

Reunion

by David W. Goldman

I'd spent most of the morning supervising my desk as it attempted, so far unsuccessfully, to locate a replacement grinding arm for a broken ore mill. As usual with my clients' operations, the mill had been obsolete nearly as long as I'd been alive.

So when my office door squealed open and the short, neatly dressed man stepped in from the street, I was taking a much-deserved break. My feet were up on the desk; beside my bare calves and beat-up croc-leather boots floated a dozen dense lines of text and symbols that I'd been squinting at for half an hour.

"Ms. Dalmas?" the man inquired. He spoke softly, like someone accustomed to people paying close attention to his words.

Beneath his mahogany hair, the short man's face was obscured by the sentence *For $m > 3$, assume not*. I twirled my index finger in a gesture my desk understood; the text and symbols disappeared.

I replied, "So it says on the door."

His round, middle-aged face was deeply tanned, of course, but

unlined. He turned it toward the door whose handle he still held, and nodded. “It also says *Expediter*.” He looked back at me. “I didn’t think that asking questions was going to be *my* job.”

I sighed, and lowered my feet from the desk. “Right,” I said. “Hello, good morning, I’m Jenna Dalmas. Welcome to my office; what can I do for you? Okay? Now would you please shut the damn door before my air-conditioning bill doubles?”

He responded with a genteel nod, as if I’d invited him in for lemonade. He pressed the door shut. But as he turned around he had a puzzled look. “This is air-conditioning?”

“Welcome to Hab Town,” I said. “Not like the big city, huh?”

Lips pursed, he gave the room an unhurried once-over. There wasn’t much to see. I rented the lower floor of one of the original colony habitats—one room for the office, three more, through a door to my right, for living quarters. A century of heat and reflected ultraviolet had matured the formerly white plastic walls to a mottled beige; the room’s sole window, behind me, had long ago gone translucent. Two straight-backed chairs faced mine across the small ceramic desk that occupied most of the floor space. On the wall to my left hung a reproduced Earth travel poster, featuring a ski lodge behind falling snow.

The poster that I’d originally hung in that spot, when I first moved in, had advertised a fancy resort in some sun-drenched desert. After a couple of months, though, even I had no longer found the irony amusing.

He eased into one of the chairs. He wore the khaki shirt, shorts, and knee socks of any city worker. But his creases were all as sharp-edged as summer shadows; beneath a thin layer of dust his boots were polished to a gloss that in direct sunlight would be painful to view. At his hip he wore a covered holster—small and functional-looking, not filigreed and oversized like the ones you

usually see on visitors from the city. He sat erect but relaxed, as if I'd stepped into *his* office.

Gov admin, then. Maybe even Central Committee.

He said, "What I'm about to tell you remains confidential until the end of the year. Understood?"

I tilted back in my seat and just stared at him. He returned my gaze, his expression blankly patient. We did that for a while, then I decided to study the travel poster. I said, "I'm not working for you yet."

He nodded. "Actually, you are."

"Huh. Why's that?"

"Three reasons." He impressed me by not ticking them off on his fingers as he continued. "First, you're a week late on rent, and a hundred rips behind on the payments for that little motorcycle you ride. Second, you promised one of your clients that you could get him a city retail license—I can help you with that."

So—if not Central Committee, then at least one of the major Subcommittees. I placed a mental bet on what he'd say next.

"And?" I asked.

"And third, I've recently received several disturbing reports of contraband software in this district. I'm sure that neither of us would want to see some zealous police investigator rummaging through, say, your desk here."

I nodded as I stacked my imaginary winnings.

"So," he said. "Confidential until the end of the year, yes?"

I shrugged. "Suppose we start with your name."

He surprised me with a genuinely friendly grin. With his curly hair and smooth skin, he suddenly looked ten years younger. "Jorge Garcia Ortega. Subcommittee on External Affairs."

I frowned. "This is about the Vulesk? I don't think my business license extends offworld, Mr. Ortega."

He shook his head. “Garcia Ortega. Or just Garcia. Or, if you like, Jorge. And no, not the Vulesk—not directly, anyhow. This can’t wait five years.”

He paused, then, and his smile faded. I couldn’t imagine what he was working himself up to tell me.

“The Warrant,” he finally said. “It’s missing.”

I stared at his boyish face. I tried to keep my voice slow and easy. “Sparkly pyramid thing? About so big?” I held my hands out, half a meter apart. “Sits in the guarded case in the middle of the lobby of City Hall?”

He moistened his lips with a quick dart of his tongue. “That’s a replica. The real Warrant stays in a high-security lab, underground.”

“Huh.” That certainly made sense; I’d never actually given it any thought. “So five years from now, that incoming Vulesk ship is going to arrive in orbit and they’re going to ask to examine our Warrant to confirm that we’re an authorized colony. But you’ve, what?” I leaned forward, both palms now on the desk, and suddenly my voice was no longer as slow and easy as I’d intended. “You’ve accidentally *misplaced* it, *is that what you’re telling me, Mr. Garcia Ortega?*”

He flinched. But, I had to grant, only slightly.

“Swell,” I said. “So when did you happen to notice that the Warrant was missing? And what the hell do you expect me to do that your people can’t?”

He sat very still. He spoke very carefully, keeping his cool blue eyes on my face. “We noticed eighteen years ago. Right after the uprising.”

A cold shiver danced up my back. But that was all. After eighteen years, I’d managed to squeeze everything into just a shiver.

Now it was my turn to speak very quietly. “If there’s something

you want to ask me...” My gaze was centered on his face. But I was watching his holster.

His arms didn’t move. He shook his head. “Not you. You were merely a secondary participant, nowhere near the core organizers. If we thought you knew anything, you would have heard from us a long time ago.”

For another few seconds I stared at him. Then I exhaled, and eased back into my chair.

He seemed to relax a bit, too; his tone became more conversational. “When the Committee Police retook City Hall, we saw that the replica was gone. But the original remained secure. Things were chaotic; several days passed before someone realized that what we had in the lab was actually the replica. Unfortunately, by then...” There he let it go, maybe to spare my feelings.

I finished it for him. “Unfortunately, by then your thirty best leads had been executed.” I was just reciting a fact. Not recalling any sights, any sounds or smells. Just feeling that cold shiver.

He nodded. “Whoever took the Warrant did a damn good job hiding it. Still, we thought we had plenty of time to find it. The Vulesk patrols are supposed to average three hundred years between visits—what were the odds they’d show up this soon?”

I gritted my teeth. I hated that phrase: *what were the odds?* People always say it as if “the odds” were some mysteriously infinitesimal percentage you’d need a supercomputer to calculate.

He didn’t seem to notice my reaction. He continued, “Since we detected the Vulesk ship last month, we’ve had to broaden the investigation. If nothing turns up by the end of the year, we’ll make a public announcement and offer rewards. But for now, none of this gets out.”

I drummed my fingers against the arm of my chair. “All these years—nobody’s contacted you?”

“No. We were hoping that the appearance of this ship would prompt some action, but it hasn’t yet. Of course, they still have five years to make us sweat before they name a price.”

“Assuming ‘they’ are still alive.”

“Yes. Assuming.”

I sighed, and stared at the ski lodge. “You think people will talk to me. That they’ll tell me things they wouldn’t tell you.”

He shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

He was wrong. For eighteen years, none of us had been interested in talking to one another.

I drummed my fingers some more. “This isn’t what I do, Mr. Garcia Ortega. When somebody’s antique optical-fiber extruder breaks, I track down obsolete replacement parts, or I rewrite their control software to work around the problem. When a business wants to expand, I figure out who they need to bribe. But apart from the time I helped my neighbor find her lost canary-snake, I don’t do mysteries.” Or take jobs for the Central Committee—especially jobs guaranteed to stir up old memories.

He nodded, a gesture that by now I didn’t find reassuring. “I understand.” He stood. “Too bad, though. I’d heard that you’re quite resourceful when it comes to finding things. And also that you’re very good with software.” He gave my desk a meaningful glance.

Damn. Over the years I’d tunneled into half the warehouse databases in the city, plus a couple of the lower-level municipal ones. The Committee never threatened idly—if he did send in the police to sift through my desk, without giving me time to tidy up first, then for the next six to twelve years my mail would be forwarded to me in care of Sandcastle labor camp.

I said, “You were mentioning rewards...”

He lowered himself back into the chair. “Five hundred as a retainer. Real money, of course; not rips. Another five hundred per

week, as long as you've got even a hint of a lead."

"Plus expenses."

"I don't think so."

It had been worth a try. "And if I actually find it for you?"

"Seventy-five thousand for information leading to recovery. Hand it over to us yourself, a hundred fifty."

"One hundred and fifty thousand kiloliters..." I nodded. I'm sure he thought I was working hard at my lack of enthusiasm. But, really, all I was considering was the five hundred per week.

I shook my head. "I can't ask the right questions if I have to keep your secret."

He spread his hands in the air above his lap. "Be as discreet as possible. In private conversations, say what you need to say. We can live with rumors."

I pushed my palms against the desk and stood. "I'll need everything you've already got."

He reached into a pocket, placed a data crystal onto my desk. Then he stood, too. The top of his head came almost to my chin.

He glanced at my waist. His eyebrows lifted slightly. "No gun?"

"No."

His eyes narrowed, but he simply said, "Keep in touch." He reached across the desk to shake hands. His grip was firm and dry.

After he let himself out, I stood there a minute, eyeing the crystal. I wasn't particularly eager to review its contents. Doing that would give me a lot of things to think about—most of them things I'd spent almost two decades working hard at *not* thinking about.

But finally I sat and gestured my desk to show me the crystal's directory. Most of the entries were people's names. I took a deep breath, then reached into the projected image and flipped through the listing, pausing here and there to recall a face. And although a dozen of the names did cause me to catch my breath—friends and

classmates I'd managed to keep out of my thoughts for years now, at least on most days—the rest were merely people I used to know a little, a long time ago. Really no big deal at all.

Huh.

I pulled up some of the reports attached to the names. These were summaries of interviews—including surreptitious monitoring of pulse, respiration, and voice stress—with the Warrant showing up here and there amidst long lists of questions. Nobody ever seemed to react to its mention.

Besides the names and reports, the crystal included a section on the Warrant itself. Its image rotated lazily above my desk—a truncated pyramid of tight-packed, knuckle-sized gems in a variety of colors and cuts. Some of the Warrant's physical measurements were included, but I could find very little about its most intriguing property.

The Vulesk had presented the Warrant to my great-grandparents and their ten thousand fellow colonists right after delivering them here, just before the last of the huge Vulesk shuttles had restarted their mysterious engines and departed. For the first few months the Warrant received little attention, everyone being otherwise occupied in setting up the colony. And, of course, in dealing with the gradual realization that while the enigmatic Vulesk had, as contracted, dropped the colonists in a region of the planet at least marginally suited to humans and our carefully planned, decentralized agricultural settlement, nearly all of the territory's accessible water lay locked beyond a mountain range three hundred kilometers to the west—in a region considerably less suited to emigrants from Earth.

So the Warrant was put into storage and ignored while the colonists erected their habitats in a tight cluster around the few local water sources, and while they established a committee to

organize the building of aqueducts. And it remained in storage two years later, when that committee requested its own police squad to enforce equitable water distribution. By the time things eventually settled down enough for scientific inquiry, not much remained of the colony's original plans for a sparsely rural, loose-knit, barter-based community.

Once taken out and finally studied, the Warrant quickly disclosed its nature—it was an active electromagnetic transponder. Expose it to a beam of light, or of radio or x-rays, and the Warrant bounced back a new beam—but with a frequency shifted slightly from the original. While any particular incoming frequency would always shift by a reproducible amount, though, a closely neighboring frequency would be altered to a completely different degree. Overall the shifts followed no pattern; the Warrant behaved as if it held a vast, randomly-generated table of incoming frequencies and their corresponding shifts.

Some experiments also suggested that the Warrant possessed similar frequency-shifting properties in other domains. For example, subatomic particles, when bounced off the Warrant's surface, changed their velocities in an unpredictable but reproducible fashion.

But before long, the Central Committee halted further research into the Warrant. Fake Vulesk Warrants, they argued, were supposed to be impossible for an unauthorized colony to forge. Now that we understood why—our Warrant's specific electromagnetic frequency shifts, plus whatever other properties it might prove to manifest, added up to a unique signature that a Vulesk inspector could verify—we would be acting against our own interests if we continued to accumulate exactly the data that a hypothetical forger would love to steal from us.

Nobody knew for sure what the Vulesk would do upon finding a

colony that couldn't prove it had been authorized by a Vulesk representative. The Vulesk's apparent aversion to aggression and chaos, which seemed to lay behind their monopolistic control of colonization in this part of the galaxy, had led to a general human expectation that unauthorized colonies would be shipped back to their homeworlds—as opposed, say, to simply being incinerated in place. But in their characteristically oblique communications, the Vulesk had never unambiguously confirmed our guesses.

Given the Committee's attitude toward the Warrant's secrets, I wasn't surprised that Garcia Ortega's crystal failed to list any details of the Warrant's frequency shifts. But he had, it turned out, given me more than merely data. According to an explanatory file, his crystal, socketed into a standard handheld scanner, could program that scanner to generate a short sequence of radio frequencies and then check the shifts of any returned signals. Should I actually come across what appeared to be the Warrant, I'd at least be able to rule out a gross forgery.

Shaking my head at the impossibility of this entire job, I plucked the data crystal from my desk and for a few seconds tossed it back and forth between my hands. Then I shrugged. I rummaged through desk drawers until I found a beat-up scanner. I inserted the crystal. Then, for lack of any better target, I pointed the scanner at my travel poster and triggered the sequence.

The scanner's display read "negative"—apparently this particular ski lodge held no Warrants. Oh well. I powered off the scanner and, after another shrug, dropped it into a pocket of my shorts.

It occurred to me that hidden beneath the false bottom of my middle drawer lay a few other items that might come in handy. Given to me four years ago by one of my less savory but unfortunately well-connected clients, in appreciation of my obtaining—to my subsequent regret—a certain pharmaceutical for

him, they weren't anything I'd ever had a use for. But if now I was to play private investigator, then I supposed that a few basic breaking-and-entering tools might prove helpful. I added them to my pockets.

I sat back and considered where to begin my investigation. The obvious approach would be to start with the Thirty. Review everything I could find or remember about each of them; try to guess who might have been involved in stealing the Warrant. Then determine their closest associates among the survivors and start interviewing.

But that was exactly the approach Garcia Ortega's people would have already tried. I could fall back to that strategy later; for now it didn't excite me.

No, I decided, it wasn't time yet for analytic approaches. What I needed to do at this stage was poke around randomly in the problem space. Build up my knowledge base, give my subconscious something to work with.

I pulled up the twelve names that had struck me earlier. For each one, I told the desk to fetch anything it could find from the public nets.

I spent the next hour flipping through the results. And felt a growing claustrophobia as I read through a dozen very different life stories up until eighteen years ago—and then, apart from variations in names and places and occupations, the same too-familiar story a dozen times over.

I picked one of the names: Paul Stein. He'd been a grad student in physics; his department, like mine, had required a year of applied math. I remembered getting together a few times after class for lunch, where we'd argued about politics. I told my desk to phone him.

He answered right away. "Yes?" From the images my desk had

retrieved, I already knew to expect the beard he'd acquired somewhere over the years. But he needed more than a few seconds to extrapolate my short, faded hair backwards in time—he frowned, obviously trying to place me.

“Paul,” I said.

My voice, apparently, sufficed as a final clue. He leaned forward. “Jenna?”

I forced myself to smile. “How have you been?”

His eyes widened. “Why are you calling?”

“I’ve just been thinking that, maybe, it would be good for some of us to get together. Just to talk, you know?”

“No, I—” He pulled back, and his hand came up to tug at his beard. “This isn’t a good time.”

“I can call back later. When would—”

He shook his head. “Sorry.” His breaths now were faster, shallow. “Some other time, maybe. I just—” He wiped his forehead. “Sorry,” he repeated, and then he hung up.

I sat there, staring through the space where his image had floated, and cursed my stupidity. Okay, so maybe I finally seemed to be ready to start coping with the past—how did that imply that anyone else was on the same schedule?

I got up and paced for a few minutes. Then I returned to my desk and put together a text message. I tweaked the wording several times, keeping it short, trying to remove anything potentially threatening, any sensory hooks to past events:

Former colleague interested in getting together with others to talk, catch up. Will not contact you again, unless you reply to indicate your own interest.

I gave it one more read, then gestured my desk to send it to the eleven remaining addresses. But my nervousness made my hand shaky; I had to take a long breath and then repeat my gestures

before the desk understood.

I tilted my chair back, wondering what else I could pursue over the coming hours. The desk chimed. Incoming text:

yes yes yes! when? today?

Huh. Apparently somebody had been following an even faster recovery schedule than I had.

The sender was Tamiko Hoshida. Botany, I recalled. Or maybe genetics. She had lived only a few doors from my apartment; we'd often walked home together after late nights in the library.

Sure, I sent. Lunch?

She replied with the name and address of a restaurant. We agreed to meet in an hour.

* * *

The restaurant sat beside a plaza on the south rim of Hab Town. Twice on the way there I had to pull my motorbike to the side of the road: first on a side street leading to Ventura Boulevard, where a tow truck was hauling away the remains of a delivery van and the ankylosaurid into which it had crashed—more and more fauna had been wandering into town lately, as their browse retreated underground for the summer—and then a second time, just a few blocks from the plaza, to let a double-wide mining transport trundle past on its way to the smelter.

I parked my bike beside one of the scraggly wirewisp bushes that lined the edge of the plaza. A herd of young kids were chasing each other and a ball back and forth across the crumbling yellow bricks; their shouts' echoes off the surrounding two-story habs seemed to triple their numbers. I paused a moment to watch. Which of them, I wondered, might children of mine have resembled? That tall girl kicking the ball past the others? Or maybe the scrawny boy lagging behind the pack? I glanced up at the cloudless sky and hoped that

all of their parents had been keeping their children's skin treatments up to date.

About half the buildings sported business signs. From my corner of the plaza I could see two dry cleaners, an appliance repair shop, and a run-down grocery. An old man sat in front of an unmarked hab, sipping from a bottle as his head swiveled to follow the kids and their ball. High upon the wall above him, something that in the city I'd barely have noticed: a camera surveiling from its windproof shell.

I skirted the game, nodding hello to a bored-looking young woman behind an ice-water cart. A whiff of fresh-baked tortillas drew me past two more buildings to the restaurant.

The interior was dim, and about ten degrees less stifling than outdoors. I dropped my sunglasses into my shirt pocket and started to look around.

"Jenna!" A thin woman with a long, black ponytail jumped up from her seat at one of the half-dozen crowded tables, waving both arms at me. I winced—I'd forgotten about Tamiko's tendency toward enthusiasm.

Squeezing between the tables, I reached out my hand. "Tamiko—"

She grabbed me in tight hug. "All these years! It's so good to see you again!" Then, maybe registering what she'd just said, she held me out at arm's-length and gazed at my face, grinning the whole time. And then she hugged me again.

I finally managed to escape her embrace. Shaking my head, I told her, "You haven't changed at all."

She wore a pair of emerald coveralls with *Hoshida Recycling and Scrap Metals* embroidered in powder blue over her left breast. Her face actually hadn't altered much over two decades; her black mane, though, now held several strands of silver.

“You haven’t changed, either,” she lied. “How do you manage to—?”

I held up a hand. “First we order. Or else we never will.” She pouted as I sat and handed her a menu. But within a few seconds she was leaning across the table and raving to me about the chef’s grilled salmon-lizard with persimmons.

Once our orders had been placed, we told each other all about our lives since we’d last been in contact—both of us politely pretending that we hadn’t already looked up the other’s public history an hour ago. Neither of us paid much attention to the food that we took turns consuming while the other spoke.

After a convenient interruption by our waiter, I asked, as casually as I could, “Did you ever hear that rumor about the Warrant?”

She looked genuinely mystified. “The Warrant? What rumor?”

“Supposedly one of us stole it, back then, and left a replica in its place. And, supposedly, it’s still missing.”

“But why...” She gave it a few seconds thought, then nodded. “Actually, that would’ve been a smart move, once it became obvious that we weren’t going to hold onto power. If someday we ever regained control, then eventually we’d need the Warrant; best to keep it close. And if not—” she grinned at me—“well, there’s always extortion, isn’t there?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Sure, if you can convince the Committee that you’re prepared to suffer, or die, along with the rest of the populace. Tricky, though, to launder a ransom in such a small colony.”

She gave me a wink. “Oh, I bet that you or I might know a few people who could help with that. But I wasn’t necessarily thinking money.”

Something in her tone, or the gleam in her eyes, froze my spine.

She leaned forward, lowered her voice. “Suppose the ransomer demanded political changes? I mean real changes, like a freely elected Central Committee, or disbanding the Committee Police—not the sorts of thing you could simply reverse as soon as the Warrant was delivered.”

I sat paralyzed for a second, panicked by this turn in the conversation. Then I forced myself to exhale, and smile. “Well, I guess that proves it’s all just a rumor, after all. Because I sure haven’t seen any changes.”

She smiled back. But she still looked thoughtful.

Quickly, I said, “Speaking of changes, do you remember that guy who lived in the apartment above yours? What was his name—Vince? Vick?”

“Yeah...oh—Vincente! Wow, I haven’t thought about him for a long time. You remember that mustache?”

Eventually, after we’d finished dessert and after we’d paid—in rips, though this restaurant saw enough city customers to also list prices in kiloliters—and after the waiter had refilled our teacups for the third or fourth time, the weight of our meals and of our lives settled over us and we both fell silent for a few minutes. Tamiko toyed with a spoon, twirling it slowly against the tablecloth. I folded and refolded my napkin into random shapes.

Her gaze on her spoon, she finally said, “Do you think they already had it all planned? When they let us go back, I mean, and finish our degrees.” She looked up. “You were doing topology or something, right?”

“Group theory.”

She frowned. “I thought that had all been completed, back before anyone left Earth.”

I sighed, and was about to launch into my usual response to that common misunderstanding, when I realized just how long it had

been since someone had provoked that response from me—our conversation really had taken me back in time. So I simply said, “No. Not quite all.”

She nodded acknowledgement, then shrugged. “So, anyhow, they let us all return to the university. But none of us liked being reminded of what had happened. We avoided each other, fell completely out of touch.” She glanced downward. “Lately, though, I’ve done some checking. And, well, now I think that probably everyone went through the same things I did.” Her gaze returned to my face, intense now. “You forced yourself to focus on your studies, right? And after a few years finally you graduated and went looking for work in your field. Or in anything close to your field. Or, finally, in anything at all. But somehow there was always a problem with the paperwork, wasn’t there? Or you were overqualified, or the funding had just fallen through...Before long, you couldn’t afford to keep living in the city.” She paused to peer into her spoon, as if it held a scoop of the past. Then she looked back up at me. “So—do you think they already had that all planned for us, right from the start?”

Her words were making my stomach tighten in a very unpleasant way. “Just stop.”

She looked puzzled. And maybe a little hurt.

“There’s no point asking questions like that,” I said. “This is their world—we forced them to remind us of that, once. We’re not supposed to forget again, not ever. Thinking about what happened, bringing everything all back up again, asking questions like yours—that’s no good. It only...look, really, there’s just no point.”

She peered at me for a moment, then disappointment overran her expression. She bowed her head to stare again at her spoon.

It struck me that this job was probably going to be full of cheery moments like this.

I pushed back from the table. “Tamiko, I’m sorry. Really, it’s been great seeing you again. I’m just not very good at—I’ll call you, okay?”

She looked up at me, but her thoughts were somewhere else. I took advantage of her distraction and left before she started asking more questions.

Emerging from the restaurant was like stepping directly in front of a blazing searchlight. I grabbed for my sunglasses; by the time I had them on I already felt sweat sliding down my back.

The kids had taken their ball someplace else. Now a few dozen swing-shift workers crisscrossed the plaza; the woman behind the ice-water cart was being kept busy.

I’d gotten a third of the way across the plaza when from behind I heard, “Jenna, wait!” I stopped, and with a sigh I turned.

Tamiko waved an arm above her head as she jogged toward me. She was, I realized afterward, by far the most animated thing on the plaza. So it was no coincidence that when the shooting started, it all centered on her.

Seeing that I’d stopped, she slowed to a walk. In the same instant, from the corner of my eye I saw a powerful, elongated form hurl itself from behind a bush to fly toward Tamiko in a low, brown-striped arc.

The first shot came from off to my left. Then two more from the other side, simultaneous with the sizzle of a maser from somebody behind Tamiko.

The croc slammed into the plaza’s bricks and skidded to rest a meter from Tamiko’s side. She’d frozen at the sound of gunfire all around her; now she jumped backward with a scream. One side of her green coveralls was spattered with black blood.

In the ensuing brief moment of stillness, as my heart slammed against my shuddering ribs and my vision’s dark rim slowly cleared,

I noticed that Tamiko—who stood mesmerized before the pile of scales, muscle and teeth splayed within the dark stain that was slowly spreading across the yellow bricks—wore no gun.

I rushed to her side, nearly colliding with a tall young man with shoulder-length red hair who was returning his weapon to its holster. Tamiko still stared down at the croc; when I spoke her name her wide-eyed gaze snapped to my face. More blood streaked her cheek.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

* * *

Over the next few days I met with two others who answered my message. The first, once a promising scholar of 21st-century West African literature, now ran a small-engine repair service. We met at his shop. I couldn’t get him to talk about anything other than motors and lubrication.

My other interviewee was Rafe Lindquist. Zoology student turned kiln operator. We’d once known each other slightly, through a mutual acquaintance and a few rather dismal parties. He’d put on several kilos since then, but he kept his still-black goatee precisely trimmed, and he dressed as fastidiously as I recalled—his unwrinkled, pale blue shirt carefully tucked into the waistband of his neatly pressed, darker blue shorts. When he pulled his chair out from the small café table, though, I’d noticed a streak of soot across one shoulder blade.

Rafe had an intriguing reaction when I mentioned the “rumor” about the Warrant. At first he simply looked blank. But after a couple of seconds, as I was about to take the conversation somewhere else, he cocked his head and said, “Maybe that’s what he was talking about...”

I waited, but he just sat there looking thoughtful. So finally I

asked, “Who?”

He studied me, tapping his finger on the tabletop. “Somebody who'd had a little too much to smoke one night, by a campfire.” Then he glanced around the busy café. “I'd like to compare notes with you. But not here. Can you meet me at my hab tonight—say, between seven and eight?”

And then *he* changed the topic.

After we parted, I shared a frustrating afternoon with my desk as together we failed to hunt up a single clue as to Rafe's mysterious informant.

The sun was setting when I pushed my bike up onto its kickstand. Long shadows stretched down the alley; a warm breeze blew a scrap of paper along the road's reddened edge. From a line of nearby bins wafted the thin, sweet smell of garbage.

I climbed the rickety steel stairs to Rafe's upper-floor apartment. He didn't answer when I buzzed, nor when I knocked. My watch showed seven-forty. I tried the door—locked.

For half an hour I leaned back against his door, keeping an eye on the alley in both directions. Apart from the muffled music coming from the hab next door, I seemed to have the darkening evening to myself.

I gave the buzzer another chance; I could hear it echoing hollowly inside the hab. Somehow it didn't sound right to me. Maybe I'd caught some of Rafe's paranoia from the café.

I glanced up and down the street, searching one last time for any obvious cameras. Then I unfastened a pocket and extracted something that looked a lot like a standard key card. Hiding my actions with my body, I held the card over the door's lock. A few seconds passed while an arcane electronic mating ritual was consummated; then the door emitted a soft, satisfied click and the lock retracted its bolt.

I stepped into the dark apartment, used an elbow to push the door closed behind me as the lights came up. There was a funny scent in the air, too faint for me to name.

I found myself in a living room spartan in its furnishings, though not currently at its most presentable. A steel end-table lay on its side; one of the couch's burgundy-upholstered cushions had slid to the floor. Beside it lay a scatter of data crystals that I guessed had been swept from the nearby wall-hung desk, along with a couple of image-frames and a brown-striped, fuzzy toy croc.

I stepped carefully through the debris, glancing into the adjoining kitchen as I passed its doorway. Nothing obviously amiss in there. When I arrived at the closed door to what in most habs would be the bedroom, I paused. Reaching into a pocket of my shorts—the same one holding the scanner and its crystal—I pulled out a small canister and sprayed a pair of gloves over my hands.

No sounds emerged through the thick plastic door. I pressed my gloved hand lightly against it; the door swung partway open to reveal the corner of a bed, along with a fuller perfume of the odor I'd been smelling—cinnamon, mixed with rotten peaches.

I'd encountered that smell once before, four years earlier. At the memory my heart began hammering; my hand trembled as I pushed the door fully open.

Rafe Lindquist lay on the bed, curled on his side, staring at me wide-eyed. One arm extended across the bed, the hand reaching in my direction. His other hand was pressed to the front of his neck like someone choking—which he had been, when he'd died.

His dark blue shorts were rumpled. His shirt was half untucked.

I spun away and squeezed my eyes shut, taking gasping breaths through my mouth to avoid the now cloying odor. Then I forced myself to turn back and step closer. Gagging at the touch, I checked his neck—pulseless, but still warm.

If I'd arrived just a little earlier, might I have run into his killer exiting the hab? A little earlier yet, might I have prevented this?

Still shaking, I cursed the intruder whose clumsiness had left those questions lying here in wait for me.

I made myself give the bedroom a once-over. Other than the bed, though, it didn't hold anything interesting. The contents of Rafe's pockets had been strewn beside him: a few cards, a pocket multi-tool, some cash-crystals—nothing interesting there, either.

I returned to the living room, pulling the bedroom door closed behind me. I stood still a moment and waited for my heart to slow, my neck muscles to loosen.

I reached down to the floor and flipped over one of the fallen image-frames. It was cycling through eight images of smiling faces of various ages, shapes and sizes. Family members? Friends? I pulled out my scanner and recorded them all.

The other frame held only a single shot. Rafe—without the extra kilos—and a tall, craggy-faced man whose graying temples contrasted with his ebony skin. Both of them wore serious boots and roughed-up field clothes as they squatted before a desolate landscape of sepia dirt and scruffy bushes. Between them sat three half-buried bluish spheres—the eggs, presumably, of some desert monstrosity. The two men were grinning like kids who'd just stumbled upon an unexpected freezer-load of ice cream. Across the image someone had hand-written “To my best student.”

I considered that inscription as I ran my scanner over the frame, and over the crystals lying beside it. I didn't recognize the older man. I stood and surveyed the room until I spotted a familiar small gray ceramic box sitting on a high shelf by the front door. I took down the box and lifted its lid—embossed with the university's crest—to reveal the data crystal inside. I closed the box but didn't return it to the shelf.

I took one more slow look around the room. Then I picked up the second image-frame and stuck both it and the ceramic box inside the waistband of my shorts, where they'd be hidden beneath my loose shirt. After a final glance toward the bedroom, I pulled open the front door and exited, pausing for a second to wipe the buzzer contact and door handle with my sleeve.

The alley was as deserted as before, but I glanced over my shoulder more than once as I mounted my bike and rode away. After several blocks I pulled to the curb, where I peeled off my gloves and stuffed them into a trash bin.

I kept gnawing at it as I rode home, but I couldn't make any sense of Rafe's death. The smell in his hab meant that somebody had wanted information from him—though that hadn't worked out as intended. I had to assume that it was my meeting with Rafe that had triggered this assault, but I could think of only one person who could have known what I'd been seeking—and that person had already hired *me* to collect his answers. Even if he didn't completely trust me, it seemed awfully premature for Garcia Ortega to be bypassing my investigation.

Still, there's nothing like a surprise to shake information out of a client. So when I got back to my office, I took a minute to get into character before making an accusation I didn't actually believe.

Garcia Ortega answered my call wearing a plush, coffee-colored robe; half a glass of red wine sat on the small wooden table beside his armchair, condensation dripping down its stem. Given the hour, I expected annoyance, maybe sarcasm. But with a business-polite expression he said simply, "Yes?"

The contrast between his appearance and poor Rafe's made it easy to give myself over to my earlier anger. I told him, "If you want to take over this inquiry, just say so. Because I don't need this sort of crap."

He frowned. “I don’t—”

“Thilosone butyrate. Whoever you sent to interrogate my lead was too dumb to air out the hab afterward. Or too panicked, once things went dry.”

The frown had deepened. He paused a second. Then he said, “I thought we had an agreement.”

“We—what?”

“I’m not the one who’s supposed to need to ask questions here.”

I studied his expression, his posture. Hovering there above my desk, he seemed as relaxed and patient as when he’d sat on the other side of it a few days earlier. He might be feigning his ignorance, but I couldn’t find any evidence of that.

I gave it one last try. “Rafe Lindquist.”

He shook his head. Not even a flicker of recognition.

I eased back in my chair. “My lead. A former, ah, colleague; you’ll have a file. When I mentioned the Warrant, he thought maybe he’d once heard something—I was supposed to meet him tonight at his apartment to talk about that. Somebody else got there first.”

“With thilosone butyrate.”

I nodded.

His frown had returned. “So—who? And what did they learn?”

Thilosone isn’t easy to acquire. But unlike other “truth serums,” thilosone actually works.

“Not to worry.” Even after four years, I could still picture the side-effects warning. I recited it for him now. “*In the rare anaphylactoid reaction to thilosone butyrate, symptoms manifest within seconds of administration; respiratory arrest typically follows in no more than two to three minutes.*”

“Lindquist is *dead*?”

“Very.”

He leaned toward the camera, suddenly all brisk efficiency. “Were

you seen?”

His intensity surprised me. “No. I don’t think so.”

He was looking off to the side, his fingers flicking through a series of quick gestures. “Lindquist...the alley between Glendale and San Alvarado? Number eighteen?”

“Um, yes. Second floor.”

He nodded. Several more flicks and then his hands dropped back to his chair. His gaze returned to me. “All right. I’ve sent some people. Your name won’t come up.” His eyes narrowed as he appraised me for a few seconds. “I don’t suppose that *you* might keep a supply of thilosone butyrate?”

My still-simmering anger flared. I drew a breath, but then forced myself to just let it out slowly through my nostrils. “If I were the one who killed Rafe Lindquist, then that’s what I’d have told you. And no, I don’t use thilosone. That’s not how I work.”

He held his stare for a moment; then his features relaxed. Either he believed me, or else he’d decided to pursue this some other time.

I added, “If your ‘people’ find any clues as to who did kill Rafe...”

He gave me a little nod. “Guesses?”

I shook my head. “Nobody but Rafe knew I was coming. Nobody but you knew why.”

He laced his fingers together, tapped his thumbs against each other. “Odd, isn’t it?” His attention drifted away for a moment, then he asked, “You didn’t find anything in his apartment?”

“No.” The pair of objects still hidden inside my waistband pressed uncomfortably against my skin. Should they lead to anything, I’d tell Garcia Ortega then. Though I didn’t think he’d had anything to do with Rafe’s death, for now I wasn’t about to put anyone else at risk.

He sighed. “Let’s keep in closer touch, yes?” He turned and reached for his wine glass, lifted it from the table.

I was about to say good-bye when he leaned toward me and said, “Ms. Dalmas, please—” he glanced toward where I should have been wearing a holster, then met my eyes—“be careful.”

“Always,” I said.

* * *

Thick, dark blue curtains hung beside my bedroom window. Not for privacy—the window was no more transparent than the one in my office. I’d neglected to pull those curtains shut when I’d crawled into bed; now I woke to a glare that pierced my eyelids like tornado-driven sand. And also to a stiff neck.

I disentangled myself from the sheets and sat up, trying to stretch the kinks from my neck. Eyes still closed, I watched a dream image retreat: sun-bleached sand spreading down to a sparkling green ocean, foaming waves lapping against dozens of long, still forms—bodies?

The memory of the previous evening returned. My eyes snapped open, and for a moment I just sat staring at a loose thread dangling from one curtain’s tight weave. Then I lifted my pillow to regard the image-frame and the gray box I’d stashed beneath it the night before.

I got myself up and dressed. The two items I’d taken from Rafe’s apartment in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other, I used my elbow to open the door into my office.

At my desk, I ran a finger over the university crest atop the box, its cold ceramic scroll and shield so familiar. Then I opened the box and lifted out its data crystal—Rafe’s dissertation.

His advisor’s name was on the third page. Stephen Johnson. I gave it a minute, but the name triggered nothing for me. My desk, though, had Johnson’s complete bio assembled in a few seconds.

Emeritus professor of zoology. Long publication list—he seemed

to have studied every animal native to our corner of the planet. Never married, no registered offspring. For years he'd lived alone in his own outback research station. No political history. No arrests.

There were plenty of pictures. In one he stood in the desert beside a folding table bearing three blue eggs; I searched, unsuccessfully, for Rafe's face among the ragged crowd in the background.

It was one hell of a lead. "Somebody by a campfire," Rafe had said. That could be anybody—another student on a field trip years ago, maybe, or a lover on a weekend getaway last month.

But you can only follow the leads you've got. I set up two spider-searches, one centered on Prof. Stephen Johnson and the other on the uprising, and told the desk to keep enlarging those two webs until they intersected, or until each reached four degrees of separation—go any wider and your searches will have linked pretty much every person and event in colonial history.

Sipping coffee, I tried some searches on my own. But if Johnson had any connections to the uprising, they weren't overt. He'd been working at his station in the outback for more than a month before the first marches and demonstrations; he was still there weeks after everything was over.

The desk chimed with a text message. I gestured it open in a pane off to the side of my work.

We have to talk. 572 Spring Street, #619. Noon.

Frowning over my coffee mug, I looked for the sender. But the message had been neatly anonymized; the desk couldn't track it back beyond the nearest public trunk line—and when it comes to tracking messages, my desk knows some rather fancy tricks.

Another chime, and an equally untraceable addendum:

Sorry about Lindquist.

Very slowly and carefully, I set my mug onto the desk. Then I

checked the time, and asked for the inter-urban trolley schedule.

* * *

Hunched, downward-gazing office workers crowded midtown's sidewalks, rushing to squeeze errands into their lunch hours. As I watched them impatiently—but carefully—dodge sauntering leisure-class shoppers, I thought of Brownian motion, and wondered whether there might exist some algebraic function capable of mapping trajectories from the microscopic domain onto the pedestrian.

Not that microscopic particles typically moved with such attentive wariness. For more than a year I'd avoided entering the city; now I had to acclimate anew to the leery vigilance of the majority of its inhabitants.

The reminders had begun at the departure terminal. As I passed the beat-up metal lockers where my fellow passengers were busily depositing their guns, a policeman—his big, black holster prominent against his broad khaki hip—swaggered across the tiled floor to ask my reasons for traveling to the city. Halfway through my spurious explanation he stepped forward and frisked me, with rather excessive thoroughness. Without thinking I glared at him and opened my mouth to complain.

He squinted in surprised anticipation.

Belatedly catching myself, I shut my mouth and stared at my boots. He grunted—in disappointment, I suppose, or maybe in disgust—and gave me a shove toward the train car.

As I boarded and found a vacant seat whose cushions were still mostly intact, the other passengers avoided my gaze. But then, they avoided *everyone's* gaze. Even after the trolley left the terminal, all eyes remained focused on their reading or on the dusty rocks and shrubs passing beyond the train's sand-scoured windows. Nobody

but me so much as glanced at the lens protruding from high on the car's far wall.

As I stepped off the train another policeman, leaning against an ornamental pillar, studied me. I stumbled, glanced away. When I looked back, though, his attention had drifted elsewhere.

A kilometer and a half from the terminal, Spring Street was a pair of facing rows of steel-and-glass low-rises. I'd visited a few times myself, back when this district was still being developed. Some of the gleam had gone out of the thick-walled buildings in the decades since then, their street-level storefronts having devolved from bistros and boutiques to shops offering work clothes or prospecting services. The ground floor of number 572 had been split between a pharmacy and a sandwich shop—the young man behind the latter's counter eyed me as I passed through to find the elevators. As I waited for the doors to open, I tried to decide whether to find his attention flattering or worrisome.

The worn carpet of the sixth-floor hallway led me past a series of identical doors bearing content-free signs like *Ecotrex Services* and *Fairhaven Development*. But there was no sign on suite 619. No buzzer, either. I knocked, waited, then tried the handle. It wasn't locked.

The empty room smelled of new paint; I tried to imagine the sort of tenant who would choose pastel pink for their walls. Opposite me, a pair of large windows framed the sixth-floor facade of the building across the street, its awnings tinted slightly blue by the windows' reflective coating. On the wall above the windows, a shiny camera-mount hung unoccupied, its wires dangling.

I took a quick tour of the empty offices off each side of the main room. Then I leaned against a window to look down to the sidewalk below. After I'd spent a couple of minutes studying the heads of passersby, the hallway door opened.

A tall, young man entered, his wavy red hair falling almost to his shoulders. He closed the door behind him, then turned to me and said, quietly, “Thank you for coming.”

I didn’t say anything. I just stared at his face. And eighteen years into the past.

Four individuals had inspired, nurtured, and led the uprising: Kushner, Mathews, Patchell and Vargas. David Kushner’s flamboyant charisma drew and ignited the crowds. Juan Mathews’s deep knowledge of history, plus his debating skills, won over the uncertain. Zoe Patchell was a natural planner and organizer—and a peerless instructor in the arts of short-circuiting locks and hacking databases.

But if those three were the heart, head, and hands of the uprising, then Luis Vargas was its soul. He couldn’t out-shout or out-argue an opponent, nor disable an antagonist’s microphone. But when Luis Vargas brushed the ever-present lock of wavy red hair from his eyes and opened his mouth to speak, the room always quieted—because he spoke with an intense sincerity and passion that no one, not even his enemies, had ever questioned.

So now I was more than a little bewildered suddenly to be facing Luis Vargas, looking even younger than when I’d last seen him: when he had stood sobbing in the center of the stadium, forced to watch each of the twenty-nine methodical executions that preceded his own.

The young man before me waited a few seconds, then said, “I’m his brother. Daniel.”

“Huh,” I said.

He smiled—and memories of that gentle smile drew my thoughts from the final stadium to earlier rallies.

He said, “When my brother’s body was returned to my parents, they had a tissue sample taken. From which I was grown.”

Ah. Well, under the circumstances I supposed that the Central Committee might indeed have granted the Vargas family an exemption from the colony's Genetic Diversity laws.

Nodding, I said, "Succinctly explained. Not the first time you've had to, I'm guessing?"

His smile deepened. "The past couple years, more and more people have been staring at my face." He shrugged. "I'm thinking of printing explanation cards to hand out. Or maybe wearing a little sign." He mimed a small rectangle dangling from his neck. "What do you think?"

What I thought was that after my initial shock he had put me at ease remarkably quickly. Not bad for, what, a seventeen year-old? "You're pretty funny. Your...brother—he wasn't known for his sense of humor."

Another shrug. "I've heard that. But maybe he reserved it. For certain people, or certain occasions."

Having met Luis a couple of times, I really didn't think so. But there was a quiet intensity when Daniel spoke of his "brother" that made me reluctant to disillusion him.

Then I recalled the message that had brought me here, and disillusionment was the least I wished him. I asked, "How about *murdering his own followers*—do you suppose that was another thing that he *reserved*?"

At my sudden vehemence, Daniel took a step back, bumping into the wall. "It wasn't me who—" He paused, his lips pressed together. "Look, I'm sorry about your friend. We didn't—" Again he stopped himself. He glanced downward for a second, then back to me. "Hypersensitivity to thilosone butyrate, it's only supposed to affect one person in half a million. There are barely a hundred thousand of us on this whole planet! What were the odds that Lindquist would be affected?"

This was probably not the best question he might have asked me.

“The *odds*?! You idiot! Try taking a basic course in probability sometime! And maybe genetics—that one per half-million number was based on *Earth* populations. But *we* started with a gene pool of only ten thousand people. Nobody has the slightest idea what percentage of us will react badly to *any* seldom-used Earth drug!”

His eyes had grown very wide at my outburst, and by now he had flattened himself against the wall. His hair clashed badly with the pink paint.

Time to press my advantage. “Who are you working for? What did you want with Rafe Lindquist?”

“That’s what I invited you here to talk about! I wanted to bring you in from the beginning. I told her that we needed to trust you, that we should be working with you.”

I held up a hand. “You told *who*?”

“Carla. The head of my cell.”

I shook my head. “What?”

“The underground resistance. You have to rejoin us—it’s your work that we’re finishing.”

Oh, no. “I don’t have any *work*.”

He stepped away from the wall. “You gave up, when my brother and the rest were killed. But you still want the same things now that you did then.”

Ice climbed my spine. “No. I really don’t.”

He took another step toward me. “We know about the Warrant. If *we* can recover it, we’ll finally be able to push through some changes. You have to help us.”

My mouth had gone dry; my heart raced. “No! What are you talking about? There’s no *resistance*! How could there be? Everyone was killed!”

“You weren’t.”

“Me? I’m nobody. Just another face at some rallies.”

“Carla says that some of your people didn’t give up. That they went underground and started forming cells. Building up resources, biding their time.”

“This Carla is lying to you! How big is this resistance supposed to be? How many members have you actually met?”

He smiled—that smile. “I’ve only met the members of my own cell, of course: Carla and—” his expression softened, to a look of trusting vulnerability that I’d forgotten, a look that begged me to not let him down—“and now you.”

He had gotten very close. Now suddenly he reached out and gripped both of my shoulders, tight enough to hurt. He said, “You’re not alone anymore.”

I shoved him away. He staggered back, nearly falling.

“You’re not Luis! You’re just some kid—some kid who’s been listening to a lot of croc-shit about a mythical resistance movement! You need to wake up, and soon, before you go too far. I should turn you in now, for your own good.”

He shrugged. “For croc-shit, you have to admit it’s pretty high quality. Like, how did I find out about the Warrant? About you? Who listened to you talking to Rafe Lindquist? Where did the thilosone come from? How did I learn about this vacant suite?”

“I don’t know! Your Carla must have some good contacts—that doesn’t add up to a *resistance*.”

With a sigh, he said, “She told me that you’d be like this. That nobody from the uprising ever wants to believe us when we first contact them. All right...” He pulled his phone from a pocket, held it at chest level. The display lit a few centimeters above the phone; from my position I could see the wrong side of several lines of text. Studying them, he said, “Among your closest friends from the uprising, your nickname was Bender. This nickname was given to

you by Fiona Halpern on the second day of the uprising, after the two of you—”

“*What the—?*” I lunged forward and grabbed the phone from his hand. I scrolled through the rest, which continued for a few pages. It was all quite accurate, some of it a bit intimate—and none of it known to more than a few people. It was also far too personal and trivial to have been extracted and recorded during any official interrogation.

I looked up to glare at him. “Who gave you all this?”

He shrugged. “It was passed to us from another cell. I assume a former associate...?”

“Yeah, sure.” I tried to figure out how he’d really gotten the information.

Damn. More mysteries.

Unless, of course, there actually *was* a resistance.

Damn.

I tossed the phone back to him. “I don’t have time for this.” I walked around him to the door. My shoulder, where earlier he had gripped me so tightly, twinged now when I reached for the handle.

He said, “I’ll message you an encryption for contacting me.”

I turned to face him. “Maybe I’ll just hand that over to the authorities.”

“You won’t.”

His damn smile was starting to annoy me.

I said, “Look, just stay out of my way from now on, all right?” I turned. Then, over my shoulder, I said, “And Daniel? Try not to kill anyone else, okay?”

His smile faded. I pulled open the door and left.

* * *

As soon as I got back to Hab Town I consulted a few maps,

transferred a few hundred rips into my phone, and threw together a small overnight bag. I checked the results of the searches I'd set up in the morning: my desk hadn't turned up any connections between Johnson and the uprising. I pondered that for a few minutes, then shrugged—it wasn't like I had any other leads to be following just now.

I biked across town to a certain vehicle dealer.

“Ms. Dalmas!” On seeing me step through his door, Demetrios Balbani nearly vaulted over his desk to greet me. I braced myself for one of his customary bear hugs, but at the last moment he must have seen me flinch; he stopped and reached out a huge, hairy hand.

While he gave my arm several vigorous pumps, I asked, “How’s the family, Demetri?”

He waved me to a chair, leaned his own bulk against his desk. “Good, all good. Stavros graduates next month—can you believe it? Getting him out of that mess, Ms. Dalmas, for that I can never repay you.” Then he grinned, deep within the black underbrush of his beard, and pointed a thick finger at me. “Though today you’re going to give me another opportunity to try, am I right?”

I acknowledged his deduction with a sheepish smile. “Have you ever considered a career in private investigation?”

His laughter was like a baritone sonic boom. “What, finding what someone is seeking? Figuring out when a person is lying to me? So what do you think I do here all day?” He shook his head, then suddenly he strode to the door and peered out toward where I'd parked. “That little bike still behaving for you? New powercell holding up?” He turned back into the room; before I could reply he continued, “But now you’re ready for something *bigger*, am I right?”

“Oh, definitely,” I said. “But just a rental, for a couple days. A rover.”

His eyebrows lifted. “And where would you be going that requires a rover?”

I shook my head. “Better you don’t know. In case certain people somehow trace me this far.”

“Oh-ho.” He looked impressed.

“No special supplies or anything—I’ll just be spending a night or two, indoors.”

He wagged his finger at me and looked stern. “You don’t drive into the outback without supplies.” He held up a hand to stop any arguments from me. Then he returned to his desk and gave it a tap. “Sal, bring around the BR-20, will you?” Facing me again, he said, “Nothing flashy. Top speed is only around a hundred, but she can take a real beating. Sleeps four, almost comfortably. Plenty of room for gear. The powercells are fresh, and—” he pointed his finger at me—“there’s water and food for at least three days. We keep it prepped for the weekend hunters.”

He led me outside. Next to my bike a very large, very orange vehicle now sat grumbling to itself.

“Somehow,” I said, “I was expecting something a little more...well, brown.”

“You buy your own rover, you get whatever color you want. For the weekenders all I care is that a rescue copter can find them.”

Demetri led me on an inspection tour. The boxy, slope-sided body rode high on four massive tires; in a windstorm, he explained, the tires could be deflated to leave the body hugging the ground. In addition to the storage spaces in the passenger compartment, exterior access panels on both sides opened to additional cargo holds. As promised, some of these were packed with containers of water and camping food.

We clambered into the air-conditioned cab and he reviewed the basic controls. “The rest,” he concluded, “you can learn while you

drive.”

I nodded. “So what’s this costing me?”

He snorted. “Please. But maybe you’ll come to Stavros’s graduation?”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it—even if I need a rescue copter to get there.”

His laugh boomed. When it ebbed, though, he seemed uncharacteristically subdued.

“What?” I asked.

His head tipped one way, then the other. Finally, frowning, he said, “Stavros—he’s a smart kid. He wants to go to the university. So I’m the bad guy.”

“What, because of where you were born?”

He looked away. “Maybe I could’ve saved more money. Asked some of my city contacts for a recommendation...”

I shook my head. “Even if you’d been allowed to move into the city, the Committee would never have let your children attend the university. That’s reserved for the wealthiest, most powerful families.”

I regretted the words as soon as they escaped. Demetri was too polite to do more than shoot me an appraising glance. But within my mind suddenly streamed the vivid impressions of an excited young woman being delivered to the university by her haughty parents. I scowled at the memory’s intrusion. That was someone else’s life, not mine. That young woman’s life—prospects, parents, and all—had ended eighteen years ago.

“Hey—” Demetri slapped the arm of his chair, jolting my attention back to the present. “You meant what you said before, about somebody trying to trace you?”

I appreciated his shift of topic. “Yes.”

He nodded. “Wait here.” He climbed out of the rover.

I watched through the windows as he walked around the vehicle and opened one of the cargo holds. Then he reached for my bike; with one hand he lifted it and slung it inside.

I opened my window as he slammed shut the access panel. He called up to me, “One less clue for the bad guys! Am I right?”

“Demetri, you are *always* right.”

He stood there grinning, his finger leveled in my direction. As I sealed the window and waved good-bye, I jotted a mental note to have a talk with Stavros about bad guys and good guys.

It took me half an hour to reach the north edge of town. For a minute I peered out at the flat, dusty landscape, crisscrossed by innumerable tire and tread tracks. Stephen Johnson’s research station sat in a valley about seven hours to the northwest. So, to be safely paranoid, I pointed the rover northeast and told it to drive in a straight line until further notice.

I launched the driver’s tutorial, and began studying command options and emergency procedures. Every few minutes I glanced at the rearview display.

After about an hour I shut down the tutorial and told the rover to stop. For ten more minutes I scanned the desert to my rear. No one followed me.

So I entered the coordinates of the outpost “town” of Glendora, and instructed the rover to head there at a moderate speed. The rover estimated the trip at five hours, which would get me in just a bit before dark. After a night’s sleep, that would leave me an easy three-hour drive to Johnson’s station the next morning.

The rover didn’t need my help to adjust for terrain or to steer around obstacles, so I got out of my seat to explore my coach.

Behind the pair of front seats, four swiveling, reclinable chairs formed a roomy oval. Next came a short passageway, kitchenette on one side and bathroom on the other. This opened into the

remaining space, as large as the forward seating area; most of it would usually be used for storing a hunting party's gear. A pair of tables folded down from the walls, their accompanying chairs stowed behind a panel. I checked the remaining wall-lockers—most were empty, but one held an impressive first-aid kit; another contained additional water and food. Next to the rover's rear hatch, a final panel opened to reveal a rack holding a pair of rifles.

I dislike guns of any kind, but living in Hab Town engenders a certain level of familiarity. These were high-powered hunting rifles, complete with night-vision sights and multi-spectral rangefinders. Not the latest models, but they looked reliable enough. According to their displays, both rifles were fully charged and loaded.

Without touching the guns, I carefully closed the panel.

Back in the driver's seat, the view hadn't changed much—gray-brown bare dirt, scattered scraggly bushes, the occasional hill or shallow valley. Ahead, near the horizon, I thought I saw something moving. Focusing the rover's forward camera gave me a blurry view of a large reddish blob and two smaller ones, ambling away from me with bouncy gaits. The display's caption suggested they might be a family of ceratopsids, probably hunting for forage.

I considered my own hunt. Suppose that Johnson had somehow gotten hold of the Warrant—he could have hidden it anywhere in the outback. Simply go for a long drive, dig a hole, and record the coordinates. Had Garcia Ortega's people already dealt with such possibilities?

I pulled out my phone, told it to link to the crystal that rested inside the scanner in my pocket. After a minute I found a file titled "Aerial Searches." Yes—apparently the same sort of frequency-shift probe that Garcia Ortega's crystal could generate would also work, with a strong enough radio beam, from blimps, helicopters, or even satellites. Over the years, the Subcommittee on External Affairs had

searched a very wide region indeed—both urban and rural, and more than once.

Of course, a simple metal cage could block a radio wave. So they had also tried various particle beams capable of penetrating such a shield. And still failed to detect any shifted echoes.

The Subcommittee, true to bureaucratic form, had included in its report an estimate of the medical effects of all those particle beams passing through bystanders. Its conclusion—“approximately 350 new cancers, leading to perhaps 30 deaths”—was presented without apology or justification. A telling indication of the attitude toward the rest of us held by our self-appointed rulers.

My employers.

I tried to push that thought away, as I'd long ago learned to do. But, I found myself thinking, what if there really were a resistance movement? And what if it actually had a droplet's chance in the desert of succeeding?

No. For me to picture an imaginary moment of hypothetical success would require me first to peer back at the all-too-real minutes and hours of actual failure. And those images lay behind a door that I refused to reopen.

I looked out over my empty surroundings. The ceratopsids had disappeared beyond the horizon. Complex shadows, already noticeably longer than earlier, extended toward me from each wirewisp bush we approached. The rover's suspended cabin floated in serene ignorance of the terrain's dips and rises.

For almost four more hours today, and then until midday tomorrow, I would be riding outside the world of Subcommittees, Warrants, and resistances; powerless to cause or prevent the turnings of history, the deaths of patriots or fools.

I rubbed a sore spot on my shoulder as I let that thought sink in. Then, after one more inspection of the rearview display, I gestured

my phone to bring up a recent article I'd downloaded from the university's net. I scrolled to *For $m > 3$, assume not*, and settled back into my seat.

* * *

The metropolis of Glendora boasted a small hotel, a grocery and supplies shop, a dry cleaner, a gunsmith, and, of course, a water station. I parked the rover before the first of these, and climbed down to the unpaved ground. A halfhearted breeze swirled the dust at my feet; above, a line of high clouds flamed in an amethyst sky.

The hotel—about the size of two back-to-back habs—lacked a formal entrance. One of the doors facing the street was labeled “Manager.” I buzzed; after a long pause the door was opened by an overweight man in his late twenties or early thirties. He wore only a pair of khaki shorts, their top unfastened to accommodate his belly. His eyes drooped under pale blond lashes; matching fuzz covered his scalp, face, torso, and legs.

On seeing me, his initially defensive expression brightened considerably. “Oh!” He peered past me toward my rover, then returned his attention my way with a gap-toothed smile. “Welcome to Glendora! Please, come in, come in!” His voice was surprisingly high-pitched.

Great—the stereotypical lonesome outback washout. In another minute, if I gave him any conversational openings, he'd be pouring out his heart to me about his unfortunate life.

He stepped back to let me enter. The hotel's air-conditioning wasn't even up to Hab Town standards—his apartment was noticeably hotter than the cooling evening outside, its air sweetened with greasy cooking odors. His desk faced a side wall; currently floating above it was a flat image frozen from what must have been some ancient Earth movie—a familiar-looking man in a fedora

gesturing with a cigarette toward a woman in dark slacks and a white blouse, everything black and white.

He noticed my gaze. As I placed the actor's face—Bogart, of course—he asked, “Are you a fan, too? Of the classics?”

“No,” I said. “Jenna Dalmás. Got a room?”

“Um, sure. Of course. I'm Roger. *Dalmás*—what is that, Irish?”

“Not any more. So, one night probably, possibly two. I do have a request.”

His eyelids fluttered as he caught up with the conversation. “A request?”

“I'd rather not register and pay until I check out.” I had no real reason to believe that my account was being traced, either by Garcia Ortega or by Daniel's alleged resistance—but my paranoia level remained elevated. “That won't be a problem, will it?”

He looked completely bewildered, as if I'd asked him for a cigarette. Or a fedora.

I continued, “I know it's a little unusual. So I'll be happy to give you a deposit up front. How about, say, a hundred rips? You could hold it in your personal account, rather than the hotel's.”

I waited a moment for him to work that out. Then he gave a slow nod. “Sure. No problem, Ms. Dalmás.”

He stepped over to his desk, pushed Bogart to the side and brought up a fresh pane. He made a few gestures, then looked expectantly my way.

I took out my phone and made a few gestures of my own. A branching chain of innocuous-looking personal messages rippled through a great many public and private nets, each encoding a covert I.O.U. from one person's very unofficial account to the next. After a couple of seconds, one hundred of those ripples converged untraceably into Roger's desk; he grunted happily and closed his pane. Then he slid open a desk drawer and dug through its

contents until, with a magician's flourish, he pulled out a blue and white card. He tossed the card onto the desktop, then spent a minute gesturing his way through a new series of panes.

Over his shoulder, he said to me, "Normally we just key the door to your phone, when you register." He closed his last pane, then turned and presented me the card. "Room 3," he said. "Around back. I can bring you dinner once you're settled in."

"Thanks, but I've got my own food." I turned toward the door.

"Later, if you'd like to watch a movie or something..."

I paused, then turned back to give him a smile. "Thanks, Roger. I appreciate the offer. But I'm really pretty tired."

"Oh, sure, of course. Maybe another time."

I smiled at him some more. It was the least I could do. "Good-night, Roger."

"Good-night, Ms. Dalmas. Oh—Ms. Dalmas?"

I'd already grasped the door handle. "Uh-huh?"

"I'm supposed to ask what you're here for. Hunting, probably, right?"

"Yes, that's right," I said. "Hunting."

* * *

I imagine the pounding on my door had been going on for quite some time. I'm not a light sleeper under any circumstances, and especially not only a few hours after stripping off my clothes and flinging my travel-tired body onto a bed.

"All right!" I shouted into the pitch-black room. "Hang on."

I reached down to the floor where I'd left my phone. The display's glow, when I touched the contact, dazzled. One o'clock. Great.

The pounding resumed. It no longer sounded like someone's fist—I was guessing something igneous.

"Yeah, okay!"

I felt around on the floor until I found my shirt. While I donned that I stood, continuing my explorations with one foot. The chill of an unexpected belt buckle made me yelp. I grabbed my shorts, tugged them on as I headed to the door.

“Okay, what—?” I yanked open the door, revealing a startled Daniel Vargas. The rock in his raised hand glistened darkly in the dim light of Glendora’s municipal streetlight.

“Hi,” he said. “Sorry to—”

He was eased to one side by the person who’d been standing behind him. She was a little shorter than me, a lot thinner, and a good deal more awake.

“Ms. Dalmás,” said the woman, “we need to talk. My name is Carla.”

I was too disoriented to reply, or to prevent her from pushing past me into my room, followed by Daniel. One of them turned on the overhead light. Squinting against the sudden brilliance, I shut the door by feel.

As my eyes adjusted, Carla smoothed the bed’s rumpled covers, then sat herself in the center of the mattress. Daniel leaned against the room’s small desk; he pushed its flimsy steel chair toward me. I ignored it.

“How the hell—”

Carla dismissed my concerns with a wave of her hand. “You already know,” she said, “who we represent. You seem to be on your way to retrieve a certain object. We’re going with you.”

I glared at her. I guessed her age at thirty, maybe thirty-five. She wore her black hair very short; slate-gray eyes looked out from a delicate-featured face. A slight smile suggested amusement at some secret joke—but that smile, like the rest of her, was hard and angular.

I said, “You seem to know a great deal about me, *Carla*. Even

things I'm not aware of—as far as I know, it's a bit premature for any talk of 'retrieving.' And at the moment I'm really not looking for any chaperones.”

She leaned back against the wall, studying me.

Daniel, meanwhile, was staring at the floor, his seventeen year-old gaze glued to the undergarments I hadn't bothered to slip into. He caught me observing him; with a blush he straightened up and turned his attention to the opposite wall.

“You know,” said Carla, “we're not your enemy. You need to work together with us on this.”

“What I need is some sleep. The rest we can discuss tomorrow.”

She seemed about to say something else, but suddenly she stood. “Fine. In the morning, then.” She marched across the room and exited. Daniel—with a few furtive glances toward various regions of my person—filed after her.

Damn! How had they managed to track me here?

I waited a couple of minutes, then eased the door open. Through the gap between the hotel and the neighboring building, the town's streetlight illuminated a wide wedge of dusty ground, empty except for a few small bushes and the scattered jagged remnants of an old steel shipping container. Still barefoot, I stepped carefully around the building's perimeter.

A second rover—tan, and newer than mine—was parked centimeters behind my own. As I watched, the light within its windows dimmed.

No need for them to stay awake to keep watch. With their rover right behind mine and the hotel in front, there wasn't space enough for me to pull out.

I returned to my room, furiously reviewing the events of the previous day. Where had I slipped up, what breadcrumbs had I inadvertently trailed behind me? As I paced, I massaged my sore

shoulder.

The shoulder that Daniel, yesterday, had gripped so tightly.

I yanked off my shirt and lifted my arm so I could scrutinize the side of my shoulder. Among my various moles and freckles, none particularly stood out. Running my finger over the area, though, I felt what could have been a tiny scab on my upper arm. I grabbed my shirt from the floor and turned the sleeve inside out—a minute red-brown stain marked the fabric.

More angry with myself than Daniel, I pulled out my scanner. Setting it to display a wide spectrum of radio frequencies, I held it near my arm and waited. For a minute the various amplitudes wavered up and down—normal communications chatter. Then, for just an instant, there was a sudden spike.

I narrowed the frequency range and turned the sensitivity way down. A minute later, the spike recurred. I dialed the sensitivity even lower, and over the next few minutes confirmed my suspicion—periodic signal bursts were emanating from my upper arm.

I stood there, unable to think about anything but my fury at Daniel and Carla, at myself, at this whole idiotic quest. After a minute, though, the fury gave way to extreme frustration. Which, being essentially my baseline emotional state for the past two decades, freed me to turn my attention to my immediate problems.

I wasn't actually as trapped here in Glendora as Carla assumed. But there was no point in sneaking away while her tracker remained in my arm.

I rummaged through my overnight bag for my multi-tool. I carried it into the tiny bathroom, where I spread a towel across the sink to work over. I folded out the smallest knife-blade, and then—holding my breath—I drew the blade's tip across my arm.

I'd barely scratched the skin.

I took a new breath and tried again, this time pressing a lot harder. The sudden pain made me gasp; blood began welling from the cut.

I probed with the knife—to my surprise, despite the pain and blood, the incision was still only a couple of millimeters deep. But the tracker would probably have been injected more than a centimeter beneath my skin. So I clenched my jaw and jabbed the knife further into my muscle, first at one angle and then another. Blood streamed down my arm, soaking into an enlarging disk on the initially off-white towel. Finally—as I was starting to grow concerned about the amount of blood a person could lose before fainting—the knife tip scraped against something hard and smooth.

I paused for several seconds to catch my breath.

I dug the hole deeper around my apparent target, working by feel through the upwelling blood. My arm felt as if a lizard with narrow, powerful jaws had taken a big chomp and now refused to release its grip. Each movement of the blade sent an aching shudder up and down my arm; cold sweat coated my body.

I grabbed a thin washcloth and twisted it around my arm, trying to staunch the bleeding for a minute as I lowered my head and waited for my gasping breaths to ease.

Then I unwrapped the washcloth and used it to wipe off the knife blade. I folded that blade back into the multi-tool, in exchange for a pair of small needle-nosed pliers.

The pain when I pushed the pliers into my arm almost made me throw up. It took a few tries to get a good grip on the slippery object, but finally I managed to extract the tracker—a ceramic needle, no more than a millimeter or two in diameter, maybe five or six in length. I let it drop onto the bloody towel.

I applied another washcloth as a bandage, securing it with a fresh towel tied as tightly as I could manage using only one hand

and my teeth. Then I retrieved my scanner and spent a few minutes confirming that the needle, and not my arm, was now the sole source of radio spikes in the room.

I placed the needle carefully into the trash, then wadded up the blood-soaked towel and washcloth and tossed them onto the floor of the shower. I sponged the blood off my arm and torso, along with some of the sweat. Then I returned to the main room and got myself properly dressed.

According to my phone, dawn was still several hours away. I hoisted my bag, took one last look around the room, switched off the light and started to open the door. Then it occurred to me to close the door to the bathroom—for a second I considered also leaving the faucet running, but I just couldn't bring myself to waste so much water—hoping that the closed door might buy me an extra minute or two when Carla and Daniel came knocking in the morning.

I crept to my rover as quietly as I could. I paused to listen for any sounds from the other vehicle, but apart from the warm breeze rustling the dry branches of a nearby bush, the night was silent.

I unlocked the door and climbed in. There were no signs that anyone had been here since I'd left. I moved to the back of the rover and got out the first-aid kit. After replacing my makeshift bandage with something a bit more reliable and a lot less bulky, I gave myself an antibiotic injection to cover any bacteria my amateur surgery may have stirred up. The kit also held injectors for pain; reluctantly, though, I decided that using those might leave me too doped-up to carry out my plans for the rest of the night. A shiny emergency blanket caught my attention; I jammed it into my overnight bag.

I turned toward the rear hatch. Several seconds passed before I could make myself open the panel and take out one of the rifles. I

double-checked its charge and ammunition, ran the control system through a self-diagnostic.

Back in the driver's seat, I loaded my phone with local maps. Then, carrying my bag and the rifle, I exited and locked the rover.

The cover of the external cargo hold squeaked as I eased it open. It took me a couple of minutes to lift my bike out without making too much noise; by the time I was done, my bandaged arm ached badly enough that I thought about returning for the pain injectors.

I re-latched the cargo hold. From another hold I removed a few water pouches. I crammed those into one of the bike's two panniers; my overnight bag fit into the other. The rifle I lashed to the bike's crossbar with some tape I'd borrowed from the first-aid kit. With one last glance at the other rover, still crouching silent and dark, I slowly pushed my bike down the street, keeping to the edge of the road and to whatever shadows I could find.

After several minutes I reached the terminus of the streetlight's illumination. Glendora remained asleep and still, apart from one quick scurry by some small animal crossing the road back by the hotel. Before me the desert extended into blackness beneath an overcast, starless sky.

I got onto the bike and flipped on the headlight. Then I started the motor, and put a spray of dust between me and the town of Glendora.

* * *

After the first half-hour my adrenaline subsided. Racing ever forward into the headlight's unchanging wedge of illumination, unable to hear anything beyond the bike's low hum and the rush of air past my ears, I fell into a sleep-deprived trance broken only by the occasional sharp scents of night-blooming plants—and by moments of heart-racing panic when a boulder or drop-off suddenly

darted toward me from the darkness. Every fifteen or twenty minutes I woke enough to pull out my phone to check my position and course.

About two hours from Glendora, my eyes were jerked open by violent bouncing and shaking. The ground was scattered with jagged rocks, from pebbles to shards the size of fists. Disoriented, I braked hard—and the bike immediately slewed sideways into a skid. I struggled to stay upright, holding the throttle partway open as my rear wheel danced across the broken surface. For an instant the tire regained traction—but then it slipped back into the skid. Despite my efforts the bike tilted closer and closer to the rocks speeding past. Then the rear tire caught hold again. The bike spurred forward just long enough, and just upright enough, for me to release the throttle and brake both wheels.

In the end, I still dumped the bike. But not until I'd come nearly to a stop.

In the abrupt quiet I lay on my back across the broken rocks, the bike's handlebars pinning my legs, its headlight shining skyward. Both wheels spun lazily. I shut off the motor, then lifted the handlebars to release myself. I turned the light toward the nearby ground.

My arm—my *good* arm—had been scraped up quite a bit, and one leg was bloody with shallow scratches. But I seemed to be basically intact. And the bike, apart from a few dents, looked undamaged, too.

Even with all the pebbles and rocks, lying down felt remarkably good. I thought about resuming my journey but couldn't muster a convincing argument. If I didn't catch a few hours of sleep, my next accident could easily turn out much worse. Besides, to avoid overrunning my headlight I'd been keeping my speed down all night—I could make much better time if I waited for daylight before

continuing.

I left the bike on its side—no harm in keeping a literal low profile out here—and pulled my bag from the pannier to serve as a pillow. Under the overcast sky, the unmoving air still held some of the day's heat; wrapped in the emergency blanket, I figured I could manage to sleep. I pushed rocks aside and adjusted my position until I was reasonably comfortable, then flipped off the headlight.

And became blind. Without stars or city-glow, there was simply no light anywhere. Maybe a miner or farmer wouldn't have cared—but I was a town dweller, and for me the impenetrable blackness was foreign and frightening.

I shut my eyes tight, trying to pretend that beyond my lids lay a world of streetlamps and light switches. And that I had to keep my eyes shut, because...ah! Because someone was watching me. Someone I had to convince that I was sleeping.

This proved to be a less-inspired pretense than I initially thought. Soon I found myself listening intently for evidence of my supposed observer. Tiny, indistinct sounds in the distance amplified themselves under the focus of my attention, until finally my too-long-awake brain grew sure that some large, stealthy creature was creeping toward me. I opened my eyes—and panicked at the complete darkness. I flailed for the headlight switch.

Once the light spilled across the rocks, my panic quickly subsided, leaving me feeling rather stupid. But I'm not one to deny the existence of her inner idiot—if I were going to catch any sleep at all tonight, clearly it was going to take something more concretely reassuring than an imaginary observer.

I unwrapped the tape holding the hunting rifle to my bike. After spending a few minutes making sure I was familiar with the gun's basic control menus, I reached over and turned off the headlight.

Hugging the rifle with both arms, this time I did finally fall

asleep, the rifle's display pulsing pale blue like some guardian fairy.

* * *

I'm not sure which sound woke me—one of the high-pitched tremolo shrieks, or the basso rumbling growl. The night was still opaquely dark when my eyes snapped open. But the urgent animal cries, though clear, sounded safely distant.

I folded out the rifle's display, set the scope to night-vision. Holding the gun in shooting position, I rose onto one knee and aimed.

About two hundred meters from me, the two creatures poised in the display's monochromatic pseudo-daylight looked unevenly matched. The larger, according to the scope's estimate, stood nearly three meters tall. Its tail lashed angrily as it retreated on its four stamping feet, both pairs of its fore-claws scything downward at its opponent. That opponent's squat body stretched barely two meters long, though half of that length seemed to be snapping jaws.

The short one's growl surged as it launched itself through the air—its brown stripes clear in my mind, if not in the night-vision display—and took a huge bite from the other's belly. The tall creature let out a final shriek, then stood unmoving for a few seconds before collapsing boneless to the ground. The croc waddled in and began a vigorous meal.

The savage brevity of the encounter left me shuddering. Panic returned then, and I hoisted the rifle and pivoted in a quick circle—followed by a second, more careful one—peering into the display for any glimpse of additional predators.

Reassured, for the moment, that the night held no threats other than the distant croc, I resumed my previous pose. The animal still dined; its repast, I guessed, would continue for some time yet. I assumed the croc would then lurch off to its lair—soon, I hoped,

before the arrival of dawn. With any luck I wasn't camped on the route to that lair.

I kept watch for half an hour, my tiredness forgotten each time those great jaws yanked out another ragged morsel. Finally the croc lay still for a few minutes. Then it lumbered up onto its several feet. I held my breath, waiting to see in which direction it would set off.

But the croc just stood there. Then it began wagging its snout from side to side. After several seconds of this, it stopped, and remained still for another moment. And then it turned and looked directly into my scope.

I gasped, nearly dropping the rifle. Fumbling in the dark, I disabled the safety and activated the auto-sight. Several very long, very bad, seconds elapsed before I could find the croc again. When its pale image reappeared in the display, the croc was taking careful, deliberate steps straight toward me.

I tried to steady my arm against my knee, tried to calm my trembling with a slow, deep breath. I'd have to aim manually—red icons at the edge of the display indicated that the croc was out of range for ultrasonic targeting, and wasn't warm enough, or moving fast enough, for the night-vision sight to automatically distinguish from the landscape. So, trying to recall teenage survival-training lessons, I half-filled my lungs and held my breath, and eventually managed to steady the sight's laser onto the croc. The tiny dot of light danced up the animal's snout, settled just above its eyes.

Abruptly, this memory: *Leaning against the wall of a dimly lit room filled with quiet breathing and snores. My colleagues, I think sleepily. My comrades. A pale red dot is moving across the forehead of the woman slouched in a chair across from me; I wonder from where in the rotunda of City Hall such a graceful beam of red light might arise. And then there's blood and loud gunshots from all directions and screaming, and someone falling against me knocking*

me to the floor.

I screamed now, I think, as I grabbed the trigger. The rifle's recoil shoved me off balance. Frantic, I pointed the rifle back into the night, peering into the display as I searched everywhere for the croc.

I finally found it, tens of meters further away from me than before, and rapidly increasing its distance each second. Whether it was my wild shot or my scream that had identified me, apparently noisy, armed humans didn't appeal to this particular croc.

Laying the rifle on the ground before me, I collapsed onto both knees. And began sobbing—but not out of relief.

Because I wasn't kneeling on the cracked and scattered rocks of a desert night. No, I lay stretched across a smooth, polished floor, terrified and helpless amid shrieks and falling bodies and concussive bursts of light. I lay in a room whose door, a decade-and-a-half ago, would swing open before me every night when I tried to sleep, and every day when a loud noise or sudden flash of light caught me off-guard. All these years I'd been reinforcing my barricades against that door, and training myself to look away whenever I accidentally wandered near. In the past decade I had avoided all but the briefest glimpses into that room.

But now, an hour before an eighteen-years-later dawn, it was as if I'd never left City Hall. Again and again came the shouted commands, the smells of blood and excrement, the hard boot kicking my ribs. And through it all: My terror at the forces descended upon us. My helplessness to defend myself. My guilt for failing to protect my colleagues—my friends—who died when I didn't.

Sobbing, I sagged forward until my head rested against the ground.

If the Committee Police had wanted to, they could have simply

fired a few shots over our heads and then marched us out at gunpoint, with no loss of life. But no, they needed to send a message to future would-be rebels. And that message was framed in the bodies of my dead comrades—the comrades I'd always pictured as courageous and powerful, but who I now recognized as young, naive idealists, with no means to defend themselves—even if someone had shouted a last-minute warning.

I dried my face on my sleeves, then picked up the rifle and scanned the night all around me. Satisfied that no new threats were creeping my way, I settled into a less uncomfortable position to await the dawn.

And only then did I realize that just now I had simply *stepped out* from the room of my nightmares. I'd never done that before. Yet if I turned to look back through that still-open doorway, the memories remained clear and immediate. I felt as much terror as always, and—huh—almost as much helplessness. But the ever-present guilt, to my surprise, I could no longer locate at all.

I sat there among the broken stones and thought about that.

After a while, violet light began spilling over the horizon's low hills, and the dry, dusty air around me stirred as if the world were drawing in the day's first hesitant breath. I retrieved one of the water pouches from the bike, and sipped it as I watched low clouds slowly brighten from rust to apricot.

Soon there was enough light for me to make out a dark, irregular mound lying across the rocks, about two hundred meters off. Even without the rifle's scope I could discern small movements that must have been scavengers, probing what the croc had left behind.

Which made me recall my own scavengers—who were, I hoped, only now waking in Glendora. I finished my water and picked up the gun. As I packed everything back onto the bike, I began to wish that before leaving town last night I'd thought to grab some of the

rover's food packs.

Well, I'd be arriving at Stephen Johnson's research station soon enough. Maybe he'd offer me breakfast.

* * *

From the front, anyhow, the station was smaller than I'd expected—a rough-walled ceramic building no bigger than a few habs pushed together, several wire-fenced pens, a few sheds. A rover sat by what I took for the main entrance; I parked my bike beside it.

I couldn't find a buzzer contact, but the door was unlocked. I pushed it open and called, "Dr. Johnson?"

No one answered. I stepped inside, into a small alcove where a collection of dusty shoes and boots covered a third of the stone floor. A couple of high-collared storm-coats hung from metal hooks screwed into the walls, their leather surfaces cracked from wind and time.

I walked past the coats into what was apparently the station's living room. The beige-painted walls held maybe two dozen image-frames, each showing a different group of grinning, grimy people dressed for fieldwork. I found Rafe in two of the pictures. Four comfortable-looking armchairs defined a square around a low table; the debris from someone's recent meal was stacked in the only corner of the table not scattered with data crystals. Two doorways led from the room—through one I could see a refrigerator and an oven; the other revealed only the ends of some sheet-metal shelves.

I called Johnson's name again, then repeated it louder. Finally, from the second doorway a voice—like rusty iron dragged across sandstone—called, "Well, don't just stand out there. Come into the lab!"

Wondering whether he'd taken me for someone else, I stepped

around the table and chairs, and through the doorway.

It was like walking into the university's Biology department. Two high, stone-countered workbenches stretched away from me down the length of the brightly lit room. A row of tall shelving units and storage cabinets lined each side wall. Most surfaces held neat arrays of laboratory equipment—pipettes, probes, culture dishes, heating and cooling units, and plenty of other objects I couldn't identify. The skeletons of several small animals were on display, as were the bones of some much larger creature looming in the room's far corner.

A scent of hot sand and a sudden scuttling sound drew my attention to the wall beside me. Wire cages and glass terrariums were stacked nearly to the ceiling. Scaly animals—some as small as my thumb, others the length of my forearm—stared back at me, displaying extravagant multicolored frills and ridges, mouths full of tiny teeth, and generally too many appendages.

"I'm out of skin cement," the raspy voice said. "There's a big bottle in the blue cabinet beside you."

Wearing a lab coat of almost the same beige as the walls, he stood hunched over his workbench near the room's other end. Wire cages sat on the counter to either side of him; I couldn't see what he was working on.

"Well?" he asked, without turning from whatever he was doing. "This *helioskolex* isn't going to heal on its own!"

The cabinets along the side wall nearer me were each painted a different color. I opened the azure one and found a large glass bottle half-full of purple liquid, neatly hand-labeled "Skin Cement." I carried it down the aisle between the benches, set it onto the counter beside him.

Johnson still matched his old images, though his tight-curved hair had grown grayer and his skin even craggier. Lying on the

bench before him was a row of metal instruments—scalpel, tweezers, scissors and such—and also a legless creature a few centimeters long, with something brown and shiny bulging from a small incision in its belly.

Without looking at me, Johnson opened the bottle and poured some of its contents into a small wide-mouthed jar. He dipped a swab into the jar, then used that to paint the edges of his patient's cut. With tweezers he pulled the incision closed; the purple edges stuck together as if magnetized.

He lifted the creature and held it close before his eyes for a few seconds, ignoring its feeble squirms. After a satisfied grunt, he dropped it into the cage on his right, where it landed atop a pile of others of its kind.

The cage to his left held two more of the creatures. He reached in for his next victim, and then—still without looking my way—said, “Thanks. So who the hell are you?”

“Jenna Dalmas. I'm investigating something.” I peered over his shoulder as his scalpel opened another belly. “What are you doing to these guys?”

He snorted. “Why—did their mother hire you to *investigate* me?” He finally turned his head my way. “Damn! What the hell happened to *you*?”

I glanced down at my scraped, scabbed limbs, my battered clothes. I shrugged. “Let's just say that I could use a better travel agent.”

He eyed me a moment longer, then grunted and turned back to his bench. Lifting a beaker full of brown glass beads, he said, “Radio trackers.” He rattled them, then plucked one out with a pair of tweezers and popped it into the animal. “Doesn't hurt a bit.”

“Not going *in*, maybe.”

He ignored my comment as he applied the purple cement. “Big

controversy about how far from the nest these larvae get before their final molt.”

“Really.”

“Oh yeah.” He dropped the creature into the right-hand cage. “Affects the whole ecological model.”

Neither of us said anything else as he tagged the final little animal. Then he gathered up his tools and carried them to a sink at the end of the bench. He washed them with practiced efficiency, setting them out to dry on a pyramidal black wire rack. He glanced my way. “Would you count up those left-over trackers for me? Just dump ’em out on the bench.”

With a shrug, I poured them out, and then pushed the beads around with both hands until they packed themselves into a rectangle. Five rows of six beads each. “Thirty,” I told him.

“There’s a paper beside that cage, with the number when I started. Write down your number, and then the difference.”

If this was supposed to be some sort of test, it was certainly starting out easy enough. I slid his paper toward me. It bore a series of hash marks—but they were a strange mess. Here and there were the standard four vertical ticks with a slash. But more often he had put down some random number of ticks—three, eight, six—and the diagonal slashes occasionally came in pairs.

“What the hell—”

“Please,” he said, his attention apparently focused on washing his hands.

So without further comments I counted up all his marks: forty-seven. I wrote down that number, then my thirty, then the difference.

He came back to where I stood, pointed at my final figure. “So that’s how many helios I must have tagged?”

“Seventeen, yeah.” Puzzled by his behavior, I turned to look at

him. He was squinting at my calculation as if trying to confirm the steps of a complex mathematical proof. After a few seconds he shook his head and let out a heavy, disgusted breath. “Dyscalculia,” he said.

“What?”

He snorted. “Calculational apraxia. Numeric dyslexia.” He shook his head again, then busied himself tidying up the workbench. “Had a small stroke last year. No big deal, right? Except that out here it takes kind of a while to get medical attention. So they could only fix *most* of the damage.”

I stared at him.

“Damnedest thing. In the end, just two residual problems. I can’t do much with this pinky finger—” he wagged his right hand—“and for anything involving numbers beyond *three*, I’m completely fucked.” He faced me, his deep-grooved features expressionless. Then he shrugged. “All right, Jenna Dalmas, investigator. What the hell are you here for?”

His abruptness took me off guard—but I’d been ready for that query since before I’d parked my bike. “Well, two things, actually. Some news to tell you. And a question.” I gestured back toward the living room. “Maybe we should sit down?”

His gaze was fixed on my face. “This wouldn’t be good news, I don’t suppose?”

“No. I’m afraid not.”

He gave a little nod. “Then let’s just stay right here and get this over with.” He took a step back and leaned against the bench, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Right.” I took a slow breath. “Do you remember Rafe Lindquist?”

That seemed to surprise him. But then he looked annoyed. “Dyscalculia, Ms. Dalmas. Not amnesia. Or dementia.”

“Um...huh?”

“Well, I’d damned well better ‘remember’ Rafe, hadn’t I? We’ve only been exchanging messages every few months for—” he paused, then frowned—“well, for a lot of years now.”

I held up a hand. “Sorry. All I knew was that he’d studied with you back in grad school.”

He grunted. “So what’s Rafe to you, then?”

“We knew each other, a little, back in school. And, um, afterwards.”

He gave me a sharp look. “In the uprising, you mean?”

Not knowing his politics, I braced as I answered, “Yes.”

But he only nodded, and looked thoughtful. “Can’t say that I recall ever hearing your name.”

“Oh, no, we were only casual acquaintances. And then we fell completely out of touch—until just a couple of days ago.”

He cocked his head to one side, and his expression hardened. “What’s happened?” His dried-out voice was quiet but threatening, like the first sprays of dust blowing in ahead of a windstorm.

“Rafe’s dead, Dr. Johnson.”

The air seemed to go out of him, and for a second I thought he might lose his balance. But after a moment he said, “Go on.”

“Somebody killed him, the night before last. They were trying to get some information out of him. They messed up.”

He turned his face away from me.

I waited.

Finally he spoke. But what he said was, “You must have known my daughter.”

I frowned. “I didn’t think you had any children.”

He nodded, still looking toward the nearby wall. “Her mother and I split up before she was born. We didn’t register my name. But my daughter and I always stayed in touch. Right to the end, almost.” He faced me again, looked me up and down. “You and Zoe must

have been just about the same age.”

My eyes widened. “Wait—Zoe? Not Zoe Patchell?”

His gaze tight on my face, he gave the barest of nods. “You knew her?”

“Oh yes,” I said. Recalling her goofy grin one time as she looked up from some hack I’d helped her pull off. Recalling her tiny, distant figure in the stadium, her suddenly limp body collapsing to the blood-slick ground while I still cringed from the shot’s echoing report. “Yes,” I repeated. “We met a few times.”

He nodded again, this time as if something in my response had met with his approval.

Then he shook his head. “And now Rafe. The bastards will get you all, eventually.”

I shook my own head as I tried to correct him. “It wasn’t the Committee who killed Rafe. In fact—”

Suddenly angry, he waved away my objection. “Haven’t you figured this out by now? It’s not the Committee Police that keep the Central Committee’s families in power. No—it’s everybody who doesn’t rise up and kick the damn Committee and its doubly-damned police off this planet! *That’s* who killed Zoe and Rafe: everybody who hears the shots, but then just looks the other way. Everybody who thinks about standing up and defying the Central Committee, but then pushes those thoughts aside and keeps doing what they’re told.”

That struck a little too close to home. I wanted to tell him that you can only ask so much of people. That you can’t demand that someone keep sacrificing her entire life for some abstract ideals. That sometimes people just have to survive.

But I didn’t say any of those things. Because—of course—I knew he was right.

Johnson misunderstood my silence. “I know what you’re

thinking. That here I am making this speech, while meanwhile I'm as guilty as everybody else." He sighed. "Well, you're right. We're all guilty." He paused, and then he glanced at my face with an expression I couldn't decipher. His voice dropped. "Well, almost all of us, anyhow." And then, as I wondered just whose face he'd seen in that glance, he pulled himself up straighter and said, "Thank you, Ms. Dalmas, for traveling all the way out here to tell me about Rafe. I do appreciate it. I believe you also said that you have a question for me?"

Huh. For a minute I'd actually forgotten about that.

I tried to collect my thoughts. All of this talk about guilt and responsibility, and about Zoe, was stirring up feelings that I'd thought I'd lost a long time ago.

"I'm here because of something Rafe said. When I asked him if he'd heard any rumors about the Warrant."

A muscle jumped beside his jaw. Otherwise his face could have been stone. "The Warrant?"

"I don't suppose you'd have any idea what happened to it, after the uprising?"

Frowning, he squinted at me. "Who's your client, Ms. Dalmas? Who hired you to ask me this?"

I stared right back. "The Subcommittee on External Affairs." I wasn't going to apologize to him. I wasn't going to deny the choices I'd made.

"And they know you're here? That you're investigating me?"

"Um, no. Not exactly."

That seemed to intrigue him. "Really? You don't keep your clients informed of your progress?"

"No, not always. Not every little detail."

From above his shoulder, the skeleton of a creature with a pair of too-close eye sockets and a long, wide jaw grinned knowingly at my

claim.

“I see,” said Johnson. He gave me an appraising look; after a moment he apparently reached some decision. “Did you know that those people—your employers—have been out here a couple of times since the uprising? Poking around and asking vague questions?”

Damn! I should have spent more time with Garcia Ortega’s data crystal. All this trouble—and Rafe’s death—for an already-examined dead end.

He continued, “I guess *they* knew about my connection to Zoe. So it was the Warrant they were looking for?”

I nodded. “It disappeared during the uprising. They want it back, as you might expect.”

“How about you, Ms. Dalmas? What do *you* want?”

I opened my mouth, but then realized that I had no answer for him. That simply wasn’t a question I ever asked myself.

He prompted, “Do you want the Warrant in their hands? Or maybe you’d prefer that the Vulesk kick us back to Earth? Assuming they don’t just kill us all, of course.”

His taunting was starting to annoy me. Mostly, though, I was simply exhausted—physically from last night, and now emotionally besides.

“You know, Dr. Johnson, I don’t really have a *clue* as to what I want. So how’s this—you just go ahead and tell me that you have no idea where the Warrant is; then you offer me breakfast. I eat, I leave, we never see each other again. Okay?”

He glanced once more at my scrapes and scabs, and gave me a rueful smile. “You’ve obviously gone through a lot to come visit me, Ms. Dalmas. I’d really like to tell you what you want to hear—but I’m afraid I can’t. The Warrant showed up here the day after Zoe was murdered by the Committee Police.”

If I hadn't been so tired, I suppose I would have said something clever. As it was, I just slumped against the workbench behind me.

He continued, "Parcel post. She packed it into a box and *mailed* it to me. Hand-addressed; her name wasn't anywhere on the package. The note inside just said, *Can you hold this for a while?*"

"So it's been right here all along?" I looked around at the cabinets and shelves. But no, the Subcommittee had already been here, hunting. And if he'd buried it somewhere in the desert, their aerial searches should have turned it up.

He shook his head. "They had just murdered my daughter. And nobody—none of *us*—had tried to stop them. Do you think I cared whether someday the Vulesk might disband our colony—or even kill us? All I had to do was destroy the Warrant, and eventually the whole colony would get exactly what we deserved."

A day ago his statement might have made me gasp. Now, though, I wondered what I would have done in his place. Maybe he was right. Maybe our colony had gone too far wrong, maybe we'd proven ourselves unworthy of this new world.

"So that's it?" I asked. "You destroyed the Warrant?"

He was slow to answer. Finally he nodded. "I may have. But my best guess is no—it will probably all still be there."

"Huh." I was too drained to even work up the annoyance to demand a straight answer.

"What do you know about salmon-lizards, Ms. Dalmas?"

I just looked at him. This was his show now. He'd been rehearsing this scene in his mind for eighteen years; I was merely the audience.

He persisted. "Really. Salmon-lizards?"

I shrugged. "Small, harmless. Grown on farms, right?"

"Come here." He turned and marched toward the end of the room where I'd entered. After a second I followed.

He pointed to a big terrarium.

At first all I could see was an empty tank, half-full of dry soil. But then something moved against the glass, down inside the soil. Stepping closer, I could make out a system of tunnels. As I watched, a slim, light-brown creature twice the length of my middle finger scuttled out of one tunnel and disappeared into another.

“Incredibly good at hiding from predators,” he said. “Even after a couple of decades, almost all of a brood will survive to return for mating.”

“Return?”

“Well yes, that’s where they get their name. They always return to their original nest to mate. The entire brood arrives within a day or two of the anniversary of their hatching. After several hours of frenzied mating, they burrow into the ground and build a communal nest.”

“That’s where they lay their eggs?”

“No. That’s where they die. The eggs—usually just one per lizard—continue to develop within their parents’ decaying bodies. When the larvae hatch, a plentiful supply of easy-to-digest nutrients surrounds them.”

“Yum.”

“After a few molts, the young salmon-lizards climb to the surface. Once they’ve rested up and gotten their bearings, they scatter in all directions, each eventually traveling impressive distances—never to meet again until it’s time to mate.”

“A couple of decades later?”

He nodded.

“And right now I find all this fascinating because...?”

“Did you know that the Warrant is hollow? And that each of those gemstones has a hole drilled through it? They’re beads, actually, strung on a complicated wire frame.”

He paused, then, as if his non sequiturs should now have answered all of my questions.

It took me a few seconds to put the pieces together. Then I stared at him. “No,” I whispered. “You didn’t...”

He returned my gaze. “I just couldn’t bring myself to destroy it. Not right away, anyhow. Maybe someday there’d be another uprising. Maybe someday there’d be people living here who didn’t deserve exile or death.”

“But...well, just how big is a brood of salmon-lizards?”

He held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. Right—he couldn’t do numbers anymore. But he said, “More lizards than beads, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So you took the Warrant *apart*...?” I shook my head in wonder, trying to picture him—still coping with the news of Zoe’s death—driving out into the desert to find a newly hatched brood of salmon-lizards preparing for their diaspora. Capturing them. Popping one of the Warrant’s gems into each belly, sealing the incisions with his purple cement. And then releasing the lizards into the desert.

He said, “I recorded the disassembly, of course, so it could be reversed someday. Several of the lizards are carrying copies of that recording.”

“How thorough of you,” I said, dumbfounded by the insane risk he’d taken with the colony’s future. But then, he’d already been prepared to condemn us all.

What about that wire frame, though? He couldn’t fit *that* into a lizard. He’d have to hide it someplace safe, somewhere that—oh.

Impressed, I glanced across the room toward his workbench. Toward the pyramidal wire rack he used for drying his instruments.

He granted me a small smile. Not so much acknowledging his own cleverness, I thought, as expressing his satisfaction with me for

figuring things out.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So then you just wait for the lizards to come home. A couple of decades, you said—?”

He nodded. “The exact schedule varies from one brood to the next—so the nest site has to be checked each anniversary until they show up. I’ve been out there a couple times so far.”

“But they’ll return in the next few years, right? Before the Vulesk arrive?”

He snorted. “How the hell should I know?”

“Let’s hope,” said a familiar female voice through the room’s doorway, “that they return *very* soon.”

Carla stepped into the lab, the neat little maser pistol in her hand pointing my way. Daniel entered behind her, carrying the rifle I’d left with my bike.

“Keep your eye on the Professor,” she told him.

Before the stacked terrariums, Daniel took a careful stance. Holding the rifle at waist level, he aimed it toward Johnson’s chest. Then, for just an instant, he glanced at me; he didn’t look happy.

“Well,” I said, “you two must have gotten up early.”

Her mouth smiled. Her gray eyes didn’t. “We’d have been here even sooner if we hadn’t wasted so much time on that loser hotel manager.”

“*Roger?* He doesn’t know anything! What did you—”

For a second her smile deepened. Then she shrugged. “Nice trick you played on us.” The tip of her pistol gestured toward my bandaged arm. “Must ache a bit, huh?”

I peeked at Johnson. He was staring at Carla, his expression fixed and grim. His index finger twitched every few seconds.

She said, “I should have thought of your damned motorcycle. Still, it’s not like there were a lot of fresh bike tracks leading away from Glendora this morning. Or a lot of possible destinations in the

direction they pointed.”

I nodded toward her gun. “I thought you said you weren’t my enemy.”

“Things certainly would be going smoother if you’d believed me. We’re a bit beyond that now, though, don’t you think?”

Daniel turned toward her. “But—”

“*Daniel.*” She spoke his name like a teacher firmly cautioning a child.

He pressed his lips together and, after a guilty glance my way, returned his attention to Johnson.

Johnson’s stony silence was making me nervous. I worried that he’d make some sudden, stupid move. So I told him, “These two have been following me for days. Carla here claims that they’re from some secret underground resistance movement. And that they want the Warrant so they can force through some big political changes.”

He nodded. “They the ones who killed Rafe?” he asked.

Uh-oh. Hoping that he wasn’t about to try anything, I moistened my lips. “Well—”

“It was an accident!” Daniel blurted. “We—”

“*Daniel!*” Carla looked quite annoyed. But she still kept her eyes on me.

Their interchange hadn’t perturbed Johnson’s expression. Staring at Carla he said, “And now you’re going to have an accident with *us.*”

She seemed surprised. “Why, no—not at all! I’m simply going to ask you a few questions, and then we’ll be on our way.”

I didn’t suppose that Johnson bought that any more than I did. I asked, “What questions?”

“We were listening to you two for several minutes, you know, from the other room. So, Professor, now all you need to tell me are the coordinates of the salmon-lizard nest and the anniversary date.”

His dried-out voice was as quiet as before. “Go to hell,” he told her.

Her head shook sadly. “Disappointing. Oh well. Daniel?”

He avoided my gaze as he lowered the rifle and set it against the cages. Carla stepped to one side as he walked past her toward Johnson.

She pointed her maser between us and said, sweetly, “If either of you tries anything, the other one cooks.”

Daniel reached into a pocket and pulled out an injector.

“Daniel,” I said, “you don’t have to do this! Don’t take the chance. Not again.”

Frowning, he looked at me, then at Carla. Then he shook his head as if to clear it, and fired the injector into the side of Johnson’s neck.

Johnson gasped. His whole body tensed, and his eyes opened very wide. For a long moment he didn’t move, except for a slight swaying.

Then, finally, he exhaled and relaxed.

I hadn’t realized that I’d been holding my own breath. I let it out, and exchanged a relieved glance with Daniel.

Reaching up to rub his neck, Johnson asked, “What—?”

“Thilosone butyrate,” I told him. “Truth serum.”

He faced Carla. “You’re going to be sorry.”

She said, “Bit late for threats, Professor.”

He snorted.

Daniel retreated to Carla’s side. He reached for the rifle.

“No,” she said. “Get out your phone. Take down his answers.” Then to Johnson she said, “All right, Professor, where do you keep the coordinates of the nest site?”

His mouth opened, but then he snapped it shut. He clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, as if fighting for control.

Carla sighed. Her gun made a small movement—
—and my left hand burned as if it were immersed in flame. I yelped, and reflexively jerked my forearm to my chest.

Carla watched, dispassionate.

I held the hand out before me. Its skin had turned bright red, and blisters bulged from the backs of three fingers. I glared at Carla as I lifted my hand to blow cool air at it.

“Well, Professor?” she asked. “Or are you going to just stand there while I set her whole body on fire?”

He’d been staring at my hand. Now he met my eyes, his expression pathetic in its helplessness. He turned to Carla.

“Damn you,” he said.

She shrugged. “The coordinates?”

“I committed them to memory.”

“Good for you. Well?”

He glared for another second. Then his shoulders slumped. “Fifty-four point seven three two,” he said. “Fifteen point six.”

Daniel jabbed at his phone.

Johnson continued, “Three point one five four.”

“Wait,” said Daniel. “That’s too many numbers. Give it to me again.”

Johnson took a breath. “Sixty-eight thousand and three. Eleven point five one seven.”

“No!” Daniel looked up. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

Carla was frowning. “It’s also different from his first answer. The injector—”

Daniel said, “I gave him the right dose!”

Her eyes narrowed. After a few seconds she said, “Professor, tell me that we’re on Earth.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” She pointed her gun at my face. “Say it!”

“All right, all right! We’re on—” He grimaced. “We’re on—”

“Professor!” Her finger shifted on the trigger.

“We’re—damn it! Don’t shoot her! We’re *not* on Earth!”

Carla gave a puzzled nod, and the pistol lowered slightly. “Okay, so the thilosone is working. But then why...”

I said, “He told you that you’d be sorry.”

Her gaze shifted my way.

“It wasn’t a threat,” I explained. “I guess you showed up too late to hear about his stroke—he can’t do numbers anymore.” At her baffled expression, I turned to him. “Dr. Johnson, can you tell Carla what number follows fifteen?”

“Six,” he answered. “No—eleven?” He frowned as the thilosone compelled him to try to come up with the truth. “Wait, you said the number after thirteen?”

“Thanks, that’s good enough. Sorry.” To Carla I said, “Sort of an ironic situation, huh?”

The confusion on her face changed to reluctant comprehension, and then, for an instant, to fury. But then her anger faded and she looked *lost*, like an explorer who’d studied all the maps and plotted all the routes, but now found herself gazing outward from the precipice of an impossible cliff.

Daniel broke the silence. “Dr. Johnson, you must have recorded this somewhere! In what data file? Is it online? What are the passwords?”

“No passwords,” he replied, looking a little smug now. “No files.”

Carla gestured to Daniel; he picked up the rifle and aimed it at Johnson’s chest. Her own gun continued to point my way. “Well then, Professor, I suppose we’ll all just have to try a bit harder here.”

“Not necessarily,” said a new voice. Through the doorway strolled Garcia Ortega, his gun aimed at Carla. To me he gave an

exasperated look. “So you’re always *careful*, are you?”

For a second we all stared at him. Then both Carla and Daniel suddenly recalled Johnson and me. They shifted their positions to keep us and Garcia Ortega all in view.

I said to him, “If there’s anybody else lined up outside that doorway, could you ask them to come in now? I don’t want to spend my entire day doing this.”

He studied the scene. “You must be Daniel Vargas—I’ve always wondered whether someday you’d become a problem. And Dr. Johnson, of course.” He gave a polite nod. Then he addressed Carla. “But you...” He shook his head, as if she had somehow disappointed him. He knew her?

She gave him an icy glance, then turned her attention to me. Her gun lifted slightly, as did the corners of her mouth.

Not wanting to let her retake the initiative, I blurted, “What the hell are you *doing* here?”

Carla frowned, for an instant not realizing to whom I was speaking.

“Your phone,” said Garcia Ortega, “has been offline since yesterday. I was worried.”

“Okay, but how did—” The answer became obvious as soon as I started to ask the question. “You bastard!” Some hotshot investigator I was—based on my recent performance, the next time I needed to sneak out of town I might as well post my destination in sky-writing. “Your data crystal—it programmed my scanner into a tracker.”

He shrugged. “Also a microphone. So in addition to rescuing you, I’ve saved you the trouble of having to fill me in on your past hour’s conversations.”

“Gee, thanks.” I held up my reddened hand. “Though your rescue might have come just a few minutes sooner.”

“Will you shut *up!*” demanded Carla. By now she was looking more than a little irritated. “Both of you! You’re outgunned, damn it. Shoot one of us, Jorge, and either Johnson or your girlfriend dies. This is still my play.”

Garcia Ortega didn’t appear particularly disturbed by either prospect. “You think so, Miriam? Even after Daniel learns what you’re up to?”

The tip of Daniel’s rifle twitched. But apart from a deepening of his frown and a slight narrowing of his eyes, no other visible reaction escaped.

“Miriam?” I asked.

Garcia Ortega nodded. “Miriam Halpern. She’s an assistant to one of my subcommittee’s staff members. How did you think she learned about the Warrant, and about you? And also, I suppose, about Daniel here.”

Daniel’s frown deepened further. He glanced at her, then at Garcia Ortega, then back to her.

I examined her face more closely than I had earlier, trying to imagine her brittle features softened by a bit more flesh. The resemblance was subtle, but...“You’re related to Fiona Halpern,” I said.

“Shut up,” she said.

“You know, Fiona once told me about her little sister. Her sister idolized her, Fiona said. She’d even convinced Fiona to give her access to Fiona’s diary, so she’d always know what Fiona was doing and thinking.”

Miriam’s thin lips tightened. Her gun hand extended toward me.

“Steady...” cautioned Garcia Ortega.

I kept my voice soft and even. “So I’m a little surprised that you’d be working for the Central Committee. Considering how, in the City Hall raid, the Committee Police put four bullets through your

sister's head.”

The threat of Garcia Ortega's gun kept her from broiling me with her maser. But not from giving me a look so cold that I wouldn't have been surprised if Johnson's lizards beside me had suddenly evolved fur.

Daniel said, “So that's why you joined the underground! To avenge your sister's death.”

She held her glare on my face as she answered him. “Don't be an idiot.”

Daniel's injured expression suggested that he wasn't accustomed to Miriam addressing him so harshly.

She continued, “You can't avenge yourself on a system, Daniel. Or change one. Fiona tried that—she's dead. No, all there is in this life is what you can get for *yourself*.”

“But...what about the Warrant?”

Miriam didn't answer, so I decided to help him out. “Cash, Daniel. Anonymous ransom notes. A carefully arranged money drop. Lots and lots of cash.”

I hadn't seen such a miserable, disillusioned face since...well, since I'd witnessed his brother Luis listening to the cheer rise from a stadium of his fellow citizens upon the execution of his comrades.

In a constricted whisper, as if he'd just been punched in the stomach, Daniel asked, “And the resistance?”

Still facing me, Miriam rolled her eyes.

Garcia Ortega remained alert, his gaze twitching between Daniel and Miriam. For the moment, though, apparently he was leaving the conversation to me.

“A fairy tale,” I told Daniel. “Dreamed up to pull your—our—strings.”

Daniel shook his head. His fingers, one of them wrapped around the rifle's trigger, clenched and unclenched in a way that made me

very nervous.

“No.” His voice grew louder as his conviction firmed. “Carla, everything you told me, everything you believe—you couldn’t have been making that up! Not all of it!”

“Daniel,” she said, “just shut up.” She pointed her maser straight into my eye. “And you—”

We had all forgotten Johnson. This whole time he must have been very slowly easing his hand into his lab coat, until it had reached the holster on his belt. Now he yanked out his gun and swung on Miriam.

The movement drew Daniel’s attention; the barrel of his rifle jerked toward Johnson’s chest.

“No—!” I shouted.

Garcia Ortega’s gun fired nearly simultaneously with Daniel’s.

Daniel let out a loud gasp, then slowly folded at the waist.

I threw myself full-length onto the concrete floor as Miriam’s maser sizzled and Garcia Ortega’s gun barked again. My body curled in on itself, eyes squeezed tightly shut. My heart hammered—I needed air, but a rigid band gripped my ribs. “No,” I whispered. “No no no—”

Hot liquid sprayed across my cheek and something hard crashed down onto my burnt fingers. My hand shrieked with pain; louder, more terrible shrieks echoed in my mind.

The pain drove my eyes open. Johnson’s gun lay on the floor by my hand, his arm outstretched and unmoving beyond it. I pivoted my head to look up. Miriam, facing away from me, was the only one still standing.

Miriam’s maser angled downward, toward the doorway against which Garcia Ortega now sprawled. I imagined a red dot sliding across his forehead.

And suddenly I was filled with rage. *No!* Not this time. Not again.

I lunged forward into a rolling dive over Johnson's arm, scooping up his gun with my good hand. Miriam spun at the sound—Johnson's sleeve burst into flame and heat scorched my calves. My roll carried me up onto my knees; I aimed and shot Miriam in the thigh.

She screamed and grabbed her leg. Behind her, Garcia Ortega's gun sounded once more. Miriam's body slammed against the end of one of the lab benches, slid to the floor. She moaned for a few seconds, then let out one long, last breath.

She lay facing me, her gray eyes staring in disappointed surprise. Her delicate features didn't look quite so hard or angular now.

Behind me, a wet cough. I twisted around to examine Johnson. His sleeve still smoldered—the fabric's gray smoke spread into the room with an acrid scent that partly masked the smells of fired ammunition and singed hair and burnt flesh. The front of Johnson's coat was all blood; I forced myself to focus on his ash-gray face.

He noticed me watching him. His gaze locked intensely onto my face; he tried to say something, but couldn't manage it. He lifted his unburned arm and pointed upward, past me.

He was pointing at the underside of the lab bench's stone counter. I leaned toward it and looked closely, but there was nothing there. Puzzled, I turned again to Johnson. His arm had dropped back to the floor. He was no longer breathing.

Numb, I used my good hand to push myself up to a crouch, and then to standing. The backs of my calves stung as I straightened my legs.

Daniel was unconscious, but breathing slow and steady.

Garcia Ortega had managed to sit himself up against the doorframe. The left side of his face was bright red and hugely swollen; his left arm lay in his lap, charred. His breaths came in

deep, wheezing gasps as his right eye followed my movements.

Somewhere during the excitement my phone had gotten smashed. I staggered out of the lab into the living room. There was probably a radio or a phone tucked away in there somewhere, but a quick survey didn't turn it up. I continued through the alcove and outside.

The harsh sun stung my burnt hand and legs. I squinted. Miriam's rover sat beside my bike and Johnson's vehicle. On the dusty ground behind them sat a two-seater helicopter.

The copter was too small to carry the three of us back to town. But Garcia Ortega hadn't locked down the controls; I was able to radio for an air ambulance. Half an hour, they told me.

I found Johnson's first-aid kit in the kitchen. An oxygen mask seemed to ease Garcia Ortega's breathing—though I had to prop the mask on his chest, rather than pulling its straps across his seared face. A pain injector seemed to help, too.

I stretched Daniel out on his back, using a couple of cushions from the living-room armchairs to elevate his legs. Besides the spot on his back where Garcia Ortega's bullet had entered, I didn't see much blood, and his breathing didn't sound labored. I covered him with one of the storm-coats from the front alcove.

Sitting on a ceramic stool, I leaned against the lab bench and watched over the two of them while I contemplated the disaster I'd made of this job. Rafe and Johnson dead, Daniel unconscious, Garcia Ortega—my client—seriously injured. I actually had managed to locate the Warrant—but I'd also virtually guaranteed that it would never be recovered. No doubt Garcia Ortega would arrange a continuous watch for salmon-lizard orgies, but the desert was a very big place, the lizards were small and well camouflaged, and his people would get only a few hours to spot each gathering.

One way or another, five years from now it was quite unlikely

that I'd still be living in this colony.

Did I really want to spend those final five years continuing in my current career?

I knew the career I'd always *wanted* to pursue. All these years I'd done my best to stay current, but I knew how rusty my math skills had become. Still, how about offering some informal tutoring? Plenty of Hab Town residents would welcome a chance at a bit of university-level instruction. Teaching would help me ease myself back into the game—eventually I might even make some minor contribution in the years remaining. Of course, for a license to teach I'd need somebody to pull a few strings for me—maybe I could talk Garcia Ortega into a favor.

That's what I was mulling when the medics arrived. As they fussed over Daniel and Garcia Ortega, I studied the body of Miriam Halpern. Under the circumstances I couldn't bring myself to feel very bad about her death. Still, who knew how she might have turned out if her sister had never been shot at City Hall? Which got me thinking about Fiona—and for once I was able to recall some of the good times the two of us had shared.

But I lost my smile when I turned and saw Johnson. Damn. I wished that I'd met him a long time ago, that we'd had more time together.

Then I remembered his final gesture, pointing toward the bottom of the lab bench. And for an instant all of my thoughts and emotions *stopped*.

The medics and their patients weren't paying any attention to me. As casually as I could, I walked down the aisle between the two lab benches until I came to Johnson's station. Pretending to examine a nearby skeleton, I ran my hand along the underside of the counter. Nothing but rough stone. I took a step to one side and continued my search. After a few seconds my fingers brushed the

edge of a small piece of paper. I worked it free of its adhesive, and then gave it a quick glance as I pushed it into a pocket of my shorts: the paper bore two short rows of numbers, plus a date.

Apparently Johnson hadn't completely trusted his memory, even before his stroke.

I returned to the other end of the room, giving Johnson's pyramidal drying rack a little tap with my finger as I passed by. The medics were getting ready to wheel their charges out to the ambulance; one of them took a moment to dress my burned hand, and to apply ointment to some of my cuts and scrapes.

From what Johnson had told me, I figured there was a significant chance that the salmon-lizards would return in less than five years. That they'd bring with them enough of the Warrant's gems that the device could be reassembled seemed possible, though certainly not guaranteed. Combine those probabilities, and then require the reconstituted Warrant to actually function after such abuse, and I guessed the overall chances of success as slightly better than the odds of a snowball fight breaking out tomorrow in Hab Town.

In other words, the colony's likelihood of surviving beyond the next five years had just shot up by a huge factor.

Assuming that somebody decided to meet the salmon-lizards.

I declined a ride in the ambulance. Before they left, the ambulance pilot helped me confirm that Miriam's rover would respond to my commands. He also helped me load my bike into the rover; I planned to return to Glendora and check on Roger, and then take Demetri's rover home. After that I expected days of interrogation and reams of virtual paperwork from the Committee Police, unless Garcia Ortega recovered quickly enough to get me off the hook.

In the meantime, I didn't plan to wait here until the police showed up. Before I left, though, there were a couple of tasks

remaining for me in the lab.

I gave Miriam's body one last look, then turned to view the stains and medical debris that marked the positions of Garcia Ortega and Daniel. Demetri's rifle lay where Daniel had dropped it; the police wouldn't appreciate me taking it back, so I figured I owed Demetri a new gun.

I removed my scanner from my pocket, then plucked out Garcia Ortega's crystal and dropped it onto one of the stone counters. Just to be safe, I pulled the powercell from the scanner before returning it to my pocket.

Finally I faced the other body. I had to clear my throat a couple of times before I could speak. "Okay, Dr. Johnson. Today somebody's *not* going to look the other way. Satisfied?" I stood by him for another minute or two.

Then I fetched what I'd come for, and headed back outside.

As I waited for the rover's air-conditioning to do its job, I looked around the interior for a good hiding place. It took me a minute to see it; I grinned then, because Johnson would have approved. I lifted the lid from the rover's trash bin and pushed aside the top layer of torn food wrappers and empty water pouches. The wire pyramid fit with room to spare. I left it half uncovered.

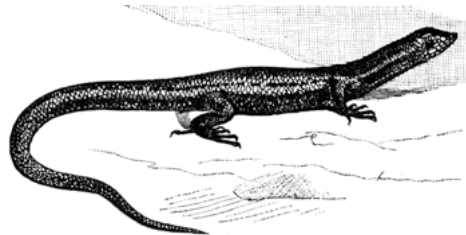
After easing around Garcia Ortega's copter, I told the rover to head for Glendora. For a long while I watched Johnson's research station shrink in the rearview display.

I hoped that Roger was all right; it would be handy to have somebody I could trust here in the outback. I shook my head at myself, then, as I realized that part of my mind had already begun assembling a *team*. Roger out here. Tamiko, with her schemes and contacts. Possibly Demetri. Hell, there might even be a place for Daniel.

I shook my head again. Jenna Dalmas: math instructor on

weekday afternoons, on weekends the clandestine leader of the Second Uprising.

What were the odds of *that*?



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