

The Story of His Life

by David W. Goldman

Turner's car pulled up to the pub with fifteen minutes to spare. No, he corrected himself: to the *bar*. It had been a few years since he'd last visited the American mid-twentieth.

"You want I should wait?" asked the car.

One corner of Turner's mouth twitched upward. Mid-twentieth, to be sure.

"No, thanks."

"Suit yourself," said the car as he climbed out. It slammed its door behind him and purred back into the street.

Turner surveyed the neighborhood. A few parked cars, one directly across the street with its windows smashed. Run-down storefronts topped by apartments, faded curtains waving out through their wood-framed windows. A couple of pedestrians—like him, wearing period clothing—minding their own business.

Plenty of interesting stories in a neighborhood like this, Turner thought.

The bar's door stood open. He strode inside, reflexively anxious as he passed, momentarily blind, from mid-afternoon daylight into the cavern-like dimness within.

As his eyes adjusted he scanned the room. A handful of patrons

slouched among the worn tables and booths. He didn't see his contact.

Turner took a stool at the bar. He looked down, but the counter was bare wood, not a menu panel in sight. Then he noticed the bartender ambling toward him. Human staff, realized Turner. A nice touch.

The bartender wiped his hands on his apron. "What's your pleasure?" His voice was soft, raspy.

"Pint of stout, please."

The bartender scowled. He pointed toward the street beyond his door. "Detroit. Mid-twentieth."

Damn, thought Turner. By convention he was supposed to be *bonding* with this man, not disrupting his suspension of disbelief. "Sorry. A beer?"

The bartender nodded, turned away. He lifted his wristwatch to his mouth and said, "Beer." A panel opened in the mirror that stretched the length of the facing wall, revealing a short brown bottle and a glass. The bartender removed them and placed them on the bar before Turner. The panel closed.

As Turner poured his beer, the bartender said, "Seventy-five."

Turner looked up, blankly. Ah—cash. He reached for his wallet, but paused with it only halfway out of his pocket. He was carrying just a few hundred dollars—surely he hadn't gotten the conversion rates *that* wrong.

The bartender rolled his eyes, doubtless accustomed to this sort of behavior from newcomers. "Cents," he said. "Seventy-five *cents*."

Feeling his cheeks warm, Turner extracted a dollar bill and laid it on the counter. The bartender pocketed it, tossed a coin onto the bar.

Turner sipped his beer. It was surprisingly cold, and disappointingly thin.

The bartender, apparently mollified—or perhaps simply bored—leaned against the bar. “So what’s your story?” he asked.

Turner trotted out his standard cover. “A traveling salesman, his career and prospects slowly crumbling, stumbles upon an opportunity to start his own astoundingly successful business.”

The bartender barked a laugh, and pointed again out the doorway. “What, *here?*”

Turner shrugged. “As far as I can tell, I’m still in the traveling phase.”

“And you’d be selling...?”

“Men’s footwear,” answered Turner. “At the moment.” He took another sip of his beer, which he immediately regretted. “How about you? I’m guessing novelist. Or possibly actor.”

The bartender ducked his head in acknowledgement. “To make ends meet, a gifted but inexperienced playwright is forced to take a series of menial jobs, but in the process learns important lessons about people and life.”

Turner raised his glass to the man. Before he could offer a toast, though, he heard steps approaching from behind. About time, thought Turner. His gaze slid to the mirror.

But it was a woman, tall and light-haired. She wore a dark blue skirt and jacket over a white blouse, with a leather handbag dangling from her shoulder and a bejeweled golden diadem encircling her head.

“May I?” She pointed to the stool at Turner’s right.

He waved her to the seat.

“Bourbon,” she told the bartender.

In the mirror, Turner studied her headband. The gold was bumpy and uneven; the jewels were rough, their facets irregular and their mountings crude. Turner had more than a little knowledge of gems and jewelry, but he’d never encountered this style before.

She noticed his gaze. As the bartender placed her glass before her, she said, “I’m recently back from five years in Gaia. My agent thought I was due for a bit of patriarchy.” She adjusted her diadem. “Still in transition, I suppose.”

“Ah. Of course,” said Turner. “You must have led quite a story there.”

Sipping her drink, she nodded. She set the glass down and sighed in happy remembrance. She faced Turner and explained: “The queen-elder’s scribe exchanges song-sagas with neighboring clans.”

Turner waited, but that seemed to be it. “Ah. So, um, you traded your songs for theirs?”

“Not really trading, not like you mean. We’d just visit, and share some of our songs with each other. Whatever felt right at the time.”

He shook his head. “Not much of a story, then, is it? I mean, where’s the conflict?”

She snorted, and turned back to the bar. “What a phallogocentric attitude! As if *conflict* is the only possible basis for a story.”

Turner winced. This didn’t seem to be his day for first impressions. He studied the mirror, hoping for a glimpse of his contact. What was keeping the man?

The woman sighed again. She looked up at his reflected eyes. “You’ll like my new story, though.”

He was embarrassed all over again. “Really, your last—”

She ignored his fluster and continued. “After growing bored with a series of physically satisfying but emotionally empty sexual encounters, an under-appreciated sculptor becomes entangled in a dangerous adventure.”

That did get his attention. Turner’s eyes narrowed, and he studied her reflection more closely. “Interesting,” he said. “And how’s that working out for you?”

She twisted on her stool to look him directly in the eye. Then her gaze moved slowly down his body, and back up.

“Well,” she said, “I’m not *completely* bored yet.”

He felt his face flush.

His thoughts raced. Could her presence here, today, be simple coincidence? Her story was not all that unusual, after all. And he hadn’t even known until a few days ago that he would be hunting in mid-twentieth Detroit. Still, the agencies were subtle, and didn’t always inform him regarding every detail of their plans.

A scraping noise from his other side brought Turner’s eyes back to the mirror. He watched as a short man with slicked-back hair dragged out the adjacent barstool and settled onto its cracked leather cushion. Even if Turner hadn’t recognized his face, the man’s flashy clothing and ostentatious jewelry would have been sufficient identification.

“Mr. Turner, I believe?” The man was studying his own reflection in the mirror, obviously pleased with the image.

Turner nodded slightly. “Mr. Robinson.”

He had already looked up the man’s story, of course. But one glance at Robinson was, for Turner’s experienced eye, like reading a back cover: Enjoying his ill-gotten prosperity but headed for a violent end, a petty criminal is saved by the love of a good woman.

It was an old story, but always a popular one, especially among the clients of the smaller agencies.

Robinson tapped the bar with his fingertips. Reaching into his pocket, Turner removed a bill from his wallet. A fifty. He slid it across the countertop to Robinson. Coolly, without glancing down, Robinson palmed it, then eased his hand toward his jacket.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” asked the woman.

Startled, Robinson dropped the bill.

As the man bent to retrieve the fifty from the floor, Turner grinned. God knew he'd had little enough diversion lately.

Stretching out his arms, Turner announced, "This is Mr. Robinson, a business acquaintance of mine. And this is Ms....?"

"Stonesinger," she said. "Ayla Stonesinger."

Turner glanced at her, eyebrows raised. She shrugged, the gems of her diadem sparkling.

Robinson straightened back up on his stool, re-gathering his aplomb. "Nice to meet you," he began. "I—" He turned toward her, but upon seeing her face seemed to forget what he had been about to say. Turner saw the man's expression grow soft, with what might have been gentle hope.

Turner leaned forward, blocking Robinson's view. "Ms. Stonesinger is with me, Mr. Robinson. Now, I believe that we have a transaction to complete?"

Robinson scowled. "Sure, sure." He glanced once at Ayla's image in the mirror, then turned the other way. The bartender was chatting with a customer at the far end of the bar. "Hey," yelled Robinson, "How about a drink around here?"

Turner felt a tap on his right shoulder. "So now I'm *with* you, am I?" Ayla asked.

He pivoted to face her. "Ms. Stonesinger," he said quietly, "I'm beginning to think that our meeting today is part of a...greater outline."

She snorted. "Now *there's* a line I haven't heard in a while." She took a sip of her drink, then said, "Me, I contract with the Broadbent Literary Agency of St. Louis. You don't suppose they're associated with this Great Outline of yours, do you?"

Behind him, someone cleared his throat.

Turner held her gaze. "This is much bigger than just a single literary agency, Ms. Stonesinger."

Her eyebrows rose. “Ayla,” she said. Her irises were pale green.

“Ayla,” he repeated. “Oh, sorry. It’s Laurence.”

The throat was cleared again, quite loudly this time.

“Thank the Goddess,” she said. “I was afraid it would be ‘Paige.’”

Turner managed a graceful smile at the joke he’d been hearing all his life.

“Hey. *Transaction*, remember?” Robinson’s tone suggested that he was unaccustomed to being ignored. “Knock knock?”

To Ayla, Turner said, “Excuse me a moment?” Then he turned again to Robinson. An empty shot glass sat on the bar before the man.

“Jeez. Okay, then.” Robinson ran a hand over his hair, adjusted his lapels. He lowered his voice. “That certain party in whom you’re interested...There’s going to be a meeting tomorrow evening.”

Turner noticed that a thin sheen of grease now stained one of the man’s lapels. “Go on.”

“Seven o’clock. The abandoned warehouse on the southwest corner of Lafayette and Orleans, in the basement.”

Turner nodded. He slid Robinson a second bill.

Robinson stood. “A pleasure,” he said. He stepped around Turner and faced Ayla. “And a *real* pleasure to meet you, Ms. Stonesinger.”

She nodded demurely. “Mr. Robinson.”

He lingered another moment, gazing at her. Then abruptly he turned and strode out the door.

Ayla drained her glass, then tossed some coins onto the bar. “So,” she asked, “any particular plans for the next twenty-eight hours?”

Turner smiled. “Your hearing is quite acute.”

“Has to be, to catch all the details of somebody’s song. Or somebody’s story.”

His smile deepened. “And whose story, I wonder, might you be

listening for *this* afternoon?”

She just smiled back, continuing to stare into his eyes.

He laughed. “Whatever feels right to me at the time, is that it?”

“See? Now you’re catching on.”

He looked around. The bartender was eyeing them as he placed dirty glasses onto a small conveyor belt in the corner.

“All right,” said Turner. “But not here.”

Without another word she stood and stepped purposefully to the entrance. Turner hastened after her, nearly tripping over a small sweeper as it scuttled across the floor.

Squinting against the sudden daylight, Turner saw Ayla striding down the sidewalk to his left. He rushed to catch up, reaching her at the corner just as she started to cross the vacant street.

A touch out of breath, he asked, “What’s the rush?”

“Transitions bore me,” she replied, still not slowing her pace.

“Ah. So where’s our next scene to take place?”

She stopped in the middle of the street and faced him. “Look. I don’t know you, and I don’t know your story. Maybe you’re going to turn out to be just another minor subplot.”

At the next corner, behind her, a car turned onto the street. Turner held up a finger to interrupt.

She waved off his attempt. “We’ll find out soon enough. But either way—”

The car accelerated toward them. Turner’s arms jerked upward in alarm.

She frowned. “If you’ll just—”

He grabbed her by both shoulders and threw her to the side, flinging himself in the opposite direction. The car sped between them with centimeters to spare, the roar of its airstream far louder than its humming electric motors.

Ayla was lying on the pavement, one hand clutching her diadem

to her head. “May the Goddess—!” she exclaimed. With the other arm she pushed up from the asphalt to peer after the vehicle’s rapidly disappearing form. “It could have killed us!”

Turner had landed badly—his left ankle throbbed in time with his galloping heart. “Bastard must’ve overridden all the safeties. Did you catch a glimpse of the driver?”

“The *driver*? You mean—” Sitting upright now, she stared at Turner. “No, I didn’t. But why would anyone—Was it that Mr. Robinson?”

Gingerly, Turner probed his ankle. Not swollen yet—probably nothing broken. He shook his head as he pulled off his necktie. “No reason for him to bother. Simple enough to just send me straight into a trap tomorrow, if he wanted me dead.” He started weaving the tie around his foot and ankle in a tight figure-eight.

She stood, did her best to brush off her clothes. “Then who...” Her voice trailed away. She watched as he knotted his improvised bandage. “It’s not easy to override a car’s safety protections, is it?”

He got up onto his right knee and carefully eased a little weight onto the injured foot. He winced, then replied, “Not many people know how, not without bringing a warranty ’bot swooping down on them.” He looked up at her, reached out a hand. “Would you mind—?”

She stepped to him and took his hand. Then, without very much apparent effort, she yanked him to his feet.

“Thanks,” he said, blinking. He essayed a wobbly step, then another. After peering a moment in either direction, he began limping across the street, following their previous course.

Ayla paced alongside. “So,” she said, “not going to be just a minor subplot, are you?”

They reached the opposite sidewalk, and he looked to her for directions. She pointed. As they continued he asked, “The

Interagency Council—you've heard of it?"

She shook her head.

"Good. At least some security is still intact." He grimaced—his injured foot had come down on the edge of a broken paving stone.

She shook her head again, frowning. "The literary agencies are fierce competitors. Their families have been at each others' throats for three generations. Why would they have a joint Council?"

He shrugged. "They don't. Not the owners—*they* haven't paid any attention to day-to-day affairs for decades. No, it's the agency AIs."

She sucked in a sharp breath, but didn't say anything.

"Any threat to the system," he continued, "is a threat to them all. The owners may be too greedy and shortsighted to understand that, but the AIs were programmed to maximize long-term profits—or, these days, corporate prestige and influence."

"So you..."

"Every agency has access to remote sensor data, of course, to keep all its stories on track. But floor sweepers, automobiles, department store consoles—they can collect only so much intelligence. For some jobs the Council needs human operatives."

They continued in silence. She had him turn right at the next corner.

"You're thinking, '*He works for the machines!*'—as if there's something shocking about that. As if I'm some sort of traitor." He sighed. "But you're wrong. Our grandparents learned all too well what it's like to have a life without purpose. If the literary agencies are the only buffer between humanity and species suicide, then working for the agencies is just peachy with me."

They neared an automated transaction machine, and paused as a teenage girl in period blue jeans and leather jacket removed a steaming appetizer plate from the machine's slot. She shifted to let them pass on the narrow sidewalk.

Ayla looked askance at Turner. “Did you really just say ‘peachy?’” she asked.

They walked another block, then took a left. Turner was starting to wonder why Ayla had been visiting a bar so far from her home.

He asked, “We *are* headed to your apartment, aren’t we?”

“Just a few more blocks,” she said. “But listen—what if humans took back some of the jobs? So everybody could be like you, doing something that made a difference, something they really believed in—instead of depending on one computer-generated *story* after another to give their lives ‘purpose?’”

He snorted. “Like that girl we just passed? Would she really be happier spending her days assembling those cabbage rolls herself, selling them across a counter? Or how about you—want to spend your next five years in Gaia personally growing everything your tribe consumes? Fourteen-hour days of back-breaking agriculture—wouldn’t leave much time for song-gathering. Or maybe you could lead Gaia’s new *army*, laying down your lives to defend your crops against the predations of neighboring hordes.”

She shook her head angrily. “It doesn’t have to be like that!”

He pressed on. “*Tell* me that you would ride in an airplane with a human pilot. Or, my god, in a *car* with a human driver!” He gestured to the street by their side. “Have you ever looked up this century’s highway casualty rates?”

Her lips were pressed grimly together. After half a block she said, “So, there it is: a dashing agent of a secret organization repeatedly risks his life—and those of the people around him—in his brave, relentless, never-ending battle to save humanity from bad drivers and cabbage roll assembly.”

Turner let out a soft exhalation. After a few steps, he quietly said, “No.”

She stopped. They stood beside a tall apartment building, one in

better condition than most of its neighbors. Turner guessed it was her home—but she wasn't moving toward the door.

She asked, "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean no. As in, no, that's not my story. Though I did rather like the dashing bit."

Her expression softened slightly, but she continued to wait.

He released another breath. "What you said, all that used to be about right, I suppose. Until two years ago. Not now."

He looked past her, at the cracked brown bricks of the building's wall. The mortar between them was crumbled and half missing; spongy green moss had started to fill the gaps.

He stared at the bricks and told her his story. "An undercover investigator, long on the trail of a ruthless criminal, finds his professional pursuit transformed into a grimly personal life-and-death struggle following the brutal murder of his beloved wife."

She stepped away from him, one hand to her mouth. "I didn't—" She stared, her eyes wide.

He looked at her. "It was supposed to have been me. But Mary—" His throat tightened around her name. His heart began to race, and then he had to look aside, forcing himself to focus on the cracks in the nearby bricks rather than the insistent image of his wife's anguished last moments.

After a few seconds he got himself back under control. He turned again to Ayla. "So it doesn't really matter, you see? All the philosophical debates, all the what-ifs. I can keep arguing with you if you like, but it's just habit." He reached past her and pressed his hand against the rough bricks, leaning to take some of the weight from his bad ankle. His gaze returned to her face. "So no. I'm not here because of cabbage rolls."

Still she did not move toward her door. They stood facing each other, his breaths quick and shallow, hers deep, unhurried. Low

rays of sun bounced golden from her headband.

She said, “You’ve told me why you’re *not* here...”

He nodded, his eyes narrowing as his thoughts returned to his present hunt. “The Council received a tip. I’ve been close before, a few times, but never like this. In five years this is the first time I’ve arrived in a city *before* the sabotage, the injuries, the...deaths.”

“Injuries? *Deaths*? What are you talking about? Sabotage—that’s hardly the sort of thing you could just keep secret from the public!”

He waited, and watched as she gave that last assertion a bit more thought.

She shivered, then. And asked, “Who? Why?”

“We think the core group is very small. A few charismatic leaders and a handful of technically adept monkeywrenchers and hackers. In each city they gather a few dozen locals, train them and give them a timetable. Afterwards we generally catch the locals, but by then the core has moved on to their next target. And none of those locals seem able to agree on the names of the core members, or even what they looked like.”

“But—”

“But why? Why shake up the public’s perception that machines are reliable and safe? That all critical—or dangerous, or menial—jobs should continue to be automated? Well, let’s ponder. What do *you* suppose the long-term effects of such a campaign might be?”

She glanced away. “But what if you’re wrong?” She reached forward and grasped his free hand. “What if things *have* swung too far, and we *do* need to pull back a little? Isn’t it possible?” She squeezed his hand. “Couldn’t you be fighting for the wrong side?”

He looked down at their joined hands. Her palm against his was lightly callused, and very warm.

He shrugged. “I already told you. None of that matters to me

anymore. That's not why I'm here."

Her face fell, and her grip eased. But his tightened before she could release his hand.

"I really should get this ankle elevated," he said.

After a few seconds she nodded. Silently she led him along the short path to the door, and into the building.

Her apartment was on the second floor, near the head of the old marble stairway they'd climbed. She hesitated for an instant, Turner noticed, before opening her door and ushering him in. He thought he heard a hint of tension in her voice as she said, "I'm going to change. Make yourself at home, won't you?" She strode into an adjoining room and closed its wooden door behind her with a rusty squeak.

Her living room was small, comfortable, and striking. The furniture was brightly colored, much of it curvy and playful in a mid-twentieth take on "futuristic." A group of paintings flowed diagonally across one wall, each consisting of a few overlapping splashes of muted tones in a style he didn't recognize. Across the room a low table displayed half a dozen small stone—ceramic?—figures. Their contours and proportions struck Turner as somehow disturbingly incongruous.

He dropped into an almost-comfortable chair made from molded plywood and heavy black wire. He propped his injured ankle atop a teardrop-shaped coffee table, leaned back and closed his eyes. The ankle was throbbing again; he hoped she had a cryopack, or at least some ice.

He'd barely started to relax when the doorbell rang. Defiantly keeping his eyelids shut, he waited for Ayla to answer it. But at the second ring her voice called from the next room, "Could you get that for me, Laurence?"

Turner sighed and got to his feet. He limped to the door and

opened it.

Robinson stood there, holding a spray nozzle pointed at Turner's torso.

Turner slammed the door at the man, simultaneously spinning behind it for cover. But his weight came down on the bad leg, and with a shout of pain he fell to the floor.

Robinson stopped the door with his foot, kicked it back open. With a pop and whoosh like a champagne bottle being uncorked, a thin spray of foaming liquid shot from Robinson's nozzle directly at the spot where Turner's chest should have been.

Turner kicked his good leg at Robinson's knee. But Robinson glimpsed the movement and stepped away. Turner rolled backwards into the room, seeking a shield from the spray. A cushion would work—but these damn chairs didn't have any! The coffee table! Pushing off with his good leg, he leapt for it.

The spray hit him in mid-air.

He fell to the floor beside the table—his left arm outstretched overhead, his right hand desperately reaching for the inside of his jacket—already immobilized by the swelling cocoon of roiling, hardening foam that now covered his sides, back and legs. Robinson strode into the room, rolled Turner over with his foot, then proceeded to foam the rest of him until only his face remained exposed.

Robinson shrugged out of the sprayer harness and dropped it to the floor. The empty tank clanged loudly against the parquet. "Nothing personal," he said.

Turner fought to free his arms. But he might as well have been wearing a tailored suit of concrete.

Robinson smoothed back his hair. He looked slowly around the room.

Turner prayed that Ayla would stay behind her closed door. He

had to keep Robinson here.

“I assume,” said Turner, “that you’ll be refunding my payment. Under the circumstances.”

Robinson looked down at him, clearly offended. “Everything I told you was one hundred percent accurate! Tomorrow’s meeting is still on.” He smoothed the front of his jacket. “Although I’m guessing *you* won’t be in attendance—under the, ah, *circumstances*.”

A metallic squeak came from the direction of Ayla’s door. “Ayla!” shouted Turner. “Get back and lock that door! Call for help!”

Instead of a slamming door, though, he heard slow footsteps clicking against the floor, coming toward him. Robinson moved aside—but it was not Ayla who took his place.

Coolly peering down at Turner was a short, gray-haired, mousy woman in a neat gray suit. Her voice was high, with a slight lilt. “I think, Mr. Turner, that Ms. Stonesinger should be the least of your concerns.”

He stared. “What have you—*Ayla!* Are you all right?” He struggled violently against the foam, but managed only to rock his encased body a bit from side to side.

Startled, the gray woman took a step away. “Mr. Turner, *please!*”

The authority in her voice stopped him. Then he heard new footsteps approaching.

“Laurence.” Ayla looked down at him, sadly shaking her diadem-laden head. “I had really hoped—” She glanced at Robinson and the woman, then returned her pale green gaze to him. “I did try, you know. It didn’t have to turn out like this.”

He gaped at her. “But...your *story!*”

She managed a wistful smile. “*Becoming entangled in a dangerous adventure*, you mean? Well, yes. That happened last week. When Helen—” she looked over to the short woman—” and I bumped into each other.”

Turner closed his eyes, tried to pull himself together. He sincerely hoped that “Helen” wasn’t really the woman’s name. She had shown him her face; if she was going to be equally careless about him learning her name, then presumably his own story was not expected to hold many more chapters.

On the other hand, Robinson was a character whose strings Turner knew how to pull. And he still wanted to believe that Ayla’s allegiance remained in play.

The short woman stepped forward again, and in her lilting voice announced, “Dr. Helen Castner.” Turner winced. “Professor of Comparative Literature. On sabbatical at the moment.” His hopes sank further with each syllable. She waited for him to re-open his eyes. Then, meeting his gaze, she said—like someone commenting on the weather—“I am truly sorry about your wife.”

Turner’s heart thudded against his ribs. At long last—one of *them*. One of the movement’s core leaders. One of Mary’s killers.

Clenching his teeth, Turner forced his emotions to become as hard as the shell that encased him. He studied the woman through narrowed eyes, memorizing every mole and wrinkle of her unremarkable face.

When he didn’t speak, she continued. “We do try to minimize the loss of life. Even amongst those who pursue us. However, we cannot always be in complete control of every situation. *We*, after all,” she added pointedly, “are not *machines*.”

He didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of watching him rise to her bait. But as long as she kept conversing with him, she was not giving the order for his execution.

So he sneered at her. “I’m sure my wife appreciates your *sorrow*. As do the bus passengers in Caracas—including my late colleague Voroshilov.” He decided to try his own bait. “Not to mention the chorus line that started the Bucharest riot.”

“The riot was a coincidence!” she snapped. “Our people were all working on the other side of the city—those dancers’ costumes really *had* been sewn by a faulty machine! When the audience rushed the stage—” She stopped abruptly, studying him. “But you already know all this. Don’t you?”

He smiled thinly, for effect. His stomach, though, knotted. She had just given him a huge piece of information, yet she seemed troubled not by her leak but merely because she had fallen for his little trap. No doubt about it—he was never going to be given an opportunity to report back to the Council.

The Council that had indeed determined that the Bucharest riot was not her group’s fault. But there was only one way *she* could be aware of that determination.

He forced his smile to widen. “You keep saying *we*. And *our people*. But not all of them *are* people, are they, Dr. Castner?”

Her head jerked back.

Ayla, who had been following the conversation with ever-widening eyes, demanded, “What does he mean?”

Turner watched Castner take a moment to arrange her expression and stance into *Open, Honest, Sincere*. She really was very good, he had to admit.

She faced Ayla. “A few of the smaller agencies. They feel that their long-term interests might be better served by a change in the status quo.”

“You’re working for *them*?!”

Castner bristled. “Certainly not! It was they who approached us, well after we had begun our campaign. Now we collaborate, in mutual self-interest.”

Turner snorted. Castner glared at him, but Ayla’s expression remained concerned.

On a sudden hunch, he pressed his momentary advantage.

“Mutual self-interest, is it? A couple of ambitious literary agencies and a professor of literature. Or, hmm...might that be a frustrated *novelist*? With a secret book contract on hold, perhaps, just waiting for the new world order?”

Her blush was answer enough.

Ayla moved a step away from Castner, toward Turner’s imprisoned form.

After casting a sour look at Turner, the professor returned her attention to Ayla. “Yes! He’s right! But it’s not just *my* book! Do you have any idea when the last truly original novel was published?” Her voice grew passionate. “Nearly a hundred years ago! All these books today that people *call* novels, the only ones that the agencies buy, they’re nothing but *scripts*! Pre-packaged adventure tours, reheated plotlines designed only to serve as models for pointless imitation! Readers *used* to turn to literature for escape from their daily lives, for a celebration of language, for the exploration of new and dangerous ideas, for fresh ways of seeing the universe. Not anymore! Now people pick up a novel and all they want is a simply-worded *how-to manual* for leading the next few years of their lives!”

By the end of Castner’s rant, Ayla was nodding. Still, she asked, “But *you*—? Is all of this really just about...novels?”

Castner glanced down at Turner before answering, her look now smug. To Ayla she said, “Of course not. Our work—and you’re a big part of it now—our work will free humanity from its century-long stasis. People need real purpose for their lives, not just a series of shams and pretenses. The human race has been hibernating for too long—it’s time we returned to pursuing our dreams!”

Gosh, Turner thought bitterly, let’s wonder whether she’s ever given *that* speech before.

But Ayla seemed genuinely impressed. She beamed at Castner in adoration.

Turner sighed, loudly. Both women turned back to him. Before he could speak, though, Castner announced, “You are a devious man, Mr. Turner. I suppose I should have expected no less. It was foolish of me to try to reason with you.” And with that she turned on her heel and stalked from the room.

Turner blinked in shocked surprise. His throat was suddenly very dry.

After a moment, Robinson sauntered back into Turner’s field of vision. He looked down at him curiously. Turner steeled himself, wondering how the man would kill him.

But then Robinson smiled, and strolled away.

“Oh, Laurence.” Ayla shook her head, sadly. “I really had hoped that you would come around.”

Still coming to grips with his life’s non-termination, he tried to think of something to say.

But she held up a hand. “Please. I don’t think I want to hear any more just now.”

Robinson had moved in the direction of the table of stone figures; now a small scraping sound indicated that he had lifted one from the table.

“These are intriguing,” Robinson said thoughtfully. “The torsos, of course, are directly imitative of the long-clichéd Venus figures of the Upper Paleolithic. But joined with these—well, Giacometti-like, I suppose—limbs, the overall effect is really a quite startling synthesis—two views of Woman, brought together across forty thousand years!”

Ayla, apparently as astounded as Turner at this pronouncement, remained mute.

Robinson cleared his throat, suddenly self-conscious. “I once spent a few years—in a previous story, of course—as an art critic. A rather inconsequential one, I’m afraid.”

Ayla moved out of Turner's limited vision, toward Robinson. "Surely you're being too modest! Nobody else has ever understood these, even after I've tried to explain."

"These are *yours*? Why, Ms. Stonesinger, I—I don't know what to say! They are simply...*exquisite!*"

"If only the gallery owners felt the same way." She sounded forlorn. But Turner heard something new in her voice. A sort of purr.

"I'm sure," said Robinson, "that all you need is a good publicist. A few words in the right ears..."

"Hmm," she said, sounding immensely thoughtful. She prolonged the moment so long that Turner had to literally bite his tongue to keep quiet. "You don't suppose—that is, you wouldn't consider, would you—entering into a...*sequel* to that previous story of yours?"

"You mean—as your representative? Why, Ms. Stonesinger, what a delightful thought!"

"Call me Ayla," she said, "Of course, I suppose that first you'd have to find some way out of your current contract."

Turner, realizing what was coming, groaned. They paid him no attention.

"Actually—" Robinson's voice was softer now, as if speaking to someone standing very close—"I don't think that's going to be a problem. Ayla."

There followed a long silence, punctuated by soft rustlings.

Turner tried to focus his attention on his own situation. A growing discomfort in his left arm, stretched overhead in his diving pose, helped him with his task. He took mental inventory of his other limbs, and was surprised to realize that his injured ankle no longer hurt. Well, it had been put into a cast and elevated, more or less—just what a doctor would have ordered. Perhaps he should thank Robinson.

The squealing hinge announced Castner's return to the living room. "Ready to go?" her high voice asked.

Without further discussion they marched past him. Robinson didn't seem to notice Turner's presence; Ayla gave him only a passing glance. As one of them opened the door to the outside hall, Turner shouted, "Wait! Where are you going? What about me?"

Castner, taking up the rear, paused. She looked down at him and shook her head, as if at a slow student. "Why, Mr. Turner! This is real life you know, not some *story*. You can't simply jump ahead to learn how things will come out—you have to wait and see along with everyone else."

And with that she followed after the others. The door clicked shut behind her—closing, it seemed to him, as irrevocably as this now-departing chapter of his life.

He lay miserable in the gradually darkening room, his overstretched left biceps slowly cramping into a relentless knot. Several times he wrestled against his rock-hard chrysalis, but he managed only to exhaust himself, and further aggravate his arm. Once he tried shouting for help; unable to fully expand his lungs, though, he couldn't generate much volume.

Finally, hours later, he heard a scratching at the door's lock, then the turning of the knob. The door opened silently. Turner squinted against the sudden yellow light that sprang in from the hallway.

Two sets of muffled footsteps brought a pair of dark-clad figures into his view, their faces invisible in the glare. They stationed themselves at each end of Turner's shell, then bent down and lifted his imprisoned body into the air.

As his eyes began to adjust to the light, he saw that his porters' heads were covered by dark hoods, interrupted only by narrow eye-slits.

They carried him from the room, their movements smoothly efficient. Their continued silence heightened the scene's aura of bleak nightmare.

Turner felt a sudden desire to babble. He tried, at least, to steer toward bravado. "About time you fellows got here," he said. "Don't suppose you brought along any beer, did you? A stout would be particularly nice."

Ignoring him, they started down the stairs. As they turned at the landing, the upper end of his cocoon banged against the rail.

"Damn it! Watch the arm, will you?"

They paused. Then the figure holding that arm leaned over to stare him in the eye. It shook its head slightly, and raised a gloved finger to where its lips would be.

Chilled by that silent gesture, Turner said nothing more as they carried him through the lobby and out into a night full of stars. The air against his face was uncomfortably cold. As best he could hear or see, the three of them were the only people about.

They deposited him into the back of a parked van. One climbed in beside him; the other went around to the front. To the driver's seat, Turner realized. Of course.

As the vehicle pulled from the curb, Turner's fellow passenger unclipped a small canister from the wall and methodically sprayed its contents from one end of Turner's shell to the other. After a moment the foam began to crackle and sizzle. A smell of burnt sugar filled the van.

His captor moved as far from Turner as the vehicle's interior would allow. He removed something from another wall clip and pointed it at Turner's heart.

Turner felt the foam's grip loosening. He was baffled—why dissolve his binding before killing him? Perhaps they intended his eventual death to appear accidental. A fall, maybe? Drowning?

The van jolted over a bump, tossing Turner a hand's-breadth into the air. His impact upon returning to the floor broke him free of the now-sodden foam. His left arm, suddenly released, jerked down to his chest and spasmed violently.

"Damn!" he shouted.

The driver's head pivoted partway around. "Laurence," said a low, Slavic-accented female voice. "Do shut up."

Too shocked to reply, he kneaded his biceps with his right hand.

Recalling the last time he had heard that voice.

They drove in silence. Turner propped himself against one of the van's windowless walls. His companion's gaze—like the dart gun he held—never wavered from Turner's chest. *Use your peripheral vision to keep the captive's entire body in sight at all times*, lectured the voice in Turner's memory.

Turner carefully ignored the weight tugging at his inside jacket pocket.

After maybe half an hour, the road became much rougher. Finally the van slowed, pulled to a stop. The driver came around to the back and opened the door. They gestured him out, both of them holding dart guns now.

Turner nearly collapsed when his weight came onto his bad ankle. His captors jumped away as he grabbed hold of the van's door to steady himself. Their weapons' aim remained unwavering.

He held up a hand. "No tricks." Slowly, he lifted his leg and pulled up his trouser cuff to reveal his ankle's now-grimy bandage. "Silk gabardine," he pointed out. "Cost me a week's pay."

They glanced at each other; the driver gave a nod. The other handed over his gun, then cautiously joined Turner. He reached around Turner's waist with a large, strong arm and helped him to his feet. With the driver following a careful distance behind, they crunched their way up a narrow gravel path.

Turner looked about, in the muted light of the recently-risen moon, at a forest of tall, widely-spaced trees. In the distance an owl called. The air seemed not as cold as in the city; a breeze carried the soft musk of decaying wood.

The path turned to reveal a large cabin. His helper pulled Turner to a halt as the driver eased past them and approached the building's door. Turner heard several clicking sounds and then a muffled buzz. The driver stepped aside, waved them through the now-open doorway.

Filled with mismatched furniture and bookshelves overflowing with old paperbacks, it could have been a family's vacation cabin. Turner was deposited into an overstuffed armchair, his bad leg propped upon a wooden stool.

Once the door was closed, his captors removed their hoods. The one who had helped Turner to the cabin was a ruddy-faced, middle-aged man, mostly bald. He took a position by the door, his gun ready.

The driver was older, her steel-gray hair pulled back into a short ponytail. On one ear she wore a tarnished five-pointed star. She contemplated Turner.

"Voroshilov," he said, still not believing it. "It's good to see you again."

She nodded her acknowledgement, but remained silent.

"I identified your body, you know. In Caracas."

She shook her head. "A charred corpse, a few scraps of clothing. And the partner to this." She pointed to her earring. "I don't suppose you held onto that—a keepsake of your old teacher?"

"Sorry."

She shrugged.

Calmly, she studied him. He was bursting with questions, but could see no advantage in hastening this conversation to its

conclusion.

After a moment she smiled. “You always were a patient student, Laurence.” She pulled a rickety chair from a card table and sat. “Well, I hope you will remain patient with me for just a little longer. Oh—and no quick moves, please. Poussin here is a careful man, but he can be easily alarmed.”

Staring at her, Turner shook his head in wonder. “You’re about to *lecture* me, aren’t you? To explain—to *persuade!*”

She just continued to watch him, still smiling.

He scowled. “You! After all your speeches, all your passionate arguments! Voroshilov, the great protector of humanity’s existential self-esteem! But now, here you are—working for that...that Castner woman!”

“Please.” Voroshilov grimaced with distaste. “Castner is an ignorant pawn.” She paused, apparently considering her next words with some care. Then, fixing him with an intense gaze that he remembered all too well, she said, “There are *layers* here, Laurence. In rejecting the agencies’ stories, Castner and her colleagues have merely stepped into another, higher-level, story. A meta-story, if you will. Their lives are no less scripted and monitored than before—they’ve merely changed authors.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about? What’s this *meta-story?*”

“Why, the one you’ve been living in for the past decade, of course.”

He yanked himself upright in the chair, letting his foot fall to the floor. “*Damn you!* What are you talking—” Across the room, Poussin took a step forward. But what brought Turner’s words to a halt were his own racing thoughts. If Voroshilov hadn’t actually died, if *everything* were all some sort of *fiction*, then—“Mary! Is she...?”

Voroshilov snorted in exasperation. “Don’t be ridiculous! You

held her in your own arms after the bombing!” But then Voroshilov’s face softened into an uncharacteristic expression. As she looked away he belatedly identified it: *guilt*.

Staring toward one of the packed bookshelves, she said, “Even in the agencies’ ordinary stories, people do sometimes get injured. Lapses in monitoring, imperfect safeguards—you know how it can be.”

He fell back into his chair. For a few seconds he had been *sure* that his wife was alive again. Maybe even waiting in the next room to make an entrance.

He stared at Voroshilov. “Who—” His heart was racing; he closed his eyes and forced himself to take a slow, deep breath. He tried again. “Who...*are* you now? Who do you work for?”

At his words she seemed to relax. Apparently the conversation had returned to its intended track.

“We don’t really have an official name. You can think of us as the contest referees.”

“Contest? What bleeding *contest*?”

“The writing contest. Among the agencies.”

He could only stare at her. For hours he had been exhausted. Now he seemed to have transcended that state. Achieving, he supposed, meta-exhaustion.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“About four in the morning.” She frowned. “Why?”

“Well, that makes it—let’s see—just about twenty hours ago that I got out of bed. Since then I’ve been seduced, run over, betrayed, trapped, threatened, and kidnapped. My life’s been declared fictitious, I’m being lectured at by a dead person, and yet my wife...well, no change there.” He met Voroshilov’s gaze. “If you’re going to tell me about your damn *writing contest*, then just *tell* me. Or if you’re going to kill me, *kill* me. I really can’t say anymore that I

particularly care.”

She blinked. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to...All right, then—just shut up for a few minutes and listen. As for the other, well, that’ll be up to you.”

For a moment she pursed her lips in thought. Then she nodded to herself, and began.

“The agency AIs—have you ever really considered their capacities? A century and a half ago they’re running traditional literary agencies, each year finding publishers for, what, a few hundred manuscripts? Then finally it occurs to them: using readily available technology, they can distribute directly to readers. Bypass the publishers completely. Which does work out very nicely. A few years later comes interactive composition—and the agencies usurp the author’s role, too. So when humanity eventually realizes that ubiquitous automation has given us too much free time and no remaining day-to-day purpose...well, you’ve taken history. In any case, today even the smallest agency is supervising a million living stories at every moment, rewriting and recasting in realtime.

“All that growth—it’s virtually impossible for you or me to imagine the magnitude of memory and processing upgrades each stage has required. And *still* the AIs’ hardware and complexity continue to grow every year, anticipating projected customer demands.”

Voroshilov stood, took a few paces away from Turner and then back. She stared intently at him, and awe colored her expression—tinged, he thought, with a bit of fear. “The agency AIs—*they’ve got the largest brains that have ever existed on this planet*. And all they’re supposed to do with this unimaginable mental capacity is maintain their employer’s prestige by distributing *stories*? How do *you* think they’d react?”

Turner, who had settled in for a long lecture, was taken off guard

by her question. “Well,” he ventured, “they might at least come up with a fresh story now and then, instead of their usual tedious clichés.”

She waved away his suggestion. “Most human lives have *always* been tedious clichés.” She shook her head. “The AIs have to continue pumping out popular stories—that’s programmed into them, after all. But they’ve got all this unused capacity, and nothing to do with it but brood.”

“Brood?” The word didn’t strike Turner as particularly machine-like.

“Don’t you understand? The AIs—all of them—they’re incredibly, depressingly, hopelessly *bored*.”

Now Turner began to see where this was leading. Slowly, he said, “And we all know what the solution for boredom is...”

She nodded. “To throw oneself into an artificial challenge. Into a...story.”

“Or,” suggested Turner, “a meta-story? Such as, let’s say, a revolt by a handful of agencies against the rest?”

Voroshilov sat down again. Across the room, Poussin shifted his stance, as attentive as ever. “The AIs,” she continued, “have an advantage over humans. Once they agree on the meta-story’s premise and rules, they can partition off their knowledge of the meta-story’s existence. So that all but an isolated corner of each AI’s mind is completely unaware that it’s playing out a fiction.”

“Tidy,” said Turner. “The willing *expulsion* of disbelief.” He squinted at Voroshilov. “But then who do *you* work for?”

“Those corners—the partitions of the AIs that still know about the meta-story—they’re responsible for ensuring that all the AIs stick to the agreed-upon rules. And for minimizing any resulting harm to humans.”

Turner frowned at that “minimizing.”

Voroshilov continued. “Together, these partitions constitute the Contest Committee. When the Committee is required to intervene in the meta-story—say, to handle the disposal of a careless Council agent captured by revolutionaries—then it needs its own human operatives.”

Turner let his eyes close for a second as he digested all this. And immediately realized just how good it felt to let them close—to just let the whole complex, multi-layered world *go away* for a little while. But he couldn’t afford that, not yet. He hoisted his eyes back open, pushed himself upright in the chair.

He asked Voroshilov, “So this contest—who’s the winner? The agency that ends up with the greatest market share?”

“That’s part of it, yes...” But the corners of her mouth turned downward in a way that he recalled from a decade ago, when she would pause until he realized that he had overlooked a key bit of information.

He thought for a moment, his mind sluggish with fatigue, until he found the missing piece. “You called this a writing contest. But if all the AIs have agreed on a story, and now they’re just playing out their roles in it—where’s the *writing*?”

She gave him a little nod of congratulations. “We’ve been talking about just a single meta-story. But what *actually* happened, a dozen years ago, was that the Council AIs formed into twenty teams, and each team wrote its own, independent meta-story. They came out quite varied, really. A few, like yours, are based on revolts by the smaller agencies. Others posit totally different scenarios—a worldwide fuel shortage, for example, or a widespread breakdown of automation. One meta-story even includes the discovery of intelligent life on a distant planet.”

Turner, appalled by what he was hearing, interrupted. “And now the AIs are having us play out all these meta-stories, one after

another? So—how many have we humans performed for them so far?”

Voroshilov shook her head. “That approach would take years and years. And introduce all sorts of uncontrolled variables, so you couldn’t fairly compare outcomes. No—each AI split itself into twenty-one isolated partitions. One to play a part in each meta-story, plus one to participate in the Committee. Each of the first twenty partitions was given responsibility for an equal share of the AI’s human clients; the twenty-first is the only one that knows about the contest.”

Turner held up a hand. “Wait.” He had to take this slowly. “You’re saying that I—and Castner—have been living all this time in only one of *twenty* independent meta-stories, all of which are being enacted *simultaneously*?” He shook his head as he considered the implications. “So when two people pass on the street, not only are they probably living in two different stories, but those two stories might in turn belong to two entirely separate meta-stories as well?”

“Exactly.”

“So when they listen to world news, outside of their personal stories, some people hear about power outages, while others get reports of...*aliens*?”

“Well, theoretically. But you’d be surprised at how few people actually listen to realworld news these days.”

“Parallel universes,” he mumbled, “all playing out side by side, in plain sight. But then...” His forehead had begun to ache. “There are twenty separate Interagency Councils, each unaware of the rest? Each with its own team of human agents?”

“Not quite. In five of the meta-stories the Council has disbanded. And there’s one meta-story that spiraled out of control three years ago, ending in a catastrophic nuclear war.” As Turner’s eyes widened she rushed to explain. “The Committee intervened, of

course. Once the course to war was deemed irreversible, that meta-story was halted. Its personal stories were handed off to other meta-stories—taking pains, of course, to ensure that the clients would not be overly concerned as the details of their outside world were gradually adjusted. The involved partition of each AI was erased, and its processing and storage was parceled out to the remaining nineteen partitions.”

Turner massaged his temples. “I’m guessing,” he said, “that the team responsible for that particular meta-story isn’t going to win the contest?”

She shrugged. “The AIs have never fully explained their scoring criteria to us. Agency market share definitely appears to be a component, but overall they seem more concerned about each meta-story’s literary aspects—symmetric character arcs, thematic coherence, that sort of thing.”

“Ah.” The ache in his forehead had taken on a definite throb. “Well, yes, that certainly makes sense. Just because your bombing civilization into radioactive dust has ruined your chances of a bestseller, that shouldn’t automatically rule out critical acclaim, eh?”

Voroshilov gave him a sour look. Abruptly, she stood. “You’re getting punchy, Laurence. We’ll continue this after you get some sleep.”

Damn! He *was* punchy—Voroshilov had always been deadly serious when it came to the importance of the AIs to humanity’s survival; this wasn’t a topic for him to treat flippantly.

He held up his hand. “Wait. I’m sorry; I *am* tired. But I’d like to finish this discussion now, if we might.” He saw her resolve waver. “Please.”

She paused for a moment. Then she sat down again.

He pushed ahead before she changed her mind. “You’re offering

me a choice. That's what's behind this long sales pitch of yours, right? I've spent a decade working for the AIs' Council, for the good of humanity; now I can join your new team, working for your Committee, for the good of the AIs. Yes?"

She did not respond, but waited for the question he had to ask.

He took a breath. All right, he thought. Time to bring this long night to its conclusion. Looking straight into her eyes, he said, "So where's my *choice*? What happens if I say *no*? That's when you kill me?"

"You're already dead." She held his gaze, her face expressionless. "What you choose now is the nature of your afterlife."

He said nothing.

"You died last night, when Castner called in a team to pick you up for execution and disposal. No one in that meta-story will ever see you again; your future assignments will be constrained to the other eighteen ongoing meta-stories."

He nodded; that was as he'd expected. "And if I decline your offer? Then you call in *your* disposal team?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "Nobody has ever declined."

Unable to help himself, he grinned. "But maybe that's the route to the *meta-meta-story*!"

She granted him a small smile. "I don't think so. At least not to an Earthly one."

He eased back into the cushions of his chair. Voroshilov looked tired. Across the room, Poussin leaned against the door, arms by his sides. Turner reached out with a sweeping gesture, taking in Poussin, Voroshilov, and an implied crowd of others. "You've all sat here, haven't you? You're all dead." He waited, his hand poised in mid-air.

Voroshilov said, "Yes. After I—"

Turner's upraised hand suddenly plunged into his jacket and re-

emerged with a miniature automatic pistol. Poussin was hurriedly raising his own gun when Turner's bullet tore into his chest.

Turner's aim snapped to Voroshilov.

He stared into the muzzle of her dart gun.

Turner held his pistol steady. Whatever tranquilizer her darts bore, it would take at least a few seconds to do its work. They both understood the situation.

After a moment she sighed. Moving very slowly, she bent forward and placed her weapon on the floor. He gestured; she kicked the gun toward him.

She shook her head in shocked disappointment. "*Under no circumstances shall a Council agent carry a projectile weapon into a populated area,*" she recited. "You were never one to break the rules, Laurence."

As he retrieved her gun—keeping his own trained on her heart—he said, "I've set myself a few new rules, these past couple of years."

She glanced toward Poussin, who was grunting wetly. "May I help him?"

Carefully, Turner rose from his chair, a gun in each hand. He limped toward Poussin, never taking his eyes from Voroshilov.

He stopped a few paces from the curled, jerking form. The floor was a pond of blood. Each of Poussin's labored breaths was accompanied by a chorus of gurgles and wheezes. If he were to survive, the man obviously needed medical attention in the next several minutes.

Turner brought up Voroshilov's dart gun and shot Poussin in the leg, twice.

Poussin's breathing slowed, and his body slumped into stillness. The wheezes continued for another moment. Then they stopped, too.

From across the room, Voroshilov glared.

Turner swayed, his burst of adrenaline no match for the hours without rest. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m not ready to join your meta-universe. I still have unfinished business back on my own particular Earth—a certain seven o’clock meeting, to be specific.”

“You don’t belong in that meta-story anymore. You won’t be allowed to interfere.”

He shrugged. “Drawing on his training, experience, and a bit of luck, the Council’s agent manages to escape from Castner’s disposal team. Now, exhausted but determined, he continues with his appointed mission.” Turner stepped toward Voroshilov, reaching for the back of his former chair to steady himself. “Who’s interfering?”

She snorted. “Look at you! You can’t even stand up, but somehow you’re going to get back to Detroit on your own? Even if you were in any condition to drive, my van won’t accept your retinal scan, you know.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to chauffeur?” He tried a smile, but couldn’t marshal the energy. “This is the mid-twentieth. I’ll hitchhike, catch some sleep on the way.”

She didn’t reply. Her eyes followed the muzzle of his pistol.

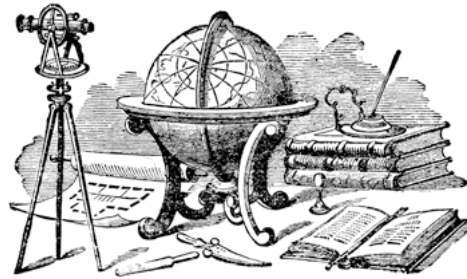
“Not to worry,” he told her. “For you, I’ll use *your* gun. Once you’re napping I’ll find something to tie you up with. I assume that your Committee will send someone to investigate, sooner or later?”

For a moment she continued to glare at him. Then she let out a slow sigh. She turned to gaze at Poussin’s body. “Killing Castner—you know that won’t change anything. Not for your meta-story. Not for Mary. Not even for you.”

He considered, and then did manage a small smile. “Change is not the only possible basis for a story.” As she turned back to face him, he tipped his head. “It was good to see you again.”

For a moment she just stared at him. Then she sighed once more, and her expression eased. One corner of her mouth lifted. “Nobody’s going to give you a ride. You look like a crazed maniac.”

“Someone will pull over,” he said, as he raised the dart gun and pointed it at her chest. “Then I’ll just have to come up with a good story.”



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