

ETERNITY'S HANDMAIDEN

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R. Peter Ubtrent

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Eternity's Handmaiden

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*For Genevieve, who always believed in me.
And for Jotykavi, whose friendship kept me sane.*

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Other Books by R. Peter Ubtrent

Dark Pilgrim Rising
Seed of Power
Dark Throne
Dark Enlightenment
Dark Redemption
Fallen Pilgrim

Cover Art by Michele Chang

ETERNITY'S HANDMAIDEN

As a drop of water is to the storm, so is an individual to the collective: one such drop misplaced will matter little to the force of the aggregate. But how are we to know when that one drop, which we have misplaced, is in fact the basis for the aggregate as a totality, and in that misplacing rend the storm of its force? How are we to know how many drops can be misplaced before we bring eternity to an end and in that end bring life to a new beginning, coming full circle in that path of the consciousness which starts with that single raindrop? Perhaps that is why the gods, in their infinite wisdom, provided us with one who knows these things, who can, in her ever-recurring life, be aptly named Eternity's Handmaiden, and who knows which drops can be misplaced and which cannot.

***--- from the sayings of Mahriso Pasha, Taoist monk,
First President the United O'Neill Colonies
Federation.***

ETERNITY'S HANDMAIDEN

PROLOGUE

We must always keep the springs of laughter dancing in our hearts. Otherwise tragedy will overwhelm and deaden us.

The ice axe banged into the bullet-proof surface of the sheet, dislodging a chunk of the ghoulish white, transparent ice to fall into the raising wind gusts and crash onto the helmeted figure a good ten meters below, who hunched his shoulders and waited for the shower of particles to cease. Dr. Krishna Pratali securely imbedded his other axe into the ice, tested his placement with a tug, then kicked the front part of his crampons in and stepped up.

He grabbed another ice screw, a twenty-centimeter long and three-quarter centimeter thick threaded, hollow tube that would arrest any fall, and began the laborious process of working it into the rock-hard ice sheet

He looked up at the lenticular clouds making their way across the face of the dark blue sky, then at the dark band building on the horizon and knew that they were running out of time. This mountain and these

storms were not forgiving of mortals who dared challenge them.

This was Cerro Torre, which rose out of the Patagonian Andes like a halberd into the winter sky, defying those who attempted to conquer it.

On the southern tip of Argentina, the Patagonian Andes plunge deep into the heart of the great Southern Ocean, the narrow land-mass all that separates the Southern Pacific from the Southern Atlantic, all that stands in the way of the pounding fury of the storms spawned over the oceans, which tear their way around the bottom of the globe in unabashed vehemence.

The west side of Cerro Torre sits squarely in the path of these storms and they frequently slam the mountain with punishing slashes of wind and rain, adorning the peaks with fantastic mushrooms of rime ice. They grow in wild and twisted shapes as if the sculptor were passionately insane. Each storm pounded the rock and in that pounding the twisted shapes evolved until their translucent grayish blue color capped the granite monoliths like gargoyles, an insurmountable barrier to the summit for those foolish enough to try.

These rime mushrooms sat athwart the main passages up and provided a dangerous challenge, not able to support a persons weight but forcing one to go around and in-between and making the ascent that much more difficult and spectacular.

It was why people chose this mountain ... and this time of year.

Krishna finished working in the ice screw. Although the temperature was well below freezing, he could feel the greasy sweat underneath his many layers of

clothing, under his helmet. He rested a moment. For all the challenges Cerro Torre offered, he was glad that altitude was not one of them. With a peak at only 3102 meters, high-altitude sickness was never a worry. He could not imagine doing all this and having to lug around portable oxygen.

He looked out over the vast expanse opening up below him, the dark blue sky in stark contrast to the blinding white of the snow and ice, the dull granite gray and rustic browns comprising the rock they had chosen to climb on this particular trip and marveled at the freedom he felt at this moment. Although extremely dangerous, especially during the winter when only a handful of climbers had successfully navigated the vertiginous cliffs, it was the best way he knew to unwind after the last few months of concentrated work on the patients for which he was responsible.

As a neurosurgeon at one of the more prestigious hospitals in the world, Krishna's work involved one thing and one thing only: repairing the damaged brains of people who were nothing but anonymous faces. He had wanted to stick to pure research, stay in a lab somewhere and never have to deal with the human side of the profession. It had not worked out the way he had planned it. That youth-inspired dream, he had learned much to his consternation, would never have made it all the way to the reality train.

Life was not that straight forward or simple.

It was not that he didn't enjoy his work. The truth was far from that. He found the entire experience extremely challenging and the lives he saved made any qualms about pure research look selfish and ill conceived. But late at night when he had time to

himself – which was so rare as to be almost non-existent – he still dreamt of where his interests lay; the theoretical side of the work, the advances in neuro-surgery that could be instituted to save even more lives, correct more of the mental problems facing so many people in the world these days.

Then there had been the sudden, tragic deaths just a few months ago of Kido Nakamura and Dr. Hart, two new acquaintances he had made at a conference recently attended. He had only known them briefly, having talked together for no more than five hours at the most and then they communicated through e-mails and phone blurbs that held more questions than answers, but they had somehow struck up a harmonious cord. Although they were all in completely separate and unrelated fields, the idea with which these two had approached him had been an awe-inspired break-through, a true revolution if it could be achieved. The ideas had been rumbling around in his mind ever since and he was determined, when he returned from this vacation, to make more time for the research they had intended him to accomplish.

They might be dead but it didn't mean that the idea had to die with them. If their totally revolutionary concept could be successfully implemented, it would be one of the most important advances in science, nay in humanity, since Newton and Einstein.

A thick Spanish accent floated up on the rising wind. "How long will you be admiring the scenery? We need to move along. We only have a few hours of sunlight left and either we reach the next ledge or we have a sleepless night here on the cliff face and I for one don't wish to sleep here."

Krishna shook himself out of his musings and looked down at his climbing companions. He smiled at them. He needed to stop all this idle daydreaming and get back to the work at hand. He looked back up at the imposing edifice, which rose like a wall of white before him and took stock of his next move. He concentrated on making easy, smooth swings with his ice axes as he slowly and methodically made his way up, twenty feet at a time, planting ice screws and securing their ascent to the sheer ice walls standing in their way to the next way point.

His calves quivered with exhaustion. His breath came in pants. It was tiring work to be sure and the sun, as it began to sink lower and lower, its slanting rays of light coming off the low fireball turning the rime mushrooms a caustic yellow, would not wait for him to rest.

Francisco worked his way past Krishna, thankfully, taking the lead and heading for the lip at the top of the head-wall and the site of their camp for the night. With the short, winter daylight and the bitter cold, they had spared rigging the usual umbilical cord of rope strung out behind them to secure their descent. They had decided early that it would take too long to rig the line and be too much of a dead weight hanging down below them for the security it offered.

They were all veteran climbers and this type of mountain required that they reach the summit as quickly and efficiently as possible, extra precautions would only hinder their ascent. The climb had become so steep now that Krishna was forced to use only the very front spikes of his crampons, knowing that if he didn't reach the head wall soon, he would be too exhausted to go on. Hanging off this cliff face was not

the best possible place to be when the storm hit. There was a storm brewing off in the Pacific he could feel in the frigid blasts of cold buffeting him with their telltale sign of power. They might have to wait it out in one of the rare huts lining the west side, boredom more of a threat at that point than anything else.

But first things first.

They needed to reach that ledge in short order.

He heard it before he saw it and knew exactly what it portended, though somewhere in his analytical mind he knew that the odds against it happening were astronomical. Had he had time to think about it, he would have found it odd how the human mind could create such esoteric thoughts and drag up such trivial data points at a time when it was facing possible extinction. Perhaps it was some form of survival technique.

He would not have time to contemplate the problem.

The warning from Francisco was more panic than caution and Krishna grabbed the line with his gloved hands, bracing himself for the sudden lurch of weight that he knew was coming.

An ice screw had failed, snapped in half like a toothpick.

Francisco swung free from the vertical for a moment, the loss of his support unexpected and sudden. He swung an ice axe into the gleaming white sheet but it merely glanced off to the spray of scattered ice particles glittering in the fading light like mini fireflies. Another screw snapped and Francisco plummeted down, his safety line like a useless tail.

As Krishna watched his companion come toward him, several thoughts flashed through his mind at once. First of all, it was almost impossible for one of

the ice screws to fail like that. They were designed to the highest specifications and could support up to ten times his weight.

For two to break was unthinkable.

His second thought was about his family. Images of his beautiful wife and two small children began dancing before his eyes. Who would take care of them now? Would his employer continue to pay them benefits? Who would teach his son to play sports?

When the third and fourth screw let loose with a snap that echoed through his very soul, Krishna knew that this was it. Without the ice screws to secure them to the wall of ice and granite, gravity would work its unalterable ways and pull each of the climbers off the face to certain death on the jagged rocks below. There was nothing he could do to avert the disaster about to befall them and yet he felt a strange calmness come over him as if he somehow knew that it was all going to be all right, that everything would be taken care of and he need not worry.

The line went taut in his hands as the full weight of Francisco came to him. The rope burned through his gloves as he clamped down slowly, letting the tension build gradually so that the sudden addition of Francisco's weight would not pull him off also.

But his efforts were in vain, for with a loud pop, followed by a series of deafening snaps, the rest of the ice screws holding the team in place let loose and the company of hardy adventurers plunged down the three hundred meter cliff, their cries of terror lost to the screaming wind that had begun to assault the mountain peak with its merciless howling.

Their frozen, dead bodies would not be recovered for several months, the look of agony and shear

horror etched on their faces a mute testimony to what had happened, a snapped ice screw taken as evidence of the tragic accident that had befallen Dr. Krishna Pratali and his climbing companions in their attempt to conquer Cerro Torre ... and themselves.

A trick of government is to make the people feel guilty.

Guilt must begin as a feeling of failure. Therefore, failure must be easy to come by and provided for readily by the government.

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5 August 2085

The view from the office window was usually, in all respects, fantastic. The clear skyline allowed one to see for kilometers, the spires of the surrounding buildings receding off like majestic descending steps to the altar that was the tallest building of the city. Its soaring structure allowed for an unobstructed panorama of the city lying below like a foundation of stability. The architecture here emphasized the harmonious while interspersing with gardens and parks, making sure the city was not a great sprawling edifice of meta-structuring metropolises into which the old cities of Earth had been allowed to fester.

But this evening the view was gone, replaced by a low band of clouds hovering over the land like a leaden shield, dropping its mixture of nitrogen and water onto a humanity thirsting for so much more.

The wind, high up in the storm where the tower pierced into the tempest like a lone brawler defying the gale, pelted the window with splattered drops of rain smearing and running along as if chased by the very hounds of hell.

The storm had come in unexpected, as most such storms still did despite the assurances to the contrary by those in the meteorological services, and had overwhelmed the tower in a barrage of wetness that now sent a chill wave of despair through the structure as if leeching into the walls and dripping on the inside like misplaced dew.

But the man standing inside, looking out into his own reflection, was oblivious to the force of the tempest outside striving to regain the surface of the planet from the virus that had infested it so many hundreds of thousands of years ago. If it could not eradicate man with his own stupidity, perhaps it could drown him out. It had happened once before to the betterment of the planet.

He was not tall by any means. Most would, in fact, call him short, but certainly not to his face. That would be a mistake never to be repeated again. His stomach – once had been firm and strong, washboard abs a part of the muscular frame that was his youth – was now a pouch of fat and intestines, sticking out like the proverbial Buddha in defiance of any to criticize. His face was round, the heavy bags under the eyes and sagging chin an indication that age had been more of a foe than a friend. Red speckles danced randomly across his cheeks, a sign, the doctors assured him, that his blood pressure was still too high. His lips were full, scarred from too many years in the sun, too many missed kisses in the

bedroom. His stark white hair sat atop his head like a warning of experience, mocking the youth he had once held and in that mocking, turning bitter, that which had once been satisfied.

His three-piece designer suit, custom-made to his specifications from the finest material, looked neat and pressed, the jacket thrown carefully over one of the three heavy leather chairs gracing the dark and foreboding office. His bow tie was undone, the top button of his white shirt open to allow his ample chin waddle to dangle in all its fatness. He looked tired.

His whole demeanor was one of trouble and worry as he stared into the raging storm that was his reflection. He could certainly not say that life had not been kind to him. It had, in all honesty, been more than kind, bestowing more money than he could conceivably ever use and more women in his younger days than he could remember, their faces like so much clutter to a mind's eye become blind to a past he would rather forget. He liked his fancy clothes, liked the feel of the expensive fabric against his flesh and yet he could still vividly remember a time when he would have been happy to have one decent dress shirt to wear.

He smirked at the remembrance.

Strange how happiness, as defined by his youth, was just as elusive now in his older age as it had been then despite the fact that he had achieved all his planned goals before he was even thirty.

The genius he once was had set up shop in someone else's body at some time which he could not pinpoint and left him with the growing girth of his own obesity as a consolation prize. He was well aware how people looked at him now, how they saw only the

superficial outside and chuckled at his inability to maintain the look that the magazines wanted everyone to see as normal.

But it was his eyes that most people would speak of after they had met him. If asked to describe him, most would have a general description of stoutness that was vague and nondescript, but all would have a comment on his eyes, which blazed away in their deep recesses like fiery green candles in a dark room, an unwavering brightness transcending his physical appearance, drawing people to him like moths to the flame, compelled with no known reason to want to talk and engage in conversation with this short, fat man.

And his conversation would be brilliant, filled with an intelligence that seemed lost in the body that presented it, that would seduce even the most abstinent of skeptics. He could hold an audience spellbound with tales of safari and the Outback, or attack without mercy those ideas and opinions he found disdainful and without merit. He had rarely lost an argument. But then, he had rarely engaged in one that he knew he would lose.

But none of that mattered.

What mattered now was the woman for whom he was waiting, the woman who would direct him to activate an asset he felt was better left alone. It was always the same. Those who used his resources never understood the price to be paid and rarely, if ever, knew what it was that they were asking of him. Unfortunately, that was not the case with the appointment for which he was currently waiting. She was well aware of what she did, every move of that delicate intellect planned and crafted until it stank of perfection.

And he hated her for it, for it was his resources that normally suffered under the demands of her ego.

She was already late, something he didn't tolerate. People who were late were people who thought their time far more important than others, their lives taking priority over the mere mortals who happened to infect their path occasionally.

There was a knock, like a rap on the door of decision, hard and caustic, echoing through the room and into his soul like a rattle of drums.

"Enter," he said in his gruff baritone, killing off the echoes of the rap in the shadows.

The door swung open on silent hinges and the tall woman strode in as if on skates, her jaw set firm and hard, her eyes uncompromising in their amber intensity. "I suppose you've heard?" she asked in a tenor rumbling about the large room like a peal of distant thunder.

"I have," the man replied simply, not having turned from his vigil of the storm raging out the window, seeing her reflection perfectly and deeming not to look at her direct visage for fear that a Medusan curse might befall him.

"Then, Dr. Cavalier, I think that your earlier conjectures were in error."

"Perhaps.... We shall see." He was not about to admit any error on his part. He didn't make errors

She threw a sheaf of papers bundled up in a tan portfolio, the words *Eyes Only* boldly stenciled in red, onto the shiny mahogany table. They slid halfway across before coming to a stop. "That's five now. The president doesn't want to wait for a sixth one. She wants you to do something, Vincent, and wants you to do something now."

The use of his first name made Cavalier turn to look at the President's Chief-of-Staff, to see the blazing eyes reaching out to him in the darkened room, the beautiful lines of her aristocratic face always creating a pang in his heart for the body laying beneath all that gruff exterior and fashion-designed suits, which fit her figure better than they should have been allowed.

He didn't turn to stone upon setting his eyes on her. Would wonders never cease?

Claudine Maxwell was not one with which to be fooled. He was more than aware of that little fact. She had not, as was the common opinion, slept her way to the top with her dark-haired good looks and model-perfect body. She had earned her position with integrity and grit, honesty and determination, assets anyone who had worked with her for any length of time would have seen within moments. She was respected by those she served, feared by those who opposed her and oblivious to anyone else.

"It's always now, isn't it Claudine?" Cav said as he ignored the sheaf of papers on his desk starting to fall out of the portfolio as if wanting to be read, needing to be seen to validate their existence.

"She wants to know if they truly are accidents, if it's all just coincidental."

Cav smirked, then walked over to the built-in bar and pulled the top off of the crystal carafe holding a smooth, amber liquid. "Drink?"

"No time, thank you." She had not always been this frigid. He remembered well a time when she would have jumped at a chance to drink with him. But then that was before his genius had abandoned him and left him a disgusting bum of a man. "So what should I tell the President? She's going to want an answer."

Cav sipped the cognac with practiced ease, the liquid burning a path down to his stomach with a retribution he felt deep down. "They always want an answer, Claudine," he said as he topped his glass off and replaced the stopper to the carafe, the clink of the glass odd in the stillness of the room, the rhythmic ticking of the French clock on the mantle like a subconscious countdown. "But sometimes...," he stated as he walked across the room and back around to the window, resuming the vigil he had held before she had entered, "... sometimes the answers are not the ones that they want to hear."

A frowned creased her face.

She hated having to come here to talk to this man. The brief and explosive love affair they had so many years ago, in that other lifetime that was their youth, made it even more difficult, especially with the condition into which Cav had let himself fall. Although pity was something she sometimes felt for him, a loathing was usually the feeling she had when she thought about having ever been involved with a man who ran one of the most nefarious and clandestine operations in the world and looked like a poster boy for over-indulgence, gluttony.

But then he was the best at what he did and that made it necessary to come here, to talk to him, to have to pretend to find his company marginally comfortable. When he didn't say anything else, she cleared her throat loudly. He turned his head slightly, caught the indication that she was becoming impatient and smiled a crooked, consoling smile reflecting back in the window like a ghost. "I'll have to see who's available at such short notice."

"No." The word was like a shotgun blast and made him wince inside. "The President wants your best. I think we both know who that means."

He nodded his head slowly as he downed the last of the cognac, the burning no longer hard and firm, the kick of the drink having already dissipated to his tolerance. "You do know that she's inactive." It was not a question but more of a statement, a hoping that the Chief-of-Staff would change her mind.

"This is considered an emergency, top priority, National Security at stake." Her words were like a litany of excuses.

He smiled again, his eyes flashing a warning. "It's always a matter of National Security, isn't it? When has it ever not been?" He turned his head to look at her again, felt his limbs begin to solidify into stone and went back to looking at her reflection. Reflections were somehow softer, more muted, as if only a part of the evil inherent in humans was displayed, the mirror not able or willing to tolerate the rest. "Half of them aren't even our citizens. We've plenty of others who can do the job just as well."

"Activate her, Cav," she said with finality, ending the conversation there and then. She always was one to get the last word in, even if she had to say it on the other side of the door. "I'll expect a report on my desk within two days. No more," She turned on her heel and strode to the door, her tight, long skirt conforming to her firm body like a glove, the reflection in the window he watched making it difficult to see her as the President's highest advisor or the shrew that she had become.

She stopped at the door and turned to look at his back, a yearning for the man she had once known

making a feeble effort to assert itself, then ruthlessly pressed it down, back into the long, lost echoes of the past she kept hidden away deep within. "We paid for her, so we'll damn well use her." She hesitated a moment, made certain that he didn't have a reply, then slammed the door shut on his solitude.

Dr. Vincent Cavalier watched the lightning as it played across the clouds in fingers of divine nimbleness, the vibrations of the thunder shaking the window ever so slightly and causing the wind-pelted rain to dance even more energetically across the panes. He lowered his head a moment, wondering what he had ever done in his past lives to deserve someone like Claudine Maxwell in his current life. He would have preferred to come back as a snail for any bad karma he might have accumulated over the years.

He threw his cognac snifter across the room, shattering it in a spray of broken dreams tinkling to the carpeted floor like so many wasted lives, the shards not even picking up the muted lights to sparkle.

*This is the season of gathering cold, the fading
memory of spring.
Light flows slowly through the woods, a light that you
could harvest
like grain or scoop into your astonished mouth the
way a bear scoops
honey until your bones dissolve and you can never
return
to the life that you were living.*

-- Tom

Sexton

2

6 August 2085

0535 hrs

Alaska

Alaska is a land of unforgettable beauty and uncompromising wildness. It's still a frontier, a last refuge for those seeking a life that does not hinge on the metropolises that seem to define so much of

humanity. The vast, unspoiled stretches of frozen tundra and towering mountain, quiet stream and tumbling river, tranquil wildlife and dignified lakes of pristine reflection harkens back to what the Earth once was, once was before the advent of humanity and its supposed monopoly on intelligence: an intelligence that decimated thousands of other species for its own righteous pursuits and then apologized to an empty landscape of malls and condominiums.

But Alaska has held its own, an island awash in a sea of rising urbanization and suburban sprawl that defines the new generation more so than anything else, her untouched back-lands a suffusion of openness and magnificence for those bold enough to live with it. For one didn't capture such a land. Only those born of an ignorance bred in the mind-numbing back streets of urban chancre infesting the very vitality of life with its lesions of concrete and steel can be brazen enough to claim to be able to capture the land. Those who live in the solemn openness of the lake and the brook and the mountain know better, and see, in their temporal existence, an acceptance by the land of them.

So it was in the lone cabin that sat by the gently flowing stream and glacial lake, the first covering of virgin snow on the ground still months away, the stillness of the morning air chill in its embrace, the vivid hue of the wildflowers, robust in their vibrancy, covering the tundra like a patchwork quilt and lining the path to the open porch and the double French doors that was the front entrance.

The stream running behind the cabin was about six meters wide and first appeared from the valley out of

which it ran as a broad, straight, transparent ripple, its bottom flowered with round stones varying in size from the small to the fist-sized. As it neared the cabin, the stream gradually swept left in a meander, the far bank undercut by the turn, the water turning ashen with increased depth, toppling birch and alders dipping into the current, the course of the stream making them tremble and bob as if bestirred by a breeze. The nearer the cabin the more densely the trees grew as the arch of the stream continued till in a thicket a lone, tall pine, the needle-less snags of the bottom third like ghost fingers in the shadows, stood tall in its solitude, a marker for the cabin.

A long pool hugged the near bank, either mysterious with ripples and waves giving it a depth it didn't have, or crystal-clear to its sandy bottom. Then the stream narrowed and, rushing in dark and strong, still deep in its latent vigor, met the caliginous lake in a tumble of water. Being a glacial lake, it sat dark and brooding, its depth unseen, the green rolling carpet that was the meadows running to its shore, spread between gray and brown hills.

But the meadows stretching out from either side of the stream and all around the cabin were anything but smooth. Close to the lake and running up toward the tundra the land was filled with tussocks, mushroom shaped grass mounds that are the stuff of Arctic legend. Narrow at the base and wide at the top, the tussocks are unstable to walk on; any step slightly off center and they would topple, sending the walker stumbling. Then came the tundra, a dry, spongy cushion abloom with a bouquet of wild flowers running the spectrum of the rainbow and beyond, to the lazy

sound of the awakening insects filling the air with their acrimonious buzzing.

Finally, the meadows turned into talus, rocky and rugged, climbing higher and higher into the hills turning into the mountains whose snow-capped peaks stood like sentinels guarding the valley below. A mass of pine trees interspersing with birch and aspen colored the horizon, standing like a line of soldiers on the fringes, reaching into the distant haze with their strong earthly essence and towering tops of dark, woodland green, the light green of the aspen a dapple of glittering light within.

The cabin was large as far as cabins go, a two-story construct that had four bedrooms, an immense kitchen, a library and numerous other amenities the owner rarely used. There was a three-car garage, though it housed only two vehicles: a silver Range Rover that was a classic in its own right and a new personal VTOL (vertical take-off and landing) that was rarely used if ever, sitting idly under its cover as if shunned for its ability to bring the outside world closer.

Two dogs ran about the cabin, frolicking in the freshness of the morning, chasing birds and rodents and dandelion seeds discharging into the light breeze in a spread of snow-white spores.

Music diffused out of the open windows, light and airy, fitting the majestic backdrop of snow-clad peaks rising out of the morning mist like giants in slumber, awaiting the right time to rumble to life and re-awaken their kin. A single violin stood out, played with a passion that would have made any music instructor proud, backed up by an accompanying orchestra on disc, the sound traveling for kilometers across the

flower-topped meadows of the long valley. But then the cabin had no neighbors within hearing distance and the animals of the land didn't bother to complain.

The music was by Strauss, *the Radetsky Marsch*, a powerful piece of eloquence that the female played with striking intensity, almost as striking as her lack of clothing. Naked as the day she was born, the female floated around the open den, eyes closed in concentration, a smile on her face that would have surprised the few people who knew her, had they been able to draw their eyes away from the body that was sleek and well toned.

Alexis Locke stood a good two meters tall and was exceptionally well proportioned. She had breasts on the small side of medium and never had a day's problem with their size regardless of the magazines and models who seemed to sport the fuller, larger variety and made everyone else who looked not as they looked feel guilty for a false inadequacy. She was very comfortable with her body, as any female who looked like her would be. Although she was sixty years old, she looked more like she was in her late twenties and felt about as old, a by-product of her genetic manipulation, which had dominated her life from the beginning. With a life expectancy of one-hundred-and-fifty years, she was still considered young by the day's standards and she didn't really care what anyone else thought. They weren't the ones living her life. It was not like she met many people anyway out here and that was the way she liked it.

Her dirty-blond hair was short, reaching down to just below her ears and cut in a style exemplifying her attractive face to the fullest. She was tanned, a deep

dark brown making her blue-green eyes that much more striking in their setback sockets, blazing forth with an intelligence stunning most who met her. She had a crooked smile that was rare to behold, the one planted on her face now unconscious and lighting her up like the auroras gracing the twilight sky in all their resplendence. Her nose was small and compact, her lips petite but well-formed, again against the custom of the day that had the models with their pouty looks making the men all weak in the knees.

Little to no makeup scarred the beauty she possessed like a natural aura. She didn't even have any make-up in the house, no foundation or eyeliner or smeared lipstick to mar what she saw as nature's own eloquence. But then she really didn't care much about any of that. It wasn't like she was hunting for a man to marry. Perish the thought. And if she really needed a sexual fix that her own cadre of toys couldn't satisfy, she always had the option of finding someone in the nearest town. Dumont, the local game warden and all around handy-man, stopped by every few weeks on his supply runs and they would curl up in each other's arms for a night full of passionate, unhindered, meaningless sex that certainly was not enough for her needs but was good enough while it lasted.

She could always fly into one of the bigger cities down south and engage in a night of sport if she really wanted – and she did sometimes with those few gentlemen friends she had acquired over the years, but it had been nearly five years since that urge had stuck her hard – but for the most part she was content with the way it was. She lived alone, though not really alone if one counted her two faithful dogs – Sasha

and Argyle – to keep her company and the ever changing vista greeting her every morning out the large, plate-glass windows stretching up to the vaulted ceiling and allowing the full grandeur of the landscape to flood the room like a beacon from on high.

She had received numerous offers of marriage and had even had a child once – a child whom she had never known, having been forced to give it up at birth – but that was in the distant past, a past she was trying, with the solitude of the Alaskan frontier, to forget. Deep down, perhaps, she wanted to have a man around the house, someone other than the dogs to love and hold at night when the chill winters from the Arctic seeped through the eaves and the door-jams and under the covers like tentacles of nature's fury. But then men presented far more problems and needs than solutions and she had found out, the hard way unfortunately, that men also had their fair share of fears and doubts that she really didn't want nor need.

She was a loner due to circumstances more than desire. In this world of satellite tracking, implanted tracking chips and constant surveillance, being anonymous and alone was not that easy. But she had managed, for the last fifteen years, to do it successfully. She was one of the few individuals nowadays, not living in one of the smaller developing countries, who didn't have a tracking chip implanted in her and that certainly made it easier to remain anonymous. The less people she had contact with the better, regardless of whether she was tracked or not. There were those out there who would like nothing better than to end her life in a heartbeat, or

keep her around to do their own bidding, whether of an espionage or sexual kind.

She didn't want to contemplate either one.

The annoying chirp of the vid-phone made it through to her mind as she waltzed around the room, but she chose to ignore it. No one ever called her. She couldn't even remember the last time the phone had rung, so whoever it was probably had a wrong number and would go away soon enough. The phone, not fond of being ignored, chirped louder and this time the automated house system chimed in with its polite voice, telling Alexis that the vid-phone was ringing and asking kindly whether it should turn the music down so that Alexis could answer it.

Alexis' smile vanished in an instant as she stopped dancing and playing the violin and stomped her foot on the wooden floor, the mood of the moment and the flow of the music now gone. "Fuck it all to hell!" she shouted in her high, melodious voice making the swear words somehow sound polite.

The music stopped and the vid-phone continued its pressing chirps, anxious now that someone answer it. "Can't you take a message?" she shouted to no one in particular as she placed the violin gently down and strolled over to the message center, uncaring that she was completely naked and that whomever was waiting on the other end would get an eyeful when she stepped before the visual system. Whoever it was deserved it for interrupting her morning. "Isn't that what you're there for you stupid piece of shit!"

"It is a priority one incoming message, text only," the fully integrated house computer answered in that gentle voice brooking no never mind to its owner's

hostile tone and manners. "I can not answer such a call."

She frowned as she hit the receive key too hard, cracking it, wondering what in the world this was all about. The last time she had received a priority one message was over fifteen years ago and she had regretted answering that one. She was certain that this would be the same.

She was greeted with a series and chirps and shrills and realized that she should have shunted the message into her computer system. With even more frustration, since she had forgotten that she wouldn't be able to read the incoming message until it was decrypted, she moved over to the monitor and waited, leaning on the table and fuming that her morning had been ruined before it had even begun. It was not every day that she got into the mood to play her violin and dance around naked. She certainly knew that she should do it more often just for the freedom it entailed but one sometimes didn't always think of such things at 0430 in the dark.

It only took a few moments for the computer to process the incoming message, but the date, time and single word appearing sent a chill through her bones and up her back, making the soft warmth of the morning turn ice cold.

Tuesday, 6 August 2085, 1500
Archangel

Her frown deepened as she erased the message and then all traces that it had even made it to her. It was what she had feared: a rendezvous. They would be by this afternoon to pick her up, take her away

from her pristine Alaskan solitude and into a world that she had sworn off. Or so she had thought. She quickly learned long ago, much to her dismay, that one never left the agency. Its insidious fingers, like the very talons of death, were always there, ready at any moment to pounce and dig deeply, dragging one back into a world of intrigue and treachery, death and foulness filling her mouth with such a taste of shit that she almost gagged.

When she had left fifteen years ago, after forty years of faithful service, she had made it clear that she was done with it all, finished with walking in the shadows and killing in the darkness. But they had had other plans.

Especially Cav.

Just the very thought of the man made her cringe, her eyes blazing in an anger she had rarely felt since moving into this cabin, this life-style. That man had made her what she was and though she at times was grateful, those moments were rare and few and far between in the last few years. Mostly she just hated him with a passion. Hated him for creating her, for bringing her into the world for one purpose and one purpose only: to serve a government she didn't respect, much less wanted to live under.

She had been created as an automat to do the bidding of people like Cav, assignments they didn't want to touch for the stench it would impart to their sensitive fingers and so she had been sent in time and time again to change a government, to steal plans, to give double agents false information or to assassinate on order, like a trained dog for the pleasure of the master, and the master always

changed, the agendas always changed and yet the killings always remained the same.

Well, that wasn't quite true. There was much to recommend the government under which she now lived, much to make it stand apart and above from the various other countries infecting the globe with their pretensions. At least here she could live her life in peace, as she wanted, dancing around naked in her house with all the windows opened if she so desired and not have a governmental agent come around and tell her to fall in line or else, reading off line after line of scripture or law that forbids everything but breathing, and even that under certain circumstances.

She walked over to the kitchen and poured herself a tall glass of orange juice, then glided back to the den and fell down on the cushy sofa and quietly drank while she watched her two dogs play around the house. They certainly had not given her much time to prepare. She looked at her watch: 0630. Not much time at all. Whatever it was must be urgent. But then it was always urgent to them. The president could break a nail and it would be an emergency.

She laughed to herself as she finished her juice and leaned her head back, closed her eyes. She would have to get a hold of Dumont and ask him to watch the dogs. No, that wouldn't work. His work forced him to be gone for weeks at a time and that would not do at all. He couldn't look after her two animals and still work. It was asking far too much.

Well, maybe not. He did enjoy her sex and perhaps he would be more than willing to look after them if it meant more for him. Better yet, she could set the automatic house system that would feed them and let them out and watch over things in general. Hopefully

she would not be a long time away from the cabin. She smiled. She somehow knew that that was not the case here. When they used *Archangel* like that, it always meant that someone had screwed up and they needed her to fix it.

Sasha and Argyle came bounding in, tails wagging and tongues lolling, the pleasure in their eyes vibrant and real. She hugged them both and then explained, as if to a small child, that she would be leaving for a while and that they would have to be alone. They licked her face in innocent oblivion, then found their way to the water and drank their fill in loud, splashy gulps.

She stood and put her glass away, then contemplated what she would have for breakfast, perhaps her last. These types of missions always held that high risk of her never returning, ending up a decomposing body in some field or forest or abandoned building for the maggots and rats to feed off.

The very thought of what she had once done made her pause a moment as she watched her two dogs sprawl on the floor by the open double French doors. It had been fifteen years since she had done anything major for the agency. Fifteen long years wherein she had found the comfort and meaning of her life in the wilds and openness of her new home and she was not about to just lose all that to the whims of Cav or anyone else with a three line message. It had taken her all of five years just to get over the feeling that she was being watched, to get over the routine that had her inspecting everything every morning on the off chance that someone had planted an explosive device in her stove or poisoned her milk.

No. This time she was going to tell them that they could go to hell. She had given her all for forty years and enough was enough. They had no right to demand anymore of her, especially after such a long break away from the action. Though she was certain that she could jump right back into the game without so much as a breath of hesitation that she was ready, it had just been too long out of the loop and that made her feel slightly uncomfortable, a feeling with which she was not all that familiar. She would just tell them no. And whether they liked it or not, it didn't really matter. They certainly couldn't force her to do anything she didn't want.

She had to smile at that errant thought.

*Everything's laughter,
everything dust, everything nothing.
Out of unreason comes everything that exists.
-- Glycon*

3

**6 August 2085
2200 hrs
The White House**

President Heather O'Rourke leaned back on the sofa in her private chambers on the second floor of the White House, sipping slowly on a margarita, the tangy taste of the salt on the rim mingling with the hardy punch of the tequila. She had made it extra strong this time, hoping to lose herself for the night and wake up in the morning with a fresh start.

But the knock on her door told her that tonight would not be the night.

The Secret Service Agent opened the door at her acknowledgment and asked if she wanted to see her Chief-of-Staff. The President nodded desultorily and Claudine Maxwell strode in with that purposeful look on her face always heralding trouble.

"So what's so important that you have to interrupt my one time alone in this hell-hole?" the President asked in mock irritation. Heather was not one to forget people who helped her. Had not been for Claudine organizing and arranging her staff and schedule these last few years, she would have failed as badly as those critics of her election had prophesied.

Having unexpectedly ridden into the top office of the land on the popular support for her platform of staying out of all future conflicts in the Indian-Pakistani area – a completely opposite platform from the incumbent, who had allowed thousands of U.S. peace-keepers to perish in the holocaust that was the nuclear exchange of the Second Indian-Pakistani War – she had been quickly and harshly criticized by the Washington Establishment for her lack of judgment when it came to domestic matters.

It had always fascinated her that so many people in America had simply forgotten, or perhaps chose to ignore, that over one hundred million had perished in the first nuclear exchange between those two religiously warring nations. Maybe it was because no Americans had been involved then. Maybe it was just because the numbers and the brutality of the event, occurring in a little under twenty minutes in total, had forced the common person on the street to block out the tragedy in order to better cope with their daily lives.

Either way, Heather O'Rourke had never been one to let a little criticism affect her negatively. Over the years, she had convinced even the worst of her critics that she did indeed have a domestic plan that would work, given enough time and money and now, as the next election drew near, she was expected to win in a landslide, the first female president to ever win back-to-back elections. Perhaps this would finally bury the fiasco that had been Hilary.

Claudine walked over to the small bar where the blender holding the fragrant concoction sat and poured herself a glass. She took a healthy slug then turned to look at her old friend Heather, whom she secretly despised. "They picked Archangel up this afternoon. She should be briefed by early tomorrow morning." Her voice was harsh, with no introduction or hello.

The President took another sip of her own drink. If she could draw the alcohol directly into her veins, she would not hesitate to do it. "Do you really think that it's necessary to go to such extremes as this? I mean, it's not like the people killed were well-known scientists or anything. They weren't even the best in their respective fields and here we are spending taxpayer's dollars on an investigation. I think that you're over-reacting to this whole damn thing." Claudine walked over and sat herself down uninvited across from the president and stared at her, wondering how someone so naive and simple could have ever been elected.

A half-smile crossed her face as she realized that the majority of people who voted for her were not much smarter and made decisions more with their emotions than with their minds. Claudine was certain

that a majority of those who had voted for Heather voted for her legs and bust as much as for her platform, if they even knew what it was.

That was one of the many flaws with democracy, something that Claudine, were she the one in charge, would make certain was the first thing to change. No more damn elections by the ill-informed populace. It was a waste of time. But until that time came, she would have to continue to play second fiddle to Heather O'Rourke, the prom queen from high school turned president whom no one in their right mind thought would ever win the election until that idiot of a predecessor had lost all those people in that stupid religious conflict over a piece of land that once was lush and beautiful but was now nothing more than a radioactive wasteland, as was most of Pakistan. What a way to loss an election. Moron.

But Claudine didn't plan on playing second-fiddle for long. "Apparently, the CIA thinks it more than a coincidence that they all were killed in supposed accidents," Claudine answered as she crossed her legs and leaned back, still keeping her steel-hard gray eyes locked on Heather. "I think it prudent that we use the assets that we have to the best advantage. Archangel was our best at one time."

"She's not even ours," Heather answered back roughly with a frown as she looked away from the intense stare of Claudine. There was something in those eyes that set off warning bells in her head. Claudine, despite her help and assistance along the way, was still a dangerous friend to have. "She belongs to that fat bastard Cavalier."

"And doesn't Cavalier work for us?" Claudine said with a hint of annoyance, finishing her drink with a

last, long swig and placing the glass down on the coffee table a little too hard.

"Nominally," Heather said.

"It was government money that paid for the project and government money that sustained it, regardless of the concessions that those in your shoes back then gave to the agency seventy years ago. As far as I'm concerned, that makes her and everything else that Cavalier and his cronies come up with ours to do with as we please." She leaned forward and tilted her head slightly to the side, an indication, Heather had learned, that Claudine was starting to get curt and impatient. "And unless you treat the agency with that in mind, they'll run rough-shod over this office and this country. I for one don't want to see that happen."

She held her stare a moment longer, then broke off as she leaned back and looked toward the window, the hot Washington august summer was more intense than usual, the humidity making any time spent outside a drenching experience. Even now, late at night, the still air was stagnant with the lingering daytime heat.

The president frowned. "Is she really that good to go to all this trouble to get her? I mean, living all alone on a Federal Game Reserve up in Alaska, isolated from everyone by her own accord? When was the last time she did anything for us? Certainly not during my tenure."

"No. She's officially retired, having put her forty years time in," Claudine said distractedly.

"Forty years?" the president said in shock, getting up to pour herself another drink. "She must've been one of the first produced. How old is she?"

"In her sixties, but what does that mean anymore? I'm told that they're expected to live to be one-fifty, making sixty not even half. If you saw her, you'd think that she looks like she's in her twenties. It's disgusting is what it is. I'd kill to have a body like that when I'm sixty." And she was not being dramatic. Claudine Maxwell was more than ready to kill a few people if it meant that she could look like Archangel.

"Starting to sag, are we?" the president asked with a hint of mirth as she walked over to the window and looked out over the city, her city, and its teeming, sweating mass of incompetent old men and drug-pushers.

"Not any more than you are, Heather."

Heather's smile faded. Claudine was far too free with her words lately. "What about the others? Why can't we use them? If this one has been retired for ... how long?"

"Fifteen years."

"Fifteen years?! I'm sure we can find someone else." Heather turned to look at her Chief-of-Staff, amazed that the self-appointed White House perfectionist would choose to go to all this trouble for someone who had been out of the game for fifteen years.

"There's no one else with her skill and experience level. She's the only one of the original group to have survived this long. The only one of the next three groups to have survived, as a matter of fact."

"She's that good?" Heather asked as she sat back down, grateful for the efficient air-conditioner in the building. She hated the heat, especially the sticky heat of the East. If it were possible, she would move

the White House to Colorado for the summer where the air was cool and dry.

"She's that good."

"But fifteen years? Won't she be a little rusty?"

Claudine stood. "She's bred for it. I don't think it's something that one forgets that easily. It is part of her genetic code I'm sure. And besides, I've looked into it a little more than I should have. She could match any ten CIA agents with one-hand tied behind her back and the other hand covering an eye. Cavalier might be fat and slovenly now, but when he first initiated this project, he was the best at what he did. He was, literally, a genius. Anything that he created during that time would be better than anything we've ever seen." She walked to the door and prepared to leave, looking over the figure of the president and wondering if she could get Cav to do her one more favor. The thought lingered in her mind a moment longer than it should have before she dismissed it, though its echo still found its way into the recesses of her deviousness to be discussed later.

"What kind of back-lash can I expect to get from her activation?" Heather asked, not bothering to look at Claudine as she stood by the door, knowing the look that would be on the other woman's face and not in the mood for the condescending look that would be found there.

"It all depends on what she turns up. But I would think that this might just turn out to be the big one. Better prepare yourself for that old plausible deniability act."

"I don't want this to blow up in my face, Claudine," Heather ordered with a rare authority she showed only occasionally and never before to her Chief-of-

Staff. "Make sure that it doesn't." She turned now to look at Claudine and saw in her face a momentary look of disdain that was quickly replaced by a smile, as if the disdain were but a shadow that had momentarily, accidentally crossed Claudine's face.

"Of course, that's part of my job."

They stared at each other a moment.

"Good night, Mrs. President," Claudine finally said as she stepped out through the door and it closed behind.

The president pursed her plump lips as she stared at the closed door. She had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach that this was not going to work out at all in her favor. And it had been those feelings in the past that had kept her out of trouble many times. The last thing she needed was to have her landslide election next year become a fiasco.

And then there was Claudine....

We too often forget that not only is there a soul of goodness in things evil , but generally also a soul of truth in things erroneous.

4

7 August 2085

0312 hrs

Somewhere in the South Pacific

The VTOL Lear fought the high winds that buffeted it, tying in vain to line up on the landing pad atop the towering building standing tall and stable in the storm enveloping the city for the past three days. The monsoonal rains lashed the landscape as if God Himself were trying to cleanse the stench from the Earth. Business had come to a stand still, the high, sustained winds having knocked down power-lines all over the new city, throwing the majority of the homes of those poor souls trapped like lemmings into a darkness that was more than blackness, seeping through the closed doors and windows like a prehensile precursor of death.

The tall building blazed forth with its own power supply, the new fusion reactor built into the basement structure churning out its sun-like power with a consistency that was extraordinary, lighting up the building like a beacon through the baneful lashings of nature.

It was, however, little comfort to the pilot of the VTOL as he struggled to land his ship somewhat near the pad and not topple off the roof. The passenger he had ferried all the way down from Alaska sat in the jump seat slightly back and between the two pilots, watching stoically the efforts of the two men to bring the craft home, the compensators whining their protest to the extreme abuse to which they were being subjected. She could have suggested a few tricks to make the landing easier, but decided that the male pilot probably wouldn't take too kindly to her presumptiveness. If she were in his position, she wouldn't like advice either at this particular moment. So Alexis just sat silently and watched as the blinking landing lights of the pad blurred through the rain on the windscreen, the wipers useless against the barrage of water, the electronic landing systems more or less useless in conditions far outside the normal range of operation.

It had been a long and trying flight and she was already seething inside with the fact of her having to come here. The last thing she needed was for the Lear to end up on the pavement below in pieces with her inside. But through an extreme effort of will she kept her mouth shut and just watched, wanting so much to tell the fool all that he was doing wrong but choosing to play the dumb female rather than give away any indication of her abilities. Fly-boys tended

to talk at bars, bragging about their latest mission and Alexis didn't need her description circulating about the local haunts where who knew who might be listening.

But then perhaps it was all for naught anyway. No one attempted a landing like this in this type of storm. To have to bring her down in this gale was more than enough material for these two flyboys to make up all sorts of stories about her. When Cav said jump, most people around him usually just asked how high.

With a loud thump and a bone-jolting bump, the VTOL settled onto the pad and the landing crew hurried to secure it against the wind. Alexis made her way quickly out of the ship and to the main terminal, the hood of her light windbreaker over her head in a vain attempt to keep the rain off of her face. This was not the tropics and she had not expected this type of reception. As such, she had worn her old and faded blue jeans, the ones she had finally broken in so that they fit comfortably and snug, outlining her lower body in lines attracting the attention of most of the male members of the landing crew. She also wore a black t-shirt, covered with a plaid shirt buttoned halfway down to her waist, her hair in a quick ponytail and her cowboy boots clacking along the non-skid.

She was not expecting to stay very long. By the time she stepped into the all-too-familiar room, with its dark, tomb-like interior accented with heavy wooden panels and shelves and shelves of archaic books, she had shed the wind-breaker and held it loosely in her right hand, her hair wet, her mood foul. Memories she would rather have not recalled flooded her mind as her eyes involuntarily swept the office, the large, dark mahogany desk sitting toward the tall windows that shook and vibrated from the assault of the storm.

Several lamps were sprinkled about the room randomly. The light they emitted was dull and yellowish as if their radiance were limited to only a meter around them, useless for the most part in illuminating anything save themselves. An odor permeated the air, an astringency she could place as the cloying pungency of a cigar adulterating the air with its illegal stench of hypocrisy.

She had been very happy the day that the filthy, addictive, cancerous drug had been outlawed, along with their smaller cousins, cigarettes, to the chagrin of several large companies who had gone bankrupt to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The large chair behind the desk that had been turned away from her swiveled to reveal the corpulent figure of Cav, the dull glowing ember of the cigar sticking out of his face like a cancerous growth.

"What the hell is this all about, Cav?" she launched at him before he even had a chance to remove the stinking trash-heap from his mouth and speak. "And put that damn thing out before I do it for you." She stood with hands dangling down at her side, relaxed, her eyes burning in the dusk of the room like twin candles of dread.

He smiled, though it was hard to see through the dim lighting, and removed the cigar. "Nice to see you too, Alexis," he said in his thick voice carrying across the room with a depth suiting the body well. He pulled open a drawer and snubbed the cigar out in it, then slowly closed the drawer back up. He hit a switch and the silent whirl of re-circulation fans began to clear the air of the foul stench.

"We have an assignment for you," Cav said as he opened another drawer and pulled out a disc.

"No fuck," she shot back, advancing on the desk and the man in menacing steps.

"No need for such foul language, Alexis." He slid the disc across the table and she stopped it with her hand as it reached the edge.

"Cut the crap, Cav. I don't appreciate being pulled from my home and my dogs after fifteen years of inactivity." Her tone was harsh. She was not about to be played by this man like he had done for most of her life. She had paid her dues and didn't need him or his assignments anymore. "What's so fucking important that you needed to reactivate me? It must obviously be huge, because I didn't hear a God damned peep when the Indians and Pakistanis decided to irradiate the Kashmir valley again!"

"Relax, Alexis," he said with that slick smile still plastered on his face as if plastic surgery had made it permanent. He was well aware of her explosive temper and her anger. And he didn't blame her one bit for her anger toward him and the system that had abused her most of her life. "Would you like a drink?"

She stared hard at him a moment, then walked over to one of the numerous over-stuffed leather chairs and sat in it. "You know I don't drink, Cav. Just get to the damn point so that I can say no and go back to my cabin. I had a fishing trip planned this weekend and I don't want the worms to dry-out."

Cav rose out of his chair and made his way over to the bar, the increase in his size since she had last seen him making her eyes widen.

"Well, haven't we gone to shit."

His smile wavered slightly. "And you're looking as lovely as ever, my dear," he intoned in all sincerity as

he poured himself a cognac. "Still running twenty kilometers a day?"

"I never ran twenty kilometers on any day, Cav. Cut the chitchat and get to the damn point. I don't like it in here and you know it."

He walked back over to the desk and sat on it, producing a creak from the legs that didn't sound all that healthy. He picked up the disc she had discarded on the table. "Okay. Put this disc in that machine over there and scan the files while I tell you about it." He threw the disc at her and she caught it deftly in one hand.

"Why? I don't want to do it, whatever it is, so why go through the routine?" She stood, holding the disc like it was diseased. "Whatever it is, I'm not interested. Capiche? NO."

Cav didn't stir from his position on the desk, just stared at her as she stared at him, the beauty he had created striking a cord in his heart. He had forgotten how volatile she could be and how utterly charming when she wanted. He would have to play this one so very carefully. "In the last six months, five people have been killed in what the local authorities have deemed as tragic accidents."

"And this means what to me...?"

He smiled again as he took a sip of his drink. This was as difficult as he had suspected. "Humor me, okay Alexis? Listen to what I have to say and then, if you still feel like you don't want it, I'll let you go."

She smirked with an arched eyebrow. "Let me go, Cav? Apparently you've forgotten what it is that I can do." She looked at her reflection in the window vibrating with the fierce winds outside, the rain dancing across as if on drugs.

His reflection stood out in the murky haze also and she saw him for a moment as the man she had once known, thin and trim, a genius who could be the biggest son-of-a-bitch she had ever met and the most important man she ever knew, ever loved. Then his over-sized body blurred back to the reflection that was reality and she sighed inwardly. "Okay, Cav. But I'll tell you right now that you're wasting your time and mine."

"That's fair enough," Cav said as he moved over to the computer terminal closest to her and inserted the coded disc. The screen came alive with the picture of a young, attractive woman.

Alexis turned from the window and looked distractedly at the image. She could tell that the woman in the photo was Ukrainian. She could see it in a heartbeat, the distinctive lines and clear blue eyes under the short-cut mantle of natural blonde hair a clear give away.

Cav moved back over to his desk and leaned on it again, taking another sip of his drink before he started to speak. "Ykaterina Godonov, PhD. Thirty-five years old. Born in Kiev. Genetic researcher with a firm in Minsk, assigned to Galileo Prime on Mars two years ago to work on simple gene splicing. Nothing special about her work or her. Killed on 21 December 2084 in an explosion in her lab, caused, the local authorities claim, by a malfunction of a heater coil and faulty wiring. Burned beyond recognition. Very messy. Had to use dental records for identification."

"Faulty wiring on Galileo Prime?" Alexis asked as she sat down in front of the monitor and looked at the un-interesting life of this ordinary scientist. "I find that hard to believe."

"Yes," Cav said with a smile, happy she had caught on to that little fact and that he had at least sparked her interest.

The picture on the screen switched to another woman, oriental, older, not nearly as attractive, rather plain looking. "Kido Nakamura. Age forty-two. Born Osaka. Software designer for a small company in Osaka. Worked for the company for almost twenty years and had a few accomplishments, but mostly worked de-bugging other people's programs. Games usually. Died on 3 March 2085, the victim of a random shooting in a restaurant. The local authorities claim that the restaurant was targeted for a robbery but something went wrong and she got in the way of a couple of bullets. Twenty-six to be exact."

Alexis raised an eyebrow. "That would kill most anyone several times over. Anyone else killed?"

"A waiter and the owner of the restaurant, but no other customers despite the fact that the place was crowded." He finished his cognac and went for another, watching Alexis closely. He could see that the tension in her shoulders had eased considerably. It was a good sign. Maybe he could talk her into it. He didn't want to think about the alternative. There was no alternative.

The image switched to a young man who looked familiar to her somehow. He was handsome, his dirty blonde hair long and tied up in the back into a ponytail that was all the rage now among the younger upper mobiles who seemed to have infested most of the tech jobs. The smile on his face, from the obvious camping trip where the picture had been taken, indicating that the man enjoyed life from the point of

communion with some happier state, which she had thought she had attained in Alaska.

"Alexander Hart, PhD. Age twenty-eight. Born in Seattle. Computer specialist for a firm in Boston. Worked on nano-technology and its incorporation into integral computer systems. Once again, nothing real special here. Was one of many working on the same simple procedures. Drowned while on a rafting trip on the White Nile on 26 May 2085, even though he was a competent swimmer. Matter of fact, won several medals when he was in his late teens and early twenties at Harvard. His body was chewed on by a few crocs before they could retrieve it. Nasty business that was."

"Lucky they retrieved it at all," she said quietly, almost to herself. She was beginning to see a pattern but held back any comment lest Cav think her interested.

The image changed again to reveal an older man, dark complexion, possibly African. "Mbombo Dumvo, PhD. Age Seventy-five. Born in Johannesburg. Lead engineer for nano-tech industry on *Stargazer I*."

She turned to look at Cav. "The O' Neill Colony?"

"Yes. I'm glad that you've kept up with the newer advances the last few years."

She narrowed her eyes, conscious of the intended barb at her. She decided to let him know exactly what she knew. "Fully operational three years ago, *Stargazer I* is the first of a series of O' Neill Colonies in orbit about the sun. Self-sufficient structures housing up to 20,000 people in an artificial gravity environment. Basically a large, rotating cylinder. Two more in the final stages of completion, three more in the initial phases." She eyed him a moment

to make sure that he understood her own barb at him, then set her attention back to the monitor.

"Impressive," he said as walked back over to his desk and sat on it again to a creak of protest. A particularly vicious wind gust rattled the windows more than before and he turned to look into the darkness beyond the reflections, the black of the storm and the power-starved city below almost draining in its obscurity.

"I'm still on-line, you know," she answered back as she scanned the data of Dr. Dumvo and found it as uninteresting as the others. "Just because I chose to live in a remote area doesn't mean that I don't stay informed."

"I'm glad to hear that. It'll make this easier if we don't have to up-date you much on the latest advances."

She smirked again. She'd up-date him in a moment if he didn't continue with the presentation. The sooner he finished, the quicker she could get out of here and back to her cabin. This was all so much bullshit that it almost made her sick to think that Cav dragged her here for this. But then, since it did seem so normal and routine, she was slightly intrigued as to what it all meant.

Obviously, someone somewhere had a hair up their ass over this.

"Dumvo died of what is being called an 'experimental mishap.' The authorities on *Stargazer I* are not known for their cooperation with Earth authorities and that was all that they would say. My informant couldn't get a better answer either and he's fairly well placed. They don't have many such

incidents up there and I think it shook them up pretty badly."

The image changed again to another male, this time with the distinctive look of a Hindu from India, his large mustache black against his dark skin.

"Dr. Krishna Pratali. Age fifty. Born in Utter Pradash. Neuro-surgeon for a prestigious hospital in New Delhi. Killed while mountain climbing in South America, on a mountain he'd climbed several times before. Once again, not the best in his field, or even at his hospital. Rather average person overall."

The screen went blank and the disc popped back out automatically. She turned her chair so that she could face Cav. "So what's the connection between them?"

"As far as we can tell, there isn't one. That's one of the problems. None of these people ever knew the others, except for a possible brief meeting at a recent conference between Nakamura and Pratali and an obscure e-mail between Pratali and Godonov. Other than that, these people had nothing to do with each other. Most of them didn't even work in the same field."

She locked eyes with him a moment. There had to be more than this. "You're kidding, right?" she said with acid. "What moron decided that all these people were connected? Was this your idea, cause I know that you used to be smarter than this. This is crap. I can't believe that you dragged me all this way to look at this! You could have faxed it to me, for Christ sake!" She stood, ready to throttle the life out of him just for the presumption to get her involved.

"It was by order of the president, Alexis. This has an *Eyes Only* tagged to it."

She looked at him with incredibility in her eyes, the final piece of the puzzle falling into place for her. "That stupid Prom-Queen? You've got to be kidding me. The only reason she was elected was because the party bosses thought that they could get down her tight pants and have themselves a good ole time with her in the Oval Office, and I don't doubt that they do. There's no way that bimbo came up with any possible connection between these people. I'd be surprised if she even knew what a neuro- surgeon did."

Cav laughed. He couldn't help himself. Although he had more respect for the current president of the United States than Alexis obviously did, having met Heather O'Rourke a few times and been impressed with her range of knowledge, he realized that Alexis' opinion was one shared by many people.

"It's not funny, damn you," Alexis shouted as she stood with that inner rage. "I'll be going now and don't try to stop me. I don't want to hurt you, even though I do find you more despicable than ever." She started for the door, grabbing her windbreaker off the chair-back where she had dropped it off.

"It was the Chief-of Staff, Alexis."

She stopped in mid-stride and turned on him. "The bitch-queen of the White House? Now that I can believe. That woman gives the rest of us women a bad name. Didn't you fuck her once?"

Cav's jolly expression fell from his face like a landslide and he turned back to go to his desk. "I also happen to think that there's a connection here somewhere." His tone was now far more serious.

She noticed how he changed the subject off of his relationship with Claudine Maxwell and back to the mission. She pursed her lips a moment, ready to pry a

little deeper into the wound she had opened, then changed her mind and allowed the man his dignity. Or what little he had left in that obese body.

Cav rummaged in his desk a moment, found the plastic bag for which he was looking and tossed it at her.

She caught it and took a look. "A broken ice screw," she said almost to herself. She opened the bag and pulled it out, examining it closely. "I've never seen a broken one before. This happen the last time you tried to go mountain climbing, Cav?"

"Your humor, if that was what that was, has denigrated in the last few years. I liked you better when you were younger," Cav remarked dryly as he sat back down in his large chair.

"When you could control me, you mean," she replied just as dryly, putting the broken ice screw back in the bag, a feeling of déjà vu suddenly sweeping through her. She shuddered a moment, a chill down her back.

"That ice screw came from Pratali's accident. It snapped in half like it was defective," he said, choosing to ignore her cogent remark. They had too much history behind them to fall into a tête-à-tête of insults. If he didn't keep on the subject, this discussion would break down into an uncontrollable rage of accusations and barbed words.

"Shit happens," she remarked as she threw the bag back at Cav. It landed on the desk and slid across, falling off the other side and onto the floor.

"Shit doesn't happen to ten of them at the same time," he answered back, his anger with her starting to grow. He guessed that she had always been this headstrong, but that because of his love for her he

had never really noticed it. But now, after fifteen years apart, fifteen years of Alexis discovering what her life could have been like had he not interfered, her latent characteristics had risen to the surface and spilled out into his lap. He probably deserved every last insult.

She looked at him with a creased forehead. "Ten, huh? That's a little unusual." She moved toward him a step, her hands on her hips. "But I don't see what the hell this has to do with me. At the most, this is a simple case of some detective work that even the CIA can handle. And, if not them, then one of the numerous other agents that you have running around out there on leashes. This isn't worth pulling me from my home after all this time. Either you've lost your mind and Claudine is pulling you around by your penis again or there's more to this that you aren't telling me. Either way, I'm gone. I don't need this. I put my time in and this bullshit here isn't even worth my coming all this way. This is wrong, Cav. Very wrong."

He nodded his head a moment, then looked down at the floor. He was hoping that her natural curiosity would compel her to want to look further into this case, but that obviously wasn't going to happen. He would have to tell her. There was no other way around it.

She waited a moment for him to speak again and when he just sat there looking at his fat, sausage-like hands, she turned to leave.

She had the door halfway open when he spoke, his words echoing in her ears like a gunshot. "Dr. Alexander Hart was your son."

She turned slowly. She knew she had heard the words correctly, but they somehow didn't register fully. "I'm sorry. I must've completely misunderstood you because I swear you just said that Alexander Hart was my son."

"Yes, Alexis. After you gave him up, I kept an eye on him over the years. Dr. Alexander Hart was your son."

She closed the door and stared at him as if she could kill him. So many emotions boiled up inside her that she didn't know which one to concentrate on, didn't know anymore why she never killed this man many, many years ago.

It was not long before he felt the tightness in his throat and instantly knew that he had only a few moments to plead his case before she closed his windpipe down and crushed his larynx. "I've wanted to tell you many times, but I didn't think you wanted to know anything about him," he gasped as his hands closed around the invisible force at his throat and fell off the chair to his knees.

She walked up next to him and stared down with cold, steel-hard eyes shining with a light of their own. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't choke the very life out of you like you deserve, asshole."

He gasped for air, the tightness increasing to the danger point, the invisible fingers around his throat like a vise-clamp. "Because ...you...haven't ...already..." he managed to get out before he fell to the floor, his eyes bulging in their sockets.

She stood over him a moment, then blinked.

The pressure ceased immediately and he inhaled gulps of refreshing air as he lay on his back. She walked away from him and over to the windows, the

storm outside seeming to have increased in intensity beyond what she thought possible. If she didn't know better, she would say that they were in the middle of a typhoon. It was an odd thought to have at this moment when she learned that her son, whom she had been told was dead at childbirth had actually been alive all this time and now was truly dead in a freak accident. But then the human mind was an odd thing to understand and she was, by all accounts, still human.

It took several minutes before Cav regained his feet and made his way over to the bar and poured himself a drink.

"You bastard," she finally said in a voice icy in its hatred.

"You gave him up," he weakly countered.

She spun around with such fury in her eyes that Cav dropped his glass and it tumbled to the thickly carpeted floor, spilling the contents all over his pants. "YOU FORCED ME TO GIVE HIM UP!! YOU GAVE ME NO CHOICE, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH!!! YOU TOLD ME THAT HE WAS DEAD!!!"

"It was for the best," he managed to say as he picked up the glass and tried to calm himself down. Although he had known that she was more than capable of constricting his throat like that without ever touching him, he had somehow never thought that she would do it to him. One should never underestimate the wrath of a wronged mother when it came to her children.

"The hell it was," she responded. "The hell it was." Her voice had lost some of the cold reserve, becoming more imbued with a tint of sadness that he seldom heard in anything she had ever said. "It was

the best for you. The best to keep me working for you."

He poured himself another drink and gulped it down before she could turn on him again and force him to spill it. He was getting too old for this crap.

Alexis shook her head slowly. To learn that her long-thought dead son was part of a mission Cav was trying to get her to take was almost too ironic for her. She found it hard to believe that Cav would keep this from her. She looked at her reflection in the window and saw herself for the first time, the instrument that she was and realized with a growing knot in her stomach that Cav had been right in keeping her son's existence from her. She wasn't mother material and his world would have been filled with tension and unknowing. But that still didn't make being led to believe that he had died at childbirth correct or moral in her mind.

It was wrong and Cav knew it, else he would have told her a long time ago.

"You took everything from me, Cav," she said with a voice even and detached, a voice speaking more to the reflection than to the man who standing behind her, looking on ruefully at the woman he had created. "You took my childhood and my parents and my life ... And now my son." She lowered her chin to her chest and closed her eyes. "I've got no more to give, Cav. No more."

He walked up behind her, wanted to place a hand on her shoulder, hug her to him as he had done when she was little and give her the assurances that everything would be okay. But that was not to be. Those days had slipped into the wandering stream of the past long ago. He could not bring himself to touch

her, to feel her pain and succor it, because everything was not going to be okay. This was the real world, a world he had, in his small way, helped to create with its death and murder and intrigues that people had thought would pass with time but that just grew more subtle as humanity grew more bold in its explorations of the mind and of space.

The world was not the wonderful place that those in the early part of the century had been so eager to make it out to be. It had turned darker in some ways even with the advent and possibilities that the O' Neill Colonies and the bases on the Moon and Mars entailed. And Alexis was one example of that darkness. Genetically designed from scratch for use as a multi-purpose agent who could do more than any before her, built for a world where normal humans could no longer cope with the evil slinking into every crack of every corner until a blackness filled the world making those who had known it before gag at the stench

She had become, over the years, more than anyone ever imagined and when she had gotten pregnant, had the audacity to become independent and free-willed, Cav had seen in her the ultimate truth of humanity. He had seen it and hidden it away from the rest of the world, deciding in a moment of clarity that the world was not yet ready for such a revelation.

She turned around and saw that he had been struggling with the thought of holding her and knew that the time for that had long passed. Memories as clear as if they had occurred yesterday clouded her mind, memories of her childhood with this man whom she had grown to love as a father and then learned to hate as a bastard when the terrible truth of her

existence was revealed. She could feel the tears wanting to flow but knew that that reservoir had been emptied many, many decades ago. "I'll be leaving now, Cav," she said in hushed tones, aware that although one of the victims had been her son, she had never had one until this moment anyway, so what the hell did it matter? All she wanted now was her cabin and her dogs and her Alaska.

Cav didn't attempt to stop her as she walked out of the office, leaving the door open behind her. He knew that he had already asked more of her than he had the right to ask. Although she had been, at one time, his creation, she was now her own person and as she had so ably demonstrated, was not about to let anyone tell her what to do ever again.

He looked down at his desk and noticed that it was missing immediately. He made a quick cursory inspection but didn't find it anywhere obvious. A smile crossed his face as he sat down to compose his reply to Claudine Maxwell.

Alexis climbed back into the VTOL Lear and buckled herself in securely. The storm had, beyond all possibility, grown worse and the pilots were not at all happy about having to fly in it and they voiced that opinion with low grumbles and muted phrases that her exceptional hearing picked up without any trouble, bringing a smile to her face to know that there were others in this crazy world tonight who weren't happy.

As the craft lifted off into the dark, brewing sky boiling with an anger bred of insolence, she felt the shape of the disc in her pocket and closed her eyes, oblivious to the violent shakes the Lear encountered as it clawed its way to altitude and out of the raging storm that was as much her soul as it was nature.

ETERNITY'S HANDMAIDEN

*In late March with the days lengthening
It will come down from its snowy den to teach us one
more time that we have not bent nature to our will,
the stars don't tick to our winding.*

--- Tom

Sexton

5

**8 August 2085
0038 hrs**

Alaska

Alexis lounged back on her sofa, a soft, emerald green silky robe dangling over her body, the sash tied in a loose knot, a cup of hot chocolate cupped in her hands. The warm, alluring aroma of hazelnut rose up and mingled with the faint fragrance from the burning logs in the fireplace, which infused with the perfume of Mozart floating upon the tranquil air like a nocturnal mist. The night sky was lit up with the majesty of the aurora covering the sky in rippling sheets of red and green, dancing with their own life against the backdrop of the snow-covered peaks.

It always amazed her how something as small as the energized particles of the solar wind which, having little to no effect by themselves, could, when working together, create such majestic displays of grandeur she was now enjoying, as if the sky itself were on fire.

Her two dogs lay on the sofa on either side of her, curled up in peaceful sleep, the rigors of the day long past. Her computer system was still up, the VR system for data retrieval and manipulation still held in stasis where she had left it an hour ago. With the disc taken from Cav's office, she had absorbed every last bit of detail on her son, a son she had managed to push to the back of her memory and forget about but which now came forward with a vengeance. The first item on her agenda when she had been dropped off at her cabin was to find the DNA pattern of the man Cav claimed was her son and match it to her own.

She had her genetic code memorized, one of the many benefits of her training and once she found Alexander Hart's code in the data she knew that Cav was telling the truth. He was her son. She had

stared at the data for hours after that, at the face of the man she had given life, at the mundane routines of the life he had lived till she had it memorized, burned it into her consciousness like a brand of guilt. Most women would have cried, broken down at the cruelty of it all and wept tears for the son that they never knew.

But then Alexis was not like most women. Although she felt a pang inside, it was more related to the fact that someone had dared to take her son from her, had dared to act against her in such a way. Any feeling of loss, of a need to be comforted was trampled by her years of hard, stoic conception to the sins of the world and humanity in general and to cry now, for this singular loss, would be a hypocritical act she would not perform.

Having never really had a family to speak of, the closet thing to a father being Cav, she had never had the experiences of family loss before. She had, of course, lost partners during operations but that was different, a product of the circumstances that were her life at that time and thus not to be taken to heart. As a matter of fact, as she sat back and thought about it, her life running through her mind's eye like a broken projector skipping and jumping from image to image, she realized that she had never, in her sixty-five years, shed a tear in sorrow.

Never.

And that surprised her a little. Not that she thought it a bad thing. It had never occurred to her before to even think about it. Tears were for those who actually lived, who experienced life in all its agony and rapture and in that experience felt the sorrow and the pain and the joy making their lives worth living, that made

them human. She was not one of those fortunate souls. She had lived life in a vacuum, in a shell of events letting her glimpse only that which it was felt she should know, that which was vital for the success of the mission.

It was not to say that she had never experienced life in all its fullness, but she had done it more as a spectator than a participant, someone who went through all the motions for a limited amount of time and then moved on to something else, to another reality, leaving behind what she had experienced as a post-mission debriefing in a dossier or a smoldering ruin in a dirty city, to be viewed from afar afterward and calibrated to make better use of her talents the next time she encountered the real world.

And now, when real life hit her square in the face, reached out with its ice-cold skeletal hands and seizing her heart in its vise-grip, she was beginning to see what it was like to really live and...

... It didn't affect her in the least.

Had she become immune to it? Was she truly unable to shed even one tear for a son she had thought dead at birth, for his death before he even had a chance to begin his life? Perhaps it was a defense mechanism, a sub-conscious blockage in her that didn't allow for such sentiment to get in the way of her mission. But there was no mission here, nothing to stop her from feeling that which all the other mortals living their lives in abject bewilderment felt when they experienced loss.

Maybe there was something wrong with her.

Or maybe, just maybe, this was just the way it was, her psyche immune from such physical and urbane thoughts. Maybe callousness had grown over her

heart over the years and it was hardened, allowing nothing to penetrate. She was not all that certain that it was a good thing to have ... or even a bad thing.

It was during her sojourn through the life of her lost son and her own lost emotions that she had begun to look into the other people who had been killed, the others who had lost their lives in the well-disguised accidents. Within her VR interface she had set up a large board, a chart displaying all the connections she could make between the five people. There were not many. The very fact that Kido and her son had met at that conference on integrated computer systems and their application to higher-reasoning artificial intelligence told her little. She would have to look into that one closer, find out more about the field and ascertain whether there was a minute connection she was not seeing due to her lack of detailed knowledge of the procedures involved.

But the cryptic e-mail to Godonov, who was a geneticist, gave her a clue that she figured that bitch Maxwell had also seen. It had been the clue, Alexis was positive, which had convinced Maxwell that *Archangel* be used on this case. That had lead Alexis to look at the other two killed and their connection, if any. Although she could link Nakamura, Hart and Godonov to each other in a tenuous vinculum, the involvement of the other two, if there even was one, still eluded her immediate grasp. But she knew it was there. One of the things she could do well and that she enjoyed was piecing together puzzles that had little to no clues to their correlation, a mass of unrelated facts that would, if given enough time, coalesce into an integrated whole greater than the sum of its parts. She felt deep down that this was one

of those problems, a conundrum that was worthy of her skills.

So it was that she found herself now on the sofa, drinking her hazelnut hot chocolate, allowing her mind to relax and possibly make a connection that her conscious self could not see, the temporal display of the aurora soothing in its regal splendor.

She felt it before she heard it, a disturbance in the air around her cabin that was not normal. Both dogs raised their heads in unison, low growls escaping as they searched for the source of the abnormality. Alexis, used to bears and the like coming around to her remote cabin and wanting to make it their own, leaned forward and set her steaming cup on the table, the marshmallows having already melted in a sporn of white.

"Computer, status of security system."

The house computer answered in its unemotional voice. "Perimeter security system deactivated as per your request."

Alexis was suddenly alert. She had not deactivated the system. "Computer, reinstate perimeter security system and bring interior systems to status `imminent.'" She stood and made her way quietly, quickly over to the paneled wall. Touching lightly, a shelf pulled out to reveal two small hand-held weapons. She grabbed one as the house computer responded to her commands. "Perimeter security system unresponsive. Interior security system set to status imminent."

The lights dimmed to near pinpoints of luminescent, allowing her acute vision to offset any intruder's plans. The outer doors locked and the pressure sensitive alarms on the windows came active, the small

charges of explosives ready to turn any would-be burglar into a mess of shredded blood and flesh. Small, interior weapons came on line, ready to attack any individual not programmed into the software, which was a very short list.

The dogs jumped off the sofa and made toward the French doors, their growls permeating the air with anger. Only the flickering shadows of the small fire embraced the room, the muted light from the aurora adding a dull edge to the darkness. She closed her eyes and relaxed, settled herself for a moment, then reached out with her mind and scanned the perimeter of the cabin, searching, looking for the intruders that she knew were out there. Unless the bear mother and her cub had increased their technical skill level by a factor of a million and figured out how to disable her sophisticated security system, her visitors were human and that never bode well.

She found them quickly enough, though they were somehow muted, almost blurred to her mind as if they were coming in and out of her senses, of reality, as if they didn't belong, as if only a part of them were here in this temporal plane. There were three of them, working together as they swept in slowly, cautiously, expertly. Whomever they were, they were not the typical house-burglars. These people were professionals and that meant only one thing: Cav had to have sent them. Sent them to eliminate her, perhaps for the disc she had taken, perhaps for her refusal.

It didn't really matter.

Alexis quickly moved her obstinate dogs into the bedroom and closed the door. She didn't want them caught in the crossfire she was certain was about to

erupt. With the agility of a cat, she climbed up into the rafters near the tall windows, lost in the shadows to all save those who looked closely. One of the numerous items she had picked up over the years was that most people when they broke into a house never looked up. It was just not a natural inclination to think of a threat coming from above, from the area where spiders lived in the dust-coated corners of the ceiling.

She waited, patiently, her weapon held loose and ready. She would need to capture one alive, to question. She needed to know why Cav had sent them, if he had sent them at all. It could very well be that bitch Claudine who sent these assassins to her cabin for Alexis' refusal to do her bidding. But that would mean that Cav had told her where Alexis lived. If so, then the president would shortly be without her Chief-of-Staff and Cav would be without a throat.

They entered the cabin quietly, stealthily. They stayed together, Alexis noted, and didn't split up. Whomever had sent them knew of what the prey was capable and had trained these three well. Had they split up, Alexis would have picked them off one by one. Of course, she was going to take care of them all anyway. It just would have been easier had they spread out. Perhaps there were others waiting outside her mental range, waiting for her to be flushed out. Perhaps these three were even the decoys, sent as cannon fodder. When Alexis had eliminated them she would relax, let her guard down and then the real attack would come. That would certainly be the way that Alexis would handle it.

They came into her observable range and she was actually surprised, a feat difficult to achieve. Not only

were they mentally blurred but visually as well, as if they were shadows themselves, slinking along the walls with weapons out, blackness against the black of the hallway, quiet, calm, confident. They seemed to waver in the air as if uncertain of their own existence, defying the molecules around them to support their solid shape. She narrowed her eyes and watched as they made their way slowly and with the utmost caution into the den. Their outlines were indistinct, as if melting into the very air around them, their lines vague. No features were visible, only a blackness that seemed to absorb what little light there was as if drawing it into their outlines to avoid detection.

She also noticed a shimmer in the blackness, a ripple like water disturbed by a slight breeze. She concentrated and projected, touching them with her mind.

They stopped short.

She pulled back immediately, shocked they had noticed, had felt her probe before she had even penetrated. They looked up ... and all hell broke loose.

There was a flurry of weapons fire, but not like she had expected. No bullets with fiery muzzle blasts came her way but rather darts flying through the air with incredible speed. She flew from her perch, swinging along the upper rafters, moving in the darkness and the shadows. She felt a prick and knew that she had been hit. She reached into herself and found the entry point, felt the lethal poison that would affect her in seconds. She identified it, broke down its molecular constituents and atoms, saw that it was beyond anything she had ever encountered before –

and she had encountered all known poisons – and then began to break it down into its basic parts, to neutralize it before it did any harm. Within a matter of seconds the poison was gone, tore apart at the molecular level and negated.

But this changed things completely.

Alexis fired five quick, steady shots in the direction of the shadows, her aim accurate and deadly. The shots appeared to have little to no effect and she could distinctly hear the clink of her bullets hitting various places around the room, where she had not aimed, their energies spend.

She frowned as she moved again, a palisade of darts flying through the air like a swarm of locusts. She would have to do this the hard way. She would have to get in close and personal. She didn't like to kill others, to take away life that was precious to all, but there were times when it was necessary and though she might not like to do it, she had no aversion to it when there was no other option. And here, with these mysterious attackers, she was keenly aware that there was no other option. She even doubted that she would be able to capture one alive.

Well, let the games begin, she thought as she calculated her first attack and set it in motion, ditching the gun onto the sofa as she flew past. She realized her sight was slightly askew with the distortion these foes presented and so compensated her course. She connected with the head of one of her assailants, the sickening snap and crunch telling her, even as she landed and rolled behind a table, that she had killed him instantly, his limp body sagging to the floor like a sack of potatoes, the dart gun clattering to the hardwood, now useless.

Sparks and a distortion wave of some sort undulated over the body, then dissipated to leave behind a dead lump in black. It made Alexis suddenly realized that she had been seeing the intruders mentally, that they were invisible to the naked eye, a device of some sort camouflaging them like a chameleon, making their outline smooth into the surrounding blackness and shadows and making them for the most part invisible to the naked eye.

She didn't have much time to reflect on it as another dart found its target and she neutralized the poison quicker this time, knowing now how to defeat it. There was a flash of bare steel, a knife produced as Alexis swung in close, to nullify the range weapons and make her assailants fight close in. She deftly deflected the thrown weapon blazing through the air, the flicker of the firelight making it appear almost beautiful in its deadly flight. The music of Mozart began to rise to a crescendo, the silent moves of the humans appearing as if choreographed by a demented playwright.

Alexis rolled in and swept the feet out from under the nearest attacker, tumbling him to the floor unceremoniously. The other hesitated a moment, as if unsure what to do next, the stealth technology that they had counted on to counter-balance Alexis' natural skills, apparently useless.

Alexis, however, didn't hesitate.

Decades of experience and a natural, inbred skill base made her react instantly, made her an efficient killing machine that didn't need to think to be successful.

She struck a rock-solid blow at the nearest attacker's chest, sending him sprawling back into and

over the sofa, his gun flying out of his hands, the crunch of ribs echoing through the room. The assailant whom she had knocked down earlier jumped up, ready to engage in hand-to-hand combat, posed for a fight to the death.

Whoever these people are, Alexis thought as she shot a glance at the assailant on the other side of the sofa as he slowly rose, *they certainly are tenacious*. The attacker before her launched into a series of moves that looked familiar to Alexis but somehow seemed different, like a known play that has a few lines and blocking changed along the way. With a speed she wouldn't have suspected he had, the attacker connected a shot to her side that stung like fire. Alexis stepped in rather than back and engaged him in a series of hand moves blurring with a rapidity that was unnatural. The shadow man was forced to do his best just to keep up and then she landed an unseen blow to the side of his head that brought stars to his eyes. This was followed instantly with a kick to the chest collapsing his rib cage in a splinter of bones and sending him sprawling back. But he refused to fall. She eyed him a fraction of a second, a frown deepening her beautiful face, and finished the job, her jab to his nose driving the cartilage into his brain and ending his life in an agonizing instant.

Why had he not just sat down and played dead?

What a waste.

She was hit then from the side, the force of the blow sending her and her assailant careening into the wall, knocking pictures down to the sound of shattering glass. There was another flash of steel, the gunmetal black of the blade slashing at her chest. She blocked with her arms crossed, then kicked up into the groin

area. Her foot encountered a hardness that was not his manhood and she realized that he had come prepared for that attack.

He gave her a sharp kick to the side and disengaged, then came at her again with two daggers, the blades blurring as he feinted. She analyzed the attack, found the weakness and exploited it. When he was but centimeters from striking, she fell back, kicking her legs under his and shoving her body past him. In an instant, she had spun around, grabbed his left foot from behind and twisted it to a bone-crunching angle.

The man turned with the pain and slashed down at her. She let go and rolled away, then kicked up and gave him a blow to his temple with her foot, felling him instantly. She moved onto him immediately, ready to give the coup de grace, but it was unnecessary.

He was dead, the same shimmer and dispersion covering his body for a moment then disappearing to leave behind a corpse in a black jumpsuit, the material of which was not even familiar to Alexis.

It was then that she noticed the vicious, concerned barking and growl of her dogs as they scratched at the bedroom door in their attempt to come to aid of their master. She would have to re-paint that door. She calmly stepped away from the dead assailants and opened the door for her dogs, who ran out in a rush of adrenaline and loyalty and went directly to the dead bodies, sniffing and growling and clawing until they finally realized that the threat was gone.

Alexis walked over to the table on which she had laid her hot chocolate. It had miraculously survived the attack and she lifted it up and took a sip of the still hot liquid. Her robe had come undone during the

struggle and her naked body glistened with sweat in the subdued flicker of the firelight making a play of shadows on the vaulted ceiling. The music had subsided to a calm and eloquent Mozart piano concerto, somehow fitting for the moment of reflection.

Her heart beat barely above normal.

She took another sip and stood looking at the mess that the three assailants had made as they lay dead on her den floor. She frowned, then threw her head back to clear her mind. A pain began to make its way to her consciousness and she explored her side with her fingers. There was a wetness that was red on her fingers as she pulled them away and studied them: a dark, crimson speaking of a deep cut. She frowned even deeper as she finished her chocolate and walked over to the kitchen to put her cup in the sink, then ran water over a clean dishtowel. She took her robe off, disgusted that it was now stained with blood and slashed along the side. It wasn't all that easy to get these silken robes up here in the wilderness. It wasn't like Dumont carried them on his VTOL.

She immediately walked over to the laundry room and sprayed the stain remover onto the large blotch of blood, then threw it in the hamper, all the while holding the wet dish-towel to her side, hoping that perhaps in the morning she could find a way to repair the damage to the robe. She walked back to the kitchen and pulled out the med-kit she always kept handy for emergencies and examined the wound for the first time as she stood naked in the den with the three dead assailants still laying on the floor, the dogs still sniffing and exploring about.

It took a good ten minutes to clean out and seal up the wound with the skin-grafter, ten minutes wherein her anger began to build over the arrogance of Cav in thinking that these three could have taken her down. It had not, except for the interesting poison, even been a real challenge. The use of the new camouflage suits was something different, though, and as soon as she had finished with her wound, she examined the closet body to see what this new technology was.

She had heard nothing about it, nothing at all. That meant that it was military in nature, one of the handful of secret projects to which even she didn't have access. Whatever it was, it was compact and light, the fabric of the suits worn an apparent integral part of the system. And it felt cold, almost frigid to the touch as if it had been cooled and yet she knew that after all the time laying there, the suits should have been closer to room temperature. The material also felt strange as she ran it between her fingers, as if at certain moments the fabric ceased to exist and her fingers touched each other, skin on skin. It would only last a fraction of a second yet it intrigued her vastly.

Had she not been able to see them mentally, been able to see their own mental projections as they looked for her, the system they wore would have been very, very effective. This was something that she might be able to use in the future and after looking over each of the three dead bodies, found the one closet in size to her and began to strip him.

She was quite shocked when she discovered that this man had breasts and thus was not a man at all. As she pulled off the face covering, she saw that it

was a rather attractive female, young, with short-trimmed hair and a military look about her that confirmed her earlier assessment. But once again there was that feeling, that sense that they didn't belong here, in this dimension, as if they were passing between dimensions and losing cohesion as they did, becoming solid one second then ethereal the next.

She examined the suit for a moment after she had taken it off the now naked body, then rolled it up and placed it on the coffee table in front of the sofa. As she looked at it, she realized with a suddenness that was chilling that her sophisticated internal security system had not fired a shot at the intruders and thus had not recognized them as intruders. How could the system, which was the best that any military on the planet had developed, not have seen these people as attackers, not recognized them as humans and thus attacked them? "Computer, can you repair the perimeter security system?"

"I will send a worker droid to accomplish the task. It will take approximately thirty minutes," the voice answered her.

She nodded her head. At least the damn expensive computer could handle that chore. "Activate motion detectors and bear alarms, please." The last thing she needed now was for a bear family to smell the blood and come wandering over for a look.

"Alarms activated."

Alexis sat on the armrest of the sofa and stared at the naked body of the female attacker for several moments, trying to come up with a rationale for what she was feeling, seeing. There was something about

her, something that didn't sit right with at all. She took the masks off the other two, both men, and saw the same wrongness on their surprised death-masks she had seen in the female, which she had felt when she had first scanned them. It was almost as if they didn't belong in this time. She memorized their faces and her feelings for later reflection.

Her dogs came up to her side and she petted their heads unconsciously as she stood and contemplated her next move. This attack put Cav's data, which she had been pouring over earlier, that had before seemed interesting but not all that promising, in a whole new light. There was something there. Something major. No one sent these types of people with this type of hardware to kill someone without a good reason and her refusal to accept the mission was not one of those reasons. Not even on a long shot.

It was something else.

She stretched a kink out of her back, then picked up the three foreign weapons and placed them in a bag, took one of the darts, placed a small cork over the needle-sharp tip and placed it in a small plastic bag. She wanted to get this poison analyzed. Next stop was her bedroom upstairs to change into the same clothes she had worn to see Cav last time, set the house computer to watch the dogs, sent a message to Dumont to please drop by as soon as possible and keep them company or even take them to his house, then carried the three bodies out to the garage.

She erased the files out of her computer system concerning the five killed people, as well as the data from the disc, put the disc into her jacket pocket, grabbed an orange and banana from the refrigerator

and went out to the garage again. By the time she was finished, she was furious and it showed on her face. No one did this to Alexis Locke.

At least not twice.

Life unexamined is not worth living

--

Socrates

6

8 August 2085

1425 hrs

Somewhere in the South Pacific

She had expected her anger to abate as she flew the thousands of kilometers to Cav's office, as it had always done in times past when she was particularly ticked off at him. She found it odd that she remembered the times when she was angry at him far easier than the times, if they even existed, when she was pleased with something he had done.

In fact, now that she thought about it, she really couldn't think of any time in the past, in her very long relationship with the man who had given her life, when she was not pissed off at him for something or other. Their relationship, if one could even call it that – and she was certain that their were legions of

psychologists just waiting to evaluate their relationship and quantify it as typical for those so close – seemed to revolve around an antagonism that went beyond the mere formality of those who hate each other yet have to work with each other.

And yet, her anger had always abated, had always reduced down to a diffuse mélange of hate, which he joked at and she packed away for later analysis in a mind too filled with the hatred of others.

But this time it didn't.

Her anger seethed and churned inside her like a living thing, fed by the extra time she was given to think and reflect on what had actually happened back at her cabin early this morning and what it meant for the rest of her life. It was, of course, not the first time someone had tried to kill her. And it certainly wouldn't be the last, she was sure of that. What truly bothered her was that it had happened at her cabin, her retreat from the world, a place that had, until now, been her own private reserve from the killing and the inhumanity that seemed to thrive on this planet.

And if she were honest with herself, having her solitude interrupted in such a callous manner was not even the bad part. It was the fact that they had known where to find her. That was a serious problem and it was what kept her anger boiling for the entire trip. The only one with that information – apart from Dumont, who didn't have a clue that she was not Morgan Trist, reclusive ex-author who wanted to be alone from the world – was Cav, and for him to have given that knowledge to someone else was unforgivable, especially when that someone else had tried to have her killed.

It was an unforgivable breach of trust and verdict on her life making her realize how easy it was for people like Cav and the president's chief-of-staff to write off others when their usefulness came to an end. There was the remote possibility that Cav had a leak, a bad leak and this was the first manifestation of that leak and it was possible that the leak originated with Claudine Maxwell. It was also possible that if frogs had wings they wouldn't hit their asses when they bounced.

Either way, she was determined to find the answer and at the moment, the only place to find that answer was in Cav's office, with her hands wrapped around his fat, greasy neck until his eyes popped out.

There was another problem.

She couldn't live in her cabin anymore.

That paradise, which she had thought perfect found along the banks of that river, between the mountain crags with their winter snows and summer flowers, was no longer a viable refuge for her. It was certainly to become a nonviable refuge for the animals who lived there in one of the last pure preserves on the over-populated planet. With the knowledge of where she lived out in the open – which was certainly going to be the case now that the assassin had missed and her life would have to be ended regardless of the original reasons -- she would be the target of any number of governments and other agencies who had been striving for her elimination for decades. She had finally found a place wherein she could relax, she could say was her own and not worry about missions and killing and danger.

That was now all gone as completely as the twig that falls into the swift moving stream and is

eventually sent to the ocean to be forever lost in eternity. She didn't intend to be like that twig.

It was no wonder that her anger had not abated.

When the flight controllers informed her that she didn't have clearance to land on the upper pad due to the heavy rains crashing down from the black, laden clouds in sheets, she told them in no uncertain terms with a voice that could have made a blow-torch look subtle, that if they didn't allow her to park her VTOL on one of the upper pads, she would blast her own pad in the side of the building and park anyway.

This convinced them to let her land without any further conversation.

The heavy winds of the storm had more or less subsided by the time she set her VTOL down, but the rain seemed determined to assail the land below with a Noahistic fury. It made the loss of power that had occurred several days ago that much more dangerous, the flooding in the streets beginning to make life a living hell for those not fortunate enough to live in Cav's towering fortress of self-sustaining bull-shit. The clouds seethed and boiled at the altitude of the upper landing pads, ragged wisps of coal black water vapor curling around the tower and the antennas like forlorn ghosts lost in time. She didn't notice any of it. She stepped out of her ship to the disgruntled look of security, who stood around by the landing pad as if they seriously expected to make her go back in her VTOL and take off again. However, one look at her face made them all step back and allow her to pass, the naked dead body she dragged behind her a nuisance they didn't want to

bother with and a problem they didn't want to even think about.

The door to Cav's office slammed open with a rush, the bolts on the hinges straining under the mental impact forcing it open from afar. The splinters from the housing of the locking mechanism flew in a wild spray onto the floor like a giant game of pick-up-sticks. Alexis entered, ready to do battle, ready to deal with a cadre of assassins poised for her entrance, the dead body bouncing behind her like a toy in some black comedy. She heaved it forward and it slumped to a stop on the carpet.

Cav sat behind his desk, apparently awaiting her arrival. He had heard about the commotion concerning her clearance to land and her tumultuous exit from her ship. He didn't know what to expect from her, but he did know one thing: it was not about to be good. He had seen her in this mood before and knew what it portended.

"You fucking bastard!" she voiced indiscreetly as she reached forward mentally and grabbed him by the collar, lifting his fleshy, short body out of the seat and a good meter into the air.

Cav relaxed, well aware that he was powerless to stop or even interfere with whatever it was she had planned for him. All he could do was wait out her anger, wait till it abated and then try to speak to her reasonably and find out what went wrong this time and how he was to blame.

"You of all people should know that if you plan on killing me, you'd better do it right the *first time* because I sure as hell won't give you a second try."

His eyes widened, the look of utter confusion and shock on his face causing Alexis to pause for

consideration. "What the hell are you talking about? Tried to kill you? Who tried to killed you?"

"Well let's examine this a moment Cav," she spit out with clenched teeth, her face a mask of hostility he had never seen so intense. "Since you're the only dumb bastard who knows where I live, I guess that narrows the field of eligible options down quite a bit, wouldn't you think?"

"I don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about, Alexis. Now let me down and we can talk about this. If someone is trying to kill you then we have a serious problem."

"You're damn right we have a serious problem, asshole!" She tightened the grip on his throat and slowly started to squeeze the life out of him, her earlier moment of pause gone now that he was starting his excuses.

Cav started to choke, clutching at his throat in a futile effort to alleviate the pressure and the pain. "Alexis ... I swear ... that I didn't ... know anything ... about this," he panted out in staccato burst of panting and choking.

She looked into his eyes, at the man she had once loved as a father and saw that he truly didn't have a clue, didn't know a thing about her attackers. Either that or he was putting on one hell of a performance as she choked him to death.

She let him go and he fell to the floor with a sickening thud. She wished that she could look into his mind, could mentally probe him to be sure, but he was shielded from her, had always been for reasons she had never fully understood. It had something to do with a block put within her mind when she was

created, but she had never had a real reason to pursue the truth before. Perhaps that was a mistake.

She discerned the hasty foot-falls of the security detachment running down the corridor leading to Cav's office and with a flick of her wrist closed the remnants of the door shut and sealed it against further intrusions. She needed to be alone with this man at the moment.

Cav pulled himself up with the help the edge of the desk and looked at Alexis with anger and bewilderment, rubbing his sore throat for the second time in as many days. He was not sure how to approach this out-burst, her use of force a new chapter in their relationship and a sign that things were not all that kosher between them. "What's with the naked female? Is this some new fetish of yours?" he asked, resorting to humor since he knew that he was completely defenseless where Alexis was concerned. That she had not killed him he took as a good sign.

The guards began pounding on the door demanding entry. Cav yelled in an irritated voice that he was just fine, simply storm damage and that there was no security breach or any need for their presence. They argued with him a moment, then disappeared back down the corridors when they were satisfied that they had covered their asses.

She looked down at the body, aware that his ill attempt at humor was all he had at the moment, then walked over to the nearest chair and sat down. "That's one of my attackers, Cav. They were all wearing this, which made them invisible to the naked eye and infrared." She threw the black suit onto the floor next to the body. He came around from behind

the table and approached the dead body on his floor. She was still not convinced that he wasn't involved somehow. "So tell me Cav. If they aren't from you, then who the hell has this kind of hardware capabilities? Has the military now declared war against me?"

Cav inspected the body and the suit carefully, his practiced eye finding several interesting anomalies he was at a loss to explain adequately. After a good five minutes, he finally straightened back up and walked over to his bar, where he poured himself a stiff drink of bourbon. He threw it back down his throat, then looked over at the body again, then at Alexis. "How many were there?" He was furiously trying to figure this out, figure out who not only had the power to call in such a hit, but also had access to the sophisticated hardware and the location of her retreat. He was the only one who knew where she lived, who knew the details that would be necessary to plan and carry out such an operation.

"Three."

"Whoever sent them must not have known you very well," he said with a smile, imagining what they must have been thinking as she kicked their asses around the cabin.

"Oh, they knew me well enough," she said flippantly. "Perhaps not as well as they would have liked to, but they were professional and highly trained and ready to kill me without a hesitation. In fact, they basically fought to the death. I tried to take one alive but that was not in their mission briefing, I would suspect." She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out the small plastic bag holding the poisoned dart. "They also used these." She threw the bag onto

his desk. "Although I wouldn't protest if you killed yourself just about now, be very careful with those, especially with the tip. It's the harshest poison that I've ever encountered and we both know that I've encountered more than my fair share of them."

Cav walked over, picked the bag up and held it to the light. "I don't recognize the caliber or the make. I'll be sure to have it analyzed immediately." He narrowed his eyebrows at the device, becoming more worried with each sentence she spoke. "Do you need a clean-up team at your cabin?"

"I brought all the bodies with me as gifts for you." She stood and walked over to the window, her hands behind her back, the same rain drops as she had seen before when she was here earlier still running down the panes in their own little worlds, oblivious to the confusing problems of the mortals. She sometimes wished that she could be as free as they were, free to just fall where they may and heed nothing, be mindful of no destination or urgent needs. "They knew where I lived, Cav." She turned to look at him with intense eyes. "If you didn't send them, then who did? And how did they know where I lived, who I even was?"

"I can't explain it, Alexis. But you have to believe me when I tell you that I didn't send them or know anything about their existence. I can't believe that you would even think that. You're like a..."

She held up a hand and the words stuck in his throat. "Don't say it, Cav, or I just might kill you anyway." Her eyes blazed with a vivid intensity. She didn't, at this moment, want to be reminded of all she owed him or how she once felt for him. Not now. She

needed her anger to stay focused on the problem.

"Okay, I won't," he said quietly as he swallowed hard. "But however they found out where you lived, it didn't come from here. The only place that I keep your personal information is in here." He pointed to his head. "And I haven't told anyone where you live. Be serious."

"You told those two flyboys who you sent to pick me up, Cav. Remember them? It was just yesterday. Who else have you told that you can't remember?"

"What I told them was that they were to pick up my mistress from my cabin in Alaska," he replied with equal vigor. "They don't know shit about who you are or even what you are. And I had their nav-com scrambled when they returned so that no one else could back-track with it."

She looked at him from under her eyebrows. "You told them what? No wonder they kept looking at me with those damn strange smiles and all that stupid laughter on the trip back."

He poured himself another drink and then knelt next to the body. "I seriously doubt they thought about it much at all. I have them bring me women all the time from around the world. Besides, they're hand-picked for my more confidential jobs and they've been with me for many, many years."

"Doesn't mean they can't be bought off. Money still goes a long way."

"Actually, yes it does. I'd have known about it if they were even approached. However, I will put someone on them right away to make certain. The only other thing I could possibly do is kill them, if that's what you're looking for to make you feel better."

"If it was them, then they already told, so killing them doesn't do any good. And it certainly wouldn't make me feel any better."

"No, I suppose it wouldn't at that."

"Cut the crap, Cav. This isn't funny. This is personal now. No one tries to kill me in my own home."

"And you actually thought that I did it. Amazing. After all --"

"Shut the hell up, Cav."

Cav spread the woman's legs apart and pointed toward her left inner thigh. "Did you notice this?"

"That she's a woman? Yes, Cav, I noticed that little detail. Are you that hard up that you need to look at dead women's vaginas?"

He looked at her a moment with humorless eyes, then placed his attention back on the woman's thigh. "I was actually referring to the tattoo here, on her inner thigh. Did you see it?"

Alexis moved forward to get a better look, her forehead furrowed. She didn't remember seeing any tattoos, but then she had not thought to disgrace the woman's dead body by spreading apart her legs. The tattoo was located where her leg intersected her hips on the inner thigh, partially obscured by pubic hair. It consisted of what appeared to be an omega symbol surrounded by finely drawn scribbles, which could be words. She recognized nothing of its origins and didn't even understand the scribbling.

But then the tattoo was not what was bothering her. She had missed detecting it and she didn't like missing details like this. Such things usually meant a great deal when the assignment was over.

He rolled her over in an attempt to look for any other markings but found nothing. "There's something strange about her. Like she doesn't belong. I felt it when I touched her body. It was far colder than a dead body should be and there was some sort of electric field at play around her skin. Did you notice any of that?"

"Yeah, I noticed it alright. They were all the same. When they were alive, they seemed to almost move in an out of our three dimensions as if they weren't quite all here. I thought it was the suit doing it, but obviously that was a wrong assumption."

Cav rose on creaky knees. "I'll have my team do an autopsy on all three and maybe that'll shed some light on who they are and where they came from." He moved back over to his chair and sat down. "These aren't normal people."

"No shit, Cav. You can be so brilliant some times." She took a seat on the arm of a nearby chair, arms dangling loosely at her sides, staring at the naked female on the carpeted floor as if waiting for it to sit up and tell them all its secrets.

"I don't recognize the tattoo," he offered as he brought his computer interface on-line to search for the pattern.

"Odd place for it. Almost as if she didn't want anyone to know she had it. People only hide things there that they don't want others to know they have."

"Or as a sexual turn-on."

She eyed him severely.

"Don't look at me like that. I know plenty of women who have tattoos down there or on their asses which they think turn guys on, and to tell the truth there're plenty of guys who find that kind of shit a turn-on."

"This world is full of very sick people."

"You've obviously been away in Alaska a little too long."

A team of specialists dressed in white chemical suits come to the door and stepped in with a large bag and a gurney. They bundled up the naked female as if they did this type of work in Cav's office all the time, then left without saying a word or even acknowledging that there were two living people in the room.

Cav looked over at Alexis as the group left with their prize on the gurney. "You have to believe me when I tell you that I had nothing to do with this, Alexis. I don't work that way and you know it. I've no reason to have you killed at this particular moment. I need you."

She smirked at his candor. "So glad that you threw in that little caveat there, Cav." They stared at each other a moment before she spoke again. "I wish it had been you in a rather morbid sort of way."

He kept his eyes locked on hers. "Because then you'd know."

"Then I'd know," she answered curtly. "Now I don't have a clue who wants me this dead to send these clowns to my place. It's going to make accomplishing this assignment that much more difficult. Usually they don't start trying to kill me until after I start making inquiries."

He cocked his head slightly. "What assignment are you talking about?"

"Into the death of my son. I'm going to find the bastards responsible and tear them apart piece by bloody piece ... slowly."

A small smile worked its way onto his lips almost as if it were afraid to make its presence known. "Can I take that to mean that you've accepted the mission?" "It means just what I said, Cav. I'm going to find the people who killed my son. That's all. I don't give a rat's ass about anything you want or that bitch Claudine wants. This is personal now. No one attacks my family like that and gets away with it. No one." She leaned on the front of his desk with both hands palms down, looking him directly in the eyes, the hint of violence like a lurking shadow across her irises. "You better hope that nothing comes back to you, Cav. Because if I find out that you had anything to do this, anything at all, I'll kill you just as surely as I step on an ant."

He left the threat unanswered. He had, over the years, gotten used to powerful people threatening him on an almost daily basis. "And if you happen to discover a link between your son and the others, that would get them killed also?"

She ignored his question just as efficiently. "I'm going to need some support from you, Cav. You know the drill. I'll be down in the weapon's lab, so tell them to be expecting me." She turned toward the door and made her way easily across the carpet. "And tell your security goons to lay off, else you're going to have a lot more dead bodies laying around this place."

His smile widened, this time with the full expectation that she would see it and not be amused. She had accepted the mission, albeit on her own terms. But then with Alexis, there was no other way of having her accept a mission. "I'll let you know the minute the autopsy results come back."

"That would be nice." She opened the splintered door to leave, then turned to look at him one last time. "You'd better warn Claudine that her time on this earth is limited, because I know that she's involved." She left without waiting for a reply, leaving the door hanging open on one hinge.

Cav breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back in his chair as he downed the glass full of bourbon he had been holding onto for the past five minutes. He had almost forgotten how difficult it was to work with Alexis Locke. Odd that one would forget something so bad tasting. Maybe he had repressed it out of sheer terror.

The side door to his office opened and Claudine Maxwell stepped out elegantly, the smile plastered on her face like a model's perfect nightmare. "Shut the damn door, for Christ's sake," he spit out at her. "Do you want everyone to know that you were here? What if she comes back? Your secret services boys won't be able to do a damn thing for you if she decides that you're the bad one here and she's just a step away from making that decision."

She waltzed over to the door and shut it slowly, then turned to look at him with a bemused look, which spoke little for his concerns. "Very interesting. Your little experiment has a rather ambitious independent streak to her, doesn't she?"

He flung his bourbon snifter at her but his aim was far off the mark. "You stupid bitch!" he screamed at her with spittle flying freely. "Did you really think, in that grotesquely deranged brain of yours, that you could send three of your military flunkies up to Alaska

and KILL HER?! Were you born that stupid or is it something you've worked on over the years?"

She chortled at him, looking over at the now harmless sniffer lying on the carpet, the smell of its lost contents permeating through her own perfume. She walked over to the bar and poured herself straight vodka, drank it down in one gulp. "It would appear that this little mission is a little more important than you thought at first, wouldn't it."

"Fuck off, Claudine. Just bend over and fuck off." He put his hand over his forehead, could feel his pulse racing, his veins straining to pump the blood that his heart could barely circulate. He could feel himself sweating, like a sticky coating on his skin that should have warded off people like Claudine but didn't seem to be functioning properly.

She poured herself another Vodka and walked over toward his desk, aware that the man was close to a coronary. "Slow down, Cav. You'll give yourself a heart attack at this rate." She sat on the arm of a chair, her short skirt riding up high on her thighs and giving that tease of a glimpse at her nether regions women used to such devastating advantage. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that you were sleeping with your little experiment, the way you're carrying on about her. I don't remember you getting all this ... What's the right word? Emotional? Yes, emotional over the others and their ultimate deaths." She sipped at her second vodka like a seasoned professional.

"Don't fuck with me, Claudine."

She laughed again as she threw her head back and flared her hair out. "Not a chance in the world of *that* ever happening again."

"Alexis is the last person in the world that you want to make angry. She will carry out her threat, you can guarantee it."

"Do you hear yourself? It's like a broken record." She sipped some more, staring everywhere in the room but at him. This was worse than talking to the president. At least that blonde bimbo had an excuse for being so ignorant. Cav had once been a genius. He had no more excuses. "Relax. I didn't send anyone to kill your precious little slut. I'm not that stupid, Cav, despite what you openly think about me."

"I sometimes wonder about that," he whispered to himself.

She finished her vodka, thought about getting more but decided that the warm feeling she was beginning to get was more than enough of a shield against his hypocrisy. "Why the hell would I, as you so clearly said, demand that she be assigned to this case only to kill her off? It makes no sense. Not even to a kid. Anyway," she intoned with a wave of her hand. "It appears that your little princess is going to take our little missions after all. Imagine that."

"Don't be so sure about that. And you damn well know her name. Why don't you use it?"

"Sure she is," she said as she wrinkled her nose at him, ignoring his plea. "She said it herself."

"What she said, had you bothered to listen, is that she's going to find the people who killed her son and hunt them down like the dogs they are."

She looked at her nails and realized that she needed a manicure. "Isn't it the same thing? When she finds the people who killed Dr. Hart, she'll have

found the people who killed the others and case closed.”

He looked at her from under his hand. Was she really this dense or just this arrogant? “It’s not the same thing at all. But it really doesn’t matter anymore. I think that the more she looks into this the more connections she’ll make with the others and it’ll become a puzzle she’ll need to solve. It’s the way she works.”

“And that’s different in what way?” She rose from her seated position elegantly and walked over to his desk, where she sat again, angling her legs just right for Cav to get an eyeful. She reached forward and grabbed a fat cigar out of the open box on his desktop. She rolled it under her nose, inhaling the aroma as she closed her eyes and imagined herself anywhere but here.

“It’s different because finding the killers isn’t the same as finding out why they killed them and who ordered it. It’s them that we need to get at else they’ll just keep sending in assassins until they achieve their goal.”

She clipped off the end of the cigar and lit it, talking out of the side of her mouth as she did so. “Do you really think that there’ll be more deaths?”

He said nothing for a few moments as the bluish cloud of smoke rose above her, enveloping her in a haze. He was finding it difficult to see what if anything he ever saw in her besides the great body. And even that didn’t seem to entice him as it once did despite her efforts to the contrary. “I’ve a feeling that whatever this is, it’s bigger and more wide-spread than even you suspect. If you didn’t sent those people to kill her, then there’s a third party at play

here who neither of us knows about and they have access to some pretty sophisticated shit.

She smiled big as she pulled the cigar out from between her plump, sensuous lips and blew out a cloud of toxic fumes. "I like them big, Cav. At least you get your money's worth that way."

He closed his eyes and leaned back, wishing that she would just leave, perhaps even die. Yes, that would be nice if she were to just keel over and die right here in his office because then he could piss on her still warm corpse. "You might just get more than you bargained for with Alexis, Claudine, far more."

She slid the cigar back into her mouth with a twisting motion, her lips puckered up around it and her cheeks sucked in, the twinkle in her eyes malicious.

She certainly hoped so.

*Science tells us how to heal and how to kill;
it reduces the death rate in retail and
then kills us wholesale in war.*

7

**8 August 2085
2000 hrs**

He found her sitting in a back office of the second floor of the extensive weapons lab, which he kept staffed around the clock. One never knew when a particular weapon might be needed at three in the morning. Her feet were propped up on some lowly engineer's messy desk, he having long since departed for his modest home and modest life. A glass of ice water rested in one hand as she read diligently a report on the computer screen

She didn't look up when he entered.

She didn't even acknowledge his presence. It was rather obvious that she was still angry with him and he let that pass for now. At least she was no longer choking the life out of him.

"They finished the autopsies," he said after several minutes of dead air between them, her eyes never once moving toward him.

"And? ..."

He moved so that he could see what was on her screen. Schematics for the new military proto-type of the Spec 5 double plasma cannon. Light reading to be sure. "Tap into the morgue's d-base. You're not going to believe this one."

She dutifully did as she was directed and soon was staring at a recorded feed of the autopsy, the typical dry, monotone voice of the primary coroner droning on about the typical Y-cut and the aftermath.

"Am I looking for something in particular?"

"Just wait a moment."

She looked at him then, her eyes shifting ever so slightly to take in his pudgy face with the chin waddle and the bags under his still intelligent eyes like lost candles in a burlap sack. A startled exclamation from the autopsy team brought her vision back to the screen and she leaned forward as she watched; not because it would allow her to see better but because it was one of those human traits to want to be closer to events transpiring before you, as if closer translated to comprehension and thus acceptance.

She ran her tongue along her teeth as she breathed in deeply at the startling events unfolding before her. The bodies were disintegrating at an astonishing rate, as if a switch had been thrown and time was suddenly marching forward at a year a second. First to go was their skin, turning into a grayish ooze and then disappearing altogether, next the eyes, tendons, muscles and finally the bones turning into a powdery

ash, sitting on the examination table as if defying any to explain.

"What just happened?" she asked as she touched a few keypads and replayed the scene.

"Your guess is as good as mine. The autopsy team is still trying to recover. It was like your assassins never existed."

She watched it a third time, looking for she knew not what but looking nonetheless because there had to be an explanation for what had just transpired. Bodies didn't just disappear like that. "What about the ashes that were left over?"

"Nothing there to speak of. Human remains basically. *Very old* human remains."

"Were they able to get anything out of them?"

"DNA."

"Where?"

He pointed toward the relevant command and she immediately moved there, watching as the streams of code started to scroll along the screen. She punched a few more buttons and the VR system lit up, displaying the DNA in all its glory throughout the room.

She rose out of her chair and studied the sequences a moment, then looked at Cav, who was still sitting, a look of bewilderment on her face. "This looks like my code."

"Yes. It does."

She looked back at the floating information. "But how?"

"It's actually not your exact code, as I'm sure you can tell. But it does have quite a few markers which are dead-on identical and they're the ones that I

specifically programmed into you those many years ago."

"So they're clones?" It could not have been said without more shock if she had tried.

"No, not technically, but close enough to worry the shit out of me. This isn't possible, what these three represent. The technology isn't here yet to do this in this way. Those three people should not exist."

She smiled, briefly. "They don't."

"Yes, well that might be true at the moment but they *did* exist." He stood, moved toward her and pointed at a particular grouping of genes. "See there? In the fourth and fifth sequence of the brain pattern?"

"They had the same abilities as I do." She looked at him. "Why the hell didn't they use them, then? I mean, why go to all the bother of cloning my better parts and then not train the clones in the primary skills specifically cloned."

"You're asking the wrong person. Speaking of that ..." He reached into his inner coat pocket and produced a small bag in which was the poisoned dart she had brought him earlier. He opened the bag up, grabbed the dart out and proceeded to prick himself in the finger.

"CAV?" she shouted as she grabbed the dart out of his hand and made ready to call the medics. She was well aware that the poison would react instantly to his system. But it didn't. She looked at him completely baffled. "You should be dead."

He smiled at her and put the dart back in the bag. "Lethal to you, yes. Completely harmless to me and anyone else on this planet." He handed her the bag and she studied the dart through the plastic. "Genetically engineered?"

"Perfectly." He took the bag from her hands and put it securely back in his inner coat pocket as if it were a treasured item. "It was designed to kill you and only you. Claudine Maxwell didn't order this. There isn't anyone on this planet with the technology necessary to create this. I've gotten close recently, but even then, I can only narrow it down to perhaps a hundred thousand people. But just one person? Not for decades, if not centuries. This is the perfect assassin weapon. You can put this in the water supply of the city where the target lives and it'll not only be completely harmless to everyone but the target but undetectable as well."

She leaned against the desk, staring at the far wall as she tried to process all she had learned in the last five minutes and she was having a hard time. "How do you know that no one on this planet has this tech? I mean, you're holding it in your hand so someone has to have perfected the technique."

"Impossible. If I haven't done it, then I would've heard about anyone else who did. This isn't just a back yard, personal computer type of job. Something like this takes billions of dollars and a research facility par excellence and any expenditure on that scale I would know about. The equipment alone would raise red flags from here to Nepal. No. Whatever this is, whomever these people are they're so far more advanced than we are that they could take us out in a matter of seconds if they were so inclined. But on the bright side, I'd say that we've caught our killers. You might not have to do much more investigative work after all."

She smirked at him. "I think you're jumping the gun just a little here. Those six deaths on that disc you

showed me weren't sloppy executions. They were meticulously planned and carried out. If you've got a cadre of these people around with this technology, why even bother with the ruse? Why not just take the targets out the old fashion way?"

He pursed his lips at the suggestion. She had a point, but he felt that there was something missing. "Perhaps they didn't want to advertise they're presence."

"And the attack on me? What was that? An after-thought?"

"That, I think, was an under-estimation of your skill levels. Just because they can clone a majority of your DNA doesn't mean that they have a clue what you can do or how well you can do it. I seriously doubt that they expected that you could neutralize poison introduced into your body, otherwise they would have never bothered with this."

As if a sudden vision had come to her eyes, she stirred and looked up at him as if bitten. "How stupid of me," she voiced with a vexation born of failure. She shook her head at the obvious answer staring at her all this time. Fifteen years ago she would have picked it up immediately, realized her error early on and changed her thought patterns appropriately. She had been out of this game for far too long and this was the perfect sign of that.

"What?" he asked, aware that she was going through her ritual self-chastisement and would be lost to him for several moments while she tried to figure out why she had missed a particular salient point. Being a perfectionist was a backlash of the job at which she had once excelled and Alexis, as far as Cav was concerned, was the consummate

perfectionist when it came to her missions, preparation and execution. If she missed something during a prep, even something minor that could be easily overlooked, she would beat herself mentally for hours over her supposed ignorance.

She stood and started to pace about the small room, hands in her hair, face a mask of frustration.

"For god's sake, Alexis, what is it?"

She stopped at the window, which had been closed off with a cheap plastic blind, and shook her head again. "They weren't after me. That was why they were so surprised when they found me there. I should've still been here, discussing this mission with you and not at home."

"That's a rather large leap, if you ask me. They did have the poison engineered for you and you alone. You don't carry something like that around if you don't plan on using it."

"In an emergency, perhaps. But I wasn't the target, Cav." She looked at him now, her eyes intense. "They were there for something else, Cav, perhaps even the information on the disc. Perhaps they're after the same thing you are."

"So then you're saying that these people might be trying to figure this all out also. I don't buy that. With the technology these people have, why would they even bother with something trivial like this?"

"Because, Cav, it isn't trivial. Whatever it is that you've stumbled onto here, it's a big one and it's biting back." She sat down again, heavily, running a hand through her hair and frowning at the computer screen that had reverted back to the information she had been studying when Cav had first entered the office. "The five people who were killed, did they

leave behind any diaries or journals? Anything to indicate what they might have been working on together."

"No." He sat on the edge of the desk to a loud protesting creak. "That was one of the red flags that perked the interest of the intelligence community and thus me and Claudine. Any and all journals or diaries that they might have had are all missing, as if someone had systematically taken them. Computers were wiped clean, completely, of any relevant information that might have connected them. Even my boys can't recover any of it, at least with the machines that weren't blown up, like Godonov's. That one was a complete loss."

Her frown deepened. She could feel herself being dragged into Cav's world and she didn't want it. It was like a rock caught in a slide, moving along with the rest of the rocks but not wanting to move at all. But one thought continued to resonate through her soul and it was that one thought, which a day ago she would have scoffed at ever having, that drove her onward and made the rockslide she was caught in not all that bad. "Then it would appear that we'll have to do it the hard way and find all the friends and relatives, talk to them, find out what they know, dig down until we find the key to this bizarre tale."

"We?" he asked with an undercurrent of amusement as he looked down at his Buddha belly.

"That was a figurative statement, my dear fat little man. I'll be the one doing all the legwork. You'll be doing all the technical support."

He smiled, a broad look of triumph she didn't fail to notice. He had her aboard. "I'll of course supply you

with whatever it is you need. Where do you want to start?"

She moved over toward the door, staring off at the far wall as she thought. Her mind-processes already far ahead of Cav's. She pursed her lips, looked down at the floor a moment. This was not going to be an easy mission. She still had no idea who the people were who were trying, very forcefully, to kill her and she knew that the attempt at her cabin was not the end of it. If anything, the next time would be even more forceful, perhaps even killing off any civilians who might be around her. They might not have intended at first to kill her, whatever their original mission, be it to find the disc or whatever, but her interference had put her life at the top of their agenda, she was certain of that.

She was the target now.

And if, as she was beginning to suspect, they had nothing whatsoever to do with Alex's death or the other four, then she still had to figure out who had done those killings and the motive behind them. This puzzle had more missing pieces than it had available pieces and she was beginning to get that warm feeling inside her.

This might just prove to be the challenge she had been looking for all her life.

"Alexis?"

She came out of her deep-thought and looked over at him. She noticed his eyes, saw the tell-tale glare of a typical male at her ass, her sleek profile, "Stop leering at me, Cav, before I break your fucking nose."

"I wasn't leering at you, my dear."

"Yeah, right, and that bump in your pants is a banana."

He looked down at his crotch, though he wasn't sure why, knowing before he even looked that there was no bump. "I don't find you attractive in that way, Alexis, and you know that."

She stepped out of the office and looked over the lab spread out before her in all its murderous wares, the numerous people working on better ways of killing people and then going home to their wives and kids and pretending to be caring individuals. It was a typical hypocritical office of human vanity. "Yeah, whatever Cav. Sell it to someone who believes." She looked back at him, having dismissed his pleas of innocence as the manure they were. "I think the best place to start is finding out all I can about that conference that my son" – *it still sounded so odd on her tongue, the word tripping over her deeply hidden emotions like a bear-trap set lightly* – "and that Nakamura attended together. I'll have to see after that. What I find out from that will most likely determine where I go next. I'm leaning toward Japan, but *Stargazer I* looks promising." She ran her hand through her frayed hair a moment, closing her eyes and realizing that she had not gotten but a few hours sleep in the last few days. "This might just take a while, Cav. Don't expect any communiqués from me for a while, if at all. I'm still not convinced that there isn't a leak here at your little organization and I don't need to be advertising my movements to the people trying to kill me. Let them figure it out the hard way."

"I'll back you in whatever way you want to handle it, as I always do."

She was forced to smile at him. "Really? I seem to remember a different level of cooperation between us back then, one that involved a lot of you telling me

where to go and what to do and how to do it and me just agreeing and doing it."

"Funny how time plays tricks on the memory."

She turned back toward the lab, a smirk marring her sculptured face. "I'll need someone to get my dogs and move all my stuff out of the cabin. It's obvious that I can't stay there anymore. And while you're at it, might as well find me a new place to live. Maybe a beach-view this time."

"Consider it already done. Anything else?"

She looked back at him. "This stays between you and me, Cav. The mission, I mean, and my acceptance of it."

"I'll have to tell Claudine, else she'll raise hell – "

She stepped forward and poked him hard in the chest. "Tell her and I'm off. Understand? Just you and me. No one else."

"Ok. You don't have to poke me so hard. It might be soft but it still hurts." He rubbed his chest where he was certain a bruise was already forming. "When do you want to leave?"

"Soon. I need to do a little more research before I even consider leaving, though. I've already got several orders in with the lab techs, so be a good boy and make certain that they get done quickly, huh?"

He rose to escort her out of the lab. "I'll make the arrangement, put a priority on it. What about transportation?" They began to walk toward the far elevator exit.

"Same as always. A multiple of covers, also. Plus clearance to pass through levels one and two if I need it. And tickets and official papers for a trip to both *Stargazer I* and *Galileo Prime*."

"CIA, NSA, or FBI?"

"Whatever is more believable at the moment." They stopped at the elevator and waited for the car to arrive. "Maybe a journalist would be good. Official government types seem to make people nervous now-a-days."

"You'll have a full set of identities within the hour, three different ones just in case. Anything else?"

"A sub sandwich, with meatballs." She smiled her famous crooked smile at him, aware suddenly that at the moment, Dr. Vincent Cavalier was the only friend she had ... and she didn't even trust him.

Cav smiled back. "My treat, my dear."

*Consciousness is the mere surface of our minds,
of which, as of the Earth, we don't know
the inside, but only the crust.*

Schopenhauer

8

**9 August 2085
0600 hrs**

Cav entered the large corner office dimmed to a faint breath of light, the one source of illumination casting a pale cone of yellow over the prone figure present, her head laying on her crossed arms. The computer screen had long since turned off on its own and its black face stared out onto the dismal scene of dark rain clouds hanging low, obscuring all below in a haze of deepest depression.

The rain had stopped for the moment: the storm was only catching its breath, making ready for the next round of torrential rains to inundate the already saturated plains below. There had been no tropical

storm warning given, the systems that had suddenly developed off the coast too quick to allow for people to prepare. And so they sat in their damp houses in their damp chairs, watching the water level rise higher and higher, flooding their dreams as much as their houses like the proverbial flood.

He watched her for several moments, a tight smile trapped on his lips. He was aware that she was most likely awake, that she could feel his presence, even if it was but subconsciously. If he had the foolish notion of attacking her in any way, he knew for a certainty that he would be dead before he could even get within a foot.

God, he had built her well.

But a nagging feeling had started to grow in the pit of his stomach that he didn't like. It was a feeling of impending doom and he knew, like he knew that he had built her well, that it was directed toward Alexis. There was something about this whole conundrum presented that was beginning to stink and he had the cold feeling that he was seeing her for the last time, seeing that crooked smile and that twinkle in her eyes when she found something humorous.

It was almost like a premonition, warning him that there was more to this than what had been presented and that it would cost the lives of those he cared for the most, including Alexis. Perhaps unknowingly, this was the very mission for which she had been designed, had been created to under-take those sixty-five years ago in that anonymous underground lab, in that flurry of activity and nervousness that had eventually ended with her birth, her perfect birth marking what Cav took to be the beginning of his life and the ultimate culmination of his career. He had

indeed been reborn that day, that less than perfect day when Alexis had entered the human race and given it a rude awakening to the future.

It had not taken Cav long to understand that the human race was not ready for her or her siblings. The entire project had been so secret that even the nurses and doctors who had such an important part of her early life had been unaware of her potential, of the plans that the brilliant young geneticist had for the whole brood of perfect people created in an idealistic furor of hypocrisy. They had known so little of the project and its implications that they had not even seen their deaths coming, like a sudden flu descending on a town of herbalists.

Erased was the official term used, a term which Cav had at first not even thought twice about but which had eventually haunted his dreams, both sleeping and waking, making him into, partially at least, the bulk of a man he was today. He saw the justification of the actions at that time, saw that they all had to go, the doctors and nurses and attendants who had never realized that they had signed up for a one-way trip to hell. But soon he saw the entire fiasco for what it was and saw in his decisions the monster he had tried become

Saw it in the mirror every morning.

There had been an accident. Another official term used for the destruction that had rained down on those caught unawares.

Most had not seen it as an accident but rather as the pinnacle of a nefarious plan of power and deceit hatched by a man desperate for attention from a world that had ignored him. Cav had for many years ignored them, ignored the words behind his back, the

accusations of his colleagues and finally the secret senate hearings that had put the blame squarely at his feet for the brilliance that had gone wrong. He had fought tooth and nail to keep the project alive, to keep his dreams alive and keep the one viable child alive who, Cav was certain, would vindicate all his expenditures and his failures.

Even to this day he was unsure what really went wrong, what had caused the birth of a mutation unaccounted for in the genetic splices and alterations. But something had happened, something unforeseen and thus unalterable. It was in the fourth birth after Alexis, in a birth that had given rise to a monster. Not one, of course, like the movies liked to depict with horns and fangs and hair all over so that it looked more like a runaway mongrel than a human, but a monster nonetheless, a man who should never have been, a species so distant from Homo Sapiens that it was almost the creation of a whole new species.

It was a mind capable of so much, a body so perfect that it scared the very people who had asked for, no, demanded the very existence of the project and this exact proto-type in the first place. And in that panic over a creation that they themselves had helped to create, they had shut it all down, stopped the funds and the authorization as tightly as a spigot, lest the secret ever leak out and incriminate those in power who wanted to stay in power. It had been that birth which had led to death of all of them, all the proto-types and the doctors and the nurses and any who might have had a hand in such a creation. It had only been Cav's brilliance that had saved him, the solutions in his mind, the prospects that they had him now by the shorthairs and could demand all sorts of

devious weaponry from him. And in his supposed salvation came the salvation of Alexis, the only prototype to ever survive to this age, to be used as she had been intended and even then it was but a sham.

Alexis was their tool far more than she ever was his love. He had led the illusion that he ran the projects, picked the missions and fought the powers that be over the way she was to be used. Yet it was not until far later, till almost forty years later, shortly before Alexis had gained an independence they could not any longer contain that he had finally wrestled enough power and money from them to allow for his own independence.

And even then it had been but a smoke screen, a brief respite that only allowed him to think that he somehow controlled his own destiny and in turn that Alexis controlled hers.

This most recent assignment was proof of that delusion beyond a doubt. If he had any delusions that he had control over anything to do with Alexis and her existence, he was sorely mistaken. And it was that very loss of control worrying him now, putting into his stomach such a cold hand of balled up dread that he could vomit from it as if punched. He could feel it like a vise-clamp to his heart, squeezing mercilessly until his soul could take no more and he burst from his own hypocrisy.

He could still remember that cold winter morning, the snow falling like autumn leaves in a cool October breeze when she had awoken to her own sense of self and had told them to go to hell and in that declaration had ended most of her usefulness to a government who didn't care whether she lived or died

so long as she went on missions and achieved results.

He had used all his power and influence built up over the years of self-deprecation to have her life spared, to have her on immediate re-call should the need arise and thus grant her a measure of isolation from those who would just as soon erase her as use her and rid their consciousness of any connection to a project that should have never existed in the first place.

And now she was back again, dragged into a world she no longer wanted, working for people she hated and who despised her despite her usefulness in such occasions. Cav could see, with his years of experience like his Buddha belly attached, nothing but trouble brewing in this puzzle.

She stirred and he turned to leave, feeling unreasonably guilty for having stared at her for so long. Her soft voice made him stop, that voice that had at times strained his heart to such an extent. "You really need to find a hobby or something, Cav, because staring at me is not really your best option." She eyed him as if she knew exactly what he had been thinking, had been recollecting in a parody of selfish recriminations. "What time is it anyway?"

"O six hundred. You need the rest."

She leaned back and yawned with a stretch making her firm, rounded breasts press against the black shirt, the bralessness obvious. He averted his eyes and looked at the wall, the floor, the ragged clouds passing by the window in wisps of darkness; anywhere but at her. He had already been accused of leering at her earlier and didn't want to re-visit that false perception any time soon. That she was like a

daughter to him made any suggestions otherwise ludicrous.

She eyed him a moment, saw the look of avoidance and smiled faintly. She knew how Cav felt about her, but he was sometimes a little too open with his praise for her anatomy and although she was fully aware that as a geneticist he was far more interested in her molecular structure, his eyes still sometimes gave her a wrong feeling inside.

She relaxed, leaned back again and stifled another yawn. She was unaccustomed to staying awake for such extended periods of time. Where once it had been common place for her to stay alert up to fifty hours without a hint of a problem, her retirement and easy life had taken its toll on her abilities and she saw it as a problem needing to be dealt with soon, else this might just turn into the shortest mission she ever started. "Next time, don't just stand there and stare at me, Cav. I don't appreciate it. No woman does."

"Find anything useful?" he asked as he looked back at her stoically. Any answer to her rebuff would only cause more grief, regardless what he said, so silence was always the best option at this juncture.

"Maybe." She brushed the keypad with a hand and the screen came alive with the data she had been pouring over when she had fallen asleep. She acknowledged his silence as a tactic 'yes' to her request and left the issue laying. "It's hard to tell." She turned the screen so that Cav could see it, then stood and stretched her legs, rubbing her forearm and noting that the room was cooler than usual.

Cav looked at the lines of data that seemed to have no connection whatsoever, the random associations

appearing as just that: random. But then, he was not the expert at such things. That was her specialty.

She spoke as she walked around the room, hands now crossed under her breasts. "It appears that Kido and Alex attended one lecture together at the conference they attended, entitled Higher Reasoning in Artificial Intelligence." Cav nodded his head in assent. He knew that much already.

"They didn't sit together and probably didn't even know that the other was there, so I don't think that the conference is a place to look, or the other participants or the keynote speaker. However, they did meet for lunch, on the second day of the conference. They talked for about forty minutes, from what I can gather, and then went their separate ways. What they talked about, I don't have a clue. How they knew to meet there, at that conference and at that time, I also don't know. There's no trace whatsoever of any contact before or after the conference, so perhaps they just caught each other's eyes across a room or some one else, another player of whom we have no clue, introduced them."

"They may not have talked about anything at all when they met at the conference," Cav interjected, wrinkles appearing like fine lines above his eyes as he looked at the data and found nothing that seemed to be anything worth pursuing.

"Well, I have to assume that since they didn't know each other before the conference and didn't have all that much in common, that they must have talked about something other than the weather and the state of the economy. Why else even meet?"

"Maybe they were attracted to each other?" he offered.

"I don't think so. I mean, I suppose it's possible, but not very likely. They're too different and Kido had a steady boyfriend for the last five years. It's just not likely to me."

"So in your world people don't cheat on each other, or is it that your son doesn't cheat?"

Her eyes flicked to him menacingly. "Don't go there, Cav. This is professional and whether he's my son or not has nothing to do with it. And yes, people cheat all the time in my world, as you put it, but not like this. If they had really been interested, they could have easily gone up to either's hotel room and gotten their jollies that way. But this, this just doesn't feel or smell like a sexual encounter. Besides, why not at least send a few e-mails afterward? Why not at least acknowledge that they had met and follow up on whatever they were talking about? We're missing something here."

"It'd be nice to know what they talked about," he said as he stopped looking at the screen, now certain as to why she had fallen asleep going over this crap. It was boring. He was getting a headache just looking at it this short time.

"Yes, it would, and I think that's where I need to start. There's something here and I think that if I can dig it out, then it'll give me a direction for the next stage. As a matter of fact, I've the unpleasant feeling that I'm going to have to go to all the places of employment of all five victims and talk to the people who knew them the best. I need to get some sort of idea what they were all doing that would mark them as targets in these elaborate staged-deaths. If there's a clue anywhere, it'll be there."

"Isn't that all in the files, the projects they were working on I mean? That has to be info my people dug up shortly after each death."

"I don't mean what they were working on for the company," she said dryly, almost patronizingly. "That's all rather mundane and useless. Nothing important there whatsoever. I'm talking about what they were working on in their spare time, on the sly, the pet projects they took home and planned to use to rise up the corporate ladder. That's where the secrets are most likely to lie, the shadows in the closet that people like these five always seem to have trailing them."

"Sounds good. What cover have you figured on using? I can't imagine going as CIA. Like you said, that would raise too many red flags. It'll have to be something more subtle, more commonplace." He frowned. "What about spouses and kids? Going to talk to them also?"

"It'd be one of the best places to start. The spouse is usually the person who knows the victim the best, or is the one who'll confirm that the victim was living a dual life, her ignorance of his life outside the home one of those clues I like to look for. Having caught many a double agent that way. One spouse had no idea what their significant other was doing on the side, didn't really know the spouse's job, or knew the people he normally associated with. As for the cover, I was thinking more along the lines of a journalist. Not many people can resist a story that has them in it or that plans to uncover something of which they're a part. Company loyalty isn't as strong as most corporate offices would like to believe."

"Story line?"

“Tragic, random acts happening to plain folk, maybe even something about the state of the industry or some such thing. Exposés always seem to get good receptions. I'm not really sure yet. I need to make these people confide in me, open up and spill the dirt.”

He pursed his lips. She seemed to have a slightly different opinion of the reaction that reporters generally received at big corporate monopolies like the ones he knew. But then, she had been his best agent at one time and she had never failed him. He was just worried that she had been out of action for too long and was taking unnecessary risks she normally would not take.

Being a journalist, to his way of thinking, was one of those risks.

“I'll have clearance control make certain that you end up on the payroll of whatever media organization you finally chose. I have the bad feeling that any poking around into the deaths of these people, this late after their deaths, will cause certain people to take notice and certain checks to be made into your cover. We'll need to make certain that you're covered thoroughly. As for *Galileo Prime* and *Stargazer I*, I think it best if you go as an insurance inspector looking into the accident, a back-claim of some sort perhaps, maybe even death benefits for the relatives. That should raise the least eyebrows seeing that it seems to happen constantly these days. A newscast doesn't seem to go by without a story about some insurance company trying to cheat some grieving spouse out of their departed's life insurance.”

"Sounds good. I've used that one before myself. Listen, I'm starved. I'm going to go downstairs for a bite."

"I'll escort you," he said, rubbing his extended belly caressingly. "It takes a lot of work to keep up this fine physique."

She looked at his belly as they exited the room. "Looks to me as if you already have most everything in there. Why the hell did you let yourself waste away like this? This isn't the man I remember. I assume he's still in there somewhere, lost in all that flubber."

They walked down the corridor to the elevator. "It wasn't easy, let me tell you," he intoned with a fake, serious look, patting his hard bulge of a stomach once again. "It takes a lot of effort to look this good."

They sat in the corner of the small cafeteria provided for the exclusive use of those working on the more sensitive concepts and designs. The room was habitually scanned for listening devices and the walls were made of a sound absorbing material making it almost impossible to hear the conversation of the table next to you, even if you were inclined to eavesdrop. At this time in the morning it was more or less empty, the few tables occupied on the other side of the room by scientists and workers huddled together whispering quietly over Danish and coffee or sitting alone, staring off into space blankly as they sipped their orange juice and chewed over last night's failures.

The majority of the workers had already arrived and eaten their breakfast an hour earlier. The night shift had already left for their mundane and dismal homes in the rain-drenched city below, to sleep the day away

and then begin life anew with the coming of the night and the dawning of a new work period.

Alexis drank the last of her orange juice, small-scattered syrup-covered remnants all that remained of the pecan pancakes she had devoured in her hunger. Cav was still busy on his double order of ham and cheese omelet with sausages, grilled hash-browns, a stack of pancakes, a bagel with cream-cheese and a bowl of grits. She watched him gobble his food down with a relish she found so typical of those who enjoyed their food so much that it showed in their physique, a smile creeping into the corner of her mouth and reflected in her eyes.

"I can still remember when you used to be a vegetarian and you'd criticize people who ate what you're devouring at the moment," she commented as she pushed her plate away and leaned on the table with both elbows.

"That was during my psychotic stage," he said out of the corner of his mouth as he ingested a large hunk of pork sausage, not deeming it necessary to stop eating just to answer her observation. "I'm cured of that now, but it certainly was a test of my will power."

She raised an eyebrow, then leaned back so as stay out of reach of his fork in case he decided that the food on the table wasn't enough.

He finally finished, wiping his mouth with an already dirty napkin and looking up at her bemused smile. "Any connections between the others?" he asked as he reached for his coffee and took a large gulp.

"Well, it's certainly an interesting collection of people. None of them are really tops in their fields or well known for anything recent, or even well known. The neuro-surgeon Dr. Pratali is the most difficult.

The others I can almost see working together on something because they all seem connected in some remote way to computers. But this doctor is completely out in left field."

"How do you tie the geneticist in with the others? He doesn't seem to fit in either."

"Well, I actually thought that at first also, but that conference that Kido and Alex attended ties her in somehow. If you think about it, that conference and that particular seminar don't really fit either of their profiles. As for Dr. Dumvo, his work can easily fall into what Alex was reportedly working on without that much of a stretch. I've reading up a lot on nano-technology and its recent applications to industry and every day life. Ever since the break through of Vasilieva and Berkinshire, that field has just exploded with potential. Since it's so new, I can easily see a connection there that I'm not aware of the moment."

Cav's beeper went off to a melody of rather comic proportions. He listened a moment in his earpiece, nodded at the information. He finished his coffee and the last spoonful of grits, which had been staring at him wanting to be eaten for the last few minutes, then rose. "Your documentation's ready, as well as your weapons. A personal hov is standing by, untraceable to this agency."

She rose with him. "You sure you don't want to get something to go? I can't even begin to imagine that

- The term hov had come into popular usage thirty years ago with the advent of the first successful hovercraft for personal use. They are now everywhere, replacing the ground-based car with its pollution spewing internal combustion engine running off of petroleum as easily as the automobile replaced the horse-draw buggy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

that was enough to keep you going more than a few minutes.”

“Ha, ha,” he muffled at her in a mocking tone, unable suppress the smile that came to his lips. “When did you become such a comedian?”

“You should know. You’re the one who put it in my genes....”

*As for the fool, he hears not, he can do nothing.
He lives on that of which one dies;
his food is untruth.*

— Ancient

Chinese Proverb

9

10 August 2085

0900 hrs.

Boston, USA

Alexis stepped out of her silver Mercedes-1450LS hov at the entrance to the branch office of Surya industries, the multi-conglomerate computer company that had arisen out of the Indian sub-continent after the break up of the Microsoft monopoly in the early part of the century. That slow and agonizing spin down of that once all-powerful monopoly had spawned off, in record time, smaller, viciously competitive companies in the wake of its demise like feeding piranha. This was where her late son had been employed, where his office had been a little over five months ago. It had been where his life was, a life

she had never known and a life that had, somehow, led to his death.

She was now sporting a mane of luxurious red hair flowing down to her shoulder blades in cascades of liquid fire, the bright green of her now emerald eyes flaring from beneath her small, fashionable sunglasses as she looked out from under them at the men who stood gawking at her from the entrance as if she were some Indian goddess come to claim their libidos. The lavender silk blouse she had selected so carefully didn't flaunt her bralessness, merely suggested it. She wore no perfume or jewelry, just a thin golden coin glittering in the morning sun shining down between the sky-scrappers of man's vanity in shafts of amber glory

Her short, pleated golden-colored skirt accentuated her curves as she walked, her long tan legs strong and firm, her lack of pantyhose like a magnet to the eyes of those who would undress her in an instant. She carried only a small, white purse containing her recorder and pocket computer, more than enough to conduct any interview. It also contained a system to download any computer file off of any computer to which she got near, palm-sized for easy concealment and use. She also carried a small handgun, made of the most advanced polymer plastics and guaranteed to defeat any metallic scanning system. It held more than enough of a punch to take down a man at a hundred meters; make that same man unrecognizable by his kin at point-blank. She could not foresee any possible use for the weapon here and that was the primary reason she had brought it along: the unforeseen.

She walked right passed the ogling men standing by the entrance to Surya Industries, their eyes plastered all over her body like leeches. She stopped, pulled out a small piece of paper from her purse as if she were checking for the final time the address and at the same time planted a suggestion into the men's mind that they were actually homosexual and found each other rather attractive.

She looked at them from behind the anonymity of her dark sunglasses, saw the confused looks on their faces as their eyes moved from her body to each other's buttocks, then pushed the doors open and walked in.

The lobby was a brilliantly designed, multi-functional edifice combining modern art with the flair of old-Europe, designed by the famous Jyotikavi Gibson, whose architectural masterpieces graced several of the major cities of the world. That he had been convinced to design this corporate office spoke volumes for the influence of Surya Industries.

Long green tentacles of vibrant and healthy plants hung down from the multiple open terraces above, the center of the building opening up into a skylight designed to make it look as if the building was open right to the upper sky, allowing a wide-open feeling to permeate the lobby like a breath of fresh air. The rich carpet on which she strode beautifully matched the slender Doric columns and arches speaking of a refinement beyond the scope of the company.

She was surprised to find a weapon detector at the main entrance, new looking and not quite broke-in. It had not been included in the intelligence brief and it bode ill for the further success of this mission. She didn't like sloppy intelligence work. She had, in the

past, never trusted the pre-mission work to anyone but herself. It was obvious that she was going to have to revert back to that true and tried practice. Nasty surprises like this were irritating.

She waited in the short line for the detector, the grumbling of those around her convincing her that this machine was not more a day old, if not new today. She stepped up to the first guard, her face set in a mask of seriousness and insolence at having to suffer the indignity of waiting and handed him her purse, giving a look of derision as he stared blatantly at her chest and legs. As he searched her purse thoroughly, she reached out with her mind, found the main processor for the detector and gave it a slight overload. There was a shower of sparks from behind the desk where the guards were stationed and they jumped out from behind, looking at the malfunctioning machine as if it might just get up and attack them. There were muffled giggles and a few curses at the delay and Alexis used the confusion to slip passed the checkpoint unseen, calmly making her way to the main hospitality desk and the sign-in log.

"I was almost killed by that damn thing," she accused in an overbearing tone, articulating her words with particular deliberation. "The management will be hearing about this, you can count on that."

The guard, a large, brute of a man who looked like he shaved with a blow-torch, looked right through Alexis as he spoke in a brusque, bass of a voice. "Name and purpose of visit."

She eyed him a moment. This one was not about to be distracted by sparks or malfunctioning hardware, nor probably if she were to strip naked in front of him and dance. This one was all business. "Katrina

Templar. Journalist for the New York Times. I'm expected."

He took her ID card without once looking at her and ran it over the scanner, then indicated toward the palm reader with a bored detachment, taking a brief glance at her to make certain that she looked like the picture. She placed her hand on the reader and then stuck her eye over the retinal scan clumsily as if she had never experienced such a thing before. She was beginning to question such intense security for a computer company.

Industrial espionage had been rampant the last decade, especially in the higher technology fields, but that still didn't justify the heightened security, so out of place in the well-apportioned lobby. It was far too much of a coincidence that all this came about the week she came here to check out on her son's life.

It gave her one of those foreboding feelings she hated so much.

She stepped back from the security devices and waited impatiently as the guard ran his checks. "If you don't hurry, I'm going to be late and I'm never late," she spit out with snake's venom.

Those appeared to be the words needed to make the guard finally look at her face, his smile cold, emotionless. He handed her ID back to her. "Sorry for the delay, Mrs. Templar," he said with a sugary sweet voice, which didn't match his face. "If you go to the third elevator on your right, it'll take you directly to the fifty-first floor. Enjoy your stay."

She sneered at him rudely. "That's *Miss* Templar, thank you very much," she said with annoyance as she snatched her ID back and turned her back to the man.

The elevator door opened on the fifty-first floor to reveal a scene looking like any other large corporate vista, the numerous worker drone cubicles joined together in a system of mazes and corridors defying description, almost like an ant colony on a mega scale in its simplistic complexity. She could only imagine that the ants actually got more work done with less stress.

She was met by a short, older man with a lion's mane of gray hair, a high forehead, deep wrinkles speaking of long hours staring at a computer screen in his youth and a nose that seemed misplaced between his eyes as if he had found it in the trash. His eyes lit up when he saw her emerge from the elevator and he shook her hand in greeting far too feverishly.

She pulled her sunglasses off with practiced ease and looked at the man, afraid that he might never give her hand back now that he had a hold of it. Inside, she wanted to crack up laughing at his over-friendliness and obvious need for a social life with females. It was also apparent that reporters from the *New York Times* didn't make it to his department with much frequency and he was eager to make a good first impression with the hopes that perhaps more reporters who looked like Alexis would grace his floor with their presence. This poor man was about to make a fool out of himself in front of all his employees and he didn't even know it. He probably had the fat wife at home who ran his entire life for him right down to the underwear he had on and the times he was allowed to go to the bathroom at night.

"So very glad to meet you, Mrs. Templar," he drooled with a saccharine voice. He moved his hand

with subtle dexterity around her waist to guide her forward through the rat-maze of cubicles. "I hope that we can make this a pleasant visit for you."

"First of all, it's *Miss* Templar and secondly, you can start making this a pleasant visit by removing your sweaty hand from around my waist. This is a Sergio De Gruni and it doesn't take well to perspiration from old men."

He removed his hand at once and smiled that awkward, unnatural smile men affected when they realize that they were making fools of themselves but were not quite sure how. Alexis opened her purse, dropped her sunglasses in and then flipped her hair breathlessly as she scanned the floor and kept her eyes off of him.

"I really don't have much time for this, so if you'll just please direct me to where Mr...." She frowned, gave a sigh of disgust, then looked back into her purse to remove a small computer pad and stabbed at a few keys. "Dr. Alexander Hart worked and I'll start there."

His smile stayed plastered onto his face as if it had frozen there until the words she had spoken and their implications sank into his Cro-Magnum brain. His smile finally faded like a rainy sunset as it dawned on him that this woman didn't want to have anything to do with him ... and he had struck out once again. He had probably tried this same approach with every attractive female on this floor and Alexis would be surprised if any of them had fallen for it.

"Of course, of course. Yes ... I understand completely" he spilled out with red splotching his face and massive drops of sweat escaping from his shiny forehead. "It's this way." He walked away from

her with his head slightly bend down as if he didn't want anyone to see him at this particular moment. He left her alone after he showed her where Alex had once worked, her dismissal with a distracted wave of her hand like a mortal blow to his male ego.

There were four individuals who had easy access to the cubicle wherein Alex had worked. She would begin with them. She stepped up to the first cubicle and found a bird-like man with a hunched back and nervous movements speaking volumes into his computer interface at a speed that she was certain made only every fifth word register on the document he was writing. He nearly jumped off his chair when she spoke. He turned to stare right at her breasts, skipping the first look at her face that most civilized people try to accomplish.

When he finally did look up at her face, he had one of those stupid, happy grins attached making him look moronic to the extreme.

"You done?" she asked with hands on hips.

"Huh?" he queried in a squeaky little voice she had half-expected to come from his tiny mouth.

"If you've done undressing me mentally, I'd like to ask you a few questions," she clarified for him with an air of impatience and insolence.

His eyes widened at the accusation – and at the fact that he had been caught red-handed – and his cheeks turned bright red as he turned his face away from her and giggled like an adolescent.

She shook her head and sighed. How could she have possibly forgotten how difficult it was to deal with most people? It had been one of the primary reasons for her moving to such an isolated spot in Alaska. People today were morons, plain and simple. The

men had only sex on their minds, the women only fashion and neither sex had a clue what they looked like from the outside.

A mellifluous voice saved her from having to slap this immature geek around a little. "You'll have to excuse Clovis here. He doesn't get out much."

Clovis? Who the hell would torture their son by naming him Clovis? "I can see why," she commented as she turned to take in this new arrival to her growing party of morons.

Clovis' savior was a young, dark-haired woman in her late twenties with melting bedroom eyes shadowed by an over abundance of make-up and long, tentacle-like lashes looking completely out of place among the rat-maze. She was almost as tall as Alexis, buxom – her loose shirt revealing far more cleavage than Alexis thought prudent for an office environment, the black bra obvious through the translucent shirt – with tight slacks conforming to a not-very-skinny lower body, bulges abounding where the fat had been compressed to fit like undulating waves at the beach.

Alexis never understood those women who insisted on wearing clothes that didn't fit them, making them look far worse than if they had just wore a size larger and not attempted to look like a super-model on parade. It was a virus affecting society that she didn't miss one bit while living in her cabin these last fifteen years. If you wanted to look skinny, then watch what you ate. Wearing clothes two sizes too small was not the answer to any problem.

The woman stuck her hand out toward Alexis. "Hi. I'm Valerie. Valerie Yeats." She had one of those faces that always seemed happy and a smile that was

contagious if not permanent. "I heard that a reporter from the Times was coming here to interview a couple of us, but I didn't believe the rumors. People are always making up stories around here just to see how far they can spread them." Her voice rose and fell with the words like a song and Alexis half expected a giggle to come out of that large mouth at the end of every sentence.

Fortunately for Alexis, that didn't occur.

"This is Clovis Barks," she said in way of introduction as she pointed toward the bird-like man who was still giggling. "Funny name, huh?"

Alexis pulled her hand away from Valerie before the woman made it a permanent attachment.

"He's been here at this company a long time. Knows everyone. And everything. Came over originally from India in the first wave of corporate expansion of Surya Industries. He's one of those genius types that never gets the recognition he deserves because he's shy and not very aggressive, but once you get to know him he's an alright sort of guy. Very polite and gentlemanly, if you know what I mean." She patted Alexis on the forearm as if they had known each other for years.

Alexis was unsure if the woman had even taken a breath during that exposition and was waiting for her to fall over from lack of oxygen. But she nodded nonetheless as if all this superfluous information was of vital importance to her life. "I'm Katrina Templar. And yes, I'm from the Times, here to do a story on Dr. Alexander Hart and his untimely death. Did either of you know him at all? I was told that he used to work here in this cubicle." She was having trouble seeing a son of hers working like a bee drone at a job that was

senseless and getting him nowhere. What type of parents would allow him to waste his life like that?

She mentally chastised herself.

She needed to remember that he was not her son in the true sense of the word. Sure he was her biological off-spring but the connection stopped there and whatever it was that his real parents did or didn't do for him was no longer her concern, if it ever was and she needed to concentrate on what she was doing before she mis-spoke and blew her cover wide open. She was certain that there were cameras everywhere filming everything with men in dark glasses watching to make certain that she was whom she said she was. Clovis stopped giggling long enough to speak a few words. "Katrina's a pretty name, Mrs. Templar."

"It's Miss ... never mind," Alexis aborted as she gave this social misfit one of her rare, broad smiles and the poor man appeared to have a small coronary where he sat. "Did either of you know Dr. Hart?"

"Alex? Oh sure we knew him. He was a great guy. Real cute too, if you know what I mean," Valerie said with an over-exaggerated wink and another pat on the arm that was becoming very annoying. Alexis might have to break that arm off before the interview was over. "He was always so nice to everyone. It was really terrible what happened to him over there in Greece. He was so looking forward to that trip and then he drowns. Isn't that just the shits?"

"It was Egypt," Alexis clarified, though she was not sure why she even bothered.

Valerie gave her a quizzical look. "There's a difference?"

"I think he was murdered," Clovis blurted out like a sudden bark of a dog

Alexis looked at him with her with penetrating eyes, thankful for not having to answer Valerie's geography conundrum. She reached into her purse and pulled out her pocket computer, setting it for record. "Why would you say something like that, Clovis? Is it okay if I call you Clovis?"

"You can call me whatever you want, Mrs. Templar," he responded with another round of giggles and a fresh paint of red on his face.

"Good. Now, why would you say that Dr. Hart was murdered? That's a pretty strong accusation." She had to remind herself to stay in character. A reporter would jump all over his admission while Alexis herself wanted to drag him into a back room and drain his brain of everything he knew.

"Because he was always working in the restricted area at nights and right before he left on his trip to *Egypt*" – he looked over at Valerie as if amazed that she could find the bathroom with her great sense of geography – "he told me confidentially that he was onto something huge. I mean really big,"

Alexis wondered how many other people her son told the same thing. He didn't seem all that concerned with the confidentiality of this big project if he told this Clovis. Perhaps he was one of those people who were more concerned with letting people know that he had a secret than with actually keeping it a secret. But the words, which Clovis had just spoken, told her more than the hours she had spend poring over the data Cav had at his disposal. There was something here after all. "What restricted area?" she asked softly.

Valerie chimed in quickly, as if Clovis had perhaps let loose a company secret that might get them all fired ... or worse. "It's not really a *restricted* area. At least it wasn't for Alex. I mean, it is restricted in the sense of the word but Alex had access to it and so to him it really wasn't all that restricted, if it could be called restricted to him at all." Valerie seemed confused for a moment with her own words. Then she looked back at Alexis and smiled, as if suddenly remembering that she had been talking. "Alex was promoted to that area about seven months or so before his death. It's up on the seventieth floor. Well, actually, he worked here and there, so I guess it really wasn't all that much of a promotion." She looked around now to see if anyone else was listening, then continued as she leaned slightly forward and lowered her voice. "Since he had access, he went there a lot at night, during off hours, logging over-time I suppose." She leaned even closer and Clovis did the same to hear what was being said. "He used to work on his own projects ... You know, things that the company would frown on if they were discovered, things that they weren't paying him for."

Alexis nodded as if she understood perfectly. However, she found it extremely hard to believe that a company as security conscious as Surya Industries would allow an employee, any employee to use their equipment for personal projects. The truth about Alex was probably more along the lines of extra work to get a project running he had been assigned and which was proving far more difficult to finish than anticipated. If he truly had been promoted, she doubted that her son would be foolish enough to

jeopardize it by doing something against company policy right away.

Anyway, even if Alex was using the company computers for his own work, it would certainly be a reason for his dismissal but not his murder. No one was that competitive.

She felt his presence behind her long before she smelled his sick, cloying and over-powering cologne that should have never been sold to humans. She probed the mind and found that it was, not surprisingly, a male in his late forties, eyeing her ass and imagining it bumping before him as he had her bent over a sofa in the back office. She registered that his minuscule mind held very little besides his pornographic fantasy.

She turned to face him and he brought his eyes up slowly from his perusal of her ass, not in the least bit ashamed, it seemed, that he was undressing her in such a blatant fashion.

"Vell, vell ," he said in a little voice holding more connotations than a dictionary. "I didn't know that they made reporters who looked like thiz. Zamachetelny." His Russian accent was thick and obnoxious, almost as cloying as his cologne.

She appraised him a moment, smiling as if he actually had a chance of getting her into bed. "And I didn't know that they had assholes who could talk. Amazing what technology can do these days, isn't it?"

Clovis guffawed loudly and several heads peeked out of cubicles to see what the commotion was.

The Russian seemed completely non-pulsed by the comment, probably because he didn't understand it fully. "Feisty. I like that. Bez perevoda." He moved closer, a near impossibility as he was already

standing so close to her, his presence like a wet, woolen blanket.

Alexis backed up a step and gave him her best vicious stare. She had dealt with these men before and knew that they thrived on fear and at the moment, she feared that he meant to kiss her. Nausea coiled in her stomach. "Back off, big boy, before I have to hurt you."

Valerie stepped between them and took hold of the Russian's arm, pushing him away slightly in a subtle way that Alexis found impressive. She might not know the difference between Greece and Egypt, but she certainly knew her way around men. "This piece of male chauvinism is Vladimir Puskin. He knew Alex also, though Alex didn't really want to know him." She smiled up at him.

Vladimir looked down at Valerie appreciatively, his eyes taking in her open shirt vulgarly as he smiled at her and began to chew what Alexis took to be gum, his mouth working like a cow on steroids. "That be not fair, Val. Alex and me make big plans, go many places where women like to fuck." He pronounced the word as if his mouth were doing the deed right there and then, drawn out and grotesque in its imagery. "Women like reporter here, but not so cold, da?" His Russian accent had gotten stronger and made his speech almost comical. He hugged Valerie to him and managed to fondle a breast on the sly. "Perhaps cold reporter be willing to come tonight to club where women want to fuck, da? Ve have good time, you see."

Alexis could tell that he was undressing her again and his surface thoughts began to give her a headache, the disgusting images he was percolating

through that pea-sized bundle of nerve fibers coming close to making her physically ill. Where did they raise these people? "Nyet," she answered smoothly, switching into Russian with such ease that it took Vladimir off guard. "You are by far too small a man to please me."

His face fell a moment, then he squeezed Valerie to his side even tighter, perhaps trying to make up for his failure with a free fondle of Valerie's body. "You interest me, pretty woman," he dragged out with his smile not losing one decibel of clarity.

Alexis turned back toward Clovis, who was following all that was said with a wide grin of understanding, his eyes telling Alexis that he agreed with her assessment of Vladimir completely. "So you happen to know what Alex was working on in the restricted areas that was so confidential."

Clovis made to answer but Vladimir cut him off with such practiced ease that she could tell he made a habit of it. "The funny little man knows nothing. Alex was company man, worked hard for company. Nothing more." He had let go of Valerie and was standing with feet apart, staring at Alexis with such blatant sexual connotations that Alexis wished the man would just go away.

But she did notice that the tone of his voice changed slightly when he spoke of Alex and the restricted areas, a subtle change to be sure but a change that told her that he was hiding something he thought important. She reached out with her mind and found the floor manager who had greeted her at the elevator and planted within his mind the idea that he needed to see Vladimir immediately.

It was not but a few seconds before the floor manager's voice came over the intercom system, demanding that Vladimir come to his office forthwith. The Russian made to take her hand and kiss it but she reached into her purse as he leaned forward, taking away the opportunity. He bowed instead with his greasy smile dripping pheromones all over the carpet, then gave Valerie a peck on the cheek and squeeze of ass eliciting a tiny squeak from her and left the area. "I will be back to conversate, Miss Templar."

"Let's hope not," she whispered under her breath as he walked away.

Both Valerie and Clovis heard her and stifled laughs until he disappeared around the nearest corner.

"He can be too much sometimes," Valerie commented as she straightened her shirt a little, giving Alexis a half-smile that told her she also hated the man's presence. "But what are you going to do? He's part of the team and I have ... I mean we have to get along with him regardless how obnoxious he is."

"You could always kick him real hard in the balls. Maybe he'd get the message that way if no isn't enough for him," Alexis offered as she tried to clear her mind of Vladimir's presence.

Clovis laughed again, tears starting to come out of his eyes and snot out of his nose. "I like you. You're funny."

She gave the short man a half-smile and his whole face lit up. "I can't see how he doesn't fall in love with himself."

"I think he did that already and thus doesn't understand why the girls around here don't do the same thing," Valerie said with a glint in her eyes.

"Was Dr. Hart really working on something personal at night?" Alexis needed to get this conversation back on track before the higher up corporate types noticed her spending all this time down here and took umbrage.

Clovis and Valerie looked at her a moment as if hesitating at what to tell her, then Valerie indicated with a tip of her head to the ceiling. Alexis didn't have to look to understand the implications. The room was monitored and they had probably told her too much already. She wondered what it must be like to work for such a company that didn't even trust its own employees. "I understand. Is there somewhere more private where we could talk? Perhaps lunch? I'll pay."

Alexis was a little confused when Clovis went back to his computer and began to type away frantically, shoulders hunched and face absorbed in whatever it was before him. Valerie looked down at the floor as if pondering the question and not sure how to answer.

Then Alexis realized that there was yet another presence behind her, a presence that had snuck up on her while she was clearing her mind of Vladimir's filth. It was powerful, far more in control of its surface thoughts than the Russian had been. She turned to find a tall, dark-skinned man at the corner of the corridor dressed in an expensive suit and tie, face chiseled with one of those aristocratic airs speaking of a superiority which he didn't possess but which he tried to project to those around him forcefully. He had a blinding, bone-melting smile that seemed to be lit from within and a charm around him Alexis found quite disturbing. *Of course he's charming*, she thought to herself as he made his way toward her,

swaggering with supreme confidence in his virility. *He probably practices in front of his mirror.*

His voice was a husky rumble as he addressed her. "Miss Templar, I presume? Perhaps I can be of more help than these two. They should really be getting back to work now. They've wasted enough of your precious time, haven't they?" The words had barely left his mouth when Valerie disappeared around a wall and Clovis cowered down even more before his interface.

Alexis arched an eyebrow. "And you would be?" This man had an unquestioned and unchallengeable power here and it was as she had feared. She had spent too much time talking here in the office and those who considered themselves more important had taken notice. For all intents and purposes, her information gathering here at Surya Industries was at an end.

He stepped forward and offered his large hand, his eyes never once leaving hers. He didn't check out her body, didn't mentally undress her as most men did. This one was smooth and knew what he was doing. He had been sent to get her away from Valerie and Clovis and what they might inadvertently let slip. This one was more than confident in his power here and his ability with women to have to ogle her. He probably already knew what she looked like naked and found it boring.

She probed casually with her mind and found a strong, powerful image of a man who knew exactly what he wanted and how he was going to get it and she was not a part of that overall plan. At the moment, he wanted Alexis in his office and away from

those who might tell her something she had no need of knowing.

"Avery Spielman. Executive vice-president in charge of system analysis, at your service. We here at Surya Industries are always happy to cooperate with the press."

By cooperate, he probably meant showing her to the front door. She didn't bother to take his proffered hand or to acknowledge his title and position and she noticed a slight twitch in his blinding smile, but no other obvious sign marred his chiseled face and hawk-like eyes, the type to see everything at once. "I was doing just fine with the two employees I was talking to," she said with scorn. "I don't need to hear the company line from you. I was guaranteed free access to any employee I wanted to interview and this does not constitute free access to me."

"Let me take you up to my office and I'll be more than happy to answer any questions you might have about our operations here."

"And Dr. Hart? Will you answer my questions about him also?"

"Of course." He indicated for her to walk toward the elevators. "We have nothing to hide here."

Translation: we don't talk about Dr. Hart or anything he was working on, she thought to herself as she stood her ground, as any good reporter would, and looked at him with impatience and impudence. "What goes on in the restricted areas that Dr. Hart worked in?"

His dark eyes looked foreboding under his bald-head. He looked at her a moment without answering, as if trying to decide whether it was Clovis or Valerie who had opened their big mouths and thus which one

he should fire. "We have many restricted areas, Miss Templar. You'll need to be a little more specific with your questions. And even then, they *are* restricted areas and I'm not really sure how much I can tell you that you don't already know."

"Did Dr. Hart work in one of these many restricted areas?" She held her recorder up a little as if to indicate that she was recording all this and might want to be more forthcoming.

"Yes, he did. Please?" He indicated again with his arm for her to move toward the elevators. "Let's go up to my office where we can sit down and have a nice, civilized conversation."

"This corridor is just fine, thank you."

Clovis stood up with a start and ran down the corridor toward the restrooms, his face screwed up as if he were going to puke at any second and hoping that he made it to the toilet before then. He had probably never heard anyone talk to Mr. Avery Spielman like that before and didn't want to be around when the shit hit the fan.

"I'm afraid that I must insist, Miss Templar." There was now an undercurrent in his voice setting off alarms in Alexis' mind. She eyed him darkly a moment as she probed his mind a little deeper, not sensing any form of mental powers to counter her own. She did find that he was becoming rather disturbed at her stubbornness and arrogance toward him and was not used to people openly defying him like this, in view of all his little worker drones.

And there was also a note of panic within him, perhaps even of confusion as to why this reporter, at this time, was poking around for answers about a man who had died months ago. It made him inwardly

nervous. Of course, she found within his surface thoughts anything she might want to know about the restricted areas wherein Alex had worked. As with most humans, the simple act of expressing the existence of something caused the mind to bring involuntarily forward information on that subject for ready access in a subconscious summoning. There was nothing new or interesting there that caught her attention. It was all rather mundane. Whatever it was that her son was doing had nothing to do with the company, that was for certain.

"In that case," she said as she put her pocket computer back into her purse. "I guess I'd better go with you."

Avery's office was large. It was not as large as Cav's, but large enough to give the impression that it was an office of command, the modern art adorning the walls and pillars in the corners striking in their ugliness. The expansive, ceiling-tall windows overlooked downtown Boston with a commanding view, the myriad of hovercraft passing by on their way to somewhere unimportant like a busy hive of bees.

He indicated for her to sit down in one of the over-comfortable chairs as he moved to the bar. They always seemed to have a bar. Whether they drank or not, the high-rollers always needed to have that status symbol in their office as if it meant something to those who dreamt of being here one day. Avery, however, did appear to drink and poured himself a scotch on the rocks.

"My I offer you a drink, Miss Templar?"

"This isn't a social meeting, Mr. Spielman. Now about Dr. Hart and those restricted areas ...?" She didn't take the pre-offered seat, preferring to stand in

situations like this if the need to react quickly became necessary. She pulled her pocket computer back out and looked at him insolently.

He finished fixing his drink and put the bottle back to the clink of expensive glass, then walked back slowly and deliberately to his over-large desk where he stood, looking out the expansive window with his back to her. "I find it strange that a reporter for the *New York Times* would be so interested in a nobody like Dr. Hart, over two months after he dies of a tragic accident in Egypt on a non-company related vacation." Now he turned to look at her as he sat down, unbuttoning his jacket and placing his glass on the shiny desk, which was unusually empty of anything that even looked remotely business related.

In fact, she noted with amusement, the desk was practically empty.

"Perhaps you could enlighten me as to why that is. And you can put that computer away, my dear. This room is shielded and emits blocking signals that'll make any recording you make nothing but gibberish." His voice had the tone of quiet authority. This was no vice-president in charge of system analysis. This was the company's resident enforcer.

She looked at him from under her eyebrows for a moment, then put the computer back in her purse, a facetious smile playing across her lips. "I don't think it would go over too well with your bosses if they discovered that you hampered me in my investigation, or with the public for that matter if I print that one of the biggest companies in the world believes themselves above the inquiries of the free press."

"Is that a threat?" he asked as he lifted his glass to his lips and sipped.

"Not in the least bit. It's a simple statement of fact. Now, the question that I'm asking is a rather simple one: was Dr. Hart working in one of the restricted areas and did it have anything to do with his suspicious death?" She could care less anymore about the restricted areas or what this man had to tell her about them but she had to put up a good front before she left. There was something more here than Surya's insistent need to protect its patent rights or its industrial secrets.

"Because it certainly sounded like a threat to me and I for one don't like to be threatened by piss-ant reporters who think that they can just demand answers from anyone." He was now scrutinizing her with narrowed eyes. Then with a suddenness that almost made Alexis assume a defensive stance, he rose and buttoned his jacket. "This interview is over. Good day."

She was slightly shocked at the rather abrupt end to their conversation, though it was hardly unexpected. She raised an eyebrow as he walked to the door and opened it for her. He was apparently done talking and would say no more. She raised her chin up slightly and walked out, talking over her shoulder as she did so. "My editors will be in contact with your bosses about this rudeness, Mr. Spielman, you can count on that." She stopped at the threshold of the door. "You'll be hearing from us."

"Of that I have no doubt." He closed the door and it actually bumped her forward as it hit her rear with a thud of finality. She turned to look at the door, pretended to mess in her purse for something, smiling at the secretary as she did so. She checked to make certain that her little device for emptying the contents

of any computer had been turned on – it was. Blocking emitters her ass – then probed back into the closed room to find out what it was that Mr. Spielman would do now, whom he would call.

But there was nothing worthwhile for her catch.

He had, apparently, completely pushed her out of his mind and was now thinking of concepts and meetings he had on his schedule today. She found this a little disconcerting. He either was aware of her mental abilities and was waiting patiently until she left before reporting or he actually was that anal-retinal when it came to his job. Either way it made for a scary individual.

This was, apparently, not going to be easy.

A smile attached itself to her face as the elevator took her rapidly down to the ground floor. She stepped out into the bright light that was the street and placed her sunglasses over her eyes. She looked around and saw that there were not any bruisers waiting for her here, waiting to rough her up so that she got the message to not look any further into Alex Hart's death, at least not any who wanted to make themselves known.

Trees and grass had replaced the ugly main streets, which had marred most American cities over the past two centuries, the introduction of the hov and the abandonment of the internal combustion automobiles making such streets superfluous. Benches and street vendors now replaced the pollution belching cars and their petroleum dependence, making not only the air cleaner but the general feel of the city far more relaxed.

She took a deep breath, then looked back up at the building from which she had just exited as it rose like

a giant finger making a vulgar gesture to the heavens, its sail-boom construction making it look almost artistic. She frowned. Unless she could find more information in the computer files she had managed to copy from Clovis' and Spielman's interfaces, this had been a waste of time and it didn't bode well for her future interactions with those who had once known the deceased.

A hand touched her arm lightly and she turned briskly to see what it was, the distraction of the grass and trees and sunlight causing her to miss the person's approach. Clovis stood next to her, a light windbreaker with the hood up covering his head so that only she could see that it was he. He looked nervous, even frightened, his large intelligent eyes pleading at her like a lost puppy's.

"They all think that I don't know what goes on around here, that I'm out of touch with what others say and do," he said in hurried phrases, his eyes darting around like excited fish. "But I know what's up. Alex told me."

The valet brought her Mercedes around as Clovis finished talking and she indicated for him to get in as she moved over to the driver's side and sped away.

"I need to be back soon else they'll notice that I'm no longer in the bathroom and come looking for me. They have a very strict rule about breaks and accountability during working hours," he informed her as he keenly inspected the interior of the Mercedes, speaking with repressed emotions.

She figured that they already knew that he had left the building but figured that telling him that would only make him more nervous and perhaps shut him up entirely. "How long do we have before they notice?"

"I'd say about fifteen minutes. I bypassed the main cameras in the stairwell and went out the back service entrance carrying a box like I was a loader. Nice hov. Is this the newer version or last year's?"

She raised an eyebrow slightly. This Clovis was more on the ball than she gave him credit. "Why do you think that Dr. Hart was murdered?"

He didn't seem to care that she had ignored his question about the hov, or perhaps he was so used to it that it no longer affected him. "Alex used to confide in me. I think he took pity on me because people like Vladimir always picked on me and made working here a living nightmare sometimes. You know, the guy who doesn't fit in, who the girls are always laughing about behind his back." A tight smile crossed her lips. "Anyway, Alex was a real good guy. Classy, not like Vladimir described at all. He used to tell me how he would get out of going to the strip bars and sexual entertainment districts with the oaf and we'd get a chuckle out of it. We used to talk about baseball and stuff. Even went to a few games. The Sox are doing pretty good this year. May even win the pennant for the first time since '04."

She parked the Mercedes in the middle of a park under a stand of old elms several kilometers away from Surya Industries and turned to look at him. The last thing she needed was to hear this person's life story. "Alex, Clovis. What was he working on that no one wants to talk about?"

"I know about Kido," he said almost apologetically, looking down at his hands and then back up at her face and smiling halfheartedly.

"What about her?"

"She and Alex had an idea, an idea that came from that Dr. Godonov on *Galileo Prime*. He wouldn't tell me what it was but he said that it was big. I mean, really big, like world changing big."

"Did it have anything to do with the restricted areas?"

He shrugged. "Not really. I mean, I don't think so. I don't see how he could use them for anything but research for Surya. They aren't like normal computers. Not these. And anyway, there isn't too much special that goes on at this branch office, so they don't have the real good machines here."

"How do you know that nothing special goes on here?"

He looked at her, his wide, beaming smile indicating the pride he felt in the knowledge he was about to impart. "I broke into the security system a few days after I was assigned to this office. I know all the projects that're currently being worked on here. And let me tell you, there isn't anything special here."

She looked at him with a higher level of respect. She knew from experience that what he was relating to her was not the easiest thing to do. Breaking in was simply enough. It was the part about not getting caught that was the catchall. Almost any third-rate hack could break into such a system. It was only the extremely talented ones who managed to escape detection, especially for as long as Clovis had been doing it. "So then what was Dr. Hart doing in the restricted areas at night? I find it hard to believe that he had that much extra work to do."

A dog barking close by made him jump, looking out the tinted windows for the man he was certain would bring his life to an end. It took several minutes before

he was calmed down enough to continue, wiping sweat from his brow and looking at her with a smile of guilty obsession. "Sorry."

"I understand. You're playing with fire breaking into Surya's secure areas like that."

He shrugged again. "It's not that bad, really. They think they've got such a good system that they don't even bother to look for certain anomalies."

"And you're the anomaly?"

His face lost a little of the paleness it had acquired and he looked down at his hands again shyly. "He was using one of the larger machines to run simulations. Strictly off disc, or downloaded from an exterior source with a secure web-clip attached to prevent back-logging. He was good, I'll give him that much. Almost as good as I am. He never left a trace, even one that I could find and that's damn good." His face lit up as his eyes moved off her and stared blankly out the hov window. He laughed slightly, then looked back at her. "He even had a program to erase the master bus that logs all the e-mails coming and going from Surya so that there was never a trace of any of the communications between him and Kido and Godonov." He paused a moment as if reflecting back on a joyous memory. "And there was another person, though they used an alias and a series of multiple line-links so that no one could ever trace the line back to them. That was something else."

Now she was getting somewhere. Clovis had given her the link between Alex, Kido and Godonov and most likely one of the others. Now if she could just figure out what they were working on that would cause them to all be killed. "Simulations of what, Clovis?"

"That I really don't know. He never told me and I could never find any trace of the programs after he ran them." He looked at her again with those intense, intelligent eyes. "I have something for you." He reached down the front of his pants and for a bad moment, Alexis thought that he was going to expose himself and ask for some kind of sexual favor for the information he had given her.

If this had all been a charade to satisfy the man's erotic lust, she was going to have to hurt him badly. She turned her head away from him and acted as disgusted as her character would, putting a hand over her eyes as if to shield them from nature's own creation. She probed his mind and found that sexual thoughts were the furthest thing from Clovis' mind, found, in fact, that the man was simultaneously working out several work-related problems while also holding this discussion with her. She was impressed yet again.

When he saw that she had turned her head away from him, he turned a bright crimson, looking down at his pulled-forward pants, the black, crinkly pubic hairs looking out hesitantly and realizing what he had just done. He finished pulling the disc out of his underwear. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think about that, it's just that ... er ... well, it's easiest to hide such things there because there aren't too many security guards willing to pat down a guy there, if you know what I mean. Really, Mrs. Templar, I didn't mean anything by it. Honest."

She turned back to look at him, at the disc he held tentatively in his hand and thought about where it had recently been and if she really wanted to touch it.

He noticed and wiped the disc thoroughly on his shirt, then offered it to her again. " Alex gave this to me before he left on his trip to Egypt. It's his journal and other related items. He told me that if anything should happen to him, I was to give it to someone who would know what to do with it ... and ...er.... um ...I think that's you, Mrs. Templar."

She took it, inwardly ecstatic that she finally had a hold of someone's journal, a record of what they had been working on and perhaps the clue that would break this conundrum wide open. "Do you know where the simulations might be?" It was a long shot but worth asking.

"No. He never told me where they were or even about them. I figured that out on my own. Here." He pushed it toward her again. She took the CD and put it into her purse quickly in case he changed his mind.

"But if it helps, Kido was also working on the same simulations, so it's possible that she might have a copy somewhere."

She patted his hand tenderly and he blushed. "Thank you, Clovis. I'll take good care of this and make sure that the public finds out about what a good person Alex was." She turned the ignition and lifted up off the ground, merging back into the traffic lanes above. "Why are you doing this? I mean, besides the fact that Alex asked you to do this. You're risking a lot doing this."

He shrugged again as she watched the landscape flash by outside. "I think Surya Industries had something to do with Alex's death. It was no accident. He was a good swimmer and had a life-vest on." He looked over at her. "I want the people who did this to

pay and I think that there are clues in that journal that'll help you find them."

She nodded her head. This Clovis was a rare one indeed in these times of selfishness and uncaring. For him to put his life on the line for a man who wasn't even his friend spoke a lot about Clovis' character ... and Alex's.

"Could you please set me down a little bit away from the main entrance. I need to try to sneak back in with the workers in the back. I don't want anyone to know that I was talking to you," he said with a little more confidence than he had displayed before.

I think it's a little too late for that Clovis, she thought to herself as she set the Mercedes down a good half-kilometer from Surya Industries. She had the particular feeling that this man's life was about to be over. Companies like Surya rarely liked to have their employees running around talking to reporters, much less breaking into their secure files.

Clovis opened the door, then closed it again and looked at her. "Thank you for believing me and not treating me like I have the plague or something."

"You take care of yourself, Clovis. I'll check back in a week or so and let you know if I've found anything."

He opened the door again and climbed out. "I don't think that would be a good idea. I'll just look for it in the paper."

Alexis leaned over as he started to close the door and blocked it from closing. "Did you read any of this, Clovis?"

He pulled his hood back over his head to obscure his face. "No, but I'm pretty sure I know what's on it. At least I think I do."

"Do yourself a favor, Clovis, and forget that you ever saw this CD, or me. You never saw it and Alex never gave it to you. Okay? It's for your own protection. When this story breaks, the company big-wigs are going to come down hard on everyone in Alex's old department and it'd be better if they had no reason to suspect you."

He smiled again, then turned and walked away, melting back into the crowd on the walkways, which wound their way like a living river toward Surya Industries, becoming yet another faceless drone in the ocean that was corporate America. She watched him a moment, then pulled the CD back out of her purse and looked at it.

She was not going to get excited over the contents until she had a chance to look at them critically, but she was certain of one thing now: Japan was going to be her next stop.

*Wisdom for a man's self is the wisdom of rats,
that will be sure to leave a house somewhat before it
falls.*

Francis Bacon

10

10 August 2085

1203 hrs

She sat in front of the small, corner deli, half of a large pastrami and rye with extra mustard sitting on her plate, the pickle already eaten, the diet drink fizzling in the cup as the afternoon sun passed the zenith, heating up the slight breeze barely moving the awning over her head. She was watching the people as they walked passed along the avenue or lounged on the grassy lanes, eating, playing, sun-bathing, sleeping on their lunch breaks like they did every day, their lives a routine of repeated acts making time pass by in their cursory lives from one season to the next in a pageant of somber and joyous procession.

She had once enjoyed people-watching, seeing what people did, how they acted, what they wore that made them think they were special or sexy or comfortable while all the time simply conforming to trends set into place by large corporate bosses sitting in board rooms and deciding what the next fashion statement should be.

But now it was more of a torture to watch these people parade around as if nothing in the world was amiss, as if their lives were not touched by the actions of some spoiled dictator halfway around the world.

They were all delusional.

And she hated them for it.

She hated the new laws against immigration and the new laws concerning the new laws and all those people who spend billions to get elected so that they could ignore the people who voted for them in the first place. And she hated the new age-prolonging techniques and the subsequent laws and problems that can of worms produced. With the advent of the newer age-prolonging medicines and genetic treatments, most people now lived to the ripe old age of one-hundred-twenty to one-hundred-thirty, one of the better improvements of the human condition over the past thousand years or so.

But it had also created problems, as any improvements in the quality of life were wont to do. With people living longer, it soon became apparent to most every one that the birth rate would have to slow if not reverse itself before the planet was completely over-crowded.

The O'Neill Colonies relieved the strain somewhat, as did the advent of the Mars Colony, but with only a maximum capacity of 20,000 souls for the Colonies

and a mean time of ten years for the construction of each O'Neill Colony, as well as the exorbitant cost of sending colonists to *Galileo Prime* on Mars, the immediate solution was not forthcoming. It had caused, in fact, at least one American President from being re-elected and a few other leaders getting assassinated.

As such, the major industrial countries had instituted strict birth controls among their population over fifty years ago and had made the large family a relic of the past. Each family was now only allowed to have two children, after which both parents were sterilized to insure that no more children were born from that pair. Needless to say, these laws had caused a virtual riot among most populations and Alexis remembered the early wars that had broken out in many countries over the complete control that the governments were attempting to place on such a fundamental human function as reproduction.

But the process had eventually taken hold and was beginning to see the first real positive results. Populations in those countries that had successfully established these laws were beginning to stabilize and the cries of outrage were beginning to become topics for the history videos. Of course, the countries that deemed themselves above such demeaning laws were creating problems of their own and would have to be dealt with sooner or later, the sanctions being leveled against them by those countries who had accepted the new laws slowly but surely having the desired affect.

Alexis was always fascinated by how easily certain countries could control others when the correct leverage was applied, especially when that leverage

involved clandestine military operations and illegal assassinations, a subject she knew of from first hand experience.

Longer life spans, however, also had the unintended effect that the retirement laws as well as the entire concept of old age had to be redefined. That had created a whole new set of problems. The revolution in age-control had only come about a little over forty years ago and the population was just now starting to see the inherent problems it caused. With people staying in their jobs far into their nineties and now even a few into their hundreds with no impairments or mental degradation, the job market was beginning to react. Many people had already foreseen that this would eventually cause large unemployment problems among the younger generations as the jobs that generally opened up due to retirement or death would now remain filled for another forty to fifty years.

It was a headache most politicians made grand speeches concerning but which they never actually made any plans to correct. It made her sick. People were not meant to live forever. They were enough of a headache to the others when they lived to be ninety. Now they were just a nuisance. And here she was in the midst of them, stuck like some stranded alien in a society she detested, wondering when some nutcase was going to nuke the whole lot of them back to the stone-age and a far better way of life.

Finishing off the last half of her juicy, greasy pastrami sandwich that melted in her mouth like any good pastrami sandwich was supposed to, she wiped her hands clean and placed the visual interface before her right eye again, hooking it over her ear.

The device was basically a miniaturized version of a heads up display the military had been using since the late twentieth century, attached to the computer in her purse via hard wire, thus severely limiting the possibility of anyone picking up the transmission and tapping into her database. It gave her the illusion of a full screen, which she could manipulate with vocal commands. It had all the features of a regular computer system without all the encumbrances. She leaned back and brought the files on the CD back up to take another look at them as the sun warmed the air around her in a typical Boston humid swelter, the slack breeze providing little succor.

The CD had been, essentially, a journal of Alex's work over the past year, including brief yet telling snaps of his personal life, which told her more about her deceased son than the contents of the technical aspects of the journal ever could. She had learned, for instance, that her son had a girlfriend, a little fact that the intelligence corps working for Cav had either managed to leave out of the report or not been able to discover.

It was this girlfriend who was now holding Alexis' attention, the more she read, the fuller a picture she was developing; and it was not a picture she wanted to see. It was not all that informative in some aspects, but it did give her new clues and a glimpse of a life that her son wanted hidden and within that, she had learned over her many years working, were more clues than anything else she might come across.

Secret women always provided tantalizing clues.

Her name had been Marie. No last name had ever been given and she had appeared in his life shortly after he had been assigned to the restricted areas at

Surya Industries. That simple fact raised a flag in Alexis' mind immediately and she had assumed at first that Surya Industries had attached this woman to her son to make certain that he was not abusing his privileges, becoming cozy with him at night and hopefully learning of his improprieties with the company equipment.

The relationship had started slowly but then had, in a matter of weeks, escalated into a full-fledged passionate romance with many hours of sexual activity that her son had succinctly placed in the journal with a few well-placed words such as, *she was unbelievable again. I've never had that many orgasms in one session in my life and she has the energy to go all night long if I let her.*

A small voice in the back of Alexis' mind had continued to complain that she should feel embarrassed at reading these very personal entrees of her son's, but she didn't have time for such trivial, emotional responses. She should have probably been disturbed by the lack of emotion but it was a problem for later, when she was done with this mess of Cav's. Then, and only then, could she perhaps sort out the messes that were her own emotions and figure out what had happened to them over the years.

Marie had, interestingly enough, gone with Alex on the trip to Egypt and then disappeared right after he drowned and she had not been heard of since. It was possible that the woman was so thunderstruck by the sudden loss of her lover that she had gone insane with grief and was wandering some back alley in Tangiers, but Alexis somehow found that solution hard to believe.

Upon running a web-wide check for her, Alexis had not been surprised to find that the woman didn't exist. Neither her image nor her name nor her family existed in any of the data-bases accessible, which meant that she was a deep-deep undercover agent for an organization like Cav's, for it was only those types of people who never seemed to ever show up on any data-bases. Alexis was certain that her own name and image had been completely removed after she had retired, if not earlier. All that ever appeared were fake aliases, cover names, images used to convince others that she existed as someone else and that was what this Marie had going.

There was no longer anything in the databases because the databases had been swept clean of her presence, to make it appear that she had never existed in the first place. It stunk of undercover and it stunk of government involvement but it didn't stink of Surya Industries and that threw an entire new player into the mix, for if it was not Surya who was keeping tabs on her son, then who the hell was it? And why? Why keep track of such a low level employee when it was obvious to anyone paying attention that Clovis had far more to offer than Alex ever did.

Were they connected to the people who had broken into her cabin? Most likely. And it even confirmed Alexis' earlier epiphany that they had not been there for her but for something she had in her possession.

They had wanted the other names.

The remainder of the CD contained notes, techniques, trouble-shooting solutions and problems, as well as a vast amount of e-mail correspondence between Alex, Kido, Godonov, and to Alexis' mild surprise, Dumvo on the O'Neill Colony. That had

been the other party to which Clovis had referred and it brought many pieces together. This was the first real, tangible link between Dumvo and the others. They had apparently communicated for almost a year without a trace of the e-mails anywhere. It was, she had to admit, a brilliant system.

A feeling of pride swelled for a brief moment in her chest, only to be immediately snuffed out as she took a sip of her now warm soda. Alex had been aware of both Kido's and Dumvo's deaths and that would explain why Alex gave the CD to Clovis. Her son had been smart enough to realize that there was someone after them, that the deaths could not be mere coincidences and this had been his safety net just in case.

Unfortunately for Dr. Alex Hart, he had not realized that the people with whom he was involved, who had killed the others, had planned all this very, very thoroughly and had not taken into account that Alex would give anything of value to another. Or they just didn't care whether he did or not. Perhaps they didn't think that the project he had been working on could be resurrected by anyone with the main contributors out of the picture.

They were probably correct.

The plethora of e-mails between the parties, unfortunately, were rather cryptic and short, written in a type of code that, it could be assumed, only the four of them knew. With all of them dead, the secret most likely died with them, for such codes, without any basis for what the communiqués had been about, was impossible to crack. The e-mails also explained how Kido and Alex had known to meet at that conference and it was there that they had discussed in more

detail, away from prying eyes and ears, their secret project. It also meant that there was nothing she could glean from the e-mails.

On the bright side, most of the technical schematics and entries dealt with a new type of expandable and flexible memory system using a type of holography to store the data arrangement, a system Alexis didn't even pretend to understand. It was, apparently, what her son had been working on at night with his simulations. He had been using the large capacity of the machines to run his holography memory and find the bugs that always hide within the code.

Other than that, there was really not much to help her, though it was certainly more than she had before she ran into Clovis. And it was a place to start, which was what she had been hoping to find.

She saw them as she was finishing her drink, strolling along the lane, his head down deep in concentration, hands in his pockets, Valerie beside him jabbering away. She had obviously managed to get Clovis away from his computer interface long enough to have lunch with her and it seemed that the man was not enjoying his time in the fresh air.

Alexis was rather pleased when she noticed that they were headed for the deli on whose patio she was sitting. Now she could speak to them, without the prying eyes of the company watching and with the new information from the CD. Perhaps she could get a little more meat onto the bones of the facts she had so far discovered. Clovis was certain to know about holographic memory and its applications. She quickly put her interface away and made ready to act surprised to see them when she first felt it. It was that

same feeling of wrongness she had felt that night in cabin and she immediately came alert.

They were here.

She probed with her mind into the surrounding area and found them standing off on the other side of the lane that had once been a street, their shadowy existence blurring into the landscape around them. She opened her eyes and was not surprised to see that she could not see them with her naked eyes. The waves of wrongness were flowing from them like sound waves, almost visible when she concentrated on them and saw them again with her mind's eye. It was as if the very air around them was rebelling against their presence, the dimensions around them buzzing like static electricity, sizzling in its intensity, potent in its juxtaposition. If only she could figure out why they had such a feeling of wrongness, as if they didn't belong, perhaps then she could understand more about from where they came but she didn't even understand the feeling of wrongness.

Both of them were intently watching, under their black sunglasses, Valerie and Clovis saunter down the breezeway. Alexis sensed weapons. She sensed violence in their stance, in their thoughts and quickly figured out that these two assassins intended to liquidate Valerie and Clovis, the last link to Alex and his idea, whatever it might be.

Valerie and Clovis moved closer to the deli, her shrill voice now reaching Alexis as she babbled on about things to which Clovis seemed impervious. The two assassins moved forward also, as if timing the attack precisely to coincide with the pairs' arrival at the deli. Alexis reached into her bag and placed her hand around the grip of the gun, though she had the

odd feeling that as before, her weapon would be useless against them. She was also aware that she could not just whip it out and challenge the two assassins whom, she was certain, only she could see.

That would certainly blow her cover both to Valerie and Clovis and to whomever might be watching her from Surya or from wherever. Besides, brandishing her weapon when there appeared to be no threat to the people sitting around her would certainly produce the wrong reaction. She was lucky in one respect, however. The assassins appeared to be concentrating so hard on the targets that they had not yet noticed her sitting here, for she was certain that they came from the same bosses who had sent the team to her cabin. Why should they be expecting her here anyway? It was not as if she ever ate here before.

She would have to do this some other way, some way that would not reveal her presence, that would not indicate in any way that she had done anything or taken part.

Then Valerie recognized Alexis and waved, making Clovis look up to see what could have possibly happened to make Valerie stop talking. There must have been something that tipped him off because he stopped in mid-stride and stared right at the two assassins as if he could see them.

They pulled out two large shotgun-looking weapons from under their long coats and cocked them in that recognizable sound actually echoing among the trees in an odd, almost surrealistic, undulating sound, causing a flock of birds to rise up into the air, their loud and squawky protests covering for a moment the sounds of life in the park. Time slowed to that frame-

by-frame lethargy that always seemed to accompany such events, as if the very time-space corridor around the deli had been slowed to allow full recognition of the imminent death of so many innocents.

Alexis had a moment of confusion as she tried to figure out how these two were going to hurt anyone when only she could see them. Were they actually corporeal? Did they even exist at all or was she somehow imagining all this?

She didn't have much time to clarify her confusion.

The assassins began to fire into the crowd of customers. People and blood began to fly freely as the projectiles found their random marks and laid customers and by-standers to the floor in grotesque caricatures of death. The large window to the deli shattered with the impact of thousands of little pellets and blood splattered across the stone floor of the patio as a head exploded from the impact of what Alexis surmised were depleted uranium explosive rounds.

These assassins had come here to make certain that they finish their assignment this time. Their weaponry was state of the art and deadly. They continued to move forward as they pumped round after round into the storefront and the customers who ran and fell and sprawled and prayed and died in the killing zone that the deli had become. With no obvious cause for the deadly carnage, the people in the area had resorted to panic and rather than falling to the ground and remaining motionless, where the projectiles would have cleanly missed them, they ran around without direction, running generally right into the field of fire and ending up splattered over the grass or concrete in crimson stains.

Alexis had learned a long time ago that panic was a far more potent killer than bullets. It was fine to be afraid. Fright produced the required adrenaline and endorphins the body needed to react properly, but panic seized the heart and the mind and in the end killed more people who didn't need to die than fright ever did. With that in mind, as well as the fact that she had been in worse fire-fights than this, she stayed seated, aware that the spread of the projectiles was slightly above her and off to the side where Valerie and Clovis had been standing. She waited calmly until the first assassin cleared the ornamental railing separating the patio section from the rest of the walkway.

She saw then that one of the assassins had noticed her nonchalant attitude and as he neared her position, turned the barrel of his weapon toward the ravishing red-head who sat rooted to her chair, lazily sipping on her now empty drink as the carnage rained down around her.

Their eyes met suddenly like an electric spark and he realized with a visible start that she could see him. There was a sudden recognition. She could tell from his reaction that he thought a mistake had been made, that she was not supposed to be here and that he had just reached the end of his life.

Alexis gave him an inexorable, scornful smile and squeezed the trigger of her own weapon. It discharged through the end of her purse and laid the assassin down heavily onto the grass, his weapon flying free and landing several meters away with a muffled thud, the actuator clearly audible as it cooled down with the loss of the pressure on the safety stock. There was a sudden discard from the

assassin, an electric spark flaring a brief moment, covering the man in what appeared to be an envelope of fire and sparks for a handful of seconds. His body twitched and jerked with the intense energy that engulfed him.

Then he became visible to the gasp of those laying or standing around him, his lifeless body laying there with eyes wide open staring at the cloud-less sky above. People ran from the body or stood stock-still looking on as if this were something really interesting.

Alexis raised an eyebrow, then looked down at her weapon. That should not have happened. Her weapon was not a stun gun and had no energy except for the momentum of the projectile. And she certainly didn't remember Cav every saying anything about the ability to turn invisible men visible. Besides, if she couldn't see them then how in the world was her weapon able to hurt them? *What the hell was going on here?*

She turned her attention to the other assassin, who, in his desire to create as much havoc as possible, had not noticed the demise of his companion. She waited a moment until he cleared one of the table umbrellas, coming toward her direction with the obvious intent of killing yet more people to cover up the real target of the assassination. His eyes fell on her as she looked dead at him and fired. The impact sent him careening into the last intact window of the deli, his weapon firing uselessly into the air. He was dead before he landed, the same reaction occurring to his body as a stench of cloudy effusion rose from his now visible body.

Alexis became aware of the screams around her and frowned. People could be so annoying. It had

taken all of perhaps ten seconds from start to finish and the horrendous cacophony that had accompanied the carnage was now replaced with the sobs for the dead and dying, the scared and confused, and most importantly the urgent wails of the heavily armored police hovs speeding toward the scene. Alexis was well aware that she needed to be gone before the police arrived and starting asking questions. She was certain that no one had noticed her part in the shoot-out. She stood up amidst the shattered glass and blood and deli meats strewn about only to find Valerie kneeling over a prone and lifeless body, the large, bloody hole in its chest more than enough prove that Clovis had been killed.

She found herself looking at his face as she hurriedly walked passed, his eyes staring up with a startled look of what she took to be curiosity, Valerie's sobbing like a morose dirge for a man she probably didn't even like. Within moments she was inside her Mercedes, speeding away from the scene as the police arrived to sort out the mess. She punched in one of her many of her personal communication codes into the rental car's comm system and composed a simple message. Cav would be reading it within the hour.

No luck on the Christmas shopping, but I did find some interesting items for your birthday. By the way, if you're ever here in Boston, you should visit the Metro Art Museum and take a look at the new exhibit by Berronitti. It's really quite fascinating. It opens at 0900. Love always.

ETERNITY'S HANDMAIDEN

*It is to him who masters our minds by force of truth;
and not to those who enslave them by violence;
that we owe our reverence*
— Voltaire

11

**11 August 2085
0903 hrs**

She sat on the cool marble bench staring at the rather obscure painting on the wall, its vivid colors and oblique lines supposedly representing something profound. She didn't really see it. To her it didn't exist but was rather just an object in the general direction in which she looking, deep in thought as she waited for her initial contact. She spent a sleepless night in the hotel room. It was not like her have insomnia and it frustrated her. So rather than be bored staring at the walls or watching what they tried to call news on the television, she had spent much of the night changing her looks. She now had raven-black hair falling to her shoulders in waves of undulating curls, fanning out around her face, punctuated now with indistinct gray

eyes, pale lipstick accentuating her compressed smile, and large sunglasses, which she kept on even in the dimness of the museum.

Her breasts had grown also, the insertion of pads making her several sizes larger than nature had made her. She wore a pair of loose slacks and blouse and looked like any other patron at the art center. The change had not taken nearly as much time as she would have liked, her proficiency at altering her appearance far greater than she remembered.

That left her with but a few options and so she had spent the rest of the evening going over and over her son's journal for anything that she might have missed. Finding nothing there, she had hacked into the Internet and learning all she could about holography and its applications to computer memory. It had not been a very fruitful search.

Several attempts at a working holographic memory system had been tried at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one in order to create virtual memory systems, but nothing had come of it. The systems, hardware, and complexity of code required were so enormous that the projects usually stalled after only a few mediocre starts. Her son, apparently, had found a way around all that, or so she gathered from the journal. Whether or not he had succeeded in generating a working model she could not tell. Her son was rather vague in his conclusions and whether he had been that way on purpose or was just sloppy with his lab work, she could not tell either.

She knew that there was something here, screaming at her from the pages of his journal and she was deaf to it and it made her angry as well as happy. There was an enjoyment to the hunt that

made her feel alive, gave her a tingling in the back of her mind not unlike sex.

Unfortunately, she had also found that whenever she closed her eyes, the image of Clovis' serene face staring up into the deep blue sky with those exanimate eyes, haunted her. She had never, in all the years she had been an active agent, had this problem. Never had she seen the faces of those innocents killed around her, due to her, by her. Never.

And yet, this one face continued to haunt her for reasons she could not fathom in the least. It was perplexing. It was annoying.

It made her wonder what was so special about this one individual that made her mind grab onto his image so strongly and throw it back at her conscious mind over and over again. Did it have a meaning associated to it? Was there something there that she had missed, something about the man that her subconscious had picked up on and was trying in its own way to tell her? She didn't know and that made her very annoyed.

The idea that perhaps she had developed a conscience along the way had been briefly brought forward and just as quickly dismissed as ludicrous. A conscience in her line of work was a liability, a threat to her well being that she needed to erase immediately.

She had not even known the man for all of ten minutes, so why in the world would she all of a sudden feel guilty about his death. And yet, here he was in her dreams, haunting her sleep with his dead face, speaking to her in a language that she didn't, or perhaps couldn't understand and causing her no end

of torment and frustration that, before this night, she had never experienced.

And now it was the next morning and here she was sitting, waiting and still his face came to her, his open chest with the blood and the splintered bones and the gore splattered over the bright sidewalk like one of the odd paintings staring back at her from the wall and speaking volumes she also didn't understand. She would have to shake this apparition from her mind and get on with the job at hand, because this mission was starting to boil over right before her eyes and she had the odd feeling that Clovis was not going to be the last person burnt.

There were several people already in the museum at this early hour, but none of them seemed to have made it over to the exhibit where she sat, or perhaps found other paintings more interesting than the jumble of colors she stared at.

Around nine-thirty, however, one lone woman did slowly wander over to the bench where Alexis sat. She was short but pert, attractive in that cute sort of way that make men look, but not too intently. She sat on the bench to rest, looked over at Alexis and flashed her a tight, friendly smile, then focused back up at the painting.

"I never understand these paintings," she said in her lilting soprano, the French accent weak but noticeable. "I don't see anything artistic about them."

Alexis focused her eyes on the painting as if interested. "I agree. And the money they get for them is obscene."

The lady continued to stare at the painting for a few minutes, then made a move to stand. "Do you know how much it would cost to take a taxi to the nearest

airport remote terminal? I'm trying to decide whether it's cheaper to take the bus."

"I don't know," Alexis answered. "I use the credit system for mass transportation so I don't really pay much attention to the fares."

"Thanks anyway." She stood and walked slowly away, placing the disc-based automatic museum guide in her ear and continuing with the self-guided tour.

Alexis waited a few more minutes, then stood and left the museum. She hailed a taxi and a hov came down immediately to the steps. She got in and it took off into the air lanes in a rush. She leaned back on the rather hard seat and smirked at the general dilapidated condition of the passenger area. "You could have at least requisitioned one that was a little nicer," she said to the driver.

Cav looked up into the mirror at her. "I didn't exactly have much time." He was silent for a few moments while he negotiated the traffic, making for the express lanes that were higher up. "I saw on the news last night that the Army for the Liberation of Humans from Machines attacked a deli in the downtown district. They killed quite a few people before they themselves were gunned down by the police. Messy affair." He looked up in to the mirror again at her face staring back at him, her lips compressed. He saw that she had not slept last night, saw a strain in her eyes letting him know that she was in her element. "It looked a little like your handy work."

"They weren't after me," she said quietly, the image replaying in her mind, trying to find the exact moment Clovis had been hit and suddenly realizing for the first

time that neither of the two assassins whom she had liquidated ever had the chance to blast Clovis in the chest. He had received a full charge and neither of the assassins ever got that close.

She leaned back. "Son of a bitch. I'm missing too much. Shit."

"Oh? Like what? Seems to me that you did a pretty good job of it. What did you miss?"

"There was another one, another assassin who must have been off at a distance," she said with an irritation at her lack of scrutiny of the attack. "He's the one who blasted Clovis, which was the entire point of the attack. The other two were just diversion. And since I never saw him, he must have seen me and how I killed his two companions. Damn-it all to hell!" She slammed her fist into the seat cushion and was a little surprised to see stuffing come flying out.

"You were kind of busy to have noticed something like that, Alexis," he responded in an attempt placate her despite the fact that he knew that she was right. She should have sensed the third assassin, if a third assassin even existed. She was damn lucky that the third one had not seen fit to finish her off. And that brought up a problem all of its own. Why had he not finished her off? What game were these assassins playing? If they were from the same place as those in the cabin, why would they not attempt to finish off Alexis at this perfect opportunity? "So they weren't after you, then? That's interesting," he mused for something to say as he settled into the express lane and caught up to the traffic that zoomed along.

"No, they weren't. They didn't realize I was there until I hit the first one. You'll need to get those bodies from the police before they disappear like the others

and it hits the press. They were the same as the ones that attacked me at the cabin. I'm positive of it."

"Way ahead of you, Locke. And you're right, they are the same. By the way, what the hell did you hit them with? You fried them something good. Is it a weapon you got from me, cause I need one of those for myself."

"That's another thing." She leaned forward, putting her arms on the divider between the passenger and the driver. She threw her Glock onto the seat next to him. "I used that. Regulation ten millimeter. I don't have a clue what the hell happened. They reacted like they had some type of shield on and getting hit disrupted it or short-circuited it or something. It was the strangest thing I've seen in a long time." She leaned back again, looking out the window at the skyline passing by rapidly.

He reached over and picked up the gun, looked at it as he negotiated his way through traffic, then placed it under his own seat. "I'll have the boys look at it. There's another one in the side compartment back there. So what were they after this Clovis guy for? Do you think that he was the next on the list? This attack doesn't seem like it fits in with the others. Far too violent and public."

She reached into her shirt and pulled the CD out of her bra. "This is the reason, I would think," she said as she handed it forward and he grabbed it with his right hand. "It's Dr. Hart's journal for the last year."

"Really?" he said as he looked at it, then placed it in his shirt pocket. "How did he get it?"

"Hart gave it to him before he left for Egypt. He had the feeling that something might happen on his little vacation. He was in contact not only with Kido but

also Godonov *and* Dumvo, so he knew that two of them had been killed already before he went on his vacation."

Cav changed directions and pulled into another express lane, following the flow of traffic converging on the main airport terminal. "How in the world did he do that? We didn't detect any communication between them whatsoever."

"It's all on the CD. And I don't think that Clovis was one of the pre-planned targets. This was much too abrupt and messy, like you said. I think I might have had something to do with it. It's too much of a coincidence that he gets hit right after giving me the CD."

She looked down at her hands a moment, shook her head at the improbability of it all. There was no way that she missed a third assassin. With the distortion that the other two projected, the wrongness she felt made it a virtual impossibility that she would have missed one of them.

Unless he was so far away that he was out of her range.

But than that didn't make any sense either because the weapon that had shattered Clovis' body had been fired at close range, almost point blank from the powder burns she had briefly seen as she walked pass his dead body.

No, if there had been a third assassin he had to have been right there with the others, walked right up to Clovis and killed him, leaving Valerie alive

That didn't make any sense either.

Why leave a witness alive who could identify him? These assassins were not that sloppy. Or, perhaps, as was the case with the three in her cabin, they just

didn't care who saw them or who knew that they had killed.

Then, of course, this ruminating brought up the point of why they failed to kill him before he gave her the CD, if they even knew about the it. Why allow that piece of vital information into her hands if they were willing to kill to silence Clovis? Did he know even more than he had told her, perhaps wanting to see if she did indeed publish what he had given her before divulging the rest? She took a deep breath, closed her eyes – to the annoying image of Clovis lying dead imprinted on her irises – and then tore her wig off and threw it on the seat in frustration.

“You still with me back there?” Cav asked as he looked into the vid-mirror briefly.

“It just doesn't add up, that's all. This whole thing seems to get more and more twisted the further I dig and I have the feeling that more people like Clovis are going to get killed before its over, if it ever ends.” She looked up at him. “If Claudine is involved in this, then that bitch has more power than you'll ever have and I can expect even warmer receptions the next few places I visit, because they have to know that I was here, that Clovis gave me the CD, that he talked me and not to Katrina Templar of the New York Times.”

“Not necessarily. This hit could have been in the works for months, years even. Maybe it had nothing whatsoever to do with the CD. Maybe this Clovis guy was mixed up with something else ---“

“No Cav. It had to do with that CD and with Alex and what he was doing. I'll bet my life on it.”

“You almost did today. Do you have any idea what Hart and the others were working on?”

"No, not really." She stared back out the window and saw the airport far ahead, the planes circling and landing and taking off in some parody of normalcy that she didn't feel. "I have a few clues but nothing real tangible. What do you know about holographic memory?"

Cav lost altitude and entered into the slower, main fly-lanes leading back around the city in a lazy circle, away from the airport. "Not a whole lot. It's one of those pipe dreams the computer nerds are always trying to come up with, but so far, no one's succeeded in even coming close. Why? Is that what Hart was working on?"

"What use would it be if it did become practical?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"Fifty years ago it would have had incredible applications, but with the advent of the new quantum computer storage systems and the nano-technology that's leaked over into memory applications, I can't really see any use for it except as a research tool."

"How so?" she pushed.

"Well, it's basically the same system that it's believed the human mind stores data with and if we had a working model then we could use it to study the brain more thoroughly and perhaps understand it better. Other than that, I can't really see any other applications for it. It can't improve on the current memory storage systems we have in place, or at least I don't think so, not unless they really improve it beyond what they've been working on."

Alexis stared out again at the passing hobs and the scenery blurring by below, the lush green of the Boston suburbs cool in their pre-planned environs.

"Alexis, you okay?" Cav asked as he eased the taxi into another lane.

"Yeah, just thinking...." She was beginning to see the misty tendrils of a connection she was not certain were there, yet, sweeping over her mind like gossamer ripples of spider webs running off into the darkness, their connection points vague, even unknown. There was no getting around it. She would have to dig deeper.

"Where are you off to next? I have tickets to various destinations as well as new identities. Your choice."

They always thought that. It was her choice. What an asinine statement to make. There were no more choices that she could make. As with most of her missions, the mission parameters decided everything in advance, made the choices pre-determined and thus made anything that she might think was her choice a pure fantasy.

Choice was a figment of the imagination, a word used to comfort those who were naive enough to think that humanity had a free will in what they did. "I was going to go to Japan, to talk to some of the people who knew Kido. Clovis mentioned something about Kido having more information on the project that Hart was working on. But I think that I may wait on that one. Without the link to the others, the info that Kido might have had won't be worth much."

"*Galileo Prime* then?"

"No. I'm thinking that I need to find out more concerning the three that didn't have anything to do with computers, especially Dumvo and Pratali. I need to find the connection between them and Hart. Sure Hart and Kido might have been communicating with

him, but why? What did he have that they might have needed, because he was an integral part of this project. If I find that out, I might be able to crack this one open a little more." She leaned forward again hit him hard in the shoulder. "And you need to find out who the hell these assassins are, because I have a gut-wrenching feeling that they'll be looking out for me now that I've made myself a nuisance, regardless where I go."

"Then is it *Stargazer I* or India?" Cav inquired, wondering where her mind was leading her, what obscure connections she was forming.

"I think that the O' Neill Colony would be the best place to look and it'll get me off the planet for a few weeks and maybe confuse our assassins a little." She didn't really believe that anything she did would confuse these assassins in the least. Although she had been one step ahead of them with Clovis and the CD, she didn't think that that would last.

She was certain that whomever was controlling these things -- for she was beginning to believe that they were more machine than human -- was not about to let anyone like Alexis unravel all their well-laid plans and expose the entire scheme. It was certain that they would be awaiting for her in all the places she could possibly go. The one advantage she had was that she could get a rapid transport to *Stargazer I* right now and thus arrive on the Colony with a slight edge and some free time to poke around before the assassins showed up.

But then, they might just be there already. It was altogether possible that they had all the places she might go staked out, waiting for her arrival. It was a distinct possibility she could not ignore and she would

have to be ready for them. With the sophistication they possessed, they would eventually figure out a way to deal with her much more effectively than they had been. She was not looking forward to that. She had the advantage at the moment and losing it meant losing any chance she might have at solving this conundrum.

"Then *Stargazer* / it is. You'll be going as an insurance investigator. Shannon Baker." He threw a set of ID cards back at her, the equipment to cover her own fingerprints with new ones, and contact lenses that would allow her to pass any retinal scans. "You'll have to change your appearance. There's some clothes and other essentials under the seat, as well as some info to read up on concerning the insurance company and the state of the business at the moment." He looked at the small clock set in the dashboard as the collision warning chimed politely and he swerved nonchalantly to avoid the passing truck maneuvering out into the wrong lane. "We're in luck. A transport leaves in a little over an hour for the main transition point. You're booked on it, as well as the connecting fast shuttle to the Colony. You should arrive in a little over thirty hours from now."

She opened the half of the back seat on which she was not sitting and pulled out the charming gray business-suit in with a pleated skirt that looked rather short.

"You need to very careful up there, Alexis," he said with a new and different tone, a drift of emotions flowing just under the surface. "The Colonies have their own set of rules and procedures and don't like it one bit when Earthers try to interfere with their lives."

"Earthers?" she asked as she unbuttoned her blouse and took it off.

Cav took one look, caught her hard eyes staring back at him and adjusted his rearward vid-mirror so that she would not think he was leering at her. He had seen her naked more times than he could count and didn't need to ogle her now.

"They call us Earthers?" she followed up as she pulled her pants off to change into the business suit. She had never considered that other humans would give those who still lived on the Earth a pejorative nickname. It seemed odd, somehow surrealistic in a way.

"The people in the Colonies are rather an independent minded lot. There've even been rumors that once they get five Colonies on-line, which should occur some time in the next seven years, they're going to petition for separation from their respective governments and declare themselves as their own country. As such, they frown very much on people like you going up and poking around. They see it as Earther interference or even as Earthers finding reasons why they shouldn't break away from the planetary governments."

"What's new? Everywhere I go people don't seem to like me poking around. And I have such a pleasant personality." she said curtly as she slipped on the skirt, finding that it was rather short on her. "And did you forget my size or something? This seems a tad bit short for an insurance agent."

"It's the new style among the more successful professional business women. You've got the body for it, so stop complaining. As I was saying, you need to be very, very careful about how you act up there.

You'll be on your own. I can't very well help you that far away and communications planet-side are carefully monitored. Very carefully monitored. You need to be especially careful of their police force. It's small, but highly fanatic, if one can call it that.

"And they're very efficient. They've lost face with the death of Dr. Dumvo and aren't going to like you dragging it up again. It's the first intentional death that they've ever had and they're trying their damndest to cover it up. Last thing they need is a panicky populace and a reason for the Earthers to deny them independence."

She pulled the jacket on and noticed that with the pads in her bra, her chest stood out more than the suit was designed to hold, making her look more like a sexual entertainment employee than an insurance agent. She frowned, then pulled the breast enhancements out, selecting a smaller size and trying them on. They were a little better, but she was beginning to see that the suit was cut to emphasize her breasts, so she stopped fidgeting with it. "Are they that self-sufficient that they can be independent?" she asked as she started work on the finger print alterations, trying to find a sitting position that didn't expose her underpants. If this was the new style for upward professional women, she wondered what they were striving upward toward? How did anyone walk in this get-up with any resemblance of professionalism.

"Completely, as of last year. They mine asteroids for all the essentials that they need in terms of water, minerals and oxygen; constant exposure to the sun gives them plenty of electricity and they grow more

than enough food for themselves. So be very careful, okay?"

She looked up at him as he turned off into the airport terminal, wondering what was up with all the dire warnings. The man had never acted like this before. If she didn't know better, she would have the suspicion that he knew something he was not telling her. "Why Cav... I didn't know you cared so much," she said with mock sweetness of Southern drawl instead of the biting retort she wanted to employ.

"I don't, actually. It's just that I'm the one who'll have to clean up the mess if you blow it and I really don't feel like having to do that."

"How sweet."

The taxi pulled into the front of the main terminal of the space transition transport just as Alexis popped the contact lenses in, making her eyes an intense, dark blue, and pulled the pale blonde wig on with the pony tail tied up in the back with the pretty red bow and tassels coming down.

"I changed the taxi's ID transmitter three times as we drove and my men report that no one followed us so you're safe to depart." He turned around and gave her one last look. "I'll be expecting you back within a week, if not sooner. Otherwise I'm sending in the marines." He saw that look on her face that spoke of telling him to kiss her ass. "I'm serious. I'll storm that Colony if I don't hear from you."

She pursed her lips at him, winked, then stepped out of the taxi, pulling her luggage with her and handing him her monetary card.

With his best Boston accent, Cav took the card and spoke. "Have nice trip, Mrs. Baker. It was a pleasure."

She smiled at him as she took the card back.
"Thanks."

* * * *

Claudine Maxwell stared out the window of her far too small office, the rain pelting the glass with an intensity uncommon for this time of year. But then, the last twenty years had seen a change in the weather patterns on Earth that the scientists had been unable to explain successfully. She remembered reading somewhere that the same thing had happened back at the turn of the century, causing large-scale problems around the globe and the introduction of the Global Weather Control Committee to understand better the intricacies of the fluid dynamics running the atmosphere.

The committee had not, as she was witnessing now outside her window, been able to produce any tangible results concerning weather control or even forecasting and as if to vouch for that, they were now right back in another series of weather phenomena defying explanation. It was almost, she sometimes mused, as if the Earth was giving subtle hints for Humans to find another place to call home if they were not going to take care of this one.

Although the slash-and-burn farming techniques of the South American and Asian countries had been banned and strictly monitored and the rain forests had been slowly growing back due to heavy popular pressure on the respective countries to curb their population explosions, the world still held plenty of areas that Humans could manage much better and plenty of animals still on the endangered species list.

She smirked at the window as if the weather were its fault somehow.

Endangered animals. The only endangered animal on Claudine's mind these days was Alexis Locke. Claudine had never wanted to get involved with her in the first place. In fact, until that day those two people came to her – two people who had approached her from out of the blue, literally, and snared her in their web of their deceit – Claudine was not even aware that there was someone named Alexis Locke.

Of course, she knew about the projects on which Cav had been slaving for most of his life and knew about the production of proto-types and the problems that had come of that, but she had no idea of any specifics or of a successful proto-type named Alexis Locke. That was, until she had been approached by the male and the female, who had dragged her unwillingly into their obscure plans. The male and female pair who, to her mind, had seemed wrong to Claudine, as if they didn't belong to the air around them, as if it somehow was revolting against their very presence. And completely apart from that, there was something about them, the more she thought about it, that just didn't sit right with her and she was very good at reading people. It was what her job was all about.

She was not sure if it was the absolutely perfect faces and bodies they flaunted, almost as if they were carefully carved out of marble and brought to life like Pygmalion and Galatea. She was not sure if it was the way they moved and the way they talked, so assured and exquisite, so confident yet fragile; or if it was just something she sensed about them, an aura

setting off warning bells for unknown reasons even now she could not put her finger on successfully.

Yet come they had, and laid on her desk a story so extraordinary that she had no choice but to believe it. It was almost as if the sheer audacity of the tale, the complete inconceivability of it made it credible. It had not taken much to bring her in, to involve her with their plot, to convince her that she was an important person – she was well aware of that little fact – and thus was needed to make certain that all went as it was supposed to.

As such, she did her part, the one part that they had asked of her: make certain that the agent working for Dr. Vincent Cavalier's organization known as Alexis Locke was assigned to the case. That she had done, her firm grasp on Cav's male libido assuring that she would get him to do what she wanted. The affair with the man those not near enough years ago had seemed at first like a great politic mistake, but she was beginning to think that perhaps, just perhaps, it had been one of the few bright spots of that time in her life. His usefulness to her now like an aged bonus for the horrendous sex she had to endure at his clumsy hands.

And then a light had slowly lit in the back of her mind, like a candle illuminating a dusty and forgotten treasure map and she started to realize that perhaps this was the opportunity for which she had been waiting. The opportunity that would open the window for her ascendancy to the top position she so craved, she could taste like the fine champagne she now sipped on delicately: the presidency.

If a stupid bimbo like Heather O'Rourke could win the highest office in the land, then why not Claudine,

who was so much smarter and craftier politically, who knew what things to change and how to change them? And so she began to congeal her own plans, to use the data the female and the male had given her to her own advantage and start making her own plans for her own benefit.

There had been a little man named Huang who had approached her a few years ago about her possible ascendancy to the presidency and how he was willing to finance her campaign if she were just willing to listen to what he had to say. His words had made an impact, that was certain. It had started her on her present course, his discreet money allowing her to take the slut prom-queen to the highest seat in the land as the first step to her own power-grab. And now she had the final piece to the puzzle, the final way to make certain that she won the next election and then tell that little Chinaman that he could go to hell.

Yes, she would have to be careful but she could use this to her own advantage. So what if innocent people died in the process? So what if she had to abuse the very powers she had been sworn to protect? To gain the presidency was worth it. To gain the power that came with it and with the knowledge that she had gained, could gain, from her two visitors, was worth a million innocent people dying. Look at the nuclear wars that had killed in the millions in Pakistan and India. They had achieved their ends, that was certain. No one would disagree on that point.

Claudine Maxwell was not about to let something as simple as killing stand in her way.

No, Claudine Maxwell was headed for the top and when one went there, the path was unimportant. The goal was all that counted.

She watched the rain pounding on the window, the black, boiling clouds ripping apart from the very winds controlling them, unleashing their load of water in inundations threatening to flood vast areas of the city. She smiled, deviously. So too would she sweep away the clutter of the government that made her country so weak and ineffective these last few decades and turn the United States once again into the premier power in the world, controlling opinion and direction on both the planet and out in the colonies.

It was there that she would need to start: the Colonies. She was certain that they would become the hub of political power sooner than anyone realized. The Colonies needed to be reigned in and Dumvo's death, though certainly tragic for someone, had been a wonderfully unforeseen start to that process.

Her comm-system beeped and she placed her finger on the security pad that scanned her fingerprint. The message flashed by quicker than most humans could read, but she had gotten the gist of it. Alexis Locke was heading for *Stargazer I*. Perfect.

She keyed in a reply and then leaned back, imagining herself in the Oval Office and controlling the world. A malevolent look crossed her face and she smiled deeply, her face taking on a demeanor totally different from the one she presented to the world or even to her friends.

President Claudine Maxwell.

It had such a nice ring to it when she said it and so she repeated it several times as she finished her champagne.

Although they started small, the O'Neill Colonies were like the American British colonies of the Eighteenth Century, a haven for those who wished to live their lives without the constant over-lordship of the government. And like those British Colonies, the O'Neill Colonies eventually found that they no longer needed the support of the masters. And then they realized that they had become the masters before the old order even knew what had happened.

--- Excerpts

from:

Commentaries from the

Journal of

Meagan Locke

12

12 August 2085

1730 hrs local time

O'Neill Colony *Stargazer I*

The rapid transport slowly and gracefully eased itself into the docking port. There was a slight bump felt by the passengers, hardly noticeable and accompanied by a muffled thud, followed in rapid succession by a loud series of quick knocks as the locking mechanism engaged and secured the bulky transport to the Colony. The fasten seat-belt lights blinked out with a chime and the flight attendants began to get the exit port ready for disembarkation. The transports to the O'Neill Colonies were well maintained and nicely appointed, the large, roomy seats allowing one to relax and sleep during the thirty hour flight from the orbital transient station above the Earth to the three Colonies currently up and running, as well as the three Colonies still under construction.

Tourism to the Colonies was minimal, the rapid transports made their way to *Stargazer I* once a month mostly for those residents of the Colony who still needed to do business planet-side, and even that was quickly becoming a minority as the self-sufficiency of the Colonies made such trips superfluous. It had even been suggested that the current service to *Stargazer I*,

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Earth could maintain control. Those in power on Earth could easily see the long-term benefits of the Colonies and their ability to easily and quickly mine the asteroid field for most any element known.

The possible loss of that control, of having the O'Neill Colonies have a virtual monopoly on the next source of almost endless supplies, was a concept that didn't sit well with those who thought they should hold that control for the Earth's benefit ... and their bank accounts benefit.

The opposite was happening aboard the Colonies and the rumors of secession from Earth that had been bantered around for the last few months were based very much in fact. As such, tensions between the original designers and backers of the Colonies – who still had major assets on Earth as well as lives they didn't want to throw away – and those pioneers who had moved into the Colonies and now called them home, was increasing daily. The Earthers were looking for any and all reasons to prove that the established ruling body of the Colonies was incapable of maintaining control and thus hopefully opening a window for those on the Earth to seize control.

The tragic accident that killed Dr. Dumvo was just such an incident. To have it turn into a murder investigation was out of the question for the local authorities. Crime was not a factor on the Colonies. With such a small community and no where to run, crime of any sort was the last thing the locals wanted or needed and thus it was, for the most part, nonexistent. Doors were left unlocked, people could walk the paths and through the parks at any time of the day or night without having to worry about getting attacked in any way. Theft was unheard of.

The biggest problem with which the Colonies had to deal was a pressure leak in the cylindrical structure that was their home, which could cause a cataclysmic failure of the structural integrity of the system and be a disaster beyond compare. The specter of the vacuum of space lay just outside the thin-sheeted triple walls of the structure, constantly waiting for that one opportunity to reach in and wreck havoc on the fragile humans within.

That was until Dr. Dumvo and the explosion.

The local authorities had quickly ruled it a tragic accident under investigation and the cause of the explosion rectified as quickly as possible so that a repeat would not occur. When it was learned that certain anomalies in the explosion itself and the circumstances of the death of Dr. Dumvo pointed toward a pre-meditated plan and not an accident, the authorities on Earth quickly jumped on the chance to prove the incompetence of the locals and to bring in Earth-based rule.

This had produced numerous clashes, both physical and verbal, when detectives from Earth had arrived to take over the case. Those detectives, made very unwelcome on the Colony, had been forced to leave shortly after they arrived, coming, not surprisingly enough, to the same conclusion as the locals: Dumvo's death was a tragic accident. The facts to the contrary were simply ignored, deposited far in the back of some police office files and forgotten.

The case was then closed on both sides, though doubts still lingered throughout the Earth detective community and even on the Colony itself.

No one on the Colony talked about the death anymore. It had become a taboo subject better left

alone. For the sake of the Colony, most people agreed that should anyone arrive asking questions, no answers should be forthcoming and those inquiring would be escorted as quickly as possible off the Colony.

This was the hostile atmosphere that Alexis, now masquerading as Shannon Baker, insurance investigator, found herself when she stepped off the transport and onto the Colony. She had been expecting far worse. She was well acquainted with what it was like to want to be left alone.

Waiting for her was a tall, burly man with an aquiline nose, prominent jaw, handsome, insolent eyes holding a depth Alexis found sinister, a deeply lined face and close-cropped hair above an austere and penetrating expression, which placed him as a military retiree almost as if it were printed on his forehead in big, bold letters. His name tag told her more than did his plain uniform, the words K. A. Viktorovna stenciled neatly across his broad chest.

Alexis was not surprised to see him here, waiting for her. She pulled up to her mind's eye his history, which she had read on the trip up here: he was the head of the security division for *Stargazer I* and was not a man she wanted to antagonize. But then, that had never stopped her before.

He was said to be kind and affable to the Colonists who stayed within the established boundaries and didn't break the rules, but brutal when necessary, clamping down with an iron grip on those who crossed him or broke the rules. During his reign as, basically, the most powerful man on the Colony, he had deported in excess of three thousand people for a variety of offenses deemed inappropriate to the

welfare of the Colony, sending them back to Earth with the designation that they would never be allowed to live, work, or travel to any of the Colonies ever again. His was a wide ranging power but one he wielded with fairness, or so those who had not been affected by him directly swore to and those in control of the Colony hoped for.

He stood before her now with a composed and particularly amiable smile and a deferential but dignified politeness, which she took to be his first assault upon her in what was certain to be a non-agreeable relationship. She spoke first, not wanting to let him dominate from the beginning. She had dealt with more than her fair share of these men and knew that the one thing they hated more than people who didn't conform were women who thought themselves superior.

She smiled at him. "Captain Kiril Andrevevich Viktorovna, I presume. Nice to make your acquaintance," she said with a sweet, affable voice, the difficult Russian name rolling off her tongue with ease as she extended her hand out to him.

He looked down at her hand a moment, then back up into her eyes with an abject, intimidating air, glaring at her from under his bushy eyebrows, his voice stern and vibrant. "Don't get too comfortable here, Mrs. Baker. You *will* be returning as soon as this transport has been through maintenance and refueled. We don't need your kind here on *Stargazer I* and I don't intend to allow you to stir up problems that don't exist." He ignored her hand.

It was the first salvo of the attack.

She let her hand drop back to her side as she stood with her short skirt and tight suit, one bag slung over

her shoulder and another in her left hand. At least there was one thing conforming to her expectations. "I just need to ascertain a few..."

"As I said, don't get too comfortable. You can wait in the VIP lounge if you like." His eyes, those rock-hard brown orbs locking on her like a hawk onto its prey, drifted down her front slowly and methodically, appreciating the lines and curves making up this newest attempt to discredit the Colonies.

It only took a few seconds but it made Alexis feel very dirty and she suppressed a shudder running down her spine, perhaps from the chill air that was part of the air lock, perhaps from the new environment, perhaps from the lascivious thoughts tumbling into her mind from him like an avalanche of rocks. Such things had never bothered her before, but when this man did it, when he fantasized about her body and his together, it brought a shudder to her mind unfamiliar and bothersome.

She wondered a moment if he had his own set of mental powers.

He didn't even bother to lift his eyes back to her face as he turned and purposely strode away, his authority complete, his will having been imposed. She watched him leave, anger seething inside her for a brief moment, then subsiding. Another clear reminder of why she had lived in the remoteness of Alaska for the past fifteen years.

Several other passengers had been passing by as they emerged from the transport where she was standing in the middle of the ramp, and as she watched the haughty and sanguine security chief walk away, thoughts of what she would like to do to him cascading behind her forehead, a voice spoke to her

that was cheerful and bright, a refreshing change after Viktorovna.

She turned with a facetious smile on her face to find a man who stood at her height with wild, wavy brown hair and a radiant serenity that seemed almost comforting with his large, kind, intelligent eyes. He had fine lines along his nose and mouth as if he had smiled too much in his lifetime and a look about him of calm detachment.

"Don't pay him much never mind," he said, referring, she assumed, to the security captain. "He's gruff and comes across mean, but he's really a good person to have around. He's kept this Colony crime free for all the time that it's been up and running." He looked into her eyes with nothing but friendship. Then, realizing that he had forgotten the most important part, stuck out his hand to introduce himself. "I'm sorry. Quite rude of me to just interfere like that without an introduction. I'm Hugh Crow. Welcome to our little bit of heaven, slightly closer than Earth ever came."

She brushed a loose strand of hair out of her face and shook his hand hesitantly. The last thing she needed was some hard-up executive trying to pick-up on her. "Shannon Baker. Does he introduce himself to all the new arrivals like that?" she asked, indicating with a tilt of her head the security chief.

"Kiril? No, that was pretty special. You should feel honored. The last time he came down to the disembarkation docks and talked to someone personally was when the detectives from Earth came up here back in June. Other than that, he lets his subordinates watch the new arrivals." He motioned for her to move down the ramp, his hover-bags following along behind him obediently. "You'll be going to the

new arrival orientation and inspection area first, before you ever see the Colony itself. It's this way."

"You mean this isn't the Colony?" she asked, acting as innocent and naive as Shannon Baker would. Maybe she could make a connection here that just might allow her to slip past the invincible Viktorovna. This Hugh Crow might prove valuable after all.

"This?" he said with a slight laugh lighting up his face and sparkling green eyes. "These are just the docking ports. You'll know when you get to the actual Colony. It's beautiful." He spoke with such ardor and feeling that Alexis was beginning to want to see the actual Colony, if for no other reason than to see what could possibly make this good-natured man so radiant. She had read the technical manuals on the Colonies, but they hardly expressed any feeling of the true impact she expected to get upon seeing the interior of the living areas.

He led her to a large holding area with several doors along the walls and large tables in the middle with a variable array of scanning and medical equipment. This must be the inspection area. Everything entering the Colony, before it ever came into contact with the actual air of the main Colony itself, was tested and scanned, prodded and probed, to make certain that, first of all, no infectious diseases found their way into the environment, and secondly that no weapons made it in. Except for the few weapons the security force had locked away, all the Colonies were weapon-free zones and they intended to keep it that way.

If she had not been on an assignment, she would be duly impressed with the way these people had organized and administrated the Colony. She

doubted that she could even name one area on Earth, apart from militarily controlled compounds, which were weapon-free. "I don't think that your esteemed Viktorovna will let me even go through this process," she said as she watched it all unfold around her.

Strip searches seemed to be mandatory, thus the small side rooms for privacy, and Alexis was beginning to think that there was a good reason Cav had warned her more sternly than he usually did. They didn't fool around here. It was professional and efficient. "He seemed quite set on not letting me in."

"Yes, I overheard that. I wasn't eavesdropping, though. It's just that with Kiril's voice it's kind of hard to not listen in sometimes." He looked around at the guards who stood about, all of them more or less busy with the disembarked passengers. "I think I can get you in. What's your business here?"

Alexis became weary. Although she had thought that she could use him to help her get past Kiril and into the Colony, the last thing she needed was to get associated with a smuggler, which she was beginning to believe this man was if he had any notion of getting her past security. She found nothing of a sinister nature in his surface thoughts and he certainly was not carrying enough luggage to suggest that he was doing anything vastly illegal.

Her gut told her to trust him, for now, and she smiled at him. "I'm an investigator for the insurance company that handles the Colonies."

He nodded his head with a knowing look in his eyes. "Ah, yes. I saw that memo when I was planet-side. Of course. Shannon Baker. When you said your name, it should have clicked. Here to look into the claim of damages and survivor benefits for the

death of Dr. Dumvo... I thought that was all taken care of."

She noticed the slight change in his demeanor at the mention of her occupation and realized that this man was not just some Colonist and the idea that he was a smuggler began to drift further way from the realm of possibilities. That he had seen a memo with her name on it spoke of someone connected. "I'm sorry, but I didn't quite catch what you said you did here," she said with a broad, unnatural smile she had seen the fashion models and those who thought themselves beautiful affected when they wanted something out of men

"That's probably because I didn't say."

The line moved closer to the front of the queue. She looked over at him with a look of frustration.

The guard looked up, a glint of recognition sparkling in his eyes as he spoke to Hugh. "Mr. Crow. Good to see that you made it back safe from planet-side. Did you have a good trip? Just step this way and we'll get you through as quick as possible."

Hugh motioned for Alexis to go where the guard was indicating and she tentatively stepped over to a clear table with no one in line, a lone guard standing sentry.

"Do you know this lady, Mr. Crow?" the guard asked in a southern drawl that seemed lazy and doleful. "Cause I've strict orders not to let her into the main Colony area."

Hugh looked at the guard a moment as he placed his smaller hand-carried bag on the table and the hover-bags floated to the designated inspection area. "Yes, I do know her. We're old friends."

Alexis looked at him a moment with pursed lips, then decided to let it flow. His surface thoughts revealing no hidden thoughts of danger against her and despite his reluctance to tell her his occupation and his obvious connections, she needed to get a look at Dumvo's lab and talk to his assistants and she could not do that all too well sitting back on the transport as Kiril wanted. She tried to remember the name Hugh Crow from the data Cav had given her regarding the Colony and drew a blank.

She had not run across that name anywhere in the list of officials, but he was certainly someone who held a hidden power here. "I'll take responsibility for her, Jack," Hugh said with a familiarity that spoke of a long-term relationship to the Colony. "If you get any flak from Kiril, just direct him my way."

"I'm not so sure, sir. I'd rather not," the guard said, the fear of his boss seeming to out-weigh any pull Hugh might have.

Hugh beamed a smile at the guard and patted him on the shoulder, then leaned in and whispered into his ear. "She promised to sleep with me if I got her into the Colony, so don't ruin this for me."

Alexis, of course, heard it quite clearer, her superior auditory senses capable of such simple feats. She could barely keep a smile from shooting across her face and revealing that she had heard. This Hugh Crow was certainly quick on his feet.

The guard smiled widely and nodded his head. Sex seemed to out weigh any compromise of the security chief's orders. "Of course, Mr. Crow. We'll process you through right away. I'll need to see your bag, Miss."

Alexis gave the guard a half-smile and lifted her two bags onto the scanner table. She didn't think that he would look too kindly on the weapons she had stored in the secret compartment in the bottom of her bag. She gave him her best, crooked smile and tilted her head slightly as he looked at her and smiled back, that shy, knowing look glazing his eyes a moment as he imagined being able to sleep with this young woman tonight also. She caught the surface thoughts and slightly prodded them a little as the guard turned and began to blush furiously.

"She's cleared, Mr. Crow," he stammered, unable to look into her eyes again as various thoughts danced in his head and blood flow began to increase to certain areas of his body. "You two can step over to the next station."

Hugh smiled and nodded his head as he thanked the guard, then moved over to a table by one of the dressing room doors. "This next part is the worst," he said in apology. "It's sort of humiliating, but it's necessary for the safety of the Colony. Any type of disease that we may have picked up planet-side would run through this place like a plague and wipe us out in no time. Plus, we've already found several people who found it necessary to try to sneak in contraband in places that only a strip search can detect." He gave her a knowing smile.

"What's wrong with the standard medical scanners?" Alexis asked as she set her bags down and waited for the female guard to open the dressing room door for her. A strip search would certainly reveal the padding in her bra. That would be a rather embarrassing event, but there was no way around it. She could always plant an image in the guard's mind

that the pads were not there, but then the cameras she was certain would be there would pick it up and explanations of such things always became more complicated than they needed to be. There was no way around the imminent discovery and she just hoped that the guard would have pity on her, understanding the reason that someone would want to increase their breast size in such a way. The things she had to do jus to survive.

"Nothing's wrong with the medical scanners, but they can be defeated," Hugh responded as the guard opened his door for him. "This way can't, not at least for the obvious things. We scan everyone also, but you've nothing to worry about." He stepped in and the door shut.

Alexis' door opened and the burly female guard, who looked more like a man in women's clothing than a woman, indicated for Alexis to step in and take all her clothes off, bend over and cough. She didn't look like the type of woman who would understand anything about padded bras, her own immense set of mammary glands making that obvious.

And to think that I could be home right now enjoying a beautiful evening with my dogs and the wildness of Alaska, she thought as the door closed and she began to undress.

* * *

Kiril Andrevevich Viktorovna watched the monitor with keen appeal as the woman who called herself Shannon Baker undressed. He could not believe the body that this one had, her perfect lines and curves almost appearing sculptured in their flawlessness.

Women this perfect didn't appear very often on *Stargazer I*, the women he usually saw the more hardened adventuresome types who couldn't find a life on Earth and came here for who the hell knew what reason, their bodies more along the lines of burlap sacks. Thus, he made certain he was taping the scene before him for later use. He taped all dressing rooms on the off chance that he might catch something that the guards conducting the strip search might miss ... and of course for the reason that he was staring at the screen now. What was the point of having all this power and authority if one couldn't enjoy it at times like these?

When she took off her bra and revealed that she padded herself, he was slightly disappointed. He liked his women to have large, soft breasts, to which one could grab onto and hold. Small breasts seemed to Kiril to be a waste, especially on one with a body like this one. What was the point of having an ass that fine and not getting breast implants to complement it? But that was a minor point,

"Is she the one?" he asked in his thick voice to the woman who stood behind him, watching the monitor intently with a look less malicious than it was curious. She was dressed all in black. The color fit her well. She was tall, as tall as Alexis and had a look about her that spoke of wrongness. But it was not wrongness with her character or her morals ... or even her mission. It was as if she didn't belong to the air in which she stood, as if the air was rebelling against her and creating a barrier seething with unbridled ebullience like a sheath over her. When she came close to Kiril, he could feel the wrongness on his arms, his short hairs raised up as if a static charge

was attracting them. His stomach would boil also, like it did sometimes when he left the rotating cylinder of the main Colony and made his way through the null-gravity of space.

And the worse thing was that he could not read her mind, not even the surface thoughts. It was just like that Shannon Baker woman or whatever her name was. He had been unable to probe her surface thoughts either, a disturbing if not frustrating setback to discovering if she was sent from the United States government to spy on him. All he got out of Shannon Baker was a headache and that had never happened before.

But this one who stood behind him now was different again. It was as if her mind was not even there, as if he were looking into an empty space filled with a nothingness as blank as the empty space around the Colony. In fact, he almost felt as if his own mind was being sucked into this one's when he probed her, as if a vacuum had been created inside this female.

It bothered Kiril, but then there were many things that bothered Kiril these days and in this particular case, he didn't have much choice in the matter. This one had been forced on him by the owners and so he would cooperate, for the owners signed his paychecks and that was one of the better benefits of this job. Anyway, this tall female was extremely attractive and perhaps he could work his charm on her, and if not then maybe his strength. Kiril was not beneath using his physical capacity to get what he wanted.

"Yes, she's the one," the women in black answered with a quiet voice that seemed like a mere whisper

but carried through the room easily. "Look how perfect she is. I never saw her like this when she was young." She was silent for a while as Kiril leered at the naked Alexis as she was searched.

He made strange noises as she bent over and coughed, the camera strategically positioned so that a full view was always possible. He re-adjusted himself in the seat. Damn tight pants.

The woman looked down at him with disgust. "She's not to be touched by you or your people until I say so, is that understood?" she said in a firm tone telling him that she meant it. "She'll be taken care of if that becomes necessary. I promise you that I'll make your death long and painful if you disregard me in this." She never once bothered to look at Kiril.

He nodded his head slowly, not really listening to what the bitch had to say. He might have let them into his security offices and given them access to all his files, but he was damned if he was going to actually take orders from her. Kiril Andrevevich didn't take orders from females.

Besides, he was far more interested in how he was going to have fun with Shannon Baker while she visited his Colony. Yes, so much fun.

Alexis stepped out of the dressing room with a curt expression on her face, the humiliation of having to strip for a total stranger only off-set by the fact that the total stranger seemed more humiliated than Alexis did. Her sleek, firm body apparently caused some discomfort to the larger boned guard, who continued to click her tongue as she examined Alexis, mumbling under her breath that Alexis should be eating more and not starving herself just to look like a toothpick.

"Did I pass?" Alexis asked the burly female who had searched her and ran the medical scanners over her body with professional detachment.

The guard looked at Alexis with a vicious stare, as if Alexis had insulted her somehow without even meaning to, then in a high, shrill voice that didn't fit the large body whatsoever, the guard told her that she was the healthiest person she had ever seen pass through the inspection station, and to have a nice visit.

Alexis seemed to think that the guard didn't quite mean it.

Hugh was waiting for her with a smile, no doubt, she thought, because he had been watching her on the small, hidden camera Alexis could feel was filming her in the dressing room. They had certainly hid it well and she was certain that Viktorovna was the mastermind behind that little improvement.

"So now what?" she asked as she picked up her bags. "Psychological tests? IQ tests? Manual dexterity perhaps?"

"No, that's about it for the inspections." He appeared not to have caught on to her sarcasm. "Next would be an orientation session to acquaint you

with the peculiar precautions and rules we have up here on the Colonies, such as alarms and where to go if one sounds and what you can and can't do and so on." He looked her over a moment as his hover luggage pulled up behind him, almost as if he were checking her out but his eyes held no lascivious intent. "But I think we can skip that with you. I can explain the highlights and you seem more than intelligent enough to be able to figure out the rest. Most of it's common sense, like don't break out any main support walls and don't open any air-locks that lead out to space. That sort of thing." He smiled brightly.

"Sounds good to me," she said as she followed Hugh out of the inspection area and through a series of air locks and de-contamination rooms. Alexis was starting to believe that Hugh Crow was even more important than she had at first thought and perhaps he could even enlighten her on some of the questions she had still lingering like a bad after-shave. The man was obviously attracted to her and it was a good bet that with a little persuasion she could get him to tell her quite a lot, or at least point her in the right direction. She was well aware that he had tried not to check out her body but, like with most men, the temptation had been too great and his surface thoughts seemed to be focused on her legs and short skirt much more than on any orientation.

The fact that he had not mentioned his occupation for the Colony, even though Alexis had asked twice, grated on her nerves and made her slightly wary. People like Hugh Crow never did anything without a reason. They chose their words carefully and deliberately and even though they might appear to

have let something slip or seemed slow, they were well aware of exactly what they said and what it implied. When people like Hugh Crow wanted something, they almost always got it. He might just be the best place to start here on the Colony.

"So where do they have you staying?" he inquired as they stepped out of the last air-lock and onto a balcony with a guard rail over-looking the entire main Colony length-wise down the center of the cylinder, the fresh, clean, cool air embracing her face and cheeks and invigorating her after the stale air of the transport and the inspection area.

She had heard all the tales and rumors concerning the O'Neill Colonies, had even downloaded all the technical manuals and schematics and memorized them. She was well aware that the engineering of the Colonies was a feat in itself and that those who had come up here, without exception, had praised the construction and the livability as beyond compare, but she was never one to believe such things. Alexis had always been one to shun other's descriptions of places, preferring to see them herself and have an open mind about it all.

With the Colonies, the descriptions that she had read had been extraordinary, vivid and filled with a wonder she thought just the ramblings of the overwhelmed journalists who had never really experienced anything real in their lives anyway and who had been paid by the Colonies to make the Colonies look good to the Earthers. But when she stepped onto that balcony and beheld for the first time the unparalleled view, she found that even the vivid descriptions didn't do it justice. She was, for one of the few and rare times in her life, overwhelmed by

what was displayed before her and it caused her to miss the question posed by Hugh.

It was over a hundred years ago that the Princeton particle physicist Gerard O' Neill had first proposed the possibility of building colonies in space that could house Humans in an Earth-like environment and ease the problems of over-crowding on the planet. The Colonies would be situated at the Lagrangian points between the Earth and the Moon, where the gravitational pull between the two massive bodies balanced out and any object thus placed would not need to constantly correct their position due to gravitational affects. O'Neill had originally chosen the Lagrangian point L5 as the most promising for a colony and that was where *Stargazer* / now serenely floated in the boundlessness of space.

As with most ideas that were ahead of their time, O'Neill's had been scoffed at and billed as impractical by the supposed experts in the field, who, it generally turned out, tended to not be experts in much of anything but nay-saying. However, with the staggering growth of the planet's population after the turn of the Twenty-first Century and the slow progress with the drastic population control methods being introduced as well as the expanded life-expectancy, it was quickly realized that something would have to be done to ease the over-crowding problems that would eventually turn the Earth into one big city and eat away its limited resources before this new century was over, plunging humans into a crisis greater than any they had ever faced before.

The small scientific colony on the Moon was impractical for any type of large scale colonization and the colony on Mars, christened *Galileo Prime* and

only completed twenty years ago, was too far away for any practical usage. The terra forming that was just in its infancy on Mars could transform the small planet into a human-friendly place, but that was decades if not centuries away and such time was not envisioned for the survivability of the Earth as a viable home.

As such, the concept for the O'Neill Colonies had been revisited by a group of investors with the capital and power to see their plans through. *Stargazer I* had been the result. Taking nothing from the Earth except for during the initial construction period, and providing permanent living space for up to 50,000 souls, the construction of *Stargazer I* heralded the beginning of a marathon construction project which, at the moment, had three more Colonies near total self-sufficiency and three more under construction with an unlimited number of follow-up Colonies already slated to be built. The asteroid belt had more than enough materials to supply an unlimited amount of colonies.

Unbeknownst to most Earthers, the construction of *Stargazer I* was the harbinger of a new order that would shift the balance of power and begin the first major step of the human colonization of space. But that was still in the future, a future that seemed rather far off at the moment.

The main area of the Colony she was now gazing over was basically a large, elongated cylinder rotating about a fixed central spoke for the simulation of gravity – about four-fifths that of Earth – and housed the living and working spaces of the inhabitants. Huge solar panels constantly facing the sun provided more than enough power. A latticework of transparent aluminum plates and trans-aluminum

girders composed the upper half of the cylinder allowing an unparalleled view of space.

The velvety blackness with its patchwork of stars, nebulae and galaxies greeted the senses with an over-abundance of visual delights that was only obscured by the passage of the bright blue and white globe spinning into view with a regularity one could set a watch by. The lustrous illumination of the sun in the distance shining like a lone beacon in the night for all the lost souls and wayward lovers who sat in the lush gardens and parks and looked out on the theater of God's own handiwork, was resplendent in its subtle hues.

It was larger then she had expected.

Though she knew the exact dimensions, the numbers somehow didn't relate to the sheer immensity now laid out before her. The main living area ran for ten kilometers and was filled with beautiful, charming, old-European houses clustering together in a random layout, grabbing and holding the eye with a grandeur belying the intricate, detailed plan actually in place, the verdant green of the parks and gardens interspersing in a medley of function and artistic flair. Tall trees towered above the landscape like pillars holding up the sky while a long, narrow lake ran the length of half the ten kilometer expanse, the triangular sails of the numerous boats plying its waters looking like toys in the distance. A rising set of steps and small hills, covered with an abundance of pines, firs, alders and lusty green aspens sat in the crystal clear distance, as if set there with a precision looking almost natural. There were no roads, only walkways. There were no hogs only bicycles, and an efficient mass transportation system bringing the

inhabitants to and from work, to and from home with the precision of a model railroad.

The living areas were not, as one would expect, confined only to the lower portion of the cylinder. They rose up at least half-way up the sides so that at any time the occupants had the uncanny and unnatural feeling of having trees, houses and people almost above them, hanging onto the side of the cylinder and not falling. For those who lived there it was but a part of the landscape, accepted as natural and not seen anymore. To a visitor it was one of the oddest experiences, as Alexis could attest. Although from a physics standpoint she was well aware how it was possible for the landscape, buildings and people to remain where they were, she continued to wait for them to fall, for the water to spill out.

It made her smile, for the designers had the touch of genius that seemed rare in these days of tall mega-structures without purpose or form. But this place, this place was a *mélange* of function and livability, of form and design, a veritable oasis in the desert that was space and it impressed Alexis more than anything had impressed her in a long, long time. It was not often that she was able to stop during one of her assignments and actually enjoy the landscape in which she found herself.

She had been to almost every corner of the world and yet she had no photos, no real memories of what any of it looked like, the buildings, castles and monuments lost in a whirl of activity and death which seemed to have followed her like an avenger shadow. That she was able to see this place for what it was, was able to soak in the surroundings and have time to be impressed struck a cord in her lessening her smile

and making her self-conscious of the fact that she should be concentrating on her mission and not the scenery.

Hugh beamed a self-conscious smile as he watched her reaction and waited for her to come back to him. It was more or less the same with every one who saw the Colony for the first time and almost all of the adherents to the benefits of living in the Colonies were created at this balcony, which had been set in this precise location for that very reason.

Alexis pursed her lips, realized that she had to stay in character and continue to be impressed and turned to look at Hugh. "This is the Colony," she breathed as she looked back at the expanse before her, leaning on the railing and absorbing the view in all its glory.

"This is the Colony," he replied casually, watching her back, her ass, and the tight skirt fitting to perfection and giving her a definition most women would kill to have. "Like I said, you'd know it when you saw it".

"Do they all look like this?"

"For the most part, but each Colony has its own say as to how the interior looks, how much water, forest, mountains or plains. They each have their own personal touch."

"It's fantastic. It's really beyond words," she said as she regained her composure and looked at him with her crooked smile. "No wonder people want to leave the Earth forever and move here. Where are the food growing regions? I know that you don't transport it up from Earth."

"That's in the Ag-Complex beyond the far wall. We produce enough food, through genetically engineered products, to have a surplus that we actually ship to

the other Colonies still getting started. We never have to worry about food here." Hugh guided her to the elevators leading to the ground level. "Within the next three decades we expect to have twenty to thirty Colonies built, each totally self-sufficient. There's more raw material and resources in the asteroid belt than we could ever find on Earth and the mining companies are growing rapidly, increasing their efficiency at extraction with each passing day. I wouldn't be surprised if the Colonies began to exert political influence in the near future, because this is where the future lies."

She looked at him, the radiance on his face and the conviction in his voice telling her that Hugh Crow was completely convinced in what he was doing. She had her doubts about his last statement, but one never knew with the way politics ran nowadays. Twenty such colonies at 50,000 each came out to one million people. If they all stood together during elections, they could conceivably make a large impact. She began to understand more why those on the Earth wanted to maintain control so fervently. To have that many people completely independent and self-sufficient would make any politician nervous.

The elevator stopped and they stepped out to the sound of birds and children and life.

"You never did tell me where they have you staying," Hugh asked as they stood by a stop for the light-rail. "It's not like we have hotels or anything like that, at least not yet. They did give you a place to stay, didn't they?" He asked with a slight alarm in his voice, looking at her with consternation.

"Yes, they did. Someone named Grace Ackland is what I was told."

"Grace?" Hugh said as if the name was a curse. "You don't want to stay with Grace. That's where they put people they don't want to stay long. You wouldn't get along with Grace, I can guarantee you that."

Alexis saw the invitation coming from a kilometer away. He had been hitting on her since he had first spoken, even if it was subtle and well-played and she was not at all surprised that he discouraging her from staying with Grace Ackland. The thoughts floating about his mind like ping-pong balls were more than obvious enough in their connotations that she could fill out the picture reasonably well enough.

"Why don't you stay with me while you're here, Ms. Baker. I've got more than enough room," he asked with such ease and self-assurance that she had to compliment him on his technique.

The light-rail came to the station and people began to move about as the doors opened to disgorge the occupants.

"Thank you very much for the offer," she said in a light voice, trying to play hard-to-get while not turning him off completely. He still had usefulness to him that she could exploit. It was not like he was all that bad looking. "But I don't think that would be appropriate. We just met."

He smiled at her as he guided her into the light-rail and motioned for her to sit. "My wife loves to entertain visitors and I think that you two would get along quite well."

She blushed, a response she didn't have to fake. There had been nothing in his surface thoughts about a wife. Nothing. Coupled with no ring on his finger, she had taken that as proof that he was not married. That was rather embarrassing. She was beginning to

assume facts not in evidence and that was a bad sign. If she wanted to stay alive past the night, she was going to have to pay much more attention and stop daydreaming and being impressed.

This was not a vacation.

This was deadly serious.

"In that case, I'd be delighted. Thank you very much for the offer and I apologize for the assumption..."

He cut her off with a wave of his hand indicating that he had taken no offense. "Perhaps I can even help you with your investigation, or at least introduce you to the people who might know something." He looked down at his ring-less hand. "And I left my ring behind when I went planet-side, in case you were wondering."

"I was, actually, and I really do appreciate the invitation to stay with you and your wife. Staying with people can be trying sometimes. By the way, you still haven't told me who you are around here and I'm fairly well versed with the names of all the important people on this Colony and I don't remember seeing your name on any of the lists," she said innocently as she watched the landscape pass by and had to remind herself that she was inside a large cylinder in the coldness of space and not on Earth. This was one of those places where one had to constantly remember that all that stood between you and death was the common sense of those around you and the thin trans-aluminum bulkheads.

He smiled at her as the light-rail worked its way around the long lake, complete with waves and sandy beaches holding small groups of bathers in various states of undress, some even totally naked. It was

apparent to Alexis that the inhabitants of *Stargazer I* had a rather liberal idea of a dress code.

"Perhaps that's because I'm one of those rare individuals," he said with a diligent and modest air, "who are powerful enough to be able to keep our names off such lists."

* * *

Alexis stood before the laboratory once housing the offices of Dr. Mbombo Dumvo. There was no sign of the explosion that had gutted the labs back in May. The authorities had quickly repaired the damage and had the lab up and running again within weeks. The sooner people forgot about the good doctor and his death, the better.

Hugh had given her a list of names of people to whom she could speak and who might have some knowledge of the explosion. She was not surprised that it matched her own list from Cav fairly well, except for one name she noted was missing from Hugh's list but was near the top of her list. Such obvious signs were always a good place to start and so it was that she was looking for a one Dr. Tsi Shu. She had been Dr. Dumvo's primary lab assistant and one of the people whom Alexis was certain would have information that would be useful, if any such information even existed.

Alexis was convinced, from what she had seen so far and from the people that she had met, that getting information out of anyone on this colony was going to be harder than pulling teeth out of a mother grizzly bear. They had been warned, she was convinced, to

avoid answering any questions related to the doctor's death or the explosion.

And it was very telling that Dr. Shu had not been on Hugh's list. Hugh would have certainly known that Shu would know more than anyone else about Dr. Dumvo's work and his death and the very fact that her name had been left off had told her much. Hugh was not all that eager to help her despite his outward friendliness and willingness. It would have been nice to be able to contact Cav and ask him about this Hugh Crow, but she had noticed Kiril keeping a sharp watch on her and was certain that any transmission planet-side would be monitored, analyzed and dissected instantly. Any mention of Hugh's name and red flags would start rising for the man almost instantly.

No, contacting Cav was out of the question. She was on her own this time ... and that was the way she liked it anyway. She set her face into the friendly pose that was Shannon Baker and walked into the lab. There were several people wandering around, holding pocket computers, scanners or various small experiments with which they all appeared to be extremely involved. Alexis spotted Dr. Shu quickly, her resolute, impassive oriental face standing out among the other Caucasians.

She walked up to her and spoke, her accent perfect. "Neh hoh mah?"

Dr. Shu looked up at the sound of her native Cantonese tongue, her black, short-cut hair and attractive dark eyes with that distinctive Chinese look placing her in her late eighties, perhaps even older, the age-lines that one would expect not to appear

until one-hundred-and-ten or later prominent on her face.

"Ho-ho," she said in response, finding it odd that this obvious quai-loh was speaking her language extremely well. When she had first heard it, Shu had thought that another Chinese assistant had been hired. But this one was not Chinese. She had the look of trouble about her.

"Dr. Shu?" Alexis asked, though she knew exactly that this was Shu. She had memorized the doctor's dossier.

"Yes, I am Dr. Shu. What can I do for you?" She seemed perturbed that she had been interrupted and her tone indicated that she didn't want to have to talk to Alexis for very long, if at all.

"I'm Shannon Baker and I work for..."

"Yes, I know. who you are," Shu interrupted irritably, standing up from her workbench housing several computer monitors as well as special graphic interfaces. She walked over to another station and Alexis followed. "There's nothing here for you to find. It was all discussed already. The case has been closed, was an accident." Her succinct, edgy remarks told Alexis that all had not been discussed and that there was much to learn here, although perhaps not from Dr. Shu.

"I see. Well, then perhaps you won't mind answering a few questions for me that I have concerning the death of Dr. Dumvo. We've been recently lead to believe that perhaps the death wasn't as accidental as it had been thought and the survivor benefits for the spouse and the compensation for the Colony for damages can't be released until we have a firm grasp on the facts."

Dr. Shu stopped her work and looked at Alexis, her eyes intense and, Alexis could see, frightened. She probed and found that, indeed, Dr. Shu was very much afraid, thoughts of Dr. Dumvo, his work, and most interestingly, Hugh Crow foremost in her mind. And it was not a very flattering image of Mr. Crow dancing in the vivid black of Dr. Shu's surface thoughts.

Shu looked away quickly, as if aware that Alexis was reading her thoughts, and walked back over to her workbench. Alexis noticed that the other workers seemed to be stiff and edgy, as if they were listening to the conversation and were afraid that Viktorovna would walk in at any second and deport the lot of them for cooperating.

Alexis felt that Shu wanted to talk but was deathly afraid to, at least here in the lab. She spoke again, this time in a whisper. "Yin ksiao shih ta." *We lose much because of a small thing.*

Shu looked up at Alexis with rapt attention and responded back in Cantonese, just as quietly. "Yes, yes we do. You must not press me on this. I know nothing."

Alexis replied in English, hoping to draw the reluctant woman out. "Then why are you so afraid? Listen, Dr. Dumvo had an extensive insurance policy that gives his spouse and kids more money than they'll know what to do with. I could really care less about the company that runs the Colony and their money for the damages, but Dumvo's family deserves something for their loss. I know that it can't make up for his death, but at least they won't have to worry about their finances. That's all I'm trying to do here. If I can just convince my company that there was no

hanky-panky here, then I can clear this policy and get them their money. I'm sure that you can understand that." Shu looked away and was quiet, pretending to stare at her screens and absorbed in her work, but Alexis could tell that she was getting through to the woman, that her thoughts were beginning to form around bits and pieces of data about Dumvo invaluable to Alexis. If she could just reach in and drag them out of the woman's head, she would. But unfortunately, her ability didn't work like that. Anything that was suppressed or buried deeply, as was certainly the case with Shu and Dumvo, Alexis was unable to extract. Only surface thoughts were accessible. It normally gave her the advantage she needed. This was, unfortunately, not one of those times.

Shu finally turned her chair around and looked up at Alexis. "Chi pao pu chu huo," she said quietly, almost as a whisper of wind, the words pronounced delicately and distinctly, as if wanting to make sure that Alexis understood but no one else overheard.

Alexis translated with ease. *Paper cannot wrap up fire.* It was an old saying, an idiom difficult to translate if one didn't understand the hidden meaning, as was the case with most idioms. *A secret cannot be kept forever.*

"Do you want to go somewhere more private?" Alexis whispered in English, aware that the lab was most likely bugged. Perhaps everything in this Colony was bugged.

Shu switched to Mandarin and spoke harshly, her eyes flaring at the proposition spoken in plain English and out in the open. "An jing yi xia!" She was telling Alexis to watch her mouth, that there were ears and

eyes everywhere. Still in Mandarin, Shu continued. "Meet me at the Gerard Memorial park, third bench from the large acacia tree in the middle. Half hour."

Alexis nodded her head. "Doh Jeh."

"Don't thank me yet, Ms. Baker. You haven't heard what it is that I have to tell you."

Alexis spent the next thirty minutes wandering around the park Dr. Shu had specified for the meeting, enjoying the pleasant temperature and peaceful feeling she seemed to get from this Colony, almost as if every day were an idyllic cool summer day in the mountains. It almost reminded her of her mountain home, of the peacefulness that seemed to seep from the trees and grass like dew. But it was also a feeling speaking to her of something wrong. No place was this peaceful and pleasant without a price to be paid. Her own cabin in Alaska had taught her that. The lack of any companionship and the time to reflect on her own soul and its journey was more than enough of a drawback to make it suspect. And this place, out here in the void of space with its perfect climate and perfect people spoke to Alexis' soul like a knife to her heart. There was a danger here that was almost tangible.

She thought about all the information she had on Dr. Dumvo and his death, the terrible plasma fire engulfing his lab and incinerated him till all that was left were but trace elements of his existence. Her eyes narrowed as she realized that they had, actually, never found a body. All they had found were ashes mingled in with the remains of the lab structure and a missing scientist. It was a foregone conclusion that Dumvo had been the one to die, but perhaps that was wrong also. Although DNA analysis had confirmed

that the partial remains were Dumvo's, perhaps too many assumptions were being made about each of these deaths. Her own son Alex had been chewed up so much that it was a miracle anyone was able to identify him. Pratali's body was badly smashed against rocks, his head shattered and unidentifiable. Godonov had also been burned beyond recognition and Kido was shot so many times in the face that it had been a mess of blood and brains and not much else.

Perhaps that was where the connection lay. Perhaps the connection that Cav was trying so hard to make was that all the bodies had been beyond simple identification and if someone wanted all these people to disappear, what better way to do it. She had more than enough experience in such things herself to dismiss them as inconsequential. If someone had kidnapped all of them, or better yet, if they had all decided to disappear and work on their discovery in solitude, what happened to each of them would be the perfect set-up to vanish from circulation. It was a sobering thought.

Dr. Shu was punctual, as Alexis had expected, and sat down next to her on the bench, looking around her as if she had been followed. Alexis probed out with her mind to see if indeed she had been followed and found nothing but the simple folk enjoying the day in the park. But she kept up a continual survey anyway, just in case. Something didn't feel right about this whole situation and the way that Dr. Shu perceived of Hugh Crow in her surface thoughts was disturbing.

"We must keep our voices down," Shu said in Cantonese, her voice clouded with a tangible fear.

"I understand that the explosion that killed Dr. Dumvo didn't originate in his lab," Alexis started with, not wanting to jump right into the only question with which she was really concerned, namely what Dumvo was working on the side.

"Yes, that is correct. The explosion occurred in the lab next door, that shares a common wall. They were working on a new plasma containment system and they had a catastrophic failure that devastated the entire lab complex."

"But only Dr. Dumvo was killed."

"No, there were three workers also killed. Two in the plasma lab and one with Dr. Dumvo."

Alexis was intrigued. None of that had been in the reports Cav's people had compiled and it was not like Cav to leave out such important facts. Could it be that there were facts left out of her son's death also? And if that were the case, then who was holding them back? Who didn't want her to solve this little riddle?

"This may sound callous, but why weren't you killed? Weren't you his primary assistant?"

Shu looked out over the small pond sitting before them, the ducks gently glided on the water looking serene and happy. "The explosion happened at night. I don't work at night." She looked up at Alexis. "Neither did Dr. Dumvo."

Now that was something certainly not in the report, Alexis thought as she tried to understand what Shu was saying. Why would he choose that night of all nights to go to the lab then? That had to be the worst luck imaginable. "Then why was he there?"

Shu shrugged her shoulders. "This I don't know." She peered deep into Alexis' eyes a moment, then looked back at the ducks floating nearby, almost as if

trying to gauge the depth of Alexis' sincerity. "How much do you know about nano-technology?"

That was an odd question. "I know the basics, but that's about it." Alexis had to lean forward to hear the barely audible whisper Shu was using, almost like a breath of wind rather than a voice. This woman was terrified of something, that was certain.

"Back at the end of the last century when the applications and know-how necessary to create nano-technology was first realized, it was thought that the field would produce some of the most radical changes in human evolution and knowledge ever imagined. The main applications that were foreseen were all in terms of medical aspects, but it was soon discovered that although the nano-probes could be readily manufactured, the process of placing the proper instructions in them, of giving them enough memory to function properly on their own, and the ultimate rejection by the body of their presence made the effort not worth the money or time.

"Dr. Dumvo was not a great scientist. But he was a good one, who was neat and orderly and had a penchant for working hard and discovering ideas more by accident than by design. As such, his work here on *Stargazer I* was never all that important." She turned now to look at Alexis again, her eyes intense, her voice like gossamer threads. "But it was what he was working on apart from the main research grants, where he found his greatest discovery and secret. Mbombo had found a way, completely by accident, to create a system that mimicked the human mind, a nano-tech aggregate that when working together could produce the same patterns as those found in a human mind. By itself, it's nothing special. It really

has no functional application apart from the sheer interest of it, but it was a breakthrough nonetheless. He was just starting to work on a system for the aggregate to reproduce itself when he was killed."

Alexis was confused. She had expected to find out about some revolutionary break-through in medical sciences involving nano-probes and their application to human physiology. But this... It was almost as meaningless as her son's work on holographic memory, another concept that was interesting in its own right but which really held no applications to anything else since the technology of the time had already found better ways of doing the same things. And now this...

She was beginning to think that perhaps there wasn't a pattern to these killings at all in terms of their occupations. If it was not for the suspicious circumstances surrounding each death and the fact that a majority of the participants had been in communication shortly before their deaths, Alexis would think, as she had upon first seeing this mess, that there was really nothing here at all.

Her idle thought of earlier about the five dead scientists not really being dead rose again to the surface of her thoughts. "That's it?" she asked a little incredulously.

Dr. Shu turned to look at her again and narrowed her eyes. "But you don't understand," she said in English, lapsing into that language without being aware. "He would never have even been working on it if that nice young man from Earth had not spoken to him about an idea that he had. He was doing this for someone else, and that someone else has died also, just a day before Dr. Dumvo was killed. Do you not

see? There was something here, something Mbombo either didn't see or didn't share with me that was of immense importance. Why else murder the man?"

Just like Clovis, Shu had used the term murder with deliberation. Was it possible that Dr. Shu was to be the next one murdered by the mysterious assassins? And if she was, should Alexis tell her and blow her cover? Should she do something to prevent it from occurring or just ignore it and hope that she was long gone from this Colony when the assassination took place?

"What nice young man, Dr. Shu?" Alexis prodded, aware that Shu was talking about Alex. Her bout of conscience would have to wait.

"Why, the one who sent all those e-mails using that program that erased all evidence of their existence. Alex Hart I believe his name was. Yes, Dr. Alexander Hart. Dr. Dumvo liked him very much."

There's the connection again, right back to my son, "So you're saying that it was Dr. Hart who asked Dr. Dumvo to work on this project?"

"Yes," Shu said as if such a question were self-evident. "But not specifically, mind you. Dr. Dumvo had already been working along these lines. The conversations with Dr. Hart just kind of gave him an impetus and a different direction to try. It wasn't like they had a real collaboration or anything, at least not that Mbombo told me about."

Although interesting, there really was not anything new here for Alexis to use. There was nothing here accounting for their deaths or for the fear Shu was experiencing and the cloak and dagger bit on which she had insisted on by meeting in the park.

Alexis frowned slightly, wondering who she was going to visit next when Shu spoke again, still quietly, the quacking of the ducks almost overwhelming her voice. "But the most unusual thing was what Mbombo told me the day before he was killed. I asked him where he was getting all the funds from to do this extra work, because he was using much equipment and consumables and I knew that on his salary he couldn't afford all of it. It was impossible. That's when he told that it was Mr. Crow who had approached him shortly after the first communication with Dr. Hart and offered to fund the entire project, so long as he kept it quiet that he was involved."

Alexis was not surprised. Stunned would have been a far better description. Hugh knew about what Dumvo was doing. Was he the one who had him killed? She could easily see the man having that much power up here, but the question was still why? Why in the world kill the man over a discovery that didn't hold any promise? There had to be something else. And if Hugh was involved, why was he still alive? He would be the only one out of the group to have survived the assassins and oddest of all, he didn't even seem concerned about it. His business partner was killed along with all his friends and Hugh was acting as if it meant nothing to him. In Alexis' world, that could only mean that Hugh Crow knew of the assassinations beforehand and was thus a part of them.

"Now you understand my reluctance, yes?" Shu said as she stood and made to go. "I have already said too much. Hugh Crow is a powerful man and I don't want to end up like Dr. Dumvo. I must go now."

I am sorry if the information I gave you was not what you were looking for."

"Can you tell me what it is that Hugh Crow does here?" Alexis asked in exasperation. She hated being in the dark about anything and this was a major piece. Cav should have known about Crow, should have had all the dirt on the man and certainly should have known that he was involved in all this. And here she was sleeping in the man's house, as his guest.

Shu bowed to Alexis and then scampered off without answering or even acknowledging the question still hanging in the air like stale air. It was then that Alexis felt it again, her sub-conscious alerting her to the presence of one who didn't belong, the same blurred, wrongness she felt twice before. But this time there was no malevolence to it, no feeling of danger or weapons or attack as there had been with the others. This was more of a sensation of watching, listening, reaching out with the mind to try to find the gist of the discussion between Shannon Baker and Dr. Tsi Shu.

And there was something else. There was a pathos of commiseration in this one, for it was only one person she sensed and not a group, a feeling that in some odd way Alexis and the watcher were connected. It was not just because they could probably sense each other mentally, each aware of the others probes, but rather something more. It was something more along the lines of..... She could not place it.

But it was there, tangible and vibrant and real, as real as the ducks swimming in the pond or the trees providing the shade around her. And it bothered her as much as it intrigued her. This was something new,

something different from anything she had ever felt before... except for one time. There was one time in her life she had felt a connection that was anything akin to this.

She almost bolted from the bench with the conclusion she reached, a conclusion that was an impossibility. She looked around as non-chalantly as she could but saw no one within her immediate sight who looked out of place, who looked wrong as the others had. If her feeling was correct, then this mission had just taken on a whole new meaning and she would have to get in contact, personal contact, with Cav as quickly as possible before she went any further. This even put Hugh Crow's involvement on the backburner. This changed everything.

And it put her life in danger aboard *Stargazer* / far more than she had thought possible.

*Man may wish for concord, but nature knows
better what is good for the species.
Nature wants discord.*

14

**13 August 2085
0230 hrs**

Alexis lay in the comfortably small bed of the Crow's guest room, wearing the silken pajamas Cav had thoughtfully packed for her. She was surprised that Cav had not included a revealing teddy or other alluring nightwear in which she could strut around as she stared at the ceiling of the moderate-sized but lavishing decorated house. The man seemed to have become more or a admirer than a father-figure and she had to laugh about his presumptions. Like she would sleep with someone like him. Hardly.

The Colony had devised a simple yet ingenious system for creating the illusion of night-time within the main Colony, moving the solar panels to block the light from the sun and basically casting a shadow over

the Colony simulating a darkness coming straight from space itself. Unfortunately, it also blocked out any star field one would normally see, but then as she had said often before, there was always a price to pay for utopia.

Her price was not being able to sleep again.

She was having trouble figuring out what her reward was at the end of the day. For Alexis, rewards were dreams and dreams were myths created for other people who actually had life to live that didn't include having their every move planned, their birth controlled, their mind implanted with such a wealth of shit that she sometimes wondered how she had ever managed to not suffocate on her self-righteousness.

At least this time her insomnia had nothing to do with Clovis. His memory seemed to have finally sunk to that deep, dark hole that all the other deaths for which she had been responsible sank in her bottomless mind, that hole of conscience acting like a deep well, the rope for which is not long enough to reach and thus the water sits stagnant and tranquil, unperturbed by the world outside.

It was the same place she assumed all her emotions sank, refusing to see the light of day and denying her even the merest normalcy those she pitied for their over-abundance of emotions found so endearing. She was well aware that she was not normal by any competent definition. She had stopped trying to be normal at the age of ten when Cav had used her for her first assignment. She had stopped trying many things that day, which an ordinary ten year old would find enlightening.

Perhaps that was the day she had first died.

No, Clovis was not the issue tonight, though perhaps he should have been. Tonight her thoughts were fastened firmly on the revelation she had received from the shadow person whom she had seen in her mind, the revelation she knew could not be true but which she could not explain in any other way. There had been a connection there of a mother to a child like a fine gossamer thread a spider might weave on a warm spring day, drifting in the wind, just waiting for a passerby to snag and pull away into oblivion. It was a connection stronger than life and she was now beginning to believe that it was haunting her from beyond the grave in a nemesis of guilt. Because if it was not from beyond the grave, if it was not a mental projection of a lost and suppressed guilt languishing in her deep well of a mind, then it meant only one of two things: either Alexander Hart was not dead or Alexis had another child in the world who was following her, playing with her mind like a cat with a mouse till, in the end, all that was left was a shell of a body that was lifeless.

And Alexis was certain that whatever it was, whomever it was, had to do with this mission, with this seemingly disconnected series of events and data screaming at her for resolution. But more than that, more than the tenuous connections she was formulating between all these dead people, it begged the question of how she could have had another child without her knowledge. Did Alex have a twin? That was a remote possibility but one she found hard to swallow. She would have known about a twin. She had been awake during the delivery – another moment through which she would have rather slept than bear the guilt of loss. There had to be another

explanation, an explanation she was beginning to think led back to Cav.

She laughed a moment.

Everything she was seemed to lead back to Cav, as if he had been her mother in some demented way almost fitting into her life too easily.

She rolled over onto her side, stuffing the pillow under her head in brutal stabs. There was a large plate-glass window comprising one of the walls and it opened out onto a partially obstructed view of the Colony, the dimmed lights of the walkways spilling their subtle yet delicate light onto the sheets covering her like a shroud, casting their luminous shadows in soft, ethereal grays upon her mind.

There was a quiet seeping through the threshold of the windows, under the doors of the house, through the very walls surrounding her like a tomb in the darkness that seemed surreal in its intensity, lapping against the walls in ripples of solitude and tranquility, speaking volumes from the darkness outside.

Alexis had always admired the night with its hidden world emerging with the setting of the sun and the cooling of the land as if it, too, deemed it necessary to sleep in a slumber of nocturnal bliss opening the world to a peace cloaked in darkness abundant with life. It was the night that allowed her to see into the infinity that was the Universe, to see beyond the limited shell of the atmosphere humans had called home for so long. It allowed her to gaze out onto a time-machine of stars winking and twinkling and radiating like miniature candles from afar, their desolate lives forever intertwined with each other through invisible threads of gravity, whose embracing

power stretched to the very beginning of life and laid out the fabric humans so blithely called time.

The night held a mystic for her that was priceless and beyond words, that gave to her a comfort, an appeasement, a justification sweeping in from the dying day like an off-shore breeze and blowing the brumes veils of urbane compaction into tattered wisps of starlit abatement easing the mind as much as the soul in its fragmentary nebulosity. It was a time of reflection, of quiet where many of her best ideas had flourished under an expanse of Alaskan sky that seemed to stretch to heaven and back in a kaleidoscope of colors, allowing the stars their full glory, her mind its full range.

Of course, the night was also when she would do some of her best work, the sneaking and prying and stealing that had been so much a part of her life, ingrained in her like her very genetic code, a part of her she could not, even if she had wanted, remove and shake off like an old jacket passed its usefulness and no longer needed.

She was a bringer of death.

There was no getting around that and like those things who had died when she was ten, so too had any resemblance of guilt over what she did, who she was, why she existed at all died that day. For night was also a time of death, the proverbial period of evil lurking in the very shadows of the day lingering in the dusk and giving to the penumbra silhouette of man his concept of self, the monsters of the subconscious allowed to roam freely, their cages of the mind unlocked. Night was darkness and darkness was shadows and shadows were hiding places for that which we, as a species, know exists within our selves

but which we deny with a vigor that goes beyond mere denial and eats away at our souls like a cancer, giving it the dark wings of flight where evil lurks and rides in its passage across the moonless phantom of our anima.

It was here, in the night, that life was at its most precious, that humans had, since their first primitive step onto the stage of life, been afraid due to their lack of defense to the mysteries lurking within the dark embrace of eternal mysticism. And it was here, in the dark of the Colony, in the house of a man whom she now knew to be deeply involved in all that she was finding, that she found herself listening to the silence permeating the air like a fog, laying in her silken pajamas feeling so delicate and sinful against her body in such stark contrast to the abrasion she felt in the air.

Crow had never been mentioned anywhere in Alex's journal entries. Not even as a shadowy non-entity. There was nothing to lead her to believe that her son had any contact with Hugh Crow and yet, his willingness to front the money for Dumvo's experiments, approaching the good doctor without ever having been asked and knowing what the project entailed spoke of a knowledge that had to have included Alex. Had to. There was no way that this project, which seemed at the present moment to have been the brain-child of her son and Kido Nakamura, could have involved a man like High Crow without the principle players knowing of it.

There had to be something she was missing. There was a clue here staring her in the face that she couldn't see, or perhaps didn't want to see for the connotations it would surely imply.

And that intrigued her more than anything else.

She felt him coming to the front door, his heavy, musky, masculine mental projection like a hammer to her mind. He opened the unlocked door and worked his way quietly through the house to Alexis' room, his thoughts a rushing trainload of sexual tension whose outlet she knew all too well. He knew the house, knew the layout, knew where she was as if he had done this a hundred times before and now it was by rote.

She readied herself for the assault, stretching one long leg out of the sheets so that its bareness lay like enticing bait, the smooth curves of her partially exposed buttocks sure to gain the attention of the intruder. She also knew this game by rote, having played it to its deadly conclusion more than one time.

The door opened on silent hinges and she closed her eyes in a feint of sleep, ready to explode at him the moment he touched her. Kiril Andrevevich Viktorovna had a lascivious smile that would have appalled the most hardened sexual entertainment employee, his gaze fastening tightly on her exposed body as if it were his to do with as he pleased. And as far as he was concerned, it was.

She could tell that this was not the first time that this man had done this, had violated a woman on the Colony with his absolute power and then covered it up with his corruption. She was beginning to see more of the price to be paid for the varnish of serenity glazing over the Colony like a sugarcoated bitter pill, a glazing hiding a world of powerful forces with baneful intent.

She wondered if Hugh Crow knew Kiril did this, that he was here now at her bedside, in his house, ready to have his way with Shannon Baker and then deport

her, or even eliminate her, with the ease of a spoken word. She almost laughed again. Of course Hugh Crow knew. Despite his open hospitality, Mr. Crow wanted Insurance Investigator Shannon Baker out of his hair as badly as the others did. Unfortunately for Kiril Andrevevich Viktorovna, it was not Shannon Baker in the bed.

He laid his big, fleshy, sweaty hand on her lower leg and slowly, gently began to move it up to her firm, tan thigh -- his pants tightening under the constrictions of his lust -- then higher to that luscious, wet place holding the pleasures of a thousand worlds.

With a quickness stunning him into in-action she spun up and around and grabbed his wrist in a vise-like grip, her eyes burning at him in the semi-darkness like fanned coals. "You picked the wrong girl to rape," she hissed in a controlled spray of rage.

He flushed apoplectically, his smile forced yet devious. "I like it when it gets rough, slut," he ejaculated sardonically at her as he struggled to free his hand and, finding her grip far stronger than he had ever imagined, brought his other hand around to strike her a forceful blow across the face and teach her what power was and where women belonged.

Alexis knew at that moment that the only thing that would stop this man was his death, his rapid death. If nothing else, she needed to stop him from doing to anyone else and perhaps atone for all the girls who had cowered under his male-driven lust. She moved with the rapidity of a cat on the attack, her hand a blur of motion. She opted for a throat blow. It was the easiest and least messy option and would eliminate any screams he might emit. In an instant she punctured the trachea by splintering the delicate

bones beneath the jaw. His death came quickly, a gurgling sound escaping from his mouth as his eyes lost their spark in a dull fading of life heralding his swift end.

She allowed his body to slump to the floor unceremoniously as she wiped her hand on the sheets to get rid of the greasy slime of his sweat. It was then she sensed the others, those that had been waiting for Kiril to finish so that they too could have their turn, his vaunted security force that every one publicly admired and privately dreaded. And she also felt her again, that presence she felt in the park after talking to Dr. Shu, that presence that had caused her such consternation, like a shade in the background, watching, waiting, knowing.

This time she was not alone, for there were four other blurred images standing around her, the space they occupied distorted as if time itself stood still within it.

Time itself...

The thought perked something in her mind but she didn't have the luxury to follow it up. She would have to leave and do it quickly and quietly. It no longer mattered that she was Shannon Baker or Alexis Locke. All that would matter to those in power here on the Colony was that she had killed Kiril. No one would believe that he had tried to rape her, of that she was certain. Breaking cover was no longer a concern.

Living was.

She ripped open her luggage and pulled out the two weapons Cav had hidden and that the ignorant security guard who was too busy staring at her breasts had missed. One she belted around her

silken pajamas as she haphazardly pulled on a pair of tight jeans. The other she held in her hand at the ready. She grabbed the computer scanner, the explosives – that Cav had also been kind enough to hide in her hair conditioner – and her pocket computer, stuffed them into her smaller bag and opened the side window in the bathroom. She suffused the minds of the security force with an image of her and Kiril in the bedroom having riotous sex, then crawled out and melted into the subtle shadows falling in shafts among the tall trees and shrubbery.

Unfortunately, she could sense that that the woman and her four companions were not fooled by the ruse easily placating the guards. If they chose to aid in the chase, Alexis was in for a difficult next few hours.

Having memorized the layout of the main colony area on the trip up to *Stargazer I*, she quickly decided on a course and made for the secondary docking port attached to the Ag-Section. She had missed by several hours the return trip of the rapid transport that the now dead Kiril had wanted her to take, so she would need to devise another plan of getting off as quickly as possible. There was no way she could stay here. Shannon Baker was now a liability and she had learnt over the decades that liabilities generally ended up dead.

She also needed to urgently speak to Cav. He needed to know, if he didn't already, that there were more people involved with whatever the five dead scientists had been working on and they were still alive and kicking. What she really needed to do was kick Cav in the balls and demand that he tell her all that he had left out of the reports, of the pre-mission briefings because she was now dead certain that

there was a whole hell of a lot more to this than just five dead people. But first, she needed to ditch the woman and her four companions before they decided that it was time for Alexis Locke to disappear. She was well aware that it was not going to be easy. But then when was it ever easy?

Although the Colony had an overabundance of escape pods should the unthinkable occur and a mass evacuation be necessary, they could only be activated if a Colony-wide emergency was declared and although that was not a bad idea at the moment, the only way to create such an emergency was to either break into the main control center or actually cause an emergency. Neither prospect attracted her much.

She noticed that the light-rail didn't run at night, making her trek to the Ag-Section that much harder. It was a good four kilometers from her current position. It was not that far of a hike under normal circumstances but with her little entourage in tow, it might be the longest four clicks she had ever run. She made it to the airlock in a little under eight minutes, sweat glistening on her forehead and making her silken pajama top cling to her bare breasts with a rather erotic sensation as her nipples rubbed against the satiny material. She stared at the lock mechanism keeping the air-tight hatch locked and knew instinctively that there had to be another way, a way that would allow greater access for all the workers toiling daily in the hydroponics sections of the Colony.

She thought back to the schematics of the Colony, brought up the plans in her head, found the entrance for which she was looking and made toward it to her

left. It was not long after that that she felt their presence, a phalanx of Colony police making their way toward her. No, not toward her but toward the entrance to the Ag-Section, their thoughts betraying the fact that they were indeed after her but had no clue as to where she was at the moment. They were just blocking off the more obvious escape routes.

She waited and watched from behind a full, leafy bush as the police opened the large, hanger bay-type doors separating the main Colony from the Ag-section and went in, leaving two guards behind to watch over the entrance. She quickly figured out that unless she wanted to create a mass hysteria among the police force and put the name of Shannon Baker on the ten most wanted list, she was going to have to find another way to get to the escape pods. There was no way she would be able to take out all the guards blocking the entrance without attracting the attention of more of them. It was also obvious that now, with the likely discovery of Kiril's body, she would not be able to just waltz onto the transport and leave.

There was a stabbing pain in her chest for a moment, then the report of a weapon, the high-pitched whine and thwack of a silencer audible to her superior hearing. She was knocked over by the impact, the momentum of the ultra high-velocity projectile transferring itself to her body in an instant of searing, white-hot pain, the unexpected shock taking her completely by surprise. She instantaneously isolated the affected area with her mind, cutting off the flow of electrical impulses telling her mind that she was in pain. Next, she began the process of healing, setting her own body to work to regenerate itself from

the damage the bullet had created on its trajectory through her body.

Fortunately for her it had missed any vital organs, only shredding the skin and tissue above her left breast and chipping her clavicle, tearing apart blood vessels in its pernicious path and shattering muscle as it exited her back in a spread of crimson blood.

"Shit!" she exclaimed out loud, the pain having subsided and the gushing blood ebbing to a trickle and then stopping altogether. "Those fuckers shot me. What the hell?" She crawled away from the area in which she had been hiding, trying to ascertain exactly who it was that had fired on her and where they were located. She found them quickly enough, the stampeding beat of multiple-booted feet coming to her quickly a hundred meters across the grassy knoll situated between her and the first house.

She made her way back toward the lake, remembering that there was an emergency escape station on the other side of the library structure butting up against the shore on the far side. That would have to be her next attempt.

An alarm began to wail, a whining, lonesome, annoying noise grating against her nerves for the thirty seconds it sounded. It was followed by an announcement for the residents of the Colony to stay in their houses as there was a fugitive on the loose and the police would be capturing her shortly. She was considered armed and dangerous and no one should attempt to apprehend her for any reason.

Alexis came to the rather sudden but not unsurprising opinion that this was getting more serious much quicker than she had anticipated and

she would need to do something soon or else end up a trophy on the wall of the local authorities.

There was fusillade of shooting at her as she dove for cover behind a mound of grass, a bullet nipping her lower leg. She quickly set her body to work on that wound. It was a bad place to be wounded for someone who needed to move quickly, but then was not this par for the course? She could easily remember a dozen times when she had been shot or stabbed and none of them helped her mood at the present moment.

She sensed about with her mind and found that the police had anticipated her move and blocked her off from her intended escape route. This was something about which Cav had been correct: the police force was fanatic and efficient, especially with the death of their revered leader inspiring them. She looked down at the blood-encrusted jeans now plastered to her lower leg with a congealed mass of plasma. This was not working according to plan. She drew her weapon free from its holster and pulled out some of the explosives she had brought along. She was hesitant about using explosives on what amounted to a space station, not sure what a series of explosions would do to the Colony, but hoped that the million or so metric tons of dirt comprising the ground would absorb the majority of the blast. The last thing she wanted was to puncture the outer skin of the Colony and create a catastrophe.

Well, maybe it was not the last thing she wanted. Setting the micro-timer for five seconds, she heaved the small ball of high-density plastic explosives and then ran in a low crouch as best she could with her wounded leg. The explosion rocked the ground

beneath her with a force far in excess of that which she expected and it spilled her to the grass in a tumble. She stood back up, the soreness in her chest and leg beginning to make it through the mental block she had placed, and continued to move, getting another ball of the putty-like explosive ready.

She should not be feeling any pain, her advanced pain-blocking techniques capable of easily handling the wounds she had sustained. She had worse. There was that time in Istanbul when that stupid hawker had ... She dropped the image from her mind and concentrated. Something else was interfering with the process. Perhaps even *someone* else was interfering as she sensed the shadow woman hovering close-by, watching and waiting, for what Alexis had no idea. It was almost as if she were testing Alexis, or perhaps even waiting until the police force had wounded Alexis enough so that she would not be such a threat, only to sweep in and take Alexis out herself.

She took a quick look back and saw a blackish cloud with tints of orange highlights rising into the air, its presence in the darkness of the Colony night foreboding. She looked down at the wad of explosives in her hand and wondered how it could have created such a large explosion. What had Cav given her? It certainly was not the normal explosive material with which she was familiar. There was no way that such a small ball of it would produce an explosion that large. Maybe she had been out of the action for too long. Maybe what she held in her hand was now the standard issue explosives all agents received. She felt a laugh escape through her

clenched teeth. What other agents? She was all that Cav had.

Three police stepped out from behind a grouping of low trees directly before her. She didn't think, just reacted. In an instant she fired three, precise rounds echoing through the air like a beacon, the harsh sound of the rapid-fire, high-velocity hand gun more or less lost in the cacophony that was the explosion she had created. The three guards fell with small, bloody holes in their foreheads and the back of their skulls blasted out in a crater of scrambled gray matter and bone fragments.

She continued to move, knowing that stopping would be her end. She could sense the presence of the guards moving in behind her, of the guards moving to block her path toward the lake ahead of her. They knew her moves, her path.

Of course! She chided herself as she began to think of a new plan. They probably have sophisticated monitoring systems in place throughout the Colony to keep an eye on everything, if not for security reasons then for engineering reasons. *They can easily track me, especially if I continue to make big explosions and fire off weapons. Why am I being so sloppy? Think Alexis, think! This is your life your playing with here and at the moment it's not going all that well, in case you had not noticed.*

She found herself moving back toward the Ag-Section hanger bay doors and found, to her surprise, that there were now only two people guarding the large entrance.

A trap.

They were herding her toward the Ag-Section. But why? She had no choice. She could feel them

coming up behind her, closing the noose. She took aim and laid out the two guards standing by the entrance with clean shots, then sprinted through the large hanger-like entrance and into the Ag-Section...

... and bright sunlight, the long rows of assorted grains, corns and vegetables stretching off into the far distance. It was obvious to her that this part of the Colony was not subject to the shadow cast by the solar panels and thus in perpetual sunlight to facilitate twenty-four hour growing. She remembered reading something about that and finding it interesting. Now it was just annoying. Shielding her eyes with a hand from the harshness of the bright light, she took her bearings and made toward the nearest escape pod station, then stopped. That was what they would be expecting. She would have to start thinking differently or else they would certainly corner her like a rabid animal and treat her just as badly.

She didn't have much time to think.

A series of plasma blasts rocked the ground around her as guards came pouring in from the main Colony and from the far side of the cornstalks, closing in on her with newer, more powerful weapons and the intention of not capturing her alive. She had killed too many now for them to even begin to think about having mercy.

Although panic, the silent killer of people in her position, was not setting in, she was beginning to get a little nervous. She was getting too old for all this crap.

A plasma blast grazed her right leg and it took all of her will power to not scream out in agony and fall over. "Son-of-a-bitch!" she exclaimed as she again isolated the blistered burn, the blackened skin and

oozing, bubbly flesh transmitting that sickly-sweet malodor so common to burnt, human flesh. It was not a large wound, but it was big enough; big enough to cause her major problems.

She thought a moment, sensed where and how the guards were moving, then made her break for the Colony maintenance center off to her left, one of the few places free of converging guards. A plan was forming in her mind that was risky but might just be the only way out of this mess. She sprinted over to the maintenance center and through the open door, closing and sealing it behind her. Working her way toward the area where those personnel who worked on the outer structures of the Colony, in the vacuum of space, had their equipment, she found what she was looking for.

Five of the massive, advanced Human Enhancing Equipment, or HEEs, stood in their power-restoration cubicles recharging. Three were still in the process of renewing their energy supplies. The other two showed green lights across the boards, indicating that they were ready to be used. The HEEs were made out of high-impact poly-duranium metallic compounds giving a dull, metallic silver sheen to them and an indestructibility making them very safe and stable platforms for the work for which they were intended.

They were anatomically correct with two tremendous, jointed arms and two equally enormous legs allowing the user, who stood in a transparent-aluminum bubble atop the device, unlimited visual access. The HEEs were controlled through an advanced system of virtual reality controls. Simply moving the arms or legs of the operator created the identical movement for the HEE, from walking to

climbing to manipulating the powerful hands to turn in a bolt or easily lift objects with masses of several metric tons.

They had been a godsend to the Colonies. Much of the necessary work on the solar panels, the lattice-work repair of girders and transparent panels, even the construction of the Colony itself had been made possible by their advent. They contained a simple yet effective life-support system allowing the user not to have to wear any type of bulky pressure suit as they sat comfortably within the heated dome. And they were tough, capable of surviving repeated micro-meteor strikes and even larger impacts on their hardened bodies without so much as a scratch.

She hit the activation switch on the closest powered-up HEE, threw her remaining equipment into the storage bin on its side, then climbed up the three meters to the access portal that slowly yawning open for her. She had read about these devices several years ago and had memorized the schematics and the operating instructions, but that was not the same as actual experience. As she settled into the operator's seat, placing the communications gear on and strapping herself in, she had the uncanny feeling that this was going to a rough ride. She began flipping switches both manually and mentally, bringing up the command sequences that would allow her to move and ordering the inner airlocks to open so that she could get out.

With the clearing of the initial start-up routines and the self-test, she was given a green board and took her first tentative step out of the re-charging station. It was almost her last. She stepped much too short and quickly had to thrust her arms out and heavily

plant her other foot to keep from toppling over onto her face. She shook her head in self-disappointment. She was going to have to be more careful about this.

Why are you going through all this trouble? A voice chimed in her head, a voice not her own but sounding familiar somehow, intruding into her inner sanctuary and giving her pause for a moment. She had never been communicated with like this before, not when she had her defenses up and it was disturbing that this person had been able to break through.

They'll never let you out and if they do, they'll let you stay out there until your use up your life-support and then they'll go out and pick up your life-less body. Just give up and I'll make certain that you're not harmed

Alexis began to walk the HEE awkwardly toward the open inner airlock, the bright, revolving blue lights of the air-lock warning system giving the room an air of the surreal.

She answered the voice back, knowing somehow that it was coming from the shadow woman, the distortion of the words almost as if they were out of phase with her own mind, a distortion within them that spoke of a phase shift. *Fuck you. Those clowns with the plasma rifles don't give a damn about your concerns. They're going to fry me for the death of their beloved, sick boss and there's nothing that you can do about it, so I'd rather pick my own method of death.*

She finally made it into the air lock and ordered the doors to close, her walking becoming smoother with each step as she became used to the device and its control systems. A plasma blast scorched the outer hull of the HEE, but except for the burnt paint, left it

undamaged. She looked into her rear-view projectors and saw that the guards were setting up a heavy plasma rifle that would surely penetrate the thick armor of the HEE after a few well-placed shots.

She would have to work quickly.

She noticed that the inner doors would not close. The guards were sending in conflicting orders to the main air-lock computer and it was uncertain what was wanted. With the inner doors still open, the outer doors leading to the cold of space would never open. Not unless, that was, she could convince the computer that the inner doors were closed. She accessed the main computer through the HEE and began to hack in, working calmly and efficiently against the guards who were trying to keep her from getting out, trying to kill her.

You're being foolish, the voice scolded her. This is unnecessary. *There's no reason for you to have to die.*

Tell that to the boys with the heavy plasma rifle, idiot, she responded with a hint of annoyance. This woman, whomever she was, was becoming old very quickly. *I don't think that they feel the same way.* She worked rapidly through the inner-locks and the safety protocols, trying to fool the main computer into thinking that the inner air lock was closed so that the outer doors would open.

You won't be successful, the voice said, still in that same collected, matter-of-fact tone she had been using all along, as if somehow she knew that taking a harsher tone would be useless. *This is a dead end.*

Dead end this bitch, Alexis exclaimed as the activation of the rotating red lights above her heralded the opening of the outer air-lock doors and her

success. As the pressure seal was broken and the doors slowly opened, the pressure differential between the interior of the Colony and space made itself known in a rush of outward air, taking with it everything not bolted down, and some things that were. She looked into the rear-view projectors and saw the terror on the faces of the guards as the worse possible scenario was becoming reality.

With the inner doors wide open, the Ag-Section of the Colony was now exposed to the rapacious appetite of nearly pressure-less space. Bodies began to fly past Alexis -- safe in her HEE, its mass more than enough to off-set the brutal wind -- as they were pulled out of the Colony. She watched as they writhed and jerked in unimaginable agony and then exploded in a silent flash of crimson gore congealing into tiny, floating, sparkling spheres as their flesh was unable to support the pressure gradient and detonated. Disregarding this gruesome scene, Alexis walked out through the airlock doors and began to make her way along the main access gantry toward the nearest escape pod station.

Inside the Colony, it was a different story.

Terrifying alarms began to wail in abject consternation, their shrill, piercing tones waking up the inhabitants of *Stargazer I* to the horror that was never supposed to happen. The hanger-like doors separating the Ag-Section from the main Colony slammed home with a ringing finality. The lattice-work of girders and transparent aluminum panels that were supported as much by the pressure in the Colony as by their own integral design, began to shiver and buckle as the pressure dropped with a rapidity that didn't seem possible for the small opening of the outer

lock, the howling of the wind created like a tornado, rumbling through the fields of wheat and barley and corn, the cattle and pigs and other assorted animals sensing the change and becoming nervous, stampeding away from the danger.

Emergency safety procedures were immediately instituted and heavy airlocks began to shut throughout the complex, sealing off areas from the escaping gases and isolating the maintenance section.

Those guards unfortunate enough to be trapped inside, at least twenty of them, didn't have a chance. As the pressure dropped and dropped with the escape of the vital life-support gases, those who had been able to grab onto something to arrest their flight quickly lost consciousness and were pulled out anyway to die a horrible, bloody death leaving grisly remnants of their battered bodies floating around the Colony like some macabre set of orbiting, bejeweled moons.

And Alexis felt nothing.

Although she had never intended to cause so much death and destruction as was apparent, she felt nothing toward those who were dead, were dying or were about to die. Life was harsh and those on the security detail – an awful lot of them for a Colony supposedly so crime free – had signed up for adventure and here it was. Besides, they worked for Kiril and Kiril was a bastard. There was no reason to feel sorry for any of them

But it seemed to her, as she made her way along the main service gantry, that wherever she ended up, death and destruction followed in a sanguinary trail of mayhem. She had fleeting thought of why that might be but passed it over as more pressing matters took

her attention. Her chest was stinging from the hole in it, her body working over-time to repair the damage she had sustained and her leg was pounding away at her senses like a hammer and anvil.

She had never before thought about dying, death having been an integral part of her life for so long that death was nothing but another word to describe what life was. And now was not much different, although she was beginning to have thoughts of all the things she would miss. But more than that, she was irritated to no end that her body was refusing to cooperate and heal itself properly. Where the hell were all these damnable useless thoughts coming?

"Mrs. Baker. You need to return to the nearest airlock and turn yourself in," Hugh Crow's voice blared through her earpiece. "I know who you are."

Alexis was tempted to rip the communications set off her head so that she wouldn't have to listen to his voice, a voice she now associated with Kiril and all the corruption that must be taking place in this far-from-utopian Colony.

"I know that you can hear me and I know that your name is not Shannon Baker."

What was he implying? Only Cav knew what her real name was and if this Hugh Crow knew it also, then she was definitely going to wrap Cav's balls around his neck. "You've got the wrong person, Hugh," she said back with a hint of panic in her voice, as Shannon Baker would be experiencing at the moment.

"Do I really? I was warned about your arrival. Why the hell do you think I was able to get your through the inspection and past Kiril? You know, you didn't need to kill him. That was stupid."

"Fuck you, Hugh. He wasn't trying to rape you, now was he?" She saw up ahead the first of the escape pod stations. She also saw a sight making her heart skip a beat. There was another HEE making its way toward her from the far side of the escape pod station.

"Come on in and we can talk about it. I had no idea what Kiril was doing. He has access to all the buildings and houses here. This wasn't suppose to happen this way," Hugh pleaded with her in false sincerity that was so obvious to Alexis it almost made her want to puke.

She ripped the communications set off her head and started to walk faster to the station but she could tell that there was no way she would beat the other HEE. She wondered who had been adroit enough to don another HEE and figure out where she was headed. She didn't have to wonder long.

You're making a big mistake, Alexis.

She almost stopped. The use of her name was a shock. Who was this person who could so easily penetrate her mental shields and who knew her real name? She had a very bad feeling starting to boil in her stomach that she had been set up, that this whole trip had been one big trap. Could Cav be capable of that? *Yeah, Cav was more than capable of something like this, but he was not behind this. It was that bitch Claudine Maxwell. She was the only other person with the access, the power, and the balls to have done something this asinine.*

I don't want to hurt you, but you're making it harder and harder for me to justify not killing you, the voice implored.

Alexis and the other HEE stopped when they were within four meters, staring each other down as Alexis

saw that her adversary was the woman she had felt all along. She had dirty blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, fine facial features speaking of a beauty rivaling Alexis' with full red lips and a body looking strong and firm, hard and powerful. There was something familiar about it, but Alexis didn't have the inclination to figure it out at the moment.

Alexis squinted, finding it hard to concentrate on the face as it appeared to shimmer, fluctuate as if it were there one second then gone the next, like a malfunctioning holo-vid. *Who are you?* she asked as they faced off. It really was not the question she wanted to ask, but it was the first one that popped into her mind and consequently to her lips.

Someone who wants to help you.

Alexis narrowed her eyes and studied the adversary in front of her closely. She tried a mind probe and found, to her dismay, that there was nothing there. Not that her mind was empty. She certainly knew better than that. It was more as if the person herself was not there, as if what she was seeing before her was indeed but a reflection of a physical body that wasn't present. A wave of distortion seemed to cross her face for a fraction of a second, like a weak-signal on a holo-vision screen. Alexis would have said that it was a hologram, a projection of something somewhere else if it wasn't for the physical bearing, the physical impression she could feel with her mind in the other HEE, a feeling of a person who was there but not there, as if lost somehow in a transitional state that was not a natural part of this Universe.

It was the same phenomena as the attackers at the cabin, the assassins at the deli, the watchers in the park. It was beginning to frustrate her, a feeling she

hated. Frustration was an emotion and right now she didn't need any emotions clouding her senses. What were these people? Who were they? She doubted very much that they had any connection whatsoever with the military, at least not any human military force and the thought that they might be extra-terrestrials put a lump in her throat she didn't need nor want at the moment. She didn't believe in little green men from other planets traveling to Earth to explore the irresistible human race.

If there was intelligence in the universe other than humans, they would be more than smart enough not to engage in any experiments of contact with a species as hostile and ignorant as humanity, of that she was certain. But the possibility was there for her to explore. Were the five assassinated people about to discover some secret to which another civilization didn't want Humans to have access? Was Hugh Crow one of them?

A corner of her mouth rose up slightly as the idea was discarded out of hand. Alexis had the feeling that whatever this was, it had a very down-to-Earth, human side to it, having had that all too familiar stench of human power and corruption.

A powerful blast shook the gantry on which she was standing, transferring to the massive HEE with a shudder and shaking her with a vengeance in her seat. The gantry began to buckle under the strain. She looked at her rear-view projectors and was dismayed to see a large cloud of debris, dirt, trees, bodies and equipment, all tinged with an orange-reddish cast blowing out like a slow motion cloud into space.

The rapid decompression of the airlock staging area had caused an explosive reaction ripping open a portion of the side of the Ag-Section, exposing even more of the Colony to the merciless appetite of space. A catastrophic progressive explosive de-compression was starting and Alexis was uncertain if it could be stopped.

The onboard computer spoke up in one of those calm and detached voices that usually had the opposite effect on people, creating a panic in them at the temerity of the computer in telling them in that calm voice that they were all about to die. "Emergency status Alpha One has been reached. All personnel will need to make their way to the nearest non-affected airlock and prepare for evacuation."

A map flashed onto one of the many screens before her as well as onto the HUD covering one of her eyes, out-lining the quickest and safest way to the nearest escape pod station. There was another explosion and the whole Colony seemed to shudder, as if it knew that it had been mortally wounded. The gantry gave way under the two immovable legs of the HEE and both Alexis and her foe were suspended in the null-gravity of space as the side of the Colony to which the gantry had been attached splintered away in a silent, grinding turmoil.

A flash out of the corner of Alexis' eye caught her attention and she was just in time to see the other HEE come flying at her intentionally. They collided in a fury of metal on metal. Alexis was sent tumbling away from the escape pod station by the momentum of the impact. She reached out and grabbed, trying to get a hold of anything solid to arrest her motion. Then she remember that the HEEs had propulsion units on

them, which of course was how her opponent had managed to get one up on her and slam into her like that. As Alexis activated the reaction-control thrusters and stabilized her tumble, she suddenly realized that she should have sensed the attack that just hit her.

Her opponent had covered it, hidden it mentally from her and that in itself was a problem Alexis didn't expect to ever face. First, her opponent had been able to break through Alexis' mental defenses and now she was blocking her own thoughts and attacking from a blind position. If it were not for this woman trying to kill her, Alexis would actually be very interested in talking to her.

Was this another of Cav's creations? A later version of herself? Was that why she looked so familiar?

Alexis was hit again hard, from the blind side and she slammed her head against the dome, sending searing lances of pain through her skull, her sight blanking out for several moments. She would have to put a stop to this. Clearing her head, she stabilized her tumble again and flew off to the other side of the Colony, which was shaking and shuddering under the explosions that were the precursor to the complete de-stabilization of the structure and a cataclysmic event.

Reaching out with her mind, she found her adversary charging around after her, trying to cut her off. An escape pod station came into view and Alexis headed toward it, hoping to reach the airlock and get inside before the other HEE made it around to this side.

Other escape pods were starting to explode off from the Colony and careen back toward Earth in slow,

low-burn orbital flights that would take them to a safe landing on the solid ground of pre-determined landing areas.

Alexis saw none of it.

This was now her only chance.

She reached the airlock and opened the outer doors. As she stepped the HEE in she was hit from behind again, the impact slamming both of them into the inner doors with such force that they buckled and bent to the sound of alarms. Warnings began to blare in Alexis' ears as her HEE, not meant to take this much punishment, was starting to come apart, sparks erupting from various instruments and broken relays before her.

She swung with all her might and slammed hard into the dome of the other HEE, knocking it back against the far wall where it fell to the floor, a hairline crack forming along the center of the plexi-glass. Alexis scrambled up and tried to open the inner doors, but the HEEs impact into them had caused too much damage and they were jammed. There was a muffled explosion and the floor under her shifted and groaned. More escape pods erupted off in shards of insulation and pressure seals.

Alexis didn't see much hope for getting passed the jammed doors and started to leave. Something grabbed her from behind. She twisted and kicked up, cracking the dome even further. Her adversary released her grip as she noted that she was in peril and needed to look after-herself before her HEE ruptured open. As Alexis was about to step out of the airlock and make her way to a new one, finally able to move without the annoyance of getting hit constantly, an explosion behind her grabbed hold of the HEE and

lifted it out among the debris that was the Colony, slamming Alexis' head hard back against the seat and knocking her out cold.

But before blackness fell over her eyes and her mind in a soothing sheet of oblivion, a voice penetrated her mind, soft and easy, reaching her across space in a last gesture of defiance.

We shall meet again, Alexis Locke.

*Truth generally lies in the coordination
of antagonistic opinions.*
— Spencer

15

**15 August 2085
0730 hrs
Washington, D.C.**

The summer lay heavy on the city, as heavy as the corruption permeating the rarefied air of this district without a soul since its first brick was laid. The stifling humidity was like a cloying blanket, sucking the very vitality out of those mortals brave enough to go outside and those unfortunates without the capability to have air conditioning, reducing to a minimum all non-essential movement and non-essential life.

It was one of those summers when people wondered why they even bothered to live in a city at all. The heat sapped all strength, leaving one with the desire to neither move nor lay still, a wetness covering the soul as much as the skin with even the

slightest movement. Even the trees hung down with trepidation in their leaves, limp and broken, waiting for the coolness of the night that never came and draining all their color until all that was left was a dull, vibrant-less green, looking more like a washed out sock than a living organism.

It was a heat that baked the brain.

Inside the White House, with its corridors oozing a power almost tangible, the elite of the puissance went about their daily lives in the oblivion of air-conditioning, unaware of the millions their petty decision affected, of the singular lives destroyed by the isolation of the decision-makers. Like the heat, the policies of those who walked these halls were unmoved by the plight of those affected, continuing in torrid waves of apathy.

In the Oval Office, the nucleus of this power that corrupts by its very presence, President Heather O'Rourke was in one of her very rare moods, a mood giving those who thought so little of her a tiny glimpse of the leader she could be, she would be were she allowed out from under the heavy hand of those who wanted her position and power and knew that the only way to get it was to control her completely.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" she screamed with a lethal vehemence. "Do you have any idea what the ramifications of this are going to be? *Do you?*! Who the *hell* authorized you to destroy half of Stargazer I, because I sure as God-damned hell DIDN'T DO IT!!" Her face was two shades beyond red, the veins on her petite neck standing out like jackhammers.

Cav sat in a plush chair, his corpulent body hanging down in the heat like wet rags, his forehead soaked in

a sweat running down the side of his face in streaks of glistening indolence. He projected an affectation of deep thought with a querulous contempt hiding just beneath the surface. His hair stuck up in quaint little tufts, as if he had not deemed it necessary to comb it, or had been summoned so quickly that he had not the time for such trivial matters. He was trying to look chided, mollified, even terrified at the tantrum the President was directing toward him, at her very well taken points concerning the debacle on the O' Neill Colony, but she was becoming tedious and Cav had much better things to do at the moment than listen to this chattel.

But whenever he tried to get a word in edge-wise, to explain a particular point or defend himself and his agents from her misplaced wrath, Mrs. O'Rourke would cut him off with a renewed attack, which he was obliged to listen to with a blithe expression on his face, wanting to look at his watch but not daring. She was in her second half-hour, going on and on about the repercussions and the dangers and the political fallout and yada, yada, yada. She turned away from him and stared out the curtained windows, past the Secret Service men standing guard outside, holding a glass of scotch, neat, in her shaking hand, the other hand firmly and irretrievably planted on her hip. "We *already* have a bad relationship with the governing council of the Colonies and their misplaced beliefs that we're trying to take over control and bind them to the Earth and now this. Is this how your best works?" She turned to look at him as she drank robustly of the alcohol. "Because if it is, then you'd better start looking for a new line of work. This is absolutely unacceptable. UNACCEPTABLE! Do you hear me?"

Scotch splashed out of her beveled glass as she railed at him without remorse. "What was she thinking? Can you at least answer me that? What the *hell* was she thinking to kill the chief of police, go on a shooting and bombing spree through the main Colony and then, as if that wasn't enough to piss off everyone and their uncle, jam the inner air lock and open the outer doors so that there's an explosive decompression that wipes out the majority of the food producing capability of the Colony?!" She looked at him as if waiting for an answer she didn't want to hear or believe anyway, then went back to her pacing before the curtained windows looking out onto the stifling heat of the morning air, a haze obscuring most everything beyond a kilometer or so.

She went to drink but found, to her dismay, her glass now empty, most of the contents absorbed into the plush carpet and the presidential seal. She went to fill it back up again, saw the quaint if not amused expression on Cav's face and set the glass down on her desk instead, pushing strands of hair out of her eyes and taking a long, hard breath sounding more like a sigh than an inhalation. "I'm just glad, *damn* glad that they'll never know that she wasn't who she claimed to be, that she was just this insurance investigator who went space mad or whatever it is they call it, that she was killed and her body never recovered and *no one* will ever find out that she was part of this administration and sent by this government to a Colony to..." her voice broke off as if the thought was too terrible for her to utter, her hand going up to her forehead as if a headache were forming, then down to her mouth, which she wiped as she eyed Cav out of the corner of her eyes.

She tried to speak, to put voice to her thoughts but found her words far too impolite even for this fat lard of a man and bit back her more caustic comments as she put hands to hips again, her nostrils flaring with each intake of breath.

She fixed her feverishly glittering eyes on Cav and saw, for the first time, that the man, though feinting to be humbled, was in fact bored with the whole routine and this made her even madder. "Am I boring you, Dr. Cavalier? Does it bore you when the President of your country catches you in a blunder that you fail to take responsibility for? Because if I'm boring you, then you can just go to hell, Sir, and so too can your whole organization, because I'm not going to just stand by and let this go unpunished! Believe me, I'm not. You can bet on that!" She stood with arms akimbo, staring at him and waiting for a reply, waiting for an excuse so that she could pounce on him again and vent her anger at someone other than her staff for what might just cost her the election.

Cav frowned, a deep frown showing his vexation with the whole matter. The only reason he came to her at all was to keep the Secret Service idiots from trying to strong-arm their way into his office when he refused the first three summonses to the White House. The last thing he needed was for there to be a bevy of dead Secret Service agents laying about the lobby of his building.

And now he was beginning to think that perhaps that would have been a far more acceptable option compared to what he was enduring at the present moment. People like Heather O'Rourke allowed him to partially understand why Alexis hated people so much and wanted to live so isolated in Alaska. He

didn't blame her at all at moments like this. "First of all, Mrs. President," Cav said in his slow, firm voice making her shrill pitch seem out of place in the finely appointed office. "I'm certain that my agent didn't intentionally sabotage Stargazer I or ever intended to. I know for a fact that she did what was necessary to save her own life and accomplish the mission. If –"

"IF?" she interjected with a spray of outrage that smelled like scotch. "IF WHAT?! There is no if here. Whether she intended to blow the place up or not really doesn't matter, now does it? If someone were to assassinate me and then said that they never meant to and that it was just an accident that occurred during the process of an unrelated assassination and so fucking sorry about it, they would still be tried and convicted for the assassination! There are no ifs' here, there's only the simple fact that your rogue agent made a mess of things that now I have to clean up!" She sat heavily in her chair and continued to stare at him, waiting for him to dare challenge her, to say anything that she could use against him.

Cav refused to rise to the bait. He was through explaining. He had been forced to activate Alexis against his better judgment and now that it had blown up in their faces, she was the one being blamed for it all. To hell with them, then. Besides, he was not the type of man who people scolded, had never been and was not about to have it done to him by some prom-queen president who didn't have all the facts and who was not even born when Cav was starting to formulate his theories on genetic manipulation.

He could sense Claudine's hand in this, could almost taste it in the air, her heavy-handed backstabbing iniquity wafting off Heather like a bad

perfume and it rankled him to the extreme. He had already read a detailed description of the entire incident on the Colony from the back-up agent who worked on the Colony and had been tasked to monitor things and he saw nothing in it that Alexis did wrong. Nothing that she did for any other reason than to save her life. There was no way that he was about to blame her for that.

She did what she had been trained to do and he could ask no more of her, regardless of the situation. The only good thing that had come out of this futile, one-sided discussion with the president was that prom-queen Heather believed Alexis dead, killed in the explosions that rocked the Colony and destroyed the Ag-Section in its totality, severely weakening the remainder of the structure. It meant that everyone thought Alexis dead.

It was the only good thing to have come out of this absolute cluster-fuck. A smile crossed his portly face for a fleeting moment.

"Do you find something humorous in all this?" the President flared, completely galled by the fact that this fat, little man who disgusted her so with his plump white hands and his Buddha belly and those intense, intelligent eyes that didn't belong to the body would have the chutzpah to dare find anything funny in all this. "I find nothing humorous in any of this! Get the hell out of my office you fat fuck!!"

Cav sighed dolorously and rose, eyed her a moment, then turned to leave. *Fat fuck? Such vulgar language from the leader of the most powerful country in the world*, he thought as he made his way to the door. *It was no wonder that most people hated*

America. At least he wouldn't have to listen to her high, whining voice anymore. Or so he thought.

She apparently was quite done yet. "And you can expect to find that the power that you've been so used to wielding in that little world of yours will soon be severely curtailed," she spit at him as she rose, hands on desk, elbows locked, face once again that red heralding a heart-ache a few years down the road. "I'll see to that personally!" she sang out in a final, defiant act, her rage not nearly spent.

Cav stopped at the door, turned to look at her as he grabbed the knob, and pushed the door open. "Don't threaten me, Madam President," he rapped out coldly, his words quiet yet with a staccato beat emphasizing his displeasure. Who did she think she was, anyway? "This isn't my country and you're not my president, so your opinions are about as practical to me as a homeless person's asshole." His eyes stabbed her like icicles. "And they smell just about as bad." He nodded his head imperceptively. "Have a good day."

He closed the door and was not surprised to find Claudine Maxwell waiting, seated in a small chair across the hall, her legs crossed, her skirt tight and revealing, her custom-fit suit pert yet professional. She looked up at him from the pocket computer she had been studying, acting as if she was surprised to see him there, then gave him an inquiring look.

"That was a little rough, wasn't it?" she said as she put her computer away and stood, smoothing her skirt and pensively sighing. "I'm sorry to hear about Alexis."

Cav looked at Claudine so hard that she took both a physical and a mental step back from him, her face falling for a brief moment of doubt, then regaining its

composure to its usual self-assured yet courteous bearing.

"Don't think for a second that I don't know what you did, Claudine," he spit out in rapid, quiet, abrasive words leaving echoes on her conscience for several minutes. "We're even now. All bets are off. You've just turned me into your worst enemy and believe me, that was the last thing that you wanted."

She gave him a caustic smile, as if the words had been but small talk about the weather, then walked past him into the Oval Office and shut the door, softly. Cav stormed off, his blood pressure turning his face a beet red that would have drawn him attention if it was not for the fire in his eyes burning holes in all they crossed and turning away even the most ardent answer-seekers.

* * *

She dreamt.

She dreamt of Clovis and Alexander and Cav, of the explosions on *Stargazer I*, of the battle with the HEEs, of her dogs and her cabin.

Her cabin. She could taste the cool crisp air of August, taste the stream winding its way behind her home with the way the wind made the water ripple and change color with the shafts of early morning sun beating through leafy, glittering aspens and pungent pines and dappled dancing patterns of demure light on the ever-changing waters flowing passed her cabin, always new, always revitalizing its appearance.

But mostly she dreamt of her life, that momentous reflection a human is lucky to get once in a lifetime if at all. It grabs hold of one's soul and lifts it from the

rotteness of its mortal existence, slamming the past into one's mind with a discomode that's a culmination of man's feeble attempt at understanding. She saw to her horror what she was, what she had become, what they had made of her in their lab underground, hidden from the prying eyes of those who would have said, *no, this is wrong.*

Her sixty-five years passed by in such a rush she was pressed to find one bright spot of hope or caring or compassion that would reach out and say, *yes, this is where you made a difference, where your spirit soared and freed itself from the confines of the body and for one, effulgent, fleeting moment, you became human.*

But it was not to be.

Nothing in the whole span of turgid years passing by in sycophantic delusion allowed her to see any speck of hope for what she could become. Nothing came of what she had thought she had found in the cabin by the stream, in the meadow butting up against the snow-capped mountains, in a land where time stood still and allowed a person's spirit to commune with nature and free itself from the shackles of humanity and soar like an eagle.

Nothing.

It was as if she had lived someone else's life, a life filled with hatred and killing and greed and beliefs not her own. They screamed out at her now with a passion she only wished she could actually feel. It was a life of singular purpose, lived with an abandon leaving her now wondering how she had ever survived it.

And in this self-reflection, when the fountainhead of her soul poured out into the wishing well of life its

contents, swirling and undulating in contradicting lessons of morality, she saw for the first time the barricade that was her life, the emptiness that was her soul, the shallowness of a psyche that was not even her own.

And still her dreams continued, pouring out the vile contents of her subconscious in a vision of reverent revulsion battering at her ego like a ram, wanting to break down the walls she had erected and in that destruction, create a new life. It was almost as if she could sense something in her that was not human, that was struggling to release itself from her human body and in that release explain all that she had been lacking and in that release bring her true essence forward. But it was not to be.

She thought of her son, a son she had in a fit of demented defiance with a man she didn't even love. Love was not something for which she was slated, that she was allowed, that the gods on high kept from her as if it were a forbidden emotion given to those who knew not how to use it. She had lusted after Alex's father, like a dog lusts after a juicy bone and perhaps in some small way had loved him after all. But it was by no means that love that speaks of candle-lit dinners and holding hands, walks on the beach and tender nights in satin sheets, that cuddles the mind as much as the body till all that is left is a unique, unambiguous feeling of unimagined stasis where two are one and all thoughts flow toward that harmonious juncture that humans define as love.

That type of love Alexis had never tasted, had no concept, had no knowledge. It was beyond her and she didn't know why. With the father of her son, a son she had not even seen much less held, taken

away from her the instant that he was born. It had not been love, of that she was certain. She may have been convinced at the time that it was love, but in all reality, it had been a mistake, a mistake made in the heat of a forbidden passion. It was a mistake that had cost Alex's father his life, his car accident fixed and caused by the same people who directed her motions like a marionette.

And yet, here she was reliving in her mind a life she could have had, that could have easily been hers, teasing her with the knowledge that she didn't live it.

And not one tear fell.

Not one iota of emotion passed her mind, an empty vacuum where nothing but the coldness of space exists in a state of perpetual nothingness, the fleeting passage of a distant ardor lost in the sinkhole that was her life. For what was life? Is it a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes, never again to grace this world? Was that what all this was that she was seeing and feeling and experiencing in her dreams torturing her in their reality and veracity until all that was left was a vapor of a passion that never was there to begin with? Would her life have been different had she made different choices or was all life fixed, destined to pan out in an unfolding drama that had already been written?

Were there signposts along the way she had missed, beacons that had called to her that she had ignored? Or did life have only one path, one way and one goal and whether one wanted that path or not was pointless to that planned it and executed it in a welter of punishing steps? Was it all pointless?

And then, as if those dreams and life-revealing seconds were not enough, she dreamt of her. Of that

face flashing before her like a phantom. It was a vortex of thought and feelings and conflicting emotions screaming for her to understand but which she could not descry in an upwelling of pent passionate purpose beyond any mortal who denied herself the simple joy of love. The face of that person in the other HEE flashed before her with matching eyes, matching hair and a mind still linked with Alexis' in a communion spanning time itself. It was that communion, a connection that had been established and had blotted out everything else and spread a blank sheet over her thoughts, absorbing all it touched and muting it in diffuse images of lost time.

That woman who had been in the other HEE, who had touched Alexis somehow was all that now remained in her mind, a solitary, encompassing turmoil of heat and passion and emotion starting to form an outcry in her soul, an outcry that slowly and irrevocably worked its way up to her mouth as unknown images of bird-like creatures flashed before her mind's eye in telling tantrums of tortured questions.

A dim light started to glow in her vision and cast all else in a shadow of dismal failure and forfeited futures imprisoned in the deep darkness that was her life. Then the images and the light both exploded in a spectacle of brilliance and she rose from out of her slumber and awoke to her old life that was now so much improvident appurtenances...

She bolted upright up into a sitting position, her face a mask of terror, her scream caught in her mouth as if afraid to come out, leaving a bad taste like death. She didn't know whether she had dreamt the scream or whether she had actually vocalized it, her mind still

lost in that transition period between the dream world and reality -- as if one could actually tell which is which. Echoes of her dreams and her scream bounced around her head as she focused her eyes and tried to figure out what had happened and, more importantly, where she was.

"God, I built you well."

She focused her eyes, the haziness clearing to a crystal clarity as she followed the voice to find Cav seated in a chair in the corner, his unkempt appearance and scruffy un-shaven face so out of place with the man that she once knew.

Her head still throbbed, her eyes felt as if someone had a candle lit behind them, her mouth had not tasted this foul since that mouthful of swamp muck so many years ago.

"It's nice to see you too, Cav," she answered back caustically, looking around the small room in which she found herself, that familiar smell of a hospital hanging in the air like a specter. "How long have you been sitting there? You look like shit."

"Thank you for the inspiring words." They stared at each other for a few pregnant seconds. "Long enough," he answered, the fatigue in his voice apparent. He leaned forward and a small smile touched his face. He had in fact been waiting two days, two days wherein he had watched and waited for her body to repair itself, to heal the physical wounds so prevalent when he had first seen her. Now she was totally healed, no marks whatsoever on her leg from the plasma burn or from the two gunshot wounds she had sustained. Also gone was her concussion and she was, for the most part, whole.

But Cav could see that although the physical wounds had been healed, there were deeper, more penetrating emotional wounds seething beneath that beautiful head of hers, eating away at her from the inside. These, he knew, she could not heal, her systems, though balanced and perfect in most every way, unable to handle the turmoil of feelings he could see were just about ready to breach and tear her apart.

"So what the hell happened up there?" he asked, though he already knew all the details. He wanted to hear her side, hear from her what had happened and why. He needed to know what had gone, in essence, wrong. Regardless of her time spent in Alaska, she was still better than any agent he ever knew or ever would know. Her version of events he would believe above any others.

She pulled the sheets off herself and swung her legs over the side of the bed to plant her feet firmly on the ground. She was dressed, she was glad to find, in a soft and silky satin pajama top and bottom rustling delicately as she stood on firm legs, the pliable, thick carpet feeling good between her toes. "Do you have some clothes for me, Cav?" she asked in answer to his question.

He pointed to the small closet. "In a hurry?" He paused a moment as he watched her open the closet door and pull out the set of clothes hanging there. "So what happened up there?" he asked again, knowing full well that she had heard the first question and ignored him. He was used to her little idiosyncrasies. She was telling him, in her own way, that she was not yet ready to answer that particular question.

She laid the clothes on the bed and stared at them a moment as if she had never seen anything like them before, then looked over at him, her eyes narrow and distant, yet somehow acute in their intensity as they stared at him. "Where's my home, Cav?"

The question took him by surprise. His brow furrowed, deep wrinkles setting in as he screwed up his face and gave her an inquiring look. "What...?"

"My home, Cav," she repeated, sitting on the edge of the bed with a tenderness and childlike innocence he had not seen in her since he didn't know when.

"Alaska, of course," he answered, his tone more in the form of a question than a statement. He was beginning to worry that perhaps there had been more damage to her brain than he had suspected. If he had not looked at the scans himself, he would have her re-examined immediately. Was it possible that the other agent had not told him everything that had transpired?

She looked up at him. A dimple creased the skin next to her mouth, a sign of slight amusement. "No Cav. That's not what I mean. You have a home, a place you grew up, a family that cared for you, friends, school, memories. At least I assume you do. I suppose that you could have come from some test tube also, but I doubt that. Who would want to produce a specimen like you?" She hesitated, made to say something else, then looked down at her hands as if they somehow held the answers for which she was searching.

When she spoke again, he could tell that she was deeply troubled by something, that some event experienced on *Stargazer I*, or perhaps even while her body healed itself, had placed her in this desultory

mood. She looked up at him again, her blue-green freckled eyes radiating an intensity that seemed to bore into his very soul, lay bare all his secrets before her and expose them to the scathing lash of her whip-like intellect. "A home, Cav," she repeated, demanding an answer to a question Cav didn't understand. "A place that I belong; where is my family?"

Like the searching beam of a lighthouse cutting through the fog in a concentrated shaft of light, Cav discerned her intent. "You know the answer to that, Alexis," he replied quietly, uncomfortable now with where the discussion was going.

"Do I? I don't think I do. I know your answer to that question, but is that the correct one? Is it the only one?"

He leaned back again and closed his eyes. "I don't know what else to tell you, then," he said pensively.

"I want a home, Cav. I'm tired." Her voice trailed off as she stood again and pulled her top off without a second thought to Cav sitting right before her, her firm, round breasts laying exquisitely against her body, the high-riding nipples hard and erect in the chill of the room.

Cav turned his head to the side, embarrassed once again at her immodesty. He didn't remember her like this before. She was, if anything, very modest in her sexuality around him. Now she seemed to be flaunting it as if in punishment for an offense he didn't know he had committed. He spoke to alleviate his embarrassment as he heard her take off her pants and change into the regular clothes, the very charge in the air from her nakedness, tangible.

He was not sure why he should even be embarrassed.

He knew her body like the back of his hand in both the clinical and sexual sense and yet now, here, he felt embarrassed, as if her questions had somehow changed everything.

He stared hard at the wall. "Why this sudden urge for a home, Alexis? I don't understand what you're asking."

"You can turn around now," she said with that old, coy, Alexis tone. "I'm done."

Cav turned his head back. "You're home is wherever you settle, Alexis. Your home is Alaska, the cabin, your two dogs. I don't know what else there is." The very thought made him involuntarily examine his own life, his own concept of what made a home a home and whether he, like Alexis, was homeless, wandering, lost forever in a sea of work and assignments and missions making a home an impossible goal to obtain.

Was this what his work had created?

Was it what afflicted all those whose work came before their lives?

She looked at him from under her eyebrows as she finished buckling the belt on her pants. "Did I have another child, Cav?"

Her question was so unexpected, so off the track from what she had just been talking about that he stammered for a moment, his eyes wide, mouth opening slightly as if to speak. "N-no. Of course not." He regained his composure, but his mind was reeling with why she would ask such a question. What was she driving at now? "How can you not know whether you had another child? That's an absurd question."

"Is it?" she queried, standing before him with that cock-sure look of confidence severely weakened by the glow of confusion in her eyes. "I'm sure that there are things about me that you've never told me, never intend to tell me."

"What's going on, Alexis? This isn't like you, not at all. I think that maybe we need to do some more tests before I release you. There may have been more damage to your systems than I had anticipated."

She laughed.

It was almost demented.

She stood before him in all her glory, her comfortable fitting jeans and loose, white shirt highlighting her precious looks and no nonsense smile. "I'm fine, Cav. You needn't worry about that. It was just a question, that's all. I accept your answer ... for now."

She started for the door but Cav stood and intercepted her.

"Like hell that's good enough for now. That's not the answer the Alexis I know would ever give. What's wrong? Tell me? What the hell happened up there?"

She stared at him a moment as if deciding whether to push him out of the way so that she could exit, or just sit back down and tell him everything. She settled for an option halfway between. She stepped close to him, his breath like a stagnant pool of crap. "I was set up, that's what happened. Who the hell is Hugh Crow, Cav? Is he one of yours?"

Cav was astonished at the mention of the name. He had forgotten how insightful she really was. She had picked up on that one quickly. "Crow is my main agent for the O'Neill Colonies. His cover is as a consultant and he's worked his way into the highest

levels of the administration. Why would you ask about him?"

She realized that Cav was completely ignorant of the fact that his own agents were working against him. "He's turned, Cav. He's the one who ambushed me." She pointed to her breast, where the wound had once been but where now only smooth, tanned skin remained. "Did you notice anything unusual about that impact site, Cav?"

He ran his hand over his mouth, beginning to see something in what she was saying. "Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I can't determine what made it. It doesn't match any of the known weapons in our database."

She pushed past him and opened the door, stepping out into the deserted corridor. "It was silenced, Cav. That one didn't come from the Colony guards. That one was meant to kill me and it came from somewhere else. I'll let you guess from where."

With brow furrowed in concentration, he followed her as she strode purposefully down the dimly lit corridor. She could tell that she was underground, the weight of the Earth above her palatable to her senses. She knew this place, her birthplace, as if it had a connection to her that went beyond the physical, a baleful impression anchoring her soul to the rocks of her own, restless past.

"And you think Crow did it? That's ridiculous," Cav finally burst out with an undertone of near belief.

She stopped and spun around, forcing him to brake hard to keep from running into her. "Then you explain it, Cav. Explain to me why your Mr. Crow had me stay in his house to make it easier for that bastard Kiril to rape me, for his little security force to gangbang me all night long. Explain to me where he was

when that was happening.” Her nostrils flared with her anger. “And explain to me why he blew my cover, over a channel that’s monitored and where many people heard it, where it was most likely recorded. EXPLAIN THAT TO ME, CAV!” Her voice had risen steadily as she spoke so that by the time that the last word came out, she was almost screaming,

Cav's inability to give her any comfort, to answer such a simple question as where her home was, eliciting something within her that was primal and ferocious, like a wounded, cornered animal.

He was all she had at the moment, so he received the brunt of her tongue lashing, the full force of all the doubts and failures and questions that had arisen in her mind from the depths of her inner-self breaking the surface with a splash of vengeful fury.

He was as surprised by her tone as he was by what she said. He had certainly been yelled at by her before, that was nothing new. But not like this. Not with such accusations and not with such full fury. “I’ll look into it, Alexis.” He could not think of anything else to say. “I find it hard to believe, but I’ll look into it. Fortunately, there’s no surviving record of any communications between you and anyone else while you were in the HEE. They were all destroyed. And I’m sorry about Kiril and all, but at least you made sure that he won’t be doing it to any more women.” He was well aware that his answer was completely inadequate but he had no more to give, to say. Her accusations flayed him to the bone.

If Crow had truly turned, then who was to say how many others had been compromised. What was even more important was who was it that was turning his agents if they were indeed being turned. And who

even knew that they existed in the first place? The short list of those who worked for him was locked away in his mind and his mind only.

One name came to his mind as if by magic, as if it had been waiting for just such a moment to make itself known: Claudine Maxwell. If anyone could know, she would be the one and yet, he was certain that she had neither the intelligence nor the resources to ascertain that information. But if not her, then who? Sure, Claudine was a convenient name to accuse, but did she really have it in her to tap into his mind and extract those names?

Alexis studied him a moment, wondering if he really was as ignorant of Crow's duplicity as he claimed, as he looked. Did it really matter? She turned and started walking again. She was becoming as uncertain of his duplicity as she was of her own sanity.

"Wait a minute, Alexis. Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"How did I get here, Cav?" she asked over her shoulder.

He assumed that she meant from the Colony to Earth and answered using that assumption. "You were picked up by one of the rescue vessels sent to help from the other Colonies. Hugh Crow made sure that it appeared that you were dead and brought you to me. If he truly wanted you dead, he could have killed you then and no one would have been the wiser. Your assumption is lacking, Alexis. Why do you ask, anyway?"

She stopped and turned around, forcing him once again to pull up short to avoid running into her. "So Crow knows that I'm alive?"

"Yes, but besides me, he's the only one. I'm telling you, he's not the one. He hasn't turned else why save you and make sure that you made it to me?" He reached out to touch her shoulder, saw that it would be a horrendous idea and dropped his hand to his side in frustration. "Listen, you've got a great chance here to move about unseen, without a trail of any sort. Even the president thinks that you're dead. We need to move on this now, solve it while we have the chance."

"You can bet that our assassin friends aren't so easily fooled," she spewed out with sarcasm. "Not in the least bit, I'll guarantee you that."

She took off again down the corridor and he sprinted to get in front of her and stop her, this fast pace a little too much for his body to maintain. "Would you just wait a minute! Tell me what the hell's wrong? This isn't just about you not having a home or parents or any of that bullshit. There's something else here, something that happened up there that you aren't telling me, that Crow didn't see or doesn't know about and wasn't in the report. He's not the enemy, Alexis. You've got to believe me on this. He's as much your enemy as I am."

She stopped when he stepped before her but refused to look at him.

"What the hell is bothering you? This isn't the Alexis I know."

Now she did look at him, her eyes glittering with passionate severity as she spoke rapidly, harshly. "The Alexis you know, the one you built like a piece of machinery is dead, Cav. Gone. She no longer exists. She died a long time ago when I gave up on this life,

when I became aware that I wasn't just some mindless droid who did your bidding."

"That's not fair, Alexis. You were never a mindless droid to me and I never treated you that way. You've always been my most valuable asset and – "

"That's just the point, damn you!" she cried at him. "I'm not an asset, Cav. I'm a person! A flesh and blood person, despite the fact that I was created. Perhaps even because of it..." Her voice trailed off, the hurt in her eyes the most emotion he had ever seen her display. "I'm tired of it Cav. Sick and tired of it all. I used to be able to kill people who got in my way without blinking an eye. But now, now they stay with me, they haunt me Cav and if that wasn't enough, there's a group out there that's..." She took a deep breath, looked up at the overhead and stood arms akimbo, her mind rebelling against the words released, the emotions derived from decades of uncaring. "I don't know what... but they're trying to kill me with advanced weapons and systems and mind-control that I've never seen before. And they aren't even really there or here or whatever the hell it is. It's like they don't belong, like they're ...like they're from somewhere else."

"Whoa, whoa, slow down," Cav said as the barrage of information came at him in a spray of wrathful rage. "What the hell are you talking about? Are you referring to the assassins who attacked you at the cabin and that killed that computer nerd?"

She stiffened and Cav thought for sure that she was going to strike him a blow that would end his life there and then. "His name was Clovis," she said slowly and distinctly, enunciating each word clearly so that there would be no misunderstanding. "He wasn't a

nameless victim, just like the others weren't nameless victims. He was a *person*, Cav, with a past and a future and a life, just like all those others who I killed on the Colony or who died due to the explosions." She looked at him with an uneasiness feral in its conviction, giving him a shiver up his spine and setting alarms off in his head that were more medical than emotional, more clinical than impulsive.

She jabbed a finger into his fleshy chest. "I'm going to figure this one out, Cav, don't worry about that. I'm going to find the people who murdered my son and all those others." With each sentence, she jabbed him hard, the pain almost like a penance to his soul. "And when I do, I'm going to kill every last one of them." Her last jab was particularly hard, as if subtly telling Cav that she suspected him in some form of embroilment in regards to the murders.

Their eyes remained locked and Cav knew that there was more coming, one last, final statement she had to make to clear her of the heavy burden somehow landed on her shoulders between Boston and *Stargazer I*. "And then that's it. You hear me, Cav? I want out completely. I want my name stricken from any and every list, I want my death publicly announced and I want you to forget that you ever knew me. And if you come looking for me, I'll kill you like any other scurvy dog. Is that clear? Do you understand what it is that I'm telling you? I want to be completely severed from anything to do with you or your agency or any government. I don't want your fucking money or your fucking cabins or anything from you! I can certainly make it on my own, with my own identity, that only I know about! It's over Cav. Over." She turned on her heel and walked down to the end

of the corridor, opening the door hard and slamming it behind her.

"Shit," Cav said as he began to follow slowly, hesitantly. He had suspected for some time that this day was coming. He just didn't expect it this soon.

*Each moment is not only something new but
something unforeseeable.*

— Bergson

16

16 August 2085

0800 hrs

City of Heihe,

Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere

The Heilong Jiang, or Black Dragon River, lazily runs along in murky blackness down the middle of the bustling Chinese city of Heihe, its white-tiled skyscrapers and towers of steel and glass stretching along both banks in an intermix of modern and classic design, the hotels, casinos and trade centers clustering along the course like perched water beetles.

The river itself rises in the Highlands of China and begins a long, sinuous path through the once endless Birch forests and taiga, finally bubbling its way in murky and muddy fatigue into the Sea of Okhotsk by the grim looking city of Nikolayevsk. It is the eighth

largest river in the world and little known outside the two countries housing its banks. Frozen for six months out of the year, it surges lustily eastward, depositing more than 25 million tons of silt into the North Pacific annually. The Irish-green plush flood plains near the Tatar Straits are known for their untouched beauty, the crystal cobalt blue river passing through in torrents of time and change as nature ignores the few humans who have dared challenge her.

There once was an extraordinary variety of wildlife along the banks: sable, roe deer, reindeer, boar, brown bear, moose, and snow sheep. But now they are few and far between, the extinct Amur Leopard and *Panthera Tigris Altaica*, better known as the Siberian Tiger, a stark reminder of the depredations of man upon the Earth.

The river had not always been called the Black Dragon on both banks.

It had once been called the Amur on the Siberian side until, in 1689, the Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed with Jesuit Priests as translators, had given both banks to the Chinese. The Tsar, however, had found that particular treaty not important enough to obey and thus a hive of dirty and grim Russian cities and towns had sprouted up overnight and the river became a border between two large and antagonistic countries.

As is the nature of these things, Heihe had not always been Heihe.

There had once been a sprawling recreation center for the more affluent of the Russian and Old-Soviet Regime officials that had gone by the name of Blagoveshchensk and had, for a time, been all there

was at this particular site, the infant village of Heihe on the Chinese side not even a cleared patch in the forest. But the Russian-Chinese War of 2025 had changed all that. Tired of the constant bickering and squabbling over who was allowed to dam the river and build the cities and control the trade, both sides had finally resorted to open conflict that was both brief and vicious. The Chinese had won easily and before nuclear weapons were involved, a peace treaty was negotiated and the Amur River became, officially, the Black Dragon River with full Chinese control of both banks with over four hundred kilometers of former Russian land along the entire length of the river bordering both countries as a conciliation prize.

With this treaty had come a massive influx of Chinese to settle the land and make its possession unequivocal and the beautiful green sea of the Far Eastern forest with its virgin tracts of larch, pine, hemlock, spruce and birch had been devastated, cut down for the valuable lumber the Chinese had been craving for centuries, and for the open space for the crops and the people. And so too had gone the pristine caliber of this part of the world, this last piece of untouched ancient forest along the river.

Not even the existence of the Nanai, Ulchi and the Evenk tribes with their primitive living and their Shamans, travelers of the spirit world and healers of the sick, had stopped the Chinese from tearing down the forests to make room for their ever-growing population. Although vast tracts still stretched in a dark green carpet to the broad, blue expanse of the distant hills, the character of the land was changed and despite recent efforts to preserve this last piece of wilderness, its future was doubtful.

This area was a perfect example of humanity's inability to keep even a small part of the Earth untouched. For every activist willing to give up their lives for the preservation of what once was, there were five developers who only saw money in the vast tracts of open land and un-cut lumber. It was a fight not about winning but more about inevitable defeat.

It was here, on the outskirts of Heihe that melted into the tufts of lone stands of pines and birch that Alexis found herself deposited ungraciously by the hover bus with a mixture of contempt and hatred from the driver and the passengers for the quai-loh who dared to intrude on their land. She was looking for an associate of Kido Nakamura. When Alexis had been first told that Aobe Fujita had left the small software firm for which Nakamura had worked soon after her death and been moved to this metropolis on the Black Dragon, she had been extremely doubtful that he would provide any help even if he lived in this remote outpost of civilization. She had figured that the other workers in the software firm had been told to tell this lie, hiding the true destination of the elusive Aobe.

But Alexis had quickly ascertained that the man had indeed moved to the predominately Chinese city, hired by a prestigious software company whose headquarters happened to be in Heihe. His official title was as a consultant. Alexis figured that he was now nothing more than an embarrassment, a problem to be hidden.

And so it was that she now stood in the lush, green meadow where large honeybees buzzed in the wildflowers giving the landscape a splash of brilliant color in the chill air working its way down from the Arctic.

She frowned, pulled her pocket computer out of her bag and looked at the address again. Gazing around at the open expanse before her disappearing into a stand of larch and birch, she realized that there were no addresses here, no numbers posted. All that was here was a small, tidy, misplaced Japanese house sitting to her left, a large garden in the back with chicken wire and posts and what appeared to be a bumper crop of assorted vegetables and fruits.

Behind her, the skyline of Heihe rose out of the green meadow like a spore, the numerous houses nestling against its immensity and constituting this suburb, appearing to peter out with Fujita's small house. Soft, distant sounds drifted on the slight breeze stirring the short grass, sounds of the city and the numerous hovers buzzing around the tall buildings almost as delicately as the bees buzzing around the flowers.

She shook her head and began to walk over to the house, her tailored business suit of dark green and yellow design and her high-heels not at all conducive to the terrain she was having to negotiate. Her auburn hair had a reddish glint to it and was combed strikingly back from her face and fell gracefully to her shoulders, where it flared back against the dark green of the jacket. Her face was not her own but rather a poly-mask, a synthetic compound forming to her features and giving her a completely new identity, her sparkling bright blue eyes standing out against the non-descript nature of the new face like diamonds.

She noticed motion in the garden and found, to her surprise, a beautiful Japanese Sekitee tucked into the corner of the lot and an older man working diligently with a rake. He had thin, bony legs attached to a frail

looking body that worked the rake with a gusto seemingly misplaced. His large, sleepy, expressionless eyes and sallow, wrinkled face told Alexis that this man was most likely near eighty if not older and was one of the first of the batch of age-extended people that the early attempts had produced, before they had been able to greatly decrease the visible effects of aging.

But as she watched him work, oblivious to her presence and anything else that didn't have to do with the garden, she noticed the liver spots on his wrinkled and bony hands, the graying hair barely there and the bend posture of his body and knew immediately that this man had not partaken in the new gene therapies and aging drugs that had been available. Aobe Fujita had aged naturally and had lived his years as humans once had, without the aid of the new, miracle medicines. What she was seeing was the age that Mr. Fujita had become by just living and she already found herself liking him.

She watched him for quite some time without saying a word or announcing her presence, content to just observe him rake his patterns in the fine-grained white sand, the peacefulness of the action somehow lost in the clutter that was the world.

"Have you come to watch me rake sand, young lady, or are you here for something of less importance?" he finally asked without looking up, his voice vibrant and strong. He spoke in Japanese, with that lilting, flowing quality that English could never come close to matching.

"Ohio Gozaimasu," she answered back, greeting him for the morning.

His raking continued as he answered, his voice taking on little to no inflection. "Hai, hai, dozo. Ah, nihongo wa jotzu desu." *Yes, oh you speak Japanese very well.*

"Lye, sukoshi, gomen nasai," she answered back, explaining that she only spoke a little. "Doko ni Fujita Aobe-san desu ka?" The words flowed off her tongue like water and Fujita smiled to himself at the modesty of the young lady who spoke his language so beautifully.

"I am Aobe Fujita," he said guardedly, moving to a different part of garden and making patterns in the sand there. "And who would you be? I don't get many visitors and certainly not attractive young ladies."

"I'm Jill Rousseau. I'm a journalist working on an article on the rise of violence in Japanese society and the impact on the victims."

He stopped raking and looked up at her, his deep-set eyes narrowing as he studied her for several seconds with a discernment that was disquieting. "Then I must apologize for your journey out to see me, for I have never been involved in any violent crimes either here or when I lived in Japan."

She gave him a coquettish smile as she answered. "You're correct, but you did know someone who was killed in a violent crime and that makes you a victim and a perfect person to interview, if you don't mind."

He continued to look at her for what seemed like an eternity, then lifted his rake off the ground and carried it over to one of the posts supporting the roof over the patio. He grabbed a rag and wiped his already clean hands on it, then turned to look at her again. "You speak of Nakamura Kido-san."

"Yes. I'm led to understand that you two worked together quite extensively in Osaka."

He gave her a shrewd look for a moment, then put the rag away carefully. "Do you speak Mandarin?"

She found that an odd question. She had already probed his mind and found that while he was raking, his thoughts centered almost exclusively on the patterns he was making and their aesthetic, pleasing qualities. Now his mind was a morass of conflicting thoughts that seemed to have no direction or drift and seemed to wander around aimlessly, though they mostly hovered in the vicinity of Kido, her face and their time together coming to her with the one, strong notion of master and pupil prevalent.

Alexis also noticed a darker, deeper feeling fading in and out in shades of fright, a feeling coming from Kido's death and Alexis' presence, almost as if he had been expecting her to come, dreading the arrival of one such as her.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. Cantonese also." she answered back with as innocent a look on her face as she could muster.

"Then perhaps it would be better if we were to go to the city and find a local restaurant to talk in. It will be my treat, please." He appeared to already know her answer, for he bowed to her and then walked inside, to come out after a few moments, his gardening clothes discarded for more appropriate restaurant attire.

As she waited the brief few minutes that it took him to dress, she thought about the odd request that he had made to not talk at his home. It was possible that he thought it safer to talk in a more public area or perhaps even more proper, the prospect of having a

younger lady in his home alone not sitting well with him and his obvious ancient Japanese customs. Either way, she found it odd and decided to pay even closer attention to her surroundings as she conducted this interview, aware that so far she had been set-up at almost every place she had gone. This might prove to be no different.

The restaurant on which he finally settled was in the outskirts of the downtown area and was apparently one to which he had never been. Alexis was amused to find that although hovers plied the skies above in numbers too numerous to count, there were still hundreds if not thousands of Chinese riding their bicycles along the tree-lined paths meandering through the district, a tradition still strong.

It was a bizarre mixture of comely peasants with their tattered clothes and thread-bare knapsacks and businessmen and women with their expensive, custom-tailored suits who rode their bikes in a mélange of drab grays and blacks, the occasional colorful dress or tourist shirt standing out with striking clarity.

Alexis and Aobe sat on the outside patio of the small restaurant, the hustle of the morning crowd gone, but more than enough lingerers hanging around to make it possible to hold a conversation that would be drowned by the ambient noise.

The waiter came up and Alexis spoke, knowing full well the customs of the land and the aversion to small talk. "Ni zao," she said with a smile that seemed to bounce off the apathetic waiter and fall to the floor with an unceremonious clang.

The waiter turned to Fujita and gave him a look of utter contempt for both the quai-loh woman and Fujita's Japanese ancestry.

"Wo yao liang ke cha," Fujita said through compressed lips, ordering two teas for Alexis and himself. When neither of them said anything else, the waiter frowned, gave a huff, then walked away.

Fujita smiled an apologetic smile to her and shrugged his shoulders as he spoke to her in hushed tones of Mandarin. "I am sorry for the inconvenience, but it is better this way. The animosity between our two peoples is still strong," he explained as they waited for the tea Alexis knew would be a long time coming. "To him, and to most of the lower class citizens here in the country, I am lang syin, gou fei: wolf's heart, dog's lungs. It is what Japanese men are still called by the Chinese. It is a reference to the numerous wars that have erupted between our two cultures over the thousands of years and I doubt that it will ever go away."

"So if that's the way they feel about you, why did you move here in the first place?" she asked, aware of his reasons but needing to act dumb to stay in character.

He shrugged his shoulders again as he looked out over the throng of people who rode past. "I was offered a job and benefits that I could not refuse. It is now a younger man's game. I was once the best at what I did, probably still am in some ways, but I am an old man with little of my life left to me. I didn't opt to partake in the aging-drugs that have made life too long. As such, I must make do with what has been handed to me. I don't mind."

Alexis gave him a tight smile. "And why did you want to come here to talk instead of at your house where the service, I am certain, is much better?"

"That is a more difficult question to answer, but one that perhaps you don't need to know. It is for the best that you are not seen at my house. There are certain..." he paused a moment as he looked around, as if expecting to see someone hovering near them but finding nothing. "...people who have been asking odd questions of me and Kido, when she still lived. You are simply the latest, though I don't believe that you and they have any connection. They were not quite as pleasant about it as you have been and I didn't like their looks. I thought that perhaps in this way I could avoid them and save you the trouble of dealing with them afterward."

Alexis understood perfectly and immediately probed the surrounding area for any signs of people who didn't belong. She found nothing at the moment but that had been the case before and she was not lulled into any sort of complacency.

The waiter returned with a tray, two cups and an ornate, cheap imitation teapot. He slammed them on the table and then locked eyes with Alexis for a moment, a moment in which she looked back and probed, finding something that she didn't like at all. She narrowed her eyes a moment, probed deeper, then spoke. "Qing jie shu," she said rapidly, asking for the check and staring him coldly back.

He looked affronted as he straightened up, his eyes flaring then constricting. He reached into the front pocket of his apron and began to pull something out.

Alexis responded instantly.

With her cat-like reflexes she rose up and belted him hard in the face. He flew back, tripped over a chair and fell heavy to the patio floor, the weapon he had in his apron flying out and landing in the soup bowl of a nearby customer, cracking it apart and saturating the startled woman with noodles. There were looks of shock, astonishment and fear as Alexis grabbed Fujita's hand and pulled him out into the street, trying to get as far away from the restaurant as possible. He said nothing as she pulled him along, still shocked that the waiter had hated him enough to try to shoot him.

Alexis made her way to a corner and hailed a hov taxi. When one zoomed down to pick them up, she shoved Aobe inside, slammed the door and ordered the driver to the airport. It had been an instinctual impulse. The moment Alexis had asked for the check, she had sensed the presence of the shadow people in the background, had felt them in all their distorted imagery coming through the back of the restaurant toward them, their blank minds like a void in the torrent of thoughts cascading around her from the ordinary people leading their ordinary lives.

Their emptiness had keyed her in more than anything else, the presence of a body without the accompanying endowment of mind, a cue for her to analyze her surroundings more intently and in that analysis, found the gun in the mind of the waiter as he reached for it in his apron pocket. It had been pure, damn luck. She was not really concentrating on the waiter despite the fact that she should have been and only the sudden appearance of those who were quickly becoming her prime nemesis had alerted her to the imminent danger right before her.

How they found her, tracked her to this obscure place was beginning to really grate on her nerves. She refused to believe that they were waiting at every conceivable place where she could visit, that they could see through her disguise, that they were stalking this frail, little old man for the off chance that she would show up at his doorstep. And to make matters worse, she was not even at his doorstep and she didn't even look like herself.

They had been at a restaurant that Fujita had stated he had never visited. The thought had crossed her mind that Fujita had set her up, had purposefully led her to this place, but she found nothing to indicate that in his thoughts and could tell, just from the short time she had spoken to him, that he would refuse to do such a thing if he had been asked.

It was altogether possible that the shadow people were able to read her thoughts, were able to tap into her mental image and find her in that way, making any disguise she chose to wear irrelevant. The more she thought about that possibility, the more she started to believe it was the prime possibility, for that woman in the other HEE, the one who had looked so much like her had been able to not only shield her mind from Alexis but project forcefully into Alexis' mind. This was becoming more than annoying. It was becoming problematic.

She would have to get this man away from here, away from those who would have him dead. She didn't want him to end up like Clovis. That was the last thing she needed: another face haunting her in her dreams.

She spoke to Fujita in Japanese, rapidly, knowing that the driver would not understand a word. "Why would someone want to kill you, Fujita-san?"

"Perhaps they are the same people who killed Kido. I don't know." He seemed sincere enough and certainly frightened, his hands trembling as they sat in his lap. He looked at her and she knew at that moment that Fujita had more to tell, that he also knew that Kido's death was no accident. "What she was working on, with that Dr. Hart, it was a bad thing. It would only lead to trouble. I warned her of this numerous times but she only saw the good in it. She only saw the good in all that she did and observed. She was that way."

"What was it that they were working on?"

"You are not a journalist, are you?" he asked with a perception that matched his years.

"We'll be at the airport soon, Fujita-san," she said calmly, knowing that she was running out of time. "Can you tell me what Kido was working on? It's very important."

"Why must I leave? I had nothing to do with what Kido and Hart were doing. I tried to dissuade them. I don't want to leave my garden and my home. Why must I leave?"

"Because you know too much, or at least someone thinks that you do and at the moment that's a serious problem. You'll be taken care of, Fujita-san. I promise. Now what was it that Kido was working on?"

He sighed, not understanding why his life had been suddenly turned upside down. And the day had started so well for him, until this white-eye showed up. He smelled trouble on her the moment he saw her step off the hov-bus but did as he always did and was

nice to the pretty lady. One day he would learn. He puckered his lips and looked out the window at the passing traffic. "Kido was developing a transfer protocol for computers, a very advanced and complicated transfer protocol."

"For what purpose?"

"To use with the hardware that Dr. Hart was developing, of course," he said with a slight hint of frustration at her obtuseness. "And also with that nice man who visited once but used a different name than the one that Kido called him by. What was that name...?" he contemplated as he screwed up his face in an attempt to retrieve the name from his memory.

Alexis was beginning to notice the increase in traffic around them and realized that they were getting near the main airport complex. She had still not figured out how she was going to get Fujita out of the country in such a hurry, but there were always ways to do these things. Although she was technically a rogue agent, without the benefits of the company, she still had Cav on her side and he would bend over backwards to help her. He might be the world's biggest ass-hole some times, but he would stop at nothing to assist her. She knew that for a fact.

Fujita's face lit up as the name came to him and he turned to look at her. "He called himself Georg Holstein but Kido called him Ian, Ian Montana."

Alexis' heart almost stopped at the name and she snapped her head to look at the old man in a mixture of hostility, passion, and disbelief. "Did you say Ian Montana?" she asked slowly, her mind reeling with the cover name she had not heard in God knew how many years, a face rushing to her as if they had just parted yesterday, his touch on her palpable and real.

"Yes, yes, that was his name. It was apparently his idea, this whole plan that they were working on, from what I understand. Though he didn't seem intelligent enough to have come up with such a plan if you ask my opinion."

Alexis could not believe it, refused to believe it. It had to be a coincidence. There were probably many people with that name in the world. *Sure, Alexis. just like there're lots of people with the name Alexis Locke running around. It's him, you damn fool. And if it's him, then that means they know all about you because Ian knows all about you.*

There was a blinding light, a wave of heat and sound rocking the taxi and filling the passenger compartment with acrid smoke burning the lungs and searing the eyes. The taxi began to descend rapidly, out of control. A long stream of dark, dense, caustic smoke lanced out from behind like a tail, marking their drop to the hard ground like a beacon.

She recovered quickly, willing herself to ignore the smoke bellowing in the taxi and filling it quickly, ignore the fire raging in the driver's compartment, his burnt, blackened, flaming body slumped against the controls in a grotesque parody of sleep. She turned to Fujita, aware that she would only have one chance to get out of the crashing vehicle alive and save the man at the same time. She still needed to get more out of him, for she could tell that he had more to give and she needed to know how Ian was involved, what part he played.

She leaned over through the blinding smoke to comfort Fujita and touched slick, wet, hot blood covering his chest in a spreading circular pattern. She was aghast. He had been shot clean through the

heart, the hole in the shattered spider-web pattern of the window behind him indicative of where the bullet had come entered. He was definitely dead, his eyes wide open from the instant shock that had laid waste his heart and left nothing behind but a twitching mass of muscle.

This had been well planned, the missile slamming into the taxi a final nail in the coffin to burn the bodies beyond recognition and cover up the murder. She sensed the work of the assassins that had been following her since the cabin in this. It had to be.

"Shit," she cursed to herself as she kicked her door open and watched as the ground came up in a dizzying spiral descent that had but one outcome. She calculated quickly, instantly, measured the distance, then leapt with all her might toward the passing hov zooming by down below, knowing that she would land on the roof with a harsh, bone-jarring impact. The only doubt she had was whether she would be able to hold on or not after she landed.

She flew through the air like a bird and landed with a thud on the roof of the hov unfortunate enough to be passing nearby, unaware of the falling taxi descending behind it in a blaze of seat cushions and flesh. Her impact dented the roof and jarred her to a stupor, the bowl-like indentation she had created keeping her from falling off as she regained her wits. The startled driver of the hov, unaccustomed to objects falling onto his roof with such an impact, chattered away in fear and excitement as the flaming taxi passed before him and he peeled off to the nearest landing site, cursing at his bad joss.

Alexis was able to regain enough sense to jump off the hov right before it landed and snake off into the

nearby bushes so that the driver of the vehicle, when he came to find the source of the deep dent in his roof, never saw her at all and ranted and raved, jumping up and down in that excited way people have as he cursed his life and his wife and his car and anything else that caught his fancy at that moment.

She lay in the bushes, breathing deeply and evenly, performing a self-diagnosis to determine how badly she had injured herself. She had knocked the wind out of herself, that was certain, but she found no other serious injuries besides a few bumps and bruises and after making certain that the frantic driver of the dented hov was busy describing his bad joss to a policeman, she slipped out of the bushes and merged into the mainstream of the crowd gathering around the wreckage of the crashed and burning taxi in which she had so recently been riding.

After watching for a few minutes to see if she could spot the assassins, she slipped off and made her way back to the nearest Internet center to place a call and get out of the country. Although Fujita had not given her the amount of information she had hoped, he had given her a name, a name that she was slowly beginning to realize was most definitely connected with this whole, crazy game.

It only made sense.

And the fact that he had used an alias told her much also, more than she wanted to know. By using the name Georg Holstein, Ian Montana had thrown the assassins off and had survived their deadly stratagem. Either that or Ian was mixed up in the assassinations, perhaps having gotten out of these people the information he needed and finding them then superfluous to his plans.

But if it was the man whom she knew as Ian Montana – another alias she had discovered shortly after she lost contact with him -- she had no problem believing that he would have the balls to implement such a plan right under Cav's nose. And that thought brought up another, far more disturbing thought. For Ian Montana had been one of Alexis' few former romantic interests and one of the few men whom Cav had despised for it. Ian had also been one of Cav's better agents, a normal agent not imbued with genetic talents surpassing normal human abilities.

And Ian Montana was supposed to be dead.

ETERNITY'S HANDMAIDEN

*History is the art of choosing, from among many lies,
the one which most resembles the truth.*

--

Croce

17

17 August 2085

1145 hrs

Dr. Cavalier's office

Cav sat in his large, plush chair, leaning back and rocking slightly, a nervous habit he had since he was young. His hands were clasped together under his chin and the ascetic look on his face was both pensive and somber. The lights, as always, were dimmed, the little cones of illumination they projected barely reaching beyond the boundary of their dark-colored shades. This dearth of light cast melancholy shadows across the furniture and the paintings of Rembrandt and Raphael, Jan van Eyck and Renoir, their own little lights casting the canvases in a dull

brilliance, placing them in little worlds all their own along the walls.

The heavy curtains covering the tall windows blocked out the glaring light of the noonday sun and the humid heat rising from the fetid, stagnant water that was the city. The rains had finally stopped, the tattered and torn metallic blue clouds flirting over the deep azure sky only echoes of the brooding thunderheads that had inundated the land for days. Hundreds of thousands were homeless, food and clean water scarce. The bodies of those who had died in the torrential downpours and the massive flooding were now coming to the surface in a morbid ballet, popping up at random intervals and spinning and bobbing among the rows of houses and offices and stores now so much water-logged refuse.

But none of this bothered Cav.

His thoughts didn't even touch on the plight of those less fortunate than him, on the millions without power, of the city that the land was trying its hardest to reclaim lying flooded at the base of the massive tower in which he sat, immune from nature's wrath. He was not even interested in the assortment of foods sitting idle and untouched on the side table; mushrooms, rye cakes made with buttermilk, honey in the comb, nuts, chocolate confections, herb brandy and cherry brandy. They were his favorite snacks, brought in several hours earlier per his request and yet even they didn't intrude on his thoughts, all but forgotten as they sat alone on the table.

He stared into the darker corners, his deep-set eyes narrow and hard, yet unfocused, his thoughts concentrated on one idea and one idea only, working

through the numerous perturbations this one idea could take in the future.

He had heard from Alexis through the dummy account in Hawaii. Although not quite clear on what had happened to her contact, Aobe Fujita, his fate was not all that important anyway. What had him in such a pensive mood was the name that she sent to him, requesting status and residence.

Ian Montana.

It was a name Cav thought he would never hear again, that he had hoped and prayed he would never have to deal with. Of all the lovers Alexis had in her torrid past, all the sexual exploits she fell into after her awakening and her defiant rebellion against her role and her design, the affair with Ian Montana had by far held the most promise for destruction and scandal.

For it was Ian Montana with whom Alexis had come the closest to failing in love, though she never saw it coming nor knew it had happened till it was too late. Cav had seen it from the very beginning.

The affaire d'amour with the father of her now dead son had been bad enough, his death in that car accident an unfortunate necessity Cav himself had ordered. But the liaison with Ian, though never producing any offspring, was worse. Cav knew it the moment he saw them together, the moment he saw the look on her face and the way she responded when around him. Cav had needed to work hard to break that one up. The last thing he had needed at that time was for Alexis' concentration to be on Ian rather than the missions, a possible deadly distraction.

It worked fine in the movies and the novels springing up like mushrooms from the plethora of

home computers, but in the real world, in Cav's world, such affairs and distractions led to one thing and one thing only: death. And that he could not allow. Alexis was his pride and joy, the apex of his work and research. And to allow her to throw her life away for a fleeting happiness that she might never truly obtain was not the life he had chosen for her, would allow for her. Alexis was his to control and any thoughts of love or infatuation for another, especially that other, were paths down the wrong road. Or so he used to think.

Now he saw the affair as a warning he should have caught, saw it as the first step toward her own awakening, which led inevitably to her quitting and moving to Alaska. It was very possible, with the commodity of hindsight, to even say that Ian's leaving led directly to Alexis' breakdown and her resignation. Was he then responsible for it all?

Most likely.

He seemed to be responsible for most of the bad aspects of her life, so why not this one also. But even that didn't bother him all that much. He had long ago come to the conclusion that it had happened and would have happened anyway and so why chastise himself over it constantly. What did bother him was why now, of all times, would Alexis want to know where Ian was, even think that he was alive?

Did her odd behavior when she awoke from her recovery so recently have anything to do with Ian? He doubted it, since she had only now mentioned Ian to Cav. But it certainly would explain her behavior. Her sentiments on home and family and wanting to sever all relationships with him and his agency had seemed misplaced and out of character at first, but

now with the name Ian Montana in the picture, it was a different story. It was beginning to make sense to him.

When she had left the last time, she had still wanted to stay in contact, still understood that she could, if the situation warranted it, be recalled and placed back on active status. Her most recent tantrum had put an end to all that, had set the ground rules without question and made it crystal clear that Alexis Locke no longer wanted to be Alexis Locke.

She seemed to fail to understand that such a request was an impossibility.

But that was neither here nor there at the moment. All he needed was for her to keep focused just a little while longer, just long enough to crack this mystery and discover what was behind this bizarre and complicated scheme that had a group of shadowy assassins killing off people who seemed to have no bearing on anything important. When she was done with this, it might be possible for him to grant a limited part of her request. She was, as far as Claudine and the president were concerned, already dead so that avenue was already closed.

But why Ian ...?

And why now?

A former CIA agent and consultant who had left the government and the Company disillusioned with his work and his life, Ian had been one of the few outside, non-genetically engineered people whom Cav had hired, had recruited into his clandestine organization to work behind the scenes. He came with impeccable credentials and background, despite the smear campaign the CIA had launched to discredit him after his less than complimentary departure from their

clutches. Ian had proven to be a valuable asset, especially in the research department, where his skills pulled Cav out of several messes.

It had, as was more often than not the case, been a chance encounter that had thrown Alexis and Ian together. Occurring right in the very office in which Cav now sat. Cav had no one to blame but himself. He had summoned Ian for a detailed report on something he could not even remember and Alexis had come storming in after a particularly dangerous assignment, as she was wont to do back then. Cav had seen from the first frosty eye contact between the two that there was going to be trouble.

It had taken all of two weeks for Cav to learn that Alexis and Ian had been seen at lunch together, then at dinner. It was not long after that Ian and Alexis became sexually involved, a steamy passion seeming to rise from the very forbidden self-imposed ardor Alexis had exiled herself to after the birth of her son and the death of the father.

It was at that point that Cav had taken action and had sent Ian to another branch office on the other side of the world, telling Alexis that he had died, telling Ian that Alexis no longer wanted to see him, that it was her request that he be sent away and for Ian to never make contact again with her on threat of his life. Cav then made damn certain that neither of them ever knew different.

The death of Alexis' son's father had not hit Alexis nearly as hard as had Ian's supposed death. She had been morose for several months after she had been informed about it and after her period of mourning, she had begun to think that there was more to all these deaths of her lovers than Cav was admitting.

She first began to suspect the accident that took the life of her other amorous relation and one thing led to another until Alexis ended up in Alaska, retired and damned if she was going to do anything for Cav ever again.

It had been a time of great upheaval at the agency and in Cav's life. Now with the re-emergence of the name Ian Montana coming from the mouth of Alexis, all those emotions and troubles and sentiments had come crashing to the surface like a pounding surf, smashing his fragile beach with their relentless battering till all that was left was his unfocused gaze at the wall and his food laying uneaten on the table.

He stirred slightly, then spoke, his voice soft yet rich, filled with a harshness both subtle and tired. "Computer. I need a transport to Kazakhstan and a Rapid Response Team immediately."

There was a slight beep as acknowledgment, a pause and a reply. "Transport fueling will be complete in five minutes. The Rapid Response Team has been notified and will be waiting."

Cav smirked, his face taking on a hardened look as he heaved his bulk out of the chair. In whatever aspect Ian Montana was involved, Cav was not about to let him interfere with the resolution of this mission. When Alexis had asked for the last known residence, he had accessed his database to find where exactly he had sent the man and a small tidbit of information had come up on Cav's screen he now found quite interesting, that he had not shared with Alexis. It had to do with a certain woman whom Mr. Montana had been in communication with recently, a certain woman whose presence Cav was not about to tolerate around all his former agents.

He had to get to Ian before Alexis, or at least shortly there after, before she could re-ignite that relationship and find out the true reasons that Mr. Montana had been exiled from the main office and eventually from the agency itself, the true reasons Cav had to lie to her and make his death convincing, funeral and all. He was not about to let his life disintegrate now, not after all that he had done, suffered, sacrificed.

If he didn't know better, he would almost believe that Claudine had set this all up to destroy Cav and Alexis. She was certainly more than enough of a bitch to do it without batting an eye.

Cav looked at the food on the table and in a moment of pure rage brought on by the connections he was beginning to see in this mess that had been dropped in his lap, swept the table top clear of all the food, sending it sprawling across the office in a shower of bowls and nuts and mushrooms. The two brandy bottles tumbled hard across the plush carpet, coming to a firm stop, the contents running out in a splash of sweet smelling liqueur soaking into the fibers and filling the room with their delectable aroma.

* * *

17 August 2085

1204 hrs

Kazakhstan

The heavy Boeing 800 Star-lifter settled onto the tarmac of Nazarbayev International Airport in the Kazakhstan capital of Aqmola with slight bump and puff of white smoke from the tires firmly gripping the

runway as it applied its reverse thrusters and began the long deceleration to mark the end of its trip from Tokyo. The advent of the ballistic airliners lifting off like normal planes but then ascending nearly vertical, pulsing out of the atmosphere and in low orbit bringing them halfway across the globe in a little under four hours, had made air travel much more efficient and timely, bringing the world that much closer together.

The city of Aqmola, which means white grave in Kazak, was turned into the new capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Qazaqstan Respublikası) in 2001. It sits at the junction of the Trans-Kazakhstan and South-Siberian railways and the flowing course of the Esii -- or Ishim, depending on what side of the river one lived -- river which, along with the mighty Irtysh and Tobol, flowed north through most of Russia, emptying out into the Arctic Sea in a rush of white, half-frozen water. The land around the capital consisted of gently sloping and undulating hills and plateaus and was dotted by depressions made by salt lakes long since evaporated, all of which had been converted into rich farming and pasture land. The fertile soil of the northern highlands erupted yearly in a bounty of food to complement the abundant mineral resources the area enjoyed and brought a measure of prosperity to this land that had for so long known nothing but the iron hand of conquerors.

Alexis, after barely making it out of the Heihe airport on a scheduled flight to Beijing, worked her way over to Tokyo under a different name and disguise and then booked a flight for herself to Aqmola using the emergency debit card she always carried with her under the name of Natasha Baklanova. With Ian's

name popping back into the equation, she was beginning to suspect that trusting Cav and his people to arrange her movements might not be that wise of a decision. She was becoming more and more of an independent, a turn of events about which was not too happy, especially with the current problems she was having.

As much as she hated to admit it, she needed Cav and his retinue of researchers and weapons experts, especially with a group of assassins after her whom she was beginning to believe more and more were not from around locally. In fact, as Alexis had sat on the plane trying to catch up on her sleep, she had begun to evaluate the trend of events that had been playing out around her and she had come to a startling conclusion that she didn't want to believe. She had thought up ways to test her theory, but after much deliberation, had come to the conclusion that there was no way to truly test it.

As such, her best option was just to go along and see what happened, reacting as circumstances dictated and hoping for the best. It was not a plan conducive to survival. Her thoughts, unfortunately, continued to focus back on the man she was going to Kazakhstan to meet, a man who she had thought had died on a mission those many years ago.

The mere name brought up a fresh spate of emotions she had thought she was over, buried deep and discarded for want of a better solution. But when Fujita had mentioned his name, that name that for so long had brought nothing but pleasure to her mind, Alexis realized in a flash of unwinding memories that seemed as fresh as the day they had been made that she had not forgotten them at all, was not over the

hurt and the betrayal and the loss of faith she had experienced because of Ian Montana.

The emotions she was feeling deep inside, that churned and boiled in her innards like a morass of maggots, were not pleasant ones. They were emotions of anger and hatred, a brooding indifference wanting to know why and how. If he was not dead, why had he not contacted her? With all the resources available, why had he not at least attempted to send her a singular message stating that he was alive and well.

Of course, there was always the possibility that his life had been in jeopardy and any contact with those he had once been close to would blow his new cover. But with the way they had felt about each other, he should have found a way, after all these years, to contact her, at least to let her know that he was alive. It would have been the compassionate thing to do.

So as she sat in the business class of the Boeing 800 and felt the absence of gravity on the apex of the ballistic track, she realized with a finality hitting her as substantial as a punch to the stomach that these thoughts were thoughts that killed. She would need to purge herself of all of it if she expected to survive long after touch-down. With the assassins on her trail, shooting missiles at her taxis and killing all the people she happened to talk to – she had half expected the star-liner she now rode to come crashing out of the sky in flames – Alexis knew that she would need all her resources and all her concentration to stay alive, to stay alive long enough to solve this riddle and make those responsible pay. Even if one of those responsible turned out to be Cav.

She involuntarily flashed back to her hasty and impromptu departure from China. She had barely made it to the Heihe airport when heavily armed police units showed up and literally closed the place down, looking for a suspected terrorist who, amazingly enough, fit the description of Jill Rousseau quite well. With this in mind, she had hurriedly slipped into a restroom and ditched the disguise, reverting to her own face and hair and changing to a gray halter top and tight jeans, a combination as far removed from what she had worn as Jill Rousseau as she could get.

Then she had made her way as loudly and garishly as possible to her gate, knowing that the more noise she made the less likely the police would be interested in her, brushing her off as just another rude, noisy American tourist and wanting as little to do with her as possible. It had been easy after that to slip past the security checkpoints and board her plane.

It led her to this moment in time now as she stood in the main lobby of Aqmola's Nazarbayev airport dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, a brown leather bag she had purchased in Tokyo during the lay-over slung over her shoulder, her short hair a vibrant bleach blonde with glaring brown roots, eyes a cerulean blue, face that of an older woman with deep lines etched around her eyes and full red lips. This was the last instant disguise she had left on her person and she was already beginning to wonder how she was going to slip out of this town if events turned on her here also. She could not remember a time during any other mission when she had been forced to change appearances so often.

She walked with a restrained swagger and a diligent, modest air about her as she made her way through the terminal. She was here to find and talk to Ian Montana, the man that she had banished to the far, far reaches of her mind long ago after his death. But now, with his name the last words on the lips of the dead Aobe Fujita, Montana's memories had exploded in her mind like a grenade, the shrapnel opening scars she had thought were healed long ago.

She shook her head to get the images of the man out, to purge her mind of all but the essentials. Despite how she felt, wondering what she was going to say when she confronted him after almost twenty years, she knew that she had to push him back once again to the far reaches, to stay there until she was ready to bring his memory forward and confront not only him but her own, lost emotions. But Ian continued to intrude, almost mockingly.

She watched the procession of people milling about the lobby, some dressed in modern, conventional clothing and others in the more traditional dress and headscarves. She could tell from this differentiation exactly from where each person originated, whether from the urban areas or the small farming villages dotting the countryside. The Slavs, Belorussians and Ukrainians were prone to living in the cities and the more native Kazaks confined themselves more to the country, their reverence for the old-life still strong.

In the last few decades, this area had grown at a tremendous rate, the industrial riches of the ground finally exploited in the western way, the large influx of Oriental and American companies bringing in their offices and their culture in bulk. As such, Aqmola, as the capital and the one city with a large enough

airport and rail centers for convenience, had become the apex of a resurgent high-tech industrial complex. The result had been the emergence of one of the leading centers of research for the major bio-tech firms, the cheap land and cheaper labor much more conducive to operating costs than the labor union saddled America or the high tax-based Europe.

It was here that Ian Montana was employed, working for one of the many nameless firms specializing in the development of ideas and equipment that were changing the way the world functioned every year. She hefted the bag onto her shoulder better and started to make her way toward the large glass entrance where the bright light of the August afternoon greeted her. The temperature outside was comfortable, in the upper sixties with a slight breeze moving in fits and starts, barely waving the flags hanging like limp rags on their impotent poles.

There was a profusion of taxis waiting for fares and she stepped up to the nearest one, addressing the indolent looking driver who relaxed back on the side of his taxi with a smoldering, putrid stub of a cigar stuck in his mouth, his eyes undressing her slowly and methodically. It was obvious that the ban on tobacco was not as stringently enforced here as it was in the other developed countries.

"Marhaba, Allah u bi ma'akum."

The taxi driver's eyes popped back up to her face and he stood up straight, taking his cigar out of his mouth and holding it down in-between his short, fat little fingers. "And may Allah be with you also. Where can I take you today?"

She didn't bother to smile but just looked at the door as if waiting for it to open itself. He narrowed his eyes a moment, then stuck the cigar back in his mouth and opened the door. She climbed in and settled herself, then told the driver to take her to Bashar Biotech. He grinned at her through the mirror as the taxi took off into the air with a jerk.

"Do you have a hotel to stay in already?" the driver asked with his sing-song accent and happy-go-lucky tone telling Alexis that the man would be more than happy to recommend a hotel where he could better have his way with her.

"I'm fine, thank you."

The driver continued to jabber away as he drove her through the city and toward the main industrial park where the large corporate headquarters of Bashar were located. She ignored him completely, watching the new construction and the old city center fly past the window, wondering if they were out there, waiting for her. The shadow people had been on her tail every step of the way. It would be foolish to assume that they would not be here also.

After an interminable drive through which the cabby never shut-up once, they reached her destination and she gladly stepped out of the taxi. When he handed her money card back, he slipped her a small piece of paper she was certain was a phone number or house address or some such nonsense, his greasy smile telling her that he thought his chances good at bedding her. She didn't acknowledge him or the note and, turning her back to him, walked toward the main entrance of the building to his whistles and cat-calls.

She noticed the myriad of video cameras and security systems keeping the main entrance, the walkway, and the lobby under constant, tight surveillance. She walked purposefully to the main reception counter where an attractive, young female sat, her low-cut shirt over-exposing the voluptuous curves of her genetically modified breasts. Alexis was certain that if the lady were to bend over she would give the male visitors to the firm a view they would not soon forget. Although she could not see it, Alexis was certain that the receptionist was wearing a tight mini skirt of some type.

Alexis had dealt with this type of woman before. They existed all over the world. Young, attractive and not very bright, they gravitated toward the jobs that required little thought, the chance to dress up sexy and the possibility they would attract the eye of some young upward mobile executive and sleep their way into money. They were the girls who usually ended up with the Jaguar and the million-dollar home after the divorce.

The receptionist ignored Alexis as she talked away into her computer mike and answered phones and generally sat there trying to look busy. Alexis cleared her throat contemptuously, standing before the counter with arms crossed and head slightly tilted to the side. The receptionist looked up with puckered lips and narrowed eyes, as if Alexis had interrupted something extremely important.

"Ayna ana 'athara lan Montana?" Alexis asked in Arabic, her face a mask of suppressed rage at the indolence.

The receptionist looked at her a moment, eyeing her figure and her facial features with a practiced eye.

She had noticed Alexis walking down the walkway earlier, had seen the strong stride and the swing of the hips and, as vain women are prone to do when they come across another woman who they believe looks better than they do, felt a wave of contempt swell in her. How dare she look better, at an older age, than the receptionist did. As was also the usual case, the receptionist began to find all the flaws, real or imagined, that she could on this new threat to convince herself that she was indeed the better looking of the two.

After taking a quick, close-up view of the enemy, a smile touched the corners of the receptionist's mouth and she looked back at her computer screen and spoke into it in a dialect with which Alexis was not familiar. She was about to ask again when the receptionist spoke without even looking up. "He's not in at the moment."

When there was no more information forthcoming, Alexis spoke again. "Can you kindly tell me when he'll be back in?"

"Hard to say. He keeps his own hours, if you know what I mean."

Alexis raised an eyebrow. "Can I wait in his office?"

Now the receptionist looked up at Alexis with a penetrating stare and Alexis could not help but get the feeling that the receptionist thought Alexis the dumbest person in the world, her contempt reaching out in palatable waves of mental anguish. "Of course not. Who do you think you are? Perhaps you had better leave now. I'm extremely busy."

"I noticed that," Alexis replied sarcastically. "Can you give Mr. Montana a message, or would that be too much for you to handle?"

The receptionist looked up again at Alexis. "Don't get smart with me, ma'am."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Alexis replied bitterly, reaching into the woman's mind and placing within it a recurring thought that she was too fat and needed to go on a diet. "Please tell him that Brenda de Vere was here to see him. Think you can handle that?" To make certain, Alexis placed the thought foremost in the woman's mind and forced her to move her hands and type it into the main message center. When Ian heard that name, if he still remembered, he would know that it was Alexis who had come calling.

When Alexis was certain that the receptionist had finished typing in the message and sent it, she turned and, smelling the aroma of freshly cooked food coming from the other side of the lobby, started to walk that way.

The receptionist, looking down at her flat stomach with a frown and noticing that she was starting to gain weight, looked after Alexis. "You can't go there," she lacklusterly called, noticing that her arms were starting to get flabby also and then took her lunch and tossed it into the trash with a longing last look.

Alexis ignored the voice and made her way toward the large cafeteria that was part of the circular ground floor, a pair of ornate glass, double doors separating the lobby from the eating area. She walked in as if she belonged, her stomach growling from the smell of the food drifting on the air, the strange, indigenous cuisine different to her palette, the rich fragrance of spices and blends enticing her to partake.

And she did.

She also noticed that those taking care of the security here at Bashar Bio-tech didn't see the

cafeteria as a high security risk area, for there were no cameras here she could see, no obvious systems like there had been in the lobby and so she decided that it would be relatively safe to relax and eat something. After loading a tray up with a variety of new dishes and a few she recognized as typical American edibles, she found an empty table near a gaggle of women who appeared to be employees, perhaps even secretaries, the ones who actually knew what was going on in the workplace. They were talking away in what appeared to be contented tones, discussing affairs that had little to do with business.

A waiter came by to take her drink order. "Ana mathilu ba'adu ma'a," Alexis droned out and the waiter smiled and brought back the water she had ordered. She quietly ate her food, enjoying the new sensations presented and listening to every word the women at the next table spoke. It was amazing what one could pick up from a secretary if one only listened.

After several minutes, she hit the jackpot.

There was to be a big company dance tonight, a formal affair for the CEO who was coming in from Japan and all the employees were expected to attend, as a sign of solidarity. The women seemed quite excited about the soiree and Alexis was able to pick up exactly where it was to be held and how it was by invitation only since several non-employee VIPs were also expected to attend and the company didn't want just anyone showing up for security reasons.

One of the ladies, the youngest of the group with delicate facial features topped with puffy brown hair and a body that had seen a few too many jelly donuts, pulled out of her purse an embossed invitation card.

It was obvious that this was the first such event this young woman had been to and she proudly showed off her invitation to the others, who smiled pleasantly at her excitement. After making certain that they all saw that she had also received permission to go to the dance, a fact that didn't seem all that interesting to the others since all the employees received the same invitation, the young lady put the card back in her purse.

Alexis smiled also.

This was too easy.

She wiped her mouth, stood, lifted her tray up, grabbed her bag and walked around the table with the chattering women, specifically to the side where the young employee sat. Timing it just right, Alexis tripped and spilled the entire contents of her tray on the lady, the tray clattering down and striking her in the chest, Alexis ending up on the floor next to the purse.

"I'm so sorry, oh my gosh, I can't believe I did that, I'm so sorry..." Alexis profusely apologized to the lady who was now completely covered in French fries, salad and various other delectable dishes that when mixed together made an awful mess on the beautiful cotton summer dress with the floral pattern.

The other women all stood, some of them going to help their friend, others kneeling down to help Alexis who had done such a good job of convincing everyone that the fall was real that they were actually concerned about her. Other employees from other tables came over to help or to watch and snicker or ohh and ahh at the ruined dress and the grease in the hair and gravy on her cheeks.

Alexis was helped up with many apologies rolling off her lips as well as offers to pay for the ruined dress.

Several waiters came over to begin cleaning up and in the general confusion that prevailed, Alexis was able to slip away unnoticed, her new invitation tucked securely in her bra.

There was just one more small thing to take care of before she could show up at the dance and hopefully meet Ian. She walked quickly over to the small park the company had built for breaks, overlooking the hov parking area and waited. She didn't have to wait long. The young woman, her dress completely ruined and unwearable, came storming out of the entrance to the building, tears streaming down her face, her purse clutched tightly in her hand as she ran to the parking area and jumped into her personal hov.

Alexis already had her pocket computer out with the signal interceptor attachment and as the hov pulled out of the lot and headed for the main thoroughfare, Alexis quickly scanned the vehicle, pulling out of the non-encoded navigation system – for who would encode such a thing? – the address where the young lady was heading. After waiting a few more minutes, Alexis used her computer to hail a taxi and gave the driver the address.

She arrived shortly after the young lady. The woman lived in a high-rise apartment that had a brand new look to it that buildings get, the gleaming metal and glass and stone structure rising into the air with its sail-boom design like a needle. The finely manicured grounds around the ample park at its base indicative of a wealthy clientele. The profusion of stores running from the complex like roots on an old, gnarled tree, busy with the day's business.

Alexis walked over to the main directory and found that, not surprisingly, it had a security lock on it that

didn't allow just anyone to walk up and discover who lived here. She pulled a small device from her purse that looked like a compact, attached it to the computer touch-plate and activated it. Within seconds the security system was bypassed and Alexis had found the apartment number of the young lady, whose name she pulled off the invitation.

She stepped out of the elevator on the ninetieth floor and, after checking to make certain that the corridor was empty, stayed in the elevator as she looked over at the security panel on the wall and frowned. This complex had constant surveillance, she was certain, and probably one of those new holographic valet centers on each floor helping with the mundane daily questions and concerns the tenants had. She sighed, then pulled out the same device she had used on the panel below and pointed it toward the panel across the corridor. It only took a few moments to insert a virus into the system that quickly disabled the entire security system on this floor and that would look, to the self-diagnostic systems in operation, as if the program had suffered a power surge and temporary malfunction.

She would have to work quickly. The diagnostics in this center appeared quite advanced and she didn't want to be caught by the system while still on the floor. She walked quickly and confidently to the door belonging to her target. With the security system down, the door opened easily – one of the many flaws with the new hands-off non-human total security systems that all the new buildings were installing – and stepped in to the sound of cursing intermixed with tearful sobs.

If this were twenty years earlier, this poor young woman would be as good as dead.

But Alexis could not, would not kill her. There was no reason to kill her. She had done nothing wrong except flash her invitation when Alexis happened to be around and for that, Alexis was not ready to kill. Too many innocent people had already died and killing this one would make her no better than the shadow people following her.

Although she didn't know it at the time, it would prove to be a mistake.

There were reasons she had been trained as she had by Cav and those reasons didn't become invalid with the passing of time. It was an inevitable bet that anyone not killed outright always managed to spoil the best-laid plans.

But to Alexis none of those thoughts mattered.

There would be no more unnecessary killing.

Not after *Stargazer I*.

The young lady stepped out of her bedroom wearing only panties. Their eyes locked and before she could get her scream out Alexis advanced on her and rendered her unconscious. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she fell down listlessly, the jellyrolls of her body flapping to the carpet.

Alexis dragged her back into the bedroom with an effort and tied her firmly to the bed, inserting a cloth in her mouth for good measure, then placing in her mind the image of a man who had attacked her – Alexis' first taxi driver – to make certain that she was not connected in anyway to the scene.

The entire event took less than five minutes and soon Alexis was back on the ground and in a taxi

making her way to the center of the fashion district to pick out the proper attire for the night's soiree.

*As fire is obscured by smoke,
and as a mirror by dust,
as an embryo is enveloped by its covering,
so is wisdom obscured by passion.*

Bhagavad-Gita

18

17 August 2085

2230 hrs

Grand Kazak Convention Center

The ballroom reserved for the special dance of Bashar Biotech was elegant in its adornments, revisiting an older time when the great Tsars of Russia had entertained in the grand style that can only survive under autocratic monarchs. Expensive hofs pulled up to the entrance in a cavalcade of glittering dresses and black ties, of slits showing off legs and décolletage dipping low to reveal the curves of those who sought such exposure.

This collage of colors and styles, of expensive hofs and limousines, of valets and servants and tuxedos

manifestly emphasized the gap that still existed between the haves and the have-nots. The small, shoddy houses huddling on the rich soil of the farms but a few kilometers from the luxury of the ballroom were a stark reminder of the poverty still holding this region in its grip despite the plethora of natural resources the land gave up to the few elites reaping the rewards. It was a state of affairs of which Alexis was well aware. She could see in the eyes of the porters and the valets who watched the glittering procession of the rich advance into the convention center with looks of smug disdain, also seeing the disparity and mocking it with hidden sarcasm. One could have easily placed this soiree in the heart of New York or St. Petersburg, Kyoto or Paris, the differences minimal, the wealth the same, the opulent eyes of those involved no different despite the fact that it was taking place in the heart of a land that had, at the turn of the century, been non-existent to most of the world.

Wealth had a way of insinuating itself into every society that allowed it in. It had a way of creeping into the farthest nooks and crannies, working its way into the very fabric of the culture, and then, when it had assured that its place was secure, exploding into the mainstream and corrupting all it fell upon in a shower of corpulent licentiousness. It had happened here in this land that once had been home to nomads and simple farmers.

It would, eventually, happen everywhere and it made Alexis sick to think that these people who paraded themselves before this temple of prosperity, wearing their idols of Rolex and Yves St. Laurent on their waists and their wrists, looking like they were

important and special because the fountain of wealth just happened to shower them with its favors, were the same as the humble farmer sitting in his unassuming abode with his mud-encrusted puttees. That the low wattage light flickering and dim and casting their shadows into the clean corners of the simple houses fell upon the same species who walked through the entrance with the blazing, fluorescent lights and flashing strobes of the convention center was somehow lost to the vagaries of vanity.

They say that success comes with a price.

For Alexis, she would rather say that wealth came with a curse: a curse that took for granted all that one had been given in a chance moment in a life that was nothing more than a mirage.

But who was she to criticize? She had been to more than her fair share of such parties in her lifetime, dressed up opulently as they did and flaunted her looks just like the want-to-be models who strutted along the walkway to the large marble steps of the convention center with their hips wagging and their chests pressed out and their looks of utter disdain for anything that didn't cost a million.

But whereas all the other times she had been simply doing a job, dressing up for Cav and doing his dirty work which, when she thought back upon all of it, amounted to no more than a pile of dog shit, now she had a purpose that was her own. She was going to find the people who murdered her son and Clovis and Fujita. And she was getting a step closer this night, at this party when she found Ian and discovered just what the hell he was playing at pretending to be dead.

She arrived in the hotel-provided limo and stepped out into the ring of indulgence wearing a full-length jacket and a scarf around her head. Until she was safely inside, safely past the press loitering around the entrance to watch the cortege and take photos of those they thought famous or important, she didn't want to cause a scene or have anyone take notice. Although a few heads were turned toward the hastily moving lady all bundled up, her lack of exposed skin in this zoo of tanned cellulite made them dismiss her quickly.

She had spent the time between tying up the young lady whose invitation she stole and this moment working on her dress selection, buying a flowing blonde wig braided tight behind her in a long tail and trying to find a way to make a new invitation that had her name on it.

She quickly discovered that the invitations were rather copy-proof. They were not even paper as she had at first suspected. Instead, they were made of the latest in the line of nano-tech electron sheets on which all the new books printed since 2015 had been made, if one could even call it printing.

The paper-like substance was actually a thin recorder sheet allowing one to display anything on its surface. A computer chip, using the latest in nano-technology, held the entire volume of the book in its memory and a simple touch of the finger changed the formatting of the electrons on the page so that new words appeared when one wanted to turn the page.

This technology had vastly decreased the amount of room one needed for book storage, for an entire thousand-page book could be kept on the simple, thin sheet. It was even flexible and easy to carry around.

The old system of requiring huge buildings to house the reams upon reams of books were now as much a relic of the past as were paperbacks, libraries reduced to small storage facilities requiring very little room to store the assortment of recorder sheets, the main memory of the billion volumes of books taken off the Internet.

When one wanted to read another book, all that was needed was for the memory chip to be reprogrammed, a procedure taking but a few microseconds and the user walked out of the library with a brand new book. The invitation was just such a recorder sheet with one, minor exception: the invitations were encoded and encrypted, making it difficult if not impossible to change the name. Whereas the books were programmed to be changed at any library or bookstore, these invitations were designed to remain as they were to prevent anyone from doing what Alexis was about to do.

After several failed attempts with her pocket computer and attached scanner, she successfully broke into the chip just as the limo was pulling up to the convention center. She changed the name to Brenda de Vere and changed the corresponding genetic information and retinal scans to match her own. Her biggest problem now would be to add her name to the list she was certain would be cross-referenced at the entrance.

She programmed the necessary info into her hand-held scanner, the one she could just touch to a computer and extract all the contents of its memory in a matter of micro-seconds, and tried to think of a way to get close enough to the registration computer to

allow her to download the virus she had programmed, which would add her name to the master list.

She followed the entourage of unknown, nameless people into the reception center where each invitation was carefully checked against the master list and then each guest's identity verified. As Alexis watched, she was happy to see that the young lady who was checking all the invitations on the master list was using a pocket computer not unlike her own and was standing close enough to the receiving line that Alexis would be able to contrive something convincing to be able to touch the master list with her own computer.

As she neared the young lady, she used the old reliable stumble and fall forward. A look of sheer horror crossed the receptionist's face at the mere thought that someone would be clumsy enough to fall on her. Alexis reached out to catch herself, looking as shocked as she could and was able to just reach the hand holding the master list. She grabbed it as several men standing around attempted to catch her, each one wanting to be able to touch the lovely woman who was falling and perhaps get a name or a dance later for their effort.

Alexis nimbly and discreetly touched her scanner to the master list for the brief amount of time needed, then turned red with embarrassment, a pinkish color filling out her cheeks and flushing them, making her look even more attractive to those standing around. She was offered the arm of numerous suitors who had come alone to the soiree and, graciously declining all of them, straightened her jacket out, smiled at the young lady with the master list as she apologized, then handed her the invitation and was duly checked off as an official invitee.

Once inside, Alexis noted that she didn't need to worry about standing out in the crowd much. The amount of bare flesh visible on the ladies in attendance made her dress feel conservative, if not downright old-fashioned. Scattered about the large expanse of the dance hall, which had numerous tables and chairs arranged along the side and a live big band at the far end, were a variety of the newest line of dresses coming off the runways in Paris and Tokyo.

The trend in the last decade had reverted back to the revealing half-dresses that had been all the rage in the 2020's and then again in the 2050's and 60's. The most popular pattern was the 'flower petal,' which consisted of nothing more than a few well-placed fabric flower petals – sometimes even real flowers for the more extravagant versions – on a see-through dress that was skin-tight nylon and barely detectable even to those standing right next to the wearer. The flowers varied from roses to orchids to simple violet petals and if the woman who wore the dress – if one could call it that – had a halfway athletic figure, the effect was highly invigorating to the men who stood around in awe.

Other dress patterns were typical styles with the exception of the other latest craze sweeping the fashion industry, another throw back from the 40's. These had a hole cut in them where a breast would hang, allowing it to be exposed in all its firm and round glory, the morals of such wanton displays of the body having relaxed greatly over the years. Sometimes it was the left breast and sometimes the right one, but never both. Which breast the lady choose to reveal supposedly implied something about

her availability or some such thing, but Alexis had neither the inclination nor the desire to learn what it all meant.

She would have to be really desperate to wear anything that tawdry.

Of course, there were always the traditional dresses that never went out of style, which those who didn't want to expose their bodies to public display or had the bodies necessary for the flower petal designs wore at such events throughout the ages.

Such a simple dress Alexis wore.

She took off her dinner jacket and handed it to the coat check droid, then made her way into the main ballroom. Her dress was a blush-rose in color and was strap-less, the cut along her breast-line oblique so that the curves on the left were more exposed than the right, the dark shadow of the left aureole almost visible under the dresses lace edge. A gold and emerald choker provided the only coverage for the otherwise bare skin extending from chin to cleavage.

The dress extended just above the knees in front and the ankles in the rear, tapered in graceful folds toward the back where a gold and emerald anklet graced her left ankle and a high slit allowed the firm, long line of her tanned leg to be seen within a few centimeters of her hip. The dress was not too tight but flowing with an elegance suggesting her body shape rather than forcefully exposing it. The back had a small band clasped together running along the line of the shoulder blades on the right and down under her left armpit. The remainder of her back was exposed down to the low-cut just below the small of her back so that when she walked the firm roundness

of her buttocks moved under the fabric in arousing and sensual grace.

High heels and a corsage of miniature roses and baby's breath intricately woven into her hair, topped off the ensemble and several heads turned as she walked down the arching steps and onto the ballroom floor. Since no one knew her, they all assumed that she was someone special, perhaps even a mistress of the CEO, the rumors and innuendoes flying fast and furious. She ignored the stares and the gawks following her, the side-glances and mumbled comments and observations floating on the air like a fine mist bouncing off her indifference as she scanned the crowd diligently.

She could almost feel his presence, sense him somehow in the room, the music of the band sweeping across the dance floor in palpable waves of energy that seemed to make those on the dance floor sway and gyrate unnaturally. To look more natural, she lifted a champagne glass off of the tray of a passing waiter droid and began to mingle slowly, always looking for him, smiling politely at those who tried to make conversation but staying unattached. She never drank any of the champagne, never having acquired the taste of the bubbly concoction that everyone else seemed to find so refreshing. To her it tasted like bitter sock-water.

After several chance encounters with the curious and the lustful, which she aborted early on the pretext that she had seen a long-lost friend on the other side of the room, she finally spotted him.

And he was indeed alive.

He stood in his white tux jacket with black pants and bow tie, a bevy of gorgeous women adorning his arms

and his eyes with looks of hopefulness and anticipation, of adoration and desire. He was tall and had a coyness and reticence of manner seemingly out of place with his looks and the women hovering about him like flies to fresh meat. He had an aquiline nose reminding Alexis of a Roman patrician of old; large, kind, intelligent eyes of a striking light gray with green flecks deep-set that could quickly become somnolent and lusterless when he was bored. His light brownish hair was tied up in a low ponytail resting on his broad shoulders. He had a prominent jaw with a half-day's beard growth giving him an outdoorsy, scruffy appearance, a look which Alexis had always found attractive.

He stood casually with a jaunty stance screaming success, yet had an unassuming air about him that seemed simple and innocent, demure and controlled. He would have fit into any boardroom, any major corporation or just as easily on a raft on the Yukon, a tour guide in the Alps, a man who had the world by the tail and knew it.

He could have come from any of the Scandinavian countries or Europe, but the flair of his long face gave him a marked preference that said Australian. He had a thick neck opening onto a medium-sized chest and trim body that Alexis knew, from personal experience, to be powerful and hard.

He looked as if he had not aged at all, appearing just as she remembered him with the exception of the tinted gray at his temples giving him that distinguished look. She had thought she had successfully purged all her feelings for the man, burned and buried them deep within her mind those twenty years ago, but upon seeing him it all came flooding back, like a dam

in her mind had broke, ruptured with a ferocity sweeping her away to their brief time together in swift, flowing images churning and bubbling in tiny whirlpools and eddies, stripping the past clean in a cascade of boiling emotions.

Someone bumped her arm and she came out of the trance with a start, her mental defenses springing up like a cage. She unconsciously flashed the man who had unintentionally brushed up against her such a look of cold hard animosity that he dropped his drink and slinked away as rapidly as his little legs could carry him.

She frowned and shook her head slowly, aware that the trance into which she had just fallen was the worst possible thing that she could do while here, in this place; in this danger. She compressed her lips into a tight smile, then stared at Ian from across the dance floor, watching him move about with his horde of want-to-be concubines, the sagacious smile plastered to his face with such ease to be an affront to the men who stood about jealous of his attractive powers.

She watched him for several minutes, observing. She even reached out with her mind and tapped into the surface thoughts of the man who had abandoned her, wanting to find something into which she could latch and with it, hate him. But she could find nothing. His thoughts, while jumbled with prurient desires for the women who hovered around him like bees to pollen, seemed to focus primarily on a particular project in which he was involved and the trouble his team was having.

She smiled at this.

It was all too typical for him to be standing in a throng of women who would give their souls to bed

him and his thoughts would be primarily on his work. She took a deep breath and realized with a suddenness that the man she had loved, the only man she could honestly say she had ever loved, was still alive, still functioning and apparently not at all concerned with her feelings or what he had done to her, how his leaving had devastated her more than she would ever admit to anyone, especially not to herself.

She reached out and placed various notions in the minds of the women who surrounded him and within a matter of minutes they all abandoned their object of lust and found new attachments. Ian looked about him with a good-natured complacency at the turn of events, sipping at his drink with a detachment that seemed natural. Then his eyes narrowed. His face screwed up slightly and he began to scan the room slowly, methodically.

She stepped up behind him, a serene, coquettishly crooked smile on her face. She had, after Cav had told her of his death, dreamt about meeting him suddenly, finding him alive and all that she would say to him at that moment of discovery and yet, now that it was actually happening, she was at a complete loss for the words she really wanted to speak. What she really wanted to do was hit him hard in the face, but she figured that this was not the correct occasion for such a re-introduction.

"It's been a long time, Ian," she said, her voice carrying through the multitude of noise sweeping over the dance floor like breaking waves. He turned casually, champagne glass to his lips.

When their eyes met there was a moment of regret, a glittering of terror, then a submission to fate panning

out in a relaxed posture as he lowered his glass from his mouth and spoke. "You know, I'm not sure why, but I had a feeling that it was your doing when the Sheila's all left me like that." His voice was rich and flowed like a bubbling brook, a melodious mixture of accent that marked him from Australia as if a sign had been painted on his forehead. "I could almost feel you in my mind like I used to be able to. I never liked that feeling." He stared at her a moment, his eyes drinking in her ravishing figure under the exquisite dress as if she were a fine liqueur to be savored slowly and easily. "You're looking as good as ever, Alexis," he finally said, forced to take another drink due to the parchness of his mouth at the sight of her.

"Don't be too pleased to see me, Ian," she said coldly, the ice coming off her voice melting as it encountered the heat from his eyes. "This isn't social." He lifted an eyebrow. "Was it ever?"

The question took her by surprise, slammed into her heart with the force of a bullet, searing her as badly as a plasma burn. *What did he mean by that? How could our relationship, the relationship that we had that was hotter than anything she had ever imagined, not have affected him as it did her? How could it have been anything but social?* She scanned him but found that he had blocked her out, closed his thoughts to her as firmly as if he had erected a wall, something that she had, regrettably, taught him.

She was about to launch into him about why he had not attempted to contact her, lambaste him for the lost and wasted years and ask him straight out – to hell with the mission – why he had just left her like that when they had been so in love, when there was a commotion at the entrance. Alexis had a sudden

feeling of danger, a premonition of flight. She looked toward the top of the arching stairway leading onto the expanse of the dance floor and saw a throng of police standing behind what she could only assume was a high-ranking detective talking to the young lady with the master guest list.

Ian chuckled slightly, the remembrances of his former life coming to him in humorous irony. "Let me guess? They're here for you."

She smirked. "Let's move a little closer to the band." She grabbed his elbow and led him toward the crowd gathered by the band, smiling at those who looked at the cute couple they made. Her inquisition of Ian regarding the sudden end of their relationship would have to be put on hold. "Do you know the layout of this building fairly well?" she asked, standing where she could watch the antics of the police without being seen herself.

He smiled, a broad retrospective lilt covering his face like a moss-covered building. "Don't tell me that the great Alexis Locke didn't bother to memorize the layout of the building that she now finds herself trapped in. I find that hard to believe."

"Bite me, Ian," she said through clenched teeth, watching as the police began to fan out across the floor, looking at each of the women closely yet politely. She reached out to touch the mind of the detective in charge but was unable to filter out the multitude of thoughts flooding the room like a noxious gas. Whispers began to ripple through those gathered, sweeping through the crowd like a surge.

Colleen Triafilidis had been raped and murdered in her apartment, the whispers pronounced with

undulating emotions of revulsion, terror and disregard. *The suspects were reported here at the dance.*

Alexis narrowed her eyes with suspicion and incomprehension. Colleen had been the young lady whose invitation Alexis had stolen, whom she had tied up and left very much alive. Her premonition of flight was starting to become a burning sensation. "We need to leave, now," she breathed to Ian, conveying a sense of imminent danger to him that he had not felt in years. "Is there a backdoor near the stage?"

He thought for a moment. He had been in this ballroom several times in the past but had never really bothered to check out all the exits. He had, of course, made a cursory survey of the more available exits in case of the necessity of a quick exit – an unconscious act drilled into him through the CIA -- but at the moment, he could not come up with a single answer for her. That his thoughts were completely jumbled over the appearance of his former lover had much to do with it. He had never expected to see Alexis Locke ever again, Cav made that more than clear when Ian had been forced out of the home office and exiled to hell's backyard.

A new whisper made the rounds and now people began to look at Ian with that look of trepidation and suspicion preceding an accusation. *Ian Montana was one of the suspects. He had been caught on tape entering the young lady's apartment.*

His DNA had been found on her, in her.

Alexis grabbed Ian's arm more forcefully. "An exit, Ian. Now!"

Ian, completely caught off guard by the rumors circulating, of the implications floating around, was having a difficult time understanding what was

happening. He had known Colleen. Had in fact dated her several times, slept with her just recently, not more than a few weeks ago. And now she was dead? Raped and murdered? Beaten to death if the rumors were to be believed. And most distressing of all was that Ian was being blamed. He had been seen there, a place that he had not gone to in weeks.

Faces were turned toward him in horror and revulsion, in disbelief. Fingers were being pointed. The police were moving closer and closer, like a mudslide working its way down the side of a weakened slope and crushing all in its path. But he could not move, could not believe that what was being said was real. That he was being accused of raping someone and then killing her brutally was so beyond any reasonable logic that he was having trouble processing it.

He felt Alexis tugging on his arm, heard her pleas in his ear but none of it registered. He was frozen, locked in place by the thought that people could believe something so hideous about him. That the very people he had just been laughing and drinking and dancing with were now ready to believe the worst of him, ready to betray him to the authorities in a flash of abhorrent dismay was beyond immediate comprehension. He had thought he had left all this when he had resigned from Cav's service.

His life had been so good here in Aqmola since that time, a place where he could start all over without anyone knowing who or what he was. He had been happy, working in a field that he may not have enjoyed completely but at which he was competent and interested. He had managed to completely forget about his former life, his work with the CIA, his killings

and intrigue and mostly Alexis and Cav and all that those two personalities implied.

Alexis: she had been the one woman he had, for what turned out to be a fleeting moment, thought he could truly love and live with forever and who had then turned into his worst nightmare, his worst experience ever. And now here she was again, the very scourge of his life, his heart, his capability to make lasting relationships. That she had come back into his life so brutally, followed like a wake by an accusation of rape and murder made his head spin.

"Damn you, Ian!" Alexis screamed into his ear, trying to force the one thought of flee into his mind.

Finally, with a single phrase spoken by one of the many women who had formerly been attached to Ian's arm like a gadfly, her finger pointing at him like an inquisitor from hell, Ian was catapulted out of his inaction, launched into a nightmare world his former lover Alexis Locke had brought with her as tangibly as her sumptuous aroma and hardened nipples.

"That's him there! That's Ian Montana!"

The police seemed to react as if they were all part of the same mechanism, turning their heads in unison like one, big automated machine. There was a moment of hesitation, a moment of suspended time where the air in the room seemed to condense into an icy blast, as if the police were uncertain whether Ian would explode in wanton brutality or surrender peacefully. Then it was passed and the single-minded force began to close in, all thoughts of peaceful surrender gone.

"Sadda! Makana ala yaddik!" the detective shouted across the dance floor as he drew his weapon.

The crowd scattered as if they were a thousand ball bearings dropped on the floor, moving in random patterns like a huge, living, multi-headed creature to the accompaniment of screams and curses.

Ian turned to look at Alexis, saw the calm detachment in her eyes he had always admired, then bolted off toward the left of the stage and for the door he knew was back there, ignoring the order to stop. There was a rapid shower of weapons fire. Pieces of glass, plants, chipped tiles and wood from the stage erupted around them as they ducked behind the heavy curtain separating the main dance floor from the musician's electronics.

Screams burst forth from the patrons as the police rushed to apprehend the fugitives, ignorant of where the bullets impacted. Ian and Alexis reached the door and went through, closing it hard behind them.

"What the fuck did you do now?!" he yelled at her with a vehemence born from terror and frustration.

She ignored him as they rushed down the empty corridor, searching ahead mentally for any ambush the police may have set for them. "What's the quickest way out of this place?" she asked him with tight control, pulling her high heels off and flinging them away.

"Do you have a weapon?" he asked as they turned a corner and startled a pair of workers lazily pushing a laundry cart along.

They looked up just as she tore, to their utter amazement, the bottom half of her dress off and shoved it into the laundry cart. Now she could run easier, the fact that only her panties were keeping her modesty intact not important at the moment.

"Does it look like I have a weapon on me?" she answered back caustically as they continued down the corridor, the sounds of pursuit heavy behind them.

"Who the hell are you?" Ian interrogated with suspicion. "You look and smell and feel like Alexis Locke, but the Alexis I knew would never have let herself get caught in something this ridiculous without a weapon though those certainly are her legs."

She gave him an inflexible look of repressed shrewdness. "This isn't the time or place for a reunion, Ian, though I certainly have a few choice words for you when we get out of this mess. But in case you haven't noticed, we're in a bit deep here."

"No shit? I hadn't noticed at all. I always thought that tearing off your dress and running from the police who want to shoot first and ask questions later was a normal part of these types of dances. Kind of like the mamba."

They came to a large door with an attached alarm and an exit sign. Alexis skidded to a stop and kicked the door open with all her might, flinging it wide and slamming it against the stop with an ear-splitting crash, bending the upper hinges. The fire alarm began to wail in supplicating whines of panic.

Ian moved to go out the door in a rush and was pulled back so forcefully by Alexis that he almost fell over.

"What the ...?" he said as she dragged him along the corridor away from the door, his arms outstretched toward the exit that led to apparent freedom.

"You've been out of the game for too long, Ian," she criticized as they turned another corridor. "We go out

that way and we won't get a hundred meters. That was a ruse."

He looked at her a moment, scowled, then had to reluctantly agree that she was right, both with the mirage of an exit and his having been out of the game too long. Intrigue, espionage and running for one's life had been the purview of his former life, a life he had buried long ago.

"We need to find some way out of this building that the police haven't thought of already. Something that they've over-looked," she stated in simple terms as they came to a dead-end and had to backtrack, the sound of heavy boots echoing down the passageways.

"You're not going to get too far on the outside dressed like that, that's for sure," he said in reference to her black panties and garter-belt, which he eyed with an appreciative glare. Gun-toting thugs might be chasing him, but there was always time to enjoy the scenery. He had almost forgotten how irresistible she was.

"Let me concentrate on how I look, Ian. You concentrate on getting us out of here and quickly, cause we're running out of places to run," she said with a dynamic conviction, beginning to feel the noose tightening around them.

He nodded his head, beginning to realize that this was serious. "The sewer."

"Show me."

They changed positions and he lead through several smaller corridors and rooms. "If we can get to the main pumping station for the convention center, then it should be a simple matter of lowering

ourselves into the main feed lines and working away from the building."

She nodded her head in agreement. It was an escape route the local constables would not even begin to consider, though her shadow friends might just be waiting for her. Fortunately, so far, she had yet to feel their presence. She was certain it was but a matter of time.

They turned a corner and found three guards turning the far corner ten meters away. The guards were more startled than Alexis and Ian but they quickly recovered and let loose with a spray of bullets.

Alexis reacted instantly, all her decades of training, all Cav's admonitions to work harder, to push herself further coming in handy. She put her hand out and shoved with her mind as hard as she could. Knowing that the projectiles were coming and having a narrow space with which to work, she could make a difference in this situation and the bullets were deflected from their deadly path and impacted into the wall in a shower of plaster and woodwork.

The guards looked at their weapons in wonder.

She sent a second wave at the guards themselves and they slammed into the wall behind them as if someone had physically picked them up and thrown them, slumping to the floor with dazed looks of utter confusion.

Ian puckered his lips a moment, then led Alexis past the downed police. This was more like the Alexis Locke he knew, though that piece with the bullets was something he had not seen before.

She picked up one of the weapons as they stepped over the dazed guards, then discarded it just as quickly as useless. The weapons were tagged for the

guards DNA and thus would not work if anyone else held them. Another one of those stupid laws passed in the losing effort to control the proliferation of firearms. They turned a corner and the corridor came alive with a buzz, a bright, searing light lighting up the whole passageway and casting ominous shadows from the bluish light down the corridor they now traversed.

"They're using plasma rifles," Alexis said as if stating that it was going to rain today.

Ian looked back with disbelief, not imagining that such measures would be taken on two people that they just suspected of foul play. "What the hell did you do?" he inquired again, this time a little tamer after her recent exhibition. "Now's not the time, Ian."

They found the main pumping station unguarded and as Ian worked on the door, Alexis made ready for the attack she was certain was about to descend upon them. A small object flew through the air, bounced once, twice, then rolled over to them with an innocence belying its gruesome intent.

She recognized it at once and slammed into Ian, throwing him into the still locked door with such an impact that the lock and the upper hinges sheared off and the door flew inward, taking them with it and hurling them hard to the floor. She grabbed him by the collar and threw him up against the wall supporting the door a fraction of a second before the thermite grenade exploded in a cataclysmic fireball engulfing the entire corridor.

A tongue of searing hot gases and plasma scorched through the broken door like a lance of death, melting fittings and hinges and plastic, the toxic foulness of

the conflagration enveloping the room in a cloud of moribund. Holding her breath and placing her hand over Ian's mouth and nose, Alexis pulled the stunned and dazed man through the subsiding blast and over to the main access ladder to the lower levels of the convention center. The main circuit box for the pumping station was fused and welded shut by the blast, the stinking electrical smoke raising from it to the accompaniment of sparks, the other plastic parts and gauges and dials of the room smoldering from the intense heat melting them.

Only her ability to mentally deflect the blast from their small location where she huddled, saved them from becoming crispy-critters. This was far more serious than anything else she had encountered before, with the possible exception of the episode on the O'Neill Colony and she wondered if the shadow people had decided that she was too much of a threat to keep alive. That they had opted to involve Ian told her much, for these people were, though it was difficult to believe at the moment, not after her but him, the death of that girl a sure sign that someone wanted Ian out of the picture, just like Clovis and Fujita. She wouldn't be surprised if Dr. Shu was already dead.

Ian regained his composure after she had dragged him down the first ladder sequence and he was able to move much better thereafter so that they reached the lowest level of the building within a matter of minutes. He had not had a thermite grenade thrown in his general direction in ... He had never had one thrown at him now that he thought about it and it bothered him to no end. These people were playing

for keeps and he didn't even know why they hated him so much.

He directed her to a large watertight hatch and unspun the locking wheel while she tried to get the security computer to release the main locks.

"It's not going to work. Without the code, this thing'll stay locked till doomsday," she grunted as she looked up for any other hatchways.

Ian frowned with the idea coming to mind, his old training starting to come back with a vengeance, then grabbed her elbow and led her to a small, perhaps half-a-meter wide hatchway that had no computer lock on it. He opened the locking wheel and pulled the hatch open to the putrid rankness of the cesspool.

She looked at him with almost a pleading look as he indicated for her to go ahead. "You've got to be kidding, right?" she said as she noticed that the ladder leading into the foul-smelling darkness was covered with a blackish, sleek mold looking almost alive.

"There's most likely a maintenance hatch that leads into the main drainage pipes and from there to the main city sewage system. We just have to find it down there," he said with less conviction than he felt.

"Most likely?" she answered back.

But with the noise of the approaching police making their way down the ladders to the lowest level and the memory of the thermite grenade fresh in her mind and her nose, she swung herself over the edge and descended through the tight hatch into the malodor making her stomach churn, the sleekness of the decomposed and rancid substance on the rungs making her hands and feet feel as if they were being eaten away.

Ian closed the hatch behind him, plunging the cesspool into a darkness filled with a repugnant effluvia. It took all of her mental powers to keep herself from throwing-up, to keep herself going through the waist-deep, thick sludge making it almost impossible to breath. She could feel creatures crawling over her legs in the muck, could almost sense the decayed and fetid matter composing the cesspool as if it were absorbing into her body.

She heard Ian retching behind her and felt sorry for him. If she didn't find the maintenance hatch soon, he would not hold out and would collapse into the shit that made up the cesspool, an event tantamount to death. She reached out with her mind and began to probe the walls, looking for any sign of an opening, anything that would lead out of this nightmare, her eyes useless in the pitch-blackness in which they found themselves.

She found the exit maintenance hatch with a sigh of relief and dragged Ian toward it, turning the main wheel and jabbing the unlock plungers. The hatch opened to a breath of air not much different from what they were breathing but which struck them as a wave of freshness. She pushed the thoroughly coated Ian through, then followed, landing with a thud on the floor of the larger circular tube that was a branch access to the main sewage system. A trench in the middle was filled with a foul smelling dark liquid but it was far better than the harshness of the cesspool-retaining chamber.

"Why in the world," Ian coughed out as he tried to regain his strength, his dry heaves racking his body with each occurrence, "have you decided to grace my

life and ruin it for a second time? Once wasn't enough for you? You get bored?"

She looked at him as she stood and dragged him along the passageway toward the larger opening she knew was the main city sewer. *Ruined his life? In what kind of a fantasy was he living.* "Fuck off, Ian. I'm not in the mood."

*I would warn you that I don't
attribute to nature either beauty
or deformity, order or confusion.
Only in relation to our imagination
can things be called beautiful or ugly,
order or confusion.*

— Spinoza

19

The coolness of the night spread over the city like an umbrella, the scent of rain light and subtle on the air. Crickets sang their lonesome song of love to the darkness, a rising and falling melody echoing the busy, boisterous day. A drunk stumbled along the narrow sycamore-lined avenue, singing his heart out with a song to which he had long ago forgotten the words, his voice carrying into the desolate, expansive, empty walkways like a temptress of old, seducing sailors to their deaths on the jagged and unforgiving shoals.

He stumbled and weaved with a measured, hesitant beat that almost seemed choreographed, his disheveled clothes – consisting of an unbuttoned

black tie, black designer pants and a tuxedo top – appearing as if they had been dragged through a mud puddle, his own vomit dribbled down the front in blobs of creamed color. He finished his song and took a long swig of the bottle of Jack Daniels.

After several prolonged moments with his head tilted far back and the bottle raised to the star-filled sky as if in prayer, he realized that there was no more liquor to be had and in a fit of commiseration flung the bottle to the cobblestones, where it shattered into a thousand pieces of glittering glass. He looked about him with a scornful smile, then launched into a new song sounding more or less like the first, strutting down the street like a majordomo.

When the manhole cover by the storm drain flew into the air a good four meters and then crashed back down with a resounding clang setting the neighborhood dogs to barking, the drunk stopped in mid-stride, a word caught in his throat, his song lost as he squinted his eyes at the black hole now appearing in the middle of the avenue.

When the two figures began to climb out, one a male in tuxedo and the other a female dressed in nothing but what appeared to be the upper half of a once beautiful dress and a garter belt with black panties, both covered in what appeared to be and smelled like shit, he was quite confused. He pointed at them with a lone, wavering finger and spit out a crescendo of remarks in a slurred dialect almost mystic. Alexis looked at him a moment as he stood looking at her and eyeing her body with unrefined candor, his eyes focused solidly between her legs, his head tilted to the side, blinking with rapid stokes. She sent him a nudge and he fell over, toppling to his

rump with a mixture of confusion and glee on his face. It didn't take long for him to slump over fast asleep, dreaming of beautiful women coming out of the ground for him in garter belts and panties.

Ian looked at the drunk only a moment, then over at Alexis. "So are you going to tell me now what the hell this is all about?" he spat out, nervously and irritably looking about him. "This isn't my life any more and I'd thank you not to ruin it a second time. And what the hell is with the telekinetic powers and throwing people around? When did you learn all that shit?"

She looked at him with feverish eyes, ignoring all of his remarks except the one that hit closest to home. "That's the second time that you've said that, Ian. What the hell are you talking about 'ruining your life?' You're the one who left, who abandoned me without a by-your-leave or good-bye or kiss my ass, so don't you *dare* lecture me about ruining lives, you son-of-a-bitch!" She grumbled to herself at losing control, at letting her emotions broach the surface.

She took a deep breath, which only managed to fill her nostrils with her own putrid stench. "We'd better get as far away from here as possible," she replied more evenly, looking around at the tree-lined lane in which they stood, looking as drunk as the man fast asleep on the pavement. "And we need to get a change of clothes while we're at it. We're both kind of ripe."

He leaned back slightly as he examined her lower half and gave her a half-cocked smile. "I don't know, I kind of like you in that get-up. There's something about it that screams refinement to me."

She started to walk away from him down the lane, ignoring the feelings beginning to resurface for this

man, feelings she had told herself, promised herself she would not ever feel again. He looked after her a moment, then started to follow, not certain where she was planning on getting a new set of clothes or what she was planning on doing next. He didn't need this in his life again and yet, here he was following Alexis Locke as if she had tied a string to his genitals.

He did have, however, one detail to clear up before they walked much further. "I think you're slightly mistaken as to the nature of our separation. It was your good friend Cav who told me that you weren't interested in me whatsoever and were just using me to fulfill your sexual needs. He's the one who gave me a job over here in this part of the country so that I could forget about you, then cut me off from his agency like so much rotten fish. I never abandoned you, sweetheart. It was the other way around, so don't get all high and mighty with me about it all. This isn't my fault."

She stopped and spun around, shit flying from her hair in a spray of rankness that would have been humorous to anyone watching. "You've got to be the stupidest man alive if you truly believed that," she shot out at him. "What we had was special, at least for me it was, and I certainly wasn't using you as a a" She could not bring herself to say the words, her emotions once again flooding to the surface in an eruption she could not contain, perhaps even didn't want to contain.

Anger flared from her in waves of heat, but it was not anger directed at him. It was anger at herself for losing control, for letting the feelings she had been successful in hiding all these years come boiling to the surface in a turmoil of doubt and indecision. And it

was anger at Cav for what he had done, first with the father of her now dead son and then with Ian. He had sent him away, told the man she loved that she was only using him for her own selfish pleasures. She had no idea that Cav was such a raving lunatic, because only a lunatic would do that to Alexis and not expect her to find out eventually.

"Sex-toy?" he offered to finish her thought, an impish smile touching his lips.

She didn't understand the feelings competing in her, driving her to rash, hasty actions and pronunciations that didn't come from Alexis. For over twenty years she had been able to control these feelings, had been able to place them in a holding bin deep in her mind and forget about them. And now, when she was faced again with the reason for the suppression of those feelings in the first place, they all came rushing out headlong in an uncontrollable rage she found frightening.

What was it about him that precipitated this reaction, which made her so unlike herself? Made her act like a damn fool.

"I LOVED YOU!" she screamed, causing even the crickets to stop in mid-song as if wanting to listen to the exchange between the bipeds that had now become interesting. "I loved you," she repeated softer, as if the declaration had taken all her strength to utter. "Damn you all to hell, Ian Montana," she finished quietly, as if all her strength had left and was laying on the unused street by her feet like so much discarded rubbish.

He looked at her and saw for the first time the lost, young girl she was underneath all the tough, gruff exterior she let few see passed. He saw the hurt and

pain flashing across her eyes, the fragile shell cracking before his very eyes. He saw it all and understood a little better about that day long ago when Cav had first approached him. He stepped forward and touched her arm, gazing deep into her eyes.

There was a magic to the moment transcending both of them and took control, took over their movements, their thoughts, their emotions and brought them together for one, brief instant of time standing still around them.

At first, his lips gently brushed hers. It was a tentative, questing probe sending electric shocks through both of them in an explosion of sensuous passion. Then he deepened the kiss and her trance that the initial contact created dissolved in a swell of remembered joy and eagerness. Her body relaxed from the rigid stance it had taken of its own accord and she sighed as she opened her mouth and wrapped her arms around his neck.

The liquid stroke of his tongue against hers made her mind flash back to lost times of long ago when she had, for the first time in her life, been happy. He deepened the kiss and she met him willingly in an arousing dance of tongue on tongue, all the while caressing her neck with silky fingertips. She felt his hand begin to fondle her breast, making her nipples seem to swell and ache and her body respond to him like it had responded twenty years ago.

Then she awoke and remembered more.

She remembered the pain and the loss, but most of all she remembered the mission, her son's death, those who wanted her dead ... and she remembered, despite his admissions to the contrary, his leaving her

and the hurt came back with a vengeance. She stopped abruptly, pulling away and leaving him deprived, every nerve ending afire with a passion he had forgotten he possessed.

A calenture of emotion crossed her eyes in a wink and she belted him hard in the stomach, causing him to double over in pain, the wind knocked out in a rush of burning excitement. She brushed her wet, slick hair back from her face, the acrid, putrid stench of the cesspool once again asserting itself to her nose as she stepped back and shook her head in utter disbelief. "Damn you all to hell, Ian."

He gasped for air, one knee on the ground in exasperation. "Christ, Alexis. I think you broke something."

She smirked as she began to walk away from him, re-building her walls in a frenzy of defensive fortifications. "You'll live," she offered with little conciliation, her rational mind back in firm control, the lingering taste and compassion of the kiss fading reluctantly.

"You certainly haven't changed," he said as he rose hesitantly, one hand holding his stomach as if it helped to relieve the pain. "How long has it been? Twenty years? It seems just like yesterday to me."

She continued to walk away from him, not certain at all where she was headed but just so long as it was away from him, the one man who had managed to break through her walls and touch her inside like no one else had ever done.

He was, in a word, dangerous.

He began to follow her, her taste strong and vital within his mouth and his groin; the emotions grabbing him so strongly those many years ago battering at his

back door and wanting in. "Where are you going now?"

Alexis stopped and he thought for certain that he had reached her and she had changed her mind. But instead she kept her back to him as she tilted her head as if ready to speak.

But he quickly realized that she was not listening to him at all, but rather to the distinctive hum of an approaching hov, the glow of searchlights over the tops of the houses several blocks away indicative of what was coming.

"We need to get out from the open," she said with her old, familiar Alexis voice, not bothering to look back at him. "Do you know this area at all?"

Ian looked around for the first time to get his bearings. The houses were middle-class abodes with well-kept lawns and fences, the few interspersed lights casting a dull luminescence over the area. He knew the area all too well.

"Yes. This way," he said as he started off across the small grass mound rising between the cobblestone walkways. "I have a lady-friend close by. She'll put us up for a while, but I don't really want to get her involved."

She followed him at a rapid clip as the police hovs came flying over the last row of houses and bore down on them in all their fury. She looked over her shoulder as the two hovs began to split up to corral them in and wondered how they had found them so quickly. There must have been thousands of possible access ports all over the city from where they could have emerged and yet here they were, closing in on them within a matter of minutes after their emergence from the sewer.

"How far is this *lady* friend?" She forced him to pick up the pace, emphasizing the words *lady friend* and placing an amorous connotation to it.

"Not far, maybe a few hundred meters." He didn't fail to notice her jealous reaction, but choose the wiser course and ignored the remark.

"We don't have a couple hundred meters, Ian." She calmed herself and brought her extensive mental capacity to bear on the problem at hand. The police had been able to follow them through the maze of corridors in the convention center, then through the warren of tunnels in the sewer to end up here, at this specific place. How?

No one was that good at guessing.

The answer came to her as one of the police Hovs roared up before them and fired a burst of cannon shot into the grass, ripping it up in a peal of thunder. She would have to act fast. Alexis grabbed Ian and pulled him under the eave of the nearest house. "Where is this friend of yours exactly, Ian? Which house?"

He pointed to the next one over. Lights were beginning to flicker on throughout the neighborhood as the report of the cannon echoed among the trees and into the empty night, shattering the peace that had laid here like a blanket.

"Sadda! Makana ala yaddik!" the amplified voice commanded them again, as if they would be more prone to listen to it now than in the convention center. "We will shoot to kill!"

Alexis shook her head, then bolted for the next house where Ian had indicated his lady-friend lived. Even though there was a barrage of cannon fire following them and slamming into the nearest houses

in an explosion of wood, plaster, concrete, and screams, the thought that Ian would have lady friends like Alexis had gentleman friends seemed to rankle her to no end.

She had thought the man dead for twenty years and yet, now that she had found him alive and well, she was expecting, assuming that he would have never looked at another woman again after losing her. It was irrational to the extreme, but it continued to play in her mind as they burst through the door of the house next to the house Ian had pointed out.

"This is the wrong house!" he shouted at her as the owner of the infiltrated dwelling came out of the upper bedroom in open robes and sleepy eyes, a large club in his hand to deter the suspected criminals.

"I know," was all she said as she ignored the homeowner, who was now shouting at them in agitated Arabic, and made her way to the garage.

"What the hell are you doing, Alexis? This is mad. Those police hov's will blow us out of the sky in a heartbeat."

She kicked open the door leading to the garage in a spray of splinters, then rushed in and opened the driver's side door. "That's what I'm counting on." He watched closely as she sat halfway in the driver's seat and began to work on the on-board computer, voicing in commands rapidly. "Watch your back, Ian," she said casually.

He turned to find the homeowner rushing toward him with his club raised and his face more a mask of utter fright than anger. Ian didn't have to think. He reverted to his instincts, those that had been honed to a fine edge while he was an active member of the CIA and Cav's group, and struck. His foot kicked out in a

blur and connected to the onrushing man's chest with a hollow thud felling the homeowner in a sprawling mess against the wall, legs and arms flapping about like a doll.

He turned back to see that Alexis had finished whatever she was doing and when she stepped back out of the hov instead of climbing completely in, he was more confused than ever.

"We're not going to take the Hov?" he asked as he narrowed his eyes and tried to think of what she was doing, what she was thinking. "No, we're not," she answered distractedly as she disappeared back into the house for moment. Ian leaned into the hov and stared at the navigation computer, shaking his head with mystification at the course she had plotted. It made no sense to him whatsoever.

There was another appeal for them to surrender from the gathering police outside, urging that innocent people were going to be hurt if they didn't leave the house with their hands up. Ian looked through the door leading into the house to see where Alexis had disappeared and saw instead an unkempt, rather ugly little woman and her two kids standing at the top of the stairs huddled together in abject terror.

He frowned, then caught hold of Alexis as she came back with a fine filleting knife in her hand and several other things that he could not make out. "I'll stop you if you're thinking of hurting those kids," he said in gallant tones sounding hollow even to him.

She grabbed his arm and led him back into the garage, closing the door behind her. "You should be worrying about yourself, Ian, and not the kids," she said as she sat him down by the workbench and laid his left arm on the table. "I figured out why they've

been able to follow us all this time. I knew it couldn't be me, so it must be you." She put her back into his chest and leaned heavily on his upper forearm with her left arm, effectively pinning him down to the table. She placed the filleting knife down, opened up the bottle of alcohol and poured some over his exposed forearm.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked, unable to see around her back and beginning to get a bad feeling.

She deftly picked up the filleting knife. "You had a chip implanted in you, didn't you?" she asked as she probed with her mind under his skin for the telltale sign of the chip's beacon. She found it easily enough halfway up his forearm, embedded in the meaty part of the muscle.

"They made me when I left the agency. Why?" His eyes opened as the realization came to him. "Oh no! Not that. WAIT!"

She clamped down even tighter on his arm and then cut with the knife, precisely, accurately, quickly. He squirmed and fought her, bucking like a wild horse but her force kept him pinned firmly as she dug around for a moment, found the tiny chip and popped it out onto the floor.

"*Jesus Christ!* You've got to be the craziest bitch in the world! *You stupid fuck!*" he screamed as she poured some more alcohol on the open wound and then let him go, giving him a diffident look as she threw the knife onto the table and handed him a bandage.

"Stop crying, Ian. You've become such a baby." For some odd reason, that act had actually felt good for her, as if in response to him ripping her own heart out

when he left due to Cav telling him she was just playing, not serious about the relationship. What kind of a jackass would believe such a contrived piece of shit?

A man, of course.

"Close that up and get ready to leave."

He grabbed the bandage, looking at the small hole in his forearm, the pain from the incision shooting up his arm as if it was on fire. It felt like she had cut his whole damn arm off. "Let's see how you react if I were to cut your whole arm open!" he complained as he wrapped his arm and stood, the pain beginning to subside slowly in pulses.

She looked at him again with amusement, knowing full well that she would be able to control the pain and not wince one bit if he were to actually cut into her forearm. But then he really would not know anything about that. Although they had shared passionate sex together and a closeness transcending that experienced by most people, he had never really learned about all her abilities or her past in any detail. It was possible that had he known, he would have never left her as he did at the word of a fat idiot who was known to be protective of Alexis.

Perhaps it was time that he did know all about what she could do. Now, however, was certainly not the place for it.

There was a loud tearing sound from the back of the house, a roaring and rattling drowning out the terrified screams of the mother and her children.

"What ever happened to the patient police?" she asked sarcastically as she picked up Ian's bloody chip from the floor and threw it into the hov, then punched the activator and closed the door.

With a roar and a thunderous crash, the family hov slammed through the garage door in a shower of splinters and fragments as it tore into the night air. The police hovs gave immediate chase, falsely believing that Ian and Alexis were inside.

Ian watched with wide eyes, realizing that Alexis had given them enough time to make good their escape. She was good. He had forgotten that she was considered the best at what she did and at the moment was very thankful for that. But would it be enough?

She opened the door leading back to the house and marched forcefully upstairs with Ian following, hoping that he would not have to try to stop her from hurting the innocent family. He knew somewhere deep inside that she was not the type of person to do something that evil, it was just that he knew how it was when one was on an assignment gone bad and sometimes the innocence of those around you faded in direct proportion to the amount of danger facing you. That Alexis had killed in the past without regard to innocence or age also played a factor in his apprehension.

The mother and two children sank as far into the corner of the banister and the wall and the carpet as possible as Alexis jumped up the stairs, her stench from the encrusted shit on her and Ian filling the house with an odor that was nauseating. The mother began to plead for the life of her children in supplicating, pitiful wails but Alexis ignored her and went instead into the bedroom.

Ian stayed at the top of the stairs, trying to reassure the frantically paranoid mother and screaming, crying kids that they were going to be all right, wondering

what in the world Alexis was up to now. She returned shortly with two sets of clothing and bounded down the stairs, dragging Ian with her.

"We need to leave now. They've probably shot the hov down and will soon discover that it's empty." She looked at him deeply, some of the emotion they had shared for that fleeting moment in the kiss glittering in her eyes in tiny specks of muted recognition. "I need you to think, Ian, to become that agent you once were and help me, because otherwise you're going to be a hindrance and you don't want to know what I do to hindrances."

He swallowed hard, the faint glittering that had been in her eyes vanishing in a flash of veteran impatience. He was well aware that Alexis almost always worked alone, and it was for a very good reason. Alexis was not beyond killing off her rare and far in-between partners when she felt that they were in her way. They left the house and made their way as far and as fast as they could in the darkness.

"Are you married, Ian?" she asked out of the blue as they crossed over grass and cobblestone and dirt in their frantic escape.

He hesitated a moment, wondered if she was just making small talk or if she had another motive behind her question. "I was," he said softly, the image of his lovely wife flashing before his mind's eye in crystal clarity.

"Divorced?"

"Widowed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said with a slight hint of actual sympathy that he caught and held on to, though he was uncertain whether she meant that she

was sorry he was widowed or that he had been married.

They were quiet for the next ten minutes as they ran, his legs starting to get weak from the exertion. It had been a while since he had to flee from anyone. It reminded him in stark detail why he had been so happy to actually stop working for people like Cav. Then he understood where she was leading him and nodded his head, thinking out loud. "The river, you're headed for the river to use it as an escape."

"Yes. We can acquire a boat and make our way downstream several kilometers before daybreak. With your chip no longer leading them to our doorstep, we might just be able to get away."

The smell of the river reached them before its broad expanse greeted their eyes in the darkness, jumping out at them from behind a stand of birch. She looked up and down the bank, saw what she was looking for and headed for it.

"Not so fast, Alexis," Ian pleaded, his breath coming in ragged gasps, blood dripping down his arm from the incision she had made. "I'm not used to this anymore. It's been too long."

"I can see that," she said with a veiled threat.

He complained no more.

They reached a marina filled with boats in a shadowy pall from the four halogen lights standing along the edge of the fast flowing river. She made her way to the closest powerboat, a medium-sized hydrofoil looking fast. She threw the clothes she had gathered into the boat, then started to untie the mooring lines.

Ian jumped in and tried to start the engine, figuring that he had better do something constructive before

she noticed that he was a hindrance. She undid the last line, jumped in and pushed him away from the controls. "We don't want to make noise, Ian. We can't risk the guard of the marina alerted to our acquisition of this boat until the morning, otherwise they'll be on us in a heartbeat. Think, Ian," she admonished him as the hydrofoil floated out into the current and slowly made its way away from the marina.

When they were a sufficient distance that the noise of the engines would not awaken anyone connected to the marina, she looked the controls over. They were simple enough. Operating the boat would be no problem. The problem was with the security system installed, which required a palm print for activation. She cursed the need for such things in the world, not failing to realize that the system was installed to prevent people just like her from doing what she was about to do. She studied the electronics for several minutes as Ian sat and regained his breath and re-wrapped his arm, the pain having now subsided to a dull throbbing that seemed determined to remind him that he had let her cut him.

She frowned as she debated about the best way to defeat the system and Ian watched her, saw the outline of her firm and hard body against the moonlight starting to make itself known as the white orb rose slowly and majestically above the horizon. She was even more beautiful than he remembered, even with the sheath of shit they both still had over them.

He thought back to something she had said and realized that he had been the stupidest man in the world for leaving her, for believing Cav and his jealous

inclinations; for not staying in communication with her. But then, perhaps somewhere in his own subconscious he had wanted to leave her, to find a convenient way out of the relationship, a relationship that was far longer than any he had ever had previously. Cav had been so persuasive, so demanding in his insistence that Alexis Locke would never be able to love anyone, would only use him like a piece of bought equipment and then, when she became bored, toss him away, a hollow husk of emotions all that would be left of his soul.

It had been the convenient excuse for which he had been, perhaps, waiting. He had seen some of what Cav had described within her, had been aware that she could be very capable of such a deception and thus had believed Cav, taken the man's advice and left. He sighed mournfully, unable to take his eyes off of her as she stood over the control panel deep in thought. He had once been much more independent than that, much more capable of making rational decisions. He had moved on with his life, had loved again deeply and now here she was again, like some specter from the past come to haunt him for bad karma he had compiled.

And all the old feelings that had caused him to become so infatuated with her in the first place fell into place within his heart as if they had been but patiently waiting for her eventual return. What was it about her that turned his rational mind into jelly and his groin into rock-hard erection?

The engines came to life with a sudden roar and the control panel lit up in muted red. The hydrofoil lifted up off the water and careened down the middle of the river. Alexis set the autopilot, aware that most major

navigable rivers now had the newest in global navigation systems, allowing one to plow down any waterway without ever having to steer. This river was, fortunately, one of those.

She turned to look at him, then at her watch, smearing the crud off of the crystal and noting the time. She pulled the remnants of her dress over her head and tossed it over the side into the now fast flowing river, her exposed breasts firm, her nipples erect and hard in the cool breeze flowing over her, her tanned curves accented by the soft moonlight as she bent over and began to remove her garter belt and panties. She took two items out of her garter belt before she removed it and stashed them subtly under a seat cushion nearby.

Ian leaned back and watched with unabashed voyeurism, the tightness in his pants telling him that she still aroused in him the passions that had first drawn them together. He was not proud of it, but it had been the physical attraction that had linked them together at the beginning and perhaps even through the whole affair, a shallow conceit to be certain but definitely a worthwhile one.

She looked at him a moment as she flung the last of the shit-covered clothes overboard, a long lingering moment as she stood before him stark naked, the moonlight casting shadows on her ravishing body subtle and illuminating. They titillated him like a cat's toy.

She smiled sardonically at him as he made to get up. She leaned forward, placing her hand against his shoulder and pushing him back down again, her closeness to him like an aphrodisiac to his libido despite the lingering aroma of shit. "Relax, Ian. I'm

going to take a shower and wash this crap off of me. When I'm done, you can wash up." She stood back up and walked to the hatch that led down below. She stopped there and spoke again. "And don't get any ideas about coming down below and restarting that kiss. That's in the past and it's going to stay there." She turned her head back to look at him, to make sure that he understood. "It's over between us, Ian. You made sure of that twenty years ago. I've got more important things to be worried about and the last thing I need is for you to be in my head. We had our time and chance and we both blew it. It's over." She disappeared down the ladder.

Ian looked up into the tapestry of the stars exploding at him with their dazzling eternity and sighed again ... then smiled. In all the time that had passed between them, in all the lives they had lived, he could still see right through her at times and into her soul and knew that the connection they had once had was still strong, still playing at her heart strings as much as at her groin. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the cool wind blowing the stench of the shit away into the night.

* * *

Cav stood near the twisted, charred wreckage of the hov that had smashed into the ground shortly after it had lifted off, the smell of burnt interior hanging in the air like a fine mist. He watched the forensic teams search through it in detail. He already knew that Alexis was not in there. Not that the forensic team

had said anything, he just knew, had an insight that she would never have been dumb enough to try to outrun the police hovs in something like this. This was a ruse and wherever Alexis was, she certainly was not in the twisted, smoldering wreckage.

He stood with his hands in the pockets of the dark brown overcoat he wore, watching silently the large, bulky police chief who was directing the investigation, aware that the man was convinced that his people had stopped the rapist and murderers who had been in the hov, the ID chip of the one called Ian Montana still sending a weak signal from within the charred remains.

It was not supposed to have happened this way.

Cav's Rapid Response Team had missed Ian at his apartment by mere minutes. The idea to frame him for the rape/murder of the young lady whom Alexis had mistakenly left alive had gone off flawlessly. The problem had occurred when Alexis had come into the scene and found Ian before the police had been able to pick him up at the dance. That had complicated things tremendously and had caused a cascade of problems which now stared at him from within the ruins of the hov.

The worse possible situation had come to pass.

Alexis and Ian were together, running, rogue, and most likely more determined than ever to find the cause of their flight. It was not the scenario for which Cav had planned. The reaction the police had taken in trying to apprehend Ian and the radical methods that they had employed were certainly not part of the plan. He was rather perturbed at the whole affair, as he was with this whole notion of taking Alexis out of retirement. It was all beginning to smell like shit.

He was already close to losing Alexis, having her slip from his grasp and turn into a true rogue agent. Now he was certain that this episode, unintentionally to be sure, had been the final event to throw her over the edge and turn her independent. Such a thought was so far from anything good that he balked at the very idea. To have someone like Alexis Locke running around making up her own missions and doing as she pleased was a disaster written in big, bold letters. It was, to say the least, an unfortunate state of affairs.

She would have to be dealt with, dealt with using extreme prejudice if her solo run lasted much longer. There was no other way out. Alexis was a one-woman army and to have her making up her own rules was one of Cav's numerous worse nightmares.

The police chief came up to Cav with a look of contempt and smug self-satisfaction for what he considered a job well done. He was a chain smoker, the ban on the use and sale of tobacco not a priority with the Kazakhstan government and especially not for the higher officials. He held his cigarette between his lean fingers as if it were a part of his body, bringing it to his mouth and inhaling the toxic smoke with a relish that seemed misplaced to Cav.

Why anyone would want to purposely inhale the cancerous fumes of those vile little moribund contrivances was beyond him. But the man seemed to think that it gave him class, style, a certain character that set him apart from the other less fortunates who didn't need nor dare insufflate their own demise. All it did was make him look foolish.

He spoke a rapid, crisp, toxic Arabic flying past his lips like the bluish venomous smoke of the cigarette.

"We will find them, that you can be assured, and when we do, I will personally make sure that they pay in pain for the vile desecration of that innocent girl."

Cav looked at the man from beneath his bushy eyebrows with a loathing that was tangible, then looked away, disgusted with the mere sight of such a man in a position of power.

The police chief continued, unaware that he was skating on thin ice. "This is what happens when we allow such people into our country. I expect that you will be leaving soon. Your presence here is not required."

Cav ignored him as he watched the forensic crew exit the wreckage and shake their heads, indicating that they had found nothing. He looked up into the sky where the blaring spotlights illuminating the crashed hov drowned out any chance at seeing the stars.

"This one female," the police chief said with a tone to his voice that set Cav's teeth on edge. "She was one of yours, no? Perhaps you should be more careful in selecting who you choose to allow into your organization. You damn Americans are so — "

He never finished his sentence as Cav grabbed the tall, muscular man by the testicles and squeezed with all his might. The police chief's eyes rolled back into his head and his face twisted into a grotesque parody of pain and ultimate discomfort as his knees buckled and he fell to the grass, trying in vain to pull Cav's hand away.

"Listen to me you piece of shit," Cav said slowly, caustically, choosing his fluent Arabic carefully, picking just the right words and making certain that the incapacitated man understood each and every

one clearly. He took the cigarette that burned in the man's mouth, hanging on his lip as if attached, and put it out on the back of the police chief's left hand, burning the skin in a sizzle of sickening sweet smoke. "If you harm one hair on that woman's head, I'll tear you apart and eat you for breakfast. No one told you to go in shooting. No one."

He squeezed even harder, creating a pain that the police chief didn't think possible, forcing tears to well up in his eyes and his face to become even more contorted. "If it hadn't been for your incompetence, this would all be over by now." He squeezed one last time, felt something break, then let go as the man sagged to the grass emitting low, pitiful moans and sobs as he curled up into a ball.

Several officers came running up to see what had happened but stood some distance from the man who had laid their chief down.

Cav looked at the pathetic ball on the grass and spit on him. "And I'm not an American, you son-of-a-street-whore." He walked some distance away and let the other officers tend to their leader. He pulled out his encrypted cell-phone using its own, singular satellite and punched the speed dial. He listened to the connection tones and beeps, then the sleepy voice answering on the other end. "This is Cav. We have a problem."

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