

UNDER A KILLING MOON

By
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PROLOGUE:

In the moonlight, New San Francisco sparkles like a chunk of cubic zirconium, an island of hollow beauty surrounded by a red sea of radiation. Five million souls drowning in gamma rays.

It's December 2042. Some optimistic visionaries predicted that this millennium would usher in a new age, where technology and enlightened minds would combine to create some kind of heaven on earth. Well, that isn't how it turned out. We kicked things off with another "war to end all wars," only this one may have lived up to its name. Half the planet took it on the chin, forests turned into ashtrays, oceans into cesspools, and a large minority of human beings into genetically disfigured casualties of war.

These unlucky souls are called Mutants. The effects of radioactive fallout added another check box to the census forms. Now, there's a whole new form of discrimination. New San Francisco is one bad decision away from civil war.

Most of us got lucky, or at least our genes did. The lucky ones are classified as Norms. I'm one of them. Most of them live in the new city, but I don't. I live among the unfortunate souls, the Mutants and the destitute, in the wreckage of Old San Francisco.

My name is Tex Murphy. I'm a private detective - or at least I used to be. Since my marriage hit the rocks, I haven't done much more than look for the bottom of a bourbon bottle. I haven't had a case in weeks, or months, if I don't count the ones I wasn't paid for. In my book, this chapter's titled "The Year I'd Like To Forget and Probably Will."

I hand my hat in a dingy joint called the Ritz Hotel. My office on the third floor doubles as a studio apartment. Just like me, the Ritz used to be something. Now it's just another grimy building in a rundown part of town. And I'm almost out of bourbon.

UAKM - CHAPTER ONE

Not a single pack of Lucky Strikes in all of Mexico City. I shook my head as my speeder glided through the clammy, grimy darkness that lay like a rotten blanket over the metropolis. From a quarter-mile up, I looked down on a sea of city lights, sparkling like sequins on a private dancer's too-tight dress. Just above the horizon, the blood-red moon was a bullet wound in the night sky.

I'd spent most of the day scouring the city for a pack of Lucky Strikes, moving frantically from one tienda to another, like a high-school sophomore on a scavenger hunt. I'd run out of time and was forced to abandon my search for the cigarettes that meant fine tobacco. I glanced at the small red box of cigarillos festering on the passenger seat and exhaled through a grimace. It was at rare times such as these that I cursed my addiction. I cracked the window of my speeder, took a final, excruciating hit from a Marlboro rojo, and flicked the sizzling butt into the night. Below me, the red hot cherry ejected and burned out, leaving the charred filter to spiral softly down into the world's largest ashtray.

Directly ahead, the Torre Latinoamericana, once the Mexican capital's tallest building, stood forty-seven stories erect above a knuckled clump of runty buildings. Together, they strongly resembled a common hand gesture. Back at ya, pal.

I descended through the two-packs-a-day layer of atmosphere frosting and touched down on a street south of the Dulce Vida apartment building. There wasn't a lot of luxury to be found in Central America's largest capital, but the Dulce Vida had an aura that would pass for luxury in any civilized spot. This was the sort of residence inhabited by tasters of decay, rather than swallows - people who liked the idea of living in Mexico City, but preferred to avoid the hands on experience.

I slumped down in the driver's seat and peered up at the top floor of the Dulce Vida. The two windows on the far right were nice and dark. A less careful shamus would've made his move immediately. I, on the other hand, saved that kind of recklessness for conjugal minefields and offers of free liquor. The windows of the neighboring apartment were lined with Christmas lights and ablaze in holiday cheer. There was no reason to take unnecessary risks. A silhouetted figure passed by the window. I glanced at my watch: 8:29 P.M. It was Saturday night, and there were only twenty-one shopping days until Navidad. I figured the odds were fair to good that Eddie Ching's neighbors would eventually go out for the evening. Fortunately, I wasn't in a hurry...as long as I didn't think about my lack of Lucky Strikes.

I settled in to wait. Out of sheer habit and a pathetic dependence on nicotine, I pulled a Rojo out of the pack and torched it. After a long drag and with renewed disgust, I removed the cigarillo from my mouth and inspected it closely. It certainly resembled the cigarettes I'd come to know and love - it even burned like the real thing. But it was an abomination, plain and simple. The kind of creation Sauron and his minions worked through the night creating in the foul-stench bowels of Barad-Dur.

But even a mutated distant cousin of nicotine had to be considered family. I leaned back, my eyes locked on the windows of the Dulce Vida and my mind idling in neutral. In the distance, Christmas music floated merrily through the polluted night air. What a way to

spend the holidays. Could've been worse, I supposed. I could've been working as a mall Santa. That was a mistake I wouldn't make twice.

A noisy, old-fashioned pickup truck roared past my speeder. I'd seen more four-wheeled vehicles after five days in Mexico City than I'd seen in New San Francisco in a year. Being out of the States made me appreciate my lot in life. Personal airborne transportation was still a novelty to ninety percent of the world, and being among the other ten percent made me smile - until I inhaled again.

A few minutes later, a scraggly group of teenagers paused to check out my speeder. Realizing that the vehicle was occupied, the apprentice lifers meandered off in search of fun and profit. Like the juvenile delinquents in New San Francisco, these hooligans were continuing the age-old tradition of cultivating a look that would be as incomprehensible and distasteful as possible to the preceding generation. The latest form of fashion rebellion was to shave a narrow strip of hair from the forehead to the back of the neck. This was known as a racing stripe. The width, depth, and design of the racing stripe apparently indicated gang affiliations as clearly as the color of one's socks had when I was growing up.

I sat in my speeder for almost an hour, smoking compost sticks and staring up at the Dulce Vida. At last, the lights in the Yule-filled apartment went out. I tossed most of the rojo out into the street and rolled up the window. There were four large, festively wrapped boxes in the trunk. After getting them out, I closed the hatch and activated the security system. Mexico City was notorious for its crime rate, and I, being a monolingual-and-damn-proud-of-it Yankee, wasn't about to take a chance on finding myself speeder-less and at the mercy of 30 million capitalist-loathing Latinos.

I looked both ways to avoid getting run down by some local reveler filled with mucha tequila, and crossed the street toward the covered parking lot that nestled up against the ground floor of the Dulce Vida. At the far end of the parking lot, a nondescript door provided a private entry for tenants. The majority of foot traffic went through the front door, which was around the corner on the east side, inaccessible directly from the parking lot. Having cased the location several times over the past few days, I knew the back door had a lock that would open only to the magnetic-strip cards given to tenants. Unfortunately, I didn't have a card. But I had something almost as good: a plan.

Peering out from behind my teetering stack of presents, I walked slowly into the parking lot. With any luck, someone would use the door in the next couple of minutes. If no one appeared, I would go to Step 2B of Plan A: intentionally drop the boxes, then stall until someone showed up. I'd seen plenty of Three Stooges movies while researching the technique and was confident I could pull it off.

A bright light flashed across the far wall as a car pulled into the parking lot and drove past me. I maintained my nonchalance as the driver parked and stepped out. It was a tiny, though sturdy elderly woman, always my preferred duping target. Laden with shopping bags, she trudged wearily toward the door. I maintained my leisurely pace.

The woman reached the door, set a shopping bag on the asphalt and, after what seemed like an eternity of purse searching, came up with a card, which she ran through the card reader. After replacing the card meticulously, she grabbed the door handle with both hands and heaved. At that moment, she became aware of me and turned. I threw every ounce of charm I could muster into a wide smile.

“Feliz Navidad!”

The woman smiled back at me and eyed my huge pile of brightly decorated packages. “Feliz Navidad!”

She stepped to the side and, as expected, held the door open. I was in.

The old lady followed me inside and down a short corridor to a set of elevator doors. An armed security guard sat on a chair nearby, reading a Condorito comic book. He barely glanced at me, probably assuming that I was helping grandma with the boxes.

The old lady reached passed me and pushed the up button. We waited silently for the elevator to descend. My nerves began to kick in, causing my stomach to slowly twist and tighten. It probably didn’t help that I hadn’t eaten anything for five days. On the flight down, I’d made the mistake of studying my Spanish for Idiots book, which had only reinforced my fear of native Mexican food by including translations for such phrases as ‘What species of meat is that?’ and ‘No lettuce, for God’s sake!’ As I waited for the elevator, I could feel my digestive juices deciding that my stomach was not only edible, but nutritious and delicious.

After what seemed like a long time, the elevator chimed and the doors opened. Grandma and I stepped in, and I breathed a sigh of relief. As the doors closed, she pushed the button for the third floor, then swiveled her head in my irection. “Que piso?”

She seemed to be asking which floor I wanted. I quickly traveled through time to seventh-grade Spanish and began counting. “Diez y ocho.”

The old lady pressed the eighteen button and offered me a crinkled smile. Ten seconds later, we came to a halt at the third floor, and grandma stepped out of the elevator. “Buenas noches.”

“Buenas noches.” The doors closed, and I began my ascent to the top floor.

UAKM - CHAPTER TWO

Two days before, I’d paid my first visit to the Dulce Vida. I’d found out which apartment Eddie Ching lived in and that he was out of town--a lucky break, since apartments are almost easier to ransack when they’re unoccupied.

I then approached the manager under the pretense of wanting to lease an apartment. The manager, a wellheeled, swarthy man by the name of Alfonso, had agreed to give me a tour of the facilities. His English was as perfect as the white teeth that gleamed from beneath his astonishingly manicured mustache. I’d said I was only interested in an apartment on the top floor, with a spectacular view of Alfonso’s uncommonly beautiful city. Obviously pleased, Alfonso had been more than happy to oblige.

As we rode the elevator to the eighteenth floor, Alfonso detailed the many benefits of becoming one of his tenants. The combination of the high crime rate and the rich clientele, he said, required that the apartment building be a veritable fortress of security. Not only were the entrances to the residential areas sealed off to outsiders, but each apartment had its own personalized security system. A keypad was installed on each apartment door, and the code to unlock the door was chosen by and known only to the tenant. Moreover, additional security systems, such as individual laser grids and LCD alarm glass for the windows, were offered optionally inside each apartment. If I’d actually been a potential renter, it would’ve sounded lovely. As it was, it made me nervous.

On the eighteenth floor, Alfonso had escorted me to an empty apartment on the far end of the hall from Ching’s. I’d casually looked over his shoulder as he entered the code 1-2-2-1 on the keypad. The access code was all I’d been after, but to avoid suspicion, I went along with the compulsory tour, lavishly complimenting the architecture, the décor, and, of course, the fabulous view. Alfonso and I then returned to the lobby, where I told him I would need time to make up my mind.

The next day, I’d gotten everything together to execute my plan, then waited outside the building. But the tenants in the apartment next to Ching’s didn’t go out that evening, so I was forced to try again. This time everything was going smoothly.

The elevator doors opened on the eighteenth floor, and I walked briskly toward the door to the empty apartment. To be safe, I knocked several times. There was no answer. I punched in 1-2-2-1 on the keypad and opened the door.

Except for the dim city glow coming through the windows, it was dark inside the apartment. I set the packages down and opened one of them. Inside was a flashlight, a laser blade, a bent piece of metal, and an extremely expensive pair of ultrasensitive night-vision goggles. Placing the implements in my deep overcoat pockets, I walked to one of the windows and, after checking to make sure it had no alarm, opened it.

There was a wide ledge below the window. I stepped out onto it and made the mistake of looking down. It hadn't seemed so high up from the ground. I turned around to face the window, closed it, and then began shuffling slowly along the ledge. The first two apartments I slid by were dark. The third was lit up, but the only person I saw inside was a bald man, sitting in an easy chair and facing away from me.

I reached the first window of Ching's apartment without incident. Then I pulled out the particle-beam-detection goggles and put them on. As I'd learned from my tour with Alfonso, the apartment windows could contain the special and very expensive LCD alarm glass. Sure enough, with the goggles on, I could see faint blue lines cycling through the glass in a grid pattern. I wasn't surprised - in fact, I'd counted on it. What suddenly concerned me was the net of motion-detecting beams I could see beyond the window. The lines of light were about three feet off the floor and crisscrossed from the wall under the window to about ten feet into the room. I checked the second window, but it was equipped with the same safeguards. The laser nets, in effect, were hightech moats. Unless I turned them off, access through the windows would be impossible.

I didn't have much to lose. If the apartments were all set up the same, there would be a switch on the wall about six inches to the right of the window, about four feet off the floor. After establishing the approximate location of the switch, I watched the cycling pattern for several minutes, then got out my laser blade and flipped it on. A razor-thin beam of light appeared, about three inches in length. With the care of a rabbi performing his first circumcision, I sliced into the glass and cut a hole with a two-inch diameter. Then I turned off the laser blade and grabbed the bent piece of metal. Inserting it into the hole, I began twisting it, feeling for the switch. After several seconds, I felt some resistance, then pushed down. The blue lights in the glass disappeared. The laser net didn't.

Using the laser blade, I cut an even wider hole in the glass, large enough to stick my head into. Peering around in the dark, I soon decided that whatever controlled the laser net was not within reach.

I'd been foiled. My first reaction, as always, was to light up. Then I reconsidered. Even though it was dark, I could be seen easily, and some might consider my conspicuous presence on the ledge of an exclusive penthouse apartment suspicious. The sooner I got inside, the better. I decided to try the neighbor's apartment. It was certainly preferable to

being seen in my current position.

On the plus side, the windows next door were made of ordinary glass and there was no laser net inside, at least not an activated one. I peered inside and made sure the neighbors hadn't just gone to bed early. A preliminary check of the window confirmed that it was locked. I took off the goggles and, using the laser blade, cut a rectangle large enough to crawl through. Removing the section of window carefully, I stepped down into the apartment.

I got out my flashlight and moved the beam around. The apartment was furnished sparsely, but tastefully. The motif was floral, a school to which I didn't subscribe, but could certainly appreciate. A simple, black leather couch took up a large section of the wall on the right. On the other side of the wall behind the couch was Ching's apartment. I touched the surface of the wall, then knocked on it. A previously overlooked option occurred to me. I pulled the couch carefully away from the wall and pulled out the laser blade.

I'd never used the laser blade on anything more dense than glass, but I thought it might have enough juice to cut through plasterboard. Kneeling down, I aimed the laser beam and began to cut. The wall studs were about two feet apart and, when I finished, there was an opening approximately two feet wide by three feet high. Luckily, this section of the wall had no electrical wiring. Once the hole in the neighbor's wall was opened, I cut into the plasterboard on Ching's side. Two minutes later, a matching section of plasterboard came loose and toppled over.

I replaced my laser blade, snapped on the goggles, and squirmed partway through the opening. The laser net I'd seen from outside extended to about halfway between me and the wall under the window. As long as I didn't get too careless, it looked like I'd be relatively free to explore the rest of the apartment.

I pulled myself all the way through the opening, then stood and took a look around. The first things I noticed were nearly a dozen terrariums, tanks, and aquariums of various makes and sizes, filled with everything from tropical fish to a boa constrictor. The soft and flickering ambient light provided plenty of visibility, so I didn't bother to turn on the flashlight.

As I looked back up, a figure moved suddenly on the far side of the room. I froze as my heart rate instantaneously tripled. Trying not to breathe, I peered toward the opposite wall and saw the face of a middle-aged man staring back at me, wild-eyed. After an instant of confusion, I realized it was me. My knees nearly buckled with relief, and it took a minute for the pounding in my ears to subside.

As my breathing slowly returned to normal, I inspected the walls of the room, which turned out to be covered with pricey-looking paintings and ornately framed mirrors. The room was not large, maybe twenty-five feet wide and forty feet long, but the mirrors gave it a much bigger feel. Some furniture was scattered here and there, but this appeared to be more of a den than a living room. I noticed a desk in one of the corners and decided to start there.

On top of the desk, I found a computer printout containing a list of names. As I looked it over, one name jumped out at me: Lowell Percival. The billionaire industrialist had been a client of mine years ago. I scanned the list and, as far as I could tell, it consisted of people interested in buying rare artifacts.

I continued on and quickly rooted through the drawers of the desk, but turned up nothing related to what I was looking for. The terrariums and aquariums didn't seem to be worth checking out, but I did anyway, just to be on the safe side. I paused to take a closer look at Ching's boa, which was curled into a dormant mound the size of a stegosaurus dropping. To the right of this terrarium was another, this one containing three brightly colored, venomous-looking serpents. Ching certainly had strange tastes. I imagined that poisonous snakes would be slightly less cuddly pets than, say, a puppy. Between the terrariums, I saw a long metal pole with a noose on the end. The thought of one of the snakes getting loose made the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention.

There was only one door leading out of the room, directly across from the freshly cut hole in the wall. I opened it and stepped into Ching's living room. The second window I'd looked in was on my right, opposite the front door to the apartment. The reflections of the city lights provided some light, but not enough for a thorough search. The room was about the same size as the den, but was much more lavishly furnished.

Directly across from me, I saw a large, wooden bookcase, crammed full of books. To the right of the bookcase was an open doorway, leading to a small kitchen area. To the left was a closed door, then a five-figure couch and love seat that occupied the entire corner of the room. I paused to examine a display cabinet teeming with exotic objects. The room was filled with plants, vases, and other ostentatious decorations. The exposed walls were covered with paintings and still more mirrors. The apartment was a narcissist's dream.

I walked around the room, examining the objects d'art and feeling like a tourist. In one section of the room, I found a panel that opened to reveal a small but magnificently stocked liquor cabinet. Ching kept an admirable selection of bourbons and scotches, as well as the usual token bottles of rum, gin, and vodka. I was thirsty and nervous, but all I really wanted was to finish the job and get out.

Eventually, I made my way to the bookcase and looked through it. Many of the volumes were foreign. Unless these were just for show, it looked as though Ching spoke at least English, Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and probably several other languages I couldn't identify. The selection of books ranged from The Complete Works of Shakespeare to a collection by some guy named Flannery O'Connor. Regrettably, my preferred reading material had always fallen somewhere between Spider-man comics and the back of a Cheerios box. Of the several hundred volumes in the bookcase, I'd read only one - For Whom the Bell Tolls. Well, read was an exaggeration, but I'd seen the movie. Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman. Now that was a woman. Women like that had disappeared around the time tube tops and tie-dye became fashionable. What a goddess. I sighed involuntarily. So very lonely.

I moved to the closed door, which turned out to be the entrance to the bano, the most commonly used Spanish word not directly related to food. There was nothing remarkable about the bathroom. To be thorough, I opened the medicine cabinet and casually glanced over the contents. Unlike some people, I've never had an interest in inspecting other people's medicinal and hygienic inventories. It looked like a pretty typical selection, so I closed the cabinet and returned to the living room.

The last area I checked was the kitchen. A stove, a microwave, a refrigerator, a sink, and a small dinette set were crammed into a space maybe fifteen feet square. Cupboards mounted on the walls circled the perimeter of the room. I took a peek in the refrigerator, but the interior was even more vacuous than the back at my office. After ten minutes, I realized that there was nothing to find in the kitchen.

I stepped back into the living room, discouraged. I'd searched carefully, but had nothing more than the name of an old client and an unwelcome reminder of my lack of exposure to classic literature. I swung the flashlight beam around, hoping to spot something I'd overlooked, but there didn't appear to be any container or space large enough to hold the item I was looking for.

I started moving everything that wasn't ruggedly attached to a wall and inspecting the areas underneath. Behind an antique-looking oil painting of buxom fruit, I found a small wall safe. Naturally, I was excited, but after experimenting with the dial for some time, I lost interest and returned to my search. There was nothing but wall behind the living room mirrors and paintings. The kitchen didn't turn up anything, so I moved into the den. After fifteen minutes, I'd come up empty again.

After I checked the wall behind the last painting, I stopped to consider my options. Taking another look at the wall safe, I decided that I'd just have to accept the fact that I would probably never get inside it.

Then a thought popped into my head. I returned to the living room and examined the layout. The kitchen, living room, and bathroom formed a horseshoe shape around the bookcase. Unless my calculations were way off, there was a rectangle of space about fifteen feet square unaccounted for. I carefully inspected the bookcase, which appeared to have been built directly into the wall. I tried to push it; I might as well have been trying to move my ex-mother-in-law. I briefly considered using brute force, but for all I knew, there might be an alarm of some sort attached to the bookcase itself.

There was only one thing to do. And it had worked before. I entered the bathroom and removed the towels from a rack on the right wall. I'd bought the laser blade at Radioactive Shack and wondered how much longer I had before it would break. Hopefully, it still had a little life in it. Like I'd done in the neighbor's apartment, I bent down and began to cut through the wall.

As I started on the second layer of plasterboard, a ray of greenish light appeared through the slit above the laser blade. A light source! There was definitely an enclosed area behind the wall. I'd almost finished when the laser blade sputtered and went out. Using the heel of my hand, I punched the center of the cut section. The plasterboard broke free, followed an instant later by a crashing noise. I wriggled through the opening, into some sort of treasure chamber. The room was no bigger than the kitchen, but was stuffed to the ceiling with paintings, statues, vases, and glass cabinets full of loose precious stones and jewelry.

As I stood up, I saw the source of the crash: I'd tipped over a stack of framed paintings. The one that had been nearest the wall had been nicked by the laser blade. I was no art expert, but it looked like an original Rembrandt. I wouldn't have known an original Rembrandt from a decorative place mat, except I had one back at my office. At least that's what the guy who'd sold it to me had said. For seventy dollars, it better have been.

The small room's contents had to be worth millions. It was like I'd found some legendary pirate's cave full of booty. A painting hung on the wall to my left and looked remarkably like a Van Gogh. I hadn't felt this over-whelmed and insignificant since my last date at divorce court. But this time, everything was going my way. In the center of the room sat the Holy Grail. Figuratively speaking. There was no question that this was what I'd come for. It was just the way Countess Renier had described it to me: a statuette, formed in the shape of a bird, about sixteen inches in height and constructed of some crystalline substance. It sat atop a marble pedestal and didn't appear to be hooked up to anything. It was a ripe peach, waiting to be picked.

I got close to the pedestal and examined every square inch. It had no visible security attachment. Moving slowly, like you do when extracting the funny bone in a game of Operation, I reached for the prize. As my hands touched it, I felt a tingling sensation,

similar to the way frozen hands feel when they're first soaked in hot water. I ran my hands over the surface for a moment. I'd never felt anything like it. It felt almost malleable, though it was obviously made of some solid material. Unsure of how heavy it would be, I tensed up and lifted the statuette from the pedestal. A deafening alarm immediately tore through the apartment.

I hesitated, unsure of whether I was responsible for the alarm going off. It didn't matter. The fact was, I'd broken into an apartment in one of the most secured buildings in Mexico City. Getting caught would not be good. I passed the statuette through the opening in the wall, then crawled back into the bathroom. As I shut the bathroom door behind me and hurried through the living room, I heard pounding footsteps outside the front door coming down the hallway from the direction of the elevator.

I hurried to the den as frantic Latin voices spoke rapidly outside. I passed the statuette into the neighboring apartment, then glanced around. Nearby I saw a remote stereo speaker. It looked just big enough to cover the opening in the wall. I was about to drop down and crawl through when I thought of something that might buy me some time. I rushed across the room and flipped open the lids on the terrariums containing the snakes. Then I returned to the stereo speaker, moved it next to the hole, dropped to my knees, and began to back in. With surprising speed, one of the smaller snakes slithered out of its tank and headed straight for me as I reached for the speaker. The snake was four feet away and closing fast when I pulled the speaker in front of the hole. As I stood up, I heard the front door to Ching's apartment burst open.

Safely inside the other apartment, I picked up the statuette, then pushed the black leather couch back against the wall. The Spanish-speaking voices next door slowly changed from frantic to angry and confused. I smiled to myself as I thought of them imagining that I had simply vanished into thin air. I wished I could understand what they were saying and regretted for the hundredth time not following up on the language skills I'd acquired in seventh-grade espanol with Senoritas Morena y Marta.

My amusement didn't last long. I had to get to either the stairway, which was next to Ching's apartment, or to the elevator, which was across the hall from the vacant apartment I'd first entered. Suddenly, someone knocked at the door of the apartment I was in. They knocked again, more forcefully. I hurried to the window and crawled through. Without the luxury of caution, I scampered along the ledge, my arms wrapped around the statuette. I reached the window of the empty apartment pushed it open, and jumped inside.

I crossed the room to the front door and put my eye to the peephole. There didn't appear to be anyone at this end of the hall. Through the door, I heard the elevator chime and then watched as a half dozen swarthy men piled out, led by an unsmiling Alfonso. They

bolted off in the direction of Ching's apartment. Behind them, the elevator doors were open.

I turned the knob and opened the door. The elevator doors were starting to close. I bounded across the hallway and knifed into the elevator, but the opening had narrowed and I'd brushed one of the doors, causing the elevator to reopen. From the far end of the hall, I heard several voices yelling "Alto!" Heavy footsteps came thundering down the hall as I repeatedly pushed the button for the first floor. As the doors began to close, I had no idea how close my pursuers were.

Apparently not close enough. The elevator doors pressed lightly together, and I began to descend away from the loud voices. A wave of relief washed over me, but I wasn't out yet. The lobby and parking lot doors, as well as the stairways, would almost certainly be guarded. I tried to think. My speeder was parked out past the covered parking area, so that would be the direction to head toward. Maybe if I took the guards unawares, I could get past and outrun them to the speeder. Unless, of course, they had guns, which they undoubtedly did. I didn't have much choice. I pressed the button for the second floor.

The doors opened at the second floor, and the immediate area was mercifully devoid of humanity. I stepped out into a hallway almost identical to the one on the eighteenth floor. In the corner across from the elevator, someone had placed a small, elegant stand with a vase full of flowers. Nice touch.

I started with the closest apartment and tried the door knob. Locked. I made my way down the hallway, stopping at each door and trying to open it. By the time I reached the last door, I decided that I wasn't going to get lucky, so I reared back and kicked it in. Cradling the statuette like a football, I ran into the apartment, past a startled old man wearing nothing but a pair of dingy boxers. He had dropped a can of beer onto his lap and was staring at me, wild-eyed, as I dashed past him toward the window. I pulled the window open and looked out. It was about a twenty-foot drop. It wouldn't kill me, but it would probably leave a few bruises. Wrapping my arms tightly around the statuette, I stepped onto the ledge and jumped.

A bed of flowers came rushing up at me. I tried to roll as I hit the ground, but didn't quite pull it off. As I lay in the garden dirt, staring up at the filthy night sky, excruciating pain shot up and down my back and both legs. I decided to wait until the agony subsided before making any attempt to stand. Several seconds passed.

Suddenly, above me, the beer-soaked man started to yell. The welcome addition of still more adrenaline gave me just the boost I needed. I pried myself out of the loam, glanced around, and hugging the statuette like a football, ran to daylight. Gunshots rang out above and behind me. Weaving like a punt returner, I crossed the street and reached the

speeder. It was where I'd left it and still had its license plates, wipers, and antenna. Perhaps there was a god, after all.

I climbed inside, turned on the ignition, and lifted off. The lights of Mexico City faded behind me like firework residue. The statuette glowed faintly on the passenger seat. Hands shaking and back aching, I lit a cigarette, took a drag, then opened the window and ejected the abomination. I checked my radar - no one appeared to be following me. It looked like I'd pulled it off. A glance at the geo-grid showed that the nearest decent-sized US city was Brownsville, Texas. Four more hours, and I'd be seated in a café, a strong cup of coffee on the left and a fresh pack of Luckys on the right. Four hours away, three and a half if I pushed it.

UAKM - CHAPTER THREE

Things were hopping at the Post-Nuclear (pronounced Nucular) café. The dinner seemed to be particularly popular with truckers and migrant workers. A lone waitress with orange hair the size of an award-winning state fair pumpkin bustled feverishly about the teeming horde of Brownsville's finest.

A single laminated page, burned and stained like the toilet tank cover in a bar restroom, sat in front of me. An index card paper-clipped to the menu proclaimed the special of the day to be beef pot pie and waldorf salad, with cherries jubilee for dessert. After brief consideration, I discarded the special as a viable option. It sounded good in theory, but pot pies are a lot like used vehicles and dames - no matter how good they look, it's what's under the hood that counts.

I reached for the unopened pack of Lucky Strikes I'd bought approximately ninety seconds after touching down in Brownsville. As I ran through the menu, I packed the fresh set of smokes against the heel of my hand. Seven times - no more, no less.

This was the first step in a complex, yet satisfying ritual known only to those who indulge in the world's second or third most dangerous habit. Pinching the starter tab, I pulled gently and unsealed the pack with all the care and anticipation of removing a bra. Next came the stripping of the foil, and finally, the extraction. It was as close as I would ever get to organized religion.

I tapped the cigarette on the tabletop, then moistened three quarters of an inch on the packed end with my tongue. With my left hand, I placed the cigarette between my lips, just left of center. My right hand approached, bearing the fire. My hands cupped around the Zippo as its flame touched the tip of the Lucky Strike. I drew in deeply and slowly and heard the pleasant crackling of toasted tobacco. My eyes closed, and I leaned back, wanting to savor indefinitely this sensation of reuniting with my one true love.

In the midst of the rapture, I felt a distinctly pink presence close by. I opened my eyes and saw that the orange-headed waitress had arrived. My head still resting on the back of the vinyl booth seat, I glanced at her name: LaDonna. LaDonna looked down at me indulgently, her foot tapping at about 6000 RPM and a brown cigarette dangling from her lip like an exhaust pipe. I tossed her a disarming smile and sat up, my attention returning to the menu.

There were so many choices, and LaDonna was like a ticking bomb. If I didn't order soon, possibly within seconds, she was likely to detonate, which would likely hurl her away from my booth and into a refilling condition-shuttling frenzy. God knew when she'd be back to take my order. I had to think quickly, yet my sense of self-preservation told me I had to be careful. Chicken-fried steak was out. So was the goulash. The meat hash intrigued me, but I passed. Finally, my eyes came across the grilled cheese sandwich. How dangerous could a grilled cheese sandwich be?

"I'll have the grilled cheese sandwich."

LaDonna scribbled furiously. "One grilled cheese. White, wheat, light rye, dark rye, pumpernickel, or pita?"

I wasn't sure how heavy I should go. I still had a long flight home. "White, please."

"American, Swiss, Muenster, cheddar, Brie, Colby, or longhorn?"

"How about a nice medium cheddar? Something in the four-to six-month range."

"Coffee?"

"A gallon, please. Make it extra thick."

LaDonna nodded and returned in the direction of the counter. She was good. In the thirty feet between my booth and the kitchen, she lit two cigarettes, dropped off three bills, told a joke, laughed at two others, all without missing a step. As I watched her work, I noticed with some shock how shapely her legs were. Of course, they were doing miraculous things with nylons these days, but those gams looked authentic. They were certainly her most attractive feature. The area between her hips and shoulders could've belonged to a Texas A&M middle linebacker, and the beehive towering above her head made the distance from the nape of her neck to her hair net measure a full third of her total height.

After a brisk, lingo-filled exchange with a dazed-looking short order cook, LaDonna set

off on another lap around the diner. She was fun to watch. I finished my first Lucky Strike and was about to help myself to a second when LaDonna swung by and thrust a full cup of coffee at me like a relay baton. Without spilling a drop, she slid the cup onto the table and continued on without breaking stride.

If only the coffee had been as enjoyable and full-bodied as the service. At least it was hot - and I'd had worse. As I blew steam across the top of the chipped mug, I couldn't help but yearn for an oversized serving of Louie Lamintz's Armageddon blend. It was a truly magical beverage. I could drink a fifth of bourbon and still do origami, but after three cups of the Brew & Stew house blend I'd catch a buzz. Louie said the secret ingredient was love, but I wasn't so sure.

A thumping sound and the tinkle of broken glass caught my ear. I looked over toward the counter and saw a heavy-set man face-planted onto the bar. A rail-thin older man behind the counter was scurrying to mop up spilled beer as the patrons reacted with amusement, empathy, and/or disgust. The sight made me think shamefully of my own recent behavior, which would have been just as embarrassing if I'd had the money to drink in public.

As it was, I'd spent most of the previous month locked in my office with a bottle of rot gut and a couple of Edith Piaf Cds. Sure, I knew I was better off without Sylvia - hell, I hadn't entertained a single Christian thought about her or even remotely wished she's come back the whole time - but the divorce had been a psychological root canal. The abscessed tooth had been removed at the expense of the entire jaw.

With my naïve and reckless idealism blown to bits all over my office floor, I'd done the only thing a hard-boiled PI could do under the circumstances: I picked up pieces, dropped them into a tumbler, and poured myself a double bourbon. From there, I went through the usual phases: disillusionment, resentment, anger, self-doubt, regret, rationalization, more anger, grief, a little more anger, and finally, black and thirsty angst. Then, exhausted from my jog around the emotional gamut, I'd rapidly descended into an amnesiac stupor of self-pity and devil-may-care intoxication.

A door in the Post-Nuclear Café slammed shut, rousing me from my pondering, and I noticed LaDonna approaching, a plate of food in one hand and a toxic-looking coffeepot in the other. "Here you go, honey."

LaDonna slid the plate in front of me and somehow topped off my mug at the exact same instant, without spilling a drop. I looked up into her overdone eyes. "You're an amazing woman."

For the first time since I'd seen her, LaDonna paused. Looking me straight in the eye

without a hint of a smile, she raised an eyebrow.

“You couldn’t afford me, sugar.” With a wink, she turned and resumed her plate-spinning act. I understood why the place was packed.

When my smoke was finished, I turned my attention to the plate in front of me. The grilled cheese sandwich looked surprisingly appetizing, a light golden brown except for the crispy dark brown edges. I made a conservative estimate that half a stick of butter had been used to grease the griddle. Melting cheddar seeped out from all four sides. Crunchy crinkle-cut fries formed a hot, salty halo around the sandwich. There was no parsley to discard, no orange slice to remove. This wasn’t cuisine - it was grub. Tasty food with no garnish required. I delicately lifted one half of the still-steaming grilled cheese and took a large bite out of the center. The smoldering cheddar was almost too hot to eat, almost. The mingling flavors of bread, butter, and cheese went to the very root of my soul and spoke to me. They said “Mmmm.”

After I’d finished half the sandwich and a handful of fries, my stomach (fresh off a five-day hunger strike) voted to light the post-prandial smoke and be done with it. My taste buds, despite active campaigning by the other senses, eventually had to concede, and I pushed the plate away. I was full and happy, a sensation I usually reserved for the Brew & Stew. I’d never had Louie’s grilled cheese sandwich, but it was now on my list of things to do.

Over a third cup of coffee, I glanced down at the backpack on the seat beside me. Hopefully, this was a sign of things to come. My career had never been the stuff of legends. Hell, I’d lost count of how many part-time jobs I’d taken just so I could afford to be a gumshoe. My resume, if I ever had the inclination or funds to have one made up, would read like an unskilled-labor listing board at an unemployment office. I had a better chance of getting invited to speak at a NOW rally than getting my bio in the PI Who’s Who.

Still, it was the only thing I’d ever really wanted to do. Mom had her heart set on my being an optometrist. Of course, that was back when people still needed glasses and contact lenses, before they became ostentatious fashion accessories. My father had me pegged to follow in his footsteps and be a security guard. Maybe that was why I’d become a detective...some sort of subconscious Oedipal thing.

The problem started thirty-two years earlier. The babysitter let me stay up and watch the late, late show. Little did I know how lasting the impact of The Maltese Falcon would be. I didn’t understand the plot, and most of the patter went right over my five-year old head, but there was something about it that captivated me. Oh, I’d gone through the usual childhood phases - dinosaurs, Robin Hood, space travel - but the hard-boiled PI

was a shtick I never grew out of. Fedoras, trench coats, cigarettes, and bourbon. Scheming dames, shady chumps with names like Lefty and Rocko, and sinister characters with pencil-thin mustaches and foreign accents.

Now, here I was. Glimpses of the glamour were few and far between, but everyone has their own delusional fantasy. I selected a Lucky strike from the pack and rolled it gently between my fingers. I had the look. I had the aptitude. I even had the skills. All I really needed was some steady employment. And maybe a dame.

After this cup of coffee, I'd get back on the road. I was looking forward to getting the statuette into the countess's hands. The retainer she'd given me was almost gone. When she paid me the rest of the finder's fee, my first stop would be Louie's place.

He'd been running me a tab for almost three months and hadn't said a thing about settling up. Plus, it was Louie who'd been at least partially responsible for me getting this case in the first place. I'd been so busy drinking myself into oblivion that I'd let trivial matters slide - my vid-phone bill, for example. From what I could gather, Louie had tried to call me sometime during my month-long Festival of Blurred Vision and found out that my vid-phone had been disconnected. An anonymous payment was made to my account, and like it or not, I was back in business. Louie professed complete ignorance about the matter, but I knew. It was soon afterward that the countess had called.

The case was a godsend. After the Colonel's visit, I'd decided it was time to crawl out of the gutter. Solitary agonizing and drinking to excess make for good film noir, but there's no satisfaction in it without an audience. I'd put the bottle away and put myself in the capable caring hands of Mr. Coffee. The transfusion took several days to complete, but when it was over, I was grimly determined and sober, not to mention a little wired.

Despite good intentions, sobering up had its downside. Taking stock of my situation, I'd been stunned to find that my liquid assets amounted to less than three figures, with my net worth solidly in the red. To the best of my recollection, I owed two months' rent, some unjustifiable alimony to Sylvia, the bar tab to Louie, and several IOUs to Digby, my bookie. I reminded myself to stop taking betting tips from my personal psychic.

When Countess Renier called and asked if I was available for a job, I was prepared to do anything up to and including scrubbing public urinals. Well, maybe not public urinals, but I was desperate. Luckily, the countess's case turned out to be more than I could have hoped for.

The countess lived in an especially affluent section of the new city, where the mortgage payments were more than I'd paid for my speeder. I floated down Filmore until I found

2429. The place looked just like my dream house, only bigger. I landed my speeder, walked to the front door of the mansion, and rang the doorbell. After a short wait, the door was answered by a nattily dressed butler who looked like a tall Hume Cronyn and sounded like Katherine Hepburn after an all-night kegger.

He said I was expected and led me through a pitch dark entryway into a softly lit sitting room just slightly smaller than a regulation NBA court. Despite an ambient temperature ideally suited for growing cacti, there was a blazing inferno in a large fireplace on the far side of the room. The place was sparsely, though expensively, furnished. The butler cleared his throat, and I noticed a slight movement from a chair by the fire. An older woman sat in an overstuffed, high-back chair with a shawl around her shoulders and a blanket over her legs. She motioned for me to come closer. I removed my fedora, more for ventilation than good manners, and crossed the room. Behind me, the butler excused himself discreetly. I approached the old woman and extended my hand, which she took limply.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Murphy. I know you must be very busy this time of year.”

I had no idea what she meant by that. The PI business isn’t seasonal. But I nodded agreeably and smiled. “It’s my pleasure, Countess Renier.”

The countess released my hand and motioned for me to sit in a chair across from hers. A bead of sweat ran down the side of my face. I wiped it away as politely as possible. The countess tucked her hands under the blanket. “I hope this heat isn’t too oppressive for you. I’m afraid I need to maintain this temperature, otherwise my joints become quite painful.”

The countess gave me just enough time to nod before she continued. Her voice had been as feeble as her hand-shake, but it suddenly shifted into business mode.

“Your services have been recommended to me by a trusted friend, who prefers to remain anonymous. Suffice to say that your unique abilities are what I need right now.”

She didn’t waste any time. For an instant I thought about asking her who’d referred me, but I had a feeling she wouldn’t tell me. “Which of my unique abilities are you referring to?”

The countess didn’t smile. “I’m sure you have many unique abilities. The one I would hire you for is your knack for locating people and things. I understand that this knack has made you some friends - and more than a few enemies.”

I crossed my legs nonchalantly. “Well, wasn’t it Roy Rogers who used to say you can’t

please all the people all the time?”

The old woman turned her gaze toward the fire. “It’s good to hear you say that, Mr. Murphy, because this errand may make you unpopular with some people.”

I studied the countess’s face, trying to guess where this was headed. She stared impassively into the dancing flames, which threw shadows across her ancient profile.

“What exactly do you mean by unpopular?”

The countess pulled her eyes from the fire and looked back at me intently. “Let me give you some background information; then you can decide for yourself.”

I nodded as she pulled the shawl closer around her slumped shoulders.

“Some time ago, a family heirloom was stolen from this bungalow. I keep most of my valuables on my estate in Europe, but on this visit, I brought the item to show to a friend. I have made extensive inquiries trying to retrieve it, but have found out very little.”

Bungalow. That was rich.

“Pardon my ignorance, Countess, but I’m guessing that you have the resources - cash, I mean - to buy all the information you need. What makes you think I can help you?”

The old woman didn’t bat an eye. “I don’t, though you shouldn’t take that personally. I have others working for me on the same matter. My friend recommended you, and I’ve exhausted every option, without success. I’m afraid you’re something of a last resort.”

I wasn’t certain if I’d been insulted or not. “Referring to me as a last resort could double my fee.”

The countess sighed, as though the subject of money was distasteful. “I’d already planned on paying you much more than your usual fee. I’m a wealthy woman, Mr. Murphy. To give you an idea, the stolen artifact alone is worth more money than most men could earn in ten lifetimes.”

These jabs were putting me on the defensive. Keeping in mind my destitute circumstances, I tried to be pleasant. “Well just see about that when I win the Clearing House Sweepstakes.”

“How quaint.” The old woman didn’t seem amused. “Let’s not waste any more time. I

need some work done, and I'll pay you well for it."

"In my experience, getting paid well is a relative term."

The countess's distaste was now fully apparent. "Is this the way you negotiate your fee for every job? I find it appalling."

I shrugged. "I have any number of appalling traits... but I am a good PI."

She looked at me appraisingly, her eyes squinting slightly. After a few moments, she turned her gaze back to the fire and spoke.

"If you prove to be as good as you think you are, I will pay you a thirty-thousand-dollar finder's fee."

Thirty thousand clams. Hmmm. That was a lot of seafood - a good bit more than I would have asked for. "Let me think about it... OK, I'll do it."

The countess nodded and turned toward me. "I thought you might. I'll expect you to focus all your energies on this. The methods you use to retrieve the artifact are of no interest to me. But as more time elapses, the less likely it is that the item will be found. For that reason I must require you to find it and return it to me within ten days. After that, the value of the artifact will decrease significantly, as will the finder's fee."

Ten days wasn't much time, but this appeared to be a no-lose situation. I nodded to show that I was following along. The old woman narrowed her gaze. "I should also warn you against any thoughts of double-crossing me. The statuette is valuable to only an obscure handful of collectors. If you were to find it and try to sell it on your own, you would certainly fetch less than the fee I have offered."

I'd never double-crossed a client, but the countess couldn't know that, so I didn't take offense. "I understand. Now, what exactly am I looking for?"

"The artifact is a statuette made from a rare crystalline substance. It is shaped somewhat in the form of a bird in flight. It is unmistakable and extremely rare - there is no other piece like it in the world. It has been in my family for countless generations and, as I said, it is extremely valuable. There are many collectors who would stop at nothing to own it. Whoever stole the statuette would likely have gone to the black market and offered it to the highest bidder."

The countess produced a photograph from under her blanket and handed it to me. It was a poor-quality print, like a copy of a copy. She wasn't giving me much of a head start.

“Is there anything else you can tell me? I could use a little more to go on. For starters, do you have any idea who stole it?”

The countess shook her head impatiently. “No, no. I’ve told you all I can. As I said, I don’t expect you to succeed in finding the statuette.”

That qualified as a double-dog dare in my book. I stood up, still holding my fedora, eager to get to work. “I’ll see what I can do. Pleasure to meet you, Countess.”

The old woman looked up at me, no expression on her face.

“I’d prefer that you not contact me until you have the statuette in your possession. I am not fond of receiving visitors under normal circumstances. But thank you for coming, Mr. Murphy. My valet will give you a retainer of one thousand dollars on your way out. I assume that will be enough to get you started. Good-bye.”

I’d gone straight to work, looking up all my old connections in the seamy underbelly of the city. The countess had said that whoever had stolen the statuette would have gone to the black market. It sounded logical to me - the buying and selling of hot property was one of Old San Francisco’s leading enterprises. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the statuette had been heard of by even the low-grade parasites, who comprised most of my underworld contacts.

After spending three sleepless days and half of the M note, I met up with a small-time gangster named Franco Franco, who gave me a fair amount of information in exchange for a favor to be cashed in later. I wasn’t altogether comfortable with the arrangement, but I had twenty-nine thousand good reasons not to worry about it at the moment. Franco passed along a name: Eddie Ching.

I asked around and found that most people experienced a strange form of amnesia when Ching’s name was mentioned. Luckily, there are plenty of cutthroats willing to do anything for money. Eventually, I got a lead and followed my nose to Mexico City.

Now here I was sitting pretty with the statuette in the bag and two days to spare.

“You all finished, honey?”

LaDonna had refilled the mug in my hand as stealthily as a pickpocket. My usual limit was three cups, but it would’ve been a shame to squander such stellar service. I took a

sip as LaDonna removed my plate and silverware, then wiped down the table in one motion, leaving it as clean as it could ever hope to be. A bill lay damage-down in front of me with LaDonna's loopy signature and a smiley face scrawled on it. I picked it up, pulled a twenty out of my wallet, and tucked them both under my mostly filled mug. I reached for my backpack and slid out of the booth. LaDonna smiled and waved busily as I pushed open the door and stepped out into the warm Brownsville night.

My speeder was still parked outside, which was good. I crossed the parking lot and beeped my alarm off. Gripping the door handle, I pulled up. Suddenly, a white flash blinded me as something smashed into the back of my head.

UAKM - CHAPTER FOUR

"My God, Murphy. You look like hell."

With some effort, I pushed myself up from a puddle of drool and slumped back into my chair, struggling to focus. The Colonel stood across the desk from me, slowly shaking his head. I hadn't seen Colonel Roy O'Brien since he'd kicked me out of his detective agency. I'd been one of his young, star recruits, and he'd been my mentor. I owed a lot of what I knew to him. We'd parted on bad terms, though, and had avoided each other since.

Fifteen years later, he was standing in my office, unexpected and uninvited, and I was seeing three of him. The three Colonels had lost the remaining color in their hair and looked a little thicker through the waist. Their faces had acquired a few dozen additional wrinkles, but the jaws were still firm and thrust forward. The deepset blue eyes hadn't lost any of their malicious glint, and the acid smiles were every bit as smug and infuriating as I'd remembered them.

I watched through horribly pulsating eyes and mirage-like waves of nausea as the three old men merged into one. "You caught me on a bad day. I forgot to take my Flintstones."

I was slurring, damn it. And probably talking too loud. The Colonel stepped around to where I was slumped precariously and sat down with one leg up on the desk. "Looks like I caught you in the middle of a bender."

"This isn't a bender. This is nighttime." Without warning, my chair lurched to the left, forcing me to grab for my desk and severely disrupting my already impaired equilibrium. With no small amount of effort, I forced the room to stop spinning and stretched myself. The Colonel's proximity wasn't helping the unsettled feeling in my stomach. Maybe a drink would calm things down. Two bottles floated around my desk. I

guessed right and unscrewed the cap. “Wanna drink? This stuff isn’t bad once you get used to it.”

The Colonel smiled and looked piously toward the floor, his hands folded serenely on his thigh. “No thanks, I haven’t had a drink in eight years.” He glanced back up at me, too quickly. “Yeah, one day I looked in the mirror and decided I needed to make a few lifestyle changes. Quit drinking, quit smoking. Now I’m looking forward to a nice long retirement on a tropical island with a tribe of beautiful young women.”

It wasn’t an attractive mental image, but everyone has a dream. He chortled and rubbed his hands together.

“Enough about me, Tex. Tell me about you. How’s everything going? Bad as it looks?”

I steadied myself as conversationally as possible. “Depends. What is today? Saturday? Oh, Saturdays aren’t too bad. I don’t get really suicidal till about Thursday afternoon.”

I poured about seven fingers of bourbon in the general direction of my glass, then attempted to fix a pointed stare at the Colonel. “So, was there something you wanted? Or did you just come by to sprinkle a little salt into the open wounds of my pathetic life?”

The Colonel chuckled insincerely. “Now why would I want to do a thing like that, Tex? Just because you ratted on me, got me suspended, humiliated me in front of peers - you sold me out, you son-of-a-bitch!”

His eyes burning through me, the Colonel paused to run a hand through his white, still-thick hair. It was a mannerism he’d always used when he was agitated. He stood and walked away, a hand massaging the back of his neck. After a moment he turned back to face me and, slowly, the smug grin reappeared.

“Of course, that’s all in the past. I quit hating you for it weeks ago. Naturally, I got reinstated and everything worked out fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” I took an unnecessary slug from my glass and wiped my mouth on the back of my sleeve. The Colonel smirked and returned to his perch on the corner of my desk.

“So what happened? I heard you were doing pretty well there for awhile. Solved a couple of decent cases. What’s your problem? Are you one of those people who can’t live with success?”

I leaned into my left armrest, away from the old man, and rubbed my eyes with the thumb and forefinger of my left hand. “Oh, living with it isn’t the problem. I just can’t commit to anything long-term.”

The Colonel didn’t respond immediately. I looked up at him and saw the priggish look on his face. It made me angry, and the paint thinner coursing through my veins didn’t help. I leaned forward and stuck a finger at him. “You know what I was fifteen years ago? I was a stupid, idealistic kid! If you weren’t such a bastard, you could have tried to understand why I did what I did. I mean, now...now I understand that I was out of line, but it was just an innocent, stupid mistake. You didn’t have to cut me off!”

The Colonel leaned down and stuck a gnarled finger back into my face.

“Yes I did! Because apparently you never learned the first rule of a PI: never, ever betray your friends! Friendship goes beyond blood or genetics or politics. You find out who your friends are, then you hold onto ‘em! They’re a precious commodity to people like me and you.”

With one last piercing stare, the Colonel stood up. He crossed the room, then paused at the door. “You’re too good to end up like this, Tex. You’ve got no excuse.”

He opened the door. “I’ll send you a postcard.”

@@@

The door slammed shut, and I was no longer in my office. I was in a dark place, lying down, a dull ache lurking somewhere close by. I’d been dreaming about the Colonel - or was I remembering a conversation that had actually happened? I couldn’t be sure. My mind was out of focus, and an unpleasant odor was making it hard to concentrate. What was that smell? Vaguely familiar...nauseating...claustrophobic. In my mind’s eye, I saw my Great-Aunt Gertie, who’d been dead for thirty years, I began to hear soft footsteps and low voices.

Somewhere nearby, I heard a harsh female voice accusing someone of sleeping with her sister. A deep, testosterone-laced voice denied everything. I tried to open my eyes, but it hurt. From the back of my skull, a steady pounding gradually accelerated. My eyeballs felt as though they were swelling up. With a mighty effort, I opened my eyelids.

Everything was white. I tried to move my head, but it didn’t want to. The female voice was now accusing the man of sleeping with her grandmother. The voice was coming from above me and to the left. The stench in the air was almost unbearable. Suddenly, a woman’s face appeared in front of the white backdrop. The face was long and thin, not

unattractive, but haggard. The eyes looked down at me compassionately, and the narrow lips gave way to two sets of uneven, gray teeth.

“Hello there.”

I tried to respond, but nothing came out. My mouth, I realized, was parched, and my lips felt dry and brittle.

“I’ll bet you’re thirsty, huh?”

The woman’s face disappeared, then reappeared behind a light blue plastic cup. As the water hit my tongue, my swallowing mechanism failed to respond, and I lurched into a coughing fit, which amplified the pounding in my head. After a few seconds, we tried again, and this time the water went down without incident. The woman vanished, and I began to wonder where I was - a POW camp, a lunatic asylum, or worse. Maybe some good Samaritan had carried me from my office and checked me into a detox center. I tried to get my bearings. The last thing I could remember was LaDonna. Or had it all been a rot gut-induced hallucination?

A man’s face appeared above me. I strained my eyeballs down and saw a clipboard tucked under his arm and a stethoscope around his neck. It all made sense now. The smell, the vision of Great-Aunt Gertie. I hadn’t been in a hospital for years.

“Hi there. I’m Dr. Berry, and this is Nurse Chase.”

I had to take his word for it. She was out of my peripheral vision.

“How’s the head? You’ve got quite a little bump back there.”

Ah...a master of understatement. It felt like I was sleeping on a baseball. Abruptly, I remembered being jumped in the parking lot of the Post-Nuclear Café. I felt a hand on my wrist. The doctor was checking my pulse.

“Fine, just fine.” He looked back down at me. “Your injury was quite serious. You were unconscious for almost two full days.”

I licked my arid lips and croaked, “Where am I?”

The doctor was looking at his watch. “Brownsville Regional Hospital. The police brought you in. Apparently, someone attacked you. They didn’t tell us anything else. On behalf of the town, I’d like to apologize. In general, you’ll find us to be good-hearted, law-abiding citizens.”

I was still trying to grasp what had happened. Then a horrible thought occurred to me. “Where’s my backpack?”

The doctor shrugged and glanced in the direction of the nurse. “I didn’t see a backpack, did you? No, I don’t think so. There’s a new Z-Mart down on Main Street. I’ll bet you can pick up a new one there. And their prices are generally quite a bit lower than you might expect.”

Damn it. I closed my eyes and tried to think. Who would’ve jumped me? I was almost certain I hadn’t been followed from Mexico City. Maybe it’d just been some drunken drifter, obliterated by a fifth of Cuervo, looking to hit someone. Or it could’ve been some rowdy local teen, rolling an unsuspecting out-of-towner for beer money. I was actually hopeful that whoever had hit me had been after my wallet. Maybe the statuette was still back in the parking lot and had been picked up by someone at the diner. If it was gone - I looked down at my wrist, still pulsating under the doctor’s fingers. There was my watch. It was no Rolex - in fact, it was a cheap piece of crap that only worked under certain climatic conditions. But if I’d been the victim of a simple robbery, they would’ve taken it. Damn.

After the doctor finished checking my vital signs, the nurse gave me a pill the size of a Ping-Pong ball. Several minutes later, everything went into soft focus, and the pain in my skull receded. I struggled onto my elbows and sat up against the metal headboard. Now what? If the statuette was gone, I was screwed. Maybe the police had picked it up. Maybe.

I spent the next four hours in medical limbo. Despite my obvious desire to leave, the doctor and nurse were hesitant. Apparently, they felt the medication they’d given me could have antisocial effects. I told them that keeping me locked up could result in violent seizures, but the nurse brandished a hypodermic and held me at bay throughout the afternoon.

Resigned to waiting, I reached for the TV remote. I didn’t have an idiot box in my office, and I hadn’t intentionally watched television since Nickelodeon had replaced Ren and Stimpy with Three’s Company. As I surfed restlessly, special news reports kept popping up with earnest-looking correspondents describing a bombing in Los Angeles. There was nothing especially newsworthy about a bombing, especially in LA, but this one had obliterated CAPRICORN headquarters. I’d heard about CAPRICORN, but had always been under the impression that it was just another left-wing agency, concerned with suing the NRA and making frantic speeches laced with sound bites and peppered with alliteration.

The reports were informative. I knew, of course, that relations between Mutants and Norms had become more and more strained over the past year. I also knew a little about the Crusade for Genetic Purity, which had grown from a radical right-wing rec room full of anti-Mutant extremists into a mainstream organization with lobbyists, PR people, and a shiny, new temple-esque structure in downtown Phoenix.

According to reports, Norms were flocking to the crusade, which held the belief that Mutants were subhuman and were polluting the world's gene pool with faulty genetics. Some of the most admired minds in the world had affiliated themselves with the crusade and were backing what they called a eugenics movement, which seemed to involve classifying people by their genetic makeup.

The reports went on to say that, recently, CAPRICORN had officially joined the Mutant League in countering the growing power and influence of the Crusade for Genetic Purity. The media usually depicted the crusade in a dubious light, hinting that it had been behind the bombing and subtly accusing the crusade's leaders with backhanded compliments and innuendo.

One news show went into detail about the president of the Crusade, the Reverend Claude Sheppard. Apparently, the good Reverend had a somewhat checkered and mysterious past. The program also described the process of initiation for joining the crusade and told how aspiring members had to pass a genetic screening. Once accepted, members advanced through a series of sixteen levels of indoctrination. Eventually, they could reach the ultimate stage of enlightenment, at which point they were invited onto the Moon Child, an orbiting resort station for the spiritually elite. On the Moon Child, members would undergo the final rites, which would result in them receiving the Good Housekeeping Pure stamp of approval.

I'd never taken a gene screen, as they called it, but I knew I was a Norm, though I'd never considered it an issue. I made my home in a primarily Mutant section of the Old City, and most of my friends were Mutants. The whole thing seemed ridiculous to me. Back when my grandfather was growing up, people were still discriminating on the basis of race. It seemed strange to think about, but there had actually been a time when people of color were forced to use separate facilities and were banned from certain places. Now, here was a racially mixed organization picking on a different group because its genetic structure wasn't the same. In my mind, it was just another playground scenario gone bad in the hands of adults.

And as far as I was concerned, the Crusade for Genetic Purity wasn't any different than the hundreds of other hate groups that had come before it. The KKK, the Nazis' Final Solution, South African Apartheid, Bosnian Ethnic Cleansing, the West Coast Gang Wars, the Asian Scouring, the African Tribal Siege, the Middle Eastern Alliance.

In every case, the destructive movement had been suppressed. After World War III, everyone looked around at what they'd done and seemed to decide that we were down to our last thread. Then came the post-war generation, and "Mutant" became a new check box on the census form. Originally, it was used to classify war veterans for benefit purposes. Then came the second generation, and the children of the Mutants were born into the same classification. Now, at the start of the third generation, when the Mutants were beginning to make up a substantial portion of the population, genetic discrimination had started to rear its ugly head.

It wasn't something I planned on getting worked up about, but I hoped that the crusade would, like its predecessors, take its fifteen minutes, then disappear. But I sensed that this time, it was different. To a lot of people, Mutants represented something bad, the visible evidence of man's stupidity and mortality. They were society's scar tissue.

The afternoon came and went, and the pounding in my head slowly changed from a sledgehammer to a hard rubber mallet. The sun was about to call it a night when the nurse came in with my clothes and announced that I could leave. I got dressed and found my wallet untouched in my back trouser pocket. That was a bad sign. Whoever had jumped me hadn't been interested in taking my cash. I didn't have much hope that I'd find my backpack.

When I checked out, I gave the desk nurse my address and told her to mail me the hospital bill. It was going to make a nice addition to my collection. Eventually, I hoped to have unpaid bills from all fifty states and Puerto Rico.

I called the police from the hospital. They picked me up and took me back to my speeder. My backpack was gone - the countess's statuette and twenty-nine thousand dollars with it. I gave the police the information they needed to fill out a report, but it was useless. They had already interviewed the people in the diner, and no one had seen anything. I spent a couple of hours checking around on my own, but it was as if the incident had never happened. No one had seen or heard anything. If it had happened in my town, I would've had connections to consult and a grapevine to listen in on. Here in Brownsville, I had squat. There was nothing left to do but fly home.

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I reached New San Francisco with mixed feelings. It was something of a relief to be home, but my head was pounding and my stomach was tied up in knots. I wasn't sure if I should tell the countess that her statuette had been stolen a second time, but I'd tell her what happened and maybe she could get a Brownsville flatfoot to pick up the trail. I began rehearsing my pitch, how the whole miserable experience had cost me most of my

retainer and that I'd appreciate it if she'd at least compensate me for time spent and bodily injury. Once again, I had ignored the credo of smart business: Get it in writing.

It was after midnight when I landed my speeder in front of 2429 Filmore. The neighborhood was dark and quiet. Before leaving the speeder, I paused. Maybe it would be better to come by first thing in the morning. No, I wanted to resolve this situation as soon as possible.

As I walked to the door, I passed a Century 22 For Sale sign planted in the front lawn. An unpleasant tingling went down my spine. I climbed the front steps and rang the doorbell. After the third ring, I moved to one of the front windows and peered in. It was pitch black inside, but from what I could make out, the room appeared to be absolutely empty. I checked all the entrances and finally had to break a window at the back of the house to get inside. The power was off. Using my Zippo as a tiny torch, I walked through the mansion.

It was completely cleaned out. With the exception of some cardboard boxes and several small potted plants, there was nothing...until I reached the sitting room, where I'd met the countess a week before. Everything was the same as it had been. I walked to the fireplace and touched the ashes. They were cold. Week-old cold. I'd been set up.

UAKM - CHAPTER FIVE

I woke up after a brief twelve hours, feeling sore and unrested. Being gifted always had that effect on me. I stumbled into the shower and tried to think. The hot water pounding on the back of my neck jump-started my brain, but didn't help me come up with any answers. The countess had obviously been phony. I hadn't thought about it at the time, but I should've suspected something when her photo of the statuette was clearly a bad copy. I suppose I'd been too eager for the case to ask myself any bubble-popping questions. A clear violation of the PI Rules.

I stepped out of the shower and dried off. The effects of my shower massager started to fade, and I took a painful inventory of my wounds. My back was still sore from the landing outside the Dulce Vida, my head felt like it was hosting some kind of aneurysm tournament, and my backside was sore from the long flight home. On the brighter side, I'd smoked less than a pack over the past eight days. My lungs and sinuses were in the pink.

After I got dressed, I fired up the coffee machine and walked to the door. On the floor, under the mail slot, was about a week's worth of mail. I'd been too tired to deal with it the night before. I gathered up the pile, crossed the warped hardwood floor, and flopped into the chair behind my cluttered desk. Pushing aside a pile of legal pads and assorted

note scraps, I tapped the envelopes into order like an oversized deck of cards and started shuffling through the bills.

On top of the pile was a handwritten, practically illiterate, and nearly unintelligible note from my landlord, Nilo. In King's English, it essentially read: Pay the rent or go find another dump to live in. This was Nilo's official pre-eviction notice. I'd been expecting it, which is why I parked my speeder by Louie's café and taken the back-alley route to my office. The longer Nilo didn't know I was home, the more time I could buy before having to smell his pig-feet-and-pork-rind breath as he told me what would happen if I didn't fork over some cash.

Of course, any reputable place would've booted me out weeks ago. Luckily, Nilo had a hard time holding onto tenants. Not that he was the slightest bit compassionate or flexible regarding payment arrangements. He was merciless in his pursuit of back rent and took every available opportunity to extort it from me. Countless times I'd tried to explain to him the nature of freelance work, how when it rained, it poured. I also tried to make it clear that, for the moment, I was too broke to pay attention and that he couldn't get blood from a stone. Unfortunately, analogies were lost on Nilo. He'd stare at me stupidly, muttering a seemingly random mix of threats and obscenities, and go back to ogling his porno mags.

I decided that rent was in the lower third of my list of priorities and turned my attention back to the pieces of mail. The second item was from the Zebra Speeder Finance Corporation. I knew what they wanted. Unfortunately, I didn't have it. With any luck, their repo man wouldn't stop by until I'd manage to get a case that actually paid off. The third bill was from West Coast Bell. Even without any long-distance charges, the amount due seemed unreasonable. Next in line was an application for a Master Express credit card. I'd have been tempted to send it in if it weren't for that annoying disclaimer: subject to credit approval. My credit rating had gone bad about the same time as the cartilage in my right knee and my hopes of playing first base for the Red Sox.

I continued on through an ad for a dating service, a form requesting a donation to the Humane Society, and a coupon booklet featuring discounts on dry cleaning and Et Tu Brute pizza. It wasn't until I reached the bottom of the pile that I found anything of interest. First, there was another credit card application, this one for the Radioactive Shack. What made it different was the word Pre-approved stamped on the form. I'd never really thought much of Radioactive Shack, but they'd recently opened an outlet (no pun intended) just down the street, which made it convenient. Besides, I'd always wondered what it would be like to charge something. I decided I might give it a try and stuck the form into my desk drawer.

The final envelope wasn't a bill or junk mail. My name and address were handwritten in

block letters. There was no return address. It had been postmarked at the downtown USPS office on November 30, exactly one week earlier. I crushed the last inch of my Lucky Strike into an ashtray and tore open the letter. Inside was a blue card, the size of a standard index card. On one side, the anonymous correspondent had written BXK +A261184. I turned the card over. There was nothing written on the back. There was nothing else in the envelope.

I wouldn't be in analyzing mode for several more hours. I set the blue card aside. There were other, more pressing things on my mind. Coffee, for one. I poured myself some instant breakfast and walked to one of the windows that looked out over majestic Chandler Avenue.

Chelsee Bando was chatting with a stocky, middle-aged gent at her newsstand. Even from three stories up, I could almost smell her perfume, and primal urges stirred within me, like a den of bears around Easter. It had been a long time since I'd performed the forbidden dance of love, but that wasn't the only reason Chelsee made my toes curl. Of course, looking at her was like holding an AA meeting at a bar. I'd sworn off women - they were worse than alcohol. Maybe they wouldn't kill your liver, but they'd done one hell of a job on most of my other organs.

I sipped the java and looked around the rest of the street. Things were pretty dead, as usual. The only unusual thing I saw was a police speeder parked toward the end of the block. It was unmarked, but it might as well have had C-O-P-S painted on the hood in canary yellow. There was only one guy inside, slumped in the passenger seat, eyes closed and mouth open.

The man talking to Chelsee left the newsstand and walked toward the cop speeder, holding two Styrofoam cups and a bulging bag. What were the cops doing on a stakeout in our sleepy little neighborhood? I'd been accused of taking too many things personally, and this was no exception. I moved away from the window and returned to my desk.

Over a second cup of joe, I wondered what the chances were of me being the target. I tried to think what I could possibly have done to piss off the SFPD. Except for the job in Mexico City, the most interesting thing I'd done since sobering up was experimenting with a tartar control gel. Everything before that was a bit blurry, but I couldn't remember doing anything illegal. Despite being reasonably sure I wasn't in trouble, I decided to keep a low profile.

My first priority was to find out who'd set me up. I'd never enjoyed being played for a sap, and I was about to get a hospital bill that I had no intention of paying. Besides, there were no messages on my vid-phone, no cases lined up, and I was determined not to fall

back into a life of sloth and slobbering.

A good place to start would be the Century 22 real estate agency. I'd jotted down the number from the For Sale sign at the countess's "bungalow." I punched in the number on my vid-phone. After three rings, a handsome black woman with large, shiny eyes and a perfect, easy smile answered.

We chattered for several minutes about 2429 Filmore. Kaitlyn Abbot, the real estate agent, told me that the house had been owned by an older woman named Mrs. Greenburg, but that she'd passed away some time ago. Mrs. Greenburg's two children, both of whom lived out of state, had decided to sell the house. Mrs. Abbot went on to say that the place had been unoccupied for at least six months.

After I disconnected, I mulled over the fact that the mansion had supposedly been vacant for months. Countess Renier, if that was her real name, had certainly shown a bold streak by staging her ruse in the empty house. I had to admire the audacity. Unfortunately, that didn't take the sting out of being used like a Kleenex. If I'd been a realist, I might have filed the whole episode under Learning Experiences, but I'd never been accused of being a realist. Besides, I had nothing else to do. The question was, where to begin? The mansion was all I had to work with. Maybe the imposter countess had left something traceable behind. I decided to make a return trip.

A light acid rain was falling as I left the office and hurried to my speeder, carefully sidestepping the street's minefield of oily pools. I was sporting my good Dexter wing tips and always tried to keep them safe from inclement weather and low pH puddles. Inside the speeder, I lifted off and headed toward Pacific Heights.

I parked several houses away from 2429 and made my way to the back of the mansion without being seen. I entered the "bungalow" and spent the next hour going through the sitting room, looking for anything that might give me a lead. The high point of my search was finding a full ashtray. The cigarettes were marked with a symbol I'd never seen before.

I poured some of the cigarette butts into an envelope I found in my overcoat pocket, then left the residence and stealthily made my way back to the speeder. Maybe a tobacconist could identify the brand of cigarettes. It wasn't the greatest lead in the world, but it might be just slightly better than nothing.

I lifted off and flew several blocks, until I reached a convenience store with pay phones out front. Jumping out of the idling speeder, I jogged through the misty downpour. At the pay phone, I inserted a dollar bill, and the directory menu appeared on-screen. I accessed the listing for tobacconist shops and decided to start at the Cigar Bar, since it

had the catchiest name, as well as being the closest to my present location.

I was about to return to the warmth of my speeder when a thought struck me. I knew that tracking someone down by way of their preferred brand of cigarette is desperate at best, but I didn't have anything else to go on. What I really needed was a crack team of investigators to go through the phony countess's sitting room. With a staff of fully trained professionals, experienced in fingerprinting, collecting DNA samples, and analyzing microscopic fibers, maybe something would turn up. And I had connections in the San Francisco Police Department.

Unfortunately, I'd seen them at work often enough to decide they were mostly a bunch of knuckleheads. Their ringleader, Lieutenant Mac Malden, was an old acquaintance. I pulled out another dollar bill, fed it into the machine, and entered the number for the downtown precinct. Inferior help was better than no help at all. I also made a mental note to ask Mac if he knew anything about the unmarked speeder on Chandler Avenue.

Malden wasn't in his office, so I left a brief message on his voice mail, asking him to call me at my office at his earliest convenience. I disconnected and returned to my speeder, then flew through a heavy downpour to the Cigar Bar. It turned out to be a rustic hole in the wall down by the Wharf. When I stepped inside, the smell of fresh tobacco reached out and embraced me like an old lover. The interior of the shop was long and slender and brown, appropriately enough. Sets of display cases faced each other down the length of the store. The hardwood floor was marinated in the blended aromas of cherry, vanilla and Cuban leaf.

I walked down the left side of the shop, inspecting the wares. Case after case was filled with handsome wooden boxes teeming with Cubans, Hemingways, and Ashtons. The shelves above were full of cigar cutters, vintage lighters, cigarette cases, and other smoking accouterments. I turned toward the right wall and its selection of hundreds of pipes. There was also a substantial magazine section containing every periodical published for the patrons of the disappearing art of smoking. It was heavenly. If I'd had the money, I could've spent the entire day here, smoking myself into a stupor.

Behind the long counter (and a cloud of smoke), a small, bony man with a bad toupee was ladling rough-cut tobacco from a large glass jar into a small plastic bag. He looked up at me, and his leathery face crinkled into a crooked grin around a neatly hand-rolled cigarette. "Afternoon."

I pulled the pack of Luckies from my overcoat pocket and walked to the counter. The man stopped ladling and extended a lighter. I leaned over until the tip of my cigarette touched the flame, then straightened up, releasing a long stream of smoke. The leathery man looked me over approvingly.

“Baby Luckies. Don’t see many people smoking’ those these days. Not really enough. Looks fine on you, though. Compliments the get-up nicely. You know, I gotta fedora like that. Pricey. Not really the style, but like I say, quality never goes out of fashion. Am I right? You bet I am.”

He glanced over the counter. “Wing tips, too. Nice touch. There ya go again...quality. These days, I dunno, businessman types wearing this new footwear - what do they call it? - active dress shoes, or something’ like that. Who are they kiddin’? Sneakers are sneakers. Now those wing tips of yers, that’s a shoe. Am I right? Sure I am.”

He took a quick drag from his smoke, then extended his hand. “Sorry if I’m talking yer ear off. Name’s Gabby. Not my real name, of course, but my friends call me that, and anyone who smokes Luckies is a friend in my book, sight unseen.”

We shook with our free hands. “My name’s Murphy. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gabby.”

Gabby stubbed out his smoke and returned to ladling. “Murphy, eh? Good, solid name. Suits ya. So, what can I do for ya, Murphy? Pack of Luckies?”

“Sure.”

Gabby turned and stood on his tippy toes to reach a pack of smokes. He rang it up, and I handed him a fin. He forked over my change and smiled. “Anything else I can getcha?”

“Actually, there is. Could you look at something for me?” I pulled the envelope from my coat pocket and passed it over the counter. Gabby picked it up and took out one of the cigarette butts. He looked it over carefully, then put it back into the envelope.

“Gitanes Specials. French cigarettes. Not bad...a little on the harsh side.”

I replaced the envelope in my pocket. “Do you sell a lot of these? I’m trying to find someone, and all I know about them is they smoke Gitanes Specials.”

Gabby didn’t reply for a moment and busied himself with expertly rolling another cigarette. After he’d run his tongue across the Zig-Zag paper and sealed it, he looked back up at me. “You a gumshoe?”

I nodded.

“That’s kinda what I figured. When you walked in, I thought to myself, this guy looks

like he stepped right out of that Bob Mitchum movie...what's it called... Farewell, My Lovely. Not like a costume or anything, just got the feel, if ya know what I mean."

I was pleased and didn't mind saying so. "I know what you mean. It's an image thing. Good for business. And I also happen to prefer the style. I guess I'm just old fashioned."

Gabby lit his smoke. "Nothin' wrong with that. No, sir. Like I say, just because it's new don't mean it's better. People these days just don't know the meanin' of style. Now you take yer Bill Powells, yer Don Ameches - those guys knew how to dress. Yessir. Nothin' wrong with a sharp fedora and a shiny pair of wing tips."

He took another short drag. "But I'm getting' off the beaten path. So, yer a PI, and yer looking' for whoever smoked those Gitanes. Well, I can tell ya a couple of things. First, I don't got 'em here in my shop, and that means they ain't real easy to find...unless you live in France, that is. I don't stock 'em because they don't sell like yer Marlboros or even yer Dunhills. If I was you, I'd be looking for someone French, or someone who mighta been to France in recent memory. Sorry I can't help ya more than that."

I left the shop a little disappointed but not surprised. The woman I was looking for (or maybe the man who'd posed as the butler) might have been French or visited France, and that meant my list of suspects had narrowed down from hundreds of millions to tens of millions. Maybe Malden and his boys would find something at the mansion, but even in the unlikely case they did, that wouldn't happen for awhile. I had only one other lead to pursue. Back in the speeder, I set course for Lowell Percival Enterprises.

UAKM - CHAPTER SIX

The Lowell Percival Enterprises building protruded from the chest of downtown New San Francisco like a massive piece of shrapnel. The structure was composed primarily of steel and tinted glass and avoided using right angles wherever possible. Critics hailed it as the premier example of the new neo-anarchic form of architecture. I'd always thought it looked like what you'd expect to get if you gave a couple of ten-year-old kids fifty million dollars to build a clubhouse.

I could've called instead of making the trip to LPE, but people like Percival are inevitably surrounded by concentric rings of red tape-spewing personnel. I figured I had a better chance to get an audience by going in person. I'd never been inside the LPE building, but I'd met the man it was named after. It had been years ago, in the Martian colonies. I was working on a big case, and a number of unusual circumstances resulted in me doing a modestly unethical errand for Percival. Now, another technically illegal operation was prompting me to renew our acquaint-ance. The fact that his name had been on the list in Eddie Ching's apartment might have been meaningless and unrelated

to the countess and the statuette, but I felt it was worth looking into.

I parked my speeder and walked to the irregularly shaped revolving doors. When I came out the other side, I stepped into a militarized zone. The security check would've made a proctologist proud. Feeling violated and slightly tender, I made my way to the large directory in the center of the vast foyer.

After consulting the directory, I crossed to a set of four elevators and waited patiently with six or seven executive types. My worn overcoat and unorthodox tie made me stand out like a rodeo clown at midnight mass, and several corporate sharks looked me over distastefully. One of the elevators opened up, and we climbed aboard. When I reached out and pressed the button for the fifty-first floor, I noticed several pairs of eyes widen.

After two stops, I was alone in the lift and continued my ascent in peace. The doors slid open, and I stepped out into a lavishly furnished hallway. I turned right and walked several hundred yards to a receptionist's station. A beautiful woman in her mid-twenties sat behind the desk and looked up as I approached. Her voice was low and silky. "Can I help you?"

I removed my fedora. "Yes, ma'am. Is Mr. Percival in?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Percival won't be in the office for several days. And he usually prefers that visitors make appointments."

"OK. Could I make an appointment?"

"What is this concerning?"

I smiled apologetically. "A personal matter."

The young woman returned the smile and looked at me as if she were trying to place my face. "Why don't you leave your business card, and I'll pass it along to Mr. Percival when he gets back."

I made the pretense of checking my pockets, knowing full well that I'd run out of business cards. "I don't think I brought one with me. Could you just take down my name and number? The name's Murphy."

The gorgeous woman smiled up at me, a clear look of recognition registering on her face. "Tex?"

I was caught off-guard.

“Tex Murphy?”

“Uh...yes. Have we met?”

The young woman extended her hand. It was soft and cool, just the way I liked it. We shook hands, and she didn't let go. “Alaynah. Alaynah Moore. I knew you looked familiar.”

I tried to place the name...desperately. I wished with all my heart that I could remember where we'd met. Studying her face, I decided she did look vaguely familiar, but that was about it. “I'm very, very sorry, but I'm not sure where I know you from. It's my darn short-term memory. Shot to hell.”

Alaynah laughed and released my hand. “It has been awhile. You used to go out with my sister Deborah.”

Oh my God. Debbie Moore. Daughter of Satan. No wonder I hadn't remembered. It'd taken months of therapy to suppress the memory.

“So you're little Ally Moore? I find that hard to believe. In fact, I don't believe it. I think you're lying.”

Alaynah laughed again. Her smile was dazzling.

“I see you got your braces off.”

“About eight years ago. In case you haven't noticed, I'm all grown up now.”

Oh, I noticed, all right. She was wearing a black blazer over a cgarcoal knit shirt that fit like a coat of paint. Her complexion was flawless, and her features had come together nicely. Long, wavy brown hair lay silkily over her shoulders. Alaynah didn't help things when she leaned forward and lowered her voice.

“You know, I used to have quite a crush on you.”

I felt a strong urge that made me feel ever so slightly dirty. I tried to contain myself by changing the subject. “Speaking of crushed, how's Debbie?”

“She got married a few years ago and moved to Seattle.”

Alaynah didn't seem to want the subject changed. “How about you, Tex? You married?”

I shook my head enthusiastically. “Not anymore, thank God. And never again. I’ve been burned a few too many times, which brings us back to your sister. She was a real flamethrower.”

Alaynah fixed her eyes on me like no receptionist had ever done before. “I’m not Debbie.”

No she wasn’t. Unfortunately, I had a dual image blurring my vision. I kept seeing a gangly teenager with braces and a knack for showing up at inappropriate times. Of course, that was a long time ago. And maybe I was just imagining that she was coming on to me. “Are you coming on to me, Alaynah?”

She gave me one of those looks that would peel paint. “I think you’ve been single too long. Why don’t you buy me a drink, and I’ll see what I can do about knocking some of the rust off.”

If she only knew how rusty I was. I hadn’t had an offer like that in a month of Sundays. It just didn’t feel.. proper. Of course, there were certainly ways to get around that. Alcohol sprang to mind. If I’d had the cash, I would’ve jumped on her invitation like a bum on a box of chocolate. As it was, the only thing I could afford to buy was time, after which I’d go back to my office and see if I’d overlooked anything worth hocking.

“Tell you what. I’m tied up at the moment, but I promise I’ll get back to you soon.”

Alaynah trumped me. “I’m buying.”

I suspected that Alaynah’s persistence came from some long-nurtured, post-pubescent fantasy, or possibly sibling envy. Motivations notwithstanding, the opportunity was too ripe to pass up. Not only was a stunning woman asking me out, but she was volunteering to foot the bill. And she was just the person to help me get in to see Percival.

“All right. I’ll let you buy me a drink, as long as you promise you won’t get me all liquored up and expect me to put out.”

Alaynah raised an eyebrow. “I promise.”

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Alaynah got someone to cover the remainder of the afternoon for her. The special treatment was unexpected, but a welcome disruption of the routine. Twenty minutes later, we walked into Lindsay’s, a piano bar on the top floor of the downtown Hilton,

which my escort said was her favorite. It was a swanky joint, where people like me would have to choose between an evening of cocktails and paying rent. The first thing that caught my attention was the sight of Nat King Cole at the piano. It was a holographic projection, but convincing enough to give me chills.

As it turned out, not only was this Alaynah's favorite watering hole, but she also had a favorite table, waiter, and beverage. It took out a lot of the usual guesswork, and since it was her party, I was just happy to tag along. Our table sat close to a window offering a majestic view over the heart of the metropolis, which probably figured heavily into the price of the drinks.

Fat drops of rain ran down the window. In the distance, a brief flash of ruddy sunshine broke through the drizzling sky, like a flare from a sinking ship, and its last gasps played across Alaynah's face like firelight. To avoid staring, I picked up a menu. The first item I noticed was foie gras. Oh, great. Vegetarian food. I decided to stick with liquor.

Alaynah smiled at me over the top of her menu as the waiter appeared and asked what we wanted. My escort ordered a white wine spritzer and something French. I wanted to make a good impression and ordered a scotch. When the waiter left, Alaynah fixed her gaze on me.

"A few wrinkles around the eyes...not quite so thin...for the most part, you haven't changed much at all. That's a compliment, by the way."

I glanced down at my rumpled overcoat and askew tie. I didn't look good at all. Of course, love is blind, and so, apparently, is pure, wanton lust. I felt like a sex object, and I liked it. "Well, I've tried to take care of myself. I eat right, exercise, and take Geritol every day."

Alaynah giggled. I suspected that she would be fun to tickle. She leaned forward, elbows on the table and chin resting on her hands. "So...tell me what you've been up to all these years."

I shrugged. "Not much. Work. I got married and divorced. No kids. That's about it. Nothing exciting."

Alaynah looked at me dubiously. "I find that hard to believe. What kind of work?"

"I'm a private investigator."

My date flashed me another smoldering look. "What a coincidence. I've been looking for a good private investigator."

“No kidding.”

Alaynah nodded playfully. “If you’re any good, I have a little something I’d like you to take a look at.”

She wasn’t very subtle, but she certainly had grown up. A part of me was quickly forgetting the image of her as a gangly teenager. Unfortunately, that particular part of me was the one that usually got me into trouble.

Like she was reading my mind. Alaynah sat back in her chair, a perfect picture of posture. She’d either shelled out for surgery or had blessed genes. “So what does a PI do for fun?”

I felt like a little kid trying to stay awake - my eyes kept drifting down and snapping back up to her face. She might not have minded, but I was still trying to handle this situation with a bit of decorum. And don’t forget, I told myself, you hate women. With some effort, I focused on her eyes.

“Oh, the usual...long walks in the rain...playing with puppies...badminton.”

Our waiter arrived and deposited our drinks with a flourish. We raised our glasses, and Alaynah volunteered a toast. “To old acquaintances and new experiences.” I nodded and we drank. Things were looking much too promising.

“Tell me, what’s it like to work for the richest man in the world?”

Alaynah shrugged. “It pays well. I’m actually planning on going back to school, maybe get a doctorate.”

“Really. What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I haven’t decided. I think it might be fun to teach. Probably history. It’s always interested me.” Alaynah took another sip. “So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I’m pretty much locked into the PI gig. This fedora was an occupational investment.”

“OK, if you weren’t a PI, what would you want to be?”

I considered. “A philanthropist.”

Alaynah's face lit up and, for a moment, I was again reminded of little Ally Moore. I glanced down briefly, and the image evaporated. Alaynah flipped her hair back and raised her glass again. "Here's to us both being happy and getting rich."

It was a worthy toast, but I wasn't going to hold my breath. I took a long drink of scotch. It was silky smooth, with a peaty nose and a long, oaky finish. Between the scotch and the company, I was happy for the time being.

Alaynah set her glass down and glanced away. When she turned back, an expression of disgust was on her face. She leaned forward and whispered, "Who let the goyles in here?"

I turned to see a young couple entering the lounge. There was no mistaking that they were Mutants. I picked up my drink and saw Alaynah staring in the direction of the couple. Her reaction to the Mutants left me stunned. Goyle, short for gargoyle, was an extremely derogatory term, coined by Norms. I'd heard it used before, but not by anyone I knew personally. Of course, most of my friends were Mutants, but that didn't matter. I glanced at Alaynah, and she looked different to me.

She leaned forward again, her voice low. "I can't believe they'd come in here. This is almost embarrassing."

"Yeah, it is." I drank the rest of the scotch. "Listen, I've got to get going. Thanks for the drink."

Alaynah stared at me, a confused look on her face, as I stood up and put on my overcoat. "Is everything OK?"

I didn't feel like climbing onto a soapbox. "Everything's fine. I just forgot about an errand I have to run. I'll see you later."

The Mutant couple were seated nearby, and I nodded to them as I passed. They were holding hands and looked like they were in love; the girl smiled back at me. It made me glad. I turned toward the door and almost bumped into a waiter carrying a tray with something on fire. I was reminded of Louie's special spicy chili. The carnal pangs I'd experienced earlier suddenly gave way to the more conventional form of hunger. I hadn't eaten anything worthwhile for a couple of days, and I was hankering to find a menu with items I could pronounce. Visions of a steaming bowl brimming with chili and a slab of corn bread with honey butter appeared before me. My bar tab and I were about to get a little fatter.

The rain had let up, and clouds the color of fresh bruises mottled the cold, bloody sky. It was late afternoon, and the daylight was fading quickly as I flew home. It was December 7, and the days were getting shorter and grayer. I'd read somewhere that, at this time of year, primitive cultures had feared the sun was dying. For weeks prior to the shortest day of the year, the people would exhort their deity du jour to spare them and bring back the sun. Then the days would start to lengthen again, and everyone would celebrate (generally with some type of orgy), eat and drink to excess, and maybe sacrifice a few virgins for good measure. New Year's celebrations hadn't changed much.

The only difference was that now we knew the sun wasn't dying - it was killing us. Between the eroded ozone layer and the radiation-saturated atmosphere, we were all helpless chunks of stew meat in a large, toxic Crock Pot. I heard rumors that the government was going to enact a "time reversal," switching business hours from A.M. to P.M. It seemed like a healthy idea to me, having people sleep through the most hazardous part of the day, but it wouldn't affect me like it would most people. I'd always been a night person.

As I started my approach to Chandler Avenue, I saw that the unmarked police speeder hadn't moved. I circled around and landed on the other side of the Brew & Stew. If the cops happened to see me in the diner, so be it. I was ravenous to the point of apathy. I climbed out of the speeder and locked it up.

It was almost dark now, and the street was quiet, except for the sound of occasional raindrops plopping into greasy puddles. The air was wet, and the smell of damp earth was thick. Ahead of me, the warm light from Louie's café reflected off the slick pavement like a welcome mat. The wind picked up, and I raised my collar. I was glad for the warmth of my overcoat. I'd had it for a long time and wore it wherever I went. It was my big, khaki-colored pal who never asked stupid questions or wanted to leave until I was good and ready.

I felt a pleasant anticipation, like I always did when I went to the Brew & Stew. Louie LaMintz ran a joint that wasn't for everyone, but it suited me fine. There was always some savory aroma billowing in from the kitchen, maybe a lamb stew or a batch of spicy chili. Almost any time of day or night, there were at least two or three loyal patrons bellied up to the bar, arguing some topic with beery breath. Everyone had their own reason to love Louie's diner. The beer was always ice cold, and as for the Armageddon blend...well, it was the kind coffee that would've made Juan Valdez cry for mercy. You couldn't help but feel welcome in the diner. It didn't matter that Louie and most of the regulars were Mutants.

I paused just outside the double doors and thought about the nearly empty wallet in my

back pocket. Louie never seemed too concerned about running me a tab - he said he knew I was good for it - but it didn't make me feel any less parasitic. Rationalization had always been one of my dominant traits - the others being a lack of patience and inappropriate spasms of sarcasm - but there were no two ways about it: I was freeloading. For an instant, I considered going back to my office and toughing it out.

As I turned away, I spotted a shiny penny lying on the sidewalk, a few inches from the toe of my wing tip. I bent down and picked it up. I was hungry, thirsty, and a stone's throw from being utterly destitute, but now I had a lucky penny.

The door burst open, and I heard raspy, drunken laughter over the smooth sounds of Mel Torme crooning The Christmas Song. A warm gust of air escaped from the brightly lit café as a young couple walked past. The mouth-watering smells of hot chili and corn bread, mingled with icy-cold beer and after-supper cigarettes, cut through my resolve like a hot knife through butter. I caught the door and stepped aside.

The diner wasn't full, maybe twenty people, but it was lively. Glenda, Louie's only employee, was making the rounds with a serving tray the size of a manhole lid, heavily laden with full plates and mugs. She was no LaDonna, but she was good. Louie looked up from behind the bar and waved. I took off my hat, noticing a sprig of mistletoe hanging over the door, and walked to the bar stool at the far end of the counter. Louie gave me that warm, ugly grin and leaned forward, round belly pressed against the bar and meaty paws splayed on the countertop. With his Kiss the Cook apron tied over a tight, white undershirt, and a disposable paper food-services hat perched on his battered head like a cupcake wrapper on a cantaloupe, Louie cut quite a dashing figure.

"Take a load off, Murph. What can I getcha?"

I slid onto a shiny vinyl-colored counter stool and pulled out my crumpled pack of Luckies. "A tall beer and the love of a good woman."

Louie winked at me, reached for a frosty stein, then drew the draft with a fluid ease I could only admire. Louie elevated the simple act of dispensing beer to an art form.

"Don't know if I can help ya with the woman, Murph. He turned and slid the nectar in front of me. "Though, I don't know if you noticed - Chelsee's over there in the corner. And she's alone."

I turned and saw Chelsee sitting sideways in a booth with her legs up on the seat, reading a paperback. Her wavy blond hair just reached the shoulders of a thick, cream-colored pullover sweater. With her dark brown Levis and high-top hiking boots, she looked soft and warm and rugged, all at the same time.

There would be time for rejection later. I turned back to my mug of beer and pried a Lucky Strike out of the pack. As I reached for my lighter, Louie struck a match and held it to the battered end of my cigarette. The Brew & Stew had a No Smoking section. It was just outside the front door. Louie believed that the air outside would kill you just as fast and wouldn't provide any of the pleasure. As Louie blew out the match, I picked up the icy glass in front of me and drank deeply. Louie watched happily as I set the beer down and took a deep drag on the Lucky Strike.

"Thanks, Louie. I should have some work soon, and I'll settle up with you first thing."

It sounded optimistic, but I'd been saying the same thing for weeks. Louie just grinned and shook his head. "How many times have I told ya, Murph. You don't gotta worry about it. Pay me when you can."

The big Mutant reached under the bar and set a menu in front of me. "Now, you look like you need somethin' substantial, you know, stick to your ribs, and I ain't takin' no for an answer."

A sudden bellow from the other side of the café forced Louie to excuse himself. I glanced down at the menu, but remembering my earlier vision, I already knew what I wanted. I took another drink and noticed a face staring back at me from behind the bar. For a moment I wondered who the old guy was. Then, with all the grace of tumbling down a flight of stairs, I realized it was me. I was not aging well. And it was probably too late for Oil of Olay to have any real effect. I peered over my shoulder at Chelsea. No wonder she always shot me down whenever I asked her out. I looked old enough to be her...older brother.

Louie returned, wiping his hands on the apron around his ample waist. "What'll ya have?"

"How's the chili tonight?"

Louie grinned maliciously. "This batch turned out real good. I'm serving it with a side of Roloids. I can get ya a nice big bowl in two shakes of a lamb's tail...if you're up to it, that is."

Them were feudin' words. "Bring it on, Louie. Make it a double. And be sure to scoop it off the bottom. I don't want any of the watered-down stuff on top."

Chuckling, Louie waddled through the swinging doors into his laboratory of culinary wonders. He popped back out thirty seconds later, balancing a salad bowl full of chili, a

piece of cornbread the size of Gideon's Bible, and a teacup full of whipped honey butter. Setting the food in front of me, he reached under the counter for a spoon, a knife, and a stack of napkins. Then, with a flourish, he reached into a pocket in his apron, pulled out a half roll of antacid tablets, and tossed them onto the counter.

As Louie watched attentively, I picked up the spoon and dipped it into the steaming hot chili. The concoction was loaded with chunks of tender beef, peppers, and tomatoes. I lifted the spoon and, after blowing on it for a few seconds, took a hearty bite. The chili was thick and tasty. As I savored the rich texture and blend of flavors, a tingling sensation began to swell at the back of my mouth, and then, without warning, it erupted into flame and blazed across my tongue like a storm-blown prairie fire. As I lurched forward and grabbed the glass of beer, Louie chortled and poured me another draft. "I told ya it was a good batch."

After draining the first beer, I picked up the fresh one and drank half of it. I broke off a piece of cornbread and dabbed honey butter on it. Partial feeling returned to my mouth.

"Bravo, Louie. I think you've outdone yourself this time."

Louie nodded happily and motioned for me to eat, eat. More cautiously now, I returned to the chili. It definitely pushed the limits of my spicy threshold, but I managed. It certainly was delicious. Louie poured himself a mug full of Armageddon and leaned against the counter. "So, where you been?"

I took another gulp of beer. "Mexico City. I thought I had a case, but all I ended up with was a goose egg and another four thousand miles on my odometer."

Louie nodded sympathetically. "Sorry to hear that, Murph." He paused to sip his coffee. "You sure missed some excitement around here."

I looked up, my mouth full of chili. Louie took another sip.

"It's this damn crusade. Got everyone all worked up. I had a couple windows busted out and some graffiti. Rook got it worse. Had someone break into his pawnshop and mess the place up a bit."

I didn't bother to ask if anyone had called the police. The cops didn't concern themselves much with what happened in the Old City, especially in the Mutant sections.

Louie took another sip of java and shrugged. "But it ain't nothing' we can't handle. We set up a neighborhood watch, so I'm hopin' it ain't gonna be a recurrin' problem."

I blew lightly on a heaping spoonful of chili. “As long as those cops are parked outside, you shouldn’t have any trouble. Speaking of which, you have any idea what they’re doing here?”

The big Mutant shook his head. “Nope. They’ve been comin’ in a few times a day, but I can’t get a thing out of ’em.”

“Well, let me know if I can help out with your neighborhood watch.”

Louie set his mug down and turned to refill my beer. “I will, but I think we got it covered. At least they didn’t do nothin’ to Chelsea’s newsstand.” He turned around and set the full glass in front of me. “Which reminds me, when you gonna go out with that girl?”

I slathered butter on another piece of cornbread.

“I don’t know. Maybe when she quits knee-jerking me every time I bring up the subject.”

Louie grinned and picked up his mug. “Well, I ain’t no love doctor, but I’ll tell ya what I think. Chelsea’s a lot like one of them videodisc players. Once you get the skinny on how they work, they’re a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, well, I have a hard time operating an answering machine.”

On cue, the young lady in question suddenly appeared on the bar stool beside me.

“Hey, Tex. What’s going on?”

I dabbed my sweaty forehead with a napkin, wiped my hands, and reached for the pack of smokes. “Louie’s guiding me through the little known ninth circle of jalapeno hell. Want some?”

I glanced up at Louie, who was smiling broadly. Chelsea peered into the bowl and shook her head. “No thanks. I’m not a big fan of legumes.”

Her perfume was pushing my buttons. Chelsea, oblivious as ever to my heartfelt longing, turned to Louie and asked sweetly for a vodka tonic. As Louie mixed her drink, she turned to me. “So, what’s the good word? Got any new cases?”

I packed my cigarette on the counter and dug the Zippo out of my pocket. “Not really. Though I did come across something kind of odd this afternoon.”

I took out the blue card I'd found in the mail that morning. "What do you think about this?"

I handed the card to Chelsea. Louie finished mixing her drink and twisted around to take a look. After a moment he glanced up at me. "What is it?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. Came in the mail with no name or return address."

Chelsea was looking at it intently. "Maybe it's a license plate number. Or a VIN."

Louie shook his head. "Too many...what d'ya call 'em...characters...for a license plate. And there ain't enough for a VIN." He squinted at the card. "Lemme see ...eight, nine, ten. There's ten characters. If ya don't count the plus sign and change them letters to numbers, could be a phone number...you know, with an area code. What would it be? 2...9...5...2,2,6,1,1,8,4. Lemme grab a white pages."

Louie hurried off to the kitchen. Chelsea set the card in front of me and leaned an elbow on the counter, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. I swiveled slightly and looked straight at her. She smiled and motioned with her eyes toward the index card. "Kind of like a riddle, huh? I like riddles."

"I'm sure you do."

I turned my head and picked up my glass of beer. When I looked back at Chelsea, she had a feigned expression of shock on her face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. Consider it a special riddle, from me to you."

Louie backed through the kitchen doors with an open phone book in his hands.

"I don't see a 295 area code listed here." He ran his finger to the bottom of the page. "No, nothin'." He closed the book and set it under the bar, a hint of dejection on his broad face. "Maybe it's some kind of international code."

"Don't worry about it, Louie. It was a nice idea, but I don't think it's anything as simple as a phone number. I'll give my personal psychic a call and see if she can sense something useful."

Chelsea smiled and stood up with her drink. "Well, I'll leave you two handsome guys to your manly conversation. I've got to get back to my book."

I turned around on the bar stool and leaned back. “Let me guess. Damp Passion. The torid story of a stunningly beautiful model turned neurosurgeon, who must choose between the sincere but dull billionaire who loves her, and the impossibly handsome and innocent fugitive accused of murder, with whom she has tasted the ripe fruit of forbidden love.”

Chelsee raised an eyebrow.

“Actually, I’m reading The Collected works of O. Henry. You know, like the candy bar.”

She spun around, her hair bouncing attractively, and I couldn’t help but stare as she returned to her booth. She gave me a brief glare before blocking her face with the book. I turned back toward Louie, who was shaking his head.

“You sure got a magical way with women, Murph.”

A vid-phone beeped in the kitchen. Louie excused himself and went to answer it. I picked up the blue card and looked it over again. BXK+A261184. A serial number? Maybe I had to sleep on it. I stifled a yawn as I slipped the card back into the pocket of my overcoat, and decided that I should probably hit the hay early. As I collected my smokes and lighter, Louie stuck his head through the swinging doors.

“Hey, Murph. Call for ya.”

I’d never gotten a call at the diner before. Intrigued, I walked around the bar and into the kitchen. Mac Malden’s puffy face filled the vid-phone screen. It looked like he was calling from an outside pay vid-phone. “I tried your office first.”

“I’m not there.”

Mac rolled his eyes. “No kidding. Look, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for a week now. Actually, a lot of people have. I’ve been calling your office since I got your message. I figured I’d check the Brew & Stew and see if I could catch you before the boys on stakeout do.”

So my hunch had been right. “How’d I get so popular all of a sudden?”

Mac ran a hand nervously over his mustache. “Look, I’m going out on a limb here. I’m telling you this ‘cause I think they’re going after the wrong guy, and if you get a head start, you might be able to do something to cover your ass. Just remember - I didn’t make this call. If the commissioner finds out I’m warning you off, he’ll have me

walking the Mission District beat with a rubber gun.”

“Well, since you’re not making this call, how about if I don’t ask you what it was I did.”

The fat cop glanced over his shoulder as someone passed by, then looked back into the camera. “You know Roy O’Brien, right? The Colonel?”

That came out of the blue. “Sure. We go way back. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Good friends?”

“Used to be. We haven’t had much to do with each other for quite awhile, though.”

Mac squinted through his already squinted eyes. “Why’s that?”

“We had a bit of a falling out about fifteen years ago.”

“A woman?”

I laughed. “Yeah, right. It was during a case. I was learning the ropes and thought I knew everything. The Colonel broke a few incidental laws and I blew the whistle on him. The ethics board suspended his license for six months. Surprisingly enough, he canned me.”

Mac snorted. “You got off easy.”

“Well...live and learn. I’ve always done everything the hard way.”

Mac nodded. “So you haven’t talked to the Colonel since he gave you your walking papers.”

The fat cop wasn’t very crafty. I knew this was leading somewhere and decided to come clean. “Actually, I did talk to him a couple weeks ago...at my office. Showed up out of nowhere. I think we buried the hatchet. So to speak.”

Mac nodded slowly, creating a modestly uncomfortable silence. I was starting to get a funny feeling. “Is there something you want to tell me, Mac?”

The cop stuck a Merit under his mustache. “The Colonel disappeared about a week ago...around the same time you did.”

“So what? Maybe he’s on vacation. I heard that one time he stopped off at a convenience store, talked the counter girl into quitting her job, and showed up two weeks later with a slight limp and a Roadrunner tattoo.”

Mac blew out a long stream of smoke. “Not this time. We got a call from some lady whose dog showed up with a finger in its mouth. A human finger. It’d been cut off at the third knuckle and the print was still good, so we ran it. Turns out the finger belongs to the Colonel. We’ve been looking ever since, but we haven’t found the rest of him.”

“Nice.”

Mac nodded like a man who’d seen too many corpses to care anymore. “The commissioner and his special unit searched his office personally and found your name, along with not much else. According to Drysdale, that makes you murder suspect number one.”

UAKM - CHAPTER EIGHT

So, by all appearances, the Colonel was dead. Assimilating that fact was surreal, like the time I’d caught Sylvia with the upholsterer. What I needed was a bottle of bourbon and time to think, two luxuries I didn’t have. I could probably avoid the cops for awhile longer, but they’d find me eventually. And when they did, I’d be a glob of chewing gum on the sole of the commissioner’s five-hundred-dollar Italian loafers. Sure, the hospital in Brownsville could verify that I’d been there three days earlier, but Mac had said that the Colonel disappeared before then. My alibi was as airtight as cheese-cloth.

If Mac’s information was current, I wasn’t just the prime suspect, I was the only suspect. And Commissioner Drysdale enjoyed an abnormally high conviction rate. He was the kind of cop who craved closure, even if he had to settle for busting the wrong guy. Unless I could prove that I’d hadn’t used a cigar cutter on the Colonel, odds were good that I’d find myself learning a new trade and making sixty-seven cents a day at Pelican Bay.

I thanked Louie for dinner and made a hasty exit. There was nothing I could do to prove my innocence, short of finding another, more realistic lead for the cops. And the only places I could think of that would turn up such a thing were either the Colonel’s house or office. I wasn’t sure where the Colonel had been living, but I knew where his office was. I fired up the speeder and lifted off.

As I flew over the brightly lit city, I remembered the dream I’d had just before waking up in Brownsville hospital. I was certain now that it had been a replay of an actual conversation. Despite my severe drunkenness at the time, on some subconscious level

my brain had recorded everything. I found myself wondering about the reason for the Colonel's unexpected visit. Why had he made the trip to my office after so many years, only to leave without giving a reason for stopping by? It just didn't make any sense. The Colonel never did anything without some set purpose. He was like a grandmaster chess player, always thinking three or four moves ahead. I, myself, had always preferred checkers, though I also enjoyed dominoes and Parcheesi.

Images came to mind of the early days, when the Colonel had taken me under his wing. Despite the big breakup, I'd always considered my mentor a father figure, albeit a verbally abusive, overbearing, foster-parent-from-Hell type. The Colonel wasn't the nicest guy in the world, but he was a top-notch detective. His agency was one of the largest and best-known in this part of the country. The clientele was a veritable Who's Who of business, politics and Hollywood. Over the years, he'd earned a lot of respect, but he'd also made more than his share of enemies. I'd lasted only two years at his agency, but I could think of a dozen people who hated his guts and had subjectively good reasons for seeing them spilled all over his office's hundred-dollars-a-square-foot carpet.

Even in my straw-grasping state of mind, I wondered if I was kidding myself. Realistically, what were the chances of me finding something in the Colonel's office that Drysdale's special unit had overlooked? His men were professionals in the truest sense of the word, and the commissioner had been hell-bent. But it had happen-ed on occasion in the past. Maybe I was no better than a gambler who'd gotten lucky on the ponies a couple of times, bloated with overconfidence and confusing luck with talent.

The Colonel's office was in Sausalito, in a nice, quiet suburb of the city, where the commercial section trailed off into the residential area. As I descended toward the office, I saw lights on inside the reception area and a police speeder parked at the curb. This was an unforeseen complication. Under more favorable circumstances, the cops might have let me poke around the place, but I was a wanted man. A diversionary tactic was called for.

I set the speeder down two blocks away from the Colonel's office and around the corner from a mom-and-pop convenience store called the Market Basket. Seeing the store had inspired a plan. It was unethical and cal-lous, not to mention illegal, but it was a proven winner. I walked to the store and looked it over. A metal grate covered the store's façade, and a Rockwell Alarm System sticker was pasted onto the front window. Excellent.

I walked around the building to a small alley and searched until I found a goodsized chunk of asphalt. Returning to the front of the market, I glanced around to make sure no one was in sight, then reared back and heaved the asphalt. It flew between two metal

bars in the grate and shattered the front window. An alarm blared as I sprinted back to my speeder. Alarms were like dog whistles for cops. I figured it would get the attention of the patrolmen down the street.

Back in the speeder, I lifted off and sped around the block until I was on the other side of the Colonel's office, with a clear view of the front entrance. The cops were quick. They were already half way down the block, guns drawn and strings of saliva trailing behind them. I set the speeder down as close as I could without being obvious, then bolted for the door to the Colonel's office.

I stepped in gingerly and glanced around. Apparently, there had been only two cops, both of whom had fallen for my little ruse. I was in the reception/waiting area, which is where the policemen appeared to have set up shop, judging by the deck of cards, piles of Styrofoam, and mountains of fast food wrappers on the receptionist's desk.

I couldn't be sure of how much time I'd have to search the office, but I knew I had to hurry. I hustled down a hallway, turned left, and entered the Colonel's private office. I turned on the lights and saw that everything had been turned upside down, with drawers emptied and papers spilled all over the floor. An expensive chess set was scattered around. There was no way to tell if this had been done before or after the cops' investigation.

A cigarette butt on the floor caught my eye. I remembered that the Colonel had said he'd quit smoking. Maybe a careless cop had dropped it, but I hoped not. I picked up the filterless stub and saw the strange symbol on the wrapper. It was the same as the one on the butts I'd found in the mansion. This was beyond coincidence. But what would the person who set me up be doing in the Colonel's office? And how was he or she involved in the Colonel's disappearance?

I began searching the office, eyes peeled and ears straining to hear when the cops returned. I had no idea what I was searching for. After ten minutes or so, I became convinced that the police had taken everything of interest and tagged it for evidence. The papers on the floor turned out to be mostly empty forms and junk mail, and the Colonel's desk was practically empty. It did contain a paperback, titled Perry Mason and the Case of the Sleeping Wife. Naturally, I was a big fan of Erle Stanley Gardner, and I hated to see a perfectly good pulp novel go to waste. I picked up the book and stuck it in the pocket of my overcoat. Under the book was a stack of blue index cards, held together with a rubber band. They were just like the one I'd found with my mail that morning, except these were blank. After a moment's hesitation, I decided I'd have to consider the implications later.

There was a coat closet eight or nine feet to the right of the desk. I figured the cops

would've gone through it, but I checked it out anyway. There were two coats, a shirt, and an umbrella inside. I'd just about decided I was wasting my time, and was expecting the cops to return at any moment. I took one more look around the room and was about to leave when I noticed something odd.

A thermostat control box was affixed to the wall by the door, but it suddenly dawned on me that there were two of them in the office. I examined the one by the door closely and decided that it was actually what it appeared to be. The second box was on the same wall as the coat closet but, unlike the first, had a casing of smoke-tinted plastic. I looked it over, then carefully pulled the casing off the wall. Staring back at me was what appeared to be a camera lens.

Apparently, Drysdale's men had missed this little item. It was just like the Colonel to have a hidden surveillance camera installed in his office. And it was almost certain that no one but the Colonel would know it was there. I thought it over for a minute. The camera was probably attached to a videodisc recorder or something equiv-alent. The question was, where? I moved back and look-ed at the wall. Stepping outside the office, I tried to de-termine if there could possibly be a small area unaccounted for behind the camera. By my rough estimates, there seemed to be.

I walked back to the coat closet and stepped inside. As near as I could tell, if there was some kind of concealed room, it had to be accessible through the right wall of the closet. I inspected the wall and saw a hairline crack running horizontally about four feet off the floor. I ran my hands over the surface of the wall, pressing and prodding. Finally, in the top left corner, I pushed and heard a click. The lower four feet of the wall sprung open.

Pulling the panel back, I got down on my knees and crawled into the space beyond. I pulled out my Zippo and lit it. After moving the flame around for a few sec-onds, I found a switch and flipped it. A light came on, and I found myself in an area a little smaller than the interior of a cardboard freezer box. I stood and saw a camera sitting on a tripod, pointed at the wall. Piled on the floor were stacks of videodisc jeweled cases, hundreds of them. When I checked the camera, I saw that it was turned on, but wasn't running.

I pressed the release button on the camera, and a videodisc ejected softly into my hand. It was almost too much to hope for. The disc could've been recording the last time the Colonel was in his office. Maybe he'd been abducted, or even killed here in his office. Was it possible that the Colonel's murder had been recorded?

Suddenly, through the wall, I heard voices. The cops had returned. I pulled the coat closet panel shut, flipped off the light, and put my ear against the wall. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but their voices weren't getting any closer to the Colonel's

office.

I waited at least fifteen minutes. When I was fairly sure they were going to stay where they were, I ventured out of the video room, breathing through my mouth and moving as slowly and quietly as possible. There was a closed window on the opposite wall. I tiptoed across the room, careful to avoid stepping on anything that would make noise. I wished I'd thought to shut the office door.

I reached the window and, as I bent down to raise the sash, spotted a Gordon Lightfoot CD case on the floor. The video surveillance disc was in my pocket, and it occurred to me that, if it got scratched, it might be seriously damaged. I picked up the CD case, which was empty, inserted the other disc, and stuck it in my pocket. The window sash was unlocked and lifted easily. I'd gotten one leg over the sill when I heard a click behind me. It sounded very much like a handgun being cocked. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a smiling cop standing in the doorway.

“Well, if it isn't Mr. Murphy, returning to the scene of the crime. Looks like I've got me an extra week of vacation.”

UAKM - CHAPTER NINE

It was only the third time I'd ever been handcuffed, and the first two times had nothing to do with the legal process. My hands were going numb as the cops escorted me into the holding area of the police station. It was 9:30, and the usual assortment of vagrants, ladies of the night, and frightened-face teenagers were seated on the benches. The air inside was tinged with the queasy odors of weak coffee, stale cigarette smoke, and vomit. A trio of hideous and unsanitary-looking hookers sat bunched together like Charlie's Angels from a parallel universe. They cackled as the cops led me past them, and I felt like the title character in some contemporary, inner-city production of Macbeth.

When my handcuffs were removed, I was asked to take off my shoes, coat, hat, and all personal effects, after which I went through the delights of the booking process. Everyone involved was unnecessarily jovial, acting as if they were the helpful staff in some hellish resort spa. There was only one belligerent cop, as allowed by law. I told him I had to call his wife and tell her I wouldn't be able to make it over till later. This seemed to offend him, and he took it upon himself to make sure I didn't loiter at the door to the drunk tank.

I picked myself up off the floor and looked around at my fellow inmates. Surprisingly, or not, most of them weren't much different from the guys I'd played poker with in college. A little older and more damp. There were a couple of vintage bums, drunk on

some cousin of Lysol and focusing on nothing in particular. The odd man out was a young man, no more than twenty years old, wearing a Polo sweater and dress slacks. He was sweating like a pimp in Sunday school.

The benches were filled, so I took a seat on the concrete floor. On top of everything else, the cops had made me leave my smokes and lighter with me personal effects. Taking my shoes I could understand. Shoelace suicides were a rich tradition in prison lore. But what did they think I'd do with a pack of Lucky Strikes? Smoke myself to death? Stage a prison riot while brandishing a red hot cherry? It'd been less than an hour, and I was already experiencing nicotine withdrawal. From somewhere outside the cell, I heard pitiful wailing. Maybe the cops were working off some empty calories. I drew my knees up to my chest and rested my forehead on them.

This was not the greatest night of my life. It'd probably been stupid of me to go to the Colonel's office. Except for the surveillance disc, the contents of which might turn out to be completely worthless, I'd ended up with nothing but smudged fingertips and a criminal record. Drysdale now had his scapegoat in custody, and it was just a matter of due process before I was taken to trial and an impartial jury of my peers found me guilty and handed down a life sentence complete with a one-way ticket to the lunar penal colony. Not that it wouldn't be an improvement over the existential quality of my past few years. At least I'd get three meals, some time to read, and rent-free accommodations. I was already celibate, so that wouldn't be a problem.

"Scuse me!"

A loud and warm gust of pickled breath blew into the side of my face, interrupting my bleak introspection. I turned my head to see a tiny wino sitting beside me and leaning close. He was old and rail-thin. With his spiky white hair and five-day beard growth, he resembled a toilet brush.

"The name's Rusty." He extended his hand, which I ignored for sanitary reasons. He paused, then looked from me to his hand, before wiping it on his pants. "I ain't seen you here before."

I nodded curtly, trying to discourage further conversation. Rusty went on, oblivious.

"Me, I been in here quite a bit." He thrust what was left of his jaw in the direction of a loudly snoring sack. "Not as much as old Quentin there. Ain't that right, Jerry?"

Another watery-eyed denizen nodded unsteadily. "Dat's right."

Rusty clapped me on the back. "So what they got you for?"

I cleared my throat. “They say I waited for my grandparents to fall asleep, then hacked them into little pieces with a shovel.”

Rusty stared at me for several seconds, then got up and staggered across the cell. Behind me, a good-sized space had appeared on the bench. I climbed up and stretched out leisurely.

I’d been resting for about thirty minutes when the cell door opened and a burly prison guard summoned me. I followed obediently through a maze of corridors until we reached the door to the commissioner’s office.

Commissioner Armon Drysdale was a mean son of a bitch. He was one of the few men I’d ever met who could make full-grown adults feel like they were back in the principal’s office, mired in a bucket of fresh manure. All the cops were scared to death of him. He and I had only spoken a couple of times and, I had to admit, hadn’t hit it off particularly well. I seem to remember making an unflattering remark about his lack of social skills. Malden had said I was lucky I didn’t end up in the drunk tank for a week.

The guard knocked lightly on the door, and I was ushered inside by a young, crew-cut man wearing the kind of dark blue suit that comes with two pairs of pants. Drysdale sat regally behind his desk, arms folded across an Armani suit and an intolerant expression on his stone-cut face. He fixed his dark, unblinking eyes on me.

“That’ll be all, Blake. Go back to your post and do something useful.”

The large man mumbled something subservient and unintelligible and marched back out the door. Drysdale motioned for the young man behind me to leave as I stepped toward the chair in front of the desk.

“I didn’t invite you to sit down, Murphy.”

The office door closed, and I casually stuck my hands in my pockets. The commissioner unfolded his arms and crossed his legs precisely. “I assume you know why you’re here.”

“Yeah. Something about a parking ticket.”

Drysdale didn’t smile. “Colonel Roy O’Brien disappeared six days ago. When the Missing Persons’ report was filed, we searched his home, then his office. When the investigators went in, they found your name and address written in an appointment book. We’ve been trying to find you ever since. Now that you’re here, we can proceed in a variety of ways. You can tell me why your name was there and everything else you

can think I'd want to know. Or, you can be a smart-ass. In which case, I'll throw you back in the drunk tank, and we'll try it again next week. It's up to you."

I considered for a moment. "I guess I'll take the first one."

Drysdale looked down at the sleeve of his fifteen-hundred-dollar jacket and delicately picked off a piece of lint. "I'm waiting."

"There's not much to tell. I hadn't seen the Colonel in years. The other night, he shows up in my office. We chat for a few minutes about nothing in particular, then he leaves. That's it."

"Which night was it that he came to your office?"

I tried to recall.

"I'd guess it was about two weeks ago. Give or take a day."

The commissioner fixed a glare on me and held it for probably twenty second, though it seemed substantially longer. "What did he talk about?"

I found a small hole in the bottom of my pocket and thought about how good a smoke would be. "Like I told you, nothing in particular. He said I looked like hell, mentioned something about retiring to a tropical island, then told me to shape up. He didn't say a thing about his upcoming murder or who the killer would be."

Drysdale held up a finger as a subtle warning. "Don't test me, Murphy. I don't like you. And if you push me, I'll kick your ass so hard, only dogs will hear you fart."

He reached into his sleeve and pulled down the cuff of his dress shirt to exactly a quarter inch below the hem of the jacket.

"The Colonel was a good friend of mine. I'm going to find whoever killed him and blow his or her brains out. From what I've heard, the only thing you've been capable of killing over the past few months is brain cells. But that isn't a viable alibi. Where were you last week ago?"

I didn't appreciate the cheap shot, but he had the home-field advantage. One thing was for sure - if I ever caught him on neutral ground, he'd get a verbal beating he wouldn't soon forget.

"I was in Mexico City, working on a case."

“Can anyone verify that you were there?”

I’d been afraid it would come to this. “Probably not.”

“Who hired you?”

This wasn’t going to sound good. “I don’t know. I was set up. When I got back, my client had pulled a disappearing act.”

The commissioner stared at me for some time, an incredulous expression on his face.

“You’re either a bigger idiot, or a lot more clever than everyone thinks. Your story is too unbelievably stupid to be fabricated.” Drysdale shook his head. “Either way, I’ve got you dead to rights for breaking and entering, as well as tampering with a crime scene. And, while I can’t prove it, a jury could probably be convinced that you threw the rock into the store window. Put all the charges together with the Colonel’s appointment book and the bad blood between the two of you, and I’ve got a reasonable body of circumstantial evidence.”

Drysdale said it like he actually believed it. I wasn’t about to say anything, but I suspected that he’d have a hard time convicting me on even one of the charges. Unfortunately, the cop was probably betting I couldn’t make bail, and that would allow him to detain me until my court date, which he could push back indefinitely. I had one blind card in the hole, and it was time to play it.

“I found something at the Colonel’s office.”

Drysdale’s cool façade lapsed for a split second. He leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. “I’m listening.”

“The Colonel had a surveillance camera set up in his office.”

The commissioner sat back in his chair, a smirk on his face. “You’re lying.”

I shook my head, mirroring the smirk. “That’d be a pretty stupid thing to lie about, don’t you think? There was a secret chamber through the side of the coat closet. There was videodisc recorder inside, and I took the last disc out of it.”

Drysdale didn’t want to believe me, but I had his attention. “Where’s the disc?”

“Drop the charges, and I’ll tell you.”

“You’re in no position to barter, Murphy. Where the hell is the disc?”

Anyone but Drysdale would’ve been willing to bargain. All I could do at this point was tell him where it was and hope it panned out. “It’s with my personal effects. In a Gordon Lightfoot CD case.”

Keeping his eyes trained on me, Drysdale activated his vid-phone and requested that the envelope with my things in it be brought to his office. After he disconnected, he raised a finger. “This better be on the level. If you’re jerking me around, you’d better have someone send you a lifetime supply of soap-on-a-rope.”

We waited in silence until the young nazi entered the room and handed a large manila envelope to Drysdale. The commissioner removed the disc and stood up. Crossing to a side table, he inserted it into a videodisc player and turned it on. Drysdale pulled a chair to the table and sat down, giving me a clear view over his shoulder.

The monitor flickered, and then a view of the Colonel’s empty office appeared on-screen. In the lower right corner was a time and date display. It was 10:15 A.M., December 1. The Colonel stepped into the picture from the direction of the coat closet. He walked through, then reappeared a moment later with a cup of coffee in hand.

Drysdale fast-forwarded for a few seconds until we saw the Colonel welcome a middle-aged woman into his office. Drysdale turned up the volume, and I could hear the Colonel discussing a job.

Drysdale resumed scanning. The Colonel stayed in his office for the remainder of the morning and then had another visitor around 12:45. He left after the second appointment, and the office was deserted throughout the afternoon. The empty office grew steadily darker as the image fast-forwarded. The commissioner glanced at me over his shoulder. He seemed impatient. It didn’t appear that this was going to do me any good.

The image slowed to real time when the office lights came on and the Colonel reappeared. Behind his desk, he put on his jacket and tightened his necktie, then sat down. It looked as though he was expecting someone. Drysdale fast-forwarded until the Colonel rose from his seat and crossed the room, out of camera range. He returned a moment later, exchanging pleasantries with a slightly built, dark-haired man, who was wearing a long overcoat and carrying a valise. The Colonel gestured toward a chair on the near side of the desk and started walking around the desk with his back to the man. He seemed to be on his guard, but it didn’t matter. With a lightening-quick move, the stranger whipped something out of his overcoat and brought it down viciously on the

back of the Colonel's head. The sickening thud was clearly audible and made me wince involuntarily. As the Colonel hit the floor, the other man pounced and slapped a pair of handcuffs on him. Then, with surprising strength, the stranger pulled the Colonel around the desk and into the chair where the Colonel had been sitting seconds before.

Drysdale was leaning forward, and I moved a step closer. We watched as the unconscious Colonel was secured to the chair. His captor was wearing delicate-looking gold spectacles and had a jet-black mustache too large for his face. His skin was dark - he looked like he might be Middle Eastern, though he could have been wearing makeup and a false mustache for all I knew. Other than his complexion and facial hair, he looked nondescript, average. His would be a difficult face to identify. One thing was certain, though - he was much too short to be the man who'd posed as the countess's butler.

Within thirty seconds, the dark-haired man had the Colonel thoroughly fastened to the chair. There hadn't been one wasted movement - this guy was obviously a professional. He lifted the Colonel's rag-doll head and waved what appeared to be smelling salts under his nose. With a jerk, the Colonel's head snapped back, eyes blinking wildly.

The dark-haired man turned calmly to the Colonel, who was shaking his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs. Almost breezily, the man removed a small silver case and extracted a cigarette. As he methodically lit what I presumed was a now-familiar French cigarette, he spoke softly to the Colonel, too softly for me to make out the words. After a moment, the Colonel looked up. "I know who you are. I'm just wondering what took you so long."

The words were clear, but the voice sounded far away. I couldn't catch what the stranger said in reply, but he went on speaking for some time. The Colonel moved slightly, testing how securely he was tied down. It was hopeless. He wasn't going to escape.

"You and whoever you're working for can kiss my ass."

In a blur, the interrogator slashed his hands across the Colonel's face. After several seconds, a red line appeared on the Colonel's cheek, and blood began to seep out of the wound. The Colonel stared back defiantly. "You might as well go ahead and kill me. I haven't got anything to say to you."

The soft voice continued, now more menacing. The Colonel interrupted with a spiteful laugh. Again, the attacker lashed out, and the Colonel began to bleed from both sides of his face. He continued to smile as blood ran into the corners of his mouth. "You got the wrong guy. How should I know anything about the Winter Chip. Why don't you check with someone at CAPRICORN? It's their chip. Oh, I forgot. You blew the place up. Looks like you're just out of luck."

The stranger walked around the desk and picked up the valise he'd dropped when he'd made his attack. Setting it on the desk, he opened it, and I saw something inside gleam as it caught the light. Out came a hypodermic needle and a small bottle. Slowly and deliberately, he filled the needle and walked back behind the Colonel. The stranger spoke for some time, his voice so low as to be almost imperceptible. When he finished, the Colonel took a deep breath. "Go to hell."

The answering voice rose slightly, and I detected a slight accent. The Colonel looked straight ahead and didn't respond. His interrogator held the hypodermic up to the light and pressed until a stream of liquid spurted out the end. Leaning down, he inserted the needle into the Colonel's neck. The Colonel struggled at first, then slowly relaxed. Finally, his head lolled forward, onto his chest.

The dark-haired man put away the needle, then left the room. Moments later, he reappeared along with another man whose face I couldn't get a clear look at. Together, they released the Colonel from the handcuffs and carried his limp body out of the room. It was impossible to tell if he was still alive. The small man returned and walked past the camera. The lights shut off, and the screen went blank.

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Five minutes later, I was standing at the checkout counter, collecting my wing tips, overcoat, and fedora. The old cop working the counter handed over my clothing, as jolly as a sub for Santa doling out gifts to an impoverished child.

"Now here's a nice hat. I used to wear a hat like that. That's how I lost my hair." He guffawed loudly. I ignored him and emptied the contents of the manila envelope onto the counter. Keys, wallet, lighter, cigarettes (thank God), several envelopes (one full of cigarette butts), the blue index card, and the Perry Mason book. As I returned the items to the appropriate pockets, I noticed something sticking out between the pages of the paperback.

It turned out to be a picture of the Colonel, who was dressed like a pirate, and a beautiful young woman, who was wearing a neon-pink bikini and holding a trophy. I flipped the photo over and read "Happy Halloween! Love and Kisses, Melahn." The bald cop contorted to get a look at the front side of the photo.

"Here, son. Mind if I take a look at that?"

I handed it over and continued distributing. The cop whistled. "Haven't seen this one for awhile. What a piece of work she was." Through the snickering, I took back the photo

and looked at it again. So, the Colonel had found himself a little plaything. I had to admit, she was an eye-popper. I wondered whether the cops had found anything linking the Colonel to this Melahn person. Maybe if I could track her down, she'd have an idea why someone had cut her sugar daddy's finger off. It was worth a try. I slipped the picture into my pocket along with the paperback and went looking for Mac.

Malden, despite his seniority, had been stuck in the late shift for as long as I'd known him and still hadn't been able to adjust his internal clock. He was slumped against a coffee machine, eyes closed, waiting for his cup to fill. I walked over, pulling out a cigarette. Bilge water gurgled from the bowels of the machine, filling the air with a wet ashtray smell. Mac heard me approaching and opened his eyes grudgingly. "Coffee?"

I lit my smoke. "I'd love some, if you have any."

Mac shrugged apathetically. "Suit yourself."

He extracted the cup of pond scum and aimed his tired girth in the direction of his office. Just as we'd gotten seated, Mac's vid-phone beeped, and he answered it. From the tone of the conversation, it was his wife Joanne.

I pulled out the photo of the Colonel and Melahn and looked it over again. The old man always had a taste for younger girls - not too young in the legal sense, but young enough to offend churchgoers. I inspected the photo closely. With my vague recollection of what the Colonel had looked like a few months ago, the picture was taken recently. Maybe he'd still been seeing this girl.

She was beautiful in a slightly soiled way. The Colonel had always preferred his playmates a little trashy, and this one certainly fit the bill. But even under the fashionably excessive makeup and overenlarged breasts, there was something undeniably appealing about Melahn. She was the kind of dame that got men into trouble. I wanted to meet her.

I knew that Drysdale would pursue every angle to find out who the Colonel's abductor had been, but I was planning on making my own inquiries. At one time, I'd felt a real affinity for the old man, and I couldn't just stand by knowing that he'd been murdered. Besides, if I found out who the killer was, it might get me in good with Drysdale, who'd be a considerably more useful contact than Mac Malden.

The fat cop disconnected from the vid-phone and looked at me pathetically, like a dog on his last trip to the vet. I'd never met Joanne...I only knew the effect she had on her poor husband. I decided to change the subject.

“You look great, Mac. The extra weight sure suits you.”

Mac pulled a soggy Merit out from beneath his yellowed mustache, sprinkling ash on his tie. He was obviously too tired to care about friendly provocation. He looked exhausted and irregular, and his scalp glistened beneath a thinning layer of blond hair.

“Looks like you worked things out with Drysdale.”

I nodded. “I owe you one for the tip. It bought me just enough time.”

“I didn’t give you a tip, so shut up about it.” Mac dropped his cigarette into a pool of stale coffee at the bottom of a Styrofoam cup, then reached into a brown lunch bag and pulled out a doughnut. His jowls jiggled as he took a bite. Another doughnut was the last thing he needed. I felt a need to express my concern for his health.

“I think there should be a warning printed on doughnut boxes: Eating these can result in double chins, tight pants, and will kill you as fast as cigarettes.”

Mac stared at me like a beef cow as he slowly chewed his cud and swallowed.

“For your information, this is a Diet Donut. Fat free, cholesterol free, forty calories, and ten grams of fiber. It tastes like a dog toy, but Joanne’s forcing me to eat ‘em. She makes these surprise visits to the office, and if she catches me with an actual pastry, she’ll rip my head off.”

“Well, you know what they say, Mac. Be good to your bowels and they’ll be good to you.”

“Go to hell.”

The lump of a policeman downed the last of the snack and reached for his pack of Merits. “What’s on your mind, Murphy?” Mac picked up my Zippo like it was his and held it to the end of a poorly packed cigarette. The tobacco seemed to cleanse his palette, and he looked somewhat refreshed. I was happy for him.

“Take a look at this for me.” I handed over the photo I’d found in the paperback.

Mac stared at it apathetically and tossed it onto the desk in front of me. “Nice looking broad.”

“You recognize her?”

Mac shook his head. "Should I?"

"I don't know. I've got a hunch she has a police record. Her name's Melahn. That's all I know about her."

Mac turned on his computer, pointed and clicked several times, then typed in his name. He leaned over and picked up the photo and held it up to the screen. "Tode. T-O-D-E. Melahn Tode. Been picked up twice for soliciting and once for possession. She got suspended sentences for all of them, but she's still on probation. Here's an address. No phone number."

Mac rotated the monitor, and I made a note. Now, there was one other item of business.

"Tell me, Mac, how busy is your crack investigative team at the moment?"

The fat cop reached for another Merit, then consulted a desk calendar.

"Well, Lenny's wife is visiting her mom over the weekend, so he's hosting the poker game on Friday. Don's hair plugs got infected, so he's out sick for a few days. And, of course, Wednesday is our bowling league night down at Lois Lanes." Mac leaned back in his chair. "Looks like we're booked. Why?"

"I've got something of a mystery on my hands, and I was hoping your guys could help out."

Mac shrugged. "Let's hear it. Try to make it exciting...I'm barely awake."

"OK, in a nutshell, I was hired by someone calling herself Countess Renier. I went to her house, which turned out to be a mansion in Pacific Heights. 2429 Fillmore."

Mac wobbled forward and made a note.

"The details of the case aren't important, but I ended up in Brownsville, Texas, where someone played jai alai with my head and put me in the hospital for a couple days. When I got back in town, I went to see my client, and her house was cleaned out. Turns out, it's been up for sale and supposedly empty for months."

Mac focused his eyes, now more alert. "A scam."

I nodded.

"And you want me to have the boys look the place over."

“If they can fit it into their hectic schedules.”

Mac leaned his head against the back of the chair and blew a smoke ring toward the dingy ceiling. He took his time finishing the cigarette, then sat forward, elbows on the desk.

“Tell you what, Murphy. Things are a little slow around here. We haven’t had a good murder case in months. Every day it’s the same old thing - some Mutant’s been beat up, a gang of Norms broke into some Mutant’s store, some old Mutant shot a Norm on the subway. Mutants, Norms, Mutants, Norms. I’ll tell ya, I’m so sick of this crusade crap I could puke. Whatever happened to good old-fashioned crime?”

I shook my head sympathetically.

“I’m with you, Mac. The world’s going to hell. But this case is a real mystery and doesn’t have a thing to do with Mutants or Norms.”

Mac doused his Merit.

“OK, Murphy. We’ll check this place out for ya. I just got an anonymous tip that someone broke in there. I’ll let you know if we turn anything up.”

UAKM - CHAPTER TEN

The city sparkled with Christmas lights, and the metropolitan air space was jammed with speeders, filled with shoppers returning from the extended-hours holiday frenzy. It was annoying. This was my least favorite time of the year. The weather was cold and clammy, and something about the yuletide season always brought out the grinch in me. I wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was the fact that a simple Christian celebration had been grafted onto a set of pagan rituals and fertilized with steaming piles of commercialism, turning the whole event into a bastardized maelstrom of greed and questionable religious value. Or maybe it was because Santa never brought me a pony.

The bottle of bourbon tucked under my arm represented a third of my remaining liquid capital. I unlocked the door to my office and stepped into the darkness. The chilly, damp street air gave way to the warm, smoky smell of home. The green glowing numbers on my watch read 11:11 PM. It’d been one of the longest ten-hour stretches of my life, and I was exhausted...but I wasn’t going to sleep.

The white glow from the streetlights outside fell through my venetian blinds and washed

across the floor, giving the room a ghostly look. I crossed to my desk, set the bottle down, and turned on the banker's lamp. In less than a minute, I was shoeless, hatless, and coatless, with a loosened tie and the melancholy strains of Miles Davis echoing off peeling wallpaper.

A speeder flashed past my windows, headed in the direction of the new city. Five million lost souls, clustered together among piles of rubble and sleek, sterile construction. Things were different now. I wondered if things were different back home, too. Probably. Everything was going to hell.

I tore the plastic wrapper off the top of the Jack Daniel's bottle and removed the cap. I'd made a quick stop at a liquor store on the way home and decided to buy the good stuff. Seeing the Colonel buy the farm had made me feel even more mortal than usual. For all I knew, this might be my last night on Earth. I stuck a Lucky Strike in the corner of my mouth and poured myself half a glass of sedative. My two best friends. I picked up the tumbler and raised it in memory of my late mentor. Three shots of bourbon coursed down my throat: one for him, one for me, and one to fill the empty feeling in the pit of my gut. I took a deep drag and refilled the glass. There was a message on the vid-phone. I pressed the playback button, then leaned back in my chair, eyes closed and feet crossed on top of my desk.

Alaynah's face appeared on the screen. "Hello, Tex. I just wanted to call and say I had a great time today. It was lovely to see you. Give me a call. My number's 671-3892. Bye."

I opened my eyes and watched smoke curl around the gold and green light of the banker's lamp. Miles stepped aside as John Coltrane's plaintive sax played an aching eulogy. I reached over to the vid-phone and erased the message. Another sip of bourbon burned in my throat.

I turned my head and looked in the direction of a photograph hung on the wall. All I could see was the reflection on the frame, but I knew what it showed. It was me, the Colonel, and Xavier Jones...an old photo. I wondered why I'd held onto it all these years. Maybe as a reminder of more innocent times. Or maybe for the same reason I kept a picture of Sylvia on my desk - to never let me forget the biggest mistakes of my life.

I leaned forward to stub out my cigarette and thought back to the last time I'd seen the Colonel, trying to remember everything he'd said during his mysterious visit. Even through the fermented haze of that night, I knew there wasn't much to remember. The more I thought about it, the more sure I was that he'd come by for a purpose. Did he know his life was in danger? Was he looking me up as insurance? So I'd follow up on him? If that was the case, why me? He'd said that he'd heard about me, that I'd done some good work. But there had to be other people he trusted, people he worked with.

Maybe that was it. Maybe he wasn't sure who he could trust.

Then there were the things I'd heard the Colonel say to his killer. He'd mentioned CAPRICORN, which I knew a little about, and something called the Winter Chip. Whatever this Winter Chip was, it seemed to be the thing the killer was looking for. The Colonel had always been hard for me to read, and I wasn't sure if he'd been bluffing or telling the truth when he'd said he didn't know about the Winter Chip. Regardless of what all this means, the Colonel had obviously gotten himself mixed up in something big and dangerous. He was the best PI I'd ever known, and it had gotten him murdered. And I knew I was about to get involved.

I slid another Lucky Strike out of the pack and fired it up. After another sip of bourbon, I drew in deeply on my cigarette and reached for the items I'd taken out of my overcoat pocket and laid on the desk. I picked up the blue index card with the code. BXK +A261184. I was now almost certain that the Colonel had sent this to me. Was I supposed to know what the numbers and letters meant?

I spent the next several hours smoking one cigarette after another and attempting to solve the code. I looked through reference books, racked my brain, analyzed, and stared until my eyes started to lose focus. It was useless. I'd always believed I had a knack for codes and brainteasers, but I had to admit I was beaten at the moment.

I wasn't in the right frame of mind for solving puzzles. I turned off the lamp on my desk and paced slowly around my office, stopping occasionally to refill my glass, pick up a smoke, or stare out the windows at the black-cold night and the crimson moon which stared back like a blood-shot eye.

I did a lot of thinking while the city slept. I thought about the Colonel. I tried to remember every detail of my dealings with the countess. Had she sent someone to follow me? It was the only explanation that made sense. And why bother to jump me, when all I was planning on doing was returning the statuette and getting paid? Throw the code into the mix, and it was like trying to assemble three jigsaw puzzles from one big pile of pieces.

My mind wandered. I thought about fate and wondered if there was any reason for why things turn out the way they do. Around 4 A.M., I decided there wasn't. There's no finish line, no final payoff. You just keep breathing until your body gives up, and in the meantime, it's a matter of survival.

And groups like the Crusade for Genetic Purity didn't make things any easier. What the hell did they know? When it came right down to it, we were all Mutants, genetically or otherwise. What did it matter if someone's face was covered with radiation scars?

Everyone carries around as much damage as the next guy. A dame with a beautiful face and spotless DNA could be more deeply scarred, emotionally or psychologically, than the most wretched-looking Mutant. We're all crippled in some way or another.

I thought about Louie LaMintz, the bloated Mutant saint, probably snoring loudly somewhere above his beloved Brew & Stew. I wondered if he ever stood at his window at four in the morning and thought, why? I doubted it. He just got up early every day, fired up the kitchen, and started making everyone's life a little more enjoyable. Whether it was a story, supper, or running tabs for down-on-their-luck PIs, Louie was the very definition of a good guy. I suddenly wanted to be down there at the Brew & Stew, cozying up to the bar, drinking cold beers, eating something tasty, telling stories.

But the Brew & Stew wouldn't be open for another couple of hours. I lit another cigarette and poured out three more fingers of bourbon.

UAKM - CHAPTER ELEVEN

I was back at the window overlooking the street when the first rays of sunlight knifed through the blood red sky. Feeling like a voyeur, but glad to see a familiar human being, I stared as Chelsea walked to her newsstand from the direction of the Brew & Stew. There was no one else on the street, though I could see speeders beginning to dot the sky in the distance, over the new city. I watched as Chelsea opened bundles of newspapers and laid them in neat piles on the counter. Even from across the street, I could see faint clouds of her warm breath. It was an appealing sight.

I ran my bourbon-soaked tongue over my teeth. My breath would probably scare off a pit bull. Down at the newsstand, Chelsea finished arranging her papers and then sat on a high stool with her knees up and hands cupped around a large plastic mug, undoubtedly full of Louie's panacean coffee.

I glanced at my watch. It was 6:54. I trudged to the bathroom, splashed some water on my face, and brushed my teeth. Twice. There was a vague sensation in the back of my head like an echo of a hangover. I grabbed a plastic bottle, shook out four aspirin, and took them with water straight from the tap. A little aftershave, and I was good as new.

Chelsea looked up as my clanging footsteps reverberated noisily off the rusty fire escape and ricocheted down the empty, puddle-pocked street. Damn, it was nippy. I crossed to the newsstand where she was huddled over her coffee, soaking up a java-steam facial treatment.

Chelsea Bando was a rare dame - that kind that could hold her own with anyone, as well as turn a man's knees to jelly. Long, blond hair, blue eyes, perfect teeth, and the kind of

voice that curled your toes. Every dope in the neighborhood had the hots for Chelsee, but she seemed to think she was just one of the guys. Unfortunately, she had all those curvy parts to complicate things. On any normal day, I would've made polite conversation, brought up the suggestion that we go out sometime, get shot down, then leave.

After a sleepless night, I didn't feel up to it. To Chelsee's amazement, I actually bought a paper, politely thanked her, and headed for Louie's diner. Safely in the warm belly of the Brew & Stew, I proceeded to fill my veins with steaming caffeine. The diner had a good-sized breakfast crowd, and Louie was bustling around, too busy for idle chitchat. It was just as well. I wasn't in a verbal mood.

Louie's television, mounted in the upper right corner behind the bar, was turned on to a morning show, hosted by two wide-eyed "beautiful people." The program seemed to be a cross between a fourth grade show-and-tell and an infomercial. I was too beat for such mindless joy and turned my attention to the sports section of my newspaper.

I finished the crossword puzzle and my ninth cup of Armageddon a little after eight o'clock. It was late enough, and I was sufficiently wired, so I got up and left the diner. The interior of my speeder was like an icebox. Ten minutes later, I was cruising over an old part of the city, near Oakland, as run-down an area as the one I lived in. As I flew over the rubble-strewn streets and disintegrating apartment complexes, I had to wonder how much longer the Mutants would put up with the current state of affairs. The war had pretty much obliterated the middle-class. The rich, for the most part Norms, had decided to build the new city and leave the old city in ruins. The only sections they'd cleaned up were the prime ones, along the bay. The Mutants, along with destitute Norms like myself, were left with the scraps.

Melahn Tode's residence was a nineteenth-century brownstone, the color of a used cigarette filter. Columns rose in front of the building, cracked and stained, like an old man's fingers. I walked to the front door and saw the word Knickerbocker stenciled over cheap stained glass. Pushing the door open released the odor of rotten wood and ancient dust. The landing was unlit, and the walls and floor were a uniform shade of soil. I glanced at the row of mail slots and saw the name M. Tode listed for apartment eleven.

Three flights of stairs later, I was slightly out of breath, and the stale air wasn't helping. I reached number eleven and paused to collect myself before knocking. After several moments, the door opened just enough to reveal a long, shapely leg, a white terry cloth bathrobe, and a cascade of untamed blond hair. Even with only a sliver showing, Melahn Tode was certainly an eyeful. She checked me over thoroughly before saying anything.

"What do you want?"

I pulled out my wallet, flipped it open to my fake police ID, and held it squarely in front of her light blue eyes.

Melahn looked back at me casually. "What do you want?"

I reached into my pocket and held up the photo of her and the Colonel. I didn't react as her hand shot out from behind the door and snatched the picture. The sudden movement had pushed the door open halfway. As she examined the photo, I couldn't help but notice that her robe had loosened some, revealing the center third of an amazingly constructed torso. Only money could buy that kind of sculpture.

Melahn glanced up at me sharply. "Where'd you get this?"

"We found it at the Colonel's office. He's missing. We're pretty sure he's been murdered. And we're hoping you know something that will help us in our investigation."

Melahn stood as still as a statue for several seconds, then turned away from the door and walked into her apartment. Since she didn't slam the door, I took it as a cue and followed her in. She crossed the room to a small hutch and poured herself a half glass of something clear. Her hand shook as she took a long drink. It wasn't water. Melahn turned to me, and I barely detected a throb in her voice. "What happened?"

For some reason, I hadn't thought about what effect the news of the Colonel's death would have on a paroled prostitute. Now, staring at Melahn, I felt stupid and uncomfortable. I wasn't sure if I should make an attempt to comfort her - which I suddenly wanted to do - or stick to the facts and get through this as quickly as possible. I decided to try and make it as gentle as I could.

"He was abducted from his office. It may have had something to do with one of the cases he was working on."

Cradling her drink in both hands, Melahn sat down on a wicker chair and stared miserably at the floor. "He said he wasn't going to take any more cases. He said he was done with all that." Melahn looked up at me and took another drink of stabilizing fluid. "We were going away together...at the end of the month. He was going to retire...and we were..."

Without looking at me, Melahn sprang up and bolted from the room. I watched her leave and decided I needed to smoke. An ashtray with several cigarette butts in it sat on the coffee table in front of the sofa, so I figured it would be OK.

I'd almost finished my cigarette when Melahn came back into the room. Even with no makeup and red, puffy eyes, she was beautiful. The body, the face...but there was more to it than that. I'd never been a good judge of female character - my wife had sworn to that under oath in divorce court - but something indefinable about Melahn told me that there was a good deal more to her than I, or maybe anyone else, had first thought. The Colonel must've seen whatever it was she had. Maybe he'd met her through one of his cases and helped her back on her feet. He'd always been smarter than I was.

But now he was dead, and I wasn't. Melahn sat back down on the wicker chair and buried her nose in a tissue as I stubbed out my Lucky Strike. "I hope you don't mind."

Melahn shook her head. I looked at her, knowing that I needed her to talk to me, but not sure how, or if the subject should be broached. Luckily, she took a shaky breath and looked over at me. "Sorry, I haven't cried in years."

I nodded. She dabbed her nose and leaned forward, elbows on her knees. After a moment, she glanced at me. "You're not a cop."

I paused and thought it over, then shook my head. "No, I'm not. I'm a PI...and an old friend of the Colonel's."

Melahn nodded. After a few seconds, she straightened up and pulled her robe tight. "What do you want to know?"

I shrugged. "Anything. I'm just trying to find out who would've killed him."

"I can't help you. Roy never talked about his work. And we'd only been seeing each other for a few months. I knew him, but not about the other things in his life." She raised the tissue to her nose, then folded her hands in her lap. She didn't look like a hooker. "That was the way he wanted it. He said we were starting over, together. We didn't talk about other things."

A wave of disappointment washed over me. I didn't want to be insensitive, but I'd been hoping that Melahn could help. Apparently, she couldn't. I believed what she was telling me, as much as I didn't want to hear it.

"Tell me, Melahn, is there anything you can think of...anything...Roy...said during the past few times you saw him?"

Melahn's eyes focused on the floor thoughtfully. After some time, she shook her head. "No."

I looked up at the ceiling. Maybe I was asking the wrong questions. “Do you remember him saying anything about CAPRICORN?”

Melahn’s head moved slowly from side to side.

“How about something called the Winter Chip?”

“No.”

Melahn stared back at me, her eyes were starting to brim again as she said, “I’m sorry.”

I was sorry too, and for more than one reason. I stood up and walked to where she was sitting. She looked up as I put my hand on her shoulder. “Me too. I’m sorry about what happened, and I’m sorry I had to tell you.”

I reached into the inner pocket of my overcoat. All I could find was a cash register receipt. I wrote on the back of it, then handed it to Melahn. “Here’s my name and my number. If you can think of anything, or if I can help in any way at all, give me a ring.”

Melahn nodded. I felt like dirt and really wanted to get home and shower. There was probably something I should have said, but I couldn’t think of anything constructive. I put on my hat and walked to the door.

“Wait.”

I turned around, and Melahn stood up. “Roy left some things here. You can see them if you think it’ll help.”

I crossed the room and followed Melahn into her bedroom. She looked into a closet and several drawers and laid a handful of items on the bed. There was a hardback novel, which I flipped through and found nothing in, a pair of cheap reading glasses, a tartan vest, two shirts, a pair of khaki trousers, and a half dozen boxer shorts. I didn’t bother to search the undies, and the shirts and pants turned up nothing. I’d just about decided that I’d hit a dead end when I checked the watch pocket of the vest. Inside was a notebook, about two by three inches. I held it up. “Do you mind if I borrow this?”

Melahn shook her head and began to gather up the items as I left the room. I reached the door and glanced back. She had sat down on the edge of the bed, her face in her hands. I turned and closed the door quietly behind me.

As I walked down the stairs, I flipped through the notebook. Something fluttered out and

dropped to the floor. It was a clipping from a newspaper, folded up. As I opened it, a picture in the center caught my eye. It was a photo of the countess's statuette.

UAKM Chapter Twelve

I checked my watch as I left the Knickerbocker building. It was just after 9am. I'd been up for almost a day and a half, and it felt more like 21 o'clock... p.m. Louie's coffee had sobered me up, and now I needed another drink.

I lifted off and headed for the nearest bar. Why did the Colonel have a photo of the statuette? Suddenly, his disappearance was connected to the bogus Countess. When I'd been in the Police Commissioner's office, I honestly hadn't thought I was even remotely involved in the Colonel's murder, but now I was starting to think maybe I was. But how? I needed bourbon and time to meditate. I glanced down at the street below and caught sight of a sign: The Gaslight Lounge. The open sign was lit up, and I still had \$40 in my wallet. The Gaslight Lounge looked like just the kind of dive a destitute PI would waste the last of his cash in.

It was dark and stinky inside-a perfect place to think and drink when one's biological clock is on the fritz. I ordered a serving of Old Grand-Dad with a sidecar from a bartender named Denny and carried the Papa glass and the Baby glass to a circular booth in the corner. The malt was cheap, but adequate, all things considered. As the harsh, caramelly taste ran down my throat and blazed a trail into my stomach, I pulled out the newspaper clipping and examined it.

The article said that a daring heist had been pulled off in a museum in Berlin. The only item stolen was the statuette shown in the photo. The article went on to say that the statuette had only recently been unearthed while renovating an old section of the city. There was no date shown anywhere on the clipping.

I took another sip of Old Grand-Dad and closed my eyes. My brain was filled with puzzle pieces that didn't seem to fit together. The first piece was the Colonel stopping by my office for no apparent reason. Then there was the call from that "Countess". She hires me to find this statuette, claiming that it's an old family heirloom that had been stolen from her. Of course, she's lying, but I don't know it at the time. I take the job, find out about Eddie Ching, and follow his trail to Mexico City. I find out that he's in some sort of illegal exporting business, but how the statuette got from the museum in Berlin to Ching's apartment is a complete mystery. Regardless, I get the statuette, but it's stolen from me in Brownsville. All indications point to me being set up and followed. According to the police, the Colonel disappeared about the same time I left town, and the newspaper clipping in the notebook shows that he probably knew about the statuette

before I did.

Now, for the questions: How, if at all, was the statuette connected to the abduction of the Colonel? Were the people who set me up and jumped me the same people who kidnapped, and possibly killed, the Colonel? How did Eddie Ching fit into the picture? Why did everyone want to get their hands on the statuette?

Maybe I could find some answers in the Colonel's notebook. I opened it, half-expecting to see a comprehensive listing of women's names, addresses, phone numbers, and vital statistics. Not that that would have been necessarily bad. The Colonel had always had good taste with regard to the fairer sex. But my suspicions were unfounded. As I flipped through, I saw everything from Freudian doodles to grocery lists, but nothing noteworthy.

Then, close to the end of the used pages, I ran across something that reminded me of the mysterious index card I'd received in the Mail. The Colonel had jotted down a series of letters and numbers: BCM1206428X8. But this was the Colonel's personal notepad. Why would he use a coded message to himself? It had to mean something.

The code was too long for a licence plate or vid-phone number. I looked it over for several minutes, then noticed something interesting. If I inserted two spaces and two slashes, I got BCM 12/06/42 8X8. I checked the date on my watch. December 8. And the last time I checked, it was 2042. The centre part of the code was 12/06/42. It had to be a date... the day before yesterday.

I poured the contents of my sidecar into the larger class. BCM, BCM. The letters seemed somehow familiar. I lifted a glass of bourbon. Three booths away, I saw a tiny, elderly grandmother-type reading a newspaper. The Bay City Mirror. BCM.

I looked down at the notebook. Bay City Mirror, 6th December, 2042. It had to be the answer. But what was the 8X8? Maybe it referred to an article on page eight, in the eighth column. I thought it over for four minutes, then decided not to worry about it for the time being. The bottom line was, there might be a message of some kind contained in the newspaper from two days ago.

Now, where to get one? The public library kept them. I started to gather up my things, then stopped. Maybe there was one here at the Lounge. It was worth a try. I sidled up to where Denny the Bartender was standing behind the bar, applying a lemon wedge to the rim of a glass containing some sort of sissified cocktail.

Denny glanced up at me blandly. "Help ya?"

"Another Old Grand-Dad please. Straight up."

Denny nodded and had a tumbler in front of me momentarily. He didn't seem overly friendly, so I handed him a ten. "Keep the change."

Denny raised an eyebrow and gave me a reassessing look. Apparently I didn't look like a tipper. "Thanks." He opened a register and deposited the ten, pulled out a five, and dropped it into a big glass jar, then turned back to me.

"Want some peanuts? Or I think I got some goldfish crackers around here somewhere, if you like those."

"No, thanks. Actually, I was wondering if you might possibly have for the Bay City Mirror from a couple of days ago."

Denny furrowed his substantial brow. "Lemme think. I might have one laying around somewhere. I got today's. Louise is reading it."

He motioned toward the dowager three booths away from mine.

"No. I need the want from the day before yesterday. The 6th."

The Bartender pursed his lips importantly. "I'll see what I can do. Go ahead and have a seat."

I thanked him and return to my booth. Denny disappeared into some nook behind the bar. Impatiently, I glanced around and, for the first time, looked closely at the surroundings. The Lounge had probably been something special in its heyday. The silver-sheened wallpaper was-top-of-the line a hundred years ago. Now it was patched and dull, like most of the clientele, at least those I could make out in the dim, smoky light. There was a pretty good crowd for the time of day. At least a dozen people were drinking alone in books or at tables. Three college kids were shooting pool on a single table crammed into one corner. A handful of haggard regulars were clustered at one end of the bar, engaging in barfly banter.

Half a smoke later, Denny stopped by and handed me a newspaper. I thanked him and spread it out across the tabletop. I started by turning to page A8. There were only six columns. In fact, none of the pages had more than six columns. I'd never noticed. I checked the 8th paragraph, the 8th sentence, the 8th line, and the 8th story. Nothing.

I moved on to B8, then repeated the process for the C, D and E sections. All came up empty. I turn back to the front page and started a methodical search. There was no way

to know what I was looking for, so I made sure to inspect every word closely. By the time I hit the local-news section, however, it struck me that I wasn't conducting a very logical search. If I wanted to leave a message in a newspaper, where would I place it? I flipped to the back and found the classifieds.

This portion of the newspaper, unlike the others, was divided into 10 columns. I turned excitedly to the 8th page and read the entire 8th column, but nothing stood out. I tried other combinations of 8 and 8. Three cigarettes later, I had squat. I was tempted to abandon hope, but I still had a strong hunch I was on the right path. Since I didn't have to be anywhere anytime soon, I decided to cover the entire classifieds section.

Other than an embarrassing fascination with the Women Seeking Women personals, I'd never had much interest in this part of the paper. For me, it was the sports section, the comics page, my horoscope, and maybe the crossword puzzle. The personal ads were a seedy, pathetically lonely place I'd never wanted to visit.

Undaunted, I pulled a pen out of the breast pocket of my coat and began scanning. As I read through Men Seeking Women, I marvelled that guys who obviously had difficulty meeting women in person would be capable of such macho posturing. As I perused Women Seeking Men, I wondered at the level of desperation that drove these ladies to pay good money to advertise for Mr Right. As I scanned the Women Seeking Women, vague visions of naughtiness danced in my head.

I stopped cold at Men Seeking Men. I guessed I'd been wrong about the code in the Colonel's notebook. There didn't seem to be anything relevant in the newspaper. He certainly wouldn't have been corresponding in the Men Seeking Men section. Not the Colonel. Not that I had a problem with it. I'd always been an open minded, live-and-let-live kind of guy. It was just that... well, it was like country music. Some people really liked it, and that was fine. It just wasn't my bag, so to speak.

I picked up my lighter and clicked it open and shut several times. I knew I should check it out anyway. At least I was in an anonymous setting where no one I knew would catch me hunched over, intently studying the Men Seeking Men section. I glanced around, just to be sure, and then started going through the entries.

I was prepared for some weirdness, but the fourth ad was especially odd: "I gave the extra one to David. He seems elated. Counting exact as per policy norm." It certainly wasn't much of a personal ad. I had a feeling it was what I'd been looking for.

I checked the Colonel's notebook. What was the damn 8X8 reference? Maybe it had something to do with counting exact as per policy norm. I tapped a pencil against my cheek. I was missing something. Maybe the word norm was important. 8X8. Eight times

eight. Multiplication had always been one of my strong suits-using single-digit numbers, at any rate. That would be sixty-four. I counted the letters in the message. There were sixty-four.

Maybe I was on to something. I moved my glass of bourbon to the side and set the cocktail napkin on the newspaper. Using my pen, I copied down every eighth Letter. EEHLNCOM. That wasn't it. I tried every eighth letter starting with the second letter, then the third, and so on. No dice. I tried every other letter, then every third letter, but came up empty doing that as well.

Sherlock Holmes might've called this a "three pipe problem." All I had was Lucky strikes, so I slid another one out of the pack and lit it. C'mon, nicotine. I walked to the bar and took a stack of napkins. Back at my table, I balled up the first napkin and tossed it to the side. 8X8. There was something to that, otherwise the Colonel would've just written 64. I started copying the message. IGAVETHE. After eight letters, I stopped and started another row. EXTRAONE. if I kept doing this, I'd end up with a square of letters, eight by eight!

I started copying more quickly. After a minute, I had the entire message written down:

IGAVETHE
EXTRAONE
TODAVIDH
ESEEMSEL
ATEDCOUN
TINGEXAC
TASPERPO
LICYNORM

It looked like a word-search puzzle. Unfortunately, at first it didn't play like one. After several minutes, I hadn't found any significant words except the ones in the original message. Then I saw it. Running diagonally from the lower left corner to the upper right corner were the words land mine. There was a dance club in the new city called The Land Mine. From what I'd heard, it was something of a college hangout. It wasn't in my Happenings book, so I'd never gone there.

I checked the other diagonal.IXDECXPM. If I hadn't been looking for it, I probably would have missed it. Adding a few dashes made it IX-DEC-X-PM. 9 December, 10pm. There it was. A planned meeting. I had the time and the place. The Colonel was supposed to meet someone at The Land Mine the following night at 10 o'clock. He wouldn't be there... but I would. Now the question was, who was going to be waiting there? And how was I going to find them?

UAKM - Chapter thirteen

It was 9:30-in the morning-and I'd already showered and shaved. My teeth were polished, and my fingernails were trimmed. My cuticles were impeccable. I was wearing a clean, cream-coloured long-sleeved shirt, my good olive trousers with the perma-crease and pleats, and an understated burgundy tie with a chess-piece motif. I was lean, neat and smelled spicy. My wallet contained all of twenty-two dollars, and I wasn't on anyone's payroll, but I was fresh from a 19 hour coma, and it was a good day.

I collected my tan trench from the coatrack and slipped it on. I then picked up my cocoa-brown fedora, removed a mysterious twig from the brim, and set it on my head at a sassy angle. I checked for wallet, keys, smokes, and lighter, and then set out with intentions of breaking my fast.

As I locked the office door behind me and stepped out onto the fire escape landing, I tried to put my finger on what had changed my outlook. It had to have been breaking the code from the Colonel's notebook. Maybe I'd been afraid my lost month had turned my brain into pickle juice, and actually figuring something out was proof that it hadn't. And, even though I wasn't getting paid for tracking down the Colonel's killer, at least it was more exciting than my last project before I started drinking: constructing the world's largest ball of cigarette foil.

For the first time in weeks, the sun was out. It was still a few degrees below comfortable, but it felt pretty good after the clouds and rain of the past several days. As I trotted down the fire escape, I noticed Chelsea at the newsstand. She was wearing a bright red sweater and a bag-like, though attractive, hat with a flower in it. With any luck, my businesslike attitude of the morning before would have her intrigued and eager to talk to me. Immediately, my fancy turned to thoughts of amore. The old Murphy charm seethed and boiled inside me. I could feel it coiled like a cobra, ready to hypnotize his victim, then strike.

I strode jauntily across the street. Ever since I'd met Chelsea, right after moving into the Ritz, we'd always gone through the same little ritual every time I'd visit the newsstand. I'd strike up a conversation, we'd flirt a little bit, and then I'd ask her out and she'd turn me down. She always claimed it was irritating; I preferred to think of it as foreplay. This morning, however, the ice would break. Chelsea smiled and waved, completely unaware of her impending doom.

"Hello, stranger."

"You know, Chelsea, I can't keep it inside any longer. Every time I see you, you break my heart."

A malicious glint flashed in Chelsea's eyes. "Why? Because I've got a steady job?"

Oof.

"No. You're just so beautiful it makes me ache."

Chelsea pouted most attractively. "Poor baby."

I leaned onto the counter. "Let me buy you a drink, and I'll tell you where it hurts."

Chelsea raised an elegant eyebrow. "Gee, Tex, that kind of talk could get you into trouble."

Her come-hither tone had me up on my hind legs like a Wiener dog begging for a piece of jerky. I clasped my hands. "That's all I'm asking for. Just a little bit of trouble."

My dream girl wagged a finger at me. "You know I don't drink with customers."

"Don't toy with me, Chelsea. I've seen you and Louie shooting tequila at the Brew and Stew."

"Oh, Louie doesn't count, and you know it."

I could sense she was about to change the subject on me, but I wasn't about to break off my pursuit. Maybe if I sweetened the deal... "C'mon. Let me buy you a drink. I'd be happy to throw in a chilly dog-"

"Well, an offer like that is hard to refuse... but no, thanks."

Her tone implied firmly that, once again, her snowshoe-hare love had eluded my panting-wolf yearning. I'd also wasted my chili-dog gambit, which I had used previously with great success. She was truly a strong-willed woman.

"Well, I'll leave you to your work. Doesn't hurt to ask, does it?"

Chelsea flashed her perfect smile.

The Brew & Stew was always more peaceful in the mornings. The nighttime sounds of inebriated laughter and clinking glasses were replaced with a rustle of newspapers, yawning, and loud stretching. A majority of the folks in the surrounding neighbourhood relied exclusively on Louie's Armageddon to stimulate their synaptic functions and get

their heart rates out of the single digits. On most mornings (or, more often, early afternoons) I, too, was a card-carrying member of the Coffee Generation. Today, though, felt different. Not that I would dream of skipping the Armageddon-it was just that I couldn't remember the last time I hadn't woken up bleary-eyed and lethargic.

I sat down at the counter as Louie burst out of the kitchen through the swinging doors, his stubby arms balancing half-a-dozen plates piled high with breakfast fare. He gave me a wink and steered his girth around the end of the bar. A newspaper was sitting unused on the counter. I dragged it over and started to scan the front page as I lit up an appetizer. The lead story was about the Capricorn bombing. I read the article and was interested to see that Interpol had taken over the investigation, though it didn't appear that they were close to making any arrests.

I inhaled the sweet tobacco taste and wondered if there was a connection between the Colonel's death and the Capricorn bombing. In my mind, they were obviously linked in some way. I thought about the rendezvous the Colonel had planned for that evening. Did it have anything to do with Capricorn? I went over the things I'd seen on the Colonel's videodisc. The killer seemed to think that the Colonel was in cahoots with Capricorn, and that he had this thing they referred to as the Winter Chip. Maybe the Colonel's contact at The Land Mine was someone from Capricorn. It seemed as likely as anything else, but why would they have to be so clandestine about it?

An oversized mug of coffee being slid in front of me interrupted my musings. I picked it up and glanced at Louie as I blew steam away and took a sip. He smiled widely and nodded his head. "You look good, Murph."

I took another drink and felt even more rejuvenated. "I feel good."

Louie reached for a menu and dropped it in front of me. "Order somethin'."

I took a drag and smiled at Louie. "What do I want?"

Louie raised his eyebrows and went back into the kitchen without saying a word. I had some more of the Armageddon and turned my attention back to the newspaper. I perused the front section of the newspaper and ran across quite a few articles related to the bombing, as well as the growing unrest between Mutants and Norms. One of the articles even compared it to the events leading up to the American Civil War. That seemed a little much to me, but it made good for copy.

By the time I finished the initial section of the paper, I decided I'd had enough of political rhetoric and turned to the sports section. I'd just completed my analysis of the box scores when Louie reemerged from the kitchen and laid a large, heaping platter and

a set of silverware in front of me.

The platter was just big enough to hold a massive omelette, a pile of fried potatoes, and three slices of wheat toast. Louie ducked back into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a large glass of orange juice.

"You gotta drink this juice, Murph. You know, you've really got to keep up on yer vitamin C on account of all the smokin' you do."

I raised the glass and took a sip. Mmm. Fresh-squeezed and icy cold. "Pretty good-tasting medicine, Louie."

I grabbed the fork and cut out a big slice of the omelette. Anywhere but the Brew & Stew, I'd do an autopsy on a mystery omelette before diving into it, but if I couldn't trust Louie, who could I trust?

My trust was well-placed. It was a chili verde filling, with large chunks of chicken. There was just enough bite from the chilies, but not so much that it obscured the sweeter tastes of onion and tomato. As I chewed leisurely, savouring the flavours, I reached for a thick slice of wheat toast and spread a generous layer of strawberry jam over the top of it. When I finished, I dug my fork into the fried potatoes. As I took a bite, I detected a hint of garlic. The potatoes were unbelievably good, sauteed in butter with chunks of onion and, if I wasn't mistaken, tiny bits of real crumbled bacon.

As usual, Louie stuck around to watch me eat. Cooking was his calling in life, and seeing people enjoy his work was his greatest reward. He sipped his coffee expectantly. "Good?"

My mouth was full. I nod vigorously, then washed it down with a long sip of Armageddon.

"You are a true artist. The Picasso of potatoes. The O'Keeffe of omelettes."

I took a hearty bite of toast as Louie refilled my mug and topped off his own. He set the pot down and then had another sip.

"Ya look like a new man. What's the story? You in love or somethin'?"

I shook my head. "God, no." I took another drink of orange juice. "I'm working on a case, and it's starting to get interesting."

I filled Louie in on most of what happened up to that point. Louie had been disgusted

when I told him about the dog and the finger, and appropriately saddened at the likelihood of the Colonel's death, but then he'd never met the Colonel. The big mutant had enjoyed my description of Melahn and had perked right up when I'd illustrated how I'd broken the Colonel's code.

"So, you got some kinda secret meeting tonight. Now I see what's got ya pepped up."

I nodded, my mouth full of chili verde and spicy potatoes. Louie leaned onto the counter. "You still got that blue card with the numbers on it?"

I wiped my hands on a napkin and pulled the card out of my overcoat pocket. Louie took it from me and examined it closely as he drank his coffee. He stared at the code for a good five minutes as I finished most of the omelette and all of the potatoes. When I'd pushed the plate away, he handed the card back to me. "You'd think we could figure that thing out."

Louie sounded a little frustrated. It was bothering me too, since I'd begun to feel strongly that it had something to do with the case. I looked at the card again, thinking it might be easier to figure out now. It wasn't. There was nothing resembling a date, and BXK didn't seem to be the initials of a publication, though the A2 could refer to a newspaper section.

For now, it didn't matter. I was full of good food, enjoying in after-meal smoke, and all was right with the world. I pocketed the index card and had another hit off the Armageddon. Louie topped off my mug. "Anything else I can get ya, Murph?"

I shook my head. "You've made me very happy, Louie. The only thing I'd want right now is enough money to pay off my tab."

Louie waved a hand at me and walked off, coffee pot in hand, to check the well-being of the other customers. I switched my half-burned cigarette to the other hand and went back to the newspaper. I read through the comics, then started where I'd left off on the front end of the paper.

I skipped most of the articles until I found one about the Moon Child. I remembered the name from watching television in the hospital in Brownsville. Apparently, the Moon Child was more like a satellite station than a spacecraft. The author of the article said that details were kept secret, but estimated that it would have cost hundreds of millions, maybe billions to construct. The author speculated on where that kind of money came from. The official statement from the Crusade for Genetic Purity said that the Moon Child had been funded by private contributions. Maybe I was in the wrong line of work. Organised religion had always been where the real money was.

I flipped through pages until I caught sight of a familiar face in a wire photograph. It was Lowell Percival, President of Lowell Percival Enterprises. With all the excitement, I'd forgotten about wanting to see him. Alaynah had said that Percival would be out of the office for a few days and hadn't made an appointment for me. I'd have to call her later. I had hoped that he could shed a little light on things. At the very least, he might know what all the fuss was regarding the statuette.

Before I did anything, though, I still had one mug of Armageddon to go before reaching full-throttle. On cue, Louie swung by and refilled me. I read the article that featured a photo of Percival. It mentioned that he was now the richest man in the world, overtaking the Sultan of Brunei through shrewd business dealings and creating a monopoly in off-planet mining operations. The article mentioned his various philanthropic gestures and detailed his unrivalled collection of art, first-edition literature, and historical documents.

When I finished the Percival story, I went through the remainder of the newspaper, finding nothing particularly worth reading. I reached the back end and the personal ads. Maybe there was another message to find. I glanced around and turn to see the Men Seeking Men section. Scanning quickly, I ran my finger down the columns of anonymous messages. There didn't seem to be any entries like the one I'd found yesterday.

"Oh, my God."

My head snapped up, and I whipped my head round to see Rook leaning over my shoulder. He walked off and sat down, two bar stools to my right, shaking his head. I closed the newspaper. "It's not what you think."

Rook gave me the eye. "Really?"

"Yeah. And even if it were, it wouldn't be any of your business."

Rook leaned forward and peered at me over his glasses. "Murphy, I couldn't care less about whatever lifestyle you choose to practice. But stooping to the use of personal advertising, why it's despicable."

If I'd really cared what Rook thought, maybe I would've taken the time to explain the situation, but I didn't feel like letting the dried-up little bastard ruin my sunny mood. I folded the newspaper under my arm and stood up. Rook looked up at me. "Found a hot one, did we? Better run back to the office and make a call. True love is so hard to find these days."

Louie stepped back behind the bar. "You hassling Murph again, Rook?"

Rook gestured toward me. "Lord, No. I'm sharing in his good fortune. It seems he's just a phone call away from meeting Mr Right."

Louie gave me a confused look. I just shook my head. "It's a long story, Louie. I'll tell you about it later. Thanks for breakfast."

I walked to the door and stepped outside. With the nicer weather, the neighbourhood was busier than it had been for days. I walked back to my office, waved to Chelsea, and climbed the fire escape. At the top, I sat down and unfolded the newspaper, then turned to the personals and went through them.

There were a number of hideously intriguing entries, but none related to the matter at hand. I turned to the entertainment section and lit a cigarette. It was nice to be outside in the warm weather. I read several articles then came across the movie listing. The Bijou was showing a double feature of *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon*. It didn't get any better than that, and I had most of a day to kill before my appointment at the Land Mine. I checked my watch; I could see the twin bill and still have time to swing by LPE before five. If Percival wasn't there, I'd make an appointment with Alaynah. I walked to my speeder and waved at Chelsea as I climbed inside. Then I lifted off and headed downtown.

There weren't many theatres still in business, and most of them were porno dives. The decline in popularity was due to a lot of factors. Going out at night had gotten to be a dangerous proposition, and pay-per-view allowed people to order new releases and watch them without having to leave the safety of their homes. Interactive movies were more popular with younger viewers than plain old motion pictures. And Hollywood had been taken over by businessmen who wouldn't know a good script from a take-out menu. Theatres had been forced to raise their ticket prices to compensate for smaller audiences, and that just worsened the situation.

As far as I was concerned, technology couldn't touch the old-fashioned movie-going experience. I spent most of the afternoon sprawled in a rickety theatre seat, wondering why no one made great movies any more. True film noir had disappeared about the same time as the American Dream, and the world was an emptier place without it. Oh sure, film-makers had tried to recapture the look, but there was always something missing. Bogart, maybe. He was the man.

As I sat in the dark, nearly empty movie house, watching the two best detective flicks ever made, I felt a sense of destiny that had been missing from my life for a long time. I

remembered why I'd gone into the PI business. Most everyone I'd grown up and gone to school with had gone into some computer-related field. I'd heard somewhere that 70 per cent of the US workforce was now in the PC or online business. What had started out as an intriguing convenience had become Big Brother. Now everyone's existence was reduced to zeros and ones, documented and stored on the internet. I watched Bogart light a cigarette and longed for simpler times.

Like movie theatres, old-fashioned gumshoes were a vanishing breed. The computer boom had created a new type of P I: the Web detective. They did a lot of the same things I did, only they did it from a comfortable chair in front of a monitor. But they couldn't do everything. Knowing how to operate a PC didn't help when it came to squeezing information out of a reluctant witness. And sometimes the only way to track down a lead was by pounding the pavement or doing an all-night stakeout. It made me happy to think that not everything had changed from 100 years ago.

It was 25 minutes to five when I stepped out of the theatre and waited for my eyes to adjust. I was feeling mentally and spiritually fortified. Louie's hearty breakfast was still tiding me over nicely, so I'd been able to skip the popcorn. Of course, I was now down to a single \$10 bill in my wallet, so I couldn't have bought popcorn anyway.

I made the quick flight to the Lowell Perceval Enterprises building and managed to catch Alaynah just as she was about to clock out. Our conversation was pleasant, but the lusty magic, at least on my part, had vanished. Alaynah asked if I wanted to get a drink, but I refused stating, honestly that I had a previous engagement. She attempted to play a one-sided game of coquette, but gave up after seeing that I wasn't interested. With a hint of regret, she said that Percival would be in the office the next day and penciled me in for a 3 o'clock appointment.

As I stepped into my office, the vid-phone beeped. I walked to the desk and answered the call. Mac Malden's sleepy bulldog face materialized on-screen. He was sipping from a coffee cup, a clear violation of vid-phone courtesy.

"What's going on, Mac? Got some news?"

He fixed his lethargic gaze on me. "Why else would I call you?"

"So, what did your boys find?"

The cop shook his head. "Nothing. No prints, not one identifiable item. Whoever was there was good at covering their tracks."

Even with Malden's gang of monkeys, I hadn't expected them to find nothing. "Doesn't that seem a little strange? I mean, not a single fingerprint?"

Mac took a drag of a Merit and shrugged. "Yeah. It's a little unusual. But there it is."

Mac set his smoke down and started working his temple with both hands. He looked as though he could use a pick-me-up.

"Looks like you could use a Diet Donut."

Mac looked up wearily. "That's not gonna help. Interpol's sniffing around, and they're coming in to talk to me in a few minutes. Bunch of bastards."

Wow. Interpol. This was big news.

"So, Interpol's looking into the Colonel's murder?"

Mac gave me a look that was as nervous as it was exhausted. "A couple of their agents have been asking questions, go through the police report. They have been raking us over the coals." Mac picked up his cigarette and took a drag. "Let me know if you find out anything about that duchess. I've got to get ready for this meeting."

The screen went blank.

So, Interpol was getting involved. That was big news. I'd never had anything to do with the International Criminal Police Organization. Interpol had come into existence more than 100 years before, in the 1920s, and had steadily grown in power. In the beginning, it was a records clearing house, so that the police of one country could communicate information with another. Then, in the nineties, it rode the wave of the World Wide Web and became the international enforcer of Internet law. Now that almost everything was run through online networks, Interpol statutes were considered the final word in almost every modernized country. Interpol also had priority in dealing with old-fashioned criminals who crossed borders. Occasionally, they'd allow local authorities to handle matters, but only if it suited them. Interpol had gotten so powerful, all we could do at this point was hope they were capable of policing themselves.

The fact that they were looking into the Colonel's murder was more disturbing than reassuring. It meant that the case was even bigger than I thought. If I felt under-informed. Hopefully, I'd be able to get some details in a few hours.

I put on a pot of coffee. Getting up at the break of day-8:30-had thrown off my internal

clock, and I didn't want to show up at The Land Mine yawning. I stood by the window and watched the sun go down, wondering what I was about to get myself into.

UAKM - Chapter fourteen

Two hours later, I paid the cover charge at the front door of The Land Mine and entered the nightclub. It was still early, and there were only 20 or 30 people in the place. The cavernous dance floor was empty, despite the whirling lights and pounding music. I hoped that I could find my contact soon, before the inevitable headache set in.

I hated the music. It was probably a sign that I was getting old, but then , I'd never liked contemporary music. During my horrid teenage years, techno-rap had been all the rage. At least most of the currently fashionable music was instrumental, which was a slight improvement. On the downside, it was heavily repetitive and seemed to avoid anything remotely resembling melody. To me, it sounded chaotic, with most of the sounds coming from percussion, and every instrument playing at a different tempo. Over the top of the incessant pounding was a steady stream of sampled and computer-generated sound effects, ranging from bits of feedback to snippets of dialogue.

I made my way to a corner and sat down on a high bar stool behind an elevated table. A bored-looking waitress with a disturbing cool stare took down my order for a tall glass of iced water and walked off without thanking me. I looked around the club and decided that I'd picked the best spot to locate my contact. The bar was on my left and would give me a good look at the faces of everyone who sat there. This was the only section of the club with seating. The other side was dominated by the vast dance floor, which was multilayered, like half an amphitheatre.

I figured that I'd find whoever I was supposed to meet in a booth or at a table like the one I sitting at. I scanned the area methodically, pausing to look closely at every face. The table next to mine was empty, but the next one was occupied by two young woman. One was tall and thin, with an unfortunate complexion and a skimpy red outfit that should have been much looser. The other girl was beautiful, but round. She wore a black jacket over a black turtleneck and a long black skirt. She had a lovely smile, and I found myself hoping that she wasn't there expecting to meet someone special.

Seated at the table behind the two girls was a textbook example of a midlife crisis. The man's hair weave looked almost real, but his outfit was unbelievable. It looked like he'd culled all his fashion sense from Miami Vice reruns. Under a light blue pinstripe jacket, a fuchsia tee shirt clung to a round belly. He stroked his moustache seductively and glanced provocatively at the two girls. To my chagrin, the girl in black took favourable notice.

Beyond the Don Johnson wanna-be, a young couple groped each other at the table in a dark corner. As they came up for air, I noticed that they had a lot in common. There were both wearing leather jackets, both had multi-coloured hair, and their faces were decorated like Christmas trees with various pins, studs and chains. The two of them had something else in common: breasts. They renewed their attack on each other, and I tried not to think what would happen if their facial jewelry got snagged.

A twenty-something young man with a goatee and glasses with oddly shaped frames sat in a booth next to the amorous couple, obviously intrigued. To his right, another young man sat alone. He seemed nervous, glancing around and running a hand through his short blonde hair.

The other booths and tables were occupied by larger groups of all shapes, sizes, ages and persuasions. The waitress arrived with my water. I sipped it, wondering how long it'd been since I'd drunk a clear beverage, and looked out toward the dance area. Several couples were joined by a scattered handful of accessible-looking exhibitionists. I checked my watch-it was five minutes to ten.

I sat at my table, sipping my free drink for another fifteen minutes. Despite my vigilance, I saw no one who even vaguely resembled the secret-agent persona I had envisioned. I decided to make a reconnaissance of the club. After circling the mammoth dance floor and making quick use of the facilities, I began peering into dark corners, but without success.

I decided to return to my corner table, but it had been homesteaded by three Middle Eastern businessman with varying amounts of facial hair. The sight of them made me think briefly of the man who'd murdered the Colonel, but I dismissed the notion and took a seat at the bar.

As I ordered a few more fingers of water, I caught the face of the young blonde man in the mirror behind the bar. His nervousness seemed to have increased, and he was wringing his hands as he looked around. He certainly didn't fit my mental picture, but I was coming up empty and really didn't have anything to lose. I got up from my seat and crossed the room.

As I approached, the young man looked up at me fearfully. I reached the table, stopped, and casually pulled out my pack of Luckies. I held up the pack. "You look like you could use one of these."

The young man shook his head. "No, thanks. I don't smoke."

I shrugged and took one out for myself. "I gave the extra one to David. He seems

elated."

The young man's eyes widened. I knew I'd found my man, though I felt a distinct twinge of disappointment. This guy wasn't at all what I'd been expecting. I suppose I'd been anticipating a David Niven-type secret agent, sipping a martini and smoking imported cigarettes. I slid into the booth and set my cigarettes and lighter on the table.

"My name's Murphy. I'm a friend of the Colonel's. He couldn't make it."

The young man looked at me with a desperate expression his face. "Why? What happened?"

I lowered my voice. "He's disappeared. Probably dead."

"Oh my God." What colour was left in his face drained away. He picked up his glass of beer and emptied it. "Who killed him?"

I flicked the ash off the end of my smoke. "Actually, I was hoping you might be able to shed some light in that area."

The young man glanced at me nervously. "How should I know? I didn't even know anything had happened to him."

"So why was he supposed to meet you here?"

The young man looked at me for a moment, then started to slide out from behind the table. I grabbed his wrist and held it until he moved back. He glared at me. "Get your hand off me."

I shook my head. "Not until you answer some questions."

"I don't need to tell you anything."

I let go of his wrist, but kept my eyes locked on his.

"You're right. You don't... and you don't have reason to trust me. But I was one of the last people to see the Colonel alive, and I want to find out what happened to him."

The young man was defiant, but scared. "And how do I know you didn't kill him? Maybe you're here to find out what I know before you kill me."

He had a good point. I didn't have anything to convince him of my good intentions

except an honest face and a pure heart.

"Tell you what. I just want to know whatever you can tell me about the Colonel. If it'll make you feel more comfortable, we can agree to meet someplace else. You tell me when and where."

The young man stared at me for some time before speaking.

"All right. You fill me in on the Colonel, then I'll tell you what I can."

I looked down at the ashtray and ground out my cigarette until it quit smoking. "What's your name?"

The young man hesitated before speaking. "Paul. Paul Dubois."

It didn't really matter if that was his real name. I just hated not having a name at my disposal. I proceeded to tell Dubois what I'd heard and seen regarding the Colonel's disappearance, then went on to tell him how I'd come to be at The Land Mine. I told it as straight as possible. By the time I was finished, Dubois seemed to be buying it. That didn't surprise me. He looked as though he wanted to find someone he could trust more than anything in the world.

When I was done talking, DuBois sat quietly, digesting what I'd told him. After several minutes, he cleared his throat and turned to me. "You know I work for?"

"I've got a pretty good idea. I'm a Taurus, myself."

Dubois smiled and nodded. "Have you heard what's happened to our organization?"

"I know about the bombing, if that's what you're referring to."

Dibble shook his head solemnly. "The bombing was just the final blow. CAPRICORN has been effectively destroyed."

"What do you mean?"

The waitress interrupted us. Dubois ordered another beer, and I asked for bourbon. I figured I could talk young man into buying my drink. When the waitress walked off, Dubois took a deep breath and continued in a quiet voice. "How much you know about CAPRICORN?"

I shrugged. "Not much. From what I understand, you guys do what you can to put hate

groups out of business."

Dubois nodded. "I joined CAPRICORN just over a year ago. I was a reader. My job was to read certain publications and find discriminatory references. Whenever I did, I'd pass the information up the ladder. If the top people felt like it was worth looking into, they'd send out agents to determine whether or not there was a major threat involved. If the discrimination was linked to a certain group or corporation, we'd send an agent to infiltrate. If there was a real problem, CAPRICORN's goal was to bring down whoever it was, thereby limiting or eliminating their power and influence."

Dubois paused. I nodded to show I was following him, and he went on. "I was never an agent, but I did move up from my position as a reader. My new job was in resource allocation. It required a security clearance and dealt with prepping agents who'd been assigned to infiltrate organizations. Our department would fix up the agents with everything they'd need, and then we'd receive reports from the agents and pass them along to the higher ups. It was while I was in resource allocation that I first found out what was happening."

The waitress returned with our drinks. I didn't even need to ask, as Dubois handed her a ten. I thanked my young friend and took a swallow of bourbon.

"You were saying that something was happening."

Dubois took a quick sip of beer. "Our agents were being taken out, one by one. Overnight. Within the space of a month, practically all the reports had quit coming in. We sent out recons to find out what had happened, and then they started disappearing. After six weeks, 90 per cent of CAPRICORN's personnel was dead or missing. CAPRICORN just didn't operate in the US... it was worldwide. We had thousands of agents, from Moscow to Santiago. Now, as far as we knew, only those of us in the home office were left. There was a meeting the day before the bombing, and everyone who attend was given final orders. I don't know what kind of orders the others got, but mine were to meet Colonel O'Brien here and get a package from him.

"How was the Colonel involved with CAPRICORN?"

"I'm not sure. He could've been on the Supervising Committee. We never knew any of the committee members names."

"Any idea what was supposed to be in the package?"

Dubois shook his head. "No. And he was going to tell me what to do with the package when he gave it to me."

I sat back and let Dubois take a drink. So, the Colonel had a package. That would explain what his killer had been looking for. But he hadn't found it, at least not in the Colonel's office. And the police hadn't found anything. Where was it? A thought occurred to me. I pulled the blue index card from my coat and handed it to Dubois. "This mean anything to you?"

DuBois looked the card over carefully, sounding out the letters and numbers silently. After a minute, he handed it back. "It doesn't mean anything to me. What is it?"

"Hell if I know. I got it anonymously in the mail. I think it might be related somehow to his disappearance. I figured it might be a code, like the one I broke to find you."

Dubois shook his head. "CAPRICORN usually kept communications direct. If that wasn't possible, we'd use messages in newspaper personal ads."

I nodded and took another sip of bourbon. Another question popped into my head.

"What do you know about something called the Winter Chip?"

Dubois almost choked on his beer. He set the glass down and wiped his mouth. His voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "How do you know about the Winter Chip?"

"The Colonel said something about it on the disc I recovered from his office. I think it was what his attacker was looking for. Maybe the Winter Chip was going to be in the package the Colonel was supposed to deliver."

Dubois was silent for some time. With some resolve, he turned back to me. "Look, I don't know that much about all this, but, since you know about the Winter Chip, I'll tell you what I do know."

I stuck an unlit cigarette between my lips and motioned for him to continue.

"Some of the most accomplished computer scientists in the world were working on some top secret project for CAPRICORN. I only heard rumours, but apparently they were working on something they called the Winter Chip. I don't know what it was, or what its purpose was. I can only tell you that it supposedly had something to do with our fight against the Crusade for Genetic Purity. Working in the Resource Allocation department, I knew that we'd sent dozens of agents to infiltrate the crusade. Word was, one of the agents had gotten in early and worked himself into a high position. I don't know if he was rooted out with the other agents, but my job was to get the package from the Colonel and leave it some place where this undercover agent could pick it up. What he

was going to do with it, I don't know."

I looked at my cigarette. It had burned halfway down without me taking a single drag. "You have no idea who this agent is?"

"I don't. But I did find out something about the mole, as we called him. He'd been undercover for months before I got promoted. Just after I started work at my new position, the higher-ups requested that all of the mole's reports be sent directly to them. But I did get a peek at one report before the order came down. It mentioned something about a plan being developed in the Crusade, some sort of eugenic cleansing that would be used to destroy the Mutants. I also remember reading something about Reverend Sheppard. The agents said that Sheppard wasn't the real leader of the Crusade, that it was someone known as Phoenix. There was also a reference to a Chameleon. The only other name mentioned was a professor. Perriman. I think that was the name."

I pulled the Colonel's small notebook out of my pocket and jotted down the names Phoenix, Chameleon, and Professor Perriman. When I finished, I glanced at Dubois. "So, what do you do now?"

Dubois shook his head and looked into his beer. "I don't know. I haven't been able to sleep since the bombing. I want to go back to LA and see if any others survived, but I'm afraid if I do, someone'll find me and I'll disappear, just like the agents." He looked up, hopefully. "What do you think I should do?"

I'd been in some dangerous spots before, but had never run for my life, so I couldn't really empathize with him. He was terrified, and probably with good reason.

"Do you have any family?"

"Yeah. Back in Des Moines. My mom and sister live there."

The mention of kinfolk seemed to calm Dubois. It seemed like a trip home would be just the thing.

"Why don't you fly home for few weeks? Or the rest of your life? You'll probably never feel safe in LA again. And what do you have to go back to?"

Dubois nodded, slowly at first, then emphatically. "You're right. That's what I'll do." He looked up at me. "Thanks a lot, Murphy."

He finished his beer and was starting to move out of the booth when he paused. "What are you going to do?"

I thought about it. "Well, I guess I'll see if I can find this package the Colonel was going to bring tonight. Then, I'll see what I can do about finding the CAPRICORN mole. Maybe through his Professor Perriman."

Dubois slid out of the booth, stood up and extended his hand. "Good luck. It was good to meet you."

"Likewise."

He grabbed his coat and walked around the corner to the front door. With my arm on the back of the booth seat, I turned and looked out the window behind me. After a moment, I saw Dubois leave the club and cross the street. I was just about to turn back to the few remaining drops of bourbon in my tumbler, when I saw three dark figures converge on him. The attackers weren't street kids, they were professionals. As they grabbed him, a speeder landed nearby, and they forced him inside. At the same instant, two grim-faced men in suits with matching bulges under their left arms approached the front door of the club.

I didn't bother to finish the bourbon. I bolted from my seat, trying to remember if I'd seen a back door during my earlier reconnaissance. I couldn't recall. A quick glance out the window told me that the men in suits had entered the club. They'd be on top of me in seconds.

I looked desperately around the room and saw the full figured girl in black, sitting alone. I hurried over to her table and sat down. "Hello there."

She looked at me, surprised, but not unpleasantly. "High. I'm Teri."

I shook her hand, my eyes trained on the mirror behind her. The two men in suits had just stepped around the corner and were carefully surveying the area. Teri moved her head a little to make eye contact with me. "What's your name?"

I pried my eyes away from the mirror and looked into Teri's lovely face. "Tex. Listen, I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, but I noticed you earlier, and I thought you might like to dance."

Teri smiled as I glanced back at the mirror. The men had started across the room. What the hell was I going to do?

"I'm really not much of a dancer. Why don't you just tell me about yourself? I think talking is much more fun than dancing."

The two men were twenty feet away and getting closer. I tensed up. They weren't going to get me without a fight. Suddenly, they turned and moved quickly in the direction of the bar. As I breathed a sigh of relief, I heard the sound of shattering glass. I spun around to see one man with his gun to the throat of the waitress. The other man was holding off several employees, identification in one hand and a gun in the other. As the waitress struggled against her abductor, a shot rang out, and the sounds of screaming joined in with the pulsating music. I jumped up from the table and ran to the door, arriving just ahead of the panicking mob.

Bursting out of the logjam at the front door, I raced to my speeder and lifted off. As I rose above the bedlam, I looked down and saw the doors of The Land Mine vomiting hordes of terrified bystanders.

As I sped through the night, jumbled thoughts rattled around my head. Who had grabbed Dubois? Were the men in suits in league with the people who had abducted Dubois, or was it just a monumental coincidence of timing? I doubted it. From everything Dubois had told me, the people who'd suddenly shown up were probably affiliated with the nameless group that had destroyed CAPRICORN. Dubois was one of the last embers remaining from a nearly extinguished brush fire. These people had tracked him down and stamped him out. But why had they gone after the waitress? Maybe she'd been involved, too.

Fifteen minutes later, I descended on Chandler Avenue. Several speeders were parked at the kerb in front of the Ritz, so I set down halfway between the Ritz and the Brew & Stew. I got out of the speeder, locked it up, and started walking towards my office. As I in passed one of the parked speeders, I heard the whirring sound of a window going down and then a female voice. "Excuse me."

I stopped and turned to find a beautiful woman looking up at me. Her skin was very fair, and her green eyes stood out, even in the dim light from the street lamps. Her red hair was bobbed and framed her face perfectly. But what really caught my eye was the gun pointed at my chest.

"Get in."

UAKM - Chapter 15

The speeder lifted off. I was in the front passenger seat, and the beautiful woman was in the back. I couldn't see the gun, but I could feel it. I looked out of the corner of my eye at the man driving. I guessed he was about thirty five, clean cut, with a pleasant face and a larger than usual nose.

When we cleared the roofline, the man turned the speeder and headed into the darkness, away from the city. My curiosity was piqued. "So, where are we going?"

"Nowhere." The beautiful woman spoke from the back seat. Her tone wasn't particularly threatening, more businesslike than anything. "Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

"Sounds good to me. I love to fly."

The man at the wheel turned and smiled at me. "And it shows."

Unexpectedly, he extended his hand. "I'm Agent McCovey. My partner is Agent Andrews. We're with Interpol. I hope you don't mind... we need to ask you a few questions, and were a little pressed for time."

Even as I shook his hand, I wasn't altogether certain whether I should be relieved or not. Agent Andrews' gun was still pointed at my head.

"If your partner'll put her gun away, I promise I won't jump out of the speeder."

I watched Agent McCovey as he smiled into the rearview mirror and nodded. The gun barrel disappeared from my peripheral vision. It made me feel better, but I was still nervous and had an almost uncontrollable urge to smoke. I dragged the pack of Lucky Strikes out of my pocket and held it up. "Do you mind?"

Agent McCovey didn't take his eyes from the airspace ahead. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Regulations?"

The agent shook his head. "No."

Agent Andrews smirked in the back seat. I put the pack away and looked out the side window. We left the occupied areas and were heading out over the no-man's-land to the north. This part of the city had never been cleaned up after the war and, according to rumour, was now inhabited by orc-like creatures who only came out at night and fed on human flesh.

Several tall buildings were still standing, and we descended toward one of them. There was no sign of electricity for miles. Agent McCovey skilfully navigated the speeder over the flat roof and landed. Agent Andrews tapped me on the shoulder. "Let's get some air, shall we?"

I opened the speeder door and stepped out. The only light source was the faintly pink half-moon, the evening had gotten as cold as it was dark. I adjusted my overcoat, tied the sash tightly, then lit up a much-needed cigarette. Agent Andrews had followed me out the door and was now leaning against the side of the speeder, arms folded across what was probably a lovely chest. Despite her having held a gun to my head only minutes before, I had quite a yearning to hug her. This wasn't unusual-I'd always been attracted to women who'd just as soon kill me.

Agent McCovey walked around from the driver's side and stooped down to collect a handful of gravel. I eyed him warily, afraid that I was about to experience a strange, new form of Interpol interrogation/torture, but he wandered toward the edge of the roof and began throwing small rocks into the murky darkness. Satisfied that I wasn't going to have information pelted out of me, I turned back and smiled disarmingly at Agent Andrews.

"This is a lovely spot. It must be true what they say-people take the places where they live for granted. I've never made the time to visit as part of town before."

The agents wide green eyes gazed at me, unblinking and unamused. "We chose this place because we know it's not bugged. There are things we need to talk about, sensitive things, that none of us want to be overheard. That includes you."

I was flattered that they'd include me in their spy games, but I was feeling the same sensation I felt in my recurring nightmare, of being a Jeopardy contestant and having the Final Jeopardy category turn out to be Famous Suffragettes. I took a deep drag and let the smoke slip out of my nose and mouth as I spoke.

"Don't get me wrong... I think we're hitting it off really well, and I'm having a great time, but do you mind telling me what I'm doing here?"

Agent McCovey meandered back into the conversation. "Don't worry. You're not in any kind of trouble. We just need to find out what you know."

Agent Andrews interrupted. "We know you found the video disc."

"Who told you that? Drysdale? He is such a liar."

McCovey smiled and looked out into the chilly night.

"It's no big deal, Murphy. The only reason we picked you up is to see if you found out anything else about Colonel O'Brien's murder."

It sounded like Interpol was grasping at straws. Taking the time to round me up seemed like a last ditch effort, though I would never verbalize that. The upside was that they might let me in on something I didn't know, in trade for me telling them everything I'd found out. Of course, I hadn't learned much, but they didn't know that.

Agent Andrews seemed to be getting cold and tucked her hands under her arms. I noticed with mixed reactions that her right hand was fondling the loaded holster under her black jacket. She seemed to be the less accommodating of the two agents, so I spoke to the man.

"Well, I'm assuming you both saw what was on the videodisc. I didn't recognize the attacker."

McCovey stuck his hands into his pockets. "There's no reason why you should have. But that's irrelevant. We already know who he is."

Agent Andrews threw her partner a cautionary glance, but he disregarded it and went on.

"The man goes by the name of the Chameleon. He's been on our most-wanted lists for years. We believe his real name is Jacques Fou, but his fingerprints have been surgically removed, and he's a genius with disguises. If you saw him again, you probably wouldn't recognise him."

If Interpol knew who the killer was, then they already knew more than I did.

"So how am I supposed to help you, seeing as how you've already solved the murder?"

Agent Andrews jumped in. "The Chameleon isn't some kind of psychopath who kills people for the hell of it. He's a mercenary. Organizations and individuals hire him for specialized hits. We want to know who his employer was this time."

Agent McCovey began to pace casually as he picked up where the woman left off. "Even more importantly, we're trying to find out more about the Winter Chip. On the videodisc, it looked like that was what the Chameleon was trying to find out from O'Brien." He turned to face me. "Where were you earlier this evening?"

I flicked my spent cigarette off to the side and buried my hands in the pockets of my overcoat. I considered how much I should tell the agents. Dubois had told me a little about the Winter Chip, and McCovey seemed open to sharing information, so I decided to tell them what I found out. In exchange, maybe they could tell me more about CAPRICORN.

As I described my meeting with Dubois, Agent McCovey nodded occasionally while Agent Andrews took notes. I wrapped things up by recounting Dubois's apparent abduction. When I'd finished, Andrews looked up from her notebook. "Any idea where we could locate Dubois?"

I shook my head. "Like I said, I had a bad feeling that he's been located for the last time. And he didn't leave me with any way to get in touch with him."

My fingers had warmed sufficiently to have another smoke. I cupped my hands around the Zippo flame, then let loose a long stream of half smoke, half breath steam. I told them what I knew. Maybe they'd toss me another bone.

"What can the two of you tell me about CAPRICORN? Do you suppose it figures somehow into the Colonel's murder?"

Agent McCovey, who'd been very attentive while I was talking, resumed his leisurely pacing. "Odds are pretty good. Whoever decimated CAPRICORN knew what they were doing. They had to have someone on the inside, to provide information, but they also needed manpower and resources. That doesn't come cheap."

"So who was it? Could it have been this Phoenix person, the one Dubois told me about?"

McCovey shook his head. "We're not sure. And we don't have any information on who Phoenix is or how he figures into this. What we do know is, the Crusade for Genetic Purity had the most to gain from CAPRICORN being dismantled. We also have reason to believe that the Crusade isn't the real power in the equation. There is another group behind it... nameless and faceless, probably very small, with a lot of money and an agenda. What the agenda is... we don't know, but we intend to find out."

"And you think this group behind the Crusade had the Chameleon kill the Colonel?"

McCovey shrugged. "Seems likely."

He turned and walked around to the driver's side. Agent Andrews opened the passenger side door and crawled in. Apparently, our interview was over. I slid into the seat and shut the door as we lifted off. Once we were airborne and headed back to Chandler Avenue, Agent McCovey turned to me.

"There's another thing I wanted to ask you about. I understand that you asked the police to search a vacant house out in the Pacific Heights area. There was also something about a Duchess and a stolen statue. It didn't make much sense."

"It never does, coming from Malden."

As we flew back to my office, I recounted my meeting with Countess Renier and what had followed. I could hear Agent Andrews taking notes in the back. At one point, Agent McCovey interrupted to ask me to describe the statue thoroughly. My story wrapped up just as we landed at the curb behind my speeder.

"That's why I had the police check out the mansion."

Agent McCovey nodded silently several times, then took a breath. "Well, Mr Murphy, thanks for your time. I hope we didn't keep you up too late."

There were other questions I wanted to ask, but I was being dismissed. I opened the door and held it there as Agent Andrews' shapely legs emerged from the back seat. She looked up at me and held my eyes-not with any interest, but to keep me from comfortably scanning her gams-until she was safely seated beside her partner. I shut the door, and the speeder took off.

As I walked back to my office, I realized the Interpol agents had never shown me any identification.

UAKM - Chapter 16

Getting up at a reasonable hour the previous day seemed to have taken a toll on my thirtysomething body. It was eleven something when I rolled over and squinted at my alarm clock. What a piece of junk. The LED read 11:88. Even worse, the plastic bumps on the snooze bar had worn off completely, making it harder to find those all-important eight minute increments of extra sleep. What I needed was one of those voice response devices with the special Monique feature. They had a sultry female voice that would make naughty sex noises instead of beeping and could be programmed to say things like, "Time to get up, handsome. I'm ready for some breakfast in bed." Of course, I'd just set the alarm over and over and spend the rest of my life in the sack.

I lurched over the side of the bed, staggered blindly in the direction of the bathroom, and began making myself beautiful. It was a longer process than it used to be, but five minutes later, I was modestly presentable. With breakfast smoldering between my fingers and the coffeemaker belching like a steel worker, I settled into the chair behind my desk and began composing my daily list of things to do.

(1) Get up. Check. (2) Splash water on face. Done. (3) PI breakfast. Almost ready. (4) Lose weight and get into shape. (5) Go see Percival.

The coffee hadn't even finished brewing, and I'd already covered half the list. I leaned back in my chair and took a drag, feeling like I had things pretty well in hand. When the coffee was ready, I poured a mug and returned to my chair.

Reading while eating breakfast is one of life's simple joys. Back when I could afford cold cereal, I knew the Cap'n Crunch box like the back of my hand. I fished the now dog-eared blue card out of my overcoat and examined it for the umpteenth time as I downed my coffee. BXK+A261184. I still couldn't make heads or tails of it. Maybe I should have shown it to the Interpol agents. I'd forgotten to ask.

Staring at the index card started to get me frustrated, so I switched to the Colonel's notebook. Maybe I'd overlooked something the first time through. I opened it up and saw the three names I'd jotted down when I'd been talking to Paul Dubois: Phoenix, Chameleon, and Professor Perriman. The first two were almost certainly code names, but Professor Perriman sounded like someone I should be able to track down.

Dubois had told me that he'd gotten the name from the Capricorn mole's report. The mole was working inside the Crusade for Genetic Purity, which was based in New San Francisco. Hopefully, the Professor was also a citizen of our fair-to-middlin' city.

I pulled up the directory on my computer and found eighteen Perrimans listed. Then I got on the horn and started calling. Eventually I reached a Mrs Perriman, who said her husband taught classes at the University of San Francisco until one o'clock and probably wouldn't be home until dinnertime.

After my third cup of sweet caffeine, I left the office and flew my speeder to USF. The campus was bustling with fresh faced students who didn't look old enough to have driver's licences. One of these, a cute redhead with newly straightened teeth, helpfully informed me that Professor Perriman taught history in the Jerry Rice building.

I followed her directions and found the building shortly before one o'clock. I paused outside the door and joined several students in a pre-lecture smoke. As we puffed, I listened in on their conversation, which was laced with sophomoric philosophy and rumours of huge, post finals keggers.

I finished my cigarette and stepped inside. On the third floor, I found a directory and made my way to room 319. The door was open, and I looked in to see a heavy-set man rummaging through a stack of papers on top of a file cabinet.

"Professor Perriman?"

The large man turned to face me. His hair was thick and untamed and had almost

completely lost the pigment battle, though his impressively feral beard still had streaks of black in it. He had a high, broad forehead and a pinkish complexion, with red blotched cheeks that peeked over the top of his beard. A pair of bifocals sat forgotten on the bridge of his bulbous nose. Professor Perriman had the look of a man who had lived a full life and still had a ways to go.

"What can I do for you?" He took a step toward me, so I stayed where I was.

"I'm not really sure, to tell you the truth. A friend of a friend said that I should look you up."

"Who's the friend?"

Dubois hadn't known the Professor, and I didn't have any other names. I decided to get the point. "Someone who works for CAPRICORN."

The Professor tilted his head forward and stared at me over his glasses. He looked like Santa, trying to decide if I was naughty or nice. After a moment, he motioned for me to come in and close the door behind me. I stepped into his office and looked the place over. He was a man after my own heart. There was a desk-shaped pile of books and papers and three other mounds with armrests. It pleased me that the Professor didn't apologise as he cleared space on two of the chairs. When we were seated, he pulled a pipe from his herringbone jacket and tapped it on the side of his desk. "CAPRICORN, eh? I didn't think they were still in business."

"I'm not sure they still are."

The Professor grunted as he packed his pipe. He smoked Captain Gold. The smell it emitted was the only entry in my top 10 list of aromas that wasn't related to food or women. The old man clenched the pipe in his teeth as he dug through his pockets. I would've offered my Zippo, but any smoker worth his salt knew that you just didn't use lighters on pipes. The old man located a red-tipped match and soon had the nest boiling. He settled in and turned his attention back to me. "We ought to introduce ourselves."

I stuck out my hand. "Murphy. Tex Murphy."

"Benjamin Perriman. So tell me, Mr Murphy, What brings you to my office under such murky pretenses?"

I smiled. "Well, I'm a PI, and, in my business, you're what we like to call a 'lead'. It's like proselytizing missionary work, except I get to smoke, drink, and swear."

Smoke curled out from under the professor's expansive moustache. "A private investigator, eh? So this visit is related to a case of some sort. Murder, I hope. Nothing better than a good whodunnit."

"Actually, there seems to have been a murder committed, though it's more of a whydunnit than a whodunnit."

"So how did it happen? In the conservatory with a candlestick?"

"Good guess. We won't know for certain until the police find the body. All they found so far is a finger."

The professor leaned forward, holding a pipe in his hand. "Anyone I know?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. You heard of Colonel Roy O'Brien?"

The professor's brow furrowed, and he puffed thoughtfully for some time before nodding.

"I can't say that your news is totally unexpected, though it's certainly unfortunate."

"You knew him, then?"

Perriman removed his pipe. "We met several months ago. I gave him some information. From what he told me, I believed he was putting himself in great danger."

"I'm trying to find out who murdered him."

Unexpectedly, the Professor smiled, though it could have been more of a grimace. "I would be surprised if you ever do." He sat back in his chair. "But that's academic. How does this involve me?"

I leaned forward. "That's what I'd like to find out. If you've got a few minutes, I'll hum a few bars, and you can jump in whenever it starts to sound familiar."

Perriman waved his hand, and I started at the beginning. He listened patiently as I told him about being hired by the "Countess." It wasn't until I offhandedly described the statuette that I got a reaction. The professor literally sat up. "The Habuh."

"Excuse me?"

Professor Perriman set his pipe on a stack of books and stood up. Without a word, he

walked to a jam-packed bookcase and began searching for something. He quickly found a large, hardbound volume and started leafing through it as he returned to his seat. Finding what he wanted, he turned the book around and held it in front of me, his finger pointing to a drawing of the countess's statuette. "Is this the one you saw?"

I nodded, unsure of what this meant. Everything I'd heard about the statuette led me to believe it was valuable and highly prized, but seeing it in this ancient book put it in a whole new light. When the Professor turned the book back around, I caught a glimpse of the title: A complete History of Arcana and the Occult.

Perriman set the book on the floor by his chair and collected his pipe. "This is foreboding news... ominous. How much do you know?"

"Not enough, apparently."

"How much do you care to know?"

"As much as you want to tell me." The Professor pulled a match from his vest pocket and proceeded to relight his pipe. After several puffs, he leaned back and crossed his legs. "Are you familiar with either the Brotherhood of Purity or the Secret Doctrine?"

I shook my head while the Professor continued. "If you like, I can tell you about the people who murdered Roy O'Brien. By doing so, you'll be in the same danger your friend was in."

"A little more danger won't make much difference."

Perriman nodded. "The Habuh, the statuette, is the sacred talisman of an occult cabal known as the Brotherhood of Purity. The origins of this group predate written history. The order was started in the Far East among a small group of men, whose concepts reached literally thousands of years into the future. While other more primitive men were barely learning the uses of metal and stone, this brotherhood was embracing the rudimentary principles of eugenics. Are you familiar with the term?"

"You bet."

"Of course, even these advanced thinkers were limited by lack of technology. The Brotherhood's trail is only faintly traceable for centuries. It is not until around 400 BC that we begin to see clear indications of its presence. To those familiar with the Secret Doctrine, there is much that can be interpreted from many of the Greek philosophers' teachings.

"The Brotherhood of Purity grew steadily in power during the rise of the Roman Empire. Despite its enormous wealth and influence, its anonymity was strictly preserved. The number of those who were initiated-and who received the teachings, signs, and passwords-was kept to a bare minimum, ensuring complete dedication and fealty, as well as avoiding the dilution of quality, which inevitably comes with overpopulation. There was also no need for a large following. As I have learned, the Secret Doctrine is filled with prophecies that would not reach fruition for many years. The order was concerned primarily with maintaining the rituals and making sure that the Brotherhood continued on toward the day when it would fulfil its destiny. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"When the Roman Empire fell, the Brotherhood survived unscathed. In fact, it is speculated that the order hastened the downfall for its own ends. The empire had grown obese and sedentary and was no longer conducive to the higher ideals of the Brotherhood of Purity. In keeping with early prophecies, the members of the order cast their eyes toward the fierce and hungry tribes of Angles and Saxons, which were not as intellectually advanced as the Romans, but had not suffered the physical and spiritual decline.

"Many pivotal and powerful figures of the Middle Ages became secretly affiliated with the Brotherhood of Purity, including Charles the Great, Henry the Lion, Otto the Great, Philip of Swabia, Conrad IV, and Frederick Barbarossa. While Emperor Charlemagne was not deemed intellectually suitable for the Brotherhood, his closest adviser and confidant, Hugo von Tournai, was a high-ranking member. His influence on Charlemagne drastically affected the course of Europe's, and the world's, history.

"Counted among the members of the Brotherhood were not only kings and statesmen, but also religious figures, such as the Bishop Klingsor, the Count of Acerra, and Eckbert of Meran, the thirteenth century Bishop of Bamberg. The Spanish Inquisition was instigated by a single radical member of the brotherhood who held a high position in the papal order. It is commonly believed that the thousands were put to death because they refused to join the Catholic faith. In actuality, these deaths were the result of an enormous ethnic cleansing. This was done, however, of the brother's own volition and was not a sanctioned act of the brotherhood.

"Throughout the Middle Ages and into the 20th century, other factious branches sprang from the brotherhood. The Crusades were in part associated with one of these branches. Eventually, the main body was able to pare off the splinter groups, but not without great bloodshed and civil war. Most of these conflicts have been misinterpreted by history, which in and of itself proves the extreme and far-reaching power of the brotherhood.

"Heinrich Himmler, who was in charge of the Nazi Occult Bureau at the height of the

Nazi movement, somehow obtained a manuscript of the Secret Doctrine and showed it to Adolf Hitler. They were greatly influenced by the brotherhood's principles, though they almost certainly were never allowed to enter the Order. It took many years for the brotherhood to undo the damage done by these madmen. Even in the years since, the main core of the brotherhood has had to deal with other contentious splinter groups, some of which have grown to massive proportions before the brotherhood could bring them under control."

Professor Perryman paused to empty his pipe ash into a trash can. I felt fairly sure that I was keeping up with him, but I had a few questions.

"So, what is the point of this brotherhood? You mentioned something about fulfilling their destiny, but it doesn't sound like they have done much more than keep themselves a secret from the rest of the world. And how is it that you know about them?"

The Professor ran a hand over his long beard. "I'll answer the last question first. I stumbled on to them quite by accident. When I was a student, years ago, I was doing research for my doctorate in a library in Vienna. I was searching through a dusty volume on German folklore when I came across an ancient manuscript, handwritten on brittle, yellowed parchment. In those days, my knowledge of the German language was marginal at best, but I was able to understand some of the contents. It was on that page that I first saw the terms Brotherhood of Purity and Secret Doctrine.

"The parchment had been placed between two pages, one of which displayed a lithograph of a painting. It was dated 1604 and signed by a man named Basilius. From what I could gather, it was an allegorical path to enlightenment, filled with symbols scattered along the way up to what I can only describe as a wizard's kitchen, filled with crescent-moon and sun designs. I'll never forget the symbols: a black raven, peacock, swan, pelican, lion, and eagle. Over the years, I have learned that each of these has a distinct attribute that must be attained by members of the Brotherhood.

"I was not allowed to take the book with me from the library, and when I returned later to take another look at the book and the parchment, they had mysteriously disappeared. Despite diligent searching, I never did see it again. My interest, however, was piqued. Since that day, I have been absorbed in learning the history behind the contents of the parchment.

"As to the brotherhood's self proclaimed manifest destiny, I have gleaned only bits and pieces, though I have no doubt that it's clearly stated in the pages of the Secret Doctrine. Since the origin of the order, the names and acts of the founders have been passed down orally for hundreds of generations. It wasn't until the third century AD that the genealogy, philosophy, and icons were set in print. A group of men, known to outsiders

as the Docetists, composed an expansive tome, attempting to summarise the order's history and doctrine. This text became known as the Secret Doctrine.

"I have never seen a verified copy of the text, though several reputedly authentic excerpts have come to my attention. Regardless, from what I have read, been told, and overheard, I've assembled a partial description of the brotherhood's objectives, as they are contained in the prophecies within the sacred text.

"The Secret Doctrine describes an entity called the Incubus, which the Brotherhood would summon when all its prophecies had come to pass. The Incubus would then create something or someone that translates literally to the Moon Child. This Moon Child would be the destroyer of the impure and the guardian of the pure and faithful."

The mention of the Moon Child made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. "Isn't the Moon Child the name of that satellite resort? The one used by the crusade?"

The Professor nodded solemnly. "It is unthinkable that the name is a coincidence. And I can infer only one of two things because of it: Either the leaders of the Crusade for Genetic Purity have somehow obtained a copy of the Secret Doctrine, and, like Hitler before them, are attempting to incorporate his teachings into their own agenda, or the brotherhood is behind the crusade and has reached a point where they no longer feel it necessary to hide themselves. I'm inclined to believe the latter."

We sat in silence for some time. It sounded to me like this cult, the Brotherhood of Purity, was planning on starting another Holocaust. There was still something the Professor hadn't explained. I spoke up. "What about the statuette I found? How does it fit into all this? And you have any idea who Countess could have been?"

Professor Perriman reached for his pipe and used it to gesture with.

"As to the identity of the Countess, I have no idea. Many rich and powerful people are affiliated with the brotherhood. As to the Habuh, it is as ancient as the brotherhood itself. Apparently, it was kept by the order for many generations, but was lost or stolen at some point during the early to mid-20th century. The brotherhood has been looking for it ever since, desperately over the past few years. I had assumed-and hoped-that it was lost forever. But, from what you told me, it appears they've recovered it."

"But why is it so important to them?"

The professor shrugged. "Its purpose may be purely symbolic, or it may have some practical use in matters of the occult. I won't bore you with all the details, but the Secret Doctrine teaches that the Earth is wrapped in layers of etheric forces. A form of energy,

called vril, may be derived from these forces. Occult theorists speculate that vril could be used to manipulate the astral plane, as well as to tap into the telluric currents that criss-cross like a grid all over the etheric body. But vril is said to be like any other form of energy-it must be channelled to be useful. Perhaps the Habuh is the controller."

The professor set his pipe down and folded his arms. "But that's neither here nor there. We may never learn its purpose. The fact is that the brotherhood seems to be preparing for the culmination of thousands of years of waiting. What their plans are, and when they will be set into motion, I don't know. I can only hope that they overestimate the power of their prophecies and fail, as the Nazis failed."

Professor Perriman leaned forward and clasped his hands tightly.

"If they succeed... God help us."

UAKM - Chapter 17

Time seemed to have stood still during my conversation with the professor. To my surprise, I checked my watch and saw that I'd have to hurry or I'd miss my 3 o'clock appointment with Lowell Percival. I thanked Professor Perriman and excused myself.

As I returned to my speeder, I tried to decide if I'd just become privy to the occult blueprint for the end of the world, or wasted a couple of hours on a delusional, peyote-eating conspiracy theorist. Maybe I didn't want to believe what Professor Perriman had told me. It all seemed too incredible. The idea that a secret cult could manipulate history and wield almost limitless power-without being publicly exposed-was the kind of tripe you read about while standing in line at a grocery store. But he was a highly educated, respected authority telling me it was so.

I was still trying to digest it all when I arrived at Lowell Percival Enterprises. I made my way through security and up to the fifty-first floor. Alaynah Moore was sitting at her post and looking especially attractive. She seemed to be wearing just a little more make-up than when I'd seen her the day before, and her hair looked like it had been professionally styled. Even though my interest in her had petered out, it was good to know that I still had an effect on the occasional dame.

As I approached her desk, I detected a scent of perfume that hadn't been there before... expensive and alluring. There was only one reason why women wore perfume like that. Alaynah had also traded in her knit top and blazer for a form-fitting cashmere dress with the neckline that dove like a hungry kingfisher.

"You look lovely today."

Alaynah's eyes darted instinctively toward her cleavage, then back at me.

"Thanks. So do you."

I knew I didn't, but I wasn't going to get into a flirtatious debate. "Is Mr Percival in?"

Alaynah seemed almost startled by the question. "What?... Oh, yes. One second."

She turned to the paging device and spoke quietly into it. I looked away politely and happened to notice a light blue manila envelope on the desk. It was sealed and marked "Genetic Research Systems: Top Secret, Attention: Lowell Percival ONLY." Alaynah turned back to face me. "He's expecting you. Right through the door."

I tipped my hat and started toward Percival's office. I could feel Alaynah watching me all the way there. After a brief knock on the door, I opened it and walked in.

Lowell Percival stood up from behind his monstrous desk and walked around it to greet me. He was even shorter than I remembered, no taller than five-six, and looked as delicate as ever, despite extra padding in the shoulders of his expensively tailored blue pin-striped suit. His hair was combed straight back and thinning noticeably, but his trademark Vandyck beard was still jet-black. Behind new, almost invisible wire frame glasses, his eyes were as dark and intimidating as ever. Satan's accountant.

He shook my hand aggressively and guided me to a chair, before making a wide turn back to his own seat behind the desk. His voice was slightly high-pitched and precise. He had no discernible accent and used every word intentionally and deliberately, never uttering a single filler noise, such as "uh" or "um".

"Mr Tex Murphy. How long has it been? Three years?"

"Five, actually."

Percival sighed and shook his head. "Where does the time go?" He shifted comfortably in his oversized seat and tapped his right forefinger several times on the leather armrest. "What can I do for you? You're not looking for employment, certainly. I would imagine there are ample opportunities for a top-notch detective like yourself."

He certainly was an excellent schmoozer. I almost believed him, and I was an award-winning cynic. Maybe that explained why he was a multibillionaire, and I was late on my rent.

"I'm not here looking for work, Mr Percival. I ran across your name in a strange place, and I wanted to ask you about it."

Percival spread his hands out respectfully. "Please. I'm at your service."

I extracted the newspaper clipping with the photo of the statuette from my coat pocket, unfolded it, and passed it across to him. "What can you tell me about the bird?"

Percival studied the clipping for what seemed like a long time, then handed it back to me. "Not a great deal more than what is stated in the article."

I folded the paper and replaced it. Maybe he was lying, maybe he wasn't. I had a hard time reading him. With almost anyone else, I would've called his bluff. Unfortunately, metaphors didn't wash with Lowell Percival. I decided to try my second line of questioning and hope that he was in a cooperative mood.

"Tell me about Eddie Ching."

Percival didn't blink. "I don't know him."

"He knows you. Your name was included on a list of potential buyers of a certain artefact. I have a hunch you were in the running for the statuette in the newspaper photo."

Percival looked vaguely interested, but didn't respond until he'd given it a lot of thought. "Very well. I should clarify. I don't know Mr Ching personally-I know of him."

"Who is he?"

Percival gazed across his desk at me like a chess player matching wits with a competent, though lesser, opponent. "He's a.... an importer. His speciality is obtaining certain... how shall I put this?... collectibles, which he then makes available to his clientele. The statuette was one of these collectible."

"So you did want it. Why?"

Percival opened his arms and gestured flamboyantly. "Why does anyone want anything? Appreciation of beauty, the desire to own a magnificent and utterly unique work of art. I am wealthy beyond comprehension. I have worked diligently my entire life, and for what? So that I may call just such an object my own. There are few things remaining in this existence that fill me with wonderment and joy. Art can affect me that way."

His explanation seemed genuine. I didn't know Percival that well, but he struck me as the type of person who was never uninformed. If what Professor Perriman had told me was the truth, and he hadn't just been mixing hallucinogens with excessive role playing, the statuette was much more than a run-of-the-mill collectible. It seemed almost inconceivable that Percival would bid (millions, undoubtedly) for the statuette and not know its significance. I had to find out.

"I've heard statuette is pretty valuable."

Percival smiled patronizingly. "That is a gross understatement. In theory, it is priceless... though theories tend to break down at the bargaining table."

"I've also heard that it may have magical powers."

Percival laughed out loud. "Ah, yes... magic. That was my esoteric motivation for wanting the statuette. With it, I would master legerdemain and become a mighty wizard!"

Still laughing, Percival removed his glasses and dried his eyes. I felt as though I were being mocked. Percival replaced his glasses and looked over at me. "You seem to have heard a great deal about the statuette. What else do you know?"

I didn't feel like dancing around the subject any more. "Some people think that it's a sacred object, worshipped by an ancient cult known as the Brotherhood of Purity."

Percival lifted his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "Really? A cult?"

"That's just what I've heard. I don't necessarily think there's anything to it."

Percival nodded sympathetically, then sat up in his chair. "Why don't you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus to me. It's like that group of devil worshippers the cops busted a couple of months ago. Turned out to be a bunch of pimply faced teenagers, sitting around with a few dead chickens, burning incense and drinking beer. I just don't buy the whole illuminati, trilateral commission thing."

The billionaire smiled approvingly. "It is good to know that there are still reasonable men in this world. Though I must admit, I have always had a somewhat morbid passing interest in the occult, and I, too, have heard of this Brotherhood of Purity. It is a fascinating idea, though I believe that it, like the concept of illuminati, is by and large fictional. As for the actual significance of the statuette, that was irrelevant to me."

"The source who told me about the occult also said that the Crusade for Genetic Purity might be connected to the Brotherhood of Purity. Do you know anything about that?"

Percival put his fingertips together and pressed them lightly against his chin. "I find it difficult to believe. The crusade is such a public organisation and, from what I know, the brotherhood has always striven for total secrecy. If it actually exists, that is."

I nodded and tried to think if there was anything else I wanted to ask. Percival and I seemed to have similar opinions of the occult. Now if we only had similar incomes.

"Well, Mr Percival, I appreciate your time."

I stood up and glanced around the office. On the wall behind the desk, I spotted a framed photograph of Percival shaking hands with the Reverend Claude Shepherd, the leader of the Crusade for Genetic Purity. I suddenly wondered if Percival had come clean with me.

"Looks like you've done alright for yourself since we last met."

Percival came around the side of the desk and shook my hand. "I hope the success has been mutual. I enjoyed our visit."

Trying to think of a snappy rejoinder, I walked to the door, and Percival opened it for me. I paused before leaving.

"Do you have the statuette?"

Percival shook his head. "I wish I did. I think it would look especially nice on that marble stand, next to the window."

I thanked him, and he closed the door behind me. Alaynah turned and smiled. "How did it go?"

"I'm not sure."

She smiled again and lowered her voice. "Mr Percival seems to have that effect on most people. So, when are you going to take me out for another drink? I think I might be free this evening."

Despite having decided against pursuing anything amorous with Alaynah, I had a good reason to buy her a few drinks, though I'd have to find some money first. She probably handled some, if not all, of Percival's correspondence. If I got her drunk, maybe she'd

have something interesting to tell me about her employer. I was also curious about the light blue manila envelope from Genetic Research Systems still lying on her desk.

"What time are you off? I can swing by and pick you up."

Alaynah smiled, glad to see that I'd finally come around. "Five o'clock."

I grinned suavely. "I won't be late."

I said goodbye and walked back to the elevator. Five minutes later, I beeped off the alarm on the speeder and climbed inside. I was actually feeling eager. Maybe I'd jumped to conclusions with Alaynah. It was something we'd have to discuss. I knew I was being weak, but a beautiful woman with a great figure and a possible trove of information was almost too much for a celibate PI with no leads. I decided to make a quick trip back to the office, take a shower, dust off the bottle of Cologne, maybe even shave.

I lifted off and began to rise above the sunset. Turning the speeder in the direction of my office, I accelerated and glanced into my rearview mirror. Behind me, the Lowell Percival Enterprises building blew into a billion pieces.

UAKM Chapter 18

The City went haywire. Immediately, a deafening cacophony of alarms went off. A massive dust cloud billowed from ground zero, then slowly dissipated, revealing piles of debris, corpses, and body parts scattered in all directions. Passersby who had survived the blast lay on the street and sidewalks, some dying, others only stunned. Within minutes, the area was flooded with fire department personnel, policemen, and horrified onlookers. The explosion had not only gutted the entire LPE skyscraper, but it had taken out most of the surrounding block. Few, if any, survivors would be pulled out of the Percival building. I suddenly remembered talking to Alaynah and Percival. Now, only minutes later, they were both almost certainly dead.

I set my speeder down several blocks away and walked toward the destruction in a semi-stupor. On every side, emergency personnel were tending to the wounded. I'd never had the dubious honour of serving in the war, but this was what I'd imagined it would be like. Dazed workers from nearby buildings were streaming out to survey the damage. Television vehicles began to appear, and the airspace was jammed with media craft.

Stopping just outside the perimeter of debris, I considered getting out of the way and returning to my office, but the awesome spectacle of the annihilated skyscraper held me fast. After several minutes, I caught sight of a familiar face. Mac Malden, along with most of the SFPD, was beginning to question eyewitnesses.

I approach Mac, who was talking to a shell-shocked-looking young woman. When he was done, he looked up to see me and walked over. "Can you believe this?"

I shook my head. My stomach was starting to get queasy.

Mac pulled out a pack of Merits. "What're you doing down here? Just lucky?"

Lucky was exactly how I was feeling. It had only just occurred to me that I'd been inside the building about three minutes before it turned to dust. If I'd stepped into the bathroom, or talked to Alaynah a while longer... I didn't want to think about it.

"I was in the building."

Mac lit his cigarette. "When?"

"A few minutes ago."

The cop glanced at me, his eyes wider than I ever thought they could be. "@#%\$."

"Tell me about it. I think I'm gonna vomit."

"What were you doing in there?"

I choked down a brief wave of nausea. "I had an appointment to see Lowell Percival."

"He was in there?" I nodded. Mac looked me over. "You don't look good, Murphy. Go home. There's nothing else to see here. Give me a call when you've got your feet under you. I'd like to hear what happened."

I turned and walked unsteadily back to my speeder. By the time I got there, my stomach was under control again, but I had a case of the spins. I climbed inside and sat at the wheel for several minutes. Eventually, my equilibrium steadied, and I fired up the engine.

My mind was racing as I guided the speeder over the panic-stricken city. Who had bombed LPE? Was it linked to the Capricorn bombing? Why the LPE building? To get Percival? Why Percival?

Back at the Ritz, I stumbled into my bedroom and fell onto the bed. I didn't realize that I'd fallen asleep until an incessant banging woke me up. The room was dark. I checked the time: 7:10. My body was aching, but my brain felt relatively normal. I pushed myself

up and crossed to the front door.

It was the Interpol agents. I stepped aside, and the female agent walked past. The man, Agent McCovey, looked me over. "Post-traumatic stress. It will pass."

I shut the door. "Yeah, I know. I used to be married."

McCovey grinned and followed me over to the desk. I dropped into my chair, and the agents sat in the two guest chairs across the desk from me. Half a pack of Lucky Strikes was conveniently waiting. I took out a cigarette and lit it, without asking permission. Agent Andrews covered her mouth and coughed delicately. I ignored it. "So, what in the world brings the two of you to my humble abode?"

Apparently my visitors had drawn straws, and McCovey had lost.

"Lieutenant Malden said he spoke with you at the scene of the bombing. You saw it happen?"

"Got a bird's-eye view."

"What were you doing down there? Malden said something about you having seen Lowell Percival. Quite a coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidence."

McCovey flashed his boyish grin again. "Really? You were one of the last people to see Colonel O'Brien alive. Same with Paul Dubois. You're a nominee for the coincidence poster boy. What do you call it?"

"Dumb luck. In my heart of hearts, I'm a Sagittarius."

Agent Andrews seemed to be getting impatient and cut in. "Why don't you just tell us why you went to see Percival?"

I took a leisurely drag off my cigarette and directed a long stream of smoke just to her left. "I was trying to find out what he knew about the statuette."

McCovey spoke with exaggerated friendliness. "The one you told us about the other night?"

I nodded, and the agents sat forward. "What did he tell you?"

"Not enough. Just pretty much confirmed what I already knew. He was interested in buying it and said he didn't have it."

Agent Andrews had her notebook out. "Did you talk about anything else?"

"Yes we did. It turns out we both love Carmen Miranda movies. Or loved, as the case may be."

Andrews shook her head and turned to her partner, then back to me. "Was there anything odd about his behaviour? Did he seem nervous?"

"He acted perfectly normal for a man about be blown into little bits." I took a drag.

"How the hell should I know? It wasn't like we were lifelong pals. I barely knew him."

The agents glanced at each other and seemed to decide that I wasn't going to be a font of information in my current frame of mind. Andrews put her notebook away, and McCovey smiled politely. "Well, we'll get out of your hair."

They started to get up, but I had a few questions of my own. "Before you go, tell me something. Was this bombing related to the one in LA?"

McCovey shifted in his seat. "We're not sure. There are some similarities. Both places have heavy security. The explosive device looks to be identical and planted in the same part of the building. That's off the record, by the way. We won't know for sure until the investigators finish sifting through the rubble. Could take days, maybe weeks. Right now, we're treating it as a serial bombing."

"But the Capricorn bombing was pretty clearly politically motivated. As far as I know, Percival didn't have any official ties to Capricorn, the Mutant League, or any other political organization, for that matter."

McCovey frowned pensively. "We thought of that. It certainly makes the connection harder to figure out. It's conceivable that Percival himself was the target, although the similarities to the Capricorn bombing seem to contradict that theory. Be that as it may, Percival turned out to be mortal, and all hell's breaking loose."

"You found the body?"

McCovey nodded. "What was left of it."

"What kind of hell is breaking loose?"

The agent shrugged. "The stock market's in a panic. Percival's fingerprints were all over Wall Street. Analysts are predicting another crash."

I didn't know or care much about what happened in the financial world, but another, more personal concern came to mind. "Percival had a receptionist. Her desk was just outside his office."

The agent shook his head regretfully.

I crushed out my cigarette.

The agents looked at each other, then silently stood up and headed for the door. After they'd gone, I popped open my CD player and put on a Nat King Cole disc. His smooth vocals always had the same effect on me as two Lortabs and a bottle of JD. I was out of prescription drugs and whisky, so Nat would have to do. As I reached for another smoke, the vid-phone beeped. I leaned over and flipped on the receiver. Unexpectedly, Melahn Tode's nicely constructed face appeared on the monitor.

"Murphy? You told me to call if I found anything else of Roy's... the Colonel's."

This sounded promising. "I appreciate you calling. What'd you find?"

"It's probably nothing... a newspaper."

Hmmm. This was familiar territory. "Bay City Mirror?"

"I think so." Melahn looked down. "Yeah."

"What's if the date?"

She paused to check. "November thirtieth. It was folded open to the personal ads, and one of them was circled. Want to see it?"

"Please."

Melahn reached off-camera, then held a folded newspaper page up to the screen. I got close and squinted, but couldn't quite make out the print.

"Maybe you should read it to me. It's a little fuzzy."

"All right. It says, 'Gorgeous, rabid single seeks confidential, open minded lover. Take away our love, and our Earth is a tomb.' That it."

I finished writing down the message and looked back at the screen. Melahn seemed upset.

"Why would he look for someone else? Especially in the personals... it's so... sleazy. I thought we had something special."

The Colonel might have been checking the personal ads for personal reasons, but I doubted it. From what I'd learned, his interest in the ads was purely professional. On the other hand, if Melahn was convinced that her boyfriend had been looking for love in a newspaper, it might make losing him less painful, but I felt like she ought to know the truth.

I explained the situation to her without any of the details. She seemed at least partially relieved, but started asking for particulars. I told I wasn't at liberty to share the information, but that she could be sure the Colonel's motives in the matter were innocent. She thanked me and said she'd call back if she found out anything else.

After disconnecting, I turned my attention to the message Melahn had passed along. I started by counting the letters-there were 84, unless my spelling skills had completely vanished. If this was a code, it didn't appear to be like the other one I'd found in the paper. I went through the other approaches, every other letter and so on, but without any luck. After a while, I decided that I would never make progress without a stiff drink.

Then I saw it. I'd been looking too hard. It was the initials. "Gorgeous, rabid single seeks confidential, open minded lover." GRS seeks COL. COL was the abbreviation for Colonel. This was definitely a communication meant for the Colonel to see. Now I just had to find out who GRS was. And what was the meaning in the rest of the message? The initials didn't make any sense. At any rate, it didn't sound like a code; it sounded like a literary quote. Unfortunately most of the literature I knew started with "There once was a man from Nantucket." Maybe if I found out where the quote was from, it would help me to interpret the message.

There was only one logical place to check. I'd never been to the public library, but my tax dollars were helping to fund it. I decided to tap the resource and looked up the number in my directory. I glanced at my watch. It was just after eight o'clock. They were probably closed, but I'd try anyway. To my surprise, someone picked up. It was an older woman, with white hair tied in a tight bun and spectacles hanging on a chain around her neck. She looked to me like a veritable vault of quote knowledge. "City Library. Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have this literary quote, and I'm trying to find out who said it."

"My goodness. Trivia. Well, let's hear it, though I can't promise anything." She was a trooper.

"OK, here goes. 'Take away our love, and our Earth is a tomb.'"

The old woman mulled it over. "If I had to guess, I'd bet it's probably Robert Browning. It sounds just like the kind of thing he'd say. We have quite a good selection of his work down here, if you'd like to look around."

I smiled appreciatively. "I just might do that, ma'am. Thank you for your help."

"Not at all. Thank you for calling."

Going to the library actually seemed like a pretty good idea. I could check on this Browning guy and browse through the newspapers from the past couple of weeks. I had a hunch there would be other messages. If only I had money. There were sources on the Internet that could give you access to newspaper data from all over the world. Unfortunately, my web subscription was one of the first things to lapse when I'd gone broke. At least I didn't have to pay to use the library and, apparently, it stayed open to at least nine o'clock. I grabbed my coat and left.

When I reached the San Francisco Public Library, I was pleased to see that the posted hours were 7 A.M. to 10 P.M. I stepped inside and breathed the pleasant smell of books. These days, more and more people were using their computers as reading material. When they weren't glued to the television, that is. Online libraries offered a direct entry to the Library of Congress, and actual libraries couldn't compete when it came to selection. The book you were looking for was always literally at your fingertips, since it never had to be checked out. Plus, you could always find what you wanted and print it out.

Despite all the advantages, in my opinion, it just wasn't the same as lounging in the tub with an old, yellowed hardback. Ever since I was a kid, I'd had a soft spot for real paper books. I'd grown up with the Hardy Boys, then moved onto Sherlock Holmes. By the time I discovered Chandler and Hammett, my destiny was clear.

I started by looking up the past three weeks of Bay City Mirror issues. This time, I dispensed with the cover-to-cover search and went straight to the personal ads. I hit pay dirt in the November 23 edition, which was seventeen days previous and a week prior to the ad Melahn had found. The message read, "Grandfather reaching sixty seeks comfortable, old-fashioned lady. Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight." There it was

again - GRS seeks COL. The quote at the end sounded like something from a Greek play or maybe Shakespeare.

Sensing a pattern, I skipped ahead two weeks to the December 7 issue. Again, I found what I was looking for: "Green-eyed, redheaded Scorpio seeks curvy, outgoing Leo. We sail tonight." The last part didn't sound like a quote. It sounded vaguely fateful.

I went on to check the other days in between, but there were only the three messages. It was almost closing time when I went to the front desk. The elderly lady I'd spoken to on the vid-phone came to the counter, smiling pleasantly. "I hoped to see you in here, but I didn't expect it would be so soon."

"You were very convincing."

I showed her the Pyramus and Thisby quote. She was all over this one and told me that the line was from A Midsummer Night's Dream. I got directions to Robert Browning and went on a search. Just at ten o'clock, I returned to the front desk with a copy of his Collected Poems and a small paperback of A Midsummer Night's Dream. The elderly lady checked out the books for me and wished me a good night.

I returned to my office and took the books to bed. It took quite a bit of searching before I located the Browning quote. There was nothing in the rest of the poem that clarified the message. I picked up the Shakespeare paperback and started scanning through the play. I paused after the first act and rubbed my eyes. It wasn't even eleven o'clock, and I was dragging. I fired up and went back to my speed-reading.

Finally, in act three, I found the line "Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight." It appeared in a scene where a bunch of knuckleheads were trying to practice their parts in a play. I'd never been an avid Shakespearean, but the scenario read like a bad episode of Three's Company. I read it over and couldn't find anything that made the quote meaningful.

Maybe the numbers at the top of the page were significant. The top right and left corner each had a number; I assumed they indicated which lines of the play were on that page. Fatigue was creeping up on me. It took me three tries to figure out the line number for "Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight." I grabbed a pen and wrote down act three, scene one, lines forty-nine and fifty. When I finished, I laid back to rest my eyes for a moment.

An especially loud snore startled me out of a deep sleep. I'd been dreaming, and the images were still fresh in my mind. I'd been talking to Alaynah and was relieved to see

that she'd miraculously survived the bombing. We were discussing the personal ads. When I asked her who GRS could be, she winked at me and pointed. I followed her finger down to a sealed envelope on her desk. Printed on the envelope were the words Genetic Research Systems.

UAKM - Chapter nineteen

There was no listing for Genetic Research Systems in the phone directory. The company either had an unlisted number or wasn't located in the greater New San Francisco area. This was a new challenge. I'd never had to track down a corporation before. Maybe it was a publicly owned business. If so, I had a connection that might help me, for once.

Lavercan Kimbell, of Kimbell, Kimbell, & Schwartz, was my investment broker, with the emphasis on broker. The more I dealt with Lavercan, the broker I got. Back when I'd had a little extra cash, I'd decided to dabble in the stock market. Lavercan had guided me through a series of mind-numbing investments, which had since dried up like old hookers. The shares I owned were now about as valuable as Monopoly money. I figured that the least Lavercan could do was help me find a lead on Genetic Research Systems.

I called Kimbell, Kimbell, & Schwartz and was told that Lavercan wouldn't be in the office for awhile. I wondered briefly if I'd underestimated Lavercan. Maybe he'd fleeced me and his other clients and was sunning his round, white belly on a secluded Mexican beach. No way. He was an inept, financial moron, but he wasn't a swindler. If all his other investments had fared like mine, he was probably browsing through pawnshops, looking for an inexpensive handgun.

Luckily, in the loosest sense of the word, Lavercan's brother Lemmer, as opposed to his wide-eyed sibling, looked like someone who would not only scam your life savings, but have someone steal the drive cell out of your speeder while you were sitting in his office. Fortunately, I had no intentions of doing anything requiring an exchange of money. I told Lemmer that I was looking for a company called Genetic Research Systems and asked if he could check his computer listings for any information about it. Lemmer seemed a little put off, but said he'd take a look before putting me on hold for several minutes. When he returned, he said that there was no listing for a company by that name, which meant the company was privately owned.

I asked if he had any pointers on how I could locate GRS. He rolled his eyes, then told me to contact the state Department of Commerce, since all businesses were required to register there. Lemmer's curt inflections let me know that I was wasting his time, so I thanked him for his help and ended the call.

It seemed logical to start with the Department of Commerce. If that didn't pan out, I'd be forced to start a more systematic search, and I had a feeling that GRS would end up being harder to find than a smoking section in downtown Los Angeles.

I looked up the number for the DOC, punched it in, and was soon face to face with a tired-looking state employee. I told him what I was looking for and asked if they had any information that would help me. The government worker said they did, indeed, have the information I needed, but that it was strictly off-limits to the public. I was about to ask him how he felt about perpetuating a stereotype when he suggested that I visit my local library and check out a publication by the name of Dun & Bradstreet. He went on to say that Dun & Bradstreet provided credit information on almost every company, public or private, and that it would also furnish phone numbers and addresses. I expressed my heartfelt gratitude and hung up.

I collected the books I'd checked out the night before and flew to the library. Since I had to consult Dun & Bradstreet anyway, I figured I ought to take back the books. If I put it off for more than a couple days, I'd totally forget about them and eventually end up with an overdue fine bigger than my annual bar tab.

Once I got to the library, it didn't take long to find the Dun & Bradstreet reference book. Sure enough, Genetic Research Systems was listed. The first thing I did was jot down the phone number and address. The business was located in Sacramento. Then, out of curiosity, I read the company bio. GRS was one of six subsidiary companies belonging to Western States Pharmaceuticals. As to what the company did, Dun & Bradstreet's blurb hedged around the subject like an intelligent but unprepared college student's term paper.

I wanted to find out as much about GRS as I could before making any kind of move. Its parent company, Western States Pharmaceuticals, sounded vaguely familiar. I ran through the alphabetical listings to W and read the bio. Somewhat to my surprise, I saw that the parent company was an affiliate of another corporation- one I knew about: Lowell Percival Enterprises. My stroll down the paper trail had suddenly gotten very interesting.

I left the library and, as I flew home, tried to make sense of this new information. Genetic Research Systems was essentially part of Lowell Percival Enterprises. Was it purely coincidental that the sealed envelope from GRS was sitting on Alaynah's desk just before the bombing? All my instincts said the two things were connected. But how?

The personal ads in the Bay City Mirror clearly implied that someone inside GRS was in contact with the Colonel. From what I'd learned earlier, I concluded that this person was probably the CAPRICORN mole Paul Dubois had told me about. Why had

CAPRICORN felt it necessary to infiltrate GRS? What was going on at GRS? I decided it was worth checking out and set course for Sacramento.

It was a short flight. I'd never felt any urgency to visit Sacramento, so this was virgin territory for me. After stopping to ask for directions three times, I finally ended up in an industrial section of the city. The buildings were old, prewar structures, and most appeared to be abandoned and/or condemned. Here and there, I saw barely thriving, unhappy businesses. From what I could see, the city had expanded to the north, leaving this part of town eerily isolated and empty.

When I reached the address I'd copied from Dun & Bradstreet, my first impression was not good. The building, a large rectangular block of cement, looked like it was just half a notch above a bomb shelter and appeared to be completely abandoned. All the surrounding buildings were in various stages of decay. I walked to the front door and saw the words Genetic Research Systems stenciled cheaply on the steel door. The lock on the door was bolted shut. I walked around the side, past seven or eight blacked-out windows, and continued on to the back end of the building. There was a rear entrance, but it was sealed as tightly as the front door. A quick check of the other side of the building confirmed that there were only two entrances.

It was times like this that nicotine often came to the rescue. Enjoying a smoke not only gave me something to do, but also seemed to inspire me, elevating my pedestrian thought processes into the realm of the sublime. I took a long drag and surveyed the building from top to bottom and end to end. I inhaled again and waited for the brain power to accelerate.

By the time I took the last hit off the Lucky Strike, I'd formulated a plan. I discarded the butt and searched the ground for a good-sized rock. Finding one, I walked up to one of the windows and threw it against the window as hard as I could. The rock bounced harmlessly off.

OK, I needed a Plan B. Maybe there was an entrance on the roof. I backed away and looked up. The roof was flat, and it had plenty of surface area. I returned to my speeder. A minute later, I set down on the gravelly top of the building. I hopped out and spied what appeared to be a trap door. The red metal lid had a rusted padlock on it. I returned to the speeder and retrieved my trusty hammer from the trunk. After five minutes of banging and twisting, the padlock broke. I traded my hammer for my flashlight, opened the trap door, and climbed down into the black hole.

When I reached the bottom of the ladder, I turned on the flashlight and looked around. Locating a light switch nearby, I flipped it but nothing happened. I moved my light

around the room. It appeared to be some sort of storage area. There were rows of metal shelves, piled high with boxes and crates. Most of the boxes were marked and contained everything from test tubes to chemicals to computer supplies.

I found a door, opened it, and stepped into a long hallway. I walked to the first door on my right and entered a room full of computer workstations. The area was divided into cubicles with low walls, separated by narrow walkways. It looked like a typical office at night or on a weekend - empty, but not deserted. On some of the desks, I saw coffee mugs, notepads, and other objects you'd expect to find. I walked to one of the workstations and checked a desk calendar, the kind with a cartoon for each day of the year. The date was December 7.

I thought back to the last personal ad I'd dug up. It'd been in the December 7 issue. The end of the message had read, "We sail tonight." The meaning now seemed pretty clear. By all appearances, GRS had been out of business for exactly three days. Where had they gone?

I returned to the hallway and crossed to another door. This room was a stark contrast to the cubicle room. It was cavernous and open, like the interior of a warehouse, and looked like it had functioned as a laboratory. All around the perimeter, overhead cabinets were mounted above black-covered counters, like the ones in my high school science classroom. Built into the counters, every twenty feet or so, were large, stainless steel sinks. In the center of the room were dozens of island tables, all completely bare. I looked through some of the cabinets, but there was nothing to find besides empty test tubes and other similar supplies. I circled the room, hoping to find something of interest, but this area, unlike the first room, seemed to have been thoroughly cleaned out.

Back in the hallway, I checked the next four doors. The first two were the men's and women's bathrooms, and the other two were utility closets. The last door, at the end of the hall, opened up to an office. I searched through the desk but, like the laboratory, it had been totally emptied. A quick search of a file cabinet, a wastebasket, and a cardboard box turned up the same result. I decided to give the first room a closer look.

I started at the work station closest to the door. Since the power was off, there was no way to turn on the computers. Upon closer inspection, electricity wouldn't have done me any good anyway. The data storage clip had been removed. The computer was like a speeder without a drive cell. I rifled the drawers of the desk, but they were essentially empty.

I walked to the adjoining cubicle and went through the same procedure, with the same result. In the third cubicle, I saw something sticking out from beneath the computer. I lifted the edge of the machine and peeled off a piece of masking tape, which had gotten

crinkled underneath. Written on it were the numbers 272551. Probably an inventory number. It gave me an idea.

I went back and checked under the two previous computers. They also had tape with six-digit inventory numbers stuck on them. I pulled out my notebook and checked the numbers I'd scribbled down the night before, after I'd found the Shakespeare quote. Act three, scene one, lines forty-nine and fifty. 314950. That could've been the meaning of the message - to find the computer with inventory number 314950. It was worth a try.

I hurried through the room, pausing only to inspect the bottoms of the computers. About halfway through, I found the one numbered 314950. To my disappointment, its data-storage clip had been removed, just like the others. I opened the top drawer and searched it. Finding nothing, I moved to the middle drawer, then the bottom drawer. Under a pile of papers, I found a tissue box. I picked it up, and it was heavier than it should have been. Much heavier. I tore open the side of the box like a kid unwrapping a Christmas present. There, nestled among the tissues, was a data-storage clip.

The Colonel had probably been meant to find this. That would explain the contents of the personal ads and why they were addressed to him. This might have been the only way the CAPRICORN mole could effectively relay the details on what was happening at GRS - wait for the decks to clear, then plant a land mine full of information. Well, the Colonel wasn't around to find the clip, but I was. I slipped the clip into my pocket and made my way back to the roof. Minutes later, I was speeding in the direction of New San Francisco. My stomach was in knots with anticipation. I hoped that whatever was on the clip would answer some of the questions that had been piling up over the past few days. As I closed in on the city I called home, the sun disappeared over the horizon, and the waning moon hovered above the red band of fading light. By the time I landed my speeder in front of the Ritz, night had blanketed the city.

I climbed the fire-escape stairs and stuck my key into the deadbolt. As I stepped inside, just for an instant, I caught the sound of heavy breathing. A split second later, my jaw slammed into a wall.

UAKM - chapter twenty

As nearly as I could tell, I was seated in one of the chairs usually reserved for my clients. Someone had turned on the banker's lamp on the desk, but my vision still hadn't cleared. Gradually, a figure came into focus. It was an Asian woman, sitting on the edge of my desk, wearing a red silk blouse and black jeans.

"Good evening, Mr. Murphy."

Her voice had a slight accent and a hard edge. I touched my chin gingerly and tested my jaw to see if it still worked. It hurt like hell, but at least they hadn't knocked any teeth out. In my peripheral vision, I could see a pair of large bodies just behind and on either side of me. The odds weren't in my favor, but I'd never let that stop me.

"I hope you don't mind if I just make myself at home."

The Asian woman folded her arms. "Something you seem to be in the habit of doing."

"My habits are my business, thank you. Now, if you don't mind me asking, who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing in my office?"

Before I could flinch sufficiently, a hairy paw came from behind my right ear and cuffed me right in the sore spot on my jaw. Blinding pain flashed into my brain. A deep, vaguely illiterate voice rumbled behind me. "Shut yer face! You ain't askin' the questions here. Nobody talks to Eddie Ching like that."

Eddie Ching? Damn. This wasn't good at all.

"You're Eddie Ching?"

"You're a fast learner, Mr. Murphy. I respect that in a man. I also respect the job you did on my flat in Mexico City. It was very cleverly executed. All admiration aside, however, I must ask you to return the bird to me."

I shifted in my seat and glanced back at the goon who'd cuffed me. "I don't have it."

Ching folded her hands patiently in her lap and smiled condescendingly. "Where is it?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

My response had come out with an unintentionally sarcastic edge to it. The punch happy-goon made another move. This time I was ready and managed to deflect the blow.

"Listen, Ching. If your goon doesn't quit hitting me, I'm not gonna tell you a @#%\$ thing."

Ching stared at me passively for a long moment, then waved the apes away. They stepped back, and I got my first look at the thugs. They were not handsome men. But they were unbelievably big and radiated violence - the kind of guys who honed their craft through childhood by stealing lunch money and intimidating teachers into raising their grades to D minuses.

"All right, Mr. Murphy. Just mind your manners, and we'll get along fine. Answer my questions, and you'll have a decent chance of getting around the rest of your life without a walker. Now let's talk about the bird, shall we?"

"We can talk about it all night, but it won't change the fact that I don't have it."

"Fine. Just tell me where I can find it."

"Well, I'm not sure. But I'd start looking in Brownsville, Texas."

Ching shook her head, confused. "Texas?"

"Yeah. That's the last place I saw it. I stopped there for cigarettes, and someone jumped me in the parking lot. Which reminds me -" I dug into my pocket, which caused the goons to tense up. I pulled out my pack of smokes and held it up innocently. "I hope you don't mind. This is a smoking office."

Ching watched me thoughtfully as I lit my cigarette. I blew out a long stream of smoke, and she tilted her head slightly. "Why should I believe you?"

"It probably won't prove anything, but there's an unusually large bump and several stitches at the base of my skull. That's about as good as you're going to get."

Ching was silent for a moment, then jumped off the desk. "Imbecile! You have absolutely no idea what you've done, have you?"

"You don't need to insult me."

Ching moved around to the back of the desk and began to pace. "Why did you steal the bird?"

"I was hired to find it. My client said the statuette had been stolen from her. As far as I knew, I was just retrieving it."

"Who was your client?"

Hell if I knew. I was sure I'd been set up and that the countess was almost certainly a fake, but I didn't know what else to tell Ching. "It was an older woman. She said her name was Countess Renier."

Ching stopped pacing and shook her head. "Jacques Fou. I'd bet my life on it."

Fou. That was the name the Interpol agents had used. The real name of the Chameleon. It was hard to believe that the countess could actually have been a man, but I'd been fooled along those lines before. It was a horrible memory. Fortunately, Ching interrupted.

"Why you? How did you get involved?"

I shrugged. "The countess, or Fou, whoever...called and offered me the case. That's it."

Ching circled back around the desk and leaned against it. "Let me tell you what you've done. There is a group - a cult - more powerful than you can possibly imagine. The bird is very important to them, and I went to great lengths to keep it from them."

Ching was getting worked up.

"I can't believe that one idiotic PI could just stumble into the middle of all this and ruin everything!"

I was starting to take exception to the verbal abuse. It simply wasn't my fault. "I really wish you'd stop calling me names. And what's the big deal with the statuette? You could probably find one just like it at Goodwill."

Ching stuck a finger in my face. "You don't get it, do you? This cult is planning on destroying the world! Finding the bird was the last thing on their list!"

I thought back to what Professor Perriman had told me about the brotherhood. It hadn't sounded very believable then, and it didn't now.

"This sounds like a bunch of mumbo jumbo to me."

Ching was upset. "It sounds ridiculous to everyone! That's the whole point! When everyone realizes that it's actually going to happen, it'll be too late! We'll all be dead!"

I wasn't convinced, but Ching certainly seemed to be. And she was clearly in charge of the situation. I didn't think I should provoke her any more than absolutely necessary.

"All right. I believe. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Give me a cigarette."

I handed her a Lucky and lit it. She took an agitated drag and began to pace frantically.

After some time, she stopped and looked at one of the photos on the wall - the one with me, the Colonel, and Xavier. She whipped around. "You know the Colonel."

I nodded behind a cloud of smoke.

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"I've found out a few things. Interpol thinks Jacques Fou murdered him."

Ching looked at me, reassessing. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were a complete incompetent. Apparently, that's not the case. And there aren't many left on our side. Maybe you can make yourself useful."

I thought it over. My PI instincts told me that Ching was on the level. Maybe this cult stuff was true, maybe it was a gross exaggeration. Regardless, it had gotten a lot of people killed. And if Ching was in the know, and I had no reason to believe she wasn't, it seemed that I'd unwittingly been an accomplice in their plans. I pulled the data-storage clip from my pocket. "Maybe you can use this."

Ching took it from me and examined it. "What is this?"

"A chapter in a long story."

"We don't have a lot of time. Make it short."

As Ching went to my computer and loaded the clip, I recounted the events that had led me to GRS. When I finished, she had something on the screen. Even the goons were interested - there must have been pictures. They moved behind her and peered over her shoulder. I joined them. Ching was paging through a directory. She clicked on a file labeled COLONEL, and a document appeared on the monitor.

It was a series of journal-like entries, dating back more than three months. We read the text in silence.

8/14/42 - I've made initial contact with the cult. The Colonel's information was right on. At least two employees here are members. I haven't been able to find a solid link between GRS and the cult, but I'm sure that Tucker knows what's going on. Over the past month, I've been letting people know that I support the eugenics movement. I was contacted today by a cult member named Murray. He's a project supervisor. I'll be attending an initiation meeting sometime next week.

8/17/42 - I've gotten to know one of Tucker's assistants. I'm fairly sure he knows nothing about the cult. He told me that Tucker doesn't trust most of his staff and has the project

groups working separately. I'm trying to work my way into a position where I can find out what's going on, but everyone's keeping quiet.

8/20/42 - Fifteen or sixteen people came to the meeting at Tucker's home. There were eight employees of GRS, and I didn't know the others. I got the name of only one other cult member, a little nazi named Camden Leander. Reminded me of Heinrich Himmler. He seemed to be the highest ranking member. I didn't learn much; they seemed more concerned with grilling me. Apparently, it was some type of pre-initiation.

9/22/42 - I've been attending the cult meetings every week, but everything I've learned is essentially a crash course on the Crusade for Genetic Purity. A lot of talk of eugenics, getting rid of the Mutants, etc., but no specifics.

10/11/42 - I heard something disturbing at the meeting last night. It wasn't said outright, but it was implied that everyone involved in the project who isn't initiated into the cult knows too much and will be eliminated when the project is finished.

11/19/42 - It looks like the project is almost completed. The cult members are ecstatic. I keep hearing them use the words "purification" and "alluvion." I don't know what they mean, but whatever's going to happen is going to happen soon. I'm planning on notifying the Colonel this week so we can make the delivery.

11/23/42 - A man attended our last meeting wearing a mask. His voice was somehow familiar, but I couldn't place him. He went by the name of Phoenix, and apparently he's in charge, the way everyone treated him. I noticed him watching me during the meeting. Afterwards, he pulled me aside and said there would be a special place for me in the "new order." I'm not sure if they're onto me or not. I'm going to hold off on the delivery until I know.

12/03/42 - Something has gone wrong. The chip was supposed to be delivered last night. I'm afraid something has happened to the Colonel. I have no choice but to keep playing along.

12/05/42 - I was just informed that we're moving in two days. The GRS phase of the project has apparently been completed. From what I can gather, we're relocating operations to the lunar penal colony. I have no idea why. I'll send a message when I can.

When I finished reading the entries, I returned to my chair. Ching resumed pacing, lost in thought. After a while, she seemed to reach a decision. "What do you think, Mr. Murphy?"

I crossed my legs nonchalantly and wiped a dirt smudge from my wing tip.

"I think we're going to the moon."

UAKM - chapter twenty-one

Ching and I discussed our plans for more than an hour. Talking to her, I came to the conclusion that she would be a good person to have in my camp. She said she had connections and would find a way for us to get passage to the lunar penal colony. Even I knew that getting to the moon required clearance, but Ching said it could be bought from the right people. We determined that it was too late to retrieve the satulette. All we could do now was try to find out what the cult planned to do. And the answer seemed to be off-planet.

Ching told me that she'd contact me as soon as she made arrangements, and then she left. Her thugs, who were introduced as Lou and Felipe, didn't seem too happy about me joining their vigilante band, but I shook their hands anyway and wished them a good night. When I was alone, I wondered if I was getting involved foolishly. I already suspected that I was getting in over my head, and everything Ching had told me seemed to confirm this. But the things she had said also led me to believe that if we didn't do something, no one would. With CAPRICORN decimated, the Colonel dead, and the rest of the world in blissful ignorance, I was inclined to agree.

The question was, do what? We had almost no clue as to the cult's intentions. What was the aim of the project at GRS? Why would they need to continue their work at the lunar penal colony? Again, I found myself asking a million questions and coming up with no answers. Maybe I just needed a few mugs of the Armageddon.

Business at the Brew & Stew was surprisingly slow. Even at eleven o'clock on a weeknight, the place was usually half full. When I stepped inside the diner, I counted eight heads. Rook was sitting on his preferred bar stool, playing chess with another old Mutant, who I didn't recognize. Louie was leaning on the other side of the counter, intently watching the match. He looked up and waved. "Hey there, Murph. C'mon in! I think we can squeeze ya in somewhere."

I sidled over to the bar and sat next to Rook's back. Rook glanced over his shoulder. "Well, if it isn't Murphy. How goes the search for true love?"

"It's a myth, Rook. The best I can hope for is the companionship of swell friends like you."

Rook snorted and returned to his game. Louie grinned and shook my hand, but his expression became concerned when he noticed the knuckle-shaped marks on my chin. "Geez, Murph, what happened?"

My hand went self-consciously to my jaw. "Oh, nothing. Shaving accident."

Louie turned his head slightly and gave me the eye. "You gotta take better care. If you ain't careful, yer gonna end up lookin' like me."

"Don't kid yourself, Louie. You're a handsome man."

The big Mutant actually blushed. "So, what'll yer poison be tonight?"

"Just a cup of the Armageddon."

"Comin' up."

The television behind the bar was tuned to a music video station. If the on-screen action was indicative of the music, I was glad the sound was muted. I heard Rook's friend call check and decided to investigate the chess game. It didn't require any neck cranning to look over Rook's petite, rounded shoulder. I'd never been much of a chess player, though I'd loaded it on my computer. The chess program had ten levels. I could win on level one with my eyes closed, but level two beat the snot out of me every time. It was just like my experience with women. Almost exactly.

Despite my lack of chess expertise, it seemed pretty clear that Rook was being taken to school by his chess buddy. Rook seemed to sense that I was peeping and turned around indignantly. "Don't you have something better to do than leer over my shoulder? Look, there's a TV. Why don't you watch that?"

I held up my hands. "Sorry, Rook. Don't let me disturb you. Looks like you're having a hard enough time without me witnessing the humiliation."

"You are so very funny." Rook turned back to the game as Louie emerged from the kitchen with a small plate and a steaming mug of java.

"Fresh pot. And I thought you might like a little something to munch on."

Louie had cut up three or four kinds of cheese and laid the slices out with pieces of ham and turkey. There was even a dollop of brown mustard in the center of the plate. At any other restaurant in the city, this little dainty would've run anywhere from five bucks to a C-note - at Louie's place, it came with the coffee. I helped myself to a chunk of sharp

cheddar while Louie dipped a slice of turkey in the mustard.

"Tell me something, Louie. You ever gotten yourself into a situation and realized you're in over your head?"

Louie chewed pensively, then took a sip off a can of Diet Shasta. "Sure. Got one of them right now, as a matter of fact." He set the can down to free up his hands for gesturing. "You see, my sister's boy, Dalton, is graduating from Berkley. Now, I think of him like my own son, so I told him I would be at his graduation. Then, as luck would have it, my goddaughter is gettin' married on the same day. Well, I wasn't even thinkin' about the graduation, and I said I'd come to the weddin'."

"Same time of day?"

"Of course. So what do I do?"

I shrugged and took another piece of cheese. "Easy. Go to the graduation."

Louie looked perplexed. "How come?"

"You only graduate once."

Louie couldn't argue with flawless logic and helped himself to a slice of ham. As he dabbed mustard, he gave me an appraising look. "You know what I think?"

"Probably not."

"I think you need to find somebody nice and settle down. That's what I'd do if I was you."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. It's an image thing, you know. PIs and women mix like toothpaste and orange juice. Besides, I already tried it once."

"I dunno, Murph. There's nothin' better than the love of a good woman."

"Good woman are extinct."

Louie grinned. "Not extinct. Endangered, maybe. But not extinct. I think yer too young to be givin' up hope."

I took a sip of hot coffee. "I don't know, Louie. Things have gotten much easier since I gave up hope."

My unwavering pessimism seemed to have won the day. Louie retreated to the kitchen for the pot of Armageddon. On the television, a hideously attractive young woman was writhing on camera, wearing two beer coasters and a scowl and not much more. Louie burst from the kitchen like an Olympic torch bearer and refilled my coffee mug.

"Fou prend reine! Echec et mat!"

I didn't know French, but something in the phrase caught my ear. I turned to see Rook's chess partner downing a shot, apparently celebrating his victory. I leaned around Rook and addressed the other man. "What did you just say?"

"Fou prend reine! Echec et mat!" Bishop takes queen - checkmate!"

Something was clicking in my head. "Fou means bishop?"

The old Mutant nodded and spoke with a slight accent.

"It means bishop, in regards to the chess piece. Fou is quite an interesting word. It is mostly used as a - what is the word?...adjective..."

While the pedant babbled on about linguistics, I was busy checking my pockets for the almost forgotten blue index card. It suddenly occurred to me that I might have overlooked an interpretation for part of the code. The card was still in my coat pocket. I pulled it out and read it again. BXK+A261184. BxK. Bishop takes king. I turned to the old chess player and interrupted him in mid-sentence.

"Fou means bishop. What is the French word for king?"

"Roi."

Roy. Colonel Roy O'Brien. All signs pointed to him being murdered by Jacques Fou. The code had to be a message from the Colonel. Maybe he knew that Fou was after him and stood a decent chance of getting him. So what did the rest of the code refer to? I handed the card to the old Mutant.

"Does this mean anything to you?"

The old man studied the card, rubbing his chin. "Well...I don't know about the numbers on the end, but the first part could, perhaps, have something to do with chess notation. Bishop captures king. Check. That is what the plus sign means. Then A2. That would be the Rook's pawn."

Rook's pawn? I ran the words together. Fou captures Roi...check...Rook's pawn...61184. The message suddenly made sense. I turned to Rook and pointed to the last five numbers. "Could these be the numbers from one of your pawn tickets?"

Rook tilted his head back and peered through the lower half of his bifocals. "I suppose so."

Even Rook seemed excited as the four of us bolted from the diner and hurried up the street to the pawnshop. Rook reached the door first, fumbled with a huge ring of keys, and finally swung the door open. Louie, the old Frenchman, and I followed him inside. The smells here were not as warm and comfortable as those at the Brew & Stew, but they were not unpleasant. The shop reeked of water-stained maps, dusty steamer trunks, and crackling parchment.

Rook moved to the other side of the counter and reached underneath for a large ledger. "What were the numbers again?"

"61184."

Rook flipped open the tome and pushed his glasses higher on his nose. "Let's see. Hmm...yes. Here it is. No name listed. I paid out fifty dollars."

Rook looked up and peered at me over the top of his spectacles. "I will expect to be compensated for this item."

Louie groaned. "For cryin' out loud, Rook. Will ya just get the darn thing? I'll give ya the fifty bucks if ya think it's gonna put ya outta business."

Rook wanted to argue the point, but was outnumbered. He closed the ledger and scuttled off into the back room. Less than a minute later, he reappeared and set a small package on the counter, wrapped in newspaper. Rook glared at me impatiently. "Well, don't just stand there. Open it!"

I walked to the counter and nervously undid the wrapping. The box underneath was plain cardboard. I opened the box and looked inside. There was a watch and a folded piece of paper. I pulled out the watch and inspected it briefly before handing it to Louie. Then I picked up the piece of paper and unfolded it. The note was handwritten. I scanned through the contents quickly, then saw the Colonel's signature at the bottom.

"Come on, Murphy. Let's hear it." Rook was examining the watch carefully. I doubted

that he, or the other men, would have the faintest idea what the contents of the letter meant, but the least I could do was humor them. I cleared my throat and started to read.

Tex

I hope you never have to read this. But, since you are, it probably means something has gone wrong. Now I need you to put aside any negative personal feelings you might have toward me and help a bigger cause. I'm asking you to do this for two reasons: One, I know you're not already involved, which means I can trust you and the people who want to stop me probably don't know about you. Two, I believe you've still got what it takes to pull this off.

I don't want to tell you any more than you need to know, but I'm going to give you a little background information, so you don't underestimate the importance of this.

For some time, I've sensed the presence of an evil force at work in this city. A web of violence and anarchy has been spreading, and I'm sure that in the center of that web is a single powerful faction. This person or group is carefully feeding the growing violence between Mutants and Norms, which has escalated to the point of civil war. Many of the recent random crimes, murders, and apparent suicides seem to be links in a dark chain. Where that chain leads, I don't know for sure, but I'm getting close.

I'm convinced now that there exists a small, powerful cult known as the Brotherhood of Purity. There are some who believe that this brotherhood has existed for centuries and has carefully masterminded most of the major social and political events throughout history. The cultists believe they are genetically superior and that they'll inherit the Earth after some sort of cataclysmic event.

The cult is opposed by CAPRICORN. This agency is known for its work in civil rights, but its most important purpose is to infiltrate groups that pose a threat to society, then unravel them from the inside out. Dozens of cults, terrorist groups, and political cabals have been broken up before the public even knew they was a threat.

Over the past several weeks, CAPRICORN has been almost completely dismantled, from the inside out. Almost all of their agents have disappeared, almost certainly murdered. No one knows who is behind this treachery, but it's been done quickly and thoroughly. There are only a few of us left to carry on the fight against the cult. One of these people is a man named Paul DuBois. It is absolutely imperative that you deliver to him the watch I included with this note. CAPRICORN chose me to be a courier because I was an outsider who could be trusted. Now I'm asking you to fulfill the same responsibility. The delivery is supposed to take place on December 9 at 10P.M. in a nightclub called the Land Mine.

Tell no one about any of this. The cult is everywhere, and they must not find out what you're doing. There is no back up plan, Tex. Don't fail me.

--- The Colonel

I folded the note and looked around at my companions. "You know what this means, don't you?"

The three Mutants looked confused.

"I'll have to kill all of you."

Back in my office, I inspected the watch. It had an inexpensive, though perfectly acceptable leather band. The face was quite large, round, and white, with old-fashioned hour, minute, and second hands that actually moved over roman-numeral-type-numbers. The rim around the face had been painted gold, but it was slightly chipped and scratched. There was a winding knob on the side, which made it look antique, but it was just for show. The watch had a self-winding perpetual-motion mechanism. It was just the kind of portable timepiece I would've bought for myself.

After twenty minutes of jiggling, prodding, and winding, it still appeared to be exactly what it appeared to be. I fastened the watch onto my left wrist - it looked good on me. Maybe I was too late to make the delivery to Paul DuBois, and maybe the Colonel's dying request was a bust. At least I'd scored a nice watch.

And now I had a different perspective on the Colonel's visit to my office. He'd probably dropped off the package at the pawnshop just before or after I'd spoken with him. And he was the one who'd sent me the index card, obviously assuming that I would figure out the code sooner than I had. Well, there was nothing I could do about it now. As far as I knew, both the Colonel and DuBois were dead. CAPRICORN was dismantled, and there were no connections left to the mole in GRS. If the cult actually existed, it looked as though it had nothing but smooth sailing ahead. As for the watch, I figured I'd hold onto it until I made contact with someone from CAPRICORN, and then I'd hand it over.

My musings were interrupted by a beep on the vid-phone. I glanced at my new watch - it was after midnight. I flipped on the viewscreen, and Eddie Ching's face appeared.

"Ready to go?"

"That's what all my good friends call me. Where are you?"

"The spaceport. Terminal G. Meet me at the courtesy phones in a half hour."

UAKM - chapter twenty-two

Even in the wee hours of the morning, the New San Francisco Interplanetary Spaceport was a teeming jambalaya of humanity. Swarming mobs of disheveled and nicotine-deprived travelers from hundreds of countries and speaking dozens of languages created smelly, pell-mell pandemonium that would've made the aftermath of the Tower of Babel look like a quilting bee. I was reminded anew of how much I loathed spaceports. I also despised going to sporting events, concerts, and grocery superstores, all for the same reason: people. I was convinced that you could turn even the most decent and intelligent person into a complete idiot simply by putting them into a crowd. On second thought, most people were idiots one on one, as well.

I jostled and knifed my way through roaming clusters of imbeciles and eventually reached the bank of courtesy phones. Ching and her matching set of goons were waiting. As the thugs cleared a path through the crowd, Ching informed me that she'd called in a few favors and gotten arrangements made for our flight. She certainly did work fast. It made me glad we were on the same team.

We made our way through the terminal to the gates. About five miles later, we reached the charter gates and exited the building. The night was clear, but cold, and our breath was steaming as we crossed the tarmac. Eventually, we reached an aircraft hangar and entered. It was chilly and dark inside, except for a rectangle of light spilling from a doorway in the back of the structure. When we reached the door, the goons waited outside while Ching and I entered.

The room beyond turned out to be a small office with one occupant - a rough-looking chap, reclining in a chair with his feet up on a desk. Ching introduced me to Karl Voorman and said that he would be handling the piloting duties on our little excursion. Voorman shook my hand and nodded, without a hint of pleasantness. Ching began discussing arrangements with him, giving me a chance to scurtinize the pilot.

He wore a full beard, which was jet-black. Together with his dark, sunken eyes, it gave him a distinctly sinister look. His voice was low and sullen, and when he spoke, it was almost begrudgingly. I got the impression that he was a man of action and preferred to avoid talking whenever possible. It was trait I'd always admired and was number three on the list of characteristics I looked for in a woman. Unfortunately, in all my past relationships, I'd rarely gotten past the first two characteristics.

Ching and Voorman bartered briefly, then came to an agreement. Ching insisted that

there be no questions asked and offered the pilot a handsome payoff for his silence. Five minutes later, we left the hangar and walked to a midsize shuttle-cruiser, parked just outside. It was the kind of spacecraft used by successful smugglers - very fast and maneuverable. I guessed that Voorman ran a lucrative operation.

The shuttle was no vacation cruise ship, but it was sufficiently equipped for the thirty-hour flight. We strapped in for takeoff and, forty-five minutes later, were officially off-planet. I'd only been on two spaceflights in my life, and the experience was still a novelty to me. Maybe that was why I didn't feel particularly tired, even though it was almost 5 A.M.

Despite the moderate turbulence associated with breaking free of Earth's gravitational pull, Ching's henchmen were nodding off, snug behind their safety harnesses. Ching was awake and seemed somewhat jittery. I yawned and glanced at my new watch. I wondered if Ching might have some idea as to its significance. There was nothing to lose by checking. I removed the watch from my wrist and handed it over. "What do you think about this watch?"

Ching looked it over without a hint of recognition, then gave it back to me. "Looks nice."

Since it obviously didn't mean anything to her, I decided to spare her the details. A few moments later, we broke free of the exposure six hundred miles up, and the ride smoothed out. Ching pulled out a large knapsack. Luckily, she'd shown considerably more foresight than I had, bringing along plenty of ready-to-eat foodstuffs. Her knapsack, however, contained an even more valuable treasure: two bottles of Black Bush Irish whiskey. She produced a bottle and held it up. "Got a use for this?"

I smiled warmly. Ching had just advanced from the "Casual Ally" category straight into "Friends Of Tex."

"I can think of a couple."

She opened the bottle, took a long draught, and handed it to me. "I hate these space flights. They always make me sick. All I can do is get drunk and try to sleep."

I nodded sympathetically. "I understand completely. I have the same reaction to women." I raised the bottle to my parched lips. "Nothing personal."

I drank deeply and felt the tingling warmth run down my gullet and into my empty stomach. This wasn't the official PI breakfast - that, of course, was a cigarette and coffee. This was more like the PI brunch. I took another mouthful, then passed the bottle

back. Then I got out my pack of Luckies and offered one to Ching, who declined. As I lit up, I caught sight of a no smoking sticker. The cigarette tasted extra good.

As I exhaled, Lou snorted and jolted upright. "We there yet?"

Ching spoke like a protective parent. "Not yet, Lou. Go back to sleep."

Lou nodded wearily and almost immediately began to snore.

Ching passed the whiskey over and turned to look out a window. I studied her for several minutes. I wasn't quite sure what to think of Ms. Ching. When I'd been tracking down the statuette, I'd gotten the impression that everyone was scared to death of her. Now that I was sitting across from her, she didn't seem particularly dangerous. She was just a regular, living, breathing person with an upset stomach. It confirmed my theory that mystique was always more powerful than reality. I cleared my throat to get her attention. "Tell me something, Ms. Ching. Why is everybody so scared of you?"

Ching smiled and motioned for me to pass the Black Bush.

"Because that's the way I like it. I've put a good deal of effort into developing a reputation. I rarely deal face to face with my clients. The less people know about me, the better it is for business."

"You ever killed anyone?"

The woman laughed. "Of course. Bluffing only takes you so far. There isn't a lot of integrity in my line of work. If someone crosses you and gets away with it, everyone else will think they can do it, too."

"You plan on killing me?"

Ching shrugged and took a sip of whiskey. "I haven't decided yet. We'll have to see how things go. Right now, I'd say it's sixty-forty in your favor."

"If you don't mind me asking, what is it you do, specifically?"

Ching yawned and capped the bottle. "Why do you want to know?"

I dropped my cigarette butt onto the floor and stepped on it. "I'm thinking about getting into another line of work. Yours seems to pay pretty well."

Ching leaned back into her seat. "I'm sort of a commodities dealer. I use my connections

to find rare and valuable items, buy them, then sell them to the highest bidder."

"How'd you get involved with the statuette?"

Ching smiled drowsily. "The statuette has a long history behind it. No one really knows how old it is, but it's one of the most ancient artifacts in the world. I'd heard about it years ago, that it had disappeared during the 1940s. Most of those in the know assumed that it had been added to the Nazis' extensive collection of art and occult objects. Then it suddenly turned up in some Viennese attic. The man who found it donated it to a museum in Vienna. Immediately, a race was on to see who could steal it first. Private collectors began to ante up astronomical offers for it. Naturally, it was something I felt I should get in on.

"Security at the museum was very tight, but an accomplished acquaintance of mine managed to get past it and snatch the statuette. Knowing that he was sitting on a fortune, he contacted me and asked me to make inquiries. I compiled a list of potential buyers and collected bids, the highest of which was in the high nine figures. I was about to carry out the deal when I was contacted by the head of CAPRICORN. How he knew about me and the statuette, I don't know, but he filled me in on its history and the cult that wanted it.

"It seemed too fantastic for me to believe at first, but then I did some checking around. Everything I learned seemed to back up what the man from CAPRICORN had told me. I decided to hold onto the statuette and see what happened. As time passed, I began to sense that the cult was getting desperate to find its talisman. Apparently, they were under some sort of time constraint...something to do with one of their prophecies. It seems they had a preset date for when their plan was to be carried out. I never found out the exact date, but I knew it had to be soon."

Ching rubbed her eyes. I was trying not to feel guilty.

"Do you think the cult would've gone through with its plans without the statuette?"

Ching's eyes were closed. "I don't know. Probably."

She began to breathe deeply. I let her sleep, feeling a little less responsible. Then I got out my seat and grabbed the bottle of whiskey. After taking a few sips, I lit another cigarette and looked out into the great vacuum.

This whole scenario reminded me of my religious beliefs, or lack thereof. I'd never really thought much about God, or life after death, but occasionally I'd ask myself, what if? I now found myself wondering the same thing about the cult. It didn't seem plausible

to me that some group would actually have the power to take over the world, but what if they did? And if so, what chance did Ching and I have of stopping them?

Here we were, flying toward the moon with no plan, no idea of what we would find. I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. For all I knew, the fate of the world rested on the shoulders of an out-of-work PI, a fence, and two thugs. I drifted into an uneasy sleep.

When I woke, Ching and her henchmen were breaking their fast with some kind of brightly colored snack cake. I opted for the PI brunch. We still had another twenty hours to go. The time passed slowly, but it gave me a chance to find some redemptive qualities in Lou and Felipe. Ching's henchmen weren't the brightest guys I'd ever met, but Lou, the one who'd smacked me around, turned out to be a talker and kept me entertained unintentionally with a steady stream of malapropisms, mixed metaphors, and unbelievably creative profanity. Felipe, the more cerebral of the two, actually came up with the occasional four-syllable word, and almost floored me when he whipped out a cribbage board and a deck of cards.

Cribbage, of course, was the greatest two-played game ever invented. My mom had taught me to play right after teaching me how to go pee-pee by myself. Since Ching didn't play and had no desire to, and Lou had yet to master Go Fish, Felipe was as happy to find a fellow player as I was.

Voorman didn't join us once throughout the flight. Instead, he sat in the cockpit and read. Ching spent most of the time staring out a window, interrupting her meditations intermittently to clean one of the many firearms she'd brought along. I didn't ask how she'd gotten them through the spaceport security. Lou kept himself amused with a Robert E. Howard paperback and a bag of pork rinds. Every few seconds, he'd silently sound out a word, then shake his head. At one point, I timed the length between page turns. Eight minutes.

Felipe and I, meanwhile, played a couple games of cribbage, feeling each other out tentatively, he like a mediocre boxer, me like a python with a cornered gerbil. Felipe cut a few lucky cards and eked out a victory in the second game, after which he suggested that we play for money. I casually suggested a dime a point - a quarter past the skunk line - and my unsuspecting opponent agreed. Calculating the length of the flight and the number of games we could get in, I figured I could pocket about four hundred bucks.

I owed Felipe a little more than two hundred dollars when Voorman emerged from the cockpit. He took a seat by Ching and removed a cigar from his mouth. "We're about an

hour out. I figured we should discuss what you want to do when we arrive."

Ching filled Voorman in briefly on what we knew about GRS and asked if he had any idea what they would be doing on the moon. Voorman thought it over for a moment. "I've heard that there's some kind of research facility up here. I don't know where it is, but you can probably find the way there through the operation center. I'll get you in, but what you do after that is your problem. I just agreed to get you there."

Ching nodded. "Once we get in, how many people will we have to get past?"

Voorman shrugged. "The complex is pretty much fully automated. There aren't more than a dozen people running the whole place."

Voorman pulled out a piece of paper and unfolded it. I moved to get a better look and saw what appeared to be a diagrammed layout of the complex. From what I could tell, it was comprised of six or seven domed biospheres, all connected by some type of subway system. Voorman pointed to one of the domes. "This is the op-center. We'll land here. I've made deliveries before and shouldn't have any trouble getting in. After we land, I'm staying in the shuttle, and you'll have eight hours. I need to leave after that. If you're not back by then, I'll leave you behind. We clear on that?"

Ching said she understood, and Voorman returned to the cockpit, leaving the diagram for us to examine. We crowded around while Ching formulated a strategy. We would all be armed to the teeth and would hopefully catch the people in the op-center by surprise. After subduing any resistance, we would split up and search the complex. Ching had brought along communication devices and rebreathers, which would allow us to leave the biospheres if it became necessary. Then she passed out the equipment, and we waited anxiously to land.

Looking out the window, I could see the moon getting larger by the minute. A short while later, I heard Voorman's voice through the partially open cockpit door. He was repeatedly asking for permission to land, but there seemed to be no response. After several minutes, he poked his head through the door. "For some reason, they're not answering. Looks like I'll have to set the shuttle down outside the op-center."

Ching looked at me, a concerned expression on her face. "I'm not sure if this is good news or not."

Twenty minutes later, the shuttle came to rest and powered down. Ordinarily, Ching informed me, we would have landed in an air lock. But since no one was responding in the op-center, we had to touch down on the moon's surface and would have to walk. Through the window, I saw a massive structure that resembled a metal bowl turned

upside down. To the right, I could see two others in the distance. We bundled ourselves into space suits, strapped on our rebreathers, and checked to make sure they were working correctly. Voorman came in and opened the hatch for us. We climbed single-file out of the shuttle and down the ladder.

For the first time, I stepped onto the dusty surface of the moon. Immediately, I felt the effects of minimal gravity. I turned and bounced along after Ching in the direction of the op-center. We reached the dome and began to move clockwise around the perimeter. A minute later, we came to a sealed door built into the curved surface. Ching tried the door, but it didn't open. She motioned for us to stand back, then leveled a large gun at it, and pulled the trigger.

The blast left a hole the size of a basketball where the door handle had been. Lou stepped up and reached inside. With a mighty tug, the door swung open, and we followed the big man into the dome.

We found ourselves in a short tunnel, with a door at the other end. Ching pushed past Lou, walked up to the control panel on the wall beside the door, and pushed a button. With a hydraulic hiss, the door slid open, and we rushed through, weapons ready to fire.

The room was empty. The four of us looked at each other, partly relieved, partly confused. Ching turned and closed the door behind us, then loosened her rebreather and signaled that it was safe to remove the apparatus. Slowly, we relaxed and began to look around. The space was large and circular, like the dome over it. Computer consoles lined the perimeter, and several computer stations dotted the center of the room.

We fanned out, and I walked to the nearest console. Most of the equipment was running, with monitors displaying everything from camera views to data readouts. The first section I checked was labeled Maximum Security Zone 10. Several dozen cameras were trained on an area that resembled a prison camp. None of them showed any movement whatsoever. Wherever this maximum security area was, it appeared to be completely abandoned.

I circled around, pausing every few feet to inspect computer screens. There were inventory displays, prisoner records, and a good deal of indecipherable data. One bit of information caught my eye. It was a listing of zone populations and seemed to show that, as of November 22, there were four hundred and eighteen occupants in Maximum Security Zone 10. What happened to the prisoners?

As I continued my examination, I saw several other banks of camera monitors, all of which showed deserted areas like the one I'd already seen. From what I could gather, the entire complex was abandoned. My investigation was interrupted by Ching, who called

me over to where she was standing.

She found a computer display of the complex's layout. Most of the areas were color-coded, and we were able to identify sections of minimum, medium, and maximum security. The op-center was also clearly marked, but there were three sections without a description. Ching and I agreed that we should explore those areas first. According to the layout, there four transport tubes, one at each primary compass point. We looked around the room and saw four corresponding exits. Ching would explore one area, I'd take another, and Lou and Felipe would go cover the other two.

I walked to one of the doors and examined the control panel beside it, which was not unlike an elevator panel. One of the buttons looked especially important, so I pressed it. A yellow light flashed on and began to blink. Thirty seconds later, the light changed to a solid green, and the door slid open. Beyond was a small compartment with two rows of facing seats and windows all around. I buckled myself into one of the seats near the door, then pressed a button to the left of the door. It slid shut, and the compartment began to move.

Through the windows, I saw the moon's landscape flying by. I looked in the direction I was moving and saw a long, clear tunnel. The compartment seemed to be moving along a monorail. A few moments later, it began to slow down, then came to a rest against a door identical to the one back at the op-center. I pressed the button by the door, and it slid open.

Suddenly, all the oxygen seemed to leave my lungs, and I groped for my rebreather. Apparently, this section had been shut down. Once my rebreather was in place and I'd regained my composure, I stood up and entered a narrow hallway that looked like it ran all the way around the dome's perimeter. A door directly in front of me proved to be locked, so I turned right and started walking.

Doors were built into the inside walls every twenty feet or so, but they were all locked. It wasn't until I'd gone at least halfway around that I found one left ajar. I pushed on it, but it didn't want to move. Then I lowered my shoulder and pushed hard. The door moved inward, and I heard the sound of something sliding on the floor. When the opening was wide enough to pass through, I squeezed in and took a look at what had been blocking the door.

It was a body. A heavy set, middle-aged man stared up at me with unseen eyes. He had a massive wound in his chest, and his white shirt was stained dark brown with dried blood. I pried my eyes away from the corpse and saw eight others, all within twenty feet of each other. Every one of them had been shot. It looked like a mass execution.

Immediately, I thought of the missing prisoners. But these people didn't look like convicts. I bent down and went through the pockets of a dead woman. Keys, a pen, a pack of chewing gum...and an ID card. It read, "Janice Bergman - Genetic Research Systems."

So this is where they'd ended up. Now, the question was, what had they been doing? And why had these people been murdered? Was there a mutiny of some kind? I stood up and looked around. The room was semicircular. Along the left side, the wall was rounded, and the ceiling rose up at quite a steep angle. To my right was a long, straight, high wall of Plexiglass. Up against the Plexiglass was a series of workstations and chairs. It looked like the engineering booth in a large recording studio.

I walked toward the clear glass wall. On the other side was what appeared to be the interior of a biosphere. There were trees, grass, flowers, and plants of all types. I estimated the size of the garden-like area to be at least the square footage of a football field. It would have been a beautiful site, except for one thing. The floor was covered with dead bodies.

The scene was nightmarish. There were literally hundreds of men, women, and children. It looked like old pictures I'd seen of the Holocaust. I pressed my face against the glass and stared at the corpses nearest to me. These people were probably the missing prisoners. As I looked over the carnage, I was especially horrified at the presence of children. For a moment I wondered why children were here, but then I remembered hearing that minimum-security prisoners weren't automatically sterilized and that male and female prisoners were allowed to mingle. Sometimes, even marriages were allowed. So, it wasn't just incarcerated scum that had been slaughtered here, but entire families.

Why had the prisoners been murdered? And how? Unlike people on my side of the wall, the victims in the biosphere hadn't been shot. In fact, there was no visible cause of death. I decided to take a closer look. There were doors at either end of the Plexiglass wall. I walked to one of them and was about to open it when I noticed a row of decontamination suits hanging on the wall. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to enter the biosphere.

I turned away and began searching through the workstations for details on what had happened to the prisoners. There was no power for the consoles, so the contents of the computers were off-limits. I opened drawers and looked in wastebaskets for some time. Eventually, I found a printout that provided some information.

ATTN: Project Supervisor

RE: Length of Process

The virus will be introduced into the atmosphere via dispenser satellites. With maximum

flight-path alignment and a minimum of one thousand dispensers, Earth's atmosphere will be thoroughly saturated within twelve hours. We estimate that eighty to eighty-five percent of the population will expire within the first twelve hours, an additional 10 percent within thirty-six hours, and the effective remainder within seven days.

I read the message several times. If it meant what I thought it did, the cult was planning on fumigating Earth with some kind of virus. And if the biosphere full of corpses was any indication, the billions down below wouldn't stand a chance of surviving. I didn't know anything about chemistry, and most of the other things I found were too technical for me to understand. As far as I could determine, the GRS scientists had spent the past few years developing the virus referred to in the message. How it worked was beyond me, but it was quick and lethal.

That left only one question. If the virus was to be released from dispenser satellites, from where would the satellites originate? Not from the moon, seeing how the complex was abandoned. There was only one logical answer: The cult would attack from the Moon Child. But when? Maybe it had happened already. Ching and I might have escaped just in time. Or maybe there was still time.

I turned on my communication device and paged Ching. After a moment, her voiced piped through my speaker. "Find anything?"

"Yeah. GRS was definitely here."

Ching's voice was excited. "Stay where you are. I'll meet you there."

"Don't bother. There's not much here to see except a bunch of dead bodies. The GRS scientists were working on some kind of virus. It looks like they came up here to use the prisoners as test subjects. Since the place is abandoned, I'm willing to bet they're all finished and, from what I can piece together, they're planning on dumping the virus into Earth's atmosphere. Unless I'm way off, they're going to do it from the Moon Child."

Ching didn't respond immediately. "I guess we need to get to the Moon Child."

There was another pause. "All right. Let's all meet back at the op-center and get out of here."

I was about to leave when I took another look at the nine bodies by the door where I'd come in. For the first time, the thought occurred to me that the CAPRICORN mole might be among the victims. I crossed the room and began searching the bodies. If the mole was one of these people, maybe he was carrying a message, or something that

would help us. It was disgusting, horrible work, but I was desperate. After ten minutes, I decided there was nothing to find.

Hopefully, the mole was alive and well. Maybe he'd gotten onto the Moon Child and would find some way to stop the cult. There wasn't much else to hope for. I decided to return to the transport tunnel.

Inside the compartment, I pressed the button by the door and began moving back toward the op-center. Suddenly, my communication device crackled to life, and I heard Ching's voice.

"If I go down, one of you is going with me!"

An unfamiliar male voice spoke up. "Just put down your weapon, and no one'll get hurt."

Ching wasn't buying it. "I don't think so. You put yours down first."

Ching had turned on her communication device to warn me. I reached up and hit a button to stop the compartment, and then hit another one to reverse course, moving away from the op-center. Ching continued to argue with several male voices. They seemed to be in a Mexican standoff. I tried not to panic. Over the communication device, I could hear Ching obviously trying to buy time. Then there was silence.

The compartment stopped, and I exited back into the GRS dome. I didn't want to be discovered, but it would be just as bad to be marooned. I decided to look for another exit from the dome and try to get back to Voorman's shuttle. At best, Ching would end up captured. At least one of us had to get out.

I hadn't seen an exit door the first time around, so this time I turned left and sprinted down the hallway, still cradling the gun Ching had given me. I'd gone maybe a hundred yards when I reached a door marked Emergency Exit Only - Alarm Will Sound. With the power cut off, I hoped that there would be no alarm, but I didn't have any choice. I pushed with my shoulder against the door and stepped outside.

As far as I could tell, nothing went off. I glanced around, trying to get my bearings. It seemed to me that the fastest way to the shuttle would be around the right side of the op-center dome, and I set off in that direction. I covered ground quickly, bounding ten feet or more with every stride.

As I came around the side of the dome where Ching was trapped, I saw a transport tunnel straight ahead. Unless I went all the way around another dome, I'd have to go over the top of the tunnel. I gathered all my strength and ran straight toward the tunnel,

then leaped. The tunnel had a rounded roof. I hit it about two-thirds of the way up, somersaulted over the top, and then landed in a soft heap on the other side. The collision had made me drop my gun - on the other side. At least I was uninjured. I stood up and made sure my rebreather was OK, then continued on toward the waiting shuttle.

There was no one in sight as I approached the escape vehicle. I opened the hatch and crawled inside. I checked the cockpit, but Voorman wasn't there - a bad sign. If he'd been caught as well, I was as good as dead. At that moment, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye, through one of the windows. Four men were emerging from the door of the op-center. One of them was Karl Voorman. There was no sign of Ching, Lou, or Felipe. It appeared that we'd been set up.

I rifled through the storage bins, hoping that Ching had left a weapon on board, but I couldn't find one. I glanced quickly around the interior of the shuttle. There was no place to hide, except for the lavatory. I hurried inside and locked the door, trying not to breathe too loudly.

A minute later, I heard the hatch open, and the men climbed in. One voice spoke up. "I say we go find the fourth one."

A second voice responded. "Don't worry about it. What's he gonna do?"

A third voice joined in. It was Voorman. "We haven't got time to look for him. We're supposed to be on the Moon Child in a few hours."

The first man gave in. "All right. Are we gonna take both vehicles?"

Voorman spoke again. "No, let's all go in this one. It's faster."

"Fine by me. Let's get going."

I hunkered down and hoped fervently that none of the men had a weak bladder. Maybe there was a chance I'd get to the Moon Child without being discovered. Through the door, I could hear them moving around. One of them found Ching's second bottle of whiskey and chortled. "Look what the bitch left us. I guess we can drink it, seeing as how she's not going to."

One of the other men laughed. Suddenly, the lavatory door moved slightly. A voice yelled from no more than three feet away. "Hey, Karl? What's with the bathroom door? It's all locked up!"

I heard Voorman's faint voice from the other end of the shuttle. The door rattled again.

"I'm telling ya, it's locked!"

Everything went silent. A few moments passed, and then I heard the sound of something metallic tapping against the other side of the door.

"Open the door. Or I'll blow it open."

I considered my options briefly, then unlocked the door and pushed it open. In front of me was a large blond man with a buzz cut and a large firearm pointed at my face. I raised my hands meekly. The man with the gun smiled. "C'mon out. Nice and slow."

As I stood up, the shuttle lurched. The blond man staggered and lowered the gun. Seeing an opportunity, I stumbled forward and grabbed the rifle barrel. Again the shuttle pitched, and I slammed against the wall across from the lavatory, losing my hold on the end of the gun. As the shuttle stabilized, the blond man regained his balance and aimed at my chest. "Don't try that again."

He motioned for me to step into the passenger area and sit down. The brute stood in front of me, the gun still pointed at my chest. "You should've stayed in the complex. Could've stayed alive a little longer."

He raised the gun. Suddenly, I heard Voorman. "@#%\$ it, Brody! Don't shoot him in here! You think I want this place messed up? Not to mention maybe putting a hole in the wall! Use your head, man! If you're gonna kill him, strangle him!"

Brody paused and looked at me over the top of the gun, then lowered it. "I wanna shoot him!"

Voorman stepped in from the cockpit. "Fine! Just wait until we get to the Moon Child. All right?" Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Voorman approaching, a length of cord in his hand. "I'll tie him up, and you do what you want with him later."

Brody stepped back grudgingly and set his rifle down. As Voorman had me stand up, I noticed him checking out my watch. For a moment, I thought he might take it from me, but he seemed to decide against it. He tied my hands behind my back, then pushed me back down into my seat. I looked up at the man who'd set me and Ching up. "You son of a bitch."

Voorman looked down at me apathetically, then headed back toward the cockpit. Brody moved, and I turned to see the butt of his rifle flashing toward my head. I flinched, then felt the white hot pain, and everything went black.

UAKM - chapter twenty-three

When I came to, my head felt like an axe was buried into it. I hadn't experienced such pain since the last time I'd had wine, beer, and Metaxa all in the same evening. Even the headache in Brownsville couldn't compare. I slowly opened my eyes just enough to look around at Voorman's three cohorts. It appeared that they'd had their way with the bottle of Black Bush. I closed my eyes and pretended to still be out.

For quite a while, I eavesdropped as the three drunken men talked about various women and their body parts. It seemed that they were excited to get to the Moon Child. From what I could understand, there was going to be some kind of large celebration the next day. A bad feeling welled up in my gut.

One of the men announced that he could see the Moon Child. I shifted slightly and realized my hands had fallen asleep. I moved a little more, and the painful tingling began in my fingertips. After a minute, I'd regained enough feeling to start testing the tightness of the cord on my wrists. It wasn't particularly tight. Trying to move as little as possible, I woked the cord. Slowly, it began to loosen.

By the time we landed inside the Moon Child, I'd gotten the bonds loose enough that I was sure I could get my hands free. As the shuttle powered down, I opened my eyes. Brody was leering at me, obviously intoxicated. It looked like he was about to attack me when Voorman stepped in from the cockpit. "All right. Let's go."

Brody looked up in protest. "What about this guy? He's mine, damn it."

Voorman was all business. "I know he is. You can have him. Kust get off my shuttle and go check in. I've got a few things to do, then I'll give you a call. We can take him somewhere private, and you can do whatever you want with him. All right?"

Brody pouted as he climbed unsteadily through the hatch. The two others followed, leaving me alone with Voorman, who went back into the cockpit. The men had taken their weapons with them. I looked around for something useful. The only object within reach was the empty bottle of whiskey. I slipped one hand out from the loosened cord, grabbed the bottle, and hid it behind my back.

A second later, Voorman reappeared. He walked straight toward me and grabbed my left arm. "C'mon. You and I need to have a talk."

Voorman helped me up with both hands, leaving himself wide open. As I stood up, I

was able to wind up and bring the bottle down on the top of his head with full force. He fell to the floor, as limp as a motician's handshake. I used the cord he had put on me to tie his hands behind his back, being careful to fasten it more securely than he had. Finally, I tore off one of his shirt sleeves and gagged him.

Before leaving, I looked around quickly for a weapon. I'd never been comfortable with firearms, but I figured I could make an exception this one time. Unfortunately, there wasn't one to be found. Apparently, Brody and his buddies had taken them off the freighter.

The hatch door was still open. I took a peek outside, then crawled out. When I reached the floor, I straightened up and stretched, then had to bend over, hands on knees, as a wave of pain crashed through my head. I reached back and felt a large, oblong bump on the side of my skull. At least it wasn't visible. Nothing made someone stand out like a huge facial bruise.

As the pain receded, I stood back up and surveyed my surroundings. I seemed to be in some sort of immense cargo bay, dimly lit with huge florescent lights. The ceiling was at least a hundred feet high, and the interior was big enough to hold a small town. As far as the eye could see, there all kinds of vehicles, from ordinary speeders to large industrial freighters. I also saw various types of machinery, from tractors to bailers. It looked like what you'd take if you were colonizing a new Earth-like planet. Of course, as far as I knew, that was exactly what these people had in mind.

Some distance away, a lone tower rose up above the sea of metal. It appeared to be a watchtower, and I could see several figures inside. I walked casually toward a nearby shuttle and ducked behind it. I glanced around, looking for an exit, and found one several hundred yards away, in the opposite direction of the watchtower. Keeping low, I moved from one vehicle to the next, slowly covering ground. Luckily, there didn't seem to be anyone wandering around the area.

Until someone discovered Voorman or he managed to get loose, no one on the Moon Child, other than the three drunken thugs, had any reason to know I was there or to suspect that I was an outsider. Considering the size of the satellite, the odds of me running into Brody or one of the other men were pretty remote. At least I had one set of odds on my side.

I eventually reached the door on the far side of the cargo bay and opened it. On the other side was a small foyer containing nothing but a set of elevator doors. Now what? I'd escaped from the freighter and was safely on the Moon Child, but had absolutely no idea what to do next. There was just one thing going for me, and that was temporary. Realistically, I had nothing to lose. The elevator panel had only one button, and I pushed

it.

After a long wait, the up light went off, and the elevator doors opened. No one was inside, so I stepped in. The panel displayed buttons for levels LL through twenty-four. There was also a button for level thirty-six, but none for levels twenty-five through thirty-five. I closed my eyes and pressed a button, a method that had worked surprisingly well for me in the past - especially at the racetrack. The elevator started to rise, and I saw, with some superstitious apprehension, that the button for level thirteen was lit up. At level three, the elevator came to a stop, and three drop-dead gorgeous women joined me, without acknowledging my existence. One of them, a tall redhead, with cropped hair and large brown eyes, was talking as she pressed the button for level nine.

"You have to try the lasagna. I don't know what they put in it, but it's unbelievable."

One of the other women broke in. "All I want is a salad."

"Oh, their salads are unbelievable. Trust me. You'll love it. And you have to try their bread. They serve it with olive oil and fresh parmesan. It's absolutely unbelievable."

I suddenly knew where to go. My mouth was watering with thoughts of rich, cheesy Italian food. When we reached level nine, I followed the young women out of the elevator and onto what appeared to be a cobblestone street, straight out of an old-fashioned Western European village. The air was thick with the aroma of culinary delights. I paused to breathe in deeply before following my oblivious guides down the street.

On either side of the thoroughfare were tables laden with food and surrounded by happy diners. The first eating establishment on my left was a brightly decorated pizza parlor. Facing it was a Chinese place with an attractive and authentic-looking Buddhist-temple facade. As I strolled down the street, I passed a bakery, a mesquite grill, and an ice cream parlor. All the food looked and smelled delicious.

Eventually, I reached the Italian restaurant. Four packed tables sat beneath a red-and-white-striped awning. Several people nodded and smiled at me as I walked around the tables and stepped through the front door. The interior looked like it had been lifted straight out of an old Dean Martin movie. Large brick ovens were crammed with pizzas. Mustachioed waiters bustled about in bow ties and garters. The air was thick with the smell of garlic and tomatoes.

I looked around and spotted a small, unoccupied corner table. Naturally, there was a red-and-white-checked tablecloth with a round candle in the middle. I took a seat and picked up a menu from behind the napkin dispenser. The menu was extensive, and everything

on it looked wonderful. There were no prices listed. Apparently, the Moon Child was all-inclusive. A waiter appeared and asked what I wanted. I ordered the lasagna, with a garden salad and double garlic bread. He took the order as if I'd said the secret word and scurried off.

I'd just about decided that this was the finest restaurant I'd ever been allowed to eat in, when I noticed that there were no ashtrays. A brief inspection of the room confirmed that no one was smoking. I wondered momentarily if the entire place was no-smoking and shuddered. At least I was about to eat. Once I had something in my stomach, I'd go back to worrying about the situation.

The waiter returned in record-setting time with a large salad. As he set it in front of me, I caught him staring at my wrist. If he'd been looking at my watch, I probably wouldn't have thought anything about it - my watch was certainly handsome enough to catch someone's eye. But he was looking at my right wrist. He backed away, a concerned expression on his face, then turned and walked quickly toward the kitchen. Mystified, I glanced at the people at the adjoining table. I hadn't noticed before, but everyone was wearing a thin metal bracelet on their wrist.

I jumped up and left the restaurant. Out on the street, I turned in the direction I'd come from and strode briskly back toward the elevator. I reached it without incident. No one seemed to be following me. I pressed both the up and down buttons and waited. A moment later, the elevator arrived and opened. There were at least ten people inside. I squeezed in, and the doors shut behind me.

The elevator climbed to level thirteen and stopped. Fate had chosen this level earlier, and I'd ignored it. Now I was in more danger and even hungrier than I'd been before. I wasn't about to chance it a second time. Luckily, most of the group was getting off here as well, so I went along with the crowd. I figured I could blend in, as long as I kept my right hand in my trouser pocket. We stepped out of the elevator into a foyer like the one I'd seen outside the cargo bay, except that this one had two revolving doors. One was marked Environ 3, the other Environ 4. Most of the people moved toward Environ 3. I walked through the revolving door and stepped into paradise.

I found myself in maybe the last place I would've imagined. Several tiny paths were worn into the grassy floor of a forest and meandered off into the shadows. Thick oaks towered overhead, and a robin's-egg blue sky peeked out from behind leafy branches. The moist air was filled with the whistling and chirping of birds. The unfamiliar smell of fresh earth, flowering plants, and pure summer rain was intoxicating. To someone accustomed to the city odors of smoke, hot asphalt, and urine, this place was surreal. I half expected to see a merry band of nymphs come dancing out of the shadows and sprinkle pixie dust on my wing tips.

This was the kind of sylvan glade that hadn't existed since I was too young to remember. Between the widespread devastation caused by the war and the radioactive fallout, most of the world's forests had been decimated. Even in places that had survived relatively unscathed, the depleted ozone was working its black magic on the ecosystem. But perhaps most shocking about this bizzare place was the blue sky - something I don't ever remember seeing. Of course, the sky here had to be artificial, but the effect was overwhelming.

The others who had entered with me went scampering down the paths and disappeared, leaving me alone in awe. I was still ravenously hungry and rattled from the incident at the Italian restaurant, but suddenly finding myself in a beautiful forest had an amazingly calming effect. I wandered down one of the paths, taking in the natural beauty. I wondered what kind of money was required to create something like this. Whoever had designed this place had spared nothing. From the mossy floor to the woodland animals I occasionally spotted in the underbrush, the forest appeared to be absolutely real. It was hard to believe I was actually on a man-made satellite, orbiting 25,000 miles above Earth.

I continued down the path, passing elms and maples. A light breeze drifted through the trees, stirring the leaves and diffusing a flowery fragrance. After several minutes, I began to hear the trickling of water. Following the musical sound, I soon reached a meandering brook. A large rock bordered the stream, and I sat down on it. Up until this moment, my hunger pangs and splitting headache had overshadowed my exhaustion. When I sat down, I realized how tired I was. I'd left the path and felt relatively safe, so I moved down onto the spongy ground and leaned back against the rock. Closing my eyes, I tried to make sense of the situation I'd gotten myself into.

What the hell was I going to do? I certainly wasn't equipped to stop the cult on my own, lacking both knowledge and weapons. The only thread of hope was the possibility of finding the CAPRICORN mole, if he had made it on board without being discovered, that is. But there were literally thousands of people on the Moon Child, maybe tens of thousands. Locating the mole would make winning the lottery seem easy.

Maybe I just had to admit I was beaten. I'd never found myself up against such overwhelming odds - except, of course, when I'd tried out for the Giants during the strike of '27. Maybe I should just cut my losses. This was a beautiful place, more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen. Sure, the cult was planning on perpetrating a diabolical act against humanity, but what could I do about it? Wasn't it Ben Franklin who'd said, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em?" I took a deep breath of pristine air and actually considered the option.

Who was I kidding? I'd never cut my losses in my life. Any successes I'd enjoyed had happened despite myself. I'd lost more money, prestige, and social advancement than anyone I knew, all because I wasn't the type to play along. Kissing up and compromising my principles, as warped as they might be, just wasn't something I could do and still maintain any sense of self-respect. I knew, at least vaguely, what the cult wanted to do, and I couldn't possibly rationalize it. Maybe they'd let me join them and spend my life here in this orbiting Garden of Eden, wanting for nothing. But I'd never be able to overcome the feeling that I'd been an accessory, albeit unwilling, to the greatest mass murder in history.

I racked my brains for a long time, trying to come up with a clever plan to find the CAPRICORN mole, but it was hopeless. At least I would try to go out in a blaze of glory. If I could find out who was behind this whole thing and take him out, I might be able to make at least a small dent in their plans. For the time being, I needed sleep. Trying to block out the thoughts racing through my brain, I eventually nodded off.

I woke up to a light rain shower. The sky overhead was still robin's-egg blue, but some kind of sprinkler system was simulating a misty precipitation. My fedora and overcoat were damp, but not soaked. The shower must've just started. I stood up and slowly worked a painful knot out of my lower back. Checking my watch, I saw that I'd been asleep almost six hours. The aching in my head had subsided, and now I was just hungry. I brushed dirt off the seat of my pants and found my way back to the path.

I reached the revolving door and moved through it. The foyer was filled with people, all waiting for the elevator. There was an excited buzz, and everyone seemed to be talking about the Reverend Sheppard. From what I could surmise, everyone was heading to a massive gathering.

I waited in the crowd for a half hour as the elevator carried load after load of jubilant Crusaders away. Eventually, my turn came, and I climbed onto the elevator. We went up and up, all the way to the top, level thirty-six.

When the doors parted, I saw a huge open area, almost completely filled with people. Stepping out, I surveyed the room. It reminded me a little of old photos of the Hollywood Bowl, before it had been destroyed in the war, except that this place was much larger. It was circular, opening and vomiting out more groups of the faithful. The diameter of the room was at least two hundred yards, and a massive, transparent dome spanned the room two hundred feet over our heads, revealing a panoramic view of eternity.

On the far side of the room, across the great expanse, I saw a large, empty stage. An

enormous and ornate podium stood at the front of the stage, and a long row of throne-like chairs ran along the back. Mounted above the thrones was what appeared to be a gigantic screen, at least three times the size of the largest movie screen I'd ever seen. Above the din, the strains of "Ode To Joy" were echoing throughout the vast auditorium. How ironic. I couldn't help but think that something from Wagner would've been more appropriate.

I couldn't begin to estimate how many people comprised the teeming throng. Endless streams of Crusaders were pouring from the elevators, and the room was filling rapidly with a rolling sea of heads. I'd never seen such an ethnically diverse assemblage - every shade of human coloring was well-represented. With the almost tangible anticipation and excitement running through the crowd, the scene was what I would envision if the United Nations hosted a Sadie Hawkins dance.

I stood against the wall by the elevator, feeling increasingly claustrophobic and desperately needing a cigarette. I decided against the indulging, certain that it would only draw unwanted attention. The stream coming from the elevators had now dwindled to a trickle, and the hum of the crowd was reaching a fevered pitch. Suddenly, the lights went down, leaving only the stage lit.

The multitude hushed as a small procession appeared stage left in single file. With great pomp and circumstance, the leaders of the cult took their places on the thrones. When all the seats were filled, a single man strode across the stage to the podium. On cue, a spotlight went on, and the man's face appeared on the screen above the stage. It was the Reverend Claude Sheppard.

The masses burst into mighty applause. When I noticed several people staring at me and my lack of enthusiasm, I was forced to join in. The Reverend Sheppard smiled, obviously soaking up the adoration and reveling in the moment. Then, with a graceful gesture of mock humility, he lowered his eyes and raised his hand for silence. The applause slowly dissipated.

The Reverend spread his arms wide and smiled down benevolently.

"Brothers...sisters...my children. At this moment, we stand on the threshold of a new era! A great and glorious era! Today, we come into our inheritance!"

The crowd went crazy. After letting the mob vent its jubilation, the Reverend again raised his hand. "Every man, woman, and child here today has been specially chosen to fulfill a vast and wonderful destiny. You shall be the first generation of the Earth's golden age."

A loud cheer went up from the masses, but I also detected some incomprehension among the faithful. The Reverend Sheppard continued.

"You have all reached the pinnacle of ascendancy in the Crusade for Genetic Purity. But today you will learn that you are an integral part of something much more. You see, my children, our beliefs and practices are ancient. The events happening now were prophesied long ago, thousands of years before we were born."

The crowd was silent, seemingly trying to comprehend what it was hearing.

"Our order originated deep in the mists of unrecorded time. These forefathers foresaw a day when the Earth would be reborn, and only the pure would survive. Throughout the generations, worthy men and women continued the process of preparation, passing on the knowledge and prophecies of the founders. All their work went into preparing for an event that will begin only hours from now. At midnight will come the purification!"

The people cheered, but most of them didn't seem to know what they were celebrating.

"We have known for many years that the Earth would be reborn on this very date. As one prophet described it, 'A great storm will appear from the Western sky and overwhelm the impure.' This purification will cleanse the Earth of the inferior masses that threaten the integrity of humanity."

Sheppard gestured all around. "This magnificent Moon Child is also a fulfillment of prophecy. It was foretold that this would be the haven of the faithful, where those who were destined to claim the purified world would be sheltered from the storm of purification and wait for the process to be completed. For forty years, we will stay here and prepare for the day when we can return to a purified Earth!"

For the first time since the speech began, I heard confused voices among the listeners. Apparently, many of the Crusaders hadn't known they were signing on for a forty-year tour of duty. As the Reverend Sheppard waited for the crowd to quiet down, I decided what I needed to do. I began making my way toward the stage. Sheppard resumed his sermon.

"Very soon, the planet below us will be engulfed in an initiation of fire. There will be no survivors. We will be the last and best remnant of humanity. Each of you carries an important responsibility. You and your children will recolonize the Earth, and we will create a civilization of enlightenment and purity, the likes of which has never existed. Our lives will be rich and full and unencumbered by the rot and decay that now infests the planet. Lift up your hearts and rejoice!"

The response was strong, but still uncertain. It was a reaction that I hoped might be exploited. I was halfway to the stage when I glanced up at the screen and saw a change come over Sheppard's face.

"There is another matter that must be addressed at this time. We are bound together here by our common beliefs and goals. It is paramount that we maintain our unity of purpose. But I say to you, there is a traitor among us!"

I froze in my tracks. They were onto me. I looked around furtively, but everyone around me had their eyes riveted on the Reverend. I looked back up toward the stage and saw three silhouetted figures approaching the podium. As they stepped into the light, I saw a familiar figure, handcuffed with a security guard on either side. It was Karl Voorman.

Sheppard pointed a finger at him. "This man is an unbeliever! He would undo all that we have sought to accomplish! He came to us under false pretenses, and we opened our arms and hearts to him. Now we have learned that he intended to destroy us!"

I continued toward the stage as an angry murmur rippled through the assemblage. Had Voorman been the CAPRICORN mole? If so, why had he allowed Ching and her men to be murdered? Maybe he didn't know why Ching wanted passage to the moon...and she'd insisted that there be no questions asked. The most reasonable explanation for his actions was that he couldn't risk blowing his cover, not even to people who might possibly be on his side. Maybe Ching hadn't explained why we wanted passage to the lunar penal colony. Or, possibly, Voorman wasn't in a position to reveal himself. I thought back to when I'd been discovered on Voorman's shuttle. He'd kept me from being killed. And he tied me loosely enough so I could escape. Had he done that intentionally? A hollow feeling in my stomach told me I'd blown the last chance to stop these madmen.

The Reverend Sheppard had now worked himself into a ranting, gesturing frenzy. "This man is an impurity to the body! There is no place for dissension! If we are to succeed, we must be absolutely united! One mind! One heart! One purpose!"

He seemed to have regained control of the masses, who cheered and applauded wildly. It was like attending a Nazi rally. I was getting close to the stage as the security guards led Voorman away. There was nothing I could do to save Voorman, but I still held onto one desperate hope, I'd only have a few seconds.

Sheppard turned and left the podium, and the crowd began a deafening roar. I reached the front of the stage and pulled myself up off the floor. No one reacted initially as I ran for the podium. Grabbing the microphone, I yelled at the top of my lungs, "These men are murderers! The purification is a lie! Everyone on Earth will be slaughtered!"

Several hands grabbed me and pulled me back.

"Only you can stop them!" I was wrestled to the floor. After being punched and kicked a dozen times, I was lifted roughly from the floor and hustled off the stage and down a set of stairs. I was dragged through a door and into a hallway. A voice cried out to take me to the holding room. Moments later, we reached a door, which one of the men opened. I was hauled inside and thrown into a large seat that vaguely resembled an electric chair. Restraints were locked over my wrists and ankles. Another went around my forehead.

Most of the men left the room, leaving two security guards to glare at me. One was a slightly built, completely bald man I didn't recognize. He looked like Mr. Clean, without the earring. The second was a breath-takingly beautiful blond woman. The third person I knew. It was maybe the last person in the world I'd expected to see. Lowell Percival.

UAKM - chapter twenty-four

"Well, Mr. Murphy, I must say, you are full of surprises. I don't remember sending you an invitation to our little party, but you seem to have found your way here regardless. I can only admire your ingenuity and tenacity...both very fine attributes, by the way. And here you are! With such exquisite timing! Not everyone will be able to say they witnessed the greatest event in the history of the world!"

Percival, dapper in a full tuxedo and black tie, looked for all the world like Fred Astaire's smaller, evil brother. He was in good form, much more animated than the other times I'd seen him. He clasped his hands together and smiled widely. "You're surprised to see me. I shouldn't wonder, the way my building blew to pieces." He gestured grandly. "A most impressive explosion. Who could hope to survive such a cataclysm? Only the Phoenix! I have risen from the ashes to live forever!"

He was clearly insane. But I wanted to find the method in the madness.

"Why'd you do it, Percival?"

The little man waved a hand at me. "A whim. A distraction. Something to keep my enemies occupied long enough for me to escape. And, I suppose, a morbid interest in reading my own obituaries. Some of them were quite stellar, I must say. It seems I lived quite a charmed life. Not unlike you, Mr. Murphy. I've never in my life known anyone who had quite the knack you do for surviving. I'd call you lucky, but you come through again and again.

"Finding the Habuh, for example. The statuette, I mean. I really must thank you for your efforts in securing that for us. It was the one item that had eluded our grasp. The sacred text said that our destiny would be secure only if we had the statuette in our possession."

Percival moved closer and lowered his voice. "Just bewteen you and me, I believe that prophecies should be taken with a grain of salt, but there's no harm in hedging one's bets."

He stepped back and made a pretense of bowing. "In any case, we are deeply in your debt."

"So you were the anonymous friend the countess referred to. The one who said I was good at finding things."

Percival chuckled gleefully. "Ah, yes. The countess...what was it?...Renier. I did indeed recommend you. The task you accomplished for me in the Martian colonies made quite a positive and lasting impression. And, as it turns out, I made the right decision in asking for your assistance."

I cut in. "But why me? I appreciate the compliments, but it doesn't seem too logical to count on someone to find your statuette."

Percival turned away, chortling. "Don't overestimate yourself, Mr. Murphy. By no means were we depending on your success. There's a quaint expression for it: I was stacking the deck in my favor. There were literally hundreds of people searching for the Habuh. For some reason that simple logic can't explain, you happened to find it first. One of our agents followed you to and from Mexico City, and then relived you of it at the first opportune moment."

He had been pacing, but stopped suddenly and raised a finger. "I digress. The important issue is your presence here and how we're going to proceed. The way I see it, you have a choice to make and, depending on your decision, you will either live or die. Let's address the first option.

"In an hour or so, we will fulfill an ancient prophecy - specifically, the purification by means of the Great Alluvion. It's a fabulous name for a somewhat unpleasant process. Those creative minds at Genetic Research Systems labored for years to make our prophecy a reality. It was quite a challenge to come up with a plan that would match the details of the Great Alluvion, as it's described in our sacred text. It cost me a fortune, but now everything is prepared.

"The fact of the matter is, the Earth has become a rotting shell, inhabited by a mongrel

breed of half-humans that infest the pure races with their filthy, mutated genes." Percival stepped toward me, his hands extended in a pleading gesture. "I ask you, Mr. Murphy, is that to be the fate of mankind? I say it is not! The Earth must be thoroughly cleansed for mankind to be saved! Otherwise, we would simply degenerate into a primitive state and squander the attributes and knowledge it has taken us millenia to achieve.

"Minutes from now, we'll release the seeds of purification. The Great Alluvion, the baptism of fire that will follow, will destroy all life on Earth, but from the destruction will arise a glorious new age! Then, after the waiting, our genetically pure children will return to a world that, like them, is clean and unspoiled. Though I may not live to see it, I will die peacefully, knowing that I have given mankind a purified world!

"Look around you, Mr. Murphy. You are aboard an Ark of Humanity. This is now the last bastion of mankind. There is nowhere else to go. But the Moon Child is more than a mere haven. It is paradise. The biospheres have been constructed to represent Earth as it once was and will be. Our skies are blue and clean, not red and saturated with deadly radiation. There are forests and rivers and lakes, the likes of which haven't been seen since the war. There are even deserts and fields and mountains, all filled with their native flora and fauna. I spent the bulk of my fortune on this satellite, creating an orbiting Eden, from which the Earth will be reborn.

"There is everything you could want here! In addition to the ecological wonders, there are aquariums, aviaries, and zoos. We have vast libraries and a superior educational system. Every conceivable form of entertainment is available, from nightclubs to concerts to sports. Any pursuit for the betterment of oneself has been included.

"And the people! Only the creme de la creme. Artisans of every kind are represented and will teach their crafts to the next generations. Doctors here provide an unrivaled level of care and have been equipped with only the finest machines and instruments. Of course, the arts are well represented. Musicians, artists, dancers, vocalists are all free to explore their creativity and will train our children.

"Above all, the inhabitants of the Ark of Humanity are as genetically perfect as possible - beautiful, intelligent, accomplished. Ten thousand men, women, and children, all bound together by belief and purpose! A desire to create a world free of imperfections. A society of harmony and peace, without fear, without crime."

Percival paused to take a breath, then walked to my side and placed a delicate, manicured hand on my shoulder. "You can share in our happiness, Mr. Murphy. The price is loyalty. If you agree to join us, I'll release your restraints, and you can begin living your new life." Percival backed away and left me to decide.

It certainly was a tempting offer. Maybe the best offer I'd ever gotten. Percival's world was beautiful and clean. From an aesthetic standpoint, my own world paled in comparison. Besides, it seemed that nothing was going to interrupt the cult's plans. Like Percival had said, there would be nowhere else to go. There were certainly worse ways to spend the next forty years.

But there was something wrong with it. Despite the cosmetics and technology, the Moon Child and everything on it were artificial. Re-creations of reality. Sure, we all wanted the Earth to be the way it was before the war, but we'd made our bed and now we had to sleep in it. Percival's final solution wouldn't change that.

I thought of the unsuspecting billions going about their business on the planet below us - people who had every right to live, regardless of their color or religion or genetic makeup. I imagined the crowd at the Brew & Stew, forgetting for awhile how hard their lives were and having a round of drinks with good friends. The image of Chelsee came to mind, sitting in a corner booth, feet up on the seat, sipping tea and reading a book. She was a Mutant, and if Percival had his way, he'd slaughtered her and everyone like her. That was unacceptable. Chelsee and I had unfinished business. I knew I could never have anything to do with the cult.

"I've decided."

Percival turned expectantly to face me. "You'll join us?"

"I don't think so. You see, the way I've got it figured, you're a sick, deranged bastard with too much money and a Napoleon complex. Your plan is the most barabric, ruthless scheme I've ever heard of, and everything about it shows you to be a coward of monumental proportions. If I weren't strapped into this seat, I'd do everything in my power to grab you and choke the last breath out of your rotten miserable body."

Percival stared at me in stunned disbelief. I wasn't sure if it'd been my response or just the fact that he wasn't accustomed to people telling him what they really thought. Either way, his face was getting a little ruddy around the edges. For a moment, I thought he was going to erupt. I watched as he regained control. Hands behind his back, he walked up to me and bent down, so that his face was inches from mine. "I admire your courage, but your decision saddens me. Good-bye, Mr. Murphy. We won't be seeing each other again."

Percival straightened up and turned to the bald man, who'd been standing silently in the corner throughout our conversation. "Kill him. When you're finished, meet me in the observatory."

The bald man nodded, a hint of a smile on his thin lips. Percival turned to the woman and extended his hand. Come along, Eva. This may be unpleasant."

The woman didn't move. "If you don't mind, Lowell, I'd like to stay. After the things he said to you, I think I'll enjoy watching him die."

Percival stared at the woman for several seconds. "Anything to make you happy."

He reached out and ran his hand over her cheek, then turned and left the room. When the door closed behind him, Mr. Clean grinned openly. "You stupid son of a bitch. What were you thinking? All you had to do was pretend to cooperate. When we let you loose, you could've jumped him and at least gotten a couple of punches in before we grabbed you. Now what've you got? You're going to die anyway, and Percival gets off without a bruise."

I recognized the voice. There was a slight accent to it. "Jacques Fou, alias the Chameleon. I was wondering when I'd finally meet up with you."

Fou's grin got a little wider as he started to walk slowly toward me. "Oh, we've already met. We just weren't properly introduced. Maybe I can refresh your memory. I'm sure you have many talents, Mr. Murphy. The one I would hire you for is your knack for locating people and things."

The countess's voice was coming out of Fou's mouth. It was hard to believe that he was the same person I'd met at the beginning of the case. When he finished speaking, he broke into a laugh. "Weird, huh? It always seems to have that effect on people." He pulled a device from his belt. It appeared to be a gun of some sort, but a type I'd never seen before. Fou noticed me looking at it and held it up.

"Ever see one of these before? Probably not. It's called a tasc gun - TSC - thermal sonic cavitator. It's an amazing weapon. The technology's been around for at least seventy years. Doctors use something like it to dissolve kidney stones without having to perform surgery. It emits an adjustable-frequency sonic wave. At close range, it has an unusual effect on the body. It essentially breaks down your tissue. A high-intensity setting will turn you into a gelatinous pile of bones and fluid. From what I've heard, it's pretty painful."

"Is that what you used to murder the Colonel?"

Fou adjusted something on the weapon, then looked back at me, still smiling. "No. Nothing so technically advanced. I slit his throat with a razor blade. Almost as messy as this tasc gun, but sometimes you just want to get hands-on. If I had a blade with me, I'd

probably use it. As it is, I'll just have to make do."

Fou took one step closer and raised the tasc gun to my head. Instinctively, I closed my eyes and tensed up. A shot went off, and my body jerked violently. A second later, I realized I was still conscious and I opened my eyes. Fou lay on the floor at my feet. I looked up. The woman, Eva, stood like a statue ten feet away, both hands gripping a pistol.

UAKM - chapter twenty-five

Eva stepped over the Chameleon's dead body and pressed several times on the side of my chair. The restraints clicked open, freeing my hands, feet, and neck. I wasn't sure what to do, but she had the gun, so I waited for further instructions. For all I knew, she wanted to kill me too, but was going to show some sportsmanship.

She straightened up and stepped back. The Chameleon's tasc gun lay on the floor where he'd dropped it. Eva picked it up and handed it to me. Firearms had always made me uncomfortable, and I'd rarely carried one, but in this case, I figured I could make an exception. Eva motioned for me to stand over the dead body, and then she walked to the door. To my surprise, she let loose with a scream for help.

The door flashed open, and a burly security guard burst in, his eyes instantly fixing on me. Standing over the Chameleon's corpse with a tasc gun in my hand, I suddenly realized the implications of my situation. The security guard pulled a pistol from his holster, and I raised the tasc gun. Eva, who was now directly behind the guard, stepped up and dropped him with a blow to the neck. Almost before he hit the floor, she pounced on top of him, grabbed his head, and wrenched it to the side, breaking his neck.

She jumped up, glanced quickly at her watch, and then gestured with her weapon toward the dead guard. "We have to hurry. Take your clothes off and put those on."

I wasn't about to argue - a painful kink had mysteriously developed in the back of my neck. It occurred to me why Eva hadn't shot the guard - she didn't want to mess up the uniform. I walked around the Chameleon's body and began removing the security guard's clothes. Eva tapped me on the shoulder with her pistol. "Take off your watch."

Under more promising circumstances, I would've almost certainly insisted on taking her request the wrong way. As it was, I just kept my mouth shut, undid the watchband, and handed it over. Eva took the watch hungrily. While she examined it, I finished with the security guard and began to undress. Instinctively, I thought of how long it had been since I'd worked out. Damn this boubon belly of mine. Luckily, yet somewhat disappointingly, Eva wasn't paying any attention.

As I dressed, I glanced around the room. Mounted high on the wall was a surveillance camera. I hadn't noticed it before. A flashing red light showed that it was activated. It made me nervous. Eva must have seen me looking at it. "That thing's patched straight into Percival's private security station. No one sees it but him, he hasn't had time to get there yet. We have at least a few minutes."

With no choice but to be relieved, I finished dressing. The guard was a couple of inches shorter than me, though about the same build. The shirt, red and black with a strange rune-like symbol over the left breast, was a short-sleeve pullover, so it wasn't a problem. Neither were the stretchy black pants. The boots, however, were about half a size too small. I could get them on, but I wasn't going to run any marathons in them.

I looked sadly at the pile of clothes I'd taken off. I'd worn my best and only overcoat. The other items were expendable, except the fedora. It was like breaking up with my first love. After a moment of silence, I turned my attention back to Eva, who seemed to be intent on destroying the watch. A moment later, she twisted the rim around the face, and it popped open. A grim smile played across her lips. "Thank God."

I moved next to her and took a peek into the watch compartment. Inside was a small piece of black plastic, about the size of a Chiclet. It resembled an old-fashioned RAM insert. Eva glanced at me. "You know what this is?"

"I think I do."

Eva closed the watch face and nodded. "Good." She dropped the watch into one of her boots. "We're running out of time, but at least now there's a chance. I hadn't planned on meeting my contact under these circumstances. We're going to have to wing it from here on out."

Eva leaned over the Chameleon's body and searched through his pockets. She pulled out a plastic card, then grabbed his legs and looked up at me. "Get his arms."

I did as she told me, and we carried the corpse across the room, away from the door. Reaching the far wall, Eva pressed one section of it, causing a small panel to spring open. Inside were several switches. She flipped one, and a bin-like contraption, with an opening about four feet square, separated from the surface of the wall. Following Eva's lead, I carried my half of the dead body to the bin. We dumped the corpse into the opening, and then did the same with the dead security guard. Eva flipped another switch, closing the bin. Seconds later, I heard a faint hydraulic rush. Eva shut the panel and turned toward me. "Just two more pieces of galactic debris. With any luck, no one will notice they're missing until we're done."

I felt a strong urge to ask what exactly it was we were going to do, but decided against it. We seemed to be hitting it off fairly well, and it didn't seem like a good time to rock the boat.

Eva walked to the door, and I followed her out. Now that she'd killed the security guard, the corridor outside was blessedly empty. Apparently, Percival hadn't thought it necessary to post more than one guard. It wasn't the first time he'd underestimated me. Eva glanced in both directions, then went left. We walked briskly until we reached an elevator, seeing no one along the way. A minute later, the doors opened, and we stepped into the vacant lift.

The menu of buttons in this elevator was different from the ones in the elevators I'd been in previously; this time, we could access levels twenty-four through thirty-six. Eva pressed the button for level twenty-eight, and we began to descend. We both stared up at the level display, not saying a word. I had no idea what was on level twenty-eight, but I was suddenly eager to get there. When the elevator started to slow down, and then stopped at level thirty-one, an urge to bolt out the doors and run wildly came over me. Since there was nowhere to go, however, I clenched my teeth and glanced at Eva. She appeared unruffled. Looking straight ahead, she whispered fiercely. "Put your hands behind your back."

I had the uniform, but still no bracelet. If anyone noticed, I'd be a marked man. The door slid open just as I put my hands behind me and leaned against the wall. A computer voice piped up: "Level thirty-one. Section A. St. Andrews. Augusta National. Sawgrass. Pebble Beach. Fenway Park. Camden Yards. Wrigley Field. Candlestick Park. For information on tee times or holo-sim sporting events, go to the check-in area." Two young men stepped inside, and we exchanged the customary greetings. Not wanting to invite conversation, I focused on the level display. I probably didn't have anything to worry about. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the men ogling Eva.

Fortunately, their ogling was cut short. The elevator stopped at level twenty-nine, and the men exited to the accompaniment of the computer voice: "Level twenty-nine. Section A. Zoological Gardens and Yellowstone National Park. For information on camping and hiking, go to the check-in area."

Seconds later, we reached level twenty-eight, section A. The computer informed me that this was the "Aquatic Level," featuring representative microcosms of the Pacific, Atlantic, Caribbean, and Mediterranean, as well as various bodies of fresh water. Eva and I stepped out of the elevator into a neat, sterile foyer. Directly across from us was a doorway leading to a check-in area. On the right were men's and women's restrooms. To the left was a door marked Authorized Personnel Only.

Eva walked to the door and pulled out the card she'd taken from the Chameleon. Inserting the card into a slot just under the door handle, she grasped the handle and turned it. She held the door open and motioned for me to enter. Beyond was a stairwell, with plain walls and metal handrails. Stairs led both up and down. Eva closed the door behind us and took the flight up.

At the top of the stairs, Eva opened the first door we reached. At this point, I had no choice but to follow her, but she did seem to know where she was going. Of course, she could have been utilizing the old confidence smoke screen. It was a ploy I'd used many times, making people think you know what you're doing when you're actually baffled and completely at a loss. My motto has always been "What they don't know won't hurt 'em." Now, however, I was the one in the dark, and I didn't much like it.

Regardless, I followed Eva out the door and into a long, featureless hallway that looked like an extension of the stairwell. We moved quickly, and every so often, we'd pass a door with a number or letter code stenciled on it. Eva increased the pace until we reached a door marked 28-A-41. She opened it, and I found myself stepping back into paradise.

Again, my sense of smell overloaded with the fragrances of grass and trees. Only this time, I smelled water - not the stinking, contaminated water of New San Francisco Bay, which now had more pop cans, syringes, and rotten corpses than fish - but the clear, pristine liquid mirror of an alpine lake.

I wished I'd had more time to breathe it in. Eva darted down a small path into the trees. I was close behind, and within minutes we reached the shore of a large lake. In the distance, I could make out the tops of trees. Eva ducked off the path, and we slowly made our way through the underbrush, moving parallel to the shore. Eventually, we reached a clearing and walked to the edge of the water. Hidden in a thicket of bushes was a boat.

We climbed aboard, and Eva started the engine. She guided the boat out of the shallow water, turned it, and we sped off across the lake. I'd never been in a speedboat before, and it was a rush. Bouncing over the surface, with mist coating my face, I felt like we were finally making our escape. With the blue sky above us, it was easy to forget where we were. I moved close to Eva and spoke up over the noise of the engine and chopping water. "Where are we going?"

Eva kept her eyes ahead. "The computer center."

"This must be the scenic route."

Eva half-smiled and pulled a strand of hair from the corner of her mouth. "More like the back door. Our only chance of getting in is to use the service access. When they find out we're missing, they'll track me down by my bracelet. I hope that taking this route might buy us some extra time. It's the long way around, but we should meet up with less resistance this way."

"What do you mean by less resistance? I'm kind of partial to resistance."

Eva shook her head. "Percival isn't taking any chances. Security is pretty high everywhere. Luckily for us, he thinks he got the last Winter Chip. I doubt he even suspected you had one."

"How many are there?"

"There were three. One was in the CAPRICORN building when it was bombed. Another one was found on a CAPRICORN agent and destroyed. Colonel O'Brien had the last one. He was supposed to get it to me before we moved up here."

I'd always been a slow learner, but things were falling into place. "You were the CAPRICORN mole at GRS."

The woman looked at me appraisingly, as if I'd unexpectedly identified her very rare brand of perfume, and nodded. I looked out across the lake, to where we were headed. "How does Voorman fit into this?"

"He was an agent. When the Moon Child was in the last stages of construction, he infiltrated the operation, running a supply freighter to and from the station. He was our most valuable source of information on the cult's activities. He was also supposed to find and deliver the Winter Chip to me when the Colonel didn't come through with it. When I'd found out he'd been exposed, just before Sheppard's speech, I was afraid the chip had been found on him. It was a good thing Percival never considered that you would have it."

"So what happens with the Winter Chip?"

Eva glanced at me, then back at the water. "Theoretically, it will introduce a rapidly mutating computer virus into the Moon Child's matrix. The virus is designed to change faster than a virus hunter can identify and delete it. Eventually, it should corrupt the data files to the point where they no longer function. And since all the satellite's systems are linked into the computer - "

"The Moon Child crashes."

Eva brushed a lock of hair out of her face. "Yeah. Theoretically."

"I don't care much for that word."

"What? Theoretically? It'll work. It just wasn't practical to test it on a computer system comparable to the Moon Child's."

"I've heard the IRS has one."

Eva smiled. "Not a bad thought."

We were getting closer to the shore. I took a seat and left Eva alone as she guided the boat into a small cove. When we reached the shore, I jumped out and pulled the boat in. Eva even gave me her hand and let me help her out. We went into the trees and walked until we reached an ivy-covered wall. I looked up and estimated the height at somewhere around a hundred feet. This had to be the outer wall of level twenty-eight.

Eva moved along the ivy-covered surface, inspecting it closely. A short time later, she found something in the wall that opened a door. By the amount of ivy, it seemed as though no one had used the door for quite a while. We stepped inside and found ourselves in another stairwell. Eva led the way, and we began to climb. After several dozen flights, my feet were in agony. The too-tight boots were like orthopedic torture devices. I gritted my teeth and kept my eyes focused on Eva's shapely posterior.

After what seemed like an hour, we reached a landing and a door marked 31-D-07. If my addition was correct, we'd gone up three levels. I leaned over, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. My forehead was drenched with sweat, and my deodorant was exhibiting signs of vulnerability. Eva was a little flush, but other than that, looked like she'd just gotten up from the easy chair and gone to the kitchen for a can of Tab.

I tried to pant quietly as Eva leaned her ear against the door and listened. Apparently satisfied, she waited for my heart rate to drop out of the critical zone, then opened the door. Again, we were in a long, generic passageway. We hadn't seen another soul since we'd been in the elevator, and it was starting to seem a little eerie.

"Where is everyone?"

Eva talked over her shoulder as she walked. "We're in what you'd call the backside of the station. The only people who make it out this far are the maintenance crews and security personnel. They sweep this section once a day, and we're in between shifts. We

shouldn't run into anyone until we get close to the computer control area."

We continued down the passageway for some time. Eventually, we reached an intersection. A sign showed the way toward the command tower, and we turned in that direction. Gradually, I became aware of increased ambient noise and noticed that more doors were appearing on either side of the hallway. We seemed to have entered a busier section of the Moon Child.

A door up ahead of us opened, and a woman wearing a lab coat stepped into the hallway. She turned and began to walk in the same direction we were. Eva slowed her pace so we wouldn't overtake her. Strolling now, I began to feel increasingly nervous. Voices were audible beyond the doors, and we were clearly in danger. Beside me, Eva checked her watch uneasily. I imagined that she was wondering how much time we had left before we were discovered and the alarms went off.

Eventually, we caught up to the woman in the lab coat. She was waiting by a set of elevator doors. Eva said nothing, but also stopped in front of the elevator. The woman smiled at us and resumed waiting. The up button was lit, and Eva made no move to press the down button, so it looked like we were going the same way.

The lift arrived, and the three of us got in. I glanced at the button panel and saw that this elevator provided access to levels twenty-four through thirty-six. The woman pushed the button for level thirty-five. Ten seconds later, the elevator came to a halt, and the doors opened. The woman in the lab coat stepped out, and doors began to close. At that moment, from a distance, I heard a male voice ask to hold the door. I hadn't planned on displaying any courtesy, but the woman who'd just exited was happy to oblige. The doors reopened, and two security guards hurried into the elevator.

The first was a slender young woman with blond hair and thin lips. The second was a giant of a man, at least six-eight, with a clean shaven head and a permanent scowl. Eva and the female guard seemed to be acquainted and began making small talk. I was leaning against one of the walls, hands behind my back. The behemoth stood rigidly across from me, his eyes focused squarely on me. I smiled at him and smiled politely, but there was no response. The doors closed, and I turned my gaze toward the level display, but I could feel the man continuing to stare at me.

Maybe he was wondering why I was wearing a guard's uniform, but didn't look familiar. I had no idea how extensive the security staff was. A drop of nervous perspiration slid down the side of my face. I glanced back at the big guard. He was clearly suspicious. Eva seemed unaware of what was happening.

A series of loud beeps startled me. There seemed to be three sources of the beeps, one

coming from each of the security guards and one from a previously unnoticed device on the belt of my uniform. The male guard took his eyes from me just long enough to reach down and press the small device on his belt. "Attention all security personnel! This is priority one. Two intruders at large. Their last known location was on level twenty-eight." The next few seconds played out in slow motion. I saw the big guard's eyes widen as his hand went for the tasc gun in his holster. Before he could raise it, a flash went off out of the corner of my eye, and he crumpled. I turned to see Eva step back and pivot toward the female guard, who was backing into a corner. A second later, the woman was on the floor next to her partner. I'd never reached for my weapon.

The communicator continued, oblivious to the carnage: "First suspect is a female - five feet, eight inches in height, one hundred twenty pounds, medium length blond hair. Second suspect is male - "

Eva bent down and switched off the guards' communicators, then reached over and did the same to mine. She turned and glared up at the level's display until we reached level thirty-five. Then she raised her tasc gun and pointed it at the still closed elevator doors. "Things are going to get a little more difficult now."

The doors opened - no one was there. Eva led the way out of the elevator, tasc gun in hand. I followed her down the passage, fumbling for the weapon in my belt. We moved as quickly and quietly as possible, periodically checking to make sure no one was behind us.

At the end of the passage, we ran into a barrier: a door marked Top Level Security Clearance Required - No Unauthorized Entry. Eva brought out the card she'd taken from the Chameleon. "I hope this thing works."

She ran the card through the reader on the door. Nothing happened for several seconds, then I heard a click. Eva pushed the door, and it swung open. Then she slid the card back into her pocket and barely smiled. "If they didn't know where we were before, they do now."

She spun around and sprinted back down the hall. I was a few steps behind her and running on pure adrenaline. Under normal circumstances, I would've been resting back at the lake and smoking a cigarette. As it was, my toxin-laced blood was pumping through clogged arteries at a rate not seen since my teens.

Ahead of me, Eva slowed down, then came to a stop outside one of the doors. She leaned against the wall next to the door and motioned for me to do the same. My damaged lungs ached, and I tried to control my breathing without bending over or passing out.

We waited as silently as possible for what seemed to be a long time, though it was probably only a minute or two. Then, behind the door, I heard a voice, which suddenly started to increase in volume. The door opened, and a middle-aged man stepped into the hallway, still looking back over his shoulder and talking.

Instantly, Eva had the man's arm twisted behind his back and her tasc gun pointed at his head. Keeping the man in front of her, she walked through the door, and I followed her inside. The room was very white and brightly lit. It was quite large, but there were only seven people in it, at least as far as I could see. Eva moved her hostage roughly into the center of the room and raised her voice menacingly. "Everyone! Move together! Do anything stupid, and I'll kill all of you!" The stunned group, five middle-aged men and two somewhat younger women, slowly clustered together.

"Get down on the floor! Hands behind your heads!"

Everyone complied in varying degrees. Some lay face down, others went only to their knees. Eva shoved her hostage toward the group and told him to join them. Then she turned to me and spoke so everyone could hear. "Keep your gun on them. If anyone moves or makes a sound, kill 'em."

I nodded and aimed my weapon at the center of the group. Eva tucked the tasc gun into her belt and walked off. I kept my eyes glued on the hostages. Behind me, I could hear Eva working on one of the computer consoles.

As I waited nervously, the men and women looked up at me with expressions ranging from terror to loathing. A part of me felt sympathy for them. These were living, breathing people like me, and I tried to keep from imagining myself in their place. Technically, I'd already been an accessory in the deaths of three security guards, and killing had never been an easy thing for me.

Then I thought back to the things I'd seen at the penal colony. Whether these people knew it or not, they were abetting one of the most hideous schemes in the history of mankind. These cult members believed themselves superior to the innocent billions living unsuspectingly on the planet below. Somewhere on board the Moon Child were thousands of lethal satellites, waiting to be unleashed so they essentially eradicate the Earth's entire population. As I looked at the faces before me, I thought of Louie and the mutated gang of regulars at the Brew & Stew. If the cult was allowed to fulfill its prophecies, my friends would die. I tightened the grip on my tasc gun and steeled myself. It was for the greater good that the people on the Moon Child die. Myself included.

Apparently, Eva knew exactly what to do with the Winter Chip and finished installing it within minutes.

"All right. It's ready to go."

I kept my eyes on the hostages. "So...what happens now?"

Eva glanced at her watch. "We get the hell out of here. There's no telling how long it will take the chip to crash the system, but I'm planning on it being sooner than later."

On cue, an alarm began to blare. I scanned the room quickly and saw lights flashing on most of the consoles. Eva was looking around frantically. Seeming to make a decision, she moved toward a corner of the room, where a tall filing cabinet stood. I backed away in the same direction, still keeping my tasc gun trained on the now- terrified group. Glancing back and forth between the hostages and Eva, I saw her pull out the drawers to form a set of stairs. Standing on top of the cabinet, she could easily reach the ceiling, which I now noticed consisted of acoustic fiberboard tiles, laid into a grid of metal supports.

Eva pushed on one of the tiles, moved it aside, and then pulled herself up and out of sight. I backed up to the file cabinet and briefly wondered why we hadn't gone out the door. As I started climbing up the drawers, one of the men got to his feet. I aimed and fired, knocking him down. Reaching the top of the cabinet, I set the gun on the fiberboard and pulled myself up, kicking the cabinet over in the process. At the same instant, I realized why Eva hadn't taken the obvious escape route. I heard the door open, and several sets of boots scrambled into the room. The hostages began to yell.

I picked up the tasc gun and spotted Eva some distance ahead, carefully moving along a catwalk. The crawl space was about five feet tall and stretched out for hundreds of yards, maybe miles, in every direction. I crouched and ran as fast as I could manage. The bedlam below faded away.

I was about twenty feet behind Eva when a hail of bullets ricocheted past me. Over my shoulder, I caught sight of several guards in hot pursuit. I couldn't look at them for long. The catwalk was perilously narrow, and one false step would send me down through a ceiling tile, into God only knew what. There could've been just about anything below us, from an ocean to a desert. Eva and I were now moving at a recklessly dangerous pace. To make matters worse, a wall loomed directly in front of us. Eva reached an intersection on the catwalk and turned right.

We continued at break-neck speed, zigzagging left and right along the narrow walkway. We were quickly approaching another wall. Behind us, the gunshots echoed

sporadically. When I turned to check our pursuers, it was clear they were gaining on us. As I looked back to Eva, I saw her reach the wall, then drop out of sight, followed an instant later by a loud clang. I reached the spot where she had vanished and saw that she'd jumped down onto a metal-grate landing. I lowered myself just as a slug put a dimple into the wall right above my head.

Now on the landing, I saw that we'd arrived at an access point to the elevator shaft. Eva was leaning into the opening, craning her neck up, then down. She looked back at me. "I can't tell if the elevator is above us or below. We'll have to risk it and hope it doesn't catch us in a bad spot."

She backed into the opening and began to climb down. I waited a moment, then followed. The ladder rungs were built into the wall. As I climbed carefully down, I looked around and saw that there were no old-fashioned elevator cables in the shaft. Instead, each of the four corners had tracks constructed into them. The elevator was probably run electrically. And with the ladder imbedded in the wall, I was willing to bet that there would be no appreciable space between the walls of the shaft and the exterior of the elevator. If we weren't close to an access window when the elevator passed us, we'd have no choice but to go with it. Suddenly paranoid, I began looking up, then down, like a spectator at a tennis match.

We continued our descent for several minutes, passing access windows about every thirty rungs. Above us, the voices of our pursuers were now audible. Once they reached the access window, we'd be dead. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel. And I'd be the first to go.

Then I heard the elevator. It was above us. Eva seemed to have heard it, too, and glanced up sharply. "Hurry!"

We moved even faster than before. A gunshot went off, and a bullet went pinging down the shaft. A security guard was leaning through the access window, cradling a rifle. I tried to pull my head in between my shoulder blades like a turtle, but it wouldn't retract. Below me, Eva had reached an access window and was crawling in. Another shot rang out. One of my feet reached the access window. A bullet ricocheted off a ladder rung just above my hand. A scream suddenly erupted and echoed down the shaft. As Eva helped pull me through the opening, a spray like red rain passed by, followed closely by the top half of a bloody corpse and a rifle. A split second later, the elevator flashed past.

I probably wouldn't have reacted on my own. I felt Eva's hands on my back, and then I was falling helplessly through the air. A moment later, I hit the top of the elevator, and then Eva landed on me painfully. I laid there, more stunned than hurt, as Eva rolled over and onto her knees. Above me, gunshots rang out, but the distance between us and the

guards was increasing rapidly.

We continued to descend for probably twenty seconds, and the elevator slowed and stopped alongside another access window. Eva motioned for me to follow her into the opening. "C'mon."

"Where we going?"

She flashed her grim smile. "All the way to the bottom. Voorman's freighter should still be in the cargo bay. And if the life-support systems don't shut down in the next few minutes, we might still make it out of here."

"So why are we climbing out of here?"

Eva looked at me indulgently. "Because going up at this point would be a bad thing."

Following Eva's lead, I crawled into the opening. We waited breathlessly until the elevator moved. It was going down. As we jumped back on, the elevator shuddered slightly, and the lights dimmed, then brightened. I wondered how much longer we had before the Winter Chip's work was done. Every breath felt precious. Eva leaned toward me. "We're almost there. Get ready."

I wasn't certain what getting ready entailed, so I tightened up and gritted my teeth. The elevator came to an abrupt halt, knocking us off-balance. Eva rolled over toward the ladder. An access window was about four feet above us. "Hurry!"

Eva scrambled up the ladder and into the window. I was just a beat behind her. As I dragged myself out of the shaft, I heard the elevator lurch. I'd just pulled my legs in behind me when the opening was sealed off momentarily by the passing elevator. We waited for a few seconds and listened to the elevator ascend. Eva nudged me, and I lowered myself into the shaft and onto the ladder.

I went down the ladder as fast as I could, figuring that Eva would let me know when I should stop. As it turned out, the elevator had taken us most of the way, and we only had to climb down about another hundred feet before we reached the bottom. I was just about to jump off the ladder and onto the floor of the shaft when Eva shouted to me. "Stay on the ladder! The floor's hot! Go into the lowest opening."

I did as she told me, and seconds later I was back in a crawl space like the one we'd been in up above. As I waited for Eva, an alarm started to blare. When she caught up to me, she gave me an amazingly calm look, and then darted down the catwalk.

Eva seemed to know exactly where to go. I followed her along the narrow walkway for several minutes until she came to a sudden halt. Getting down on her knees, she pried up one of the ceiling tiles and peeked beneath it. Apparently satisfied, she lifted the tile and set it to one side, then nimbly swung down into the hole and dropped. Not wanting to seem apprehensive, I followed her lead without my usual preliminary inspection.

Fortunately, the drop was only about ten feet, and I suddenly found myself in the midst of a women's lavatory. I'd heard rumors about "the other rest room," talk of luxurious daybeds and sparkling clean facilities, not to mention the strange compliment of dispensers. Even now, seeing it with my own eyes, I'd never dreamed it'd be so much nicer than ours. Of course, Eva had no reason to be awestruck. She moved quickly to the door and opened it. As she did, the lights flickered, then went out.

We left the restroom and stepped into a dark hallway. Some kind of emergency lighting had come on, giving the passage an eerie, greenish glow. Eva turned, and we bolted down the hallway. When we reached a door on the left side, she opened it. Then she led the way down an almost pitch-black stairwell. The still-blaring alarm echoed over the concrete. My lungs burned, and I realized that the air was growing warmer and thinner. It felt as though the circulation function of the life-support system had quit working.

I was panting like a dog by the time we exited the stairwell. Following Eva, I stepped through a door and entered the cavernous cargo bay. The air here felt like a cool ocean breeze. The cargo bay was as dark as the stairwell had been, but there were searchlights constantly scanning the area. I traced the searchlights to a dimly lit tower that rose about forty feet above the floor. With the darkness, the alarm, and the wildly circling spotlights, the scene resembled the pre-tip-off extravaganza at a Bull's game. I could clearly hear several voices as they echoed around the chamber. It didn't sound like there was a lot of security in the cargo bay, but there was certainly enough to make me uncomfortable.

Eva pulled me close and whispered fiercely in my ear. "Where is Voorman's ship?"

I squinted my eyes and tried to get my bearings. I'd only been here once, and I hadn't been in a particularly observant frame of mind. After a minute of scanning and trying to catch sight of things when the searchlights hit them, I decided that our freighter was parked at least a hundred yards away, somewhere between ten and eleven o'clock from our relative position. The guard tower was about a hundred and fifty yards away and at the two o'clock position.

I pointed out the freighter to Eva. She waited for the searchlight to illuminate the ship, and nodded. Then she again put her mouth to my ear. "Can you fly it?"

I wasn't sure, but I figured I could wing it. "You bet."

Eva nodded. "I want you to get inside it and fire it up. Do you see that door?"

She pointed across the cargo bay to one of the exit doors for aircraft, and I nodded.

"I'm going to try to get that open. When you start up the freighter, that should get everyone's attention and hopefully give me a chance to get into the control booth. The door is hydraulic and isn't connected to the network, so I should be able to access it, even if the computer system's down. Once it starts to open, they won't be able to close it for at least thirty seconds. Hopefully, that'll give you enough time to squeeze through."

"What about you? I'm not just gonna leave you here."

Eva smiled indulgently. "The important thing is that one of us gets out of here. Percival and some of the others undoubtedly have their own private escape pods and are probably already clear of the Moon Child. Someone has to notify the authorities and have the cult leaders picked up. And you know where to find the evidence that will put them away."

I must've looked confused. Eva's smile changed from indulgent to sympathetic. "I'll try to make it back to the freighter, but you can only give me twenty seconds after the door opens. No more." Her smile disappeared. "After that, our window of opportunity will disappear. Literally. Once the cargo-bay door is open, fly the ship through it and into the vacuum tunnel. There's another door at the end of the tunnel that will open as soon as the door behind you seals."

Eva waited for me to acknowledge that I understood, then headed off toward the searchlights. I watched her for a moment, wondering if I'd ever see her again, and then began to make my way across the bay. The room was not unlike a speeder lot, with hundreds of vehicles and other pieces of machinery neatly arranged. Keeping my head low, I moved from one hiding place to another, careful to freeze whenever the searchlights seemed to be close.

It took about five minutes to reach the freighter. I waited for the searchlights to flash across the ship before opening the hatch on the underbelly. Scrambling inside, I climbed into the cockpit. Then I strapped myself into the driver's seat and surveyed the instrumentation. It didn't look too difficult to manage.

The windows in the cockpit wrapped around, and I could see both the escape door and the guard tower. Taking a deep breath, I turned on the pilot console and fired up the engines. Moments later, like a scene from an alien abduction movie, the cockpit was suddenly bathed in bright white light. The security personnel seemed to have noticed me

and had focused the searchlights on the freighter. I glanced at the bay door, but it wasn't opening. Looking toward the tower, I saw several dark shapes running straight for me.

I checked to make sure I was ready to lift off, then looked back toward the hydraulic door. It wasn't moving. For the first time, it occurred to me that Eva might not get to the control booth. Maybe she'd been discovered and killed. What if the door never opened? I'd locked the hatch behind me, but the security guards would be able to blast their way in eventually. And even if they didn't, the Moon Child's life-support system would fail sooner or later, and being in the freighter would only prolong my fate.

Several light bursts flashed in the corner of my eye. Shots were being fired in the guard tower. I strained to see, but could make out nothing. Then everything went dark. Someone had shut down the searchlights. A starry pattern floated in the darkness as my eyes slowly adjusted.

Beyond the stars, a vertical stripe of faint light appeared, then slowly widened. I squinted my eyes, trying to make out what was happening. After several seconds, I realized the cargo-bay door was opening.

Under the hull of the freighter, someone started banging on the hatch door, sending a metallic clanging through the ship. My eyes were now accustomed to the darkness, and I scanned the area between the freighter and the guard tower for signs of Eva. Then I began to count silently. Thousand-one, thousand two, thousand three...the cargo-bay was opening from right to left. When it was fully open, the doorway would be about thirty feet high and fifty feet wide. Thousand ten, thousand eleven, thousand twelve...the freighter was probably twelve feet high and twenty feet across. Thousand twenty, thousand twenty-one, thousand twenty-two...cursing under my breath, I shoved the freighter into gear and lifted off.

As I raised Voorman's shuttle-cruiser off the floor, the cargo-bay door was fully open and holding. I accelerated and steered toward the opening. Pinging sounds told me that the guards were firing their guns at the ship, but that wouldn't do any good. The only thing that could stop me was the door, which gradually started to close.

The freighter was slow to accelerate...and I was about three hundred yards from the door. If I didn't get there in time, something told me I'd hit the door and crumple like a pop can. The ship was gaining speed, but not quickly enough - it was going to be tight. I angled toward the right side of the opening, my knuckles white on the steering handle.

Fifty yards away, I realized I wasn't going to make it. At least not horizontally. I raised the elevation, then grabbed the balance-control stick and wrenched it hard to the left. Immediately, the ship rolled. I heard and felt metal scraping along the floor. I tried to

adjust the elevation, but the ship only veered slightly to the left, away from the opening. I was seconds away from hitting the door. Using both hands, I threw the balance-control stick hard in the opposite direction. The ship rolled wildly to the right and veered in the same direction. The cockpit slammed into the opening. The force of the entry carried the freighter through the door, but the loud sounds of metal being snapped off and crushed told me that the ship had sustained considerable damage.

I looked out the window and saw that both sides of the freighter had been raked. Even worse, the rudder mechanism had been ripped off the back. The cockpit was untouched, but the freighter wasn't in good shape. It was probably still capable of propulsion, but I wouldn't be able to steer it.

As I was assessing the situation, I felt a giant shudder as the door behind me closed and sealed. Up ahead, the outer door cracked and began to slide open. I pushed the accelerator and felt the engine rev up, but the freighter didn't move. I tried again, but it was no use - the ship might as well have been in neutral.

Helplessly, I watched as the gap in the outer door widened, the blackness of space seeping in like an oil spill. I was trapped, a scant few yards from freedom. Desperately, I began manipulating the controls. I tried everything, but could do no more than rock the freighter and raise the back end slightly. The outer door was now completely open. As my eyes searched the instrumentation frantically, I spotted a small panel marked Emergency. I tore it open and found a T-shaped handle. A sticker beneath it read Eject Capsule.

My speeder didn't have an eject button, and I'd never used one before, but now seemed like a good time for a new experience. It wasn't like I had anything to lose. I was about to pull the lever when it occurred to me that I might just be making a big mistake. I had to assume that the cockpit capsule would eject straight-off, which would send me into the ceiling of the vacuum tunnel.

But I had to do something. I glanced up and saw that the outer door had begun to close.

One of the things still working on the freighter were the rear elevation thrusters. I cranked them up as far as they would go, until the cockpit was almost face down on the tunnel floor. In front of me, the opening was half the size it had been a moment ago. I pushed the thrusters as far as they would go, then grabbed the T-shaped ejection handle and pulled.

What followed was a sensation I hadn't felt since the final time I rode the Hammer at the state fair. In a blur, the cockpit jettisoned from the freighter and slammed into the roof chamber, just in front of the closing door. The force of the impact caused the capsule to

careen toward and through the opening. The g-force had me pinned painfully against my seat, and the spinning motion blanketed me in a wave of nausea.

It took several minutes for me to regain control of my equilibrium. The capsule continued to spin out into the darkness. I checked the air pressure, and it was holding steady. Apparently, the capsule had survived the collision inside the tunnel. I searched for a set of capsule navigation controls, but there didn't seem to be any. There were only two useful mechanisms on the console. The first was an oxygen-level display, which showed I had enough to last for at least as long as it would take me to die of thirst. The other was an SOS emitter, which I flipped on.

I leaned back in my chair and relaxed for the first time in days. Outside the window, the Moon Child was dark and dead. Minutes earlier, it had been the greatest threat ever known to mankind. Now it was a slain dragon, a massive, metal graveyard floating in the great abyss.

Lowell Percival had said he wanted to create a perfect world. Well, so do most people, but Percival tried to play God, and it wasn't his call to make. A lot of people had died on the Moon Child. Their fate proved only one thing: There's no easy path to Utopia. Hell, maybe it doesn't even exist...but it made me feel good to know that Louie would be telling stories and slinging hash for years to come. Louie - and Chelsee and even Rook - all have as much right as anyone else to live long, happy lives. Even if they were Mutants.

As the gigantic satellite spun slowly out of my view, my eyes wandered down to a recessed handle on the underside of the console, which I hadn't noticed before. I reached down and pulled the handle. It turned out to be nothing more than a glove compartment. Sitting on top of an owner's manual and a pile of receipts were a mangled pack of Lucky Strikes and a book of matches.

There were four cigarettes left. I took one out and molded it gently back into shape. After wetting the end, I placed it gently in my mouth and lit it. God, it was good to be alive.

UAKM - chapter twenty-six

I was picked up by a passing mining transport twenty-two hours after being thrown clear of the Moon Child. I used the radio onboard to contact Interpol. Within hours, dozens of interplanetary vehicles were closing in on the galaxy's largest piece of man-made debris.

I slept most of the way home. When the mining transport arrived in New Jersey, my two Interpol pals, Agents McCovey and Andrews, were there to meet me. I was debriefed in

a Greek deli over gyros and dolmas, and the agents informed me that Percival and several others had been located and taken into custody. I asked if they knew what happened to Eva, but they didn't. I found out later that she didn't make it.

As a final order of business, the Interpol agents told me that a reward had been offered for the capture of the Chameleon. I hadn't exactly captured him, but it was close enough. They took me to Interpol headquarters in Manhattan and gave me a check for ten thousand dollars, as well as a hearty congratulations for my efforts toward making the world a safer place to live.

With my wallet now as full as my tummy, Interpol stuck me on one of its private aircraft and gave me a lift home. Agent McCovey went along for the ride. On the way, we discussed what had happened. Having shown myself to be a man of no mean talent, I fully expected him to offer me a job in the agency, but for some reason, the subject never came up. Not that I would've accepted. Regular paychecks and medical benefits just weren't my style.

As we arrived in New San Francisco, Agent McCovey made one last request - that I keep the events of the past few days to myself. He explained that it would be in the public's best interest not to know how close it had come to complete and utter destruction. I agreed to keep a lid on it, not because I endorsed the suppression of truth of the manipulation of the masses, but because no one would've believed me anyway.

An hour after we landed, I was planted on a bar stool at the Brew & Stew, looking and listening and soaking up the atmosphere. I was showered and clean-shaven and wearing my good tie. It was a little after 7 P.M., and the crowd was converting from diners to drunkards. Louie was bouncing all over the joint, red-faced and grinning from ear to ear. All the regulars were there, sipping cold beer from chilled mugs, or toasting each other with tumblers full of strong spirits. Rook was in a heated debate at the other end of the bar. For once, his high-pitched, abrasive voice sounded good and familiar to me.

Chelsee was seated on the lucky bar stool beside me, nursing a vodka and tonic and smelling good enough to eat. I had five hundred dollars in my pocket, and the rest was stashed away in my secret hiding place back at the office. The thought of paying off my tab to Louie made me feel almost as good as being close enough to hear Chelsee's soft breathing. I took a sip of twelve-year-old scotch and held it on my tongue for a few moments before letting it flow warmly down my throat. Behind me, a slurring voice requested a "slippery nipple." Chelsee set her drink down and turned to me with one eyebrow raised. "What in the world is a slippery nipple?"

An uncontrollable shiver went through me, but I managed to shrug casually. "I don't

know. But it probably has egg in it."

Chelsee smiled and gave me a chastizing look, then returned to her drink. I lit a cigarette and carefully blew the smoke away from my lovely bar mate. "You know, Chelsee, I think we should meet later. Maybe up in my office. I'll show you something I learned to do with my hands."

Chelsee looked at me out of the corner of her eye and stirred the vodka and tonic with her finger. "You know, Tex, I've always been enchanted by a lack of breeding."

"I know. That's exactly what I'm counting on."

"Oh really?"

I flicked an ash off the end of my cigarette and grinned disarmingly. "Yeah. I've got a theory. I think you're secretly attracted to me. You only hold back because the intensity of your passion frightens you. I don't blame you for that."

Chelsee took a drink, then turned to face me. "That's quite a theory. You have a wonderful imagination." She smiled sweetly. "Don't get me wrong, Tex. I like you, just not that way."

I took a resigned drag. "Well, no need to give up on a good theory just because it isn't true."

I lifted my glass and glanced at the television behind the bar as I took a sip. A shot of the Moon Child was on-screen. Louie appeared and emptied my ashtray.

"Louie, could you turn up the volume?"

The big Mutant reached under the counter for a remote and aimed it at the television.

" - when disaster struck yesterday. No official comment has been released, but it is believed that as many as five thousand people were aboard. Indications are that the satellite resort experienced a massive systems failure. Initial reports state that there were no survivors. If so, this would qualify as the greatest off-planet disaster in history. In other news - "

Chelsee shook her head. "That's horrible. All those people."

I set down my drink and drew in on my Lucky Strike. The cafe was alive with the clinking of glasses, snippets of conversations, laughter. It was a beautiful sound. I

drained the last of my scotch and set the glass on the counter. Louie asked if I wanted another. I shook my head and smiled, then laid three large bills on the bar. I could tell Louie was about to protest, and I cut him off. "Thanks for the drink. I'll see you tomorrow."

I leaned down and kissed Chelsea on the cheek. She didn't seem to mind. Then I slung my brand-new trench coat over my shoulder, set the matching fedora on my head, and walked to the door. I'd gotten half way across the room when I noticed a stunning brunette in a black dress sitting alone in the booth next to the door. She was a dame. The kind of dame that could make a bishop kick out a stained-glass window. As I approached, she looked up and smiled. "Are you Tex Murphy?"

Feeling pleasantly confused, I doffed my hat. "Have we met?"

The woman looked up at me with large, hazel eyes. "No. I have something I'd like to show you."

She motioned for me to sit down, then opened her purse and handed me a -

Well, that's another story...