toward her. "Yes?"

"Isn't there any chance of working this around until we can use it?"

His eyebrows drew together. He studied her for a long moment of silence.

"The short answer is no. Do you want the long answer?"

She nodded jerkily. "Just go easy on the tech talk."

"Hm. That's not as simple as you might think." He took the envelope back from her, extracted the fabrication blueprints for the avionics cradle, and spread them on the desk between them.

"Now, you can see here that there are fastener lines along both the short and the long dimensions of this support plate." He traced two rows of circles with a finger. "GA didn't put these here for show. They're the mating interface to that strut over there, which has a similar line for attachment to the fuselage of the plane. This line mounts an INS or GPS, and there's no doing without it, either. So this thing has three long sets of perforations that intersect at mutual sixty-degree angles, with unbalanced masses on either side of every one. The torsion from a dozen catapult launches would rip it along one of these lines, no matter how we turned it inside the aircraft. It's very basic physics."

It does seem obvious. "Why did they propose it if it couldn't possibly fit the bill?"

His eyes rose to meet hers. "They probably didn't have time to work out a brand new design for a cat-launched plane." His grin was both rueful and understanding. "GA does mostly ground-strike missiles. Use once and discard. No worries about reliability."

"Still doesn't seem too smart. And with all the brainpower you guys in Engineering have, you can't change it a little and make it work?"

Louis's grin faded and was replaced by a gaze of cool curiosity.

"A few years ago, we got an opportunity to bid on an upgrade to the F/B-6E. The specs the Navy sent us outweighed you and me put together. I was on the eval team for it. We studied those requirements for eight weeks. If we did it so that we could make money, even two percent over cost, the plane would have killed a healthy fraction of its crews. If we did it so it would be safe...well, as safe as a warplane usually is...we'd basically have to lift up the windshield wiper and slide a whole new plane underneath it. We figured to lose twelve million dollars on every unit. So we decided not to bid. Thomson got the contract. They barely survived as a corporation, and the Navy still flies the old model."

Tanya wilted inside. "Same deal here?"

He nodded. "Dead on."

I guess it wasn't in the cards. I tried, though.

"Think Forslund has heard yet?"

His eyes widened. "I'd hardly know," he said slowly. "Just where are we going with this, Miss Taliaferro?"

The formal address sent an unpleasant charge up her spine. She had a sudden intuition that he could read her thoughts.

"Just making chat." She moistened her lips. He was neither attractive enough nor high enough in the company hierarchy for her to want him for herself, but her options were falling one by one. She slid forward in her chair, inclined her head and torso to display her cleavage and outline her nipples against her blouse. "You know, you can call me Tanya. Everyone else does."

He stared at her briefly, then scooped up the drawings, stuffed them back into the envelope, and laid it on her desk.

"Thank you."
He turned and left.

Stephen Sumner wasn't quite as surprised to see Louis as Tanya had been. The young engineer laid a *pro forma* knock on the open door, sauntered in, and dropped into a guest chair. His face was a study in unquiet and concern. Sumner shoved away his reading and folded his hands on his desk.

"What brings you to Administration, Louis?"

Louis jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I was downstairs dropping off my report at Purchasing. Heard a few things that got me thinking. Level with me, Steve. Is Admin going to overrule me and sign up GA?"

If it had been anyone but Louis Redmond who sat before him, Sumner would have composed a bland non-denial denial and found some way to change the subject. With Louis's dark eyes fixed on his, he couldn't even shade the truth.

"Forslund is thinking about it. He heard about Lazear's play yesterday and got worried. It's not a done thing, but I can't say it's *not* going to happen, Louis."

To Sumner's surprise, Louis remained calm. "First time since the founding of the company, Steve."

"I know. I hate it, too. I hate it double that it's you being overridden."

A ghost of a grin flickered over Louis's face. "Thanks. You make it sound more likely than not."

Sumner rose and stood with his hands in his pockets.

"My guess? It'll happen. Just now, Forslund can't think of anything but California's fifty-two votes in the House. The company will pay GA for its design and then throw it away."

"That'll put a big hurt on the profit margin."

"Inescapable. There's no way we can use it."

"Who decided that?"

Sumner inclined his head to the young engineer. "You did. I heard about you telling off Lazear, by the way. Nice work, if you can get it."

"Oh. Thank you." Louis grinned. "Lack of rank hath its privileges."

Sumner waited. Presently Louis stood, pulled his coat tight around him and belted it.

"I'd better get back to work. By the way, who's going to tell Floyd?"

Despite himself, Sumner grinned. "I assigned that job to Forslund."

Louis squinted. "You what?"

Sumner chuckled. "Well, don't think I just marched into his office and gave him an order or anything. That wouldn't be appropriate. No, I made an appointment to see him, asked him what he was thinking, heard him out, and then told him that if he was going to act like a gutless toady for fear of one smarmy federal pol, he could bloody well be the bearer of his own bad news."

Louis Redmond's face split with a dazzling smile. He pulled himself erect, snapped off a crisp salute, and strode out of Sumner's office.

The news of the overrule was all over the company before noon. Tanya was braced about it several times, on her way to the ladies' room, the water cooler, the supply area, the copier, and the vending machines. Among her coworkers, the reaction was nearly uniform: stunned shock. It was an event that didn't belong in their universe.

"The company's changing," one said.

Maybe so. Maybe it needs to, to survive.

"I don't know if I want to be here any more," murmured another.

Kid, it's this way everywhere. If you don't bare your throat to the bigger critters, they'll go for it on their own.

"And to Louis Redmond," breathed a third. "Imagine!"

It doesn't matter. Eric has what he wants. Maybe I'm not the reason, but he has it anyway. He'll give me what I want. In two weeks I'll be five hundred miles from here and forgetting this place as fast as I can.

It didn't numb the bruise to her conscience, but it gave her something to look forward to.

When lunch hour arrived, she threw her coat on and hurried out of the building, trying to avoid being noticed. It took more control than she thought she owned to get to Grucci's Gardens without getting stopped for breaking the sound barrier within city limits.

Eric awaited her in the main dining salon, at the table they'd had the previous evening. The restaurant was all but empty. He smiled, rose, and waited as she seated herself. Mere seconds later a white-coated waiter arrived with their meals: veal *marsala* for him, *paglio e fieno* for her.

I'd better not make a habit of eating like this once I get to D.C.

"You're going to win."

He nodded, a victor's gracious acknowledgement of a tribute justly due him. "I know. I was on the phone with Anders Forslund for most of the morning."

"Happy?"

"More relieved. Getting reelected without GA behind me would be a lot more difficult." He forked up a medallion of veal, sniffed at it delicately, and put it down again. "You have no idea what it costs to run a Congressional campaign."

She grinned in a way she hoped was appropriate for an equal partner to a successful conspiracy. "I'll know soon enough, though." She twirled cream-slathered vermicelli onto her fork and stuffed her mouth full.

His eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. "Isn't that a bit presumptuous? I said we'd discuss it, no more than that."

The delicious pasta turned to ice in her mouth. She swallowed carefully.

"You sounded a lot more definite about it last night." *In between dinner and bouncing on my bones like a teenage kid who'd never had his hand on a tit before.*

Lazear assumed an expression of tolerant benevolence. "Don't jump to conclusions, Tanya. I like the idea, and I'm leaning toward it, but there are preparations to be made. I can't just airdrop you on my Washington office and expect everything to go like the music of the spheres. There's a pecking order there. I have to work out whether and how I could slip you in."

All at once, Tanya Taliaferro became aware that she had allowed her wishes to do her thinking. Having her folly made plain to her in such a manner could only have one of two results. She could panic at the disappearance of the earth beneath her feet and grovel before her presumptive savior, or she could flog herself for her mistake and strive not to repeat it.

"So what, then? You go back to D.C. and prepare the ground, and I fly in a few weeks later?"

He nodded, pleased that she'd followed his trail of breadcrumbs. "If all goes well. But I won't be leaving right away. It would be foolish until everything on this end was cast in stone, don't you think?"

"Hard to argue with that." She poked at her entree, forced herself to nibble at it.

His expression changed. He leaned forward a trifle and peered curiously into her eyes. She tried not to turn away from his examination.

"You're not quite happy about this, are you?"

She smiled weakly. "I'm not going to kid you, Eric. I thought we had a firm deal. I held up my end of it."

"But to what effect, Tanya? You don't expect me to believe that you influenced Forslund's decision, do you?"

She said nothing.

"And if you didn't, how can you think you've earned the full payment for what you had no part in delivering? God help me, I was planning to give it to you anyway, and now you've got me wondering whether you're mature enough for the cut and thrust of Washington."

"You asked, Eric." His face darkened at the sharpness of the riposte. Restraining her emotions cost her more with each passing second. "I answered. Let's keep this pleasant. I still have an afternoon's work in front of me." She returned to her meal. He stared at her a few seconds longer before he finally took his first bite.

Presently he said, "Your Christmas party is this Friday."

"Yes, it is. So? It's for employees and spouses only."

He smiled formally. "Forslund invited me."

"Oh." She laid down her fork and waited.

"Would you like me to escort you?"

It was a second blow, scarcely inferior to the first, and it taxed Tanya's remaining reserves near to zero.

I'm just a dumb little backwoods slut, aren't I, Eric? Your chess piece by day and a receptacle for your fluids by night. Maybe you didn't get all you came for from Anders Forslund. Maybe you need a queen for your victory parade, so my coworkers won't miss the point. Or is it that you want to leave me so thoroughly compromised in their eyes that I'll have no choice but to lick your boots?

Onteorans can't aspire to your level of sleaze.

"I'm sorry, Eric." Her tone was casual. "I already have a date for Friday. Maybe if I'd known earlier that you were still going to be here." And at last the river of lava inside her burned a channel through her veneer of calm, and seeped into her face and voice. "Maybe."

Lazar didn't miss it. He paled, caught himself, and responded with his coldest smile. "I see. No doubt you're busy tonight and tomorrow as well."

She nodded slowly. "No doubt at all."

Kevin Conway sailed majestically across the exercise room, head over heels and screaming at the top of his lungs. A moment later the thick foam floor mat rammed him in the back like a charging linebacker. The air that remained in his lungs came out in a single basso grunt.

He lay there and waited for the swirling blue worms to clear from his eyes and for his diaphragm to respond to his urgent need for oxygen. Louis's face edged into his field of view. The software engineer's expression was chagrined.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Conway closed his eyes and shook himself. "My pride, mostly." He opened his eyes and rose tentatively. One knee complained of abuse. "How the hell do you do that?"

Louis shrugged. "It's just position and leverage."

"Sure it is." Conway straightened his *gi*, retied his black belt and breathed slowly and deeply. They'd waited for the room to empty before they started to spar. No one had witnessed his defeat by a far smaller man. "What do you do for fun when you're not beating the bejeezus out of me? Wrestle alligators? No, can't be that in New York. Never mind." He held out a hand, and Louis took it. "Good match."

Louis grinned. "Thanks. You competing again this year?"

"I surely am. How about you?"

"Naah. I'm not at my best when there's money on the line."

Yeah, right. "Well, you'll be at the tournament, won't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"...and the party after?"

Louis nodded. "I suppose so. I'm not really up for it, but I don't want to be a spoilsport."

Conway grunted, went to the water cooler in the corner and poured himself a disposable paper cupful. "No one would think less of you, Louis. The whole company knows the score now. Come if you want to, stay away if you don't." He threw back his head and downed the water in a single draught.

"No, I'll come." Louis's expression had become solemn, reflective. "It's a company thing. If you don't go to company functions, it's like telling your coworkers that you think you're too good for them."

A lump rose into Conway's throat. He opened his mouth to speak, swallowed his words and started for the locker room.

"Something on your mind, Kevin?"

Conway's impulses locked with one another, momentarily paralyzing him. He stood motionless, wondering what would be right.

"Kevin?"

"Yeah."

"Something I should know about?"

Conway clenched his teeth.

"Kevin...?"

"You are too good for them, Louis." Conway's revulsion at what Anders Forslund had done, until that moment not allowed to reach the upper levels of his consciousness, filled his brain with scintillation. "Forty-four years and never an overrule of Engineering by Administration, and now they overrule *you*?" He turned and looked the astonished software engineer full in the eyes. "I can't figure out why you're still here."

They stood there, eyes frozen together and the silence piling deep around them, for perhaps a minute.

"Kevin, I...maybe we should sit down."

Louis settled himself on the exercise mat, legs folded under him Turkish style. Conway hesitated, then followed suit.

"You think too much of me, champ."

Conway shook his head decisively. Louis blushed and grinned.

"OA's engineering is a long way from the defense mainstream, you know."

"How? Ethically? Skill levels?"

"Both." Louis paused and stared at the mat. "The engineers who go into defense work are a little below par for knowledge and skill. Present company excepted, of course. Most defense shops make allowances for that. They're more interested in whether you'll toe the line. Good engineers will seldom put up with the nonsense we have to deal with as regards security, procedure, scheduling and so forth."

Louis paused again. Conway could almost feel him searching for words.

"I've been here seventeen years now. The company has sent me to a dozen other shops as a liaison officer. I've seen the way other outfits work. Not only are most defense engineers substandard professionally, they're also deficient morally. The rule seems to be 'don't get caught,' not 'do it right.' OA is different."

Louis rolled his head and shoulders. His joints and vertebrae redistributed their fluids in a series of faint cracks.

"But you know, even if it were no better than any other defense firm, it wouldn't make a

difference. Back in middle ages Britain they had a saying: 'If thou takest the King's shilling, thou art the King's man.' I take OA's shilling. No excuses, no evasions. So I accept management's decisions and I do what they tell me."

"No limits, Louis?"

The software engineer scowled. "Of course there are. They haven't hit one yet. If they do, I'll go."

It wasn't the first time Louis Redmond had made Kevin Conway feel small. Still, he hadn't gotten used to it. He took a deep breath, tipped back his head and waited for the moisture to drain from his eyes. "Think you'll be coming to the fencing finals too?"

"Sure, why not? You and Thad always put on a good show. Come on, let's get cleaned up."

OA's annual intramural judo tournament was held each year on the afternoon before the Christmas party. Though the contestants seldom numbered above forty, it was as popular among the employees as the party was. The only place it could be held was the Administration building's cafeteria. Immediately after the second lunch period that Friday, maintenance personnel emptied the hall of chairs and tables, and covered the floor from wall to wall with the enormous brown exercise mats, each painted with a white combat circle, that would protect the contestants and provide seating for the audience. At four PM the first of the contestants arrived, garbed in white *gis* and belts of brown and black, to begin their warmups. Spectators began to trickle in a few minutes later.

By five PM the room was full. The year's thirty-two contestants knelt on the centermost of the mats facing Hiroshi Takahashi, deputy comptroller and fourth degree black belt. As he had done each year since the tournament began, the white-haired old sensei opened the contest with a prayer, praising God, asking His blessing upon the company and its workers, and calling down His protection upon the warriors who had come to do Him homage with their courage and prowess.

Near the back of the huge hall, Eric Lazear leaned toward Stephen Sumner and whispered, "A Christian sensei?"

Sumner looked sideways at the politician. "Why not?"

"Never met one before."

"I'll introduce you to him afterward. Hiroshi's an interesting fellow. He and his parents survived Hiroshima. An American priest arranged for them to come to the United States."

"What's the format?" Takahashi ended his prayer with the Sign Of The Cross and stepped back. The contestants rose fluidly to their feet. Lazear's gaze fixed upon Kevin Conway. The tall, broad shouldered engineer moved to a nearby circle to face off against his first-round opponent, a slender brown belt with copper-colored hair.

"Each match is two falls out of three," Sumner said. "Three minutes maximum per fall, one minute between falls. It's single elimination until the last round, when they play for gold, silver and bronze. By the way, I understand you've met our defending champion, Kevin Conway. Unbelievable power and speed. Last year he took ten straight falls. I wonder if any of the new players have a chance against him?"

Lazear said nothing. A tiny ripple of the facial muscles was all the reaction Sumner could see.

The first round was almost all brown belts pitted against black. It lasted less than two minutes from the opening bell. Only one brown belt survived his opening match.

The second round took only a little longer. The sole brown belt faced Conway, and was slammed to the mat twice in quick succession. The other black belts grappled with one another for nearly three minutes before all the matches had been decided.

The third round seemed to go on forever. Conway lost his first fall, slipping under the pressure of a deft leg hook and then staggering outside his circle despite a frantic effort to recapture his balance. Gasps went up from the entranced crowd. The champion bowed to his opponent from outside the circle, waited for a bow in response, and stepped cautiously back into the ring for the next fall. He took the second fall with a gorgeous wraparound takedown, and the third with a low-line feint and a cross-throat arm bar that forced his opponent to his knees. After the ritual bows, a broadly grinning Conway grabbed for his opponent's hand and pumped it hard. Cheers went up from the onlookers.

"He's very popular, isn't he?" Lazear whispered.

Sumner nodded.

The fourth, semifinal round was over surprisingly quickly. Conway's opponent seemed to offer him no resistance at all. Either that, or the champion's focus had been honed by losing a point in his previous match. He tossed his foe, a man as tall and broad as he, out of the ring twice, with such ease that he might have been facing a child.

Takahashi stepped forward to officiate the bronze medal contest. The two black belts, both tall, hard men in their early forties, faced one another with wary respect. They crouched and circled for an interminable time before one essayed an offensive move, sliding forward and hooking for his opponent's right ankle while reaching cross-body for a torsion takedown.

His opponent, who had lost to Conway in the previous round, stepped into the takedown attempt and spun clockwise, then thrust his rump into his opponent's midsection and locked his left hand onto his opponent's wrist. A fraction of a second later his opponent flew over his head and slammed supinely into the mat.

"*Hai!*" The sensei raised a hand, and the contestants stepped apart. He lowered it, and they approached one another again.

The second fall was shorter than the first. Sumner couldn't see the loser's mistake, but there must have been one, and a serious one at that, for within seconds he'd been wrapped in a serpentine choke hold that left him to choose between unconsciousness and concession. He chose the latter. The crowd cheered, and Takahashi stepped forward to award the bronze medal to the winner.

Moments later, Kevin Conway took the center circle to face Warren Frye, hangar mechanic and his final opponent. Frye was thirtyish, balding and of middle height, but with a weightlifter's build and a look of cool determination in his eyes.

"Have these two faced each other before?" Lazear whispered.

Sumner nodded. "This is a replay of last year's title match. Warren's very good, just not quite as good as Kevin."

Conway proved it in short order. He waited for the other man to attack, then used a curious forward slide and twist to lever him to the mat. It was a move he'd never previously displayed. Shouts of excitement rang out from the spectators.

"*Hai!*" The aged sensei stepped forward and the contestants stepped back. Sumner saw a glaze of concentration pass over both contestants' faces. Lazear appeared hypnotized by the spectacle.

Takahashi's hand fell again, and the contestants stepped into the circle. This time Frye's attack took Conway by surprise with its speed and novelty: he simply charged forward, seized Conway by the lapels and strove with his full power to bear him off his feet.

Conway reciprocated, his hands closing on Frye's lapels, and the two remained deadlocked, all their forces engaged, for several seconds.

The resolution took the entire gathering by surprise. Frye staggered forward, the victim of his own strength. Conway vanished beneath him, reappeared behind him, and relentlessly

pressed him prone against the mat.

"Hai!"

The crowd surged to its feet and erupted with cheers and shouts of praise.

The two fighters separated, stood, bowed to one another, to Takahashi, and finally to the wildly applauding crowd. The sensei brought forth the medals, looped the ribbon of the silver one over the head of Warren Frye, and laid the gold one against the chest of Kevin Conway.

Lazear added his own hands to the storm of congratulations. "He's very good, isn't he?"

Sumner grinned. "Not just at this, either. You should see him with a sword in his hand."

Lazear ceased to clap. He turned slowly toward Sumner, an unreadable look on his face.

"He fences?"

Sumner nodded. "He's our epee champion. This year's finals are Monday, if you think you might stick around."

The congressman's mouth widened in a smile, but the face above it might have been made of marble.

"How interesting."

Tanya rose and cheered with the rest. She hadn't seen the tournament before. Jake, a martial artist himself, had nagged her to attend, and she'd finally decided to give it a try, and now she was glad of it. Her coworkers were a blizzard of celebration around her. Their applause wasn't only for the winners, but for the courage and skill of all the contestants, even those who had been eliminated in the opening round.

Jake left off clapping to nudge her and give her a told-you-so grin, which she returned. He'd told her about it, but she hadn't understood. She wouldn't ever have understood it if she hadn't come to see.

Well, he took a night off from boffing me and Jody for this and the company Christmas party. I should have known it would be pretty good.

"How come you don't play?"

He shrugged. "I'm only a green belt. Not good enough for these guys." But there was a glint somewhere deep in his eyes that said *maybe in a few years*.

Conway beamed like a new father as he accepted congratulations from dozens of spectators. Yet he kept one arm around Warren Frye's shoulders the whole time, and nodded repeatedly toward the silver medalist, subtly reminding his admirers that a champion's stature was no higher than the man he'd bested for his title. Frye was appropriately modest and deferential, but the glow on his blunt features brightened each time Conway directed the crowd's attention to him.

A prickle on the back of her neck suggested that she turn around. She did, and was jolted to find Eric Lazear's eyes upon her. The politician's gaze was speculative, as if he had something in mind that she'd be unhappy to discover. After a moment, he smiled, inclined his head, and went back to clapping. She turned back to the front of the room.

As she did, there was a brief commotion to her left. Jake nudged her again and whispered "Watch this."

Louis Redmond broke through the crowd and strode up to the medalists. Conway finally let go of Warren Frye, just in time for Redmond to capture him in a fierce hug. A moment later it appeared that Redmond had lifted the much larger Conway off his feet and tossed him into the air as a father would his infant son.

Two hours later, the mats had been removed, catering equipment had been imported, and Christmas bunting in red, green and gold had been hung about the walls of the cafeteria. The

room began to smell of the delights OA's food service would serve that year: miniature meatballs, sausages in peppers and garlic, lasagna, roast ham and turkey, cornbread stuffing, braised red cabbage, spinach in crumbled cheese, deviled eggs, and more. Huge half-barrels were filled with ice, into which dozens of cans of soda were nestled. A party music system was wheeled in, arranged against the northern wall and fed with tapes of seasonal favorites. At eight PM the celebrants began to arrive.

By eight-thirty the room was filled to capacity. Anyone who wanted a bite had to negotiate a perilous sea of elbows to reach the catering stations, and then again to reach a space clear enough to eat. A few gourmands didn't make it with their prizes intact, but no one seemed to care.

It was really many parties that chanced to occur within the same four walls. There was little hope of getting everyone's attention onto a single person or activity. Anders Forslund himself stood near the center of the gathering, ignored by all but the knot of executives that stood immediately around him.

Eric Lazear had nearly relaxed. Forslund had announced his decision in GA's favor, and showed no sign of reconsidering it. To a man the OA executives treated him as one of their circle. Even Stephen Sumner, whose escort of Lazear had begun with the glacial stiffness of a duty unwanted, had thawed to a moderate friendliness.

Damn Tanya. I was looking forward to that, for afterward.

You can't win them all, Eric. You're going home with the big prize, so be happy.

He did his best to participate in the banter and celebration, chuckled at the others' jokes and stories, and provided his own as the opportunity arose. Yet a shadow played at the edges of his thoughts, not distinct enough to be named, but there all the same. When he tried to focus on it, it floated away on a wave of embarrassment or anger, or both.

Something was missing. Something had been taken from him along his path to victory, and he could not define it. The vacuum pulled at his nerves, asserted its priority and demanded action...but toward what end?

He kept half an ear's worth of attention on his prestigious companions and gave the rest to scanning the crowd. It was hard to see anything more than a few feet away, and he was unwilling to admit to his conscious mind what he was looking for anyway, but his eyes roved among the hundreds of revelers until they locked onto the tall, buxom form of Tanya Taliaferro. Not far from the doors at the room's northeastern corner, the young purchasing manager stood with her chin in her hand, chatting amiably with Kevin Conway.

Tanya frowned. "If Warren can lift that much more than you, how come he couldn't throw you?"

Conway grinned. "Because strength isn't the ultimate asset in judo. Sure it matters, but speed and coordination count for a lot more. Remember Louis Redmond? From our meeting with Holloway?"

"Uh, yeah." *I remember him throwing you in the air like a baby.* "Why?"

"Louis could toss me into orbit. I've got him by seven inches and seventy pounds, but in the three years we've been sparring, I've never won a fall from him."

Tanya's eyes widened. "Why doesn't he compete?"

"He says it's because he's not at his best in competitive circumstances, but it's a crock. With him in the tournament, there'd *be* no competition." He cocked his head in fresh assessment. "Do you have any interest in pursuing it for yourself?"

"I don't know. Jake has told me a little about it, but I'm not sure it's my kind of thing."
Where the hell did Jake go, anyway?

"Would you like the short course, right here and now?" A hint of mischief entered his grin.

"Uh, you aren't going to throw me, are you?" She quickly scanned the throng for Jake. He'd introduced her to Conway, muttered "be right back," and disappeared, more than an hour earlier. The engineer had cut deftly but courteously away from a conversation with two other women, and had given his full attention to her ever since. Even so, her lover's absence pulled insistently at her thoughts.

He chuckled. "Nope. But I could show you how to throw me, if I ever came at you. In Japan, judo is called 'the gentle way.' Its basic principle is that your attacker always brings enough weapons to the contest to defeat him." He waited.

"Him?"

"Him. Most people react to a shove by shoving back." He reached out and pushed gently against her shoulder, and she stiffened in response. "That's a direct opposition of forces, where the stronger man will win. A *judoka* will yield to the force of the shove, blend with it and add a little of his own. His attacker will go flying, propelled by his own effort. Everything else is just, uh, position and leverage." His sunny smile flickered once, then stabilized.

It dovetailed with much that Jake had told her. "So you look for which way your attacker is going, and then help him along?"

"Exactly. Anyone can fight an opponent. How do you fight a helper?"

"Hm." She mulled it as her eyes roamed the periphery of the gathering. As if drawn there by her gaze, Jake Axthelm slid through the crowd toward the northeastern doors and slipped out as unobtrusively as he could. A few seconds later, a short, busty, nervous-looking redhead in a tight black jumpsuit followed.

Jody Erling.

*How the hell did **she** get in here?*

What surged up from the subcellars of Tanya's mind in that moment could not fairly be called shock, hatred, or any other pure emotion. It was blended of all the darkest colors known to the human soul. It knew no light and would have none. As it wrapped itself about her, her rationality fled, and all her strength and balance as well.

Conway caught her before she could topple to the floor. The crowd around them staggered back with a murmur of dismay.

"Tanya? Tanya, are you okay?" The engineer had gone pale.

Stupid question.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Just...just give me a little space." She put her hands on his brawny forearms, pushed herself upright and put a little distance between them. "I just had a weak spell there." She faked a grin. "Too many late nights living the high life, I guess."

It took everything she had to keep her feet. An emptiness she'd all but forgotten had opened within her. A sweetly evil voice from its depths bade her step over the edge of the chasm.

The colors of fear had not left Kevin Conway's face. He stood poised to spring, as if he meant to put himself between her and whatever might threaten her.

What's he worried about? He doesn't even know me.

"Kevin, I'm okay. Really." Her vertigo receded, though the pit of despair still yawned within her. "And thanks for the lesson. It sounds like something I should look into some time."

Maybe it would keep me from being blindsided by the pricks on stilts I'm always surrounding myself with.

He eyed her nervously for a moment. "Can I get you something?"

She nodded. "Another cola would be nice."

As he moved off, she clamped her eyes shut against an imminent flood of tears.

Conway elbowed his way through the crowd to the line of crosscut barrels, fished through one until he found a can of cola, straightened and found himself face to face with Louis. The software engineer clutched a root beer in one hand and a formidable sausage-and-peppers hero in the other.

"Hey! Glad you made it. Not a bad crowd for a stormy night, eh?"

Louis shrugged. "A lot of them haven't gone home yet." He waved his soda can, narrowly missing several other partygoers. "If they left the mats on the floor, a lot of them would probably wake up here. So who or what are you occupying yourself with?"

Warmth rose into Conway's face. He dropped his voice. "Uh, remember Tanya Taliaferro?"

"The purchasing manager?"

Conway nodded. "She's right over there. Great gal." He emitted a half-embarrassed chuckle. "I'm beginning to see the attractions of a career in Administration."

Louis's eyes twinkled. "Maybe I should look into it myself."

Conway looped an arm around Louis's shoulders and herded him toward where Tanya stood. "No time like the present, my man."

Lazear had drifted slowly toward Tanya, intentions unformed, until he stood watching her surreptitiously from not five yards away. The animation had vanished from her face. Her posture was slumped, listless. She leaned visibly upon the arm of Kevin Conway.

Speaking to them both, his hands moving in quick, crisp gestures that had the look of a sculptor shaping a figure in the air, was Louis Redmond.

Finding the three of them together amid the hundreds at hand triggered a primitive node in the politician's brain. Something cruel unfurled to blanket his thoughts. He moved toward them with newfound purpose.

"What a jolly crew!" Three heads swung toward him, and three faces tightened in suspicion. He beamed back at them. "Enjoying the party, I trust? But Tanya, didn't you arrive with someone else? I was quite certain of it. You do change partners rapidly, don't you, dear?"

The young woman's eyes flamed. She seemed about to blast him when Conway intervened.

"Miss Taliaferro isn't feeling well, Congressman." Conway's words were soft, but his face was harder than it had been at any instant of the tournament he'd won. "If the two of you have private issues to work out, I'd suggest another time and place for them."

A knot of bystanders turned to watch and listen.

"Oh, we don't have any issues, Mr. Conway. Do we, Tanya? Just a little matter of a billet in my Washington office that Tanya might fill, in exchange for services rendered."

Tanya's face went completely white. Conway pulled her behind him and moved toward Lazear until they were a millimeter apart. Around them the watchers multiplied, and the noise of the party diminished.

"Back off, Congressman." It was a bare whisper. "You're off your reservation and riding for a fall. This is our turf, and we don't like guys who mess with our heads or our womenfolk."

Tanya bleated, "Kevin, it's not --" and fell silent when Redmond's hand closed powerfully upon her wrist. Her head jerked back to face him, but he said nothing and she remained silent.

Lazear produced a coarse, rowdy laugh.

"Your womenfolk? Are you planning to lay claim to this tart? What do you have to offer her, macho man? A three-bedroom shack on a quarter acre? How long do you think she'll stay bought for that?"

Tension mounted in the engineer's shoulders. Conway was at the limit of his self-control.

"Kevin." Redmond's light baritone pierced the room like a thrown blade.

Conway looked back at his smaller colleague, the muscles of his face and neck still

writhing.

"He wants you to swing at him." It was the simple declarative voice of a grammar school teacher. The tension drained from the larger man's features as if a plug had been removed at the bottom of his skull.

"He wants you to hit him." Redmond stepped forward to put himself between Lazear and Conway, and Conway automatically gave way. "Look at his hands. Look at the set of his spine. After he's provoked you, he'll go to work on me, and come Monday morning we'll both be out of our jobs."

Lazear stiffened. From the corner of his eye he saw that Anders Forslund and Stephen Sumner had moved up to observe the confrontation. Forslund watched him intently. Sumner's attention was fixed on Redmond.

"What a clever little boy you are," Lazear murmured. "Good with words and with numbers, too. Mama must be so proud. But tell us, little boy, is she doing anything about your habit of sassing your betters?"

The huge cafeteria, packed dangerously full of OA employees, had gone as silent as a confessional.

Redmond produced a gentle, untroubled smile. It was the most enraging thing Lazear had ever seen.

"I doubt there's a man in this room who'd call you his better, Congressman. Nor would any of them be wrong. Now excuse us, please. We have matters of substance to discuss." He turned and pulled Tanya away.

Eric Lazear did not consciously decide to strike at Louis Redmond. He stepped forward not from intention, but from gravitational pull. His arm rose and his fist clenched, not from intention, but from the buoyancy of rage. Thus he was utterly shocked when Kevin Conway's hand closed about his wrist and whirled him about. His scream of pain as Conway locked his arm behind him surprised him as much as anyone else present.

Conway held him there, doubled over and nearly on his knees, for several seconds before he spoke.

"You're an asshole, you know that, Lazear? If you were to hit him from behind, he'd crush you down to bite size and swallow you whole, and this whole room would applaud while he did it."

Lazear tried to rise, but Conway increased the pressure and forced him all the way to his knees. The crowd murmured. Those nearest the tableau drew a few steps back.

"Go back to California, Congressman. Don't hang around where you're not wanted. And leave Tanya the hell alone."

Abruptly Lazear's wrist was released. The grinding pain in his shoulder and elbow ceased so suddenly that the absence was a fresh spasm of agony.

When he stood upright again, he found himself to be the focus of hundreds of onlookers in an all but silent room. The faces that surrounded him held no sympathy, not even those of the executives who had embraced him. They showed only a regretful embarrassment that his chastisement had happened among them.

Conway, Redmond, and Tanya were gone.

Tanya allowed Louis to lead her out of the room. She hardly noticed where they were going until he pulled her into an office, closed the door behind them, settled her in a metal chair and squatted before her.

Louis's face was unreadable. His eyes were fixed on hers. There was a constancy in them, a concentrated desire to know, that brushed past her outer defenses and seined the silt at the

bottom of her soul. The longer he regarded her, the more opened and helpless before him she felt. Yet she dared not look away.

"What's got hold of you, Tanya?"

Well, at least he called me Tanya.

"Nothing important." She tore her eyes from his and scanned the unfamiliar room. The knickknacks and *objets d'art* suggested a high-status owner. "Whose office is this?"

"Ted Morelon. He's in planning. Don't worry, he's a friend. Look, you're obviously bothered and you're obviously alone. If there's anything Kevin or I can do, say the word. If it was Lazear, take my word for it, he won't come near you again, ever."

Sure of that, are you? Maybe you are. I've seen you read him off twice now. Where do you store the balls for it?

"Thanks, Louis. Are you, uh, here with anyone?"

He squinted. "Don't you count?"

She laughed briefly, a squidge of sound with an unwanted roughness on its edge. "Well, okay. I meant, I don't want to get between you and...whatever you were doing." *Whoever you were hoping to be doing.*

He grinned, and his daunting focus seeped away. "I was eating, mostly. Don't let it trouble you. Kevin wanted me to get to know you, and I'm glad I did."

She sat forward in the chair, hands clasped and forearms pressed together. "How well do you think you know me, Louis?"

"Well enough, for two encounters. Kevin likes you, and his character judgment is about as good as his judo."

A burst of gabble from the party wafted from the cafeteria and under the office door.

I wonder if Jake went back to look for me.

She couldn't bring herself to care. Something had snapped in her, some string that had held her routines together with invisible tension.

Louis sensed it. Hesitantly, he wrapped his hands about the ball she'd made of her own. There was a disturbing warmth from the embrace.

"Look, Tanya, the world isn't exactly full of churls, but there are enough of them that we have to stay on the lookout. You let your guard down, and one of them got in close, and now you're hurting. Just tell me this much: did he get you to do anything dishonorable? Anything you feel a need to be forgiven for?"

The question ought to have made her panic. It didn't.

"No. I...came close, but no."

Louis grinned. "With me, you mean?"

"Huh? Well, yeah." *But you didn't let me. Why didn't you let me?*

"Don't give it another thought. Would you like to go back to the party? Kevin's probably waiting for us." He stood, his hands still cradling her own.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

His eyebrows knitted. "What do you mean?"

"Who the fuck *are* you? Mister All-Business Engineer? Mister Sarcastic Wit? Mister Crusader for Truth, Justice, and Corporate Integrity? Mister Super Athlete that won't even compete with the others because he doesn't want to embarrass anyone? Mister Selfless Counselor of Wayward Girls in Distress? Who's the real Louis Redmond and where are you hiding him?"

He paled, tried to disengage and step back. She surged out of the chair and snapped her arms around him, tried to plant her mouth against his.

Louis's arms came up and captured her head between his hands. He pushed her away irresistibly, breaking her grip on him and putting her at arm's length. There was no question of

her resisting his strength. Yet he looked for all the world as if he faced an enemy that wanted his blood, an enemy so powerful that all his assets were as nothing.

An instant later he released her, darted for the door and slammed it behind him.

Conway was scanning the halls and any offices with open doors for Louis and Tanya. He was about to head to the second floor when Louis charged around the corner and seized on him.

"Kevin! You're looking for Tanya, right?" Louis's hands closed on Conway's forearms like twin vises. He was flushed and struggling for breath.

"Yeah, where did the two of you disappear to? Louis, are you all right?"

A spasm crossed Louis's face. "I'm fine. But someone should be with Tanya. I left her in Ted Morelon's office. She's...not right, Kev." He hunched momentarily, as if from a blow to the gut. "Go look after her, would you please?"

"Okay, sure, but where are you headed?"

Louis spun Conway around and propelled him several yards down the hall with a mighty shove. "Just get down there!"

Conway halted himself and turned to call after the other engineer, but Louis was already gone.

Kee-rist.

Tanya was in Ted Morelon's office, slumped over in his guest chair.

She raised hollow eyes rimmed in crimson as Conway entered. Without a word he shut the door and dropped to a squat before her.

I've seen that face. In a mirror, when Dot left me.

"Tanya...?"

"Am I so bad, Kevin?" The words were slurred by tears.

"Huh?"

"Am I so bad? Look at me." She straightened her body in the metal chair. "I take care of myself. I work out. I stay on top of my weight. I look after my hair and skin. I make up whenever I go out. I don't have any moles or scars or anything." A shudder passed over her and shook bright droplets from her carefully thickened lashes. "I'm not bad, I'm not, I'm *not!*"

"Calm down, Tanya." He pitched the words as low as he could. "Of course you aren't. You're a great gal, gorgeous, smart, lively..."

The hopeless look remained.

"Then why have three guys pissed on me in just half an hour?"

"What?"

She nodded. "First Jake. Then Eric. Now..." Her voice cracked, her eyes filled with new tears, and she slumped back into a posture of despair.

She must have thrown herself at Louis.

For an instant his skull was filled with the green ice of envy.

"Tanya, Louis is, a, a little different. He's, well, no one's ever seen him with a girl on his arm."

She looked up at him from under sodden lids. "Queer?"

He recoiled internally. "Shit, *no!* Excuse me, I mean...no. But not, uh, not available."

Not like me.

She waited for further explanation. He cast about for a way to explain the little software wizard who stood higher in his esteem than anyone else in the world, and found that he could not.

"Do you think I offended him?" she said.

He thought about it a moment, then shook his head. It seemed to relieve her. They held the

silence between them for several minutes. In the distance, little squirts of music and laughter from the party spoke of revelry that the scene with Eric Lazear had not managed to quench.

"Kevin," she murmured at last, "can I go home with you?"

It took him by surprise. He sputtered and stalled, caught without a graceful response.

"Please, Kevin?" She pushed herself up out of the chair, and he rose with her. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

He breathed deeply. "Of course."

Her nod was almost a formal bow. "Thank you."

Kevin Conway's Bronco glided to a halt at the steps of the Administration building at twelve minutes to eight the following Monday morning. The sound of the engine fell to a low burble, dwarfed by the howl of the wind. A few flakes of snow, outriders from the approaching storm, rode the gale to plaster themselves against Tanya's window. She eyed them without interest.

It was time to work, but she couldn't bring herself to move, almost couldn't bring herself to speak.

"Tanya?"

"I know." She did her best to smile. "You've been awfully nice, Kevin. Thank you for everything."

His eyebrows rose. One hand left the steering wheel and caressed her cheek.

"I tried, Tanya."

She nodded. "You did more than that. It was a wonderful weekend."

"We could get together again tonight, after the fencing finals...?"

She started to decline, said, "Let me get through the day before I decide whether to take you up on that. I do want to see you fence, though. Could you buzz me a little before five so I don't forget?"

He nodded. She put her hand to the door latch and he said "Tanya, wait."

There was a lump the size of a softball moving in Conway's chest, constricting his breathing and pulling at the cords of his neck. She faced him squarely and waited.

"You're going to see him. We both know it. It's going to upset you. He'll want to know where you were all weekend. He'll serve up some kind of wacky story about what he did at the party. He'll have all kinds of things to say and none of them will amount to anything but this: *forget what you saw.*"

Something was struggling to be born within Kevin Conway. A transformation was upon him, something unexpected, something he couldn't decide whether to allow. For an instant it shook his massive body like a sail caught by a hurricane.

"Don't forget anything, love. Remember it all. Remember who betrayed you and who stood by you. Remember every millisecond of it and how it felt. Remember how badly you wanted to forget. Forgive if you must, but don't forget a speck of it. You deserve better than him, and if he gets you to forget what he did, you'll forget that too."

For the first time since the party, Tanya felt the twisting in her gut lessen.

"I'll see you at five, Kevin."

She pushed open the door and leaped into the embrace of the wind. She raced up the steps and into the building before he could pile more straw of kindness around the glacier that had closed over her heart.

Sumner was startled out of his late-afternoon reverie when Eric Lazear strode into his office. The politician walked with a spring that suggested that something he'd awaited long and

eagerly had finally arrived.

"Congressman? I thought you'd headed back to Washington already."

Lazear grinned. "After what you told me about the fencing tourney? Not a chance, Steve. I assume you're going to attend?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"But you're puzzled why I would want to go, seeing that the defending epee champion humiliated me in front of your whole company Friday night?"

Sumner breathed deeply while the klaxons screamed in his skull.

"Something like that, yes."

"Because I never let my personal feelings cloud my admiration for a real sportsman. If this fellow is as good as you say, I'd want to see him fence even if he'd bugged me in church. So I'm here." He glanced at his watch. "We'd better get a move on, hadn't we?"

Reluctantly, Sumner stood.

Kevin Conway and Thad Myszciewicz put up their swords in final salute. Ted Morelon, OA's vice-president for business development and master at arms for its fencing club, stepped forward to take the weapons from their hands and present them their medals. The Engineering exercise room rang with applause.

Tanya, who had never seen a fencing match before, had followed every feint and stroke with hypnotic fascination. The two big men had moved with the fluid grace of great hunting cats, engaged only along the slender lengths of their blades. Their concentration and precision had mesmerized the crowd into silence, though, according to Kevin, most of the attendees knew no more about fencing than they did about nuclear physics.

Kevin had won, five touches to two. When Morelon sounded the gong for the winning touch, the champion immediately pulled the wire-mesh mask from his face to expose a brilliant smile. His eyes arrowed straight for Tanya.

A deep, sustained note pealed through her nervous system, an evening bell to call the members of some woodland cult to a service among the trees where incense would spice the air, and rites conducted in whispers and subtle gestures would lead the communicants through passion to peace.

She rushed toward him. The crowd murmured its surprise as he wrapped her snugly in his arms.

She put her arms around his waist and laid her head against the thickly padded fencing jacket. Whatever he was or thought her to be, however the hopeless snarl of her regrets might yet unravel, he was good to her, and he wanted her. For now, that was enough.

She'd walked past Jake twice that day. He'd looked away and never said a word.

The crowd had begun to mill about the finalists when a strong voice rang out over their heads.

"Mr. Conway! My congratulations!"

Eric Lazear burst through the front of the crowd with a hand extended. Conway relaxed his embrace, and Tanya slid away. Conway clasped the politician's hand in a notably awkward way. Lazear smirked as if he'd just cornered a lifelong enemy.

"Not bad at all, son. You have a fair set of strokes." The edge on the smile and the dismissal in the words put a hot spike up Conway's spine that the whole room could see.

"Thank you, Congressman." A muscle twitched in Conway's cheek, just below his left eye.

"Of course," the politician continued in a tone of arch condescension, "against a serious swordsman, you'd last about ninety seconds."

Morelon's eyes flicked back and forth between the two of them. He looked as if something

dark loomed at the back of his memory, something he feared he wouldn't remember until it was too late to do any good.

"Do you fence, Congressman?" Conway had not yet released his hand.

"A little."

"Foil, epee, or saber?" A low growl of challenge had crept into the champion's voice.

"Epee. Would you like to try a round with me?"

Conway turned to Morelon. "Ted, do we have a jacket that will fit Congressman Lazear?"

The master at arms nodded and went to fetch it.

"Perhaps I can provide you with some amusement to compensate for our little spat Friday evening, Congressman." Conway's teeth were on full display.

So were Lazear's. "Perhaps."

Morelon helped Lazear into his jacket and fitted a mask over his head. Tanya stepped back as he handed the duellists their swords. They saluted, crossed blades, and Lazear attacked.

The swords flashed almost too fast for the eye to follow, but from the outset it was clear that Lazear was much the better. He scored touch after touch, and never allowed Conway's blade to threaten him. Less than ninety seconds had passed when Morelon rang the final gong.

The crowd was silent.

Morelon practically ran to relieve them of their swords. Conway handed his over without comment, but Lazear refused to relinquish his. He held the ordinary practice blade up to his eyes and studied it as if it were a museum piece of ancient lineage.

"A gentleman's weapon, the sword." He grinned mockingly. "Not like the sweatier martial arts, you know. Only gentlemen study the blade, and only gentlemen ever master it. You can tell a pretender by his lack of skill. It's really just his lack of class expressing itself as sloppy footwork and awkward posturing with a tool he's not fit to wield. Now you, Mr. Conway," and he leveled his sword directly at the engineer's flushed face, "could fool an untrained eye with your little routines, but to a real devotee of steel, foolery is all it could ever be. The true art is simply above you."

Conway ground his teeth.

Anders Forslund, who stood at the front of the crowd, gaped at the politician as if he'd transformed himself into a viper before their eyes.

"Is that so, Congressman?"

A hundred heads whirled toward the soft baritone of Louis Redmond.

"Perhaps you'd care to demonstrate on a fresher student, then? Someone who isn't tired out from having fought three matches already?" Louis strode forward to stand between Lazear and Conway, shielding his friend with his body much as he had at the Christmas party.

Lazear's eyes widened in mock surprise. "You, little boy? Don't tell me I have to whittle the pretensions out of you, too."

"Put your mask back on, Congressman. I don't want to take any chance of hurting you. Ted, hand me that sword, would you please?"

The entire room gasped as one.

"Louis, not without a mask and jacket."

Louis reached toward the fencing master without turning. "**Hand me the sword, Ted.**"

Morelon gave it to him. Conway stepped away from the mats and pulled Tanya with him.

"Have you even fenced before, little boy?" Venom dripped from the politician's smile.

"No, I haven't. Instruct me, Congressman, if you can."

"Oh, I will," Lazear breathed.

They saluted, and Lazear attacked at once.

Without seeming to move, Louis's blade rose to block Lazear's. The crack of the epees rang

unusually loud in the silence of the room.

Lazear frowned. He stepped back, waited for a count of three, and advanced again, oscillating the tip of his epee to a dim blur.

Louis parried backhand, beat his opponent's weapon aside with a single flexure of his wrist, and laid a dainty touch directly over the politician's heart.

"Touche!" Morelon's voice quivered with astonishment.

"You've fenced before," Lazear growled.

Louis smiled. "As God is my witness, I have not."

Lazear charged again.

Attack -- parry -- beat -- attack -- riposte -- counter-riposte -- bind -- and the blunted tip of Lazear's epee scraped across Louis's upper thigh.

"Touche!"

"No, perhaps you haven't," Lazear said, "but that's how it's done, little boy."

"I'll remember that," Louis said, and struck.

Clang!

"Touche!"

"Why, Congressman, you've dropped your sword!"

Warily, Lazear stooped to recover his weapon, his eyes never leaving Louis's unprotected face. He straightened and held the garde position as if lost in thought.

"Well struck, little boy. But you know," Lazear said as if to himself, "a swordsman isn't fully fledged without at least one scar." And he thrust directly at Louis's eyes.

Parry -- beat -- disengage -- thrust, parry and stopthrust -- and Lazear's sword clattered to the floor again.

"Touche!"

"Then why don't you have one, Congressman?"

Lazear snatched up his weapon and charged like a man shorn of his wits.

The guard bells of the swords crashed together. Louis twisted his wrist, and Lazear's epee flew across the room. Tanya flinched away as it landed, grip first, in the hand of an amazed Kevin Conway.

The politician staggered back as the crowd roared.

"A gentleman's weapon, the sword." Louis held out his epee and sighted along its length with one eye closed. "Not a tool for the crass or the vicious. Only gentlemen study the blade, and only gentlemen ever master it. You can tell a lowlife by his lack of skill. It's really just his grasping, envious soul expressing itself as a desire to wound and kill. Tell me, Congressman," and he leveled the sword directly at Lazear's face, "when you won your silver medal back in '83, did anyone show up to claim the bronze?"

Lazear pulled off his mask. His face was white with embarrassment and fear.

"Who are you?"

Louis flipped his epee to Ted Morelon and walked forward until his face was a hand's breadth from Lazear's own.

"I'm not a ringer, Congressman. I'm an engineer, and an Onteoran, and an employee of the company you've been harassing. So let's have it out: are you ready to leave New York and let us be, or do you have any other little games in mind before you pick up your marbles and go back to your usual sewer?"

Though the room was as brightly lit as an operating theater, Louis seemed to blaze like a torch swathed in shadow. Tanya could easily imagine that his embrace would sear his contours into her flesh. She held her breath and crushed Conway's hand in her own.

Anders Forslund slid forward and said, "Louis, maybe --"

Louis held up a hand toward him. "*Not now.*"

The executive fell back.

Without a word, Eric Lazear dropped his mask, stripped off his fencing jacket, and ran from the room.

Louis stared after him for a moment, then turned sorrowful eyes to Conway.

"Forgive me, Kevin."

"It's okay," Conway whispered.

Louis nodded and left.

Ted Morelon approached them and extended a hand for the sword. Conway gave it to him without speaking. Tanya slipped her arm around Conway's waist and pulled him tight against her.

"Kevin," she murmured, "what is he?"

Conway's neck muscles clenched and relaxed. He spoke in a voice barely audible, yet thick with longing.

"What I want to be when I grow up."

Sumner caught up with Lazear in the lobby, hunched over on the sofa, his topcoat a ball on the seat beside him. The security guard stood with arms crossed over his chest, watching the politician impassively.

Lazear's head rose as Sumner approached. He started to speak, caught himself, rose and held out his hand.

"Thanks for your attentions, Steve."

Sumner let the hand hang there. Presently it fell to Lazear's side.

"Are you planning any more surprises for us, Congressman?"

Blood mottled the handsome face.

"The weather's supposed to get a lot worse overnight, you know. And Louis could be along at any second."

Lazear slithered into his topcoat, belted it around him, and pushed out through the doors of the Engineering Center for the last time. A brief gust of wind swirled into the lobby to punctuate his departure.

Sumner turned to the security guard and began to laugh maniacally. The guard joined him.

Conway knocked on the rectory door twice and stepped back. The man who answered it was tall and gaunt, with a full head of gray-white hair and a refined Old World face that made the engineer think of a formal tea in a Victorian parlor. He wore civilian clothes, but carried himself with an ecclesiastical formality that was nonetheless supremely welcoming.

"Uh, Father Schliemann?"

The priest smiled. "Good evening, Mr. Conway. Come in out of the cold, please."

"Call me Kevin, please."

"As you like."

The priest escorted Conway down a short hall to a small sitting room filled with old furniture, leather armchairs and a floral-print sofa, all of it well worn but sturdy. He gestured Conway to take a seat, headed back down the hall and returned a minute later with mugs of coffee.

"You were a bit indirect on the phone. What is it you want to discuss?"

Conway sipped from his mug. "It's a little awkward. I have a friend who's referred to you a bunch of times as his counselor. Well, I need to understand him better, and I just have this feeling...Father, I'm not a religious person myself, I hope you won't hold that against me."

Schliemann nodded. "Is your friend Louis Redmond, by any chance?"

Conway strained to control his reaction. "Yes, it is."

"What has my parishioner done to confuse you, Kevin?"

The words *my parishioner* carried an amazing weight of love.

"Well, Father, I could say 'everything' and not be exaggerating much, but maybe I'd better stick to lately."

Schliemann nodded again. "Tell me, then."

Conway told him of the events of the week past, compressing them as much as he could without sloughing any important details. Schliemann listened in silence.

When the engineer ran down, the priest silently rose from the old sofa, disappeared down the short hallway with their mugs and returned with fresh coffee. Conway accepted his with murmured thanks and wrapped his hands gratefully around the mug's warmth.

"How long have you known Louis, Kevin?"

"Must be seven or eight years, by now."

"Would you say his behavior has been consistent? Does he always maintain the same standards, rise to the same sorts of challenges, stick up for the same sorts of people, and so forth?"

"Uh, yeah, I suppose so."

"Then why," Schliemann said, leaning forward, "do you consider him such a puzzle? Isn't consistency easier to understand than inconsistency?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Schliemann waited.

"Father, let me cut to the chase. I worry about him. You know him better than I do, you've got to know what a wild man he is."

"You worry about him." Schliemann drew a hiss of air through his teeth. "It speaks well of you, Kevin. And yes, I know how headlong he is. But has he ever given you a real reason to worry? Has he ever sustained any damage from his derring-do?"

"Just one time."

"The episode in New York City a few years back?"

Conway nodded.

"So we'd have to say there was some reason to accept his judgment of the risks he plunges himself into, wouldn't we?"

"Uh, yes, I guess so."

"Of course, that's the sort of intellectual recognition that never really reaches the guts." The priest smiled. "But he's worth it, isn't he? He's the *creme de la creme*, the best of the best at everything he touches, but he never flaunts it or grinds it into the faces of the less well endowed. Louis Redmond is a Lancelot for our time."

Conway grinned ruefully. "I should have known you'd know."

"But you're still confused."

"Well, yes." Conway rose, paced aimlessly for a few moments, and came to rest behind his chair with his hands in his pockets.

Is this the sort of thing you discuss with a priest?

Who else?

"He takes nothing for himself, Father. His life is just work, work, work, study, study, study, fall into bed and repeat the next day. At the party last Friday..." Conway halted himself, gathered his courage, and charged ahead. "Father, don't think badly of me for this, please?"

Schliemann nodded.

"That gal Tanya I met? I wound up taking her home. I guess we're an item now. We spent

the whole weekend together. But, Father --"

"She'd offered herself to Louis first?"

The blow rocked him where he stood. He braced himself against the back of the armchair.

"How did you know?"

Schliemann pursed his lips and looked away. "He confessed it to me Saturday morning."

"He *confessed* it to you? Like a sin?"

"He did."

"But --"

"He wanted her, Kevin. And he was afraid of what it meant."

Conway lost all power of speech.

"Please sit down, Kevin."

He did. The priest sat forward and folded his hands upon his knees.

"You know him, Kevin. You know his capacities. Do you think there's anything in this world that could hold him against his will?"

Conway shook his head.

"Nor do I. But if we're correct, then the only thing that could ever restrain him is his own self-restraint, a conscious decision not to reach out for what he wants. And he knows it."

Schliemann picked up his mug from the little table between them, looked into it briefly, and set it down again.

"God has made Louis a man that nothing can restrain. I don't presume to know His mind in this. I do know that He's equipped Louis not just with power, but with an understanding of his power that no amount of wishful thinking could overcome. And Louis has responded by teaching himself never to want anything beyond his necessities and the welfare of those he loves."

The old priest stared at his knees.

"A true champion doesn't ride into battle for trivial reasons, Kevin. Certainly not for personal glory or to get satisfaction for some petty slight. It's always either for justice or for love. Louis has a little list of people and things he loves. It's clear from what the two of you have told me that you have a high place on it. When you find yourself wondering at his decisions to take up cudgels, it might ease your mind to remember that."

Champion.

For years Kevin Conway had hunted for the meaning of maturity, the import of his many gifts, and a fitting purpose for his time on Earth. Now he saw them.

He rose shakily and put out his hand. Schliemann covered it with both of his own.

"Thank you, Father," he whispered hoarsely.

The old hands squeezed. "You're welcome, son. Go with God."

"Tanya?"

Tanya looked first at her desk clock, then into Jake's face. "Eighty-six hours and twelve minutes. I expected better of you."

"Hey!" The young buyer's cheeks flushed brightly.

"What do you want, Jake?"

Her peremptory tone drove her ex-lover deeper into confusion.

"You didn't work up all that spit just to stare at me, did you?"

"Tanya, what happened at the party --"

"-- took your name out of my address book, moron. Did you really think I was going to overlook it?"

He fell silent, stared down at her desk.

"She's a cutie, I'll give you that. Have fun. I don't begrudge you. But let's keep it strictly

business from now on. I'm not interested in a rematch."

"Tanya -- !"

"You didn't make the cut, Jake." She pulled the approved vendors list off her desk, opened it to the section on subcontractors for the Dazzler project, and stared at it pointedly. "I'm sorry." She kept her eyes on the book and willed him to leave before her resolve broke. He did.

==<O>==

Intermezzo

I have not shadowed him for several years. If anyone has earned privacy, he has.

No one else has been as hard on him as I was, during his training. It was necessary. Gifts such as his will not develop to their fullness except under intense and unrelenting pressure. He rose to it, and above it, and he never once complained.

With all that I knew of him, I hadn't known that he was harder on himself than I could ever be.

I could be candid with him. I could tell him of my origin, and my mission, and of Tiran the Essence, named the Defiler by his Brethren, who seeks to mar Evoy's works so deeply and indelibly that Evoy himself will destroy them in disgust. He would take the cup from my hand without protest. He would hunt Tiran down as I have failed to do. He would give his life and his soul to expunge Tiran from this world. He would not count the cost. He, for whom this world was made, to whom it properly belongs.

It shall not be.

I will find another. Someone whose Essence I can bear to see destroyed for the sake of destroying Tiran. Not today, but soon.

After Louis is gone.

==<O>==

Incantations

Dick Orloff fell into his desk chair with a crash. The Director of Software Engineering for Onteora Aviation felt his heart flutter ominously as the letter of resignation slipped from his fingers.

"Louis, tell me you don't mean this."

Louis Redmond sat unmoving, hands folded in his lap and face judicially solemn. "I'm sorry, Dick, but I do."

The door to the office squeaked open. Yvette Hamelin peered around its edge.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Orloff?"

Four years she's worked for me, and she still says "mister."

"Everything's fine, Evie." *In Hell, maybe.* "Louis and I will need a few minutes more. Is anyone waiting?"

She glanced out at his vestibule and held up a finger. Her expression said that it was no one he'd want to see. "Shall I say you're busy?"

"Yes, until we're done here, thanks." He forced a smile. The secretary retreated and closed the door.

Orloff's worst nightmare had materialized. The young engineer who'd carried OA's software department on his shoulders for almost two decades had announced his resignation,

with no warning. The executive wanted to cry, to scream, to beat his fists against his desk in a tantrum. Anything that might wake him up.

"Louis, what do I have to do to get you to take this back?" Orloff's voice became husky. "Name it, up to and including my job, and it's yours. Just tell me you'll stay."

Louis winced. "I was hoping you wouldn't do this, Dick. There's nothing you can offer me that would change things." His eyes traveled around the luxurious office and rested briefly on the award-filled breakfront, the barrister's bookcases, and the brilliantly polished mahogany sideboard that Orloff had never used. "Your chair has to be the hottest hot seat in the company. I wouldn't want it for any money."

If you're leaving, neither do I.

"Nothing, Louis? You could write your own ticket. I could double your salary, set you free of the T.O. and give you a roving commission to do good."

"Dick, please. Don't make it any harder."

But that's what I'm supposed to do.

Orloff slid forward and reached for the fatal sheet of paper. He lifted it gently, as if afraid that it might explode in his face, and rattled it gently at the younger man. "Will you at least tell me why?"

Louis bowed his head. After a few seconds of silence, he rose from Orloff's guest chair and began to amble around the office, eyes on the carpet and hands in his pockets.

"I don't envy you, Dick. More of this is surely coming, and none of it is your fault. I've enjoyed my time here thoroughly, and if it weren't for the Act I'd be willing to stay here till I die. But Congress passed it yesterday, and Coleman's already said he'll sign it."

"Damn it, I can protect you! I *will* protect you! Don't you give me credit for that much?"

Louis ceased to pace. He eyed Orloff with a sad affection.

"I credit you with the best intentions, Dick, always. I've never doubted you for a moment. But even you couldn't prevent the Navy from serving me with a conscription warrant, if I were to stay. And who in the department is more likely to get slapped with one?"

Orloff started to speak, stopped himself.

"I've labored long and hard here, and I don't regret a moment of it. OA makes the best warplanes in the world, and if they're better because of me, then I'm proud. But I'm not a national resource, Dick. And I won't stick around to get drafted as one by a government that gives billions of dollars to foreign dictators and career bureaucrats every year, but doesn't want to pay market wages for the technical talent it needs."

At the ten-minute mark, Angela Farnsworth decided she'd waited long enough. She rose from the sofa and stalked toward Orloff's inner office door with her petition clutched in her fist. Orloff's secretary rose and moved after her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Farnsworth, but you can't --"

Farnsworth shoved the smaller woman back against her desk with a sweep of her arm. "Sure can, bitch." She flung the door open and strode in.

Orloff was at his desk, talking to that little prick Redmond. She stepped past the engineer with barely a glance and thrust her petition under the nose of the software chief.

"Sign it."

Orloff looked up at her with barely concealed distaste. "I'm otherwise engaged at the moment, Miss Farnsworth."

"Didn't say read it."

Orloff couldn't quite suppress a rictus that time. Farnsworth allowed herself a nasty smile.

"What's it about this time?"

"New furniture in the women's rooms."

The executive rose and planted his hands on his hips. "I ordered those couches less than two years ago."

"There are stains on 'em."

"Then get them cleaned. You know the phone number at Facilities."

She shook her head, smile still in place. "We want new ones."

"Excuse me."

Redmond moved toward her. She looked down at him with unconcealed contempt.

"This was a private meeting."

Farnsworth laughed. "Gonna do something about it, Irish?"

He smiled and moved with cobra speed. She was unable to say what he'd done, but he had her right arm twisted behind her and her right wrist pulled up to the nape of her neck before she could draw another breath. She squealed in pain and writhed against his grip, but it was inescapable.

"I'm going to see you out," he murmured. "When Mr. Orloff and I are finished, perhaps he'll agree to see you. Perhaps you'll learn some manners while you wait."

He marched her to the door and thrust her through it. She flew past the cringing secretary and crashed into the guest couch in the vestibule. Her papers flew from her hand. When she'd regained her feet, she found the door closed against her.

The secretary regarded Farnsworth impassively for a moment before giving birth to a tiny smirk of satisfaction. She returned to her seat, pulled an emery board from her desk and began to file her nails.

Farnsworth picked up her papers, started to approach the secretary, and stopped. The mock-innocent look on the woman's face was more than she could bear. She swiveled on her heel and stamped out of the office, slamming the outer door as hard as she could.

Enjoy it while you can, bitch. You'll get yours.

Orloff was reluctant to take his eyes off his office door. "Did you hurt her?"

Louis shook his head. "Her pride, maybe. She thinks she inspires fear. She's got it mixed up with distaste."

"When will I have seen all your talents?"

Louis waved it aside. "Are you ever going to take her in hand, Dick?"

Orloff ground his teeth. "I've tried."

Louis resumed his seat and folded his hands in his lap, as collected as if nothing at all had happened. "HR gave you static, right?"

"Plenty. To Grutstein's bunch she's not a productivity hole or a discipline problem, she's a check mark on an EEO form. Hankshaw's an order of magnitude worse. Grutstein won't act against either of them until they do something he can't ignore. So far, they've stayed just inside the lines."

"Why did Reardon hire her?"

"I never thought to ask."

Orloff glanced down at Louis's letter of resignation. It was still there. The words were just as they had been. He looked up into Louis's eyes, and the finality there was unchanged.

"Do me a favor, Louis?"

The young engineer smiled gently. "Anything but stay."

"Not that." Orloff rose and stepped out from behind his desk. "I can't stop you from destroying the department by leaving --"

"Hey!"

"Cut the crap. You are, and you know it. I'll never be able to replace you. But would you do this much for me, at least: would you not talk up your reasons?"

Louis sat in silence, his eyes lowered, for a long time.

I couldn't have asked any more of him. He delivered on all of it. Even when no one thought it could be done, he did it. The company owes him its existence about three times over. If he wants to go, no one can say he owes it to OA to stay. Just don't let him take my whole department with him, please, God.

"They're not stupid, Dick. The ones who're likely to be targeted will know it without needing to be told. But I won't rub their faces in it. I'd never do that to you."

Orloff released a breath he hadn't realized he held. "Thank you, Louis. They aren't on your level, but they mean well, and they try hard, and they do pretty well, mostly. I'd like to keep them a while longer. Say about eleven years."

"I hope Wickenheiser lets you."

"He won't do that to me. I've been dealing with him since he was a commander. He owes me a little something for all the garbage I've had to take from him." The executive smiled crookedly. "You've never appreciated how loyal a bastard like the Wick can be, toward someone he considers an asset."

Louis's laugh surprised them both.

"For the love of God, Dick, listen to you! 'Someone he considers an asset.' That's not loyalty. That's just good bookkeeping."

News of Louis Redmond's resignation went all the way through OA's engineering directorate before lunch that day. It brought dismay and shock to every office and every desk. Even Louis's handful of detractors knew that for the company to lose his talents could bring them no good.

Over the next three workdays Louis was deluged with expressions of sorrow and requests for explanation. He smiled faintly, said "Personal reasons," and never went a word further. Many of his colleagues tried to probe him for his plans. He declined to discuss them.

Dick Orloff took it upon himself to arrange Louis's farewell luncheon. It was the only thing he could do to keep himself from wishing Louis's resignation away as a bad dream. He selected Grucci's Gardens, Onteora's finest restaurant, and drew deeply on the department's petty cash fund for the deposit and the trimmings. The owner-operator assured him of a day to remember.

A geyser of regard and regret followed the official announcement of the resignation. Orloff was staggered by it. Louis's reputation had been all business, cordial but aloof. He seldom socialized within OA's walls. Yet more than four hundred people, nearly the entire engineering directorate and quite a few employees from outside it, registered for the farewell luncheon despite its thirty-dollar cost. Louis's send-off would strain Grucci's to its limits. It would be the grandest and best attended OA had ever seen.

It would be the end of Orloff's love for his job, as well.

"Think you got enough?" June Hankshaw asked off-handedly. She didn't take her eyes off her apple turnover.

"Don't know," Farnsworth replied through a mouthful of cheese Danish. "If I'd gotten Orloff's and Morrison's, maybe. Guynemer's managed to keep me away from Morrison."

"Knows you by now." Hankshaw didn't sound concerned.

Just like I know you, bitch. You don't give a rat's ass about any of this. You just like to cause trouble.

The large cafeteria was sparsely populated. Most of the employees at Onteora Aviation's

research and development center kept to their desks even at break time. There was always too much to do. There were never enough people to do it.

How June and I got in here.

The doors at the far end of the room opened and Louis Redmond came striding through in his characteristic stand-aside-or-be-mowed-down fashion. If there were anyone in the directorate Angela Farnsworth hated more than that little shit, she couldn't put a name to him. Not that it mattered. From the moment of her arrival, Redmond had never given her the time of day. Yet his altitude among OA's engineers was so high it was a wonder he could breathe, and not just for his professional skills.

Get someone like that to stand with you, you've got a real asset. Why does he have to be such a tightass?

Hankshaw noticed Farnsworth's attention and turned. Farnsworth noticed the gleam of malice in Hankshaw's eyes and became uneasy. Farnsworth might detest the righteous little prick, but she didn't want to lock horns with him again. Hankshaw had no such inhibitions.

As Redmond passed behind Hankshaw's chair, she pushed it back and into his path, all too obviously trying to catch his foot or shin. Farnsworth almost called out a warning, but it caught in her throat.

Redmond flowed aside with the same preternatural speed he'd exhibited in Dick Orloff's office. As he stepped around the obstruction, he put a hand to the back of Hankshaw's chair and shoved. The chair flew forward. The edge of their table rammed into Hankshaw's midriff. Her lungs emptied and her eyes bulged.

"It's important to be careful in here, Miss Hankshaw." The engineer wore a look of prim amusement. His captive tried to force herself away from the table with both hands, but it availed her nothing. "There's a lot of random traffic, and it moves every which way at once. If you don't pay attention, you never know who might get hurt." He relaxed his pressure on the chair. June Hankshaw's lungs refilled with air as her face filled with hatred.

Redmond's eyes moved to Angela Farnsworth. There was an analytical quality about his regard, a weighing and measuring that she was not ready to confront. Some weak element inside her quailed under the pressure, moved her to rise and start toward the exit.

"Miss Farnsworth."

She whirled, suddenly afraid. But he'd remained where he'd stopped. One of his hands rubbed at his midsection; the other was raised in entreaty.

"I'd like to speak to you privately, if I may."

Farnsworth's pulse quickened. She started to ask why but swallowed it. He waited in silence until she had nodded assent. She followed him out of the cafeteria as June Hankshaw watched incredulously.

"Why did you interrupt my conversation with Dick Orloff last Friday?" Redmond sat at his desk with his hands folded before him, as if he were interviewing a potential assistant.

Farnsworth's first impulse was to hurl defiance into his face, but there was a note in his voice she hadn't expected to hear. The question wasn't rhetorical. He hadn't asked it as the first salvo of a dressing-down.

"You really want to know?"

He nodded. "That's why I asked."

She glanced around his little office, looking for something with which to stoke her sense of injury. The sheet-steel desk and bookcases were the same as the ones in her cubicle. There was no carpet. But he did have a window, and a door.

He's a white male kingpin. Got this place wrapped around his pinky. Out of here in three

more weeks. What a black woman with no skills has to do to get respect in a place like this matters less to him than the dust on his bookcases. Or it should.

"You want respect, you gotta get noticed. You want to get noticed, you gotta force your way in, sometimes." She said it as levelly as she could.

His expression of focused gravity did not waver. "It didn't occur to you that you might be your own worst enemy, did it?"

"Huh?"

Redmond grimaced. "You want respect, but you showed a ton of disrespect toward the man you wanted it from. You think that'll make him give you what you want? Or is he more likely to respond in kind?"

She vented a gust of bitter laughter. "I ain't got nothing else to go with, Irish. I ain't some lily-white shit-don't-stink prize with a degree from MIT, in case you ain't noticed."

He lowered his eyes briefly to his folded hands, as if trying to choose the right words in which to deliver some very bad news.

"I'm not Irish, Miss Farnsworth. My grandparents were dirt-poor Quebecois who came to America because they couldn't scratch a living out of the land up there. And I don't have a degree from MIT either."

She snorted and looked away.

He rose from his chair and stood with his fingertips lightly brushing the surface of his desk. "I've asked Dick when he was going to take you in hand. He doesn't know what to do about you. Well, I've got three and a half weeks left here, and nothing pressing on my agenda. So I'm going to make you an offer. ***Look at me, Miss Farnsworth.***"

It was a tone of command she'd never heard before. It literally compelled her to return her eyes to his own. Power shone from him, an electric force that set the air around him to shimmering. She tried to look away again, and discovered that she could not.

"We both know that if you go on as you've been going, you're going to get fired for insubordination or worse." His tone had returned to that of ordinary conversation. "This is your shot, you were lucky to get it, and you'd be damned lucky ever to get another one. So don't blow it. When do you get here in the morning? About ten?"

She nodded.

"Tomorrow it'll be eight. Plan to be here until five PM. And you'll stick to me as if we were superglued together. I'm going to try to teach you how to do the job you were hired to do." There was a faint emphasis on *try*. "If I can pound a little something into your head in three weeks' time, I'll tell Dick that he ought to ride with you a while longer. Do you have any *decent* clothes?"

"Huh?" She looked down at her baggy tunic and multiply ripped jeans.

He waved. "Something without holes or obvious food stains. And shoes, for God's sake, not those stupid flip-flops."

Willful anger surged from the cellars of her mind and tried to override her judgment. It had done so many times before, but this time she managed to hold it in check.

"Yeah, I guess I --"

"That's something else." His voice was steel-hard. "You're going to learn how to speak and behave with respect. You're going to say good morning and good afternoon, and please and thank you. You're going to interrupt other people's conversations as seldom as possible, and you're going to apologize when you slip. You're going to use names from now on, and you're going to do it right. I am 'Mr. Redmond' to you. Dick Orloff is 'Mr. Orloff' or 'sir,' and don't let me hear you call him anything else."

She sat back in her chair, heart beating wildly. All of her habits strained to propel her into

the face of the arrogant white prick who presumed to dictate to her. It would be so good to spit in his face and laugh. It would be even better to smash him, to scatter a few of his perfect teeth on his desk blotter...if she could.

His dark brown eyes re-engaged hers, and her madness subsided.

"Why?" She hated herself for the plaintive note in her voice. "Why should I?"

He smiled pleasantly and turned to look out the window at the parking lot beyond. All was quiet.

"Because you're a thirty year old black woman with no education and no skills, who got her job here under false pretenses. Because you've got no other hope of turning your life around. Because you just can't believe that I mean it, and you have to see if it's for real, and there's only the one way."

It was more truth than she was prepared to swallow. It made her guts roil and twist. But he hadn't said it cruelly; he'd merely served her with notice that she hadn't managed to disguise the facts.

"What's in it for you?"

He smashed his palms down on the surface of his desk and leaned toward her with a look that said she'd used up all her slack. "None of your damned business, Miss Farnsworth. None of it concerns you. None of it will be coming from you. Just decide whether you want what I'm offering you before I change my mind and throw you out of my office."

His focus, laid inescapably upon her, was terrifying.

"Got to think about it."

He shook his head once slowly. "The offer expires when you walk through that door. Refuse it, and I'll go directly to Orloff's office and *tell* him how to fire you with no legal liability." His hand went to his midsection again. "Get it straight, Miss Farnsworth: you are in the deepest of deep shit and sinking fast. Don't think you won't drown."

Her skull hummed with fear. She sensed that a cusp had arrived and that no matter what she decided, great consequences would ensue. She breathed deeply.

"All right, I -- Mr. Redmond. I guess I'm yours."

He looked into her eyes a moment more, then nodded. "Tomorrow at eight."

June Hankshaw was waiting in her cubicle. "Well? What did he want?"

Farnsworth stepped around her friend and sagged into her desk chair. In the bottom right corner of her monitor, the incoming mail symbol blinked regularly. "He wants to train me."

Hankshaw's eyes went wide. "The Irish white boy wants to train *you*? For what? A blackface show?"

"Chill, June." Farnsworth double-clicked the mail icon, one of the few things she'd learned to do with her computer. A message form popped open on her screen. Its contents were in an unusually small font that she had to lean close to read.

Dear Miss Farnsworth:

Get June Hankshaw out of your office *now*.

Regards,
Louis Redmond.

She jerked back from the screen and quickly closed the message form.

"June, I got some stuff to get done." She tried to smile at her friend. "I'll catch you later,

okay?"

Hankshaw peered at her uncertainly, made a who-knows gesture and sauntered out, humming tunelessly. Farnsworth sagged in her chair.

This ain't gonna be no walk in the park.

He didn't say it would be.

Farnsworth knocked on Louis Redmond's office door at seven fifty-nine Thursday morning. There was no shout of "Come in" from behind it. She waited.

The door opened to reveal the young engineer, immaculate as always in a crisp white shirt, neatly pressed black slacks and a black tie. He looked her up and down once without expression, said "Good morning" and waved her in. She walked past him uncertainly, the more so for the pinching from shoes she'd worn only once before. Once she'd settled into his guest chair, he resumed his seat at his desk and leaned forward to prop his chin on his folded hands.

"What do you know about computers, Miss Farnsworth?"

She shrugged.

He nodded. "About what I expected. Well, what do you think a computer is?"

"Some kind of smart machine, right?"

He shook his head. "Wrong. There are no smarts in a computer. All the smarts at the table are between your ears. Come around the desk."

She rose and joined him behind the desk. He moved aside to allow her to see the screen of his personal computer. It showed the same bewildering array of tiny pictures she'd seen on the monitors on all the desks in the building.

"Those are called icons." He tapped his finger against the glass in several places. "They're memory aids, to help you find things quickly. You can do a few simple things to each of them." He demonstrated by moving his mouse cursor over one icon, a picture of a file folder, and clicking the buttons of the mouse in several ways. The icon went through a series of visible changes.

"How long have you been at OA, Miss Farnsworth?"

She glanced over at him. "A year and a little."

"Have you ever done this?"

"Me? Shit, no. Afraid I'd bust something."

Redmond looked sideways at her, the corner of his mouth curled in disdain. She began to regret her decision to cooperate with him.

You know what songs to sing to this thing. I don't. If I do something to it, they'll take it out of my hide.

"That might have seemed wise, but you need to know what your tools can do. Did anyone else ever offer to show you?"

"Well..."

"Never mind. Do you know what an incantation is?"

"Huh?"

"A spell. An attempt to summon an angel or --"

"Oh. Okay, yeah."

Redmond's eyes hardened. Blood rose into her face.

"Sorry. Yes, I do."

He relaxed. "Well, there are only two attitudes you can take toward machines like this. You can decide to master them, learn all the details of what makes them work so you can program them to do whatever you like. That's a life study. I've been at it for more than twenty years and I'm nowhere near finished."

He sat back in his chair and fitted his fingertips together. "Or, you can study useful programs other people have already written, and just learn how to summon their powers when you need them. Learn the incantations and let the angels and demons do the heavy lifting.

"You were hired as an engineering aide. You're expected to know the incantations for several kinds of programs. That's what we're going to go over. And over, and over, until you mumble them in your sleep. Then you'll be some use to the company. Maybe you'll be able to do the job you're being paid to do." He smiled grimly, a final challenge to her resolve. "Are you ready?"

Shit, no. Not for anything like this.

"Bring 'em on, Mr. Redmond. Ain't no demon can scare me."

His eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"You never seen where I grew up."

He laughed. "Okay. We'll start with word processing."

Orloff arrived at his office at seven fifty-five Friday morning to find it already occupied. A tall, aristocratically slender Navy officer in dress whites sat in one of his guest chairs, a brown leather briefcase at his side and a clipboard on his knee. He rose to his feet as Orloff entered. He did not offer his hand.

"Mr. Orloff, I'm Lieutenant Commander Ellis Marquette, United States Navy. Admiral Wickenheiser sends his compliments. He's sent me to obtain a printout of the performance reviews of all the employees of OA's Engineering Division for the past five years."

My God.

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

The officer remained expressionless. "Is there anything unclear about the request, sir?" He glanced at his clipboard.

"Well..." Orloff circled his desk and settled into his chair. "You really want them all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Even the clerical staff and the maintenance crews?"

A quick nod. "Yes, sir. We'll sort them by specialty back in Bethesda."

He's probably exceeding the Act, but I can't afford to put his back up. There's less danger to the company if I pretend to play along.

"I assume you want these as soon as possible."

The officer grinned faintly. "I'm booked on a three forty-five flight out of Westchester Airport."

Orloff drew a deep breath and selected an arrow from his quiver.

"Well, Commander, I'm afraid you'll be going home empty-handed today. It'll take about three weeks for me to run all those files through a copier for you." He smiled as pleasantly as he could manage.

Marquette's jaw sagged. "Your personnel records aren't computerized?"

Orloff shook his head. "Never have been."

Marquette half-fell into the guest chair. His mouth worked for several seconds before any words came out.

"The admiral will not be pleased. Why haven't you computerized?"

Orloff leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. "We figured the probability of unauthorized access was less if we stuck to paper in locked cabinets. General Aeronautics had a whacking judgment against them a few years ago. Heard about it, by any chance?"

The officer shook his head.

"Seems an employee cracked their personnel database and was using the information there

for illicit purposes. Several other employees sued the company for not exercising adequate care in the handling of their personnel records. A judge and jury agreed with them. Each of them took home enough money to choke a law firm." Orloff smiled. "A large law firm."

Marquette's face filled with consternation. He looked about Orloff's office as if searching for a hidden prankster, someone who was operating Orloff like a ventriloquist's dummy. Orloff let him suffer in silence.

I can do a lot in three weeks. Maybe everything I have to do.

"Three weeks, Mr. Orloff?"

Orloff inclined his head. "Not a moment less."

The officer rose, tucked his clipboard under one arm and hefted his briefcase. He blinked once, and Orloff saw a spark of anger flicker in his eyes.

"Not a moment more." Marquette turned and strode from the office, back straight and shoulders held rigid. Orloff permitted himself to sit back in his chair.

I hope he doesn't ask any questions at Human Resources.

Maybe my deadpan needs some work.

Angela Farnsworth closed the document she'd been editing, closed the word processor, and double-clicked the Backup icon. The computer's floppy disk drive began to whirl. She sat back in her chair and glanced sideways at her tutor.

The light in Louis Redmond's eyes was something she hadn't seen before. She was no expert at reading white men's faces, but she was almost certain she saw approval in his half grin.

Maybe this ain't hopeless after all.

"How'm I doing?"

The grin grew wider. "How do you think you're doing?"

"Well...?"

"Get used to evaluating yourself, Miss Farnsworth. Sometimes there's no one else around. You're doing well, and you should know it." He leaned back in his chair and stretched. The muscles and joints in his shoulders groaned audibly. "I'd say it's time for an evening's rest. I'll see you Monday, same time, same station."

She rose from her chair with her notebook clutched to her chest and glided toward the door on an invisible carpet of joy.

I can do this. He thinks so, too.

He'd taken her to the cafeteria and bought her lunch. He'd paid for it without even looking at her. He'd sat with her and made small talk while she ate. June Hankshaw had seen the two of them sitting together and stared daggers at her, and she'd shrugged it off.

I'm not gonna be a fake any more.

As she closed his door behind her, Rolf Svenson strode up the hall wearing a mask of alarm. The tall blond group leader hardly spared her a glance as he burst through Redmond's door and slammed it behind him. She halted, leaned back against the corridor wall and listened hard.

"What's up, Rolf?" Redmond's voice was muffled.

"The Wick sent his hatchet man to see Orloff." There was no muffling the fear in Svenson's voice. A long silence ensued.

"Well, it had to happen eventually." Even through the wall, Redmond's tone of unconcern sounded forced, layered onto the words by conscious intention.

"Do you think...?"

"Probably not today, Rolf."

Farnsworth felt her heart rise in her chest. Something bad was going down, and she was on the outside. She didn't want to be on the outside, not this time.

"Dick said he could protect us." Redmond was trying to be reassuring, but he wasn't pulling it off.

"How's he going to do that? The Pentagon can make the company cough up all its personnel records now! Louis, aren't you even a little upset about this?"

"What good would it do?" Redmond's voice was gentle. "I'm already outward bound. Should I flee the country? Canada, maybe, the way they did in the Sixties?" He chuckled. "If they're going to get me, they're going to get me. I won't give them the satisfaction of running from them."

A few seconds later, she heard the creak of a man rising from a chair from inside the office. She burst out of her paralysis and scurried down the hall as fast as she could, determined to be out of sight before Svenson or Redmond could emerge.

Bad enough to have to explain her eavesdropping. She could never explain her tears.

Farnsworth threaded through the gray corridors to her cubicle, intending to grab her coat and head home. She was halfway into her coat before she realized that June Hankshaw was sitting in her desk chair.

"Well, well, if it ain't the Black Flash her very self." Hankshaw's smile was as ugly a thing as Farnsworth had seen. For no clear reason, a band of tension formed in her chest.

"What's up, Junie?"

"Came to ask *you* that. What's going on with you and the white boy?"

She tried to shrug. "Teaching me stuff."

Hankshaw hooted a derisive laugh. "Yeah, right. How to suck little white dicks, I bet."

Farnsworth's mouth fell open. Against her better judgment, she'd come to think of Hankshaw as a friend, her only friend within the company's walls. She was reluctant to give the idea up.

Foiled myself pretty good.

"Got a problem with me learning how to do my job, Junie?"

Anger flared in Hankshaw's eyes. "Got a problem with being dumped for some white shit-don't-stink."

She's jealous!

The urge to justify herself was irresistible.

"Like I said, he's teaching me stuff. How to run the computer. Might keep this job a while if I learn a little more. And what he teaches me I could pass on to you. When he's done with me."

"Hah!" Hankshaw dismissed the suggestion with a feral flash of teeth. "Had your nose up his ass for two solid days, sister mine. Little prick say 'frog' and you hop across the building. Felt like I ought to make an appointment, find out where your head is at." She rose and set her arms akimbo. "Maybe you forgot who your people are. Maybe you need a *reminder*."

Despite her considerable size advantage, Farnsworth felt a surge of physical fear. June Hankshaw's viciousness toward those she considered enemies knew no limits. Even vastly superior force was no guarantee against her spite.

Louis wouldn't care. She came at Louis, he'd toss her around like a toy and tell her how important it was to be careful in the workplace. All the cases and tenses right, too.

It was a moment for choosing sides. She announced her choice as she made it.

"Know who my people are, Junie moon." She strove to put steel into the words. "Coretta Simpson. Harry Toussaint. Al Lombard." The three black engineers were all well respected for competence and reliability. "Maeve Luttwidge." The black secretary to the avionics department

director ran her boss's life like a boot camp for executives. "And Louis Redmond. Now are you gonna paddle on up the creek, or do I have to kick your ass for you?"

Hankshaw's face turned momentarily ashen. The vindictive gleam returned swiftly.

"Made your bed, bitch. Hope you sleep well."

She smirked and strutted away.

Dick Orloff cantered down the hallway at speed, hoping to catch Louis before he left for the weekend. He rounded the corner and found the young engineer slumped over his desk, slowly rubbing his temples. Louis looked up, grinned faintly, and sat back in his chair. He looked drained.

"It's okay, Dick. I know all about it."

Someone must have seen Marquette coming out of my office.

Orloff lowered himself into the guest chair. "I think I can keep your records out of the Navy's hands."

Animation returned to Louis's face. He sat up and fixed his eyes on Orloff's.

"How?"

"I told the Wick's emissary that all our performance review records were on paper, and it would take three weeks to copy them out for him. He bought it." Orloff sighed. "I've spent the whole day trying to make sure my ass was covered. HR might give me away -- you can never tell with Grutstein -- but so far everyone else is playing along."

Louis watched him steadily.

"There's a chance I can get you out of here with no paper trail, Louis. I just have to get access to the HR databases. Deleting your file would take half a second. Once your last paycheck was cut, you'd be safe."

Louis winced and closed his eyes. He shook his head very slightly.

"Why not?"

"Databases don't work that way, Dick." Another pale grin. "Deleting a record doesn't remove it from the database. It just marks it as no longer valid. The record can still be retrieved if you ask for it the right way. It would still be exported if anyone copied the database onto a backup tape or a removable disk. You'd have to delete the record and run a compaction procedure, with all the safeguards turned off, to be certain it was gone. That would disable all access to the database for half a day. People would ask questions. You'd leave a lot of fingerprints. No one in his right mind would do it for you. He'd be risking his career and federal prosecution in the bargain." The young engineer started to slump forward again.

"I would do it for you, Louis."

Orloff had never seen incredulity in Louis's eyes before. A pang went through him, a note on a heartstring nothing else had ever plucked.

"I'm...I don't know what to say, Dick. Thank you. But you can't. You don't have access."

"Their computers are networked to ours, aren't they? Can you crack your way in, get a username and password for me?"

The young engineer paled further. "Talk about leaving fingerprints! What good would it do? Everyone from here to China would know I'd done it!"

"Will they? If we can get your records out of all the databases, you'll be an unperson. How will anyone who could come after you know it was you?"

Louis pondered it.

"Are you sure about this, Dick?"

Orloff hesitated briefly, then nodded.

Louis looked away. He shook his head as if the turn of events had overwhelmed his

capacity to accept it.

"There's only one way it'll work. It has to be done the night before my last day. That means I stay late Wednesday that week to do the breaking and entering, and you stay late Thursday to do the actual theft. Are you sure about this?"

"You asked me that already." Orloff rose. "Just get me what I need and I'll take care of the rest."

"What if they catch you?"

"I don't really care."

Angela Farnsworth's next three weeks flew by like so many days.

Redmond pushed her hard. He accepted nothing less than mastery. She had to watch and listen with attention and concentrate on his every word. When she'd gotten over a hurdle, he'd compliment her and confront her at once with a new one. Word processing. Spreadsheets. A graphic presentation tool. A calendar and electronic mail organizer. A personal database program.

Every minute in his company was a challenge. His standards were too high for her to relax. She spent her evenings alone and went to bed early, more fatigued than she'd imagined the pressing of keys and mouse buttons could leave her.

They had a few visitors during the period. She got used to the raised eyebrows, the quick swerve of eyes from Redmond to her and back as if no conceivable explanation could exist for her presence. Redmond never took the bait. He would ask what his visitor wanted, provide it if he could, and dismiss him with a smile and a few pleasant words. Within seconds they would be back to work.

She heard nothing more about whatever had agitated Rolf Svenson.

From eight in the morning to five in the evening, they did not separate. He spent lunch with her every day and conversed with her like an equal about things far removed from work. The milling hundreds who marveled at Louis Redmond's inexplicable companion kept a respectful distance.

June Hankshaw kept her distance too, but there was nothing respectful about it. Her stare had an invasiveness that nothing in Farnsworth's colorful past could match. It was the equivalent of a slap across the face and a hand thrust down her pants at the same time.

Once and once only, Redmond took note of Hankshaw's attention. His eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch, and he smiled. Her face ballooned with blood. She whirled and stalked away to wherever she passed her days now that Farnsworth was otherwise engaged.

Yvette Hamelin could not quite repress a twitch of revulsion as Angela Farnsworth came through the outer office door. She did her best. Mr. Orloff expected it from her.

To her surprise, the young black woman was neatly clothed, including actual shoes, and with the strap of a purse slung over her shoulder. She stopped at Yvette's desk and folded her hands before her.

"Uh, Miss Hamelin, I heard Mr. Orloff is having a party for Mr. Redmond day after tomorrow."

Yvette Hamelin, forty-eight year old wife to a steamfitter, a twenty-four year veteran of military engineering administration, and mother of three grown children, had heard every profane expression ever wedged into an English sentence. None of them could have shocked her as it did to hear Farnsworth say "miss" and "mister." Her hands clamped the edge of her desk.

"Yes, Miss Farnsworth, that's right. Lunch on Friday, at Grucci's Gardens. Are you, I mean, would you like to attend?"

Farnsworth nodded. "What's it cost?" She pulled a wallet from her purse and fingered a couple of small-denomination bills.

"Thir...excuse me. Thirteen dollars." Yvette hoped her office-grade smile wasn't about to slip off her face.

"Shit." As soon as the word was out, Farnsworth bit her lip. "Excuse me, Miss Hamelin. I mean, I ain't got that much. Give you ten now and the rest on Friday?" She pulled two five-dollar bills from her wallet and held them out to Yvette like a sacrificial offering.

Yvette's hand trembled slightly as she reached out to accept the money. "Of course, Miss Farnsworth. I'll add your name to the list. Just stop by Friday morning with the other three."

Farnsworth's smile was childlike. "Hope it's gonna be a good party."

Yvette had to fight down the urge to leap from her chair and bundle Farnsworth in her arms.

"I think it will be. There'll be four hundred people there. More like a wedding reception than a going-away lunch."

"Solid! Hey, is he married? Mr. Redmond, I mean."

"No, he isn't."

Farnsworth frowned. "Why not?"

Yvette giggled. "Beats me."

Dick Orloff came to Louis's office at five-fifteen that day. He found the engineer deep in conversation with Angela Farnsworth. The two of them were hunched over Louis's personal computer, discussing how best to normalize a personal database. Farnsworth's gently slurred urban-black patois made a curiously musical counterpoint to Louis's crisp middle American.

"Uh, Louis?"

The two of them looked up from the glowing screen simultaneously.

"What's up, Dick?"

"I just stopped by to, uh, remind you about tonight. Still on?"

Louis's glance at his companion was over almost as it began. "It sure is. Is tomorrow night still a go?"

"Yeah." Something was trying to squeeze Orloff's throat closed. "The decks are cleared. Do you expect any trouble?"

Louis shook his head. "Do you?"

"Nothing untoward. Well, you have a good evening and stop by tomorrow early, okay?" He forced a smile and backed out, with Louis and Angela Farnsworth watching him intently.

"Mr. Orloff?"

Mister?

The voice was one that had raised the hair on Dick Orloff's neck from the first time he'd heard it. He looked up reluctantly to confront Angela Farnsworth.

"Can I talk to you a minute?"

He nodded, unsure what to make of her unprecedented politeness, and pointed toward a guest chair. She settled into it gingerly, hands balled in her lap.

"Look, I know something's going down, something bad. Ain't heard enough to know what, though, just that it's about Mr. Redmond. Just wanted to know if I could help."

Had Anders Forslund strolled into Orloff's office, leaped onto his desk and dropped his pants, Orloff would not have been more surprised. The triple shock of finding Farnsworth in Louis's office, having her approach him with such courtesy, and hearing that she knew trouble was afoot briefly deprived him of all thought.

"Mr. Orloff?"

"What...yes, Miss Farnsworth, I'm sorry. It's been a hard day and I'm not at my best. Would you tell me something, please?"

She nodded uneasily.

"Why are you being so polite to me all of a sudden?"

Her mouth dropped open. She laughed in the halting way that confused people will, as they search for a more appropriate response.

"It's all right, Miss Farnsworth. Believe me, I appreciate it greatly. Louis has been working with you, hasn't he?"

"You didn't know?"

Orloff shook his head.

"Three weeks now. Teaching me my job, Mr. Orloff."

Of course.

"I see he's taught you a few other things as well. How do you feel about it?"

Her eyes glistened. "Didn't like it up front. But he got the power, you know?"

Orloff couldn't help but grin. "I most certainly do. And now?"

"Now I see why. Easier this way, ain't it?"

The executive leaned back in his chair and fitted his fingertips together.

"Miss Farnsworth, you are obviously a lot brighter than I gave you credit for. Forgive me for having thought so little of you. Yes, exactly. Politeness is like the grease in a bearing, or the oil in an engine. So is dressing neatly and conservatively. These things make it possible for people to work together without constant friction. We can concentrate on our work instead of our dealings with one another."

She nodded. "Sorry I was such a pain in the ass."

"It's already forgotten. And by the way, you can call me Dick. Everyone in the department does."

Her eyes lit with alarm. "Shit, no! Mr. Redmond might hear."

Orloff guffawed. Presently Farnsworth joined in.

"Miss Farnsworth, I suddenly find myself liking you very much. Yes, something bad is going down, and yes, I can use your help. Are you free tomorrow evening, from five till about midnight?"

She nodded. "Got something for me to do?"

"Be my secretary for the evening. Just sit at Yvette's desk and make certain that no one comes into this office. I'm going to be in here doing something that could get me into a lot of trouble if I were caught at it. You could bring a book, or anything you liked to keep you amused, as long as it wouldn't draw attention to my presence here. Would you do that for me?"

"Sure!" A glow of delight spread across her face. "Be your bodyguard any time you want, Mr. Orloff. You just say the word. But what's up with Mr. Redmond? He in trouble for something?"

"Not yet, Miss Farnsworth. And we're going to see that it stays that way. Do you read the papers?"

She shook her head.

"Ever heard of the Technical Personnel Conscription Act?"

"Uh, no." She slid forward in her chair. "What's it about?"

He told her.

On Thursday evening at four fifty-five, Angela Farnsworth, loaded down with pulp puzzle books and canned cola, presented herself at Yvette Hamelin's desk. Hamelin glanced quickly at

the closed inner door, rose from her chair and headed home. Farnsworth settled in and spread her entertainments on the desk.

Five minutes later, Louis bustled in with a spiral bound notebook under his arm. He double-clutched at seeing her, then gave way to a broad, rueful grin. She returned it. He darted into Orloff's inner office. Moments later he returned without the notebook, stopped before her and planted his palms on her desk.

"Watching the boss's back?"

She shook her head. "Watching yours."

His eyes widened. He started to speak, stopped, and hurried out of the office.

Ten minutes later the outer door to the office suite opened to admit a tall, white-uniformed Navy officer. Farnsworth rose from her seat and tried to pretend she wasn't nervous.

"Is Mr. Orloff in?"

Farnsworth shook her head. "Sorry. Busy with a project."

The officer glanced sideways at the closed inner door. "But is he in?"

"Uh, no."

The officer's eyebrows rose. "Then why are you here?"

"Just watching the phone."

"After five PM?"

"Yeah." She decided to improvise. "Mr. Orloff is expecting some calls, but he ain't here to take 'em, so he asked me to sit here."

The officer's interrogating look had grown uncomfortably intense. "But where is he?"

Farnsworth shrugged.

"Well, if you can't find him when you need to, what good does it do him to have you here watching the phone?" The officer smiled as if he'd scored a point.

"Take messages."

"What about the voice mail?"

What's voice mail? "He don't like voice mail."

"Really." Hazel eyes tinged with suspicion squinted down into hers with deceptive mildness.

Shoulda worn my heels.

She tried to produce a casual smile. "Want to leave a message?"

One corner of the officer's mouth curled up. "No." He regarded her a moment more, then strode out in silence.

Farnsworth collapsed into her chair in absurd relief.

Orloff worked feverishly to cover all the bases before the midnight security sweep. As uninquisitive as the guards usually were, he didn't want one of them to find him here pounding away at a keyboard as if he were a working-level engineer. It might occasion questions, and even one would be too many.

OA's array of internal databases had several levels. The project-oriented ones were numerous, but were easiest to deal with. The ones organized by occupational specialty were a little more work to traverse, but were still fundamentally clear and rational. It was the Human Resources database system, with all its legally mandated pockets and eddies, that made him sweat.

Louis had provided him with a username and password that had infinite access rights. He could go anywhere, and do anything, with one exception: he could not prevent the system from recording his stream of keystrokes in its operator interaction log. Anyone who looked at that file would see his sequence of commands to the system, dated to that date and tagged to his terminal.

He tried not to think about it.

Layer by layer, he stripped OA's computerized recordkeeping systems of all mention of Louis D. Redmond. Louis's name appeared in a great many places. His years with the company had taken him through many projects, major and minor. At each turn, his involvement had been captured in one or more databases.

Orloff could not resist the urge to read each entry before he destroyed it. He'd been a low-level group leader in another part of the company when Louis joined OA. This would be his only chance to learn the full sweep of the young engineer's exploits. After Louis's name was gone from the records, Orloff would not speak it within OA's walls again.

What had been respect clad in deep affection changed first to astonishment, and then to awe.

It's a sacrilege to erase this.

It's the only way he can stay free.

But who will remember after this? Who will know how much he's done, and honor him for it? Other than me?

It would have to be enough.

A tired but jubilant Angela Farnsworth came to Louis Redmond's office that Friday morning at eight as if it were just another day. She knocked at his door, waited a moment and knocked again, but there was no answer.

He step out for coffee or something?

Might as well just wait.

She put her hand to the knob and eased the door open. The engineer was at his desk, his face buried in his hands, sobbing quietly.

Farnsworth had never dealt well with confusion. She had always run from it if she could.

She slipped around the door, settled herself into Redmond's guest chair with as little noise as possible, and waited for him to notice her. It took a while. When he finally looked up and saw her sitting before him, he grinned wanly, not trying to hide his dishevelment.

"Been here long?"

"Couple minutes."

He glanced at his desk clock. "I guess I ran a little over time." He wriggled his shoulders and sat back in his chair. "We don't have much to do this morning. You've gotten past everything I had planned for you. Congratulations." His hands clenched rhythmically in his lap.

It was what she'd wanted to hear from the moment her training had begun. It was the fulfillment of a fantasy she hadn't even known she harbored, the passport to a security that had seemed permanently out of her reach. It wasn't enough.

"Gonna tell me what this is about?"

His brow furrowed.

"You're gonna leave here a free man. Mr. Orloff said everything went smooth and easy last night. So how come all the wailing?"

He studied her face for several seconds, then rose and went to peer out the window of his office. The OA campus spread beyond it, a dozen modest two and three story buildings spread over a lush green expanse, crisscrossed by walkways and dotted by clumps of trees. OA employees in shirtsleeves strolled the walks between the buildings, enjoying the arrival of spring. There was a sense of ease and contentment to the scene. It was hard to see it as the headquarters of a research and development company in the murderously competitive aerospace field.

"Do you believe in God, Miss Farnsworth?" His voice was low and casual.

A lump of uncertainty congealed high in her chest. "Don't think about it much."

He nodded, eyes still pointed out the window. "Most don't. And most don't believe, not really. I do. Mr. Orloff broke half a dozen federal laws last night, just so I could stay out of government service. Pretty brave of him, wasn't it?"

"He gonna have to do time?"

Redmond glanced back at her with a half-grin. "Practical lady, aren't you? No, I don't think so. But he didn't know that, and he went and did it anyway. Courage like that isn't something you find on street corners."

He returned to his desk chair and dropped into it with none of the grace Farnsworth had come to expect from him. His face sagged with the fatigue that comes not from effort but from doubt.

"Now that you're qualified, you're going to be used. Make no mistake about it. There are too few aides in the department, and you can trade shots with any of the others and come out with your head up. So my bet is that you're going to get really popular.

"Some of the people who'll use your services will be involved with classified projects, projects you're forbidden by law to know everything about because you don't have a security clearance. They'll ask you to work on partial collections of information, stuff that's obviously incomplete because all the sensitive bits have been deleted. Even if you get a clearance some day, it'll still happen, because the first rule of security is not to spread sensitive data beyond those with a need to know. It won't matter how much you want to see the puzzle completed. Only need counts."

He paused to let out a sigh.

"I prayed last night. I asked God to help me to know if it was right that I let a brave man risk his freedom to protect mine. I didn't get an answer, and I still don't have one this morning. The only thing I can infer from that is that God doesn't feel I need an answer. Miss Farnsworth, nothing will ever twist your guts as hard as wanting a question answered with all the force in your soul, and being told that you have no need to know."

Farnsworth's mouth dropped open. Redmond closed his eyes again.

Some kind of load to carry.

He got the back for it.

"Got a ticket to cash in with God, Mr. Redmond?" She said it as lightly as she could. The dark brown eyes opened and stabbed into her own.

"He ain't no program. No incantation gonna get Him to lift and carry for you. You dicker with God, you say 'please' and 'thank you.' You take what you get."

She forced herself to sit calmly as the moment drew thin between them. She didn't trust herself to speak further. He rose again and looked down on her with his hands in his pockets, studying her as if they'd just met.

"I thought you didn't believe."

"Don't know if I do."

"Hm." The lines of strain on his face were slowly disappearing. "You're supposed to wait to be admitted to an office with a closed door, you know."

"Cut me some slack for once."

He grinned. "Okay."

The main dining salon at Grucci's Gardens was filled to capacity and beyond.

Waiters and waitresses moved as fast as they dared among the tables. Plates were brought laden and removed empty. Water glasses were refilled constantly. Pitchers of wine and beer were brought, quickly drained, and quickly replaced.

Louis Redmond sat at the head of the central table of the array. He ate in leisurely fashion,

swapped casual small talk with Rolf Svenson and Dick Orloff, his immediate neighbors, and acted as if his farewell luncheon were of no more significance than a Friday night poker party among old friends.

The affair possessed a surreal aspect. Farnsworth, who sat near the main entrance, far from the guest of honor, felt waves of unreality circling the room. The partygoers did their best to feign good cheer and good tidings for their highly regarded, soon-to-depart colleague. Yet underneath the veneer of merriment was a sense that things were about to go terribly wrong, for Oteora Aviation and perhaps for each of them individually.

Ain't his fault.

She did her best to enjoy the surroundings and the fabulous food.

At twelve fifty-five, with the entrees behind them and ice cream and coffee being distributed, Dick Orloff rose and tapped a spoon against his water glass. The gabble of the huge crowd faded swiftly to silence.

"Ever think we'd have one of these deals here?"

"NO!" The responding roar was immediate.

Orloff grinned. "Neither did I. But we've never had to get rid of a prick like this one before." He looked down at Redmond. The engineer's face was a picture of astonishment.

"This little guy has made me rewrite every scheduling guideline the engineering department ever had. All our management charts are shot to hell because of him. He kept bringing in projects ahead of schedule and under budget! Now you know who to blame for the decline in paid overtime, guys."

Hoots of affectionate derision echoed through the restaurant.

Orloff's smirk softened into a smile. "I'm going to miss him. Any time one of you clowns wanted to know why you weren't rated 'outstanding,' all I had to do was mention his latest miracle and say 'can you do that?' Now what the hell do I do?"

Laughter fluttered around the hall. Orloff turned his smile on Louis Redmond.

"I tried everything to get him to stay, but he turned it all down. He never told any of you why, though. I asked him not to, and he agreed, and I know he kept his word, because I know him. Louis, stand up and let us all have a last look at you, and tell us now. I think the time has come."

Louis Redmond rose shakily from his seat to a swell of applause that rattled the dishes against the tables. He stood at his place, momentarily shorn of words, and bathed in the regard of his colleagues. They clapped and cheered for several minutes for the man who'd set all of Oteora Aviation's engineering benchmarks for nearly two decades.

When the noise had abated, he passed a hand across his eyes and drew a deep breath.

"I didn't expect this. I've tried to do my best, and I knew it was appreciated, but that's quite a distance from this kind of lionization. You think too much of me, really.

"I want you all to know that I'll miss working with you. The company is the people who work for it. That's what makes it so good. Each and every one of you is better than you know: better engineers, better colleagues, and better friends."

His eyes swept the gathering slowly.

"Give yourself the credit that's due you. Those of you who work for Dick will never have to worry about being unappreciated by your management. As for the rest of you...well, maybe you can transfer." A peal of bright laughter pierced the air, and Redmond smiled. "Seriously, though, OA is a good company. It'll stay that way as long as you take your work seriously and treat one another right. So just keep it up. Keep doing your best. You don't need any more blather from me." He slipped back into his seat.

The second round of applause was ear-shattering, too loud to be contained by the walls of a

mere restaurant. It pounded through the gorgeous stained-glass dome of the ceiling and lapped at the fringes of the clouds. Whatever dwelled there was on notice: an alpha male, foremost of his tribe, was leaving for the uncharted lands beyond. The tribe would miss him.

Dick Orloff beamed at his departing engineer and clapped along with the rest, but Farnsworth could see the question in his face: why hadn't Louis stated his reasons for resigning, after Orloff publicly released him from his promise of silence?

Farnsworth knew.

She rose from her seat and hurried out the restaurant's front door as the tribute thundered on.

June Hankshaw had the Engineering Center to herself. Aside from her and the front desk security guard, the place was deserted. She wandered the corridors and fumed impotently, searching for some way to vent her spleen.

Her instinct was to destroy whatever was closest, but she knew it wouldn't satisfy her to exercise her fury against mere things. She needed to hurt someone. She wanted to inspire terror and revulsion in someone, anyone. She needed to look into eyes gone wide with confusion and pain as her nails raked the face below them.

There was no one around to be her target. Except for her, the entire Engineering Division was at Louis Redmond's farewell party.

Farnsworth included.

Bitch can't just leave me that way!

That Farnsworth had started to put distance between them several weeks earlier was something she'd conveniently forgotten.

Angie on her own now. Think she got herself a deal, but that little white prick gonna laugh from here to the bank. She done a whole lot of sucking for nothing.

On impulse, she strode across the building to Redmond's office. The door was open; the room was vacant of everything but the ubiquitous sheet-steel furniture. Even the nameplate had been removed from the door. Redmond had packed up and hauled stakes already. Hankshaw's anger surged a notch higher.

As she stood seething, a tall, white-uniformed Navy officer came around the corner from Mahogany Row with a pile of manila folders under his arm. She fell back a pace. He raised an eyebrow and stopped to peer into the empty office.

"This is the only unoccupied office on this floor. Whose is it?" The nametag over his row of ribbons said MARQUETTE.

She started to sneer and turn away, but her instinct for opportunity was alerted. "Guy just quit. They're having his blow-off bash right now."

The corners of the officer's mouth turned up slightly.

"What was his name?"

"Redmond." She tried to smile back at him.

He riffled through the stack of folders he carried and peered at the tabs. "I don't see that name here. Just quit, you say?"

She nodded. The officer's smile grew broader and quite a bit uglier. A trickle of excitement ran down her spine. She had no idea what she'd just unleashed, but she expected to enjoy it.

"His last day today. Ought to be back from lunch soon."

Marquette nodded. "Then we'll wait for him." He reached casually for her wrist and clamped a grip of surprising strength upon it.

"Hey --"

The ugly smile shone full into her face, and her excitement inverted all at once. "You can point him out for me."

She jammed her mouth shut and started to worry.

Farnsworth stayed close to Redmond as they reentered the Engineering building. She sensed that he was likely to try to slip away quietly, to avoid another huge fanfare as he departed. She didn't want him to slip away from her. She didn't want to see him go at all.

Introspection was not Angela Farnsworth's forte. She seldom pondered her own drives and motives. Her panicky desire to keep hold of the man who'd driven her unrelentingly for three weeks was in no danger of close examination.

Redmond noticed, of course. He didn't tax her with it.

They ascended the stairs to the second floor and turned onto Mahogany Row. Dick Orloff glanced once at Redmond, peeled off and headed for his office. Rolf Svenson smacked his forehead, muttered something inaudible and turned back down the stairs, and they were alone. Redmond shortened his stride and braked to an uncharacteristically leisurely saunter, and Farnsworth matched him.

"The hard part comes now, you know."

"Huh?" His words jarred her to attention.

"You've learned it. Now you have to do it. Without someone to catch you when you stumble."

He stopped and leaned back against the paneled corridor wall. "You've been a good student. But I think that if you had your druthers, you'd keep hold of the side rather than swim out into the middle of the pool. Am I right?"

She hesitated briefly, then nodded. He grinned.

"It's natural. Don't flog yourself about it. But you have to swim out now, or it's all been for nothing. You're good enough, you'll be all right without me to look after you. I can't make you feel it. I can only assure you of it and hope that you'll take my word for it until you've proved it to yourself out in the deep water. Are you ready, Miss Farnsworth?"

Shit, no. "Gun's loaded, Mr. Redmond. Gonna take my shot. You give a call every so often, maybe?"

He nodded. "That I will. Thank you for coming to my luncheon."

She couldn't meet his gaze again. She nodded quickly, turned away and hurried up the hall before him, determined not to let him see the mist that filled her eyes.

When she rounded the corner, she immediately spied the Naval officer, with June Hankshaw standing at his side. They were looking down the hall the other way. She surged back, bumped Redmond back into concealment, and spread her arms to prevent him from going around her.

"What --"

"Shhh." She turned and put a finger to her lips. "Bad company," she whispered. "Go sit in Mr. Orloff's office for a while. The inside one."

He studied her face a moment, then turned and strode off the other way.

"What's happenin', Junie moon?"

Hankshaw whirled to confront the approach of Angela Farnsworth. Hankshaw's erstwhile companion in mischief ambled easily down the hall, smile wide, hands loose at her sides. The Navy officer released his grip on Hankshaw's wrist.

"What you doing down here, Junie? Got an itch to see how the other half lives?" Behind Farnsworth's smile, anger flickered and surged, bright flames dancing behind a lattice of black

iron.

"Wandering."

"Found yourself a squeeze, I see." Farnsworth turned toward Marquette and looked him over insolently. "Remember you from last night. Can't get enough of this place?"

Marquette didn't rise to the bait. "Have you seen the occupant of this office?" He peered down at Farnsworth in inquisitorial style.

"You're looking at her, sugar. Moving in Monday, bright and early."

Hankshaw's mouth fell open. Farnsworth didn't spare her a glance.

"I meant the previous occupant, Miss..." He peered at her badge. "Farnsworth."

"Ain't no previous occupant, sugar. This room been empty for years. Got a bad rap back in the Eighties." Farnsworth let one leg trail behind her and stood hipshot, inviting the officer's attention to her generous curves. "Someone died in it."

Marquette stiffened.

"Are you quite certain of that, Miss Farnsworth?"

"What I been told, sugar." She fluttered her lashes. "You want to check it out with me? See if we can find some, you know, ghosts or something?"

"Miss Hankshaw, here," the officer grated, "says there was a Mr. Redmond who used this office up to this very day."

"Hah!" Farnsworth's cackle was derision itself. "He dead twelve years. You listen to Junie moon for long, be looking for Martians in the basement. She think aliens from Pluto control the pres-i-dent's brain by sending radio through his fillings."

Hankshaw opened her mouth to blast her former friend, but Marquette silenced her with a wave, never looking at her.

Incredibly, Angela Farnsworth advanced on Hankshaw and slipped an arm around her waist. Hankshaw couldn't move for the shock, even after Farnsworth allowed her hand to trail across Hankshaw's buttocks as Marquette watched.

"Junie moon don't want me moving up here, is all," Farnsworth purred. "We had us a little, you know, quarrel night before last, and she don't forgive and forget the way a good girl should."

Spots of color formed on Marquette's face. His mouth contorted in disgust. His eyes flicked from Farnsworth to Hankshaw and back. He turned and strode silently down the hall at an unnatural speed.

When the Navy officer had rounded the corner, Hankshaw wrenched away from Farnsworth's grip and raised her hands to attack. Farnsworth moved with her, threw an arm across her throat and shoved her against the corridor wall before she could draw a full breath.

Hankshaw squealed as Farnsworth pressed her back with her full strength. The light in the larger woman's eyes said she was in no mood to grant indulgences.

"Got to get with the program, Junie moon." Farnsworth's whisper was low and caustic. "Can't go throwing shit no more, or somebody gonna *take you in hand*. Got a feeling I know who'd be doing it."

Farnsworth's mad eyes bored into Hankshaw's for perhaps five seconds more before she relaxed her grip. Hankshaw squealed again, this time from surprise. She started to flee, had a moment of uncertainty, and halted herself. Her former friend stood motionless in the hall, watching her.

"Angie..."

Farnsworth shook her head. "Later, maybe. Not now."

Hankshaw turned and scurried back to her cubicle.

Angela Farnsworth raced back down Mahogany Row to Dick Orloff's office. As she burst

through the outer door, Yvette looked up from her typing and waved her in at once. Farnsworth grinned and pushed open Orloff's inner door to find the executive at his desk. Alone. Orloff looked up at her and grinned sadly.

"Didn't..." She stopped to draw a breath and gather calm. "Didn't Mr. Redmond come in here?"

Orloff nodded. "He said he had to go. I'm sorry, Miss Farnsworth. I know you wanted to say goodbye." He waved her into a guest chair. She settled nervously onto its edge. He gazed at her with the expression of a man whose son has just fallen in battle, but who has resolved to soldier on regardless.

"Louis told me how far you'd come under his tutelage. I was impressed. It says a lot about someone to be able to learn that much under that kind of time pressure."

Farnsworth held her tongue.

"One of my senior engineers has asked for a full-time aide for six months. Emil Deukmeijian. Have you met him?"

"Uh, no."

"He's a good man. Not as good as Louis, but a good man." Orloff's eyes crinkled at the edges. "Of course, Louis can spoil you for anyone else. Do you know that in seventeen years here, Louis never had an aide of his own, unless we count you?"

She shrugged. "Ain't no surprise. He didn't need one."

"True. Though 'need' seldom enters into it." Orloff rose from his chair and stuck his hands into his pockets. "A lot of people in the business world think of aides and secretaries and such as status symbols. Even the ones who have no real need will fight to get them and keep them. It's more than a little sick, but you'll find it just about anywhere you go."

Farnsworth shrugged. "Mr. Orloff, if this Mr. Duke-whatsis need an aide, then I work for him. Up to you to figure out the need. What you get paid for."

Orloff threw back his head and laughed long and hard. Despite the bleakness at her core, Angela Farnsworth began to laugh along with him.

"Thank you for that, Miss Farnsworth. Sometimes I forget. This has been a very bad day for me and for OA, and you've helped more than you know." He rounded his desk and perched himself on its edge. His tired smile held all the affection she had come to expect from her departed mentor.

"In six months I'm going to reassign you. I have an assignment in mind, and I think I'm going to tell you about it right now." He paused. "It's a chance to pay back the help Louis gave you, by paying it forward to others who'll need it just as much."

She waited.

"Instructor. Teaching other new aides the things Louis taught you, and that you'll be using in your work for Emil. Think you can handle it?"

Farnsworth's blood raced through the veins at her temples. "Me, a teacher? Stand up in front of a class?"

He nodded. "Or sit in front of a computer. Whatever works. We've never tried this before, so I'm not going to tie your hands. Do you think you'll want the job, Miss Farnsworth? Even if you say yes now, you have six months to back out."

She willed back her lightheadedness and mulled over her training. Could she match Louis Redmond's gentle patience? His careful, elaborate explanations? His absolute refusal to accept second-best?

Sat next to him for three weeks and listened to what he said. Did what he told me. Did what he did. Wasn't no miracle. Just a good man with a firm hand.

Ain't enough men like that.

"Try it if you say so, Mr. Orloff."

Orloff nodded again. "I'm happy to hear you say it. For now, I'm sure Emil will keep you busy. Stop in here on Monday and I'll take you to meet him." He started back toward his seat.

"Mr. Orloff?"

He turned back toward her. "Yes?"

"Figure I get to train Junie moon?"

His forehead wrinkled in momentary confusion. "You mean June Hankshaw? Yes, certainly, if she's still around by then."

"Solid." Farnsworth sat back in her chair as a not entirely wholesome warmth spread through her chest. "Can't wait to hear *her* call me 'Miss Farnsworth.' "

Dick Orloff lowered his head to peer at her from beneath his shaggy gray-black eyebrows. Despite the mask of severity, the glint of humor was still in his eyes. "Don't push your luck too far, Miss Farnsworth."

She giggled. "Okay."

It felt odd for Louis to return home so early in the day, but there was nowhere else for him to go.

He let himself in, closed and locked the door with unusual care, and collapsed onto the old sofa that had sat in his living room for more than twenty years. The thousands of books of his huge private library, sole companions of his years alone, loomed cold and indifferent about him that afternoon. They offered neither comfort nor counsel. They did not possess the answer to his prayers.

The pain had been growing. It was still intermittent, but the separate spikes were rising in intensity.

He pulled himself upright and trudged up the stairs to his little office. The room was silent, the air still and slightly musty. The computer's blank screen reproached him silently for his neglect.

The large manila envelope remained where he'd left it three weeks earlier, wedged into his keyboard. He plucked it loose and weighed it in his hand.

When I first saw them, I couldn't face them. I wasn't ready. I might not be ready even now, but at least the decks are clear.

He lifted the flap of the envelope, slid out the contents, and held them up to the light from the westward window.

The three X-rays were as he remembered them. The dark mass that wrapped around his lower spine and cupped his kidneys like a pair of clutching hands was no smaller than it had been.

Miles didn't want to discuss surgery. I wonder if it's even possible.

If I'm meant to live, I'll live. Otherwise, not.

He returned to his desk, picked up the phone and dialed Onteora General Hospital. Connection was immediate.

"I'd like to speak with Dr. Miles Jefferson, please. Tell him Louis Redmond is holding for him."

He waited as the switchboard sought out the head resident.

You've done what you can. It's time to let others do what they can. Have a little faith in your fellow man.

"Louis, this is Miles." The young physician's voice was piercing in its suddenness, shot through with anxiety and tension.

"Hello, Miles. How've you been?"

"Worried." The word rang like beaten metal in Louis's ear. "Are you all right?"
Louis closed his eyes tightly and struggled for peace. "I think it's time we discussed my options."

-- **Exeunt Omnes** --

We will return to Louis Redmond, Malcolm Loughlin, Father Schliemann and Onteora County, New York in *On Broken Wings*.

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Francis W. Porretto is an engineer, fictioneer, and commentator. He operates the *Eternity Road* Website (<http://eternityroad.info>), a hotbed of pro-freedom, pro-American, pro-Christian sentiment, where he and his Esteemed Co-Conspirators hold forth on every topic under the Sun. You can email him at fwp@eternityroad.info. Thank you for taking an interest in his fiction.