

Twisted Stories

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Judge, Jury, Executioner

Wireless internet access changed everything.

In ways not entirely positive.

With electronics training from the U.S. Air Force, and six years structuring firewalls and virus protection systems for a major international bank, Ziggy Edmundson used the technology to transfer millions into his personal accounts - and earn a ten to twenty-year stretch in a federal penitentiary.

He managed, behind bars and without actual tools, to construct a transmitter from scraps of wire, discarded contraband cell phones, and assorted oddities. This allowed him to play jokes on the guards, tapping into their radio frequencies, issuing false alarms, and opening cells at random.

Good for a laugh.

And another decade added to his sentence.

That setback bolstered his determination to find a method of escape from the collection of murderers, rapists and drug dealers. Periodic cell inspections didn't deter him from pilfering bits and pieces from trash bins.

Having no family, the shaggy-haired, scruffy-bearded inmate presumed the warden had made a mistake ordering him to the visitor's room that Friday afternoon. The sole reason he complied with the request: there might be some useful items lying on the floor of that heavily-trafficked chamber.

He didn't expect two black-suited FBI goons to be waiting for him.

Polite inanities were ignored; Ziggy wished they'd drop whatever bomb lay in the manila file on the metal table. It took them fifteen minutes, but finally, they did.

"We've got a situation," announced rust-crowned Ken Carnes, the younger and leaner of the pair.

Okay, Ziggy thought. Get on with it.

"Someone has been committing murders via the internet."

"So?"

The sandy-maned portly second agent, Todd Ullery, pulled an mp3 player from his jacket pocket, hooking it up to a portable speaker. He activated a saved recording.

"You have been convicted of betraying the trust of those you claimed to serve. You will now be eliminated from the human race."

The playback quality wasn't good, but Ziggy could still detect a Celtic accent to the singular, throaty baritone. "Where'd you get that?"

“It was the last message received by the third district congressman from Utah,” Carnes responded. “He was electrocuted through his keyboard five seconds later.”

The prisoner didn’t care if the agents thought him callous. Such a feat surpassed impressive. “Nice.”

“You think it’s *nice* that eighteen people have been killed in cold blood using... using...”

“A computer as a weapon?” Ziggy interspersed. “It was bound to happen eventually.”

Ullery demanded, “Do you recognize the voice?”

“No. Haven’t you been able to trace the IP address?”

Carnes and Ullery didn’t have to speak; their sheepish expressions provided a negative answer.

“What’s he doing, piggy-backing his signal on another carrier?”

“He’s... I hope I explain this correctly, because I’m not a geek, like you,” scowled Carnes.

“Thanks.”

“Anyway, he’s... randomized the wireless modulation and scrambled the satellite feeds, so it can’t be traced.”

“Cool.”

“You sound like people on the social networking sites, who’ve created pages honoring this guy as a hero,” raged Ullery.

“If the people he’s taking out are corrupt politicians, more power to him. The government needs a system-wide overhaul, for sure.”

Carnes noted, “Among his victims were an Italian Catholic priest in Venice and a Hong Kong investment banker with six children. The messages were phrased differently in those instances, but essentially the same.”

That piqued Ziggy’s interest. “Did you bring them?”

“No,” huffed Ullery. “One’s enough for what we need.”

“Regardless of what *you* need, listening to altered versions could determine whether the messages are computer-generated, or recorded by a live body.”

“Very good, Mr. Edmundson,” Carnes praised. “Your insight into such... problems is why we’re taking you with us.”

“What?”

Ullery grumbled, “Don’t you get it, jerk? The FBI director himself has approved your release, on condition you assist us in catching this bozo.”

Something to consider, Ziggy mused. “What do I get out of it?”

“A full pardon, authorized by the Department of Justice.”

“You got proof?”

Carnes slid a document toward him, on official letterhead, signed by the Attorney General and the President himself.

“You guys must be really desperate,” chuckled Ziggy.

Again, no verbal reply was necessary. He read near terror in their eyes, as if they feared being next on the murderer’s hit list.

Attired in the faded jeans and USC t-shirt he’d been wearing the day of his arrest, Ziggy accompanied the FBI agents to a private hangar at the Denver airport, flying to Washington, D.C. in a posh Cessna Citation. He was hustled into a black Chevy Suburban upon landing, and driven in fading daylight to a nondescript row of brick houses on L Street NW.

Despite outward appearances, the structures were wired to handle the highest speed computer network, with sound systems many theatre owners would envy. Ziggy was gruffly directed to a chair in the middle of a cluttered former bedroom - only, he didn’t see the equipment as clutter.

He wouldn’t have bothered to murder anyone using the servers and software, but he could’ve done some major damage to the utilities grid, if he chose.

Carnes brought a flash drive, plugging it into the nearest USB port. Each clip lasted less than ten seconds, but confirmed for Ziggy that a real person - perhaps with a legitimately inflated ego, given his apparent genius - had spoken the words precisely at the time the killings occurred.

“How can you be so sure?” puzzled Ullery.

“If they were pre-recorded, there’d be a level of degradation. This guy was on a live feed when he executed his victims.”

Carnes echoed, “Executed? Why use that term?”

“Can’t you tell? The guy sees himself as judge, jury and executioner. He’s convicted his victims of their crimes, pronounced and executed the sentence.”

“If you can tell that just from his voice, you must already know who he is!”

Ziggy swiveled on the lopsided chair. “Just because I understand how hackers’ minds work doesn’t mean I’ve met every one of them.”

“Our cyber crime unit doesn’t think he’s a simple hacker,” countered Carnes.

“They’re right. He’s a super-hacker, or more. He doesn’t merely invade other people’s computers, he’s set up a foolproof way to prevent being caught.”

“Don’t say it’s foolproof. It can’t be foolproof. We need you to... unravel this mess so we can take him into custody.”

“It’ll take time. Weeks, maybe months, depending on what complexities he’s integrated into the base language.”

Ullery barked, “You’re *wasting* time.”

“I need a starting point. Who was the last person killed?”

“The congressman,” supplied Carnes.

“Was he in the city when it happened?”

“He rented a house in Arlington.”

“Take me there.”

“Why?”

Ziggy sighed. “You ever get lost in the woods?”

“I grew up in the city.”

“You ever turn left instead of right, and end up on the wrong side of the tracks?”

Carnes nodded.

“There’s an old Boy Scout tactic which uses a length of string to help you retrace your steps to familiar ground. Same thing applies here. I have to start at the end and work my way backward...”

“Ah!” Ullery grasped the concept - to Ziggy’s surprise - and smiled.

They escorted him to the Suburban and headed toward Virginia.

The stone facade mansion on three acres of well manicured lawns didn’t intimidate Ziggy. If politicians accepted vast sums from lobbyists and special interest groups to occupy these behemoths, they had skewed priorities.

Congressman Henry Bloom had been a fixture in the House of Representatives for thirty years. He’d greyed and grown pudgy, and must’ve liked videotaping his visitors, given the elaborate cameras he owned.

Carnes and Ullery left him alone in the study, which allowed him to pop in one of the DVDs and view it on the 80-inch plasma screen suspended from the wall.

Sex tapes, featuring amazingly youthful women.

Ziggy had better things to do.

Like performing a disk scan on Bloom’s laptop, still open on his desk blotter, to see who or what had invaded the circuits.

A knife, thrust in the abdomen and quickly removed, would have left no less evidence.

The computer was clean.

Ziggy's respect for the crime's author increased by leaps and bounds.

He understood why discontented souls - at odds with government inaction, religious sex scandals and Wall Street greed - would hail him on their websites as champion of their cause.

"What'd you got for us?" Carnes prodded, when Ziggy wandered into the kitchen an hour later.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Huh?"

"The guy's incredible. There's no string to tug. He left nothing. Didn't even wipe the drive, which would be the cheap way to cover his tracks."

Ullery growled, "So, you're saying we'll never catch him?"

"Oh, no. You'll catch him. Somewhere along the line, he'll tap into the wrong computer, and get bit."

"Is there a way we can force that to happen?" queried Carnes.

"Not until we know how he chooses his victims. Before Bloom died, had he make the news, for instance?"

"He'd been indicted for ethics violations in the House."

"What about the others?"

"We'd have to check."

"Do it, then. Take me to my hotel, so I can get cleaned up, and we'll try again tomorrow."

"We can't wait until tomorrow," Ullery remarked.

"Why not?"

"His first few murders were months apart. Recently, they've been happening in intervals of less than two weeks..."

"He's perfected his selection criteria, or his program." Ziggy stretched. "Until you get me the information I need, though, there's not much I can do."

Carnes acquiesced. "There'll be an agent at the door night and day, so don't try anything stupid."

"You can count on it. This is the kind of challenge I would've liked back in the Air Force. I might not've... done what I did, if I'd had this kind of mental stimulation."

"You think our killer has the same attitude?"

"Can't tell yet. He may have realized he's created the ultimate weapon and is testing it, with plans to sell it to the highest bidder. Or, he may honestly be working as an avenging angel of sorts to rid the planet of parasites."

"Our statisticians estimate the next murder will take place before Wednesday. You are to be given whatever leeway you need to prevent it."

In that instant, Ziggy couldn't see how. The man had undoubtedly spent months - years - designing and implementing his strategy; as good a hacker as he was, Ziggy couldn't infiltrate his target's defenses in four days.

Unless...

The hardware required to reconfigure communication satellites - as well as instigate a fatal electrical shock on the receiving end of a transmission - could not be bought at the suburban big box store. Orders placed to specialized suppliers, via phone or internet, would be mandatory.

Ziggy had dealt with the limited number of such suppliers during his career. Having FBI administrative staff request their records for specific items would narrow down the field of possible suspects.

He explained the idea to Carnes and Ullery. They agreed it was a lead the bureau should have followed up on much earlier. "Except, we don't have your expertise," conceded Ullery.

"You guys don't think like criminals," Ziggy commented. "That's your biggest obstacle to solving cases."

"I'll take that under advisement," scoffed Carnes.

Yet, the senior agent did notify those at headquarters to contact the list of companies Ziggy provided, checking sales of three key components. Any hits, and the customer's contact information was to be cross-checked with every FBI database.

After two days of wild goose chases, Carnes confronted Ziggy in the cobbled-together L Street computer lab. "We're running up blind alleys because of you, spending valuable man-hours..."

Ziggy pulled off his reading glasses and glared at his accuser. "Don't you guys lose the suits on weekends?"

"We have a strict dress code," barked Ullery. "Why have you deliberately tried to misdirect us?"

"Did you ever consider, if the guy has the sense to mask his IP address, he'd divert any orders through a series of third parties?"

It clearly galled Carnes this two-bit hacker was correct. It would be almost impossible to find their culprit so easily.

"Have *you* made any progress?" probed Carnes, dejected.

"I've been mapping where the victims died, coordinating the date and time of each incident with traffic on the nearest wireless router. It's like finding a needle in a haystack, but I've noticed a couple similar signatures. If I find more, I'll let you know."

Carnes picked a pile of hamburger wrappers and stale french fries from the corner where Ziggy had pitched them. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“No idea, and I don’t care.” A bell chimed from within the maze of interconnected boxes. “There’s another one.”

Ziggy didn’t realize when or if his keepers left the building. Familiarizing himself with the carrier tone and fluctuation, he could weed through the morass of activity more quickly.

Auto mechanics could listen to an engine and tell whether to tune it, or replace certain parts. Ziggy’s success in the Air Force stemmed from his ability to interpret electrical impulses and rectify anomalies before they escalated into system failures or outright disasters. He used his practiced ear now to, hopefully, avert a horrific crime.

State-of-the-art stereo speakers crackled ominously, the further he ventured beyond local routers. His adversary had installed a failsafe to bolster his failsafe against detection. Ziggy decreased the volume until he could filter out the interference. That’s when he thought he heard the Voice.

He checked his audio player; the USB drive Carnes had given him with the recordings had been removed from its port. Skilled fingers punched keys and isolated the lower ranges.

This was no live feed. The repetition proved as much. Still, it made the hacker’s skin tingle with delight.

“If you are hearing this, you undoubtedly think your investigation is going well. I beg to differ. If you wish to ruin the thousands of dollars invested in your processors, proceed. Not one resistor on your primitive circuit boards will remain viable if you risk the labyrinth of viruses and worms which lies ahead.”

Somewhere, someone monitored his activity, and might have been laughing at his heretofore feeble efforts. Reaching for an empty soda can, Ziggy resolved to increase his concentration and find the bastard.

If only to shake his hand.

That opinion changed dramatically early Monday, when feedback from his digital traces started corrupting the RAM and shorting out internal fans, causing drives to overheat. A grudging respect emerged; Ziggy knew he would’ve taken the same precautions, had he anticipated anyone would try to catch him draining outrageous sums from off-shore accounts favored by the rich and famous.

When the lights dimmed, he disconnected power to all but the main console. Ullery and Carnes burst into the pitch-black room around noon, bringing lunch, which they dumped on the tile floor after tripping over a stack of CPUs.

“Dammit, what’s going on?” wailed Carnes, rusty mop disheveled.

Ziggy retrieved a ham and cheese sandwich, applying the five-second rule. “I’m getting close.”

“How close is close?”

“I’ve narrowed down the source to one of sixteen locations.”

“Sixteen?”

“Islands.”

“Islands?”

“What are you, a parrot?” Ziggy snapped. “Madagascar, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Bermuda, Easter Island.”

“Easter Island?” Carnes gulped. “Sorry.”

“The signals are bouncing off points on these islands, but the pattern varies exponentially, so the sequence never repeats itself.” Ziggy played the latest warning message coded into the carrier wave.

“So, your mother boards have not been reduced to ash... yet. Persist in your task, and they will be. That’s a guarantee. I will congratulate you on your tenacity and prowess while again warning you to beware my wrath.”

Ullery sniffed, “We’re glad you’re so proud of yourself.”

“Huh?”

“We’ve received a new recording, too.”

A neon green flash drive loaded the newest file onto the desktop. “You have been convicted of destroying millions of lives and polluting the environment. The sentence is death. There is no appeal.”

“Who?” Ziggy inquired.

“A Chilean drug lord and six of his high ranking deputies.”

“Simultaneously?”

“Through their smart phones,” declared Carnes.

“Assassination by conference call. Phenomenal.”

“You think frying guys’ brains from the inside is phenomenal?” Ullery’s frustration couldn’t be ignored. “According to the coroner, they might’ve been cooked in a microwave oven.”

“What was their proximity to each other?”

“Hundreds of miles apart.”

“Show me.”

Ullery marked an open atlas stacked atop newspapers and miscellaneous print-outs. Throwing caution to the wind, Ziggy fired up the dormant equipment and typed a series of commands.

“Well?” the two agents chorused, gazing at the monitor over his shoulder.

“Give it time. Give it time.”

“The President believes we don’t have much time before this guy starts killing innocents,” retorted Carnes.

“No one is completely innocent.” Ziggy discarded dry bread crusts, quoting, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”

“This asshole’s casting a lot of stones.”

“Maybe this kind of genius has the right.”

Ullery kicked the desk. “Nobody has the right!”

“Not even a judge and jury?”

“That’s... different.”

“Not in this guy’s mind.”

Carnes prevented Ullery from punching his fist through an auxiliary screen. “We’ll be back in the morning. You better have something definite for us by then.”

A sheet ejected from the HP LaserJet. Ziggy rose and presented it to the pair. “Why don’t you *investigators* contribute to the cause? I need a shower and some sleep.”

“What are we supposed to do with *this*?”

“You didn’t hear it, did you?”

“Hear what?” asked Carnes.

Ziggy waved the flash drive at them. “In the background of this recording, there’s a 747 taking off. You need to check the major airports on those islands, to see where such a plane was outbound at the precise moment the Chileans were killed.”

“How can you be so sure it’s a 747?”

“My ears are my greatest asset.”

“And, major airports?”

“Those monsters need a lot of runway to get airborne.” Ziggy shuffled toward the door. “Which rules out Easter Island, at least.”

As he climbed the stairs, he heard Ullery mutter, “Bastard!”

Not that Ziggy closed an eye in the three hours he lay on an army cot in the converted attic. Through the floor, the vibration of the computers mirrored the vibrations in his brain. He’d never competed on the hacker level against others of equal or greater skill; his had always been independent efforts. His arrest proved he wasn’t as good as he thought. He had a sense they’d never catch this guy alive.

Back on the wobbly chair, he assessed the latest trace results. He’d analyzed the feedback which had crashed part of his system, and guessed that intermittent pulses - rather than a steady barrage - might penetrate the traps and reach the point of origin.

He had a guess, too, about which islands would be “finalists” when the FBI crew had tapped the air traffic control database. The Voice’s unique inflection hinted residence in a country influenced by Britain - possibly Ireland, New Zealand or the Bahamas.

“We’ve got our contacts at Interpol checking wireless providers around Dublin and Christchurch,” stated Carnes when the pair arrived at 9:00 AM.

“What about Nassau?”

“With the hurricanes forming in the Atlantic, we don’t dare.”

“You’d better dare,” countered Ziggy. “Or, I’ll go myself.”

“You’ll escape, you mean. You never did cough up the full eight million you stole... You got it stashed in a bank down there?”

“You think I’m nuts?”

Ullery snorted.

And got the trio clearance to fly out of Dulles before noon.

Ziggy had never flown in so much turbulence. Even his mostly sedate stomach churned when the Cessna bumped through pockets of unstable air.

“Will you be able to track output - if there is any - in this weather?” hollered Ullery above the whining engines.

“Just because you’re scared of a little wind and rain, doesn’t mean I am.”

“Smartass.”

From their modest hotel room, Ziggy’s streamlined mechanisms showed little activity during the storm’s early stages. Carnes received regular updates from Interpol - none encouraging.

“We can’t just sit here,” he grumbled.

“You want to go door to door, asking people whether they own a high-tech killing device?”

A blip on the screen captured Ziggy’s attention. The source, as confirmed when the flickering settled into a rhythm, lay to the southwest. He didn’t wait for the downpour to abate, nor did he bother to grab an umbrella from the closet.

“He *is* nuts,” moaned Carnes, tying his tan trench coat at the waist.

Difficult to stay on the sidewalk when gusts blew from every direction at high velocity. Then again, few cars navigated the streets, so Ziggy didn’t worry about being struck by a passing motorist. Two miles inland, he spied what neighbors might’ve mistaken for an old-fashioned television antenna tower beside a modest dwelling. The series of dwarf satellite dishes - almost too tiny to be effective - told the hacker otherwise.

He sloshed across a muddy lawn to the back door. Knocking would've served no purpose; the noise of windows rattling and trees creaking drowned out normal sounds.

Deadbolt tumblers shifted, and the reinforced panel glided inward. Through the gloom, Ziggy saw every room filled with elaborate computer configurations, some linked in parallel, others in series. If anyone actually lived in the structure, he must've slept in the bathtub, seemingly the only vacant space.

The humming and clicking matched the hurricane for decibel output. Finding the main monitor in the living room, surrounded by smaller LCD screens, Ziggy didn't dare touch anything.

Dust on the keyboard belied recent use by live hands.

Could this set-up be a decoy? he mused.

Ullery and Carnes burst into the house, dripping on the floors and shaking themselves like dogs. They drew their sidearms and searched for their prime suspect, in vain.

"Where is he?" the lean agent inquired, joining Ziggy as he studied rapidly scrolling information on the monitor.

"Hell if I know."

"What's it doing?"

"Self-destructing."

He spoke the words without panic, cognizant that panic would not halt the process initialized by their entry into the building. This master hacker was destroying not only the physical evidence which might be used against him in court, but the very programming which had perpetrated murder. He'd gone... where?

"Sorry I missed you, Mr. Edmundson," came the Voice. "You and your friends are advised to vacate the premises, before you are consumed by the forthcoming conflagration."

Ziggy retreated; Carnes pushed him forward.

"You've got to stop it."

"I can't."

"Then, I will." He aimed his semi-automatic pistol at the largest CPU, emptying the clip.

"You idiot!" shrieked Ziggy. "Do you realize what you've done?"

"I've aborted the self-destruct sequence."

"Like hell you did! You remember HAL 2000 in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*? How it had developed self-preservation instincts? This monster was

content to destroy itself, but when outside forces try to kill it, the final command is executed...”

Ullery interspersed, “What final command?”

“The murder of every individual listed in the database.”

“How many?”

Ziggy contemplated the code fading from the dead monitor. “Tens of thousands.”

An explosion in the kitchen sent the trio sprinting for the exit. Before fire crews arrived, the entire dwelling was engulfed in flames.

Heavy rains failed to extinguish the blaze; winds whipped the fire dangerously close to the nearest houses.

“You think he fled when he realized we were on to him?” pondered Carnes.

“He hadn’t been there in days, maybe weeks. If he was logging in from elsewhere on the island, we’ll never find him.”

“And, in the meantime, thousands more people are dead...”

Ziggy shrugged.

“How can you be so heartless?” Ullery steamed.

“I blame you over-eager assholes. Like cops across the U.S. Pulling your gun before reviewing if a situation can be defused peacefully...”

“Oh, now wait a minute...”

In no mood for an argument, Ziggy strode toward the city center. Fully pardoned, he checked into five-star accommodations with an excellent view of Nassau’s shoreline. By morning, the hurricane had rotated toward South Carolina, leaving the sun to shine brightly and dry the flooded streets.

From the hotel veranda, Ziggy watched bucket trucks reattaching electrical wires to poles, and chainsaws ripping through downed tree limbs. Carnes and Ullery converged on him, handcuffs dangling.

The latter snickered, “Until we’ve apprehended the murderer, you go back to the pen.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal!”

“You didn’t read the fine print,” Carnes chortled.

“Fuck you!”

Before they could dash for safety, the massive oak being dismembered on the lawn snapped a partially severed branch, which crushed both FBI agents. Ziggy sank on a soaked chaise lounge, stunned by the blood oozing from their skulls.

“Goddamn fools.”

Ziggy stiffened at that statement. He spun toward the cultured baritone, only grey cuffed trousers and polished oxfords visible over the back of a north-facing lounge chair. A white fedora with black band obscured his face.

“You’re free to go, Mr. Edmundson. Out of respect for your perseverance, I... pronounced sentence on yet more corrupt officials.” He revealed the remote control in his left hand, a gold signet ring on his pinky.

“Harsh.” Ziggy mumbled.

“I trust you’ll respect my privacy.”

Awed in the presence of, undeniably, history’s greatest hacker, Ziggy averted his gaze momentarily, running nervous fingers through his shaggy mop. He turned back, mouth open...

The lounge chair was empty.

Holiday Weekend

There are certain things in life which a person simply cannot not do.
Yes, a double negative equals a positive.

Walking in on a stark naked boss might have embarrassed most women.
Not Lea Mullin. She'd grown up in a house with four brothers and only one bathroom. Rather than blush to the roots of her sandy hair, she stood on the penthouse office threshold, curious.

"Planning to add a nudist policy to the employee manual?" she quipped.

Her reaction determined Ben McQueen's response. Nearly sixty, dripping muscles toned, with a wealth of greying hair on his chest, he scrutinized her.

"What are you doing here at this hour?"

His baritone reminded her of the sound made by a rock slide.

"I forgot to set the phones for the holiday weekend," she replied. "What about you?"

"Just finished the first round of the rugby regional championship. I wanted to catch a quick shower before heading to the country club dance."

Lea had forgotten McQueen had a private apartment adjacent to the stark, yet impressive, office. He rarely used it, rarely commuted from his country mansion these days, thanks to modern technology.

She'd forgotten how handsome he was.

Years earlier, newly hired for the secretarial pool - when they were still called secretaries - Lea developed a crush on McQueen, before she learned of his idiosyncrasies and misogynistic tendencies. She outgrew those emotions, eventually marrying a Marine Corps captain.

Who'd been deployed in Afghanistan for six months - this time - and wasn't due home for another three.

"Don't you have any towels in there?" she continued. "You'll ruin the carpet."

"It's my carpet."

"Suit yourself."

She spun toward her desk in the armchair-lined reception area. The polished teak surface might have indicated unoccupied space, except for the phone. Since no one called upon McQueen, she had few duties these days.

He stood over a half-foot taller than her 5'6", so when he approached, his breath rustled her curls. She felt the hardness of his body and stiffened, herself.

"Lea," he whispered.

"You're getting my blouse wet."

“I’ll buy you a brand new outfit when we’re done.”

“When we’re done what?”

His massive hands - twice the size of hers - slid around her waist, deft fingers untying her wrap-around skirt.

“Ben, I...”

“I’ve seen the longing in your eyes, whenever you dare look at me.”

“That was... before. Not now.”

“Remember your wedding? Your father ill in hospital, I walked you down the aisle. Never was there a more gorgeous bride. I got the distinct impression you would’ve rather it been me standing beside you, repeating the minister’s words...”

“I...”

“Are you not lonely with your soldier battling our country’s foes across the ocean?”

“Yes.”

“What if he never came home?”

Lea’s heart sank. She’d wondered about that many a sleepless night. “I... don’t know.”

McQueen twirled her 180 degrees and, as his smoldering brown orbs stared at her, tears trickled down her cheeks.

He kissed away the droplets, their lips met, and together they passed a most passionate, satisfying weekend.

When work recommenced on Tuesday, Lea wasted the morning gazing out the windows at the rainy cityscape beyond. She wondered if her self-esteem were so low she’d allowed herself to be used that blatantly to feed one man’s ego.

Yet, she had wanted him as much as he wanted her... and the interlude would lead to nothing more, because she wouldn’t divorce her husband to spend her days with an unpredictable eccentric.

His empty chair in the huge chamber behind the double doors didn’t surprise her.

The incoming e-mail did.

Benjamin J. McQueen, businessman, philanthropist and rugby enthusiast, had been discovered dead in his bed at 9:00 AM, when the cook brought his breakfast.

The coroner’s report, three days later, confirmed McQueen’s heart had literally burst as a result of extreme exertion. Official paperwork listed the rugby game as primary cause.

Lea knew differently. He’d left her at 6:00 AM Tuesday, after a final frolic in the shower, to drive home.

She thought he'd been in better shape.

He definitely hadn't shown any signs of fatigue during their marathon session.

Which would remain her secret alone, but the source of no regrets.

The Best Laid Plans...

I

They met in the Navy or, rather, on their way out of the Navy.

Lcdr. Sean Thomas had served as a fighter pilot for ten years, before transferring to submarine duty. The stress of both careers produced bleeding ulcers, disqualifying him from further service.

A logistics specialist on an aircraft carrier, Chief Petty Officer Cass Wright supervised dozens of men and women, before being raped by a lieutenant junior grade in a supply closet. Three months from their home port, instead of waiting for military red tape to process an uncertain justice, she snapped the man's neck while he sat alone in the officers' ready room, drinking a cup of coffee.

Thomas had heard about the case, and noticed the lean brunette didn't resemble a murderer - at least, not in the chow line of NAS North Island's transitional unit mess hall. She wore a baggy work uniform, denoting considerable weight loss since she'd been flown ashore to face court martial.

He picked at the choices in the buffet line; he'd lost weight, too, damn his stomach.

Setting aside an empty tray and utensils, Thomas navigated between crowded tables toward the exit, his appetite ruined. Wright, seated alone in the far corner, quipped, "You come here just to admire the cuisine?"

Non-comms had no respect for officers, Thomas lamented silently. He slipped a khaki garrison cap atop close-cropped white hair and shoved open the door.

Aggravated enough by the process of filing paperwork for his medical disability pension, which included repeated exams and tests, Thomas thought the lack of discipline in the transitional unit appalling. Knowing they were soon to be discharged didn't give lower ranks and rates the right to disregard the oak leaves on his collar.

He welcomed the precise salute from an E-3 electronics technician while en route to the base hospital. Still, Thomas halted him in mid-step, his gig line far from straight.

"Sorry, sir," muttered the youngster with a Hispanic accent, fumbling with his smudged belt buckle.

Thomas watched him duck past the maintenance garage, still struggling to correct his appearance.

In this era of high unemployment and multiple battle fronts, newcomers to the military didn't take as much pride in serving their country as when it was more difficult to enlist.

He chuckled, wondering how he would treat civilians when he had no authority over them, or if they had authority over him in whatever job he could procure.

Poked and prodded for another two hours that afternoon, he fell onto the lumpy mattress in the stark barracks before sunset. Officers were assigned private accommodations in one wing of the three story structure, far outnumbered by non-comms crammed mostly four to a room.

Loud conversations and thin walls kept Thomas awake most nights. This particular Friday, he was roused in the wee hours by a scuffle in the corridor. Instantly angered, his stomach churning, he bolted upright and formulated a suitable rebuke for the bumping and groaning.

What he witnessed drove the censure from his brain. The E-3 he'd encountered earlier had a woman in skimpy nightshirt pinned against the wall, both fighting to gain control of an ice pick. The assailant glimpsed Thomas and froze for a split second, before abandoning the attack and sprinting in the opposite direction.

His victim slumped against the wall, chest heaving: Chief Wright.

Thomas, unconcerned about being clad merely in plaid boxers, caught her before she hit the floor. "Are you all right?" he queried, the deep register laced with gravel.

"Thanks to you, yes," she panted, her knuckles white gripping his tanned arms.

"Did you know him?"

"Not on a first name basis, but I know who sent him."

He supported her at the waist as they shuffled toward her room. "Who sent him?"

"When you kill the nephew of a Mexican drug lord, there are bound to be... repercussions."

"Eh?"

"Ramirez, the j.g. who raped me. Thought he'd teach me to mind my own business. Now he's dead, and his relatives want my head in a basket."

"But, that man was Navy personnel..."

Wright groped for the light switch before dropping onto a wooden chair. "You know how easy it is to steal one of those outfits?"

"I... never paid much attention."

“Not being in supply, I don’t blame you. Guys would send them home to their kids, sell them in port... I had to keep the issue under lock and key, and post Shore Patrol on the door during liberty to prevent the thefts.”

“Outrageous.”

She reached in a drawer and tossed him an oversized t-shirt. “I could say the same about you. Most officers your age have a beer gut and flab instead of muscle.”

Thomas accepted the garment and slipped his arms through the sleeves.

“Sorry. I... didn’t have time to dress.”

“You saved my life. You could be fat and naked; I’d still be grateful.”

“Are you going to call the duty officer?”

“I’ll be out in a few days. More delays will only give them more chances.”

“I don’t understand why...”

“It’s detailed in the court martial transcript, if you care to wade through three hundred pages. Or, the short version: the idiot was smuggling poppies to his uncle in Mexico, courtesy of the *USS Nimitz*. I found the most recent load concealed in three hollowed-out bombs. You can guess the rest.”

“Indeed.”

“You on some kind of exchange program?” she asked abruptly.

“What do you mean?”

“Sounds like you should be in the British Navy, not ours.”

“I was born in Wisconsin. Went to live with my grandparents in Scotland when I was five. Picked up the accent and haven’t been able to lose it.”

“Better than the Brooklyn twang most guys mimic.”

Thomas detected her sarcasm. “Thanks.”

“You should lose the mustache, though.”

He massaged his upper lip self-consciously. “Why?”

“It doesn’t suit your face. Or, grow a beard to go with it. More symmetrical.”

His grunt doubled as a reply.

“I apologize for the disrespect, *sir*,” Cass yawned. “I’m tired and... pissed.”

“You’re disrespectful even when you’re not tired,” he observed.

“Let’s say, the way certain officers handled my... situation on ship has jaded me toward the lot.” She rose and shooed him across the threshold.

“G’night.”

Before returning to his own bed, Thomas debated making a report to the Shore Patrol, or searching himself for the disguised seaman. He abandoned the idea, knowing Chief Wright wouldn’t appreciate his efforts.

Her attitude *did* change, at least toward him. On Monday, bound for the travel office to finalize his outgoing flight, she saluted him in passing.

Seated among posters for Caribbean cruises, tours of Ireland and Asia, he found himself on the receiving end of strange glances when he requested transportation to Guam. "We normally approve connections to the individual's home of record," explained the second class petty officer at the computer.

"My home of record is Kirkcaldy, Scotland. My grandparents are dead, and the house I lived in as a kid has been sold. I have friends on Guam, and will be visiting them until I decide where I want to settle."

"It's an awfully long flight."

"Give me a couple days' layover in Hawaii, then, to break the monotony," said Thomas.

The yeoman tapped a few keys. "We can do that."

In his heart, the former submarine exec wished he was standing on the tiny Pacific island that very moment. He'd left many of his personal possessions - including a certain tightly wrapped cardboard box - with Roberto Baubauta in the village of Santa Rita on his last stopover. The prospect those items might be damaged by high humidity or the extreme heat had bothered him for weeks.

Thomas still couldn't figure out why Ollie Norris bequeathed him the antique Egyptian urn. The third class radio operator had bought the painted clay souvenir at a Cairo bazaar during his leave. Returning to the sub, he'd grown depressed upon receiving orders to Diego Garcia. He gave away everything before taking his own life.

The crew offered those possessions to Norris' fiancée in Seattle; she refused.

The urn had been placed on a shelf over Thomas' bunk. He thought little about it until they hit a typhoon off the Philippines. At the end of his watch, he discovered clay fragments scattered across the floor, and a rolled parchment.

He couldn't decipher the symbols. Scanning and e-mailing a portion of the six-foot sheet to an ancient history professor at the University of Edinburgh, he'd nearly choked on the reply.

Sealing the manuscript in an airtight plastic bag, he'd packed it in straw and exhausted a roll of shipping tape on the box. Roberto, a civilian contractor at Guam's Naval Station, always invited Thomas to the village fiesta when they were in port, so the request to store his belongings in the empty bedroom closet was not met with undue suspicion.

Thomas intended to spend a week or so lounging on coral sand beaches and snorkeling warm blue waters. Then - when he didn't have to rely so heavily on

antacids to lessen his abdominal pain - he would take the artifact to three separate experts, confirming the document's translation and age, before selling it to the highest bidder.

He might not be able to complete thirty years of service and earn full retirement pay, but he wouldn't have to rely on the pittance guaranteed him for a service-related disability.

An exclusive enclave, like the Bahamas' Lyford Cay, would suit his tastes after enduring cramped quarters at sea and, prior to that, his grandparents' two bedroom cottage.

He'd always had an affinity for the water, and couldn't imagine himself living far from it. He also couldn't imagine himself marrying at this late stage of the game; he'd watched shipmates wed and divorce during their tours. He'd never had the desire to inflict himself to that degree on anyone - or let them interfere with his day-to-day life.

Distracted by these ruminations, he strolled off base to the island's western shore, near the Hotel del Coronado. He spent the evening lounging in the sun, yachts cruising past, catamarans propelled by the wind.

Whatever money he made from the parchment, none of it would be invested in a boat. Thomas didn't want to work for his enjoyment. He'd be content dipping his feet in the waves on a warm summer day.

That contentment edged ever closer as days progressed. Forms began trickling in, and his airline reservations were confirmed. A blue Navy school-styled bus drove him and other fortunate souls over the San Diego Bay Bridge to the airport on a rainy Thursday morning. He had eight hours to kill until his 6:00 PM departure time; he didn't care.

As when he'd go on liberty, having money in his pocket was a decided plus, Wearing black jeans, a red polo shirt and sneakers eliminated the need to salute or be saluted...

Except when he saw Chief Wright.

This time, her salute appeared more a thumbing of her nose. It didn't matter; she, too, wore civvies and had a backpack slung over one shoulder.

"You out?"

"Finally," she sighed, perusing local newspaper headlines at a kiosk.

"Congrats. Where are you headed?"

"First, Hawaii."

Thomas' jaw tightened. "First?"

"A lot depends on if I'm... followed."

He caught the innuendo. While no other disturbances had occurred since he'd interrupted that midnight assault, he pitied her living in fear.

He pitied himself if she were seated anywhere near him on the plane. He retreated into the crowd. "Take care of yourself."

"You, too."

He ended up five bodies behind her in the boarding line, after enjoying an overpriced salad and club soda at a Celtic-themed pub. Reaching the 767, she veered right along the aisle, while he crossed the galley before turning.

They nearly collided in the center section of row 28.

"Damn!" Thomas cursed under his breath.

"Don't worry," she assured him, stowing her backpack. "I'm not a talker."

He gulped, "That's... I requested a window seat."

"The government would have to pay extra for that perk. We get the shit seats."

An empty spot between them made it easier for Thomas to stretch out during the periodically turbulent journey. An old movie played on the screen attached to the headrest; he slept through most of it.

Cass wore headphones, listening to a music channel. When flight attendants served dinner, she poked him and used a primitive sign language to get his attention.

They chatted over the unappealing meal of fatty beef stroganoff and diced potatoes.

"And I thought the mess hall was bad," joked the former chief, picking gristle from her molars. "I've heard the sub cooks were trained chefs."

"If they were, they trained at the Cordon Puke."

"Home cooking is the best."

"Who'll be doing yours?" Thomas wondered.

"Eventually, I'll do my own. Living in hotels for the next few months, I won't have the facilities."

"You a good cook?"

"I used to be."

"Fed your family the healthy stuff?"

"My family's... gone."

"Sorry."

Cass grinned, softening the harsh lines of her narrow face. "Don't be. I have no regrets."

"Not even..." Thomas ran his thumb across his throat.

"Not even that."

Their trays removed, Cass reclaimed her headphones. Surprising himself, Thomas persisted with his questions.

“Did you spend time in the brig?”

“Three days, total. Once NCIS verified the poppies in the bombs, I was released. The court martial was a fiasco. The big brass still hate women in the Navy. Despite overwhelming evidence confirming the rape, they labeled me a liar and threatened to reduce me to E-4. You mentioned my lack of respect for officers. You should’ve heard how I showed my disrespect *that* day.”

“It’s not a dishonorable discharge?”

“They wouldn’t dare. Certain parties in the media have been entrusted with certain documents, which would blow a huge hole in Navy recruiting and retention if they became public. One phone call from me...” She shrugged. “You’re heading for Guam?”

Thomas nodded.

“Odd place for a Scotsman.”

“I told you, I was born in America.”

“To one Scottish parent, if not both, so you’re a Scotsman.”

“I’m not settling there permanently.”

“You got assassins on your tail, too?”

“Nothing so dramatic.”

“Thank your lucky stars for that.”

“I suppose so.”

Headphones in place, Cass activated the music and ignored him the remainder of the flight.

II

Sean Thomas didn’t realize how many old salts he knew, until he was perched on a bar stool on Waikiki Beach. Most were former pilots, now assigned to administrative positions in the Pacific command. As the numbers grew, they pushed together a row of tables, and regaled each other with stories until last call. Thomas knew, as some staggered toward their cars assisted by designated drivers, they’d be useless at their desks in the morning.

He didn’t envy their 8-5 jobs. Tough to admit, though, if he’d opted for shore duty, the bleeding ulcers might not have formed to end his career. He walked back to The Royal Hawaiian Hotel and slept until noon.

Showering in something other than a barracks bathtub, multiple jets pulsating at various points on his skin, felt strange. The realization dawned as he

shampooed his hair with tropical scented lather: acclimating himself to civilian life might be more difficult than expected.

More expensive, too. Paying for every ounce of food, unlike the free fare at the mess hall, quickly took a toll on his wallet. He could've taken a bus tour around Oahu, but visited only the Arizona memorial. The rampant commercialism, catering to tourists, spoiled the experience for him.

Thomas was glad to depart for Guam that weekend. Thunderstorms and a lousy lunch didn't help his mood, but landing at Agana relieved much of his tension.

A taxi drove him south through the capital city - past the cathedral where a rotating statue of Pope John Paul II faced out to sea at this hour. Past the Naval Station, veering inland to Santa Rita, he alighted near the village church. Roberto Baubauta's simple domicile stood directly across the potholed street.

Welcoming a prodigal son would've been no less joyous. Thomas received hugs from every member of the household, from the aging grandparents to the youngest toddler. The Spanish blood mixed with their Chamorro roots showed in their dark skin, but the incomprehensible language used by the older women baffled their guest.

"They are wondering why your hair is so white," noted Baubauta, stowing Thomas' luggage in a bedroom at the rear. "They've never seen the like on a younger man."

"Young?" Thomas guffawed. "I don't feel young."

"When you're 90, a 70-year-old is young."

"True."

Red rice and fish served for dinner filled him without irritating his stomach to excess. While the women occupied themselves with domestic chores, the men sat on the thatched porch, enjoying an evening breeze.

"I was saddened to learn of your ailment," said Baubauta. "We have old family remedies which may help..."

"A good long rest is what the doctors recommend. Limiting my stress will be the best medicine."

"There is no stress here. We hope you will stay for many days."

"I would love nothing better." Thomas outlined his plans, then posed the key question. "Is everything still stored..."

"Last year's typhoon season was especially harsh. We were without electricity for three weeks, so we moved everything to my cousin's in Barrigada. He is assistant to the territorial governor, with a generator to prevent loss of power."

“Lucky devil.”

“There is no sense in fighting the weather. It is part of life. The wind blows down a building, and we rebuild. It has been so for centuries.”

Centuries. Millennia. Sean Thomas puzzled about the parchment and what wisdom it might contain. Before leaving the airport, he’d reserved a seat on a flight to Tokyo that coming Wednesday and, from there, to Rome to consult the first of his experts. In the meantime, he could borrow snorkeling gear and enjoy the Piti Bomb Holes.

Quite a crowd joined him in the water at the site reputedly created by both Japanese and U.S. shell fire during World War II bombardments of the island. Roberto and his three teenaged children, six of their friends, and the parish priest rode in mini-vans to the park, laughing, singing and tussling with each other.

Thomas could’ve floated on the calm surface, sparkling in the sun, for the rest of his life. Below him, starfish, eels, brightly colored fish and coral enjoyed a tranquil existence. If human beings could emulate their behavior, the world might not be plagued by wars and divisive politics.

Baubauta swam out to summon him home toward sunset. The children had already left, only he and the priest were still enjoying the view. “Sorry, Bob,” he apologized. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been this relaxed.”

“There’s a beach bar up the road, where the native dancers will really relax you,” his host chuckled.

“I’ll pass.”

“Women can do wonders...”

“Or cause you grief. I’m not going to risk it.”

Toweling himself dry, he crawled into the Toyota and dozed during the drive to the village.

Or, had what he thought a dream been reality? Facing the passenger window, he’d felt his eyes close. Then, he saw a familiar figure trekking along the highway...

He jolted upright and craned his neck out the window. No pedestrians were visible, much less one wearing Navy khakis.

“You okay?” asked Baubauta.

Thomas settled on the cushions. “Nightmare.”

“In the daytime?”

“My... internal clock is screwed up, traveling through so many time zones.”

“Jet lag?”

“Probably.”

“Get to bed early tonight. I’ll wake you at the crack of dawn. That’ll fix things.”

“Thanks a lot,” Thomas retorted.

The tactic worked, temporarily. He spent the better part of Tuesday sorting boxes and crates in the air-conditioned spare bedroom at Jaime Baubauta’s magnificent dwelling in Barrigada, discarding clothes which no longer fit - too big after his weight loss - and trinkets purchased in many ports, holding no lasting significance. He prepared the remainder for shipment, the address to be determined after his visits to the various universities.

To have the same nightmare on two consecutive days disturbed Thomas immensely. Glass of decaffeinated ice tea in hand, he, Roberto and Jaime sat on the terrace, indulging in the traditional siesta. That same khaki-attired spectre seemed to cross the manicured lawn and vanish between two palm trees; when he woke, only the bushes rustled in a light breeze.

“Any Navy people live nearby?” he inquired.

“Lots. Officers, mostly. Just beyond the fence line.”

The wood slat privacy fence had no gate in the section where Thomas had seen his phantom, so he determined it must’ve been the wanderings of his tired brain. After a hearty meal prepared by the governor’s own chef, he and Roberto took their leave.

And, fully alert, he saw the flesh-and-blood mortal crossing a corral of goats.

The clothes weren’t khaki, either, but desert camouflage.

“Stop!” hollered Thomas, scrambling from the Toyota to intercept his stalker.

He drained his energy supply in the process, the pursuit a full sprint over a half-mile course, cluttered by trash, tree roots and thorn bushes. He finally tackled the agile fugitive atop the hood of a Volvo outside a quaint restaurant.

Flipping his captive face-up, Thomas recoiled. Cass Wright glared at him with reddened orbs.

“What the hell...” she barked, straightening.

“Why have you been following me?”

“I haven’t been following you. I’ve been running from the hit men.”

“I’m no hit man. Why run from *me*?”

“Put yourself in my shoes. You hear brakes squealing, a door slams...”

“Why the outfit?”

“I ditched my BDUs in San Diego, thinking myself done with them. I stole these off a clothes line in the Navy housing complex down the road.”

He inspected grease spots on the elbows and smears of paint on the legs. “Whoever owns them must be assigned to aircraft maintenance. That still doesn’t answer why you’re here.”

“I flew in yesterday.” She sank on the car’s bumper. “I tried escaping those bastards by hopping from Oahu to the big island, and even tried Molokai. No good. So, I grabbed a ticket on the first available plane.”

“You think they’re here?”

“Hard to tell. These natives have the same coloring as Mexicans... unless I hear them speak, I don’t want to take a chance.”

Thomas seized her arm and tugged her to where Baubauta had pulled into the parking lot. “Come on. You look like you could use a bath and a bed.”

“You ain’t kidding, there.”

The introductions were cursory, Thomas explaining the former chief petty officer was a Navy friend. Roberto’s female relatives babbled incoherently, gesturing in ways which made Thomas uncomfortable.

“They think we’re...” he prodded, imitating the hand motions. “To put it bluntly: sleeping together.”

Cass choked, “Oh, for Christ’s sake.”

“The bathroom’s in there.” Thomas shoved her past the kitchen.

While she stripped off the sweaty uniform behind closed doors, Baubauta ordered his relatives into the house, leaving him alone with Thomas on the porch. The Guam native made certain no one was eavesdropping before pulling his guest onto the warped steps.

“You place yourself in harm’s way, and my family, too.”

“Eh?”

“Your friend. She’s... dangerous.”

“No moreso than any other woman.”

Baubauta clicked his teeth in warning. “Far more, Sean. Working on the base, I read *Stars and Stripes*, and listen to Armed Forces Radio...”

“If you mean the murder, I know.”

“Do you also know there’s a price on her head?”

“Eh?”

“Guam is a very... diverse society. People from around the world live here. Some, we wish we could send back to their native land. They... use our ports to smuggle illegal goods, thinking the territorial government is blind...”

“Drugs?”

“From the Orient, India, the Middle East...”

Thomas thrust his right fist into his left palm. “Shit. You mean, the guys who want to kill her are already here?”

“Connected to South American and Mexican drug cartels. My cousin was foolish enough to marry one of them...”

“So, *that’s* how you know...”

Baubauta nodded his shaggy black head. “It seemed like an inconsequential bit of gossip when Inez told me last night on the phone. The offer of \$50,000 might appeal to those of... less integrity.”

“Shit.”

“You leave tomorrow for Tokyo. Will she travel with you?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“She cannot stay here.”

“I’ll get her a hotel room in Tumon once she’s...”

“Once she’s what?” queried Cass, emerging from the house in a borrowed blue terry robe, a towel wrapped around her short Brunette mop.

“That was quick,” remarked Thomas,

“I still limit myself to two minutes in the shower, like we did on ship.”

“Get yourself dressed. We’ve got to find you a better place to hide.”

“Huh? No one would think to search for me here.”

“Wanna bet?”

Cass glimpsed Baubauta’s somber glare in the fading light, and swallowed further protests. Thomas detoured to his room, stuffing the little he’d unpacked into his suitcases, the parchment wedged between the socks and boxers.

“You’re going, too?” puzzled Baubauta.

“She needs a bodyguard, if only for the night. In the morning, I’ll grab a taxi to the airport.”

“Do you wish to borrow my rifle?”

“To get myself accidentally shot if she panics? No, thanks.”

The trip north to the tourist district on Tumon Bay passed in solemn silence. Registered as Mr. and Mrs. Thomas at the Guam Hilton, they slept undisturbed in separate beds, until an unrequested wake-up call at 6:00 AM.

Thomas slapped Cass’ fingers off the receiver, then raised it to his ear.

“What is it?”

“Your car is waiting, sir,” a nervous desk clerk declared.

“I didn’t...”

The connection had been broken.

Cass must’ve sensed their predicament from Thomas’ expression. She lurched off the mattress and pulled on her jeans. while he slipped on a plain white

t-shirt and Bermuda shorts. Snapping his luggage closed, he peered through a crack in the door at the empty corridor.

“Let’s hope there’s a service elevator, or back stairs,” he whispered, signaling her to the left.

“We may have to jump out the window.”

Thomas’ head whipped in the direction she gazed. “Shit.”

III

A nondescript man in chauffeur’s uniform strode toward them at a leisurely pace, cap pulled low on his forehead. Two swarthy thugs in suits and ties matched his gait, ten feet behind. Another pair guarded the elevators.

“Last time I went against these odds was at a bar in Manila,” grumbled Thomas. “Twenty Marines against four Navy.”

“Who won?”

“Nobody. We were all bruised and bloody by the time the MPs arrived.”

Cass Wright inhaled deeply. “I’ll take the flunkies. You make sure the point man doesn’t pull a pig-sticker from his coat.”

“Pig-sticker?”

“They don’t want to rouse the other guests using guns, even with silencers. They prefer... quiet weapons.”

“Ah!”

Cass bent almost double, charging the larger of the second ranks like a defensive lineman. She knocked him over a glass-and-metal plant stand, which shattered noisily. A deft back-hand to the other’s pock-marked face stunned him immobile.

Thomas squared off with the supposed driver, who reached inside his jacket. A right cross to his jaw laid the attacker out on the carpet.

Doors were opening, groggy occupants investigating the source of the ruckus. The couple grabbed their belongings and hustled to the stairs. The remaining toughs had abandoned their posts, leaving their comrades to be apprehended or escape on their own.

“Interesting fighting technique you have,” Thomas panted as their taxi traversed Tumon.

“On the carrier, we organized an intramural flag football league. Played in aircraft hangars when the squadrons were on patrol. The Logistics Lions had a reputation for sending our opponents to sick bay, because we played dirty. The only person who *didn’t* get hit was the guy carrying the ball.”

“The teams were co-ed?”

“As chief, I bent the rules. Besides, my teammates appreciated the damage I did with these bony shoulders.” She nudged Thomas, and he felt the sharpness of her joints.

“Why didn’t you defend yourself against Ramirez when he...”

“He had a knife to my throat.”

“Ah.”

“I never want to be in that position again. Nor do I ever want to see your iron fist arcing toward my face!”

Thomas massaged the arm she’d jabbed. “What’ll you do next?”

“Go somewhere those boys will stand out, and I won’t.”

“The guy I punched wasn’t Hispanic, or Guamanian. He had blond hair and freckles.”

“Damn!”

“Did you know about Ramirez’ connection to the drug cartel before you killed him?”

Cass smirked. “He bragged about having wealthy relatives, but never elaborated - for obvious reasons. How was I to guess he wasn’t some stooge they were paying to handle the shipments?”

The cab driver braked at the main entrance to Guam International Airport, unloading the bags from the trunk while Thomas and Cass argued briefly over who would pay the fare.

Thomas palmed his companion’s \$20 bill, slipping it under her exposed bra strap as they crossed the concourse. “If you’re buying a last-minute ticket, you may need it,” he advised.

“You’ve got yours?” Cass asked, adjusting her tank top.

“Tokyo.”

“Doing the tourist thing?”

“No, an eight-hour layover before I head out again.”

“Taking the long way to Scotland?”

“You could say that.”

Cass bid him farewell with that nose-thumbing salute and veered toward a lengthy queue. Thomas flexed his fingers, throbbing from impact on the potential assassin’s bone. He was glad to be rid of the woman and her troubles.

The flight to Japan proved, thankfully, uneventful. He fit the profile of a stranger in a strange land, riding a tour bus, struggling to understand the guide’s description of monuments and sights. Buying dinner at a tempura restaurant, he

was spared the need to sit on tatami mats at a low table, but his stomach didn't appreciate the spices.

During the twelve-hour non-stop journey over Asia and eastern Europe, Sean Thomas decided he hated air travel. He'd booked one of the sleeper seats, allowing him a little privacy, but the snoring of his neighbors and the passage of uniformed personnel reminded him too much of the barracks he shared with forty others during officer training years earlier.

Taking the train from Fiumicino Airport to the center of Rome saved some of his dwindling cash reserves. At the bustling Termini, he was met by Professor Aldo Linarello of the University of Rome's Egyptian Archeology Department. Thomas had never visited the city before, and quickly grew confused by the narrow lanes and angled streets running past ancient ruins and countless Baroque churches.

Over cappuccino and warm pastries, Linarello carefully unrolled and examined the parchment. He murmured to himself in Italian, using a magnifying glass to enlarge the lines.

"You say this was stored inside a clay urn?" the elderly academic asked, glancing up from his desk.

"Sealed tight with some kind of mud, from what I could tell after it broke."

"Was the clay stained or painted?"

"It looked like a copy of those old murals you see in history textbooks, some pharaoh laid out with attendants."

"The textbooks and murals copied *it*."

Thomas set aside his coffee cup. "Really?"

"I cannot be absolutely positive, but I believe you have here the only known eyewitness account of Jesus Christ's last breath."

"You mean, equivalent to the Dead Sea Scrolls?"

"Or the writings found at Nag Hamadi."

"Then, the figure on the urn..."

Linarello's lips twitched into a grin.

"Shit." Thomas sank on an armchair by the dormant fireplace. "Wouldn't something like that have been written in Hebrew or Greek?"

"The author was clearly an educated man. He had access to writings in Akkadian, the language of ancient Babylonia. Possibly the Code of Hammurabi. He may have feared for his life. This was probably intended for his heirs, or to refute claims by the early Christian community. Somewhere, he would've provided a key to deciphering the narrative."

"But, *you* can decipher it, can't you?"

“I would want my interpretation verified by qualified researchers.”

“I’ve... arranged to show it to a professor in Paris, and another in Edinburgh.”

Linarello considered before picking up a pen. “I will write out my translation and seal it in an envelope. Once the others have done likewise, the three versions can be compared without prejudice.”

Thomas spent two days in Rome, recovering from another bout of jet lag. He forced himself to walk the historic city streets, visiting the Vatican, the Colosseum, and the Circus Maximus. He boarded a train for Paris the third morning, viewing the Alps as they sped past.

Rail travel offered no more comfort than flying, he discovered. The starting and stopping at numerous stations, the bumpiness of the tracks... If he sold his treasure for a decent amount, he’d never set foot beyond the yard of whichever house he bought in the Bahamas’ Lyford Cay.

The University of Paris archeologists wanted to perform carbon dating tests on the parchment and analyze the ink, besides consulting on the translation. Thomas wiled away that week roaming the banks of the Seine, the proximity of water compensating for the failure of antacids to calm his stomach. He paid to see the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, and stood beneath the rose window in the Cathedral de Notre Dame for hours as the sun transformed patterns on the floor.

He hiked over the bridge to the Rue de Rivoli, which linked to the Champs Elysees. Sidewalk cafes held no appeal for him, but twinkling lights did add an air of peace to the crowded metropolis.

Twilight brought out the pickpockets, as well. Thomas had shifted his wallet to his front trouser pocket, and avoided nightclubs - where fights could break out in an instant, and crooks pounced just as fast.

He couldn’t avoid the black streak which intersected his path near the Arc de Triomphe. Knocked on his backside, he didn’t recover in time to see which direction the human flash had fled.

Money untouched, he turned toward his hotel, anxious for the scholars to finish their project and send him on his way.

They did, the next day. Their summation of the results displayed an element of reserve, as if they deliberately damped their enthusiasm to not inflate his price when the bidding wars began.

The parchment was between 1,800 and 2,000 years old. The ink was not a modern mixture. The chronicle referenced concepts known by few contemporary archeologists, making forgery doubtful.

A second envelope joined the first in the straw-lined cardboard box among Thomas' socks.

Checking in for his Scotland flight was bittersweet for the former pilot. He had been cruising a hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface when his grandfather died; his grandmother mourned herself into the grave a month later. He hadn't been able to attend either funeral. His mother had authorized selling the family home from her posh condo in Chicago - Thomas had never been able to get a straight answer from her why she relinquished her responsibility for him after her husband abandoned them both.

He'd definitely lost the ability to comprehend the Scottish burr which met his ears as he waited near the cab stand outside Edinburgh's terminal. On the university campus, a variety of accents blended with the native dialect, and the professor who answered his knock, Hasan Zahedi, was clearly not a Glasgow man.

Raised in Egypt, the wiry Arab complained vociferously about the thefts of antiquities from archeological digs. "Not so much the foreigners," he added, "but our own people, desperate for money to feed their families..."

"My friend thought it was a replica. As I recall, he told me he paid ten dollars for it, so he never expected it to be authentic."

"If we substantiate the origins as Egyptian, I must caution you: proceedings may be initiated by that government to confiscate the document from you."

Thomas' plans for a comfortable future dissolved.

"Without the vessel in which it was stored, though, that may be impossible. Such parchment was widely used in the Roman Empire, from Britannia to Jerusalem, and beyond."

Relieved, Thomas swallowed the lump in his throat.

Adjusting his silver-rimmed spectacles on an aquiline nose, the professor studied the lines intently. "If this says what I think it says, the Vatican may want it burned."

Renewed dismay for Thomas. "What do you think it says?"

"The author is named Samuel of Capernaum, a rabbi's son. After accompanying Jesus on many travels - he is specific about the name and the widespread reputation as 'a wise prophet' - Samuel describes no crucifixion. A severe injury by a Roman chariot during a riot caused Jesus' death from blood loss."

"That would mean..."

“The Christian religions have based their beliefs on... embellished histories.” Chewing on the arm of his glasses, the scholar’s next question was garbled. “Do you intend to go to the media with this?”

“And have a thousand microphones stuck in my face? No, thank you.”

“Wise decision. Publicity might also open you up for... retaliation.”

Retaliation, like Cass Wright faced for executing her rapist?

“How long will you need to confirm your hypothesis?” Thomas queried.

“Personally, I won’t be able to sleep until the truth is revealed. If you check back on Thursday, I’ll have a more definite time frame.”

Grasping the man’s extended hand, Thomas departed the brick structure. He recognized few landmarks in the city, flagging a taxi to take him to the Balmoral Hotel.

A pistol barrel jammed against his spine prevented him from sliding onto the black vehicle’s rear seat. An unaccented voice directed Thomas to walk south and make no attempt to run.

“What in hell...” he demanded.

“Your assistance is required in a missing person case.”

“You guys Scotland Yard?”

“Nothing so mundane.”

Marching into an alley, Thomas was clubbed with a blunt object, losing consciousness as his kidnappers dragged him past dust bins and delivery vans.

IV

He awoke sprawled on a bed in a grimy room, an ice pack balanced on his cranium. Keeping vigil on a tottering wooden chair: Cass Wright.

“Oh, God. Not you, again,” he groaned with more gravel than his norm.

Her jeans torn and muddy, flannel shirt stained with blood, she shrugged.

“Sorry, Sean. I never thought Ramirez’s family would target you, too.”

“They said something about a missing person...” He tried to sit up, the pounding in his head prohibitive.

“Me. I’ve been on a whirlwind tour of four continents since Guam. First, I flew to Sydney, then Mumbai. Every step, I had someone on my tail. I thought maybe I’d be safe in Johannesburg... no luck.” She raised her sleeve, exposing dirty gauze covering a bullet wound. “I had four days’ peace in Paris before literally running the entire distance to the airport to catch a flight here.”

The human streak who bowled him over on the Champs Elysees.

“Obviously, you’re not missing, so why...”

“I was, until I saw them abduct you right in front of God and everybody. I thought, if I surrendered to them, they’d release you. No dice.”

“I had nothing to do with killing Ramirez!”

“They think you’re undercover FBI, investigating the poppy smuggling.”

“Shit.”

She lowered her eyes; soot from her brunette hair dusted the warped planks. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“If they’re so pissed, why aren’t we both dead?”

“From what I overheard, they’re going to bribe you to submit misleading reports and, if you won’t take their offer, use me as... as...”

Thomas propped himself on his left elbow, still dizzy from the hard blow. “I get it. They think I’ll cave if they put a gun to your head.”

“Exactly.”

“Do they realize you’re a tough old bird?” he drawled.

“I object to the ‘old’ part, but I’m sure they’ve received hospital bills for their boys’ broken bones and contusions.”

“How many of them are there?”

“I counted nine last time they let me use the bathroom.”

“How long have I been out?”

“Six hours.”

“Shit.”

She held a warning finger to her lips. “Shhh. Someone’s coming.”

“Can you take him?” whispered Thomas.

“Not if it’s the biggest one. He’s built like a tank.”

“He wasn’t the one who conked me?”

“No, but he met us at the door and tossed you over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Carried you up three flights of stairs without breaking a sweat.”

Rusty hinges creaked when the door opened. The corridor’s ceiling fixture shone blinding light on the bed; Thomas squinted. The shadow which fell on the wall indicated a squat individual, however, so Cass swung the chair at his torso, propelling him backward in a daze.

She offered Thomas her arm, urging him to his feet with her free hand.

“C’mon. I know you’re in pain, but we’ve got to get the hell out of here.”

He stumbled and righted himself quickly. “Do you know where we are in the city?”

“This is my first time in Scotland. I couldn’t understand the directions the tourist centre gave me to my hotel.”

“Did you see any street names?”

“They made sure to use the alleys.”

They pressed against crumbling plaster walls en route to the stairs. Sounds from far below rose to greet them.

“If we can make it closer to ground level, we can jump out a window,” suggested Thomas.

“You may already have a concussion. You want to make it worse?”

“Better than dead.”

Cass conceded the point, preceding him down the tattered carpet.

Freedom came within twenty feet for them. The Tank happened to be fetching a new bottle of tequila from the kitchen, while his comrades watched some BBC comedy in the parlor. He glanced up and saw the pair, raising the alarm.

“What now?” rumbled Thomas.

“This is your homeland. You tell me.”

Sean Thomas leapt the final ten steps, crashing into three ruffians starting their ascent to intercept the prisoners. Taking his lead, Cass hurdled the bannister, kicking the Tank in the nose on her way past, and connecting her fist with his associate’s groin.

A valiant effort, albeit futile. Both were tackled, subdued and shackled - wrists and ankles - between the doorposts at opposite ends of what must’ve once been a grand dining room.

They’d been in that position all night, slapped awake when the burly Rodrigo Ramirez, boss of the drug cartel, arrived.

He stood within inches of Cass’ face, his breath foul from cigarettes. “So, you’re the bitch who murdered my Francisco?”

“I’d do the same to you if my hands were free, pendejo.”

She earned a clout on her chin for this insolence.

Thomas cringed. Antagonizing this bully would serve no purpose. Nor would being reasonable, he guessed.

“My men may have failed in avenging Francisco; I will not.” Ramirez promised.

The entourage moved to where Thomas hung. The smaller thug, right arm bandaged from injuries sustained during the previous evening’s skirmish, twirled his pig-sticker - a twelve inch ice pick - like a baton.

Ramirez commented sarcastically, “For an FBI agent, you travel a lot.”

“I’m not FBI.”

The drug lord eyed his compatriots.

“We found no Fed ID on him,” admitted the Tank.

Ramirez oozed, "So, CIA?"

"No," spat Thomas.

"Then, why help this woman thwart our... business transactions?"

"We're... friends."

"Ah, you have slept with her?"

Cass responded, "You think I'm nuts?"

Thomas scowled at her over Ramirez's shoulder.

"You're going to tell me you know nothing about my... corporation," droned Ramirez, flopping his bulk onto a battered armchair. "I will not believe you. We might as well get down to, how you say, the nitty-gritty."

He drew a rubber-banded parcel from the briefcase presented by what must've been his son, given the close resemblance. "If you take this \$50,000, we will provide you with a new identity and monthly payments in the same amount, provided you have no further contact with law enforcement agencies currently hampering my... overseas trade agreements."

Tempting. A beach-front home in exchange for a white lie. Thomas exhaled, tensing against the impending strike. "Fuck off."

The knee to his stomach sent searing pain through every nerve. Chains stretching his arms and legs prevented him from curling into a fetal position. His muscles contracted, ripping screws and anchors from partially-rotted framework.

Links of forged metal gouged the nearest tormentors, spraying blood on their superiors. Shock gripped the assemblage as Thomas repeated what had been a reflex motion with additional precision. The ice pick missed Ramirez's ear by a hair, lodging in the empty china cupboard.

While their captors attempted to regroup, he unfastened the metal bands restricting his joints and hustled to do likewise for Cass.

She resisted when he tugged her toward the obvious exit.

"C'mon!" he urged.

"I'm going to make them pay for what they did..."

As agonizing as it was, he hoisted her off the floor and carried her into the frosty morning air. "Some other time."

Her fists remained clenched during their trek through a maze of alleys to a main thoroughfare. Thomas couldn't be sure she wouldn't pummel him at a moment's notice. The cloudy dawn afforded little illumination; he had difficulty getting his bearings in what had become, for him, a strange city.

"Where are you taking me?" Cass spit.

"To more familiar territory."

"We need to get to the airport..."

“I can’t leave yet. I’m waiting on results...”

“Results? What, medical tests?”

Thomas dabbed his mouth with his sleeve. The amount of blood filling his stomach since Ramirez’s macho show of force should have resulted in prolonged vomiting...

“Why’d you have to remind me?” he retorted.

Retreating along the sidewalk, his body convulsed, and he dashed for the closest concealment - a recessed boutique entrance.

Cleaning the bricks, cement and windows would be only a fraction of what awaited the shop owner prior to commencing the day’s trade. Even the double doors’ brass handles would require attention.

“Damn!” Cass muttered from the curb. “Don’t go and die on me.”

Thomas’ retching ceased once his stomach had expelled its contents. He tore off the bottom half of his filthy shirt and wiped his chin, aided by a horrifying reflection in the glass. Cass clutched him at the waist when he shuffled onto the sidewalk, her eyes wide.

“What?” he hissed.

“Your face is as white as your beard. You look like a ghost.”

“You’re the one who told me to grow it out.”

“That was before I knew how sick you were.”

“C’mon.” He steered her to the nearest intersection, pleased by the street signs. A block from The Balmoral Hotel. They could shower, change and rest undisturbed.

Thomas made certain the desk clerk, concierge, and those on later shifts, kept his room number confidential and rang police if anyone expressed an interest in his presence.

“Were you robbed, sir?” the young woman ventured, stunned by the couple’s appearance.

He didn’t respond, half-way to the lifts.

“I... don’t have my key card to unlock the room,” he muttered to Cass once they alighted on the fifth floor.

She extracted his wallet from her jeans and waved it.

“Where’d you get that?”

“They searched your pockets after dumping you on the bed. What they didn’t regard as important - everything, basically - they tossed in the corner. I... collected the lot.”

“What about that overstuffed backpack of yours?”

“I think it’s laying on a dirt track somewhere in South Africa,” she sniffed.

“You have no clothes?”

“I’ve been... making do as I go.”

Thomas rolled his brown eyes. Like he’d told Roberto Baubauta: women could cause a great deal of grief, which is why he’d shunned intimate relationships all these years. “Do you have any money?”

“Loads. I’d never expect you to cover my ass. I’ll pop ‘round the corner and buy a few things...”

“Alone? With those goons prowling the streets?”

“Those goons will be on the next plane back to Mexico. They’ll be thinking you contacted local authorities, and they don’t want to be arrested on foreign soil.”

He insisted she first use the bathroom, and borrow one of his baggy sweat suits until she purchased suitable clothes. He laughed when she rejoined him, a freshly scrubbed, shapeless grey blob.

“Put a cork in it.”

His chuckles subsided and, prior to stripping off his grungy garments, he instructed Cass to order a light meal from room service.

“Light, hell. I’m starved.”

“My stomach...”

“Okay. Crackers and soup for you, steak and potatoes for me.”

His mouth twitched into a grin. “I recommend the haggis.”

She threw her towel at him, missing when he slammed the door.

Attired in a dress shirt and brown slacks, he sat down to a bowl of chicken noodle soup and apple juice. Across the board, Cass hadn’t stood on politeness. She devoured the twelve ounce filet mignon and sour cream-topped baked potato, sipping red wine from a crystal goblet.

“I wish I could eat with such gusto,” Thomas lamented.

Between bites, “How’d you get your ulcers?”

“The *Nimitz* was a floating city compared to our sub. Being confined in tight spaces for months on end got to me.”

“You had a choice, y’know. You could’ve requested a training command, instructing future pilots...”

“I’m fully aware of my strengths and shortcomings. Teaching falls in the latter category.”

“And would probably make the ulcers worse.”

“They can’t get much worse.”

He hadn't intended the statement as an accusation, but Cass reacted otherwise. A cloud darkened her visage, and she spoke not another word the entire evening.

This lack of chatter relaxed Thomas, until he determined the sleeping arrangements might prove problematic. One bed, king size, and he a gentleman - an extremely weary gentleman.

The velveteen divan wasn't half so appealing.

"I can get my own room," Cass carped when he broached the subject.

"Why waste your money?"

"Why are you such a prude to assume we can't share that football field without... without..."

"Fine. Which side do you prefer?"

"Facing the window."

Lights out, they settled beneath the covers. Neither was satisfied with the firmness of the pillows, or the air temperature.

So, they stared at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry for offending you," Thomas finally stated. "I wasn't referring to *you* aggravating my ulcers."

"But, I've been a contributing factor. I don't seem to be able to apologize enough."

"Nonsense. It's more excitement than anything."

"Excitement? About what?"

He recounted the tale of the parchment for her, and his meetings with the university professors.

She rolled toward him, her smile visible in the dimness. "In my own perverse way, I'd love to see the expression on the Pope's face when he hears about this."

"You sound like an atheist."

"Aren't you? Anyone who's spent more than one tour in the military ought to be, once they see how stupid the wars are. The whole 'we're right, you're wrong' dynamic is based on fraudulent religious claims..."

"Whoa. That's an unreasonably harsh assessment."

"You've been toting around the evidence..."

"Until we compare the three translations, there's no telling..."

She flipped 180 degrees. "If you *do* sell it, do you suppose it'll be encased in glass for the curious to inspect? The institutions who have bilked a gullible public through the years aren't very likely to tolerate the loss of income."

"Go to sleep, already."

The awkward silence didn't assuage the damage which had been done. Thomas spent the remainder of the night hunched over the toilet, losing more than just his dinner.

No more had the sun rose, than he was on the phone to Professor Zahedi. He'd washed and trimmed his beard, brushed his teeth and donned a clean suit. A slice of unbuttered toast served as breakfast before he departed, Cass still curled on her edge of the bed.

Regaining possession of the Akkadian manuscript, and holding the sealed results, Sean Thomas pondered his next move. He didn't want potential buyers to suspect tampering if he reviewed the documents in private. Zahedi suggested he convene a panel of unbiased experts to witness the comparison.

"Cambridge or Oxford might be suitable sites," concluded the archeologist.

When Thomas returned to The Balmoral to retrieve his luggage, Cass Wright was gone. She'd tucked the borrowed sweats into his suitcase with a note of thanks and a promise, "I shouldn't trouble you any more."

That assurance made hopping a train south easier.

Until he discovered she'd removed the Paris and Rome embossed envelopes.

"Shit."

V

Sean Thomas sat on a twin bed in the dusky chamber above an Oxford pub, a stream of expletives inaudible over the noise of tour busses idling in the depot below. Given Cass Wright's anti-religious tirade the previous night, he would've thought she *wanted* the parchment's narrative disseminated. To delay matters, when arrangements had been made for the media to attend the unveiling...

A tapping on the door roused him from his moroseness. "What it is?"

"A call for you, Mr. Thomas."

Might be Professor Zahedi, or one of the Oxford faculty, confirming his arrival. He snatched the receiver off the scratched metal desk.

"Listen, Commander."

Wright.

"What in Christ's name..."

"This isn't some ransom plea. A couple Edinburgh U. students, likely assigned to your boy's lab, came a-knocking after you sneaked out this morning. The shower going full blast drowned out the sound. After I finished, I heard them rummaging through the drawers, debating where to light their mini-bonfire. I

grabbed the envelopes from your bags and stuffed them... well, in a safe place. They fled when I made a racket kicking the trash can.”

“What about your note?”

“I’d already written it. I was planning to disappear for good...”

“Where are you now?”

“Never mind. Be at the auditorium on time, as if nothing’s wrong. There’ll be a special delivery...”

“How can I trust you?”

“How can you not?”

Thomas raged, “Damn you, woman! This isn’t some five hundred dollar lottery ticket you’re holding. The next thirty years of my retirement rides on those papers!”

“Don’t get your ulcers in an uproar, Sean. Be grateful I prevented a tragedy. A pile of ashes wouldn’t be worth much.”

“I’ll grant you that,” he admitted evenly. “Just do me one favor: curtail the dramatics. For this news to have the proper impact, dignity will be key.”

She snorted, “I’ll roller skate down the aisle wearing a clown costume.”

In the back of his mind, he suspected she might, at that. An ominous beeping on the line eliminated the need to rephrase his petition.

Would the six representatives - three curators from the British Museum, lecturers from the Universities of Bristol and Leeds, and Oxford’s head of the School of Archeology - could have met that same day! Pacing aimlessly for eighteen hours would only wear out the soles of Thomas’ shoes.

He couldn’t skip eating, though. Something in his stomach on a regular basis, so long as it was bland, alleviated his misery. He navigated the narrow stairs to the pub, where a lively assortment of students and faculty mingled over pints of lager.

Much of the conversation involved the “Friday symposium on the newly-unearthed Akkadian text.” Opinions in support and debunking it as a hoax numbered almost equal. The banter distracted Thomas from his troubles; he didn’t mount the stairs to his musty room until after midnight.

The sound of labored breathing met his ears, and he switched on the wall sconce to find Cass Wright stretched on the bed.

He toppled her off the mattress. “We’re not sharing this time.”

Her tousled mane shot vertical, manila envelopes clasped in her teeth. “My feelings exactly.”

Thomas redeemed his property roughly.

“Hey, watch that!” Cass protested.

“Go to hell.”

“‘Thanks for saving my ass,’ in other words.”

“You can’t be positive those guys were from the university, or that they wanted these.”

“Even if one of them dropped his school ID?”

“You have it?”

“Nope. I turned it in to the concierge before leaving the hotel. I wanted those jerks to be quaking in their boots about making the ‘Stupid Criminals’ list.”

The touch of humor lightened Thomas’ mood. “Then, I *should* thank you. I’m just so...”

“Sick and tired?” she supplied. “You look it. When this is over, you need a long vacation.”

“I plan on it.”

“Tahiti, or Jamaica?”

“The Bahamas.”

“Good choice.”

“Have *you* chosen your next destination?” wondered Thomas.

“Somewhere I can move freely without needing a passport, which the drug cartel has technology to track.”

“Canada?”

“Too cold in winter.”

Every country he proposed, Cass declined. Ultimately, they fell asleep sitting side by side on the carpet, not waking until ten minutes before the scheduled press conference.

“Shit!”

Thomas was so rushed and jittery, Cass had to help him button his shirt and knot his necktie. Impulsively, she kissed his cheek, for luck.

“Will you be here when I get back?” he queried, flying out the door with the overstuffed cardboard box.

“No.” She smirked at his doubtful glance. “And I mean it this time!”

He shouted from the bottom of the stairs, “I’ll wager a hundred bucks you’re lying!”

“How will I collect if I’m telling the truth?” she snickered.

Jogging the distance to the auditorium, Thomas was amazed to see satellite news vehicles from the BBC, U.S. networks and global cable channels. Though no admission was being charged for the event, the lines to gain entry extended two blocks down the street.

A constable monitored Thomas progress, and escorted him to the stage door.

The experts were already seated at a table on a dias, draped with a cloth bearing the Oxford crest. Sean Thomas presented the rotund woman on the end, wearing a British Museum nametag, with the three parcels. She tested the seal on each, then passed them to the wizened academic beside her. He did likewise, as did the other four panelists.

The Oxford dean, on his home turf, rose and signaled for silence from the audience. A harried staffer brought a wireless microphone onto the platform, counting into it to check the level. He offered it to the administrator, who dismissed him with a nod.

“Good morning, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen,” he hailed. Perfunctory acknowledgments and polite inanities preceded his call for the parchment. Thomas reached into the straw and drew out the plastic bundle. The Leeds professor presented him a pair of gloves, and the former pilot realized no one had directly touched the surface - except him. He felt like a fool.

He covered his embarrassment well, allowing the representative from Bristol to smooth the document on the tablecloth. Six pairs of eyes strained to view the cuneiform.

Following a prolonged silence, the envelopes were opened by three different hands. The sheets inside were read by those to the immediate right of the person who broke the seal, beginning with the dean.

The translations were almost identical, as Hasan Zahedi had summarized. So were the carbon dating results, authenticated by additional tests.

Thomas was assailed by questions, after agreeing to entrust the parchment to Oxford security officers for safe keeping. He suddenly became aware of acute hostility among the students, some of whom chanted pro-Christian slogans.

“Have you received any death threats?” an American reporter asked.

“Not yet.”

A Frenchman interrupted, “Were you not afraid of upsetting the Christian faithful?”

Remembering Cass’ renunciation of gullible believers, Thomas abruptly grasped her point. “Faith should be based on the truth. This is an authentic account of Jesus’ death, not a story written decades or centuries after the fact, based on exaggerations and rumors. Christians must weigh whether they have been deceived by those in power, and make whatever changes they deem necessary.”

“What if this discovery sparks riots, or wars?” yelled a British cameraman.

“Should the truth be suppressed because it is inconvenient? How many innocent people have been imprisoned because investigators found it inconvenient to do their job thoroughly? How many wars have been sanctioned based on outright lies and faulty intelligence? If human beings are so shallow they would ignore verified facts, I pity the world!”

On the dias, the dean summoned constables to disperse the throngs. The other five experts were huddled off stage left, in hushed conversation.

Striding to the exit, scraps of paper were thrust into Thomas’ hand. He paused to unwad them, nearly collapsing against a spiral staircase.

Six million pounds.

Eight million pounds.

Twenty million pounds.

If these offers were any indication, Sean Thomas could write his own ticket, and build his dream home on Lyford Cay.

Surviving a gauntlet of angry protesters surrounding the auditorium would be vital. The constables had vanished mysteriously; Thomas was elbowed, tripped and thumped with picket signs.

He could’ve reciprocated, citing “an eye for an eye.” Even on the sub, he’d encountered too many self-proclaimed Christians, who preached compassion and forgiveness, judging themselves superior to both non-believers and those of differing denominations. Mediating disputes wasted valuable energy. Sanctimoniousness seldom conceded error.

So it would be on a sunlit avenue in Oxford this particular Thursday. He could bandage his wounds later, and take advantage of the Bahamas’ gated community to repel further attacks.

A passage opened ahead as the mob was muscled from his path.

By the dirty flag football tactics of a jumpsuit-clad Cass Wright.

“You come to pay the bet?” he joked, latching onto her forearm as she yanked him clear of the mayhem.

“I figure we’re square, since you otherwise wouldn’t be able to collect your fat check.”

She’d stowed his luggage in a taxi along a quiet lane, and they drove together to the train station. “How’d you know...”

“I watched the whole debacle in the pub. The BBC ran it live. That fat chick from the British Museum got the final word on her way out, boasting about a ‘significant’ offer.” Cass hugged her knees. “Good thing you gave the parchment to the university until the high bidder is determined.”

“I’d say twenty million...”

“Give yourself a day or two. If you don’t see a quarter billion, I’ll swear off steak for a year.”

Thomas couldn’t deny being awe-struck. “You really think...”

“The really huge amounts will come from religious groups - not museums or universities - if not Rome itself.”

“I can’t imagine...”

Cass added, “Imagine the taxes.”

“With that kind of money, I wouldn’t go in debt to pay them.”

“What will you do with it?”

He unloaded his suitcases near the station platform. “You talk like it’s a done deal.”

“Maybe not top dollar, but you’ll accept one of the offers. It’s what you’ve been planning since San Diego.”

“I *plan* to live near the water, and enjoy the sunset every evening.”

“You’ll be bored out of your skull within a month.”

One of Britain’s renowned commuter trains pulled in, forcing Thomas to raise his voice. “*You* are the reason I’m glad they haven’t started putting women on subs.”

She held up her hands in submission. The train’s automatic doors slid open, and Thomas hopped over the gap. Cass remained behind; he saw her thumb her nose in salute as the engines accelerated toward London.

In the ensuing weeks, Sean Thomas was feted and dined by officials of diverse governments, institutions and charitable organizations. The latter hoped to benefit from the funds he’d not yet acquired. The others had their own reasons for wanting to possess what the media dubbed the *Capernaum Gospel*.

Cass Wright never crossed his path in London. Nor did she show up in the Bahamas, when he moved into his six million dollar home that spring. On rare occasions, he wished she’d been around to pepper a conversation with her pragmatic sentiments. And, she’d been right in her estimate of his increasing boredom. He seldom ventured onto the terrace overlooking a stretch of private beach after the first month.

He wondered if Rodrigo Ramirez’s thugs eventually caught her and made good their retaliation for his nephew’s murder. Or, if the trauma of being raped took its toll, driving her into seclusion.

Thoughts of her faded as he chartered a private jet, traveling whenever a whim seized him. He married and divorced three beautiful - albeit grasping - women in seven years, losing most of his wealth to attorneys and settlements.

Somewhere along the line, he'd forgotten telling Roberto Baubauta how much grief females could cause, and triple that grief indelibly warped him.

He chanced upon a former commanding officer in the Nassau airport, who mentioned the availability of civilian contracting jobs for those with a background in submarine operations. That's how Thomas wound up at Virginia Beach, residing in a studio apartment, working 8-5, until his ulcers permanently incapacitated him.

This unwilling retirement on a fixed income increased his misery, besides which, the futility of his accomplishments became far too clear.

The waste, the absolute waste, he groaned inwardly, staring across the Atlantic toward Scotland.

Better he'd burned the parchment when the urn initially shattered.

Or, integrated Cass Wright's offbeat wisdom with his own experience.

Too late now.

Before Wallace

At 19, Allison Garner thought the world would stretch before her in this new decade of the 1970s, offering endless opportunities for fulfillment. Instead, every Friday she trudged to the Bronx after her last class at the ridiculously named Hope Community College, up four flights of stairs to her grandparents' apartment in a steadily crumbling structure overlooking a concrete jungle. The elderly couple wouldn't heed their daughter and son-in-law's recommendation to move into a Nassau County retirement community, so they relied on Allison to apply some pressure.

"We'll send you to a real university there, so you can visit them on a regular basis," announced Ralph Garner at the beginning of the current semester.

"I do that now."

"But, you won't have to take two subways to get there and back."

An advantage, maybe. A chance for a broader education, too, mused the young woman.

So, she got her exercise on the worn steps, slept on the lumpy guest room bed, fetched fresh vegetables and milk from the last family-owned store on the block, and listened to an interminable stream of stories about the "golden days" of the 1930s and 40s.

In many ways, the hippie crowd congregating at the playground across the street might've been better company. Sharing the pot they smoked might've alleviated her angst - temporarily, at any rate.

Allison noticed her grandparents' next door neighbor on odd occasions, such as when he poked his greying head out to retrieve a cardboard box of supplies left in the corridor. She thought grocers no longer offered delivery services. A few times, arriving in late afternoon, she saw him sitting precariously on the ledge outside his window, wiping the glass clean.

The only New Yorkers who really cared about other tenants in the same building were the local gossips. Allison never asked Sam or Jean O'Brien about the man, and pretended not to notice him.

Until that biting cold December evening.

Then again, he noticed her first.

She'd been knocking at the apartment, ungloved hands frozen, for five minutes. It was unusual for her grandparents not to immediately grant her access. Neither of them were deaf - yet - so there shouldn't be a reason...

The peephole on the neighbor's door snapped open. Allison could see about an eighth of his face, including one brown eye. "Why the devil are you making that racket?" he hissed with a definite accent.

His anger stunned her. "I..."

"Your grandparents have gone out for the evening."

"How do you know?"

"The walls in this building are exceptionally thin. Every time they leave, I hear."

"I'm... sorry."

They stared at each other in silence for a prolonged moment.

"Well?" he prodded.

"Well, what?"

"I told you, they're out. Are you just going to stand there?"

"I... stay here weekends."

"Then, you should have a key."

She conceded his logic. "I don't."

"So, you're going to loiter like a vagrant?"

"That, or take the subway back home and try again tomorrow."

"The latter idea is more feasible."

"But..."

His annoyance was evident in a gravely baritone. "But, what?"

"It's my duty to them. I'll have to wait, but it's so cold..."

"Go find a coffee shop, then."

The wooden panel behind metal scrollwork slammed. Allison slumped against the dingy wall and involuntarily shivered.

By 10:00, Sam and Jean still hadn't returned. What could two septuagenarians be doing out so late? Allison wondered. Fingers tucked inside her partially unzipped parka, the tips were still numb. She hoped jumping jacks would revitalize her circulation, but landed on her knees because she'd lost sensation in her feet.

That pale cheek and squinting brown orb reappeared within the square, witnessing her uncoordinated fall. Multiple tumblers shifted, and the door opened barely an inch. "If you're going to be so attentive to your duty, you can come in and warm yourself."

It wasn't much warmer in the book-lined apartment. Space heaters supplemented an ineffective furnace, within a radius of six feet or so. She sat on the battered armchair he indicated, accepting a mug of steaming coffee. She didn't

have a chance to thank him before he poured a hefty portion of scotch over ice and disappeared into the bedroom.

The O'Briens survived their ascent of the stairs just past midnight. From her vantage point near the ice-encrusted window, Allison corroborated the neighbor's statement about thin walls. She detected her grandparents' muted voices, and their passage across the threshold. Even the distinctive hum of the living room's overhead bulb penetrated the plaster.

Believing her reluctant host asleep, she quietly unlocked the deadbolts. Before she could make her exit, though, he stood behind her, ready to seal the aperture against future intrusions.

Irritation at Sam and Jean's unexplained absence abated when Allison learned of Lincoln Center tickets won on a radio contest. If anyone deserved a night away from this miserable locale, it was these hardworking people, who'd made it possible for her mother to enjoy an Ivy League education.

The neighbor, on the other hand, didn't rate her mildest grin when next their paths crossed. Forty or even fifty, cavernous wrinkles and white patches in his dark beard and mustache aged him beyond his years. Those brown eyes, capped by expressive black eyebrows, held deep secrets - which she didn't want to know.

She did strike up a conversation with a twenty-ish suited professional one January Friday, as he toted a loaded cardboard box upward. That solved one mystery, anyway.

"Why cut corners, dropping this stuff where anyone could steal it?" she queried.

"Mr. Johanssen doesn't appreciate visitors."

"You ain't kiddin' there."

"You've met him?"

"Not by choice."

"This isn't my job by choice."

"No?"

The lean, bespectacled blond described himself as an editorial assistant for a prominent publishing house.

"You do this for a few extra bucks?" puzzled Allison.

"Mr. Johanssen is... affiliated with our firm."

"Oh, a retired editor, or something?"

"Something."

These elusive replies fascinated Allison. Given the countless books in Johanssen's apartment, he was definitely an educated man...

Her interim companion quickened his pace.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I didn’t realize it was getting so dark. If I don’t hurry, I’ve never make it back to Manhattan...”

Allison chuckled. “Before they trash your car?”

“It’s the boss’ Mercedes. One scratch and it’s my ass.”

She watched him literally dump his burden on the dusty floor and jog down the stairs by twos. That positioned her a foot from the door when it shot open and the shaggy-haired Johanssen leered at her.

“You again?”

She held up her hands in mock surrender. “Don’t blame me, Mister. I didn’t touch your” - she glanced into the paper sacks within the box - “socks or newspapers.”

“Then, why are you blushing? Mark Twain was right to link that reaction to a human’s sense of guilt.”

“Not always guilt, but embarrassment, too. I’ve been trying to avoid you.”

“A bit more effort is required.” He bent and easily hoisted the box, kicking the door shut behind him.

The young woman would’ve liked nothing more than to exert that extra effort. Unfortunately, every time she entered or left her grandparents’ home, she glimpsed Johanssen monitoring her progress through his peephole.

She wished Sam and Jean would agree to move, soon.

They resisted the notion of relinquishing their own space, of admitting their eyesight might not be as good as in their youth, or their limbs weakening. Approaching her twentieth birthday, Allison was ready to declare her independence from her parents and this older generation, and hop a flight for California, or anywhere warm.

The sleaze who followed her from the subway station, past rows of shuttered storefronts, might’ve wanted to keep warm on this blustery February night. Allison maintained a swift pace past the brick edifice, to throw him off regarding her actual destination. Farther along, she ducked around a corner, and sprinted along an alley, doubling back on her route.

The guy wasn’t as dumb as she’d figured. He saw her emerge from the alley and picked up the scent. She had no choice but to race through the lobby and scale the stairs. She lost both loafers rounding the third floor landing, proceeding in her wool stockings.

Johanssen evidently heard her noisy ascent - complete with labored breathing - and planned to protest this disruption of his dinner hour, or drinking

binge, whichever applied. He stood scowling beneath the lintel, clad in slippers, pajama bottoms, green turtleneck shirt and cable-knit sweater. Rather than try to rouse her grandparents with frantic knocking, she leapt into his arms, the impact forcing him backward.

“You weren’t invited...” he snapped, retreating.

Doubled over from exertion, she puffed, “Shut the door, dammit!”

Booted footsteps reached his ears then, and she guessed he understood. The deadbolts shot into place, but his lack of migration from the portal left no doubt she would be leaving once the potential attacker set his sights on other prey.

“You... may have saved my life.” She labored to slow her respiration, tears dampening her cheeks.

“Purely unintentional.”

“He might’ve... he...”

“A boyfriend you’ve scorned?”

She managed a feeble glare.

“Oh, spare me your self-righteous wrath,” he mocked. “He probably wanted to despoil your wallet, not your unsullied virtue.”

Allison spied her reflection in the newly cleaned window and groaned. Her short, sandy hair tousled, bell-bottom jeans muddy at the hem, tie-dyed t-shirt bathed in sweat beneath her unzipped parka, what man would want to touch her?

No sense feigning offence, either. She got the impression he could read her like any of the first editions neatly aligned on his shelves.

“Is he gone?” she inquired.

“No.”

“You didn’t even look.”

“I can hear him pacing. He’s debating whether the break in the door, or wait for you to come out. How much cash do you carry?”

“None. I bought a subway pass a couple weeks ago.”

“Don’t your grandparents give you money to run errands for them?”

“That won’t be until Sunday.”

He placed his hand on the worn brass knob. “Do you want me to order him off the premises?”

“You could call the cops.”

“He’s committed no crime.”

“If I go out there, he will.”

“Then, don’t go.”

He signaled her to a chair. She sank on the cushion gratefully, her legs throbbing.

“Water, or coffee?”

“A shot of whiskey, if you have it.”

“I prefer scotch, and you’re not old enough to drink hard liquor.”

“I’ll be 20 next week.”

“In that outfit, you look 15.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

A pot overflowed on the stove. Johannsen muttered an expletive and abandoned his post to tend the disaster.

“Thank you for ruining my dinner,” he admonished, wiping his hands on a striped tea towel.

“Geez, man, I’m sorry. It’s not like I set this up to... infiltrate your *sancto sanctorum*.”

“Do you know what that means, or did you hear it in a movie?”

“I took Latin in high school. ‘Holy of Holies’.”

“Congratulations.”

Allison rose. “A thousand apologies for trespassing. I won’t let it happen again.” She strode toward the door; he intercepted her with amazing agility.

He towered above her, and his massive hand preempted disengaging the locks. “If you wind up robbed or injured, you’ll blame me, and I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“I wouldn’t...”

“Perhaps not, but your grandparents would. They’ve been courteous enough neighbors these many years, I wouldn’t want to spoil that record.”

She returned to her seat. “At least, you’re honest.”

“No reason not to be. Men only lie when they want what the woman will otherwise not willingly offer.”

“For someone who doesn’t get out, you’re a font of knowledge.”

“I didn’t always... live this way.”

“What happened?”

He crossed to the cabinet where bottles were stored, filling a glass except for three ice cubes. “That’s not a question which will impart knowledge benefitting you. If you ask me something pertinent to your situation, I may answer.”

She gazed over his shoulder.

“Might I borrow one of your books to read while I’m visiting my grandparents?”

“Wouldn’t you rather listen to their stories?”

“You can hear those, too?”

He nodded solemnly.

“If I inflict that pain upon my own grandchildren, I hope somebody shoots me,” grumbled Allison.

“Have you a favorite author?”

“In high school, reading Poe was more fun than homework. Lately, Steinbeck and Hemingway distract me from the mindless subway mobs.”

“Diverse tastes you have in literature.”

“There’s one name I’ve searched for high and low since reading his first book, *Avalon Landing*. Other than some magazine articles, he never published anything else.”

Johannsen stiffened, his broad shoulders formidable. “You should go.”

“What?” Allison challenged. “What’s wrong with William Forrester?”

“You won’t find that book among these treasures.”

“Did you ever bother to read it?”

He stared at her with seeming befuddlement. She hesitantly got to her feet and let his eyes follow her to Sam and Jean’s door, where they welcomed her, ignorant of the erstwhile danger.

At Hope Community College’s library on Monday, Allison scoured the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* 1954 issues for articles on William Forrester. It surprised the student he’d lived in the Bronx - might the O’Brien’s neighbor have known the famed novelist and nursed a grudge against him?

Or, based on the biographical notes in another magazine, could their contentiousness stem from Forrester being Scottish, and Johannsen being... who knew, given his muddled accent.

A review from the *New York Times* included Forrester’s photograph. Allison nearly choked on the gum she’d been chewing.

Johannsen *was* William Forrester.

And, no other novels besides *Avalon Landing* bore his name.

Switching off the microfiche machine, she ran trembling digits through her unruly curls. She’d been sitting in the presence of America’s greatest living author, and he’d never hinted at the truth.

Honest, indeed.

Tempted to catch a train to the borough and confront the man, the day dragged on with required English and math courses, her energies focused on other aggravations. By that Friday, she hadn’t forgotten his ruse. She’d released her frustrations elsewhere.

A collection of newspapers tucked beneath her arm, she knocked on his door. He must’ve been waiting at the peephole, because it instantly flew open.

“What?” he barked.

“I brought you a present.”

“I don’t want...” His protest died when he saw the bounty. “Are those today’s editions?”

“Uh-huh. The Knicks had a good night last night.”

“I know.”

She hadn’t seen a television in the main room. Perhaps he connected it in the bedroom to facilitate better reception on his rabbit ear antennae.

“The Yankees made some interesting trades prior to spring training.”

A crack appeared between the peeling jamb and varnished wood.

“I don’t bite.”

He conceded, pulling the panel wide. “If you insist on coming in...”

“Thank you, no. But, I didn’t think this would fit through that narrow gap.” She revealed a quart of Dewar’s White Label within the rolled newsprint. “Not that I expect you to drink it all tonight.”

She tried to gauge Forrester’s reaction. His publisher’s assistant brought weeks-old reading material, making current papers desirable - that she understood. It intrigued her how he clutched the bottle like a man who’d navigated a desert without water, finally reaching a lush oasis.

Maybe he’d drained his reserves before the reinforcements arrived.

Abruptly, he remembered antiquated manners, assessing her blue peasant skirt and white scoop-neck blouse. “You clean up rather well. Would you join me?”

“Sure, Mr. Forrester.”

She dropped that bomb just to watch his expression transform from unwitting gratitude to cold stone.

“So, you *did* know the whole time,” he spat, hugging the scotch to prevent her from reclaiming it.

“No, only since Monday. You betrayed yourself, if you’re interested in what piqued my curiosity.”

He quoted Shakespeare, “Methinks thou dost protest too much?”

“Exactly.”

The recluse smirked. “Most people would’ve missed it.”

“I might’ve, if I didn’t wear out paperback copies of Arthur Conan Doyle as a kid.”

He waved her inside and secured the deadbolts.

“You afraid someone will break in?” she probed.

“The neighborhood has deteriorated through the years.”

“My grandparents are content with two locks.”

“They have less to protect.”

He plucked two glasses from the dish rack, dropping ice cubes in one.

“I’ll take mine straight,” directed Allison, observing the process.

Nor did she sip the brownish liquid. They both drained the tumblers in one gulp, smiling at each other in satisfaction.

“Another?” he offered.

“Please.”

By the third refill, Allison could feel her muscles loosening - her tongue, especially. Forrester chuckled as she plopped onto the armchair, babbling about his book.

“You’re a lightweight,” he chided quietly.

Her retort lacked force. “Am not!”

He scooped up her limp arm, dropping it on her lap. “You’ll be asleep in a minute.”

She shot up like a bottle rocket. “You may have written a damned good book, Mr. William Forrester,” she drawled, “but your knowledge of women is severely lacking.”

He reached to ease her back onto the worn fabric; instead she spun inside, grabbed a handful of his red cardigan sweater and planted a sloppy kiss on his pale lips.

His failure to respond caused her to recoil, blushing. She stumbled, and he caught her before she collided with the manual typewriter on his cluttered desk.

“I’m... sorry.”

Righting her awkwardly, he admonished, “Like I said: you’re a lightweight.”

Conscious thought precluded by an infusion of alcohol-diluted blood, she raised her diminutive right fist, preparing to strike. Forrester blocked the attack without exerting himself. She squirmed to extricate herself from his iron grip, and his free hand steadied her at the waist.

Nonetheless, she staggered and pitched sideways, so anyone viewing their posture would’ve assumed they’d concluded a ballroom dance in a dip. Supporting her slender form into a vertical position brought her uncomfortably close to his chest, though when she kissed him again, he reciprocated with intense passion.

That intensity immediately sobered Allison. Not that she was a prude by any standard, but the boys she’d dated had been young and unrefined, as a rule. William Forrester applied years of experience to the task, making her body tingle in unaccustomed ways. The room might still have been chilly; she felt quite toasty.

“My... grandparents will be worried.” She bolted for the exit.

He let her go without objection.

She paused on the threshold, speculating, “Did you mean it, or are you drunk, too?”

“It doesn’t matter in the greater scheme of things.”

“It matters a great deal!”

“To you? Why?”

She shuffled to her grandparents’ apartment, rage boiling.

Hearing his comment - “Silly women want life to mirror those trashy romance novels.” - added fuel to the flames.

She whirled, blue eyes burning. “For your information, I don’t read those trashy romance novels. And if you think I couldn’t simply jump in bed with you, then walk away without any emotional attachments, you’d be dead wrong.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Her knuckles hit the closing door so hard, she instantly perceived bones were broken. She moaned piteously - the last thing she wanted to do - attracting Forrester’s attention anew.

“Good work, young lady. You’ve earned yourself a trip to the hospital.”

Through grit teeth, she muttered, “It’s your fault.”

Three joints already swelling, he rested her on the edge of his desk, loading an ice pack in the kitchen. “Should I fetch your grandmother?”

“This would... just upset her.”

“You expect *me* to care for you?” droned Forrester.

She shoved the ice pack at his torso. “I can take care of myself, thanks.”

He trapped her uninjured arm and urged her onto the wooden chair. “Will you curb your temper and accept help when it’s offered?”

“You didn’t sound like you were offering.”

“You blame me for this, so I don’t have much choice.”

Allison crinkled her nose, the ice failing to decrease her anguish. “Why are you such a heartless bastard?”

“To employ the proper definition of the word, I’m not a bastard. My parents were legally married when I was conceived. The accusation of heartlessness... that’s a subjective opinion, which I would vigorously dispute.” He inspected bruises already forming on her skin. “You should get to the hospital, and quickly.”

Except, her feet wouldn’t cooperate, and she felt extremely dizzy. She leaned her head on the typewriter keyboard, sending the carriage into fits.

Forrester removed the typewriter, and her forehead bounced on the stained blotter. She groaned again.

He poured himself a fresh drink.

Eventually - two hours later, to be exact - she sat up and scanned her surroundings. "Where the hell..."

Her host was reading the *New York Times* sports page. He glanced up over utilitarian reading glasses. "If you feel rested, the hospital awaits."

"My hand... feels better."

"Liar."

"I wouldn't want to impose."

"It's no imposition. You descend the stairs to ground level, then hail a taxi. In Friday night traffic, the journey shouldn't take more than an hour."

"You're a schmuck," she remarked, lurching toward the door. "I'd like to see you contest my usage of *that* noun."

"If you don't see a doctor, you'll never use that hand again."

"I didn't say I wouldn't, did I?" Tears commenced in earnest. "I'll have to wake Gramps to get the cab fare..."

Forrester snorted, "That's right, you don't carry any cash."

"Two bucks I've got on me."

He hunted through various piles, locating his wallet. He extracted a twenty dollar bill. "Here. Pay me back when your finances allow."

"I... can't. "

"If you don't, I'll never be rid of you."

She snatched the currency and tucked it in her jeans. "Don't worry, Mr. Forrester. I'll make a point to convince my grandparents to vacate this rat trap by the end of the month, then you won't see my face anymore." Rotating 180 degrees, she smacked her bloated fingers on the scotch bottle, dissolving in heart-wrenching sobs.

He edged in front of her, lifting her gently off the floor. "Your outpouring of vitriol really was unwarranted," he soothed. "That I distance myself from women - and men - is my own business, and not wanting an intimate relationship with anyone is no reason for you to ridicule me."

She paid no heed to his lecture, collapsing in his arms and soaking his turtleneck with salty droplets.

The author fell silent, while her body shuddered uncontrollably. He stroked her tangled mop, humming an old Scottish lullaby until her muscles relaxed and her inhalations resumed a normal rhythm.

He presented her a linen handkerchief so, when she raised her chin, the sole evidence of this episode were her bloodshot corneas.

"I'm... sorry," murmured Allison. "I can't describe the pain..."

“Don’t try. Get yourself treatment, and abide by the doctor’s orders.”

She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek; his mustache tickled her. Playfully, she ruffled the greyish growth. Her touch triggered something within him, and he clutched her in an unyielding embrace, devouring her mouth with his.

Allison forgot the pulsating agony in her arm, swept up in a wave of longing. She let Forrester carry her to the bedroom, and have his way with her. Uncharacteristically tender, he avoided contact with her injured hand, making it possible for her to revel in their union as much as he.

They lay together through the wee hours of Saturday morning, dozing fitfully. At sunrise, he slid from under her head, to shower and dress.

“You’d better go,” he advised, nudging her. “The longer you delay, the harder it will be to set the bones...”

She recalled her misery, and cringed. “I promised I could walk away after...”

His left eyebrow arched accusingly. “But?”

“No buts. Unless you count that I’ll never forget this night.”

“Neither will I. Nor do I wish a repeat of it.”

“Amen.”

She crawled from beneath the wool blanket and into her clothes. He refused her breakfast, rationalizing a full stomach might complicate any medical procedures. A glass of grape juice to sustain her, she flashed the peace sign upon departure.

Her grandparents gave her hell when she arrived well into the afternoon. Repressing her laughter at Sam’s lament - “We couldn’t sleep for fear you’d been mugged, and listening to that lunatic next door humping some hooker.” - she must’ve succeeded in looking innocent.

True to her pledge, Allison harangued the O’Briens until they signed the paperwork to relocate in Nassau County on April first. In the interim, the young woman never saw Forrester at the peephole, and he must’ve rearranged his deliveries to mid-week. She took up with an orderly at the retirement home that autumn, seeing him between classes at the university.

Occasionally, she would roam the campus bookstore, anxious to find a new title by William Forrester.

She never did.

Nor did she forget - or tell anyone - about that bizarre, ecstatic interlude.

Every time she flexed her right hand, the twinge of permanently damaged ligaments reminded her.

Family Connections

Brian MacInnes began losing his hair before his seventeenth birthday. By the time he entered Stanford University, he looked more like a professor than a student. He and roommate Ryan “Rooster” Highgate, whose fire-red crown was already thinning, started BALD - Bald and Literate Discontents - as a joke.

By spring break of their freshman year, 35 undergrads gathered on a weekly basis at a cozy diner to commiserate about college life and relate their escapades with older women.

Rooster couldn't afford a flight home to Rhode Island for his vacation, so he accepted Brian's invitation to spend ten days in San Francisco at the MacInnes' home.

“It'll be like one of the BALD meetings,” quipped Brian. “Just us guys.” His mother had died three years earlier from complications sparked by Multiple Sclerosis.

“I can deal with that,” Rooster smirked. “My mom does nothing but talk. Drives us all nuts.”

They set out Friday afternoon, driving to the Bay Area in a thunder storm. Stopped at traffic lights on the severely angled streets, the old Honda Civic couldn't get any traction when the line of vehicles moved forward.

“We're gonna die!” bellowed Rooster, shielding his face in mock fear.

Brian punched the accelerator at the same time he released the clutch, and they lurched around a corner and descended the next hill. Once the roller coaster ride ended, they parked before a refurbished brownstone, placing chock blocks under the tires.

“You afraid it's going to roll away?” puzzled Rooster.

Brian grimaced. “I've already had the brakes replaced twice since I've owned it. Can't be too careful.”

They carried duffel bags of dirty laundry up the steps to the front door. Inside, the evening news blared on the living room television.

Brian grabbed the remote and lowered the volume. His father, tall and lean, a salt-and-pepper fringe the remnants of a full ebony mane, peered out from the kitchen. “What the hell...”

“Hi, Dad.”

Hugs were exchanged and introductions made. They concocted a make-shift dinner of grilled hamburgers, potato chips, and baked beans from a can. They left the dishes until morning - maybe - and switched to a sports network for the early rounds of the NCAA basketball championship.

“Where are you from, Ryan?” asked Neil MacInnes, sipping a beer.

“Providence.”

“Really? What neighborhood?”

“I’ve lived in about every neighborhood, actually. Mom never... stayed long in one house.”

“When Brian’s mother and I were first married, we lived on a quiet street of starter homes. Ash Street, or something like that. Blocks and blocks of clones, the same floor plan, everything.”

“Mom rented a house on Ash Street when she was pregnant with me.”

Neil’s craggy countenance darkened. “You say your name is Highgate?”

“Mom’s second husband adopted me. Useless, really, since he divorced her five years later.”

“What was your name before...”

“Whalen.”

“Your mother’s name is Lily?”

“That’s right.”

Wistfully, Neil admitted, “She was my wife’s best friend. They went shopping for baby clothes together, and the parish women’s club threw them a joint baby shower, right before we moved out here.”

“I’m sorry if it brings up sad memories, Mr. MacInnes,” Rooster apologized.

Neil shook off the reverie. “Don’t be. A lovely woman, your mother.”

Their attention shifted to the game, in the last minutes of the second half.

Sacking out in adjacent bedrooms around midnight, Brian and Rooster heard Neil pacing into the wee hours. Brian rose at 3:00, to find his father brewing a pot of coffee.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

“Can’t sleep.”

“Unless that’s decaf, it won’t help.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Look, I wasn’t going to mention this until morning, but since we’re both awake, I might as well.”

Neil glanced at his son suspiciously. “You’re not dropping out of school, are you?”

“No. Not yet, anyway.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“If the deal Rooster and I have been working on pans out, I won’t need to go to school.”

“Deal?”

“I told you about the group we started, right?”

Neil nodded.

“The past few months, a few of the regulars have been complaining how their parents are rich, but won’t give them more than a token allowance. They live in fancy gated subdivisions, never lock their doors. They agree it would serve their families right if they were robbed.”

“And, you’re seriously considering this? Are you nuts?”

“It’s no worse than what you did when you were young.”

Neil’s brown eyes lit with rage. “What *did* I do?”

“I found a copy of the probation record tucked in Mom’s scrapbook.”

“A stupid decision, for which I paid dearly.”

“Not the worst offense.”

“Indeed, I’ve done worse.”

Brian stared at his father’s furrowed brow. “Worse, how?”

“Has Rooster told you how many times his mother was married?”

“Three, I think. Her first died in a car accident a month before he was born. She divorced the second and third. Why?”

Neil didn’t respond immediately. He filled a mug with steaming brew, added cream and sugar, and stirred it distractedly.

“Dad?”

“Back when we lived on Ash Street...” So agonized his throaty baritone, the words might have been ripped from inside him. “After your sister was born... I wasn’t what could be called a model father.”

“I’ve never met a guy who was.”

“Hush, boy. This is hard enough.”

Brian sat at the dinette table. “Okay, Dad. I’m listening.”

“Three nights a week, I left your mother alone, playing poker with co-workers from the construction company. We’d drink, smoke cigars...” He gazed wistfully out the window into the blackness, his coffee untouched. “One Tuesday, I had a few too many vodka tonics and, walking home, I ended up in the wrong house. They were identical...”

“You said that already.”

“I stumbled into the bedroom, stripped off my clothes and crawled beneath the sheets. What happened next, well...”

It didn’t take specific details for Brian to guess where Neil was going with the story. “Who was the woman?”

“Lily Whalen.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Her husband was out of town on business - he died on the trip home. When she turned up pregnant, we both knew...”

“Which is why we moved to California?”

Neil bit his lip. “I scrambled to get a job out here. Your mother never suspected, since she learned she was carrying you within a week of Lily’s announcement.”

“You mean, Rooster is my brother?”

“Yes.”

The son’s reaction startled his father. “Cool.”

“You’re not... scandalized by the news?”

“I think Rooster’s great. I always wanted a brother, and I couldn’t ask for one better.”

“Robbing the rich together?”

“We can call it a family project. We’d need you to dig up information on the security companies guarding the gates, whether the fences are electrified...”

“You *are* nuts. I won’t endanger my career in project development - or my pension - so you can spend the next ten years behind bars.”

“It’d be a piece of cake, Dad. We watch the properties for a few days, and hit them the night before we head back to Stanford.”

“No.” Neil dumped his mug in the sink. “And if you mention it again, I’ll turn you in myself.”

Dejected, Brian returned to his room.

Rooster sat on the edge of the mattress. “No go?”

“No go,” Brian confirmed.

“He didn’t sound angry.”

“He doesn’t blow up, unless it’s really serious.”

“He doesn’t like me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I heard my name, and my mom’s... He holding a grudge against her?”

“No, it’s...” Revealing the truth to his friend was tougher than Brian would’ve predicted. When he finished the narrative, he grinned sheepishly.

The impact didn’t seem to register on Rooster, at first. “Shit,” he soon muttered.

In fact, the pair’s common blood didn’t affect their relationship in the slightest. Spoiled plans to travel east to Livermore, scoping out the subdivision where three of their BALD classmates’ parents owned dwellings, they spent the

week checking out girls at the mall and skateboarding on the steep San Francisco hills.

Until Lily Highgate arrived.

Pounding on the brownstone's front door at 10:00 PM Thursday, none of the trio inside suspected the disaster to come. Less than ideal years, multiple marriages and three children had weighed heavily upon the woman. Neil didn't recognize her, and Brian scowled at his roommate when she breezed through the foyer.

"Hey, it slipped out when we were talking on the phone," confessed Rooster.

Over the course of two days, Lily never shut up, prattling about how she never knew where the MacInnes had moved, what her life had been like raising Ryan and his younger siblings, and on, and on. Unable to follow the NCAA brackets, the three men took to drinking heavily, blurring the constant stream of chatter.

Sunday morning, she embraced Neil and her son, then bounced out to a waiting taxi. Brian and Rooster packed their now-clean clothes into the Honda Civic, headed back to school.

In the rear view mirror, Brian saw his father standing on the stoop, intense relief visible on his face.

The freshman vowed never again to bring another friend home on vacation. As much as he liked knowing he had a real brother, he had no desire to learn if his father had made any other... stupid decisions.

Through Their Eyes...

It could be said Zen Rafferty's interest in psychology and psychiatry originated in her unique name. As a child, she was left wondering why other students teased, berated and bullied her. She decided to make the human mind her career when, working at a local ice cream parlor, she noticed scars of an attempted suicide on a woman's wrist while giving the customer her change.

She discovered, investigating options at the collegiate level, how psychiatrists focused their energies on prescribing meditations to control patients, while psychologists most often sat and listened to irrational ramblings for 45 minutes, perhaps asking a few questions and pretending to take notes.

Neither sought to cure these forlorn souls, content to collect their fees. While the textbooks purported the brain operated with mathematical precision, few beyond research facilities made an effort to understand why one or more variables became misplaced in the grand equation - as she termed it - or were missing entirely.

Zen's grand equation, true to her name, encompassed the universal consciousness. She envisioned herself being a detective, sorting through environmental factors, physical ailments, personal attitudes and external prejudices. The necessity existed to penetrate a patient's natural defenses, literally get inside his or her head.

During her undergraduate years, she enlisted the aid of a computer science major, to create technology which facilitated seeing through a separate individual's eyes. Rather than following the current standard of fitting patients into a pre-determined mold, this psych-interface took her grand equation and quantified the variables, allowing for an accurate diagnosis.

Without that diagnosis, she saw viable treatment as impossible.

Graduate school professors dismissed her criticism of time-honored practices when she met with them to discuss a topic for her dissertation. Their refusal to accept reasonable arguments in favor of a more holistic approach - and use of the psych-interface - enraged her. She left the Dean's conference room with a sheet offering three choices for her doctoral thesis, crumpling it and pitching it in the nearest trash bin.

She would prove them wrong.

She would prove people could be helped - it would just take time.

Time most psychiatrists and psychologists didn't want to spend, because actually reading the files and personally conducting tests, instead of relying upon

computerized results, disrupted the flow of bodies through the office, and the number of checks deposited in their bank accounts.

Zen took up her approved post, cross-legged on a wooden table in one corner of the inpatient common room at University Hospital. The staff didn't know she wasn't following the faculty's listed guidelines. She spent the first week merely observing, both the "guests" and their caregivers. Maintaining a calm atmosphere seemed the only goal.

A travesty, she lamented, jotting notes on a legal pad.

Of the sixteen individuals on that ward, Zen singled out three potential subjects for trials with the psych-interface. The first: Dianne Geffen, a young mother who had strangled her two children in their sleep, professing she'd been so instructed by God. Her case history documented a past rife with sexual and emotional abuse, in response to which she turned to fundamentalist religion. During group sessions, she continued to assert hearing divine voices, which guided her from day to day.

Her mutilated forearms indicated she might be cognizant enough to fake such delusions, in lieu of controllable clinical depression - which might land her on death row.

The burly pianist, Lionel O'Neill, intrigued Zen, for the sheer fact he did not communicate any other way. By choice, or of necessity? she puzzled. He'd been a college football player, sustaining three severe concussions in four years. In describing his grand equation, Zen suspected his variables had been forcibly disordered, or outright destroyed by the trauma.

Yet, something within him continued to reach out, no differently than a foreigner unfamiliar with the language of those around him. Such travelers signed their needs, or drew pictures to convey a message. Would basic speech therapy serve to open the doors slammed on this aging athlete?

Last, but - by far - not least: the dark, curly-haired Greek warrior stood head and shoulders above the rest. Except for his tunic and leather armor, displaying exquisite musculature of his legs and arms, Walter Finnigan could've been deemed entirely sane, in Zen's estimation. Self-educated, wise, benevolent toward others, she'd watched him step between two combative schizophrenics to stop a fight over a chess game, his grip on their fists so strong, he nearly broke their fingers.

He'd spent twenty years producing news programming for a cable network. After traveling the world, never married, he quit his job to care for his parents in the final stages of dementia. His file recorded no trigger for this shift to

the alternate identity of “Alkaios”, meaning “strength” in Greek. Zen mused whether heredity could play a role.

O’Neill being unmedicated, she concentrated on him initially, while pleading with the lead psychiatrist to reduce or discontinue her other two subjects’ drugs.

“If you’re not careful, we’ll have you committed as a patient, yourself!” Henry Vinson snapped, darting into the men’s room.

She pursued him, disregarding the males tending their business at the urinals. “How else do you expect me to put together an objective assessment? In their original state, I can...”

“In their original state, you’ll be dead. Dianne’s voices will find a reason to send you heavenward. The Greek... he could snap your scrawny neck with one hand.”

“Why would he? None of his previous doctors noted a violent disposition.”

“His strength makes him involuntarily violent. As a teenager, he was obsessed with body building. Didn’t realize how powerful he’d become, until he was washing his Saint Bernard one day, and accidentally broke its back scrubbing in the shampoo.”

“You’re kidding!” Zen challenged.

“We expunged that - and similar incidents - from his record.”

“Why?”

“None of your business.”

The portly Vinson locked himself in a stall and, frustrated by the others’ prudish stares, Zen made a reluctant exit.

If Finnigan’s file had been selectively edited, what else didn’t she know about him?

Shuffling to the nurses’ station, she reviewed the medication charts. Replacing pills with placebos for a few days wouldn’t do any major harm...

In the meantime, she brought O’Neill into the common room early Tuesday morning to begin a preliminary exploration of his mind.

He sat on the piano bench beside her. She played a bit of Chopsticks, and he embellished the melody with a jazzy bass line.

“You do understand what I’m saying, don’t you, Lionel?” she queried. “If you do, hit high C.”

He did.

“If we use the keyboard as an alphabet, will you answer my questions?”

High C, again.

“Will you talk to me, using your mouth?”

Silence.

Zen had printed stickers with the letters, and stuck them to the keys. To anyone listening, the notes might have sounded like discordant rubbish; to her, it revealed the inner genius of a crippled body.

A slow process, however. He easily tired of the interrogation, preferring to play Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. He wasn't excused from meals or group sessions, so Zen spent those hours studying his MRI films and medical background.

O'Neill had broken both wrists, his left leg and multiple ribs in the course of his football career. He'd damaged most of the ligaments, his right Achilles tendon, ruptured his spleen, punctured a kidney, and lost eight teeth. He'd suffered a series of minor strokes before his 35th birthday, high cholesterol an unresolved problem.

The guy was, for all practical purposes, a mess.

In the midst of that mess, he clung to one comfort - music. He posed no danger to society or himself, had committed no crimes. He wasn't incapacitated beyond an inability to verbalize. For what reason was he being kept in this facility?

Perish the thought that his family had institutionalized him, not wishing to be so burdened.

"Lionel," Zen resumed her interview, "how long have you been here?"

He plunked F-sharp and B-flat, symbolizing a 1 and a 3.

"Thirteen years?"

He nodded.

"Do you think you could take care of yourself if you lived... outside?"

"No," he spelled.

"Why not?"

"Many reasons."

"Tell me."

His fingers flew across the keys, and Zen felt like a military trainee learning Morse code, scribbling the letters on scrap paper.

She dropped her pen when the last note faded.

"Wait here," she instructed, striding purposefully from the common room to Dr. Vinson's office.

He deflected her expletive-laced greeting, "I'm busy."

"Too busy to ensure your patients' well being?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The clipboard crashed on his desk blotter, knocking over his pencil cup and a bowling trophy.

He adjusted his reading glasses and smirked. "So?"

"Lionel O'Neill believes he's a prisoner here, despondent and without hope of a future. Your reaction is, 'So'?" bellowed Zen.

"Most of these people don't understand *why* they're here. They don't grasp they are in need of constant supervision, for their own safety."

"Their own safety'?" she choked. "That man is fully functional! Modifications can be made to integrate his unique form of communication..."

"Sit down, Miss Rafferty," Vinson growled, rising to close the door.

She hesitated before dropping onto a brown vinyl armchair.

"Your reputation as a rabble-rouser preceded you on this assignment. Your professors have noted your persistent refusal to abide by departmental policies, or submit your homework according to their guidelines. If you are going to be successful in your chosen field, you can't rebel against proven methods."

"I don't have to accept them, either," retorted Zen. "Do you think the sciences, or medical practice would have advanced so rapidly in the past century if students hadn't gone looking for new answers to old problems? We can't keep dumping pills down people's throats and believing that's the end, or lock them in a ward and write them off as incurable."

"Some of them are."

"Some, not all. I suspect half the people here could be discharged, if their doctors bothered to do more than merely control their symptoms."

"That kind of optimism has no place in psychiatry."

"What *does* have a place? Cookie cutter prescriptions and burnt out staff?"

"Get out."

Zen didn't move, her gaze locked with Vinson's puffy blue eyes. The stand-off was interrupted by Bea Posner, the head nurse, who rushed in to report trouble on the ward.

"What kind of trouble?" demanded Vinson.

"The Greek wants his sword."

Instead of taking charge of the situation, he squinted at Zen. "Here's your chance to prove your idiotic theory."

"And, if I do?"

"I'll resign."

Zen leapt off the chair, matching the russet-haired nurse's hurried gait along the corridor. "Has this happened before?"

"Twice. I don't understand it. He's been given regular doses of his medication... unless his body has developed a tolerance..."

The common room had been evacuated, Finnigan pacing in the far corner. Zen ventured across the tile alone, while hospital employees monitored the scene behind the unit pharmacy's shatter-proof glass .

"Alkaios," the graduate student hailed softly.

His curly head whipped toward her, the regal countenance strained. "You have brought my sword?"

"Why do you need it, sire, when we are at peace?"

"There is always the threat from Troy..."

Zen was glad she'd leafed through a history of ancient Greece. "Troy has been defeated."

"You lie! As commander of the armies, I would have struck the first blow..."

"Your... horse was killed beneath you, and you were knocked unconscious in the fall."

The logic of this tale appeased the patient. "Truly?"

"Truly, the war is over." She took his massive hand and led him to a tan sofa. "Sit with me."

"You are wife to one of my advisors?"

"No. I am... a friend."

He glared at her suspiciously. "Or, a Trojan spy."

"No, sire. I shall ask nothing about your soldiers, nor your battle strategies. I want to hear your life story."

"Before the wars? There was nothing before the wars."

"What started the wars?"

"Our enemies attacked incoming supply vessels..."

"Can you see such vessels from these windows?"

"You ask strange questions, friend. We built our fortress inland, in the shadow of the gods' temple. We cannot be attacked without advance warning..."

"Where is the temple?" pressed Zen.

He thrust his finger east. "Can you not see it?"

"I am... blind."

"You do not act as one who is blind."

"My other senses compensate for the lack of sight. Please, what do you see?"

He vividly recounted a landscape consistent with Greece in the centuries before Rome's rise. Zen ached to share his vision; the psych-interface - previously tested on so-called "normal" college students - would give her the means to determine how the human mind could override the optic nerves and tactile input.

So different from textbook descriptions, so elusive and mysterious, so frightening how a person could lose his very self behind a veil of mental deception.

“Incredible,” she shuddered.

“Would you like to pray at the sacred altar?”

“I... later, sire. I beg leave to depart.”

Lights flickered above, signaling the patients’ return to their rooms for the night.

“You will fetch me my sword?” Alkaios inquired.

“I promise to bring it if Greece faces another war.”

He was escorted by two attendants. Zen merited a smile from the head nurse.

“Why is the staff so frightened of him?” the younger woman asked.

“Ever since he... mauled one of my LPNs, they’ve refused to deal with him.”

“Mauled?”

Bea recounted how the buxom community college graduate had flirted with male patients, hoping to gain their cooperation. Alkaios had misinterpreted her attention, trapped her in the exam room and, after raping her, beat her within an inch of her life. “Dr. Vinson supervised her treatment in the emergency room. She took 84 stitches and both her arms were broken.”

“Why wasn’t Alkaios moved to a different facility, as a consequence?”

“A change in prescription eased his temper - for the most part.”

“Does he sleep well, or must he be sedated?”

“He doesn’t sleep. He stands watch the entire night, like many soldiers.”

An idea crept into Zen’s head. “Mind if I stay to observe?”

“Dr. Vinson left ten minutes ago. They haven’t installed cameras in the patient rooms yet, so what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“Cameras?”

The middle-aged nurse pointed to the suspended, bulb-like fixture overhead. “The entire hospital is being wired for a video security system. Some student organization has filed a lawsuit to block cameras being placed in patient rooms, citing a violation of privacy. The ones in the halls and public spaces are monitored by department heads.”

“Good to know. I’ll grab a bite to eat, and be back in a few minutes.”

Bea proceeded on a round of bed checks, while Zen hurried to the parking garage, where a cardboard box of wires and components sat in the trunk. What Vinson didn’t know, indeed, wouldn’t hurt him.

A more thorough review of Finnigan's psychological tests wove together a picture of a man who blended creativity with superior intelligence and logic, not unusual in his profession. She slid a DVD featuring videos he'd produced into a computer at the nurses' station, confirming interesting footage and verified, factual narration by field reporters.

News segments compiled from his fascinating perspective maintained consistency in the months prior to his resignation. The final clips - titled, "Last project: Greek travelogue" - might explain the setting for his delusions. Otherwise, interviews with former co-workers, albeit a decade old, noted a friendliness and generosity in direct contrast to his current violent outbursts.

What had months confined in a home with dying parents done to him? Zen mused. The entire period was a blank in the files - few blood relatives or neighbors had visited to witness any alterations in his personality. The day after the elder Finnigan's funeral, Walter had been driven in a police cruiser to University Hospital. Officers had found him wandering a park, clad in his night shirt, berating the trees for their failure to march in step.

A cursory inspection of the tidy ranch-style house on a quiet street had provided no additional evidence for this deterioration. No liquor bottles, no drugs beyond over-the-counter vitamins and aspirin...

Yet, something had occurred.

If Zen couldn't get him to answer straight questions with straight answers, she would wade through the barriers his brain had erected to shield him from the unknown anguish. Under cover of darkness, on a quiet ward, she could hook Finnigan to the psych-interface and see what could be seen.

"Usually the master rests while the sentries guard the city," she greeted, totting the box into a stark chamber lit only by deflected beams from outdoor flood lights.

"I require no task of my men I am unwilling to perform myself."

Zen extracted an oversized skull-cap fitted with sensors and mounted the lone metal chair to place it on atop his dark mane.

He flinched.

"Fear not, sire. This will help you see further and more clearly."

No lie, there. The programming would enable her, once she established what he saw, to reverse the process, introducing elements of modern life into his illusion, and gradually bring him back from his mental retreat.

In theory, anyway.

Her half of the assembly resembled virtual reality goggles, which they had, in fact, been when purchased. Guttled and refitted with a network of diodes and

processors, she could view the impulses Finnigan's mind spun into a web of deception.

The origins of those impulses would be mapped on an opaque LED chart of the grand equation, highlighting the defective variables.

During Zen's undergraduate testing of the device, she'd witnessed one sophomore's fantasies about the cheerleading squad, juniors' memories of weekend drinking parties - and the aftermath, which the subject believed forgotten - and a freshman's daydreams during classroom lectures.

Nothing exceptional.

Switching on the psych-interface, setting the timer for ten minutes, and activating the transmission link between her set and Finnigan's, she never anticipated the impact.

Her own brain functions were preempted by his. She was, literally, inside his head, gazing out upon a glorious night sky, from the parapet of a sandstone fortress.

A wave of vertigo engulfed her; she suppressed an urge to vomit.

The man who called himself Alkaios glimpsed her muscles tense. "Are you unwell, friend?"

"I'm... fine. Who built these walls?"

"I, and my men."

"Before that, where did you live?"

"I... don't remember."

Static on her screen implied another lobe sending signals, though not strong enough to congeal into a visual image.

"You live here with the other soldiers?"

"Many moved their families inside the fortress for protection."

"Not you?"

Alkaios' visage hardened. "My family died; the house where I lived was destroyed..."

"How was the house destroyed?"

"Torched by the enemies of Greece."

More interference. Those portions of Finnigan's brain where his genuine memories abided had been severely weakened by nine years of immersion in this alternative reality.

The timer zeroed out, commencing the unlinking routine. Zen realized the importance of this phase in the program - similar to decompression when scuba diving at great depths.

She removed the visor, partially satisfied. Adjustments to the receiving antennae should convert weaker neuron signals into recognizable images, rather than snow on a TV screen.

“Good night,” she said, hauling the box into the glaring light of the corridor.

He didn’t realize she left.

Sleep didn’t come for Zen at her apartment. Alkaios seemed to hover over her bed, an attentive sentry. The bed wasn’t her bed, either, but a stone slab sprinkled with straw.

Hell of a time to start hallucinating, she thought, brewing a pot of strong coffee to dispel the creepy sensation of being elsewhere. Instead of spending the morning with Lionel O’Neill, she drove to campus and had her computer science consultant tweak the display settings.

“Make up your mind,” he grumbled, typing commands on the keyboard. “You want low frequency input to register strong, or you want the visual intensity of the main feed reduced. Can’t have it both ways.”

She opted to up the gain on the low frequencies. It might not matter, anyway, if she didn’t get another chance to test it on Finnigan.

No one could say Henry Vinson wasn’t devoted to his job. The next three nights, he remained in his office until after 10:00 PM. Zen sat in her vintage Volkswagen Rabbit, parked on the far side of the employee level, waiting for him to leave. That late, the main doors were locked, and she hadn’t a pass code for after-hours entry.

Instead, she swung into an off-campus bar where many psych majors drank themselves into neuroses of their very own. Straddling a bar stool, she sipped a double shot of Dewar’s, watching life reflected in the mural-sized mirror.

Normal being a relative term, the din of conversation, mingled with hip-hop music seemed normal enough. When she twirled 180 degrees on her seat, however, the scene which met her eyes was decidedly abnormal.

A cadre of Greek soldiers milled about their barracks, sharpening spears and swords, in various states of undress.

Zen blinked once, twice.

The apparition remained.

Tensing with confusion, the whiskey glass ruptured in her left hand. Blood and liquor dripped on the dirt floor...

The bar didn’t have a dirt floor.

The polished oak bar wasn't a bar anymore. Snatching a towel to wrap around gashes on her palms, Zen trembled at the line of beaten metal shields propped against a stone wall.

Stumbling from the building, it took Zen over an hour to find her car in the parking lot, which had become a horse corral.

Clasping the steering wheel with whitened knuckles, she vowed to expedite a solution to this problem.

Bea expressed sympathy for the student, suturing the deepest laceration - without anesthetic - the next morning. "If the Greek asks, tell him you cut yourself slicing meat or vegetables," the head nurse suggested.

"Why?"

"The slightest whiff someone else hurt you, and he'll go on a rampage against the staff."

"Meaning?"

"You wouldn't want him sedated during your..." Bea revealed Dr. Vinson would be attending a conference in Chicago over the weekend. "He's flying out at 3:00 on Friday, and won't be back until Monday morning."

"I've got to prep a thesis outline for a meeting with my advisors on Saturday. The best I can hope for is Sunday."

"Show up at 9:00, just before lights out."

The conference with her professors taxed Zen's patience; she was eager to prove the psych-interface's value and dispel their misgivings.

Her own, as well. Traversing the university's north quad, through a Grecian fortress courtyard - helmeted trainees and clanging swords in abundance - rattled her. If the interface disconnection sequence wasn't correctly configured, could her link with Finnigan's brain have not been properly truncated?

The warrior voiced no protest as Zen fitted the wireless dome atop his curly head, while patients in adjacent rooms slumbered. She spun the timer dial past the ten minute increments to its highest limit, unsure whether it was an hour or five, and fitted the goggles over her eyes.

Deep greens of moonlit fields popped like an artist's painting. Crumbling mortar between the edifice's stones shown with chalky consistency.

"It's so beautiful," she commented, leaning on the wall, grainy against her skin. "I can see why you chose to live here."

"Your so-called beauty hides infinite danger, friend."

Yes, for him it would, Zen agreed silently. If he would be more specific, she might be able to ascertain which hemisphere of the brain generated these distortions. "Who are your enemies?"

“All those who threaten our borders, burn our crops and steal our livestock.”

“Who, though? You mentioned Troy, but that war is over. Where do your other enemies live?”

“Across the great sea.”

A reference to water. Little help, there, unless fear of drowning factored into his ailment.

She couldn't rule out anything.

“Do those who live outside the fortress have any grievances against those inside?” she pressed.

“Some believe we are privileged. We have invited them to join us. They refuse.”

More significance to this statement, perhaps. Dissent among his own countrymen could symbolize the inner factioning of his mental processes...

How many arguments had she waged with herself about the grand equation, using the psych-interface and flying in the face of accepted treatments? She had rationalized her way onto this present course, casting aside opposing opinions - her “enemies”.

Nonetheless, they resurfaced at periodic intervals, unwilling to concede their viewpoint, or acquiesce to hers.

Those battles seemed very real - and exhausting. Why shouldn't Alkaios'?

Might she not convince him to negotiate with his enemies, with an eye toward ultimately reestablishing awareness of the present?

Based on the psych-interface's elaborate rendering of his visions, Zen pondered whether an innate super-lucid sensory perception compelled him to recoil from reality. The burden on his neurons might've initiated a cascading failure of his receptors...

She couldn't imagine how a mass influx of modern technology would affect such a brain, if drained by the rigors of caring for parents afflicted with senility...

Personally, scanning the sky for familiar constellations, she didn't miss the mechanical noises and chirping cell phones.

Would it be a crime to yank Finnigan from this haven, again inflicting upon him the hellish era in which he was born?

Was that why Dr. Vinson ordered him medicated and left otherwise undisturbed?

No, she determined. Finding the root of his ailment, and rectifying his grand equation, would enable this man to resume a functional life. That was why she'd embarked on this experiment; she would see her goal achieved.

“Alkaios?”

“Yes, friend?”

“There was a girl... some time ago... you treated her most ill.”

“A spy sent to seduce me and take our secrets to the enemy.”

Analyzing that single response could take ages. Sexual frustration, coupled with fear of exposing personal shortcomings...

Zen felt a warm summer breeze on her arms. In the depths of her consciousness, she knew it to be early spring, and the windows were securely closed. The difference in latitude and longitude between her actual location and Alkaios’ Greece meant she couldn’t counteract the gap in temperature.

Nor what transpired next.

“My sword!” hissed Finnigan.

On the horizon of his mind, a horde of armed men crawled through tall grasses. Zen debated whether they were manifestations of his dormant grey cells, fighting to regain supremacy, or mere figments of his imagination as he longed to do battle.

Whichever explanation suited them, they moved very swiftly, spears and bows at the ready.

If it had been a movie, Zen might’ve enjoyed being a spectator. When Finnigan repeated, more urgently, “My sword!” she could not think how to defuse the situation.

Except to manufacture a sword from her own thoughts, and present it to him.

At least, it wasn’t forged steel of the tangible sort, so he could do no damage to himself or others.

Seconds later, she kicked herself for that assumption.

The first wave scaled the walls like spiders, and Zen was attacked in a very physical sense. She found herself on her feet, dodging knife thrusts, while Alkaios hacked at his opponents with righteous fury.

Zen couldn’t stop to consider why she had been sucked into the fray, an unwilling participant. The psych-interface’s programming had built-in buffers to ensure those observing the patient’s cerebral operations would view it no differently than an IMAX projection. And, a constant reminder, the grand equation flickering on the screen.

But, not now.

Vaguely aware of a malfunction, she hadn’t a hand free to switch off the headset.

She was hoisted airborne and tossed over the wall, falling, falling...

As a child, she'd had dreams like this, always waking just before hitting the ground.

This time, no ground awaited her. A glance down showed a swirling vortex... the void within Finnigan's psyche wherein the cause of his delusions remained secreted.

Perhaps, for the best, this descent. If she could discover the source, his treatment would be improved beyond a sequence of pills, four times a day.

Confusion gripped her. This wasn't his mind, this was hers... Once in the pit, she could never escape; she would be trapped by her own mental aberrations...

She screamed. Aloud, evidently, and her right arm was practically ripped from its shoulder socket when Alkaios seized her wrist. She dangled precariously from the parapet, though he lifted her easily out of danger.

Before her lay the decimated bodies of two dozen soldiers. Their blood stained the stones, and the smell of death assailed her nostrils. Zen could not fathom why it was real, why black and blue bruises were visible on her arms. She was consumed by fear and suddenly cognizant of what it meant to be insane.

Alkaios held her at the waist, her shaking limbs a concern to him. "For a blind woman, you fight well, friend," he praised. "Does this helmet you wear give you god-sight?"

Helmet? Abruptly, she remembered the psych-interface. She fumbled to cut the power.

The shock overloaded her system and she collapsed on the bed.

Waking in a white-washed, cement block room scared the hell out of Zen. She'd read about the transformation of the "padded cell" to this model, due to cases of patients eating the synthetic material and dying. Vinson had been right: she'd been committed.

Fluorescent ceiling bulbs above an immovable grid muddled her sense of time. Her wrist watch had been removed; the best guess was the episode with Finnigan lasted until sunrise.

Or, hadn't yet ended. She heard the door unlatch and open outward. A white-robed figure entered, carrying a loaded tray.

Bea followed.

"Good, you're conscious," breathed the head nurse. "When the Greek carried you to the desk, you were out like a light. We had no other place to stash you until..."

"Until?"

"Until Dr. Vinson left again. He came straight from the airport for an emergency consult on a new patient. If he'd seen you and that contraption..."

“Then, I’m not...”

“No. This was just temporary. Had you confided the full extent of this... stunt, I never would’ve sanctioned it.”

Zen slowly righted herself on the hard floor.

“You should eat something,” advised Alkaios from the threshold.

The selection on the tray which had been positioned beside her made her leap into his arms. Snakes and scorpions mingled with rats and spiders...

He signaled for the tray to be removed.

“What is it?” Bea queried, prying Zen away from the tall warrior.

“I’m lost. I’ve... lost... myself.”

The nurse eased the grad student onto a chair delivered by an attendant.

“Close your eyes. What do you see?”

“His world.” Zen thrust an accusing finger at Alkaios. “I’m stuck inside his head...”

“Would fixing your... equipment...”

Zen’s face shot level with hers. “Fix? What...”

“When you fainted, the apparatus must’ve dislodged, shattering into pieces. It’s unusable, from what I can tell.”

Six years of effort, shot to hell. She glared at Alkaios. He’d dwelled in this Grecian realm nearly a decade, and his brain’s neurons were attuned to the deception. They had, through the psych-interface, reconfigured her faculties to an identical pattern. Just as she wouldn’t have been able to resist his physical strength, she surmised nothing would have stopped this disaster.

The walls vanished in a wave of nausea, replaced with a display of colorful tapestries and hand-carved furniture.

She sensed herself losing what little contact with the 21st century she had left.

“Bea, is this how it happens?” she muttered eerily. “The mind just unhinges?”

“I’ve been here 24 years, and I can attest it’s never the same twice.”

“There isn’t any cure, is there?”

“You may have come closer than some, if your invention had worked.”

“It didn’t, and Dr. Vinson’s gonna kill me.”

“No one shall harm you,” Alkaios affirmed, offering his arm.

Zen turned; Bea no longer wore floral-print scrubs, but a blue gown belted at the waist with silver beads.

Her own stupidity, her own arrogance, had landed her in this predicament. As her companion led her along what was, beyond the elegant trappings of ancient

Greece, a hospital corridor, she resolved to claw her way through the illusions, to repair her own grand equation.

While Alkaios stood guard until sunrise, she sat cross-legged on his bed - why shouldn't they be housed together, sharing the same diagnosis? - scribbling with what appeared to her as a stylus on a wax tablet. A niggling impression of a legal pad and pen lingered...

The equation defied her comprehension. Entire lines of variables had been altered, or she didn't recall them correctly.

Everything was wrong.

"For one blind, you write with a confident hand, friend," remarked Alkaios, peering over her shoulder, "though I do not recognize the language."

"It's... a mathematical principle. Pythagoras, also a Greek, created parts of the system used through the centuries."

"A name with which I am not familiar. By the way, I know not *your* name."

"Zen."

"Unique."

"That's supposedly why my parents chose it."

Alkaios murmured wistfully, "Parents do terrible things to their children without realizing."

The implication could not be ignored, and Zen grasped it. If she reconstructed his equation, might not hers fall into alignment - or vice versa?

"What did your parents do to *you*?"

Whatever memory sparked the testimony had evaporated like puddles after a rainstorm. He gazed at her blankly.

Henry Vinson scowled at her, fury lighting his green eyes, despite his humorous appearance in a red-piped linen tunic. Zen struggled to see the rotund psychiatrist in the business suit he undoubtedly wore, but her optic nerves persisted in their trickery.

The worst part of being insane was knowing she wasn't.

Then again, believing she wasn't insane...

Her body began to twitch as parts of her brain fought amongst themselves for dominance.

Vinson's tirade registered as gibberish on her ears.

Whatever he'd said, two attendants clutched her arms and roughly dragged her from Finnigan's room. Another pair prevented him from interfering; he barely restrained himself from crushing their bones.

Zen wept profusely until noon, sequestered in an exam room - in her mind, a musty, dim dungeon cell. She stared at her hands, a sense she should be firmly

clutching onto... what? That which she had been was no longer; her future lay in this foreign land.

What future? The tablet on which she'd jotted the grand equation had softened with her tears, the letters illegible now, their meaning slipping through her fingers like sand.

Softly, the door opened. Alkaios wrapped her tiny frame, shaking with sobs, in an unyielding embrace. "I'm sorry for what I've done."

"You... did nothing." Zen could still take responsibility for her own mistakes. "I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have..." What?

"Torturing the blind is reprehensible, as would be imprisoning the lame, or the dying."

She raised her face from dampening his leather armor. "Thankfully, I'm not *that* blind, Alkaios. If I were, I never would have seen your magnificent face..."

"You... lied to me?"

"There are varying degrees of blindness, one being stupidity and naivete. In that regard, I was blind. I believed... I believed..." What? She pounded her temples, aspiring to unclog the psychological blockage.

Henry Vinson whisked into the exam room, dumping the cardboard box of broken psych-interface parts at her feet. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

To Zen, it was a gilded chest filled with writhing snakes. "Get it away!"

Alkaios reached for his sword, absent from its scabbard.

"Can you do nothing?" Zen cried.

"He is a mighty oracle, predicting life and death. He must be respected."

Vinson spat, "Who are you talking to?"

"Alkaios, who else?" replied Zen.

"The Greek's not here."

"Yes, he is. He's standing right there..." She reached out and poked his sinewy upper arm.

"He's locked in his own room, until his real medication pacifies his warrior spirit. The same with Dianne Geffen. We discovered the placebos, Miss Rafferty." Vinson flipped her arms toward the light. "I told you he'd hurt you. Look at these bruises..."

"I got these in a skirmish with enemy soldiers!"

"You've put our federal research grants at risk, and my job."

Prick, she thought.

"We're transferring you to another facility. I've notified your parents..."

"Parents," she echoed. "Finnigan's parents." A jarring flash of clarity; the key variable restored. "He couldn't fight off the ravages of his parents' dementia,

so his brain created a world where he could successfully do battle against all enemies!”

“So?”

Exasperated, she pummeled Vinson’s chest with clenched fists. He slammed into the exam table and hit his head on the padlocked cabinet. Zen raced from the room, setting off the alarms at the emergency stairs, mounting the steps by twos en route to the roof - the fortress’ parapets.

The problem with this choice: her sole means of escape was jumping from the heights. At best, she would break her legs upon impact on the rocky soil below.

She would, nonetheless, be free.

“Zen, no!” shouted Bea, first to emerge from the stairwell.

Panting, Dr. Vinson concurred. “Don’t, Miss Rafferty. There are ways...”

“You’re not a wise oracle; you’re a conniving bastard!” Zen shrieked.

Attendants crept slowly forward - guards wielding spears, in her eyes. Squaring off with her destiny, the young woman vaulted over the stones. The ground opened beneath her, sucking her into that inky vortex...

“Zen!”

Her descent once more abated by Alkaios, holding both her wrists in an iron grip. “I can’t consign you to that endless abyss...”

“I’m there already!”

“You were one who understood...”

“There will be others, not so blind.”

“Your failure is no reason...”

“This kind of failure leaves nothing for me.”

He raised her level to him; she kissed his cheek.

“You enabled a blind woman to experience the mind’s awesome capabilities,” she whispered in that last glimmer of coherence. “Let me go, before *their* blindness spoils it.”

Alkaios kissed her fingertips before releasing her. “The gods protect you.”

As the blackness enveloped her, she never uttered a sound.

It didn’t take checking her pulse for Henry Vinson to rule Zen dead, five stories down, amidst a bed of multicolored tulips.

Filling the Gap

When the alarm reverberated through the station, fire marshal Dixon MacFarlane imagined another typical day extinguishing flames in vacant houses or issuing warnings to residents for illegally burning yard waste.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The speaker suspended from the lounge ceiling broadcast details of this call: an explosion at the gate house of the city's most historic home.

One advantage to this, Dixon conceded: that structure was built entirely of stone, so there wasn't much to burn. Still, the damage visible arriving on the scene astonished him.

The rear of the two-story edifice had been obliterated, leaving its blackened interior exposed to the elements.

MacFarlane realized it wouldn't be easy wading through this rubble to find the cause of the blast but, at least, he'd have plenty of fresh air while making his rounds of the former stable. Ample ventilation would disperse the odor of smoky residue.

And death.

He glimpsed the dismembered, charred finger protruding from a pile of splintered beams. Retrieving an evidence bag from his Chevy Suburban, he carefully placed the lifeless flesh - and the beaten silver ring which slipped off - between the plastic sheets.

Media clamoring for any updates to their breaking news reports, MacFarlane located the fire chief and pulled him to one side. Their whispered conversation blanched the chief's normally ruddy face.

"How could someone have been inside? The museum director swears the security guards locked all the doors at closing time..."

"I don't know, boss. This proves it, though." The fire marshal unzipped his coat and removed his helmet, scratching his bald head with his free hand. "We won't be able to let the restoration crews in until we find... the other pieces."

"That could take days."

"Then, it'll take days. If this was deliberate, such evidence might lead us to the culprit."

"The police will want in on it."

"They *should* be in on it."

The chief grumbled an expletive. "Damned detectives always taking credit for our investigations..."

"As long as we find the truth, I don't care who gets the credit."

“Well, *I* do.” Wiping his face with a red bandana, the chief also blew his nose. “The mayor refuses to raise the department budget until he sees proof we’re doing more than hosing down house fires.”

“Fine. Keep the police out of it until we’re sure.”

“You can have three men assist you in... the excavation. They’ll be sworn to secrecy.”

MacFarlane hated politics. His curiosity piqued, he ached to discover whose finger he held, and why that person had been in the gate house in the wee hours of the morning.

On a hunch, he plucked the silver ring from the bag. An inscription could prove invaluable...

“Shit!”

He read the Latin motto of Clan MacDonald - of which the MacFarlanes were part: “*Per mare per terras.*” engraved in the soot-covered metal.

The only person he knew in the region who bothered to research their Scottish heritage was his younger sister, Amelia.

He hadn’t spoken to her in a decade.

MacFarlane sank on the twisted remains of a wooden bench in what had, until a few hours ago, been the museum’s landscaped gardens. Regulations required him to inform the fire chief and recuse himself from the search, if there was the slightest chance a close relative was involved. He could be mistaken; he prayed he was mistaken.

Fifteen years’ age difference between himself and Amelia made the gap between them as siblings worse than most. He’d been an only child well into his teens, and news of an addition to the family after his parents enjoyed their second honeymoon in Hawaii angered him. He’d had to give up high school sports to babysit the infant, while his mother returned to work so they could afford a larger home. His dreams of a college education were almost shattered, as well. If he hadn’t earned an academic scholarship to Purdue University, he might’ve been laboring side by side on the assembly line with his father to this day.

Amelia, on the other hand, received the best of everything. She was a high school volleyball and track star, rated a new car for her sixteenth birthday, and four years at Notre Dame, never earning a degree. She married some professor’s son, divorced him after abuse allegations surfaced, then vanished.

Approaching his fifties, Dixon MacFarlane didn’t need to reopen those old wounds. Especially if Amelia were scattered over two acres of public property.

He straightened to his full height, steeling himself against dormant emotions. Fact was: whoever had been literally blown apart in the gate house, she'd been standing awfully close to whatever exploded.

That could mean she precipitated the damage.

Or, was trying to prevent it.

A trio of weary faces presented themselves - rookie firefighters anxious for advancement, no doubt, MacFarlane speculated. He gave them instructions on how to handle any remains they might find.

The cocky blond cringed. "You mean, *human* remains?"

His superior glumly nodded.

"I... didn't sign on for this."

"Your training should have included victim recovery."

"Sure. I never thought..."

They don't think, do they? lamented MacFarlane. "Let's get started, before the heat of the day makes it worse."

Ten long hours, his t-shirt and jeans drenched in sweat inside his protective suit, the fire marshal had collected eighteen bags - of various sizes. A clump of hair and flesh lay among them; they'd never found the head.

With the fingerprints scorched off, and little viable material for DNA samples, it would be impossible to identify the deceased.

Or, had the perpetrators intended it to be that way?

The remnants of a timing mechanism proved a bomb had created this disaster. Two days later, when forensic test results indicated C-4 of home-made origins, MacFarlane buried his face in his hands, tears unwillingly staining his desk blotter.

What had Amelia been doing with C-4?

At church that Sunday, he knelt in prayer long after strains of the final song faded. He couldn't reconcile his rage with the grief consuming his soul. He couldn't even tell his parents - now retired in Florida - of their daughter's suspicious demise.

Walking from the dim interior into brilliant summer sunlight, MacFarlane was nearly tackled by a streak of blue which seized onto his arm and dragged him around the building's corner. He was pressed against the bricks by unyielding hands, his assailant furtively scanning their surroundings for eavesdroppers.

He managed to raise his fist in preparation for a counter-attack, when wire-rimmed sunglasses slid down a sloped nose and familiar green eyes met his.

"What the hell..."

Amelia MacFarlane laid a silencing digit on her brother's lips. "Hush, Dix. I just needed to warn you to drop your investigation into the museum explosion."

"Why... What..." he stammered.

"Long story. If I go into details, you'll be in danger, too. You've got to trust me."

"You're supposed to be dead."

"I need them to think that."

"Who?"

"Don't play big brother with me." She glanced around again. "I've got to go."

Being manhandled made MacFarlane temporarily forget he outweighed the diminutive woman by seventy pounds, and had more than once in his youth taken her across his knee. As she bolted across the church parking lot, he caught her with a firm grip. Her resistance merited her being lifted off her feet and slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

She beat on his back with surprising strength while he carried her through the church's rear entrance. The pews deserted, he sat her in the front row and towered above her, daring her to move.

Even in the utilitarian jumpsuit, he could tell she'd matured into a beautiful woman. Her tawny hair didn't match the dark brown he remembered - or that had been discovered in the wreckage.

"You're not going anywhere until you spill the beans," he commanded, using the term their father had uttered on numerous occasions.

She grunted, "Insurance fraud."

"You'll have to give me more than that."

"A couple museum employees - lesser paid but trusted - were running a Medicare/Medicaid insurance fraud scam from the gate house. I was undercover for the state's attorney general, and when my cover was blown, they tried to destroy the evidence - and me."

"Why *wasn't* it you?"

"Just because you think I was a spoiled brat doesn't mean I'm stupid, big brother. I've read the *Anarchist's Cookbook*."

MacFarlane shuddered. This rogue manual of bomb-making recipes had seen renewed interest in the years since terrorist plots had been broadly publicized for killing thousands worldwide. He'd read it, too, while training for his current position.

"So?"

“These jokers didn’t ditch the receipts for the chemicals. I put two and two together, and got the hell out seconds before the blast.”

“Your ring...”

“I had to infiltrate their operation and earn the scammers’ trust. I gave it to one gal who admired it.”

“You bitch! Do you know what I’ve been through this past week?

Thinking you were... were...”

His knees gave way, and he sank on the polished wood beside her.

“You never liked me. Why would you mourn my loss?”

“For the same reason you tracked down all the MacFarlane’s living in the Midwest. Blood, dammit.”

She patted his slumped shoulder; he recoiled from her touch.

“It’s my job, Dix. And it’s not over. Your report will bring in the ATF and the FBI. We’ll never snag these jerks, and they’ll set up shop somewhere else...”

“Why didn’t you arrest them in the wake of the explosion?”

“They blew town that morning. We’ve got a line on their destination, but if news leaks out, they’ll go underground for a year or more, and we’ll lose the trail.”

“What do you need from me?”

“Delay submitting your report. If your chief asks, tell him the coroner needs to retest the tissue samples. He won’t bark, because he doesn’t want the police initiating a homicide inquiry.”

“And you? The dyed hair, the glasses...”

“Part of the game, dear brother. I was recruited for this because I got into acting in college. That’s why I never finished my degree, not because I dropped out.”

He glared at her. “You could’ve told Mom...”

“I couldn’t tell anybody. You, if anyone, should understand the need for confidentiality in these situations. I’ve got a collection of IDs the envy of every underage drinker.”

MacFarlane reached out a tentative hand and tugged her curly mop. It came off unexpectedly; he dropped it on the floor.

“It’s not alive.”

He rose, facing the stained glass windows. “Get out of here. I don’t want to know any more.”

She strode confidently toward the exit, spinning on her heel at the threshold. “Dix, harboring anger against me is senseless. We’re... both on the same side in this.”

“Maybe so. You could cost me my job, though, and you don’t give a damn.”

“I give a damn about stopping the fraud.”

“There’ll always be more.”

“If I can prevent another bombing, doesn’t that matter to you?”

The fire marshal wouldn’t admit to her he honestly didn’t know. His investigations were forthright and transparent. She worked in the shadows, employing lies and deceit. They still viewed life from opposite ends of the spectrum.

He heard the door slam, and sighed.

Monday morning, he filed his report, painting over the name he’d typed under “Deceased” with correction fluid. He replaced the entry with “Identity Unknown”.

He would go no further to protect his sister. Periodically, he scanned the newspapers for articles on insurance fraud, never seeing her name.

Mason's Revenge

The FBI believed him dead.

Vaporized by a thermite plasma bomb accidentally fired at Alcatraz Island.

That's what chemical weapons specialist Stanley Goodspeed had told bureau director James Womack, anyway.

Once John Patrick Mason had slipped into scuba gear and swam back to the mainland.

The \$200 from Goodspeed's hotel bible hadn't gone far. Another disadvantage: Mason - British SAS and imprisoned by the Feds for three decades - had no ID. He couldn't rent a car, buy an airline, train or bus ticket, or even get a senior discount at the supermarket.

Proof of his existence was limited to the presence of his daughter, Jade Angelou, in San Francisco. The government had obliterated every other shred of evidence.

They'd been embarrassed by his theft of J. Edgar Hoover's secret files.

He'd never revealed where the microfilm had been hidden.

By now, the tiny canister had been removed from its concealment in a Fort Walton, Kansas church pew. Mason had no knowledge of its current location, and he was the happier for that ignorance.

Catching his reflection in a storefront window - white hair and beard, with a few remaining strands of dark mixed into his mustache - he had other fish to fry. Trained in survival techniques far superior than the Navy SEALs who'd died on the Alcatraz mission, he would make the U.S. pay for unjustly incarcerating him, first on the Rock, then a series of other maximum security facilities.

He would reclaim his life.

With a vengeance.

He would've loved nothing better than to hike to Jade's cozy bungalow, enjoy a cup of coffee across a homey kitchen table while explaining to the young woman what had happened to derail his life. If Womack didn't believe Goodspeed's story, though, the FBI might have the house under surveillance. He wouldn't put his daughter at risk; he'd done that once already.

He needed cash, documents, and a ride to Washington, D.C. to enact his long-standing plan.

Little did he expect the money to literally fall into his lap.

Mason was strolling along The Embarcadero when two masked, black-clad figures dashed from the First National Bank with a brown paper bag. One collided

with him, and he instinctively throttled the miscreant. The bag dropped, the second man yelped in fear and sprinted down an alley.

Police arrived to find the thief, his neck snapped, sprawled on the sidewalk with a few stray bills blowing at his feet.

Not one to shun an unexpected gift, Mason continued calmly along the street, wads of loose cash tucked in his trouser pockets. Between bookshelves of the local library, he counted nearly six thousand dollars in fifties and twenties.

An auspicious start.

One that afforded him the means to stop at a pub for a double scotch whiskey, something he hadn't tasted in decades.

A bit of female companionship might not be so bad, either.

The western-themed bar was crowded with youngsters - under 35, Mason guessed. Some were pretty, others tried too hard to camouflage their flaws. The one who sent a drink, via the gruff bartender, from the far end of the polished mahogany board winked when he glanced in her direction.

He lifted the glass in a silent toast of thanks; she did likewise.

Only once a country-rock band took the stage did the brunette move from her spot. Beneath her windbreaker, he detected the bulge of a shoulder holster. Off duty cop probably working a second job.

Or, FBI.

He hadn't noticed her in the mobile command center before the team had boarded the helicopter for Alcatraz. And, though confined to cells for extended periods, he still prided himself on an ability to thoroughly observe his surroundings.

"Haven't seen you here before," she greeted.

He countered, "You a regular?"

"I run the joint for the owner."

"With a pistol?"

"Fights aren't uncommon." She pointed upward. "A slug in the ceiling gets their attention."

The roughly-hewn wood was pocked with bullet holes.

"Would you like another?" she offered.

"No, thanks."

"You need a job?"

"Why?"

"With those hands, you could stop a fight without a gun."

He'd done so on many occasions - started and finished confrontations, as well. "Thanks, but no. I'm headed east."

“Where?”

Too many questions for a casual conversation. “Why?”

“I’m leaving in the morning for Philadelphia. Been looking for someone to ride-share for weeks.”

Coincidence, or set up? puzzled Mason. It smelled fishy, and not because the breeze came from the general direction of the famous wharf. Taking a turn interrogating her might uncover her ruse.

“If it’s a business trip, why not fly?”

“I’ve made the drive every summer since I was in college. The annual family reunion, to which we all must bring proof of the states we pass through, or the grandparents aren’t satisfied.”

A man who’d been denied access to his family could relate to the need for a gathering of relatives. Still, if she expected her companion to drive, he didn’t have a license...

“I wouldn’t trust anyone with my beast,” she declared. “Just help pay for gas, and provide a bit of intelligent conversation.” She studied his wrinkled visage, which made him slightly uncomfortable. “You look like you’ve read a lot of books.”

“Not much else to do where I’ve been living.”

“My grandparents hate being retired.”

“When it’s forced, it’s hell,” concurred Mason.

Other females began flocking to the bar, evidently intrigued by the manager’s interest in the tall older patron. She retreated from the throng, with a cheery, “Meet me here at six!”

He wasn’t sure he would. He couldn’t deny a prime opportunity, yet harbored grave misgivings.

Not so about the lithe blonde who laid her head on his chest and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

She had an apartment and was willing to share her bed for the night, at a mutually agreeable price. He slept contentedly after the exertion, unconcerned about federal marshals breaking down the door, as occurred the morning after Jade had been conceived.

He crept from the chamber in the wee hours, replacing clothes rummaged from Goodspeed’s hotel closet with better fitting, comfortable jeans and a turtleneck sweater bought the previous afternoon after his windfall outside the bank. He arrived at the shuttered bar just as the manager was tossing her suitcases in the white Mustang’s trunk.

“You forget your bags?” she wondered, brushing a straight wisp of brown hair from her freshly-scrubbed face.

“I’ll buy supplies as we go.”

“That’s another reason I don’t fly. I hate when the airlines lose my luggage.”

Mason let the erroneous assumption stand. The car’s pristine grey interior appeared brand new; he had to adjust the seat backward to prevent his head from hitting the glass roof. The driver didn’t have that problem.

“By the way, what’s your name?” he queried.

“Dana Horning. Yours?”

“Mason. Mason Patrick.” Slight alteration of the truth with the FBI potentially a looming presence.

“From Britain originally, eh?”

“Came over in the 60s; never went back.” That was the truth.

Dana punched the clutch, twisted the key in the ignition and let the engine roar. He could imagine her flooring the accelerator on the highway, in excess of 100 mph.

His imagination became reality. Even with the seatbelt fastened, he gripped the armrest with whitened knuckles. Until their first stop along Interstate 80: Reno, Nevada.

“We’ll grab some lunch and fill the tank,” announced Dana, whisking into the truck stop like an old pro.

Mason employed more caution. He surreptitiously assessed lines of tractor/trailers, and the vehicles at the fuel pumps, some hauling campers, others with bicycles on racks. Hurried vacationers bustled hither and yon, caught up in their own troubles.

Not one of them gave him a second glance; he was fine with that.

The restaurant’s food was worse than prison fare. Greasy, salty, undercooked... he’d convinced his jailers to provide him a healthy diet during stretches in solitary confinement, which enabled him to maintain a fitness level acceptable to an SAS operative his age.

This trash would make him ill in a week.

“Come dinner, if you don’t mind, let’s try an establishment whose menu boasts a greater variety,” he grumbled, dropping his fork on the untouched plate.

“Sure, if you’ll cover the check.”

He nodded.

Though Dana had indicated she wished intelligent conversation during the trip, they didn’t talk much. A collection of CDs shuffled through the Mustang’s

stereo, some with songs old enough Mason recalled them from before his incarceration. The woman no more than 40, maximum, her taste in music was pleasantly diverse. Instrumental pieces, classic rock, musical soundtracks, everything except the expletive-laced rap he'd heard fellow inmates blaring when they earned radio privileges.

Another 400 miles of concrete and asphalt passed beneath the tires prior to parking at a cheap chain hotel. Dana told the desk clerk to assign them a room with two double beds; Mason opted to pay for his own private space, on the upper floor.

"You don't like my company?" she prodded.

"You won't like mine. I snore."

In fact, he didn't. He slept so silently, his guards had often entered his cell to check if he were breathing. That led to a number of his escapes, overpowering the weaklings and scaling the walls.

The travelers parted at the stairs. Dana reminded him they'd be off at sunrise; he set the high-tech wrist watch he'd been given as part of the Alcatraz mission to wake him well before dawn.

The selection of television channels, cable networks and even pornography stunned Mason. He enjoyed a hot shower, his first since swimming across San Francisco Bay in a wet suit. The only aspect he didn't appreciate: floral-scented soaps and shampoo.

Especially since it drew unwanted attention to him in the restaurant's tacky bar.

To preserve his anonymity, he tolerated the drunken taunts of unshaven truckers. Noticing the cashier at the front counter being robbed at gunpoint, however, sent him into action.

The clerk cowered behind a glass case displaying candy and souvenirs, not seeing the man who broke the robber's nose and both legs. Intoxicated witnesses wouldn't remember his description once they regained their sobriety; by then, he'd be gone.

"Hotels near the off-ramp may be convenient," lamented Dana as she positioned her insulated coffee mug in the Mustang's cup holder, "but listening to those sirens... I could swear they were right outside my door!"

Mason didn't contradict her.

The third day cruising I-80, a storm front impeded their progress. Either using the weather as an excuse, or because layers of water coating the asphalt caused serious hydroplaning - Mason couldn't determine - Dana pulled off at Indiana's exit 72.

“My dad loves Notre Dame. This’ll give me a chance to buy him a new football jersey to wear during the games.”

She had, throughout the trek, purchased little oddities at every gas station or restaurant. The collection she would be presenting to her grandparents at the family reunion defied explanation, in Mason’s estimation.

A football jersey made sense, at least.

Students of the renowned university remained mostly indoors during the deluge; a few brave souls risked drenching by racing across the quads from building to building. The Mustang parked beneath a sheltering tree and, Dana not owning an umbrella, the pair were soaked before entering the brick bookstore lobby.

Mason selected a Fighting Irish monogrammed t-shirt and sweat pants from a clearance rack to replace his present wet attire. Dana mulled over every version of quarterback commemorative jerseys, her cost for the one item exceeding his total.

Oppressive humidity replaced raindrops outdoors, giving them a chance to trek up the aptly named Notre Dame Avenue and view the famous Golden Dome. Dana snapped photos with her cell phone; Mason calculated the minutes wasted with this sightseeing.

And dining at the overpriced campus restaurant.

This menu touted gourmet cuisine: small, artistically composed portions inadequate for an adult-sized stomach. The SAS agent flexed his fingers in frustration, waiting for Dana to finish the meal, and let her pick up the check.

He picked up her wallet when it fell to the carpet after she extracted a credit card.

Among the photos encased in worn plastic was one of Mason’s nemesis, FBI Director James Womack.

Suspicious resurrected, he didn’t return the leather billfold, tucking it into his own pocket. Once Dana had added a tip and signed the receipt, she detected the theft. He signaled her toward the exit.

His grip on her upper left arm as they returned to the car cut off circulation to her hand, and she squirmed against the constraint.

“What the hell?” she protested.

He hissed, “Who the fuck are you, really?”

“You’ve got the wallet. Check my ID. It says Dana Horning.”

“We both know it could be fake. The FBI is better at counterfeiting documents than the black market.”

“I’m not...” She glared at him. “But, my dad works for the FBI.”

“Womack?”

Her blink sufficed as affirmation.

“Then, why use the name Horning?”

“It’s my married name, you nit. My husband’s an Army colonel serving in Afghanistan. I’ve been living with his parents and running their bar.”

He slammed her against a light post. “Where you chanced to meet me, while wearing a pistol under your jacket.”

“I told you...”

“Your father has told me innumerable lies over the course of three decades. Why should I believe *you*?”

“I...”

“Did you know your father spent the last few days running an operation in San Francisco?”

“He phoned me, and we had dinner before I drove him to the airport for his flight to D.C.”

“Then, you knew about me.”

“No. He felt guilty about getting a group of Navy SEALs killed, and some Marine general going off his rocker, but didn’t say much else.”

“So, the name John Mason means nothing to you?” he pressed.

Her expression didn’t require a verbal response. “Every time you escaped from prison, Dad got in hot water. Mom argued with him about keeping you inside; she thought you should be released...”

“Kudos to your mother. Womack didn’t mention I was part of the Alcatraz fiasco?”

“My guess would be he’s tried to forget you. He wouldn’t voluntarily...”

“No, he wouldn’t. And, he screwed me out of the pardon I was promised - again.”

“So, you’re a fugitive?”

“No. Officially, I’m dead.” He scrutinized her blanched countenance. “Yes, you will be, too, if you say a word...”

A campus security sedan rolled along the street; Mason released Dana. Contritely, she led him to the Mustang, and they drove the rest of the day in silence.

The passenger cut short his sojourn in Youngstown, Ohio, before Dana diverted onto I-76 toward Philadelphia. She didn’t object, evidence of her fear transmitted by the Mustang’s squealing rear tires as she sped into the midday swelter.

He managed to hook up with a sultry red-head displaying an overt father-fixation at a nightclub. After driving her to her pink frill-draped apartment and depositing her passed-out form on a king-sized bed, he kept the keys to her Chevy Impala, driving east across the Pennsylvania state line. He stopped long enough to switch license plates with another vehicle in a mall parking lot, to deflect suspicion once the owner realized through her tremendous hangover the blue sedan's absence.

Three days until the Womack family reunion, Mason made use of an ID he lifted off an unsuspecting customer in a department store to secure a hotel room in Glenside, north of Philadelphia. He availed himself of local library archives and maps, determining with a rich taste of poetic justice the perfect site for his revenge.

Eastern State Penitentiary.

The historic prison, now a tourist attraction, had been a precursor to many modern facilities. Closed in 1971, some cells had been allowed to deteriorate. Others, like Al Capone's lavish quarters, were preserved for the paying public.

Not unlike Alcatraz.

Another boon: the 19th century stone fortress' Fairmount Avenue location was conveniently close to the park where the FBI director would join relatives on Saturday. Appraising the parking situation confirmed for Mason the ease with which he could whisk his prey from public view.

He'd never seen Womack wearing anything but the standard black suit. Watching from an alley, Mason still recognized that withered official in the gold Notre Dame shirt Dana had bought. No wife accompanied him in the government-issued cruiser; Mason chuckled to think no woman would've tolerated his caustic demeanor for long.

Sidling up behind him on the sidewalk, Mason wedged a length of copper pipe from a trash bin against Womack's spine. The pistol he'd confiscated from a dead Marine on the Rock was tucked in his belt, ammunition clip empty.

It didn't matter. Womack stiffened visibly at the contact, and began sweating when Mason whispered, "Calm yourself, you fucking idiot. This isn't going to hurt any more than the thirty years I did in those hellholes."

"I knew Goodspeed lied about you being vaporized," sputtered Womack, yielding to the pressure and crossing the street in minimal traffic.

Mason's lips twitched slightly upward at the image of his captive's terrified expression when they approached the penitentiary's glass entrance. Inside, a tour had just begun; they joined the stragglers until reaching a roped-off section of intersecting corridors.

Steering Womack along a dim row of rusted doors, Mason shoved him into a block room occupied by an assortment of rats and spiders. The sole illumination was provided by a cracked, dingy skylight. Hinges grated ominously when the lattice-work panel slammed shut. "See how you like it."

Womack recovered his balance and rushed at the rectangular view port. "You can't do this, Mason!" he squealed. "I'll have your ass!"

"You'll have nothing, except an idea of the life you stole from me. Not that you'll learn anything from the experience."

Desperate, agonized cries faded once Mason rounded a corner and met another parade of curiosity seekers.

Among them, Dana Horning.

She linked her arm through his when he attempted to dodge the throng. "As much time as you've spent behind bars, this should be the last place you pay to see," she remarked.

"Each is unique in its way," he bluffed. "Especially when it comes to methods of escape." He shook her loose. "Why aren't you picnicking with your family?"

"The eats aren't laid out until mid-afternoon. First, there are kid games, and sightseeing."

He scanned the crowd. "So, these are all Womacks?"

"Right."

"Your father had the sense to skip this attraction?"

"Haven't seen him today."

"I hope to never see him again. You'll excuse me?"

He retreated along the corridor and cut through what had been an administrative wing to a service exit. His eyes adjusted to the brilliant sunlight, he retraced his steps to the borrowed Impala, filling the tank at the nearest gas station before heading north to the border.

Where he'd once been caught with J. Edgar Hoover's microfilm.

This time, he'd make it back to British territory, and live out his days in peace.

Mason abandoned the car, keys in the ignition, at the Niagara Falls gift shop. Before traversing the bridge into Canada on a bus, he picked up a copy of the *New York Times*. A photo of the deteriorated Eastern State Penitentiary cell and Womack's bloody fingernails from clawing at the door to free himself were featured on the last page. He claimed to have become disoriented during a tour and been trapped for twelve hours.

He couldn't tell the truth.

As far as the government was concerned, John Patrick Mason didn't exist. Nonetheless, his daughter joined him for a relaxing vacation in Vancouver that autumn, giving the pair a chance to finally get acquainted.

After the U.S. President forced James Womack to resign from the FBI, Mason felt safe attending Jade's wedding, escorting the bride down the aisle. He celebrated the birth of his first grandchild, and eked out a modest living as a farmer, writing poetry in winter.

He'd been robbed of thirty years, but more than made up for lost time.