

# CLARION CALL 1

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## CHAPTER ONE

*CLARION CALL 1: FIVE TIMELESS STORIES OF THE FUTURE*  
*INSPIRED BY CLARION WEST*

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# Hunt Along the Iron River

"Hey, Senor Webb!" The old man leaned out of the doorway of the shack, the only trading post in two hundred miles. "Telephone, eh. States on the line!"

The old man's long white hair tattered in the wind like a prayer flag; his necklaces, a dozen or more, some glass beads, some amber, one strung with chunks of raw emerald from the beds upriver, glinted in the sun.

"Who is it?" Taylor Webb yelled back without looking up from his clipboard. The collecting expedition, though only a short one, was already three days behind schedule. Taylor was not interested in any further delays.

"A woman. Says her name is Penny."

*Good God, how in the hell did she track me down here?* Taylor wondered. *What could she possibly want bad enough to go to such lengths to find me? Only one thing, the child support check. I already mailed it two days ago.* He felt like screaming it loud enough for her to hear on the other end of the line. He hesitated for a moment. He should take the call, just in case.

But with Penny, it wouldn't be quick. It never was.

He stopped checking off items on his list. "Do me a favor, will ya? Tell her I left a couple days ago. If she asks, tell her I mailed a bunch of letters before I left."

The old man nodded, his necklaces tinkling like wind chimes. He disappeared back through the doorway.

Taylor handed his clipboard to a short, brown man dressed in Army fatigues standing next to him. "Moises, how about finishing this while I get my gear from the jeep. We've got to get the hell out of here."

Moises nodded, taking over the task without a word. Moises seldom spoke, which was one of his attributes Taylor admired most. In the ten years they'd worked together on various expeditions, Taylor had grown accustomed to Moises' quiet style. On top of which his military training in survival techniques made him an excellent guide in the remote jungles of the Rio Yavari, on the border between Peru and Brazil. Moises would be particularly valuable on this expedition since he knew several of the local natives of the tribe they were to visit.

The expedition, sponsored by the Atlanta Zoological Society, had run into delays ranging from supplies not being

available, to carriers disappearing in the middle of the night. As with most expeditions, this one was on a tight budget. Taylor's contract was to find a *dow-kiet*, a rare tree frog and to bring at least one of the brilliant green amphibians back alive. The local Matses tribe honored the frogs for its ability to secrete *sapo*, a vital element in the tribe's pharmacopoeia.

Taylor had his own reasons for wanting the expedition to be a success. He had been the one to tell the Society about *sapo* from previous expeditions he had made to the Peruvian Amazon. It had a reputation for being "powerful medicine." Taylor hoped he wasn't leading the Society and himself on a wild goose chase.

He walked into the shack to purchase a carved animal for his son's collection. He could already see the bright smile of satisfaction spread from ear-to-ear on Peter's face. It would make a great show-and-tell for the second grade class. Peter had a large collection of animals from all over the world, a testament to his father's many trips. *And to the many birthdays and other special occasions I've missed*, thought Taylor.

As he entered the store, the owner hung up the phone and gave Taylor a thumb's up sign. Another fight with

Penny avoided for at least a few more days.

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Two days later with the expedition finally under way, a Matses hunter approached the party on the trail in the late afternoon. The slender man appeared on the edge of the camp, bow and arrow in one hand, palm-leaf basket in the other. He waited until Moises motioned him to come forward. His mouth was tattooed with dark vertical lines and his face adorned with cat-like whiskers. A baby monkey clung to his black hair and squealed from time to time to be answered seconds later by its mother from inside the basket.

After a brief conversation with Moises, the hunter led the expedition to his village. On their arrival, Taylor watched the hunter turn the baby monkey over to a young woman nursing a child. She took the monkey and allowed it to nurse at her free breast. The hunter then turned the mother monkey over to another woman who stunned it with a blow to the head, then began roasting it over an open fire, oblivious to its cries.

Taylor stared, frozen by the contrast of compassion and cruelty then realized it was this contrast which drew him

back to the Amazon time and time again.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a familiar face. Pablo, a Matses he'd been introduced to by Moises on a previous trip, walked across the camp towards him. Like most of the male Matses, his face was adorned with the vertical tattoos, although his upper lip lacked the whiskers of the hunter.

He nodded, pointing approvingly to Taylor's earring, a gift from the young Matses on their last trip, then turned and spoke to Moises in a mixture of hand signals, Matses and pidgin Spanish. Moises turned and translated for Taylor.

"He is inviting us to a celebration tonight at his pueblo to prepare for the hunt," Moises said.

Taylor nodded. He started to instruct Moises to ask about the *dow-kiet* and *sapo* then thought better of it. Time enough for that later.

"We'll be honored to attend," he replied, smiling and nodding in Pablo's direction.

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Pablo's pueblo stood on the crest of a hill overlooking one of the tributaries of the Rio Lobos. Each of Pablo's four

wives had their own hut and they shared the pueblo with Pablo's brother, Alberto, who had two wives of his own, so there were several huts grouped closely together.

They entered the largest one, where Pablo lived with his main wife who served them a meal of roast sloth and yucca. After the meal, Pablo pulled out a long hollow reed and a brown beer bottle. From the bottle he poured a fine green powder with which he filled one end of the reed. He then placed the filled end of the tube in Alberto's nose and blew through the other end.

Moises leaned over to Taylor and whispered, "*Nu-nu*, good medicine." He then went on to explain that the medicine was used to bring visions to the hunters as to where to find the animals.

After a few seconds during which Alberto coughed and sneezed several times, he laid down next to the fire with his eyes closed, his sinewy body twitching, the fire glistening off his bronze skin. After a minute or two, he started talking, his words slurred at first then cleared. As he spoke, Moises whispered a translation to Taylor.

"He's in the woods, near a stream. He says he knows the place. It is familiar. Less than half-a-day's journey from

here. It is daylight, early morning by the look of the mist still hanging over the water.

"He sees animals, many animals." Moises' voice raised in pitch, matching Alberto's telling of the vision. "Tapir, monkeys — many monkeys, and wild boar. The boars are charging towards him. They stampede. Now, many fall and lie still where they fall." Suddenly Alberto stopped talking as he fell into a deep sleep.

Pablo sidled over to his brother, checked his eyelids and smiled before passing the tube to Moises who repeated the filling action, then held the tube out to Taylor who looked at him uncertainly.

After another moment of hesitation, Taylor shrugged and allowed Moises to blow the *nu-nu* up his nostrils.

Within seconds the green powder flared deep into his nose, scalding the sensitive tissue. Taylor coughed, sputtered, coughed again, bringing up a thick clod of green phlegm. Then the pain dissipated and he closed his eyes. At first, a velvety darkness met him, sparkles of light blurring the edges.

When nothing else happened, he decided the *nu-nu* was only a bad joke played on foreigners. Then out of the center

of blackness a bull elephant thundered, bellowing and tossing his ivory tusked head from side to side. *An elephant in South America*, Taylor thought. *It can't be. What kind of vision was this?*

He watched, enraptured by the fine detail of the vision; the left tusk of the elephant cracked and discolored, the cloudiness of one eye, its inner corner matted with flies. He inhaled the overwhelming heated stench of the great body, making him gag now, his head rolling on his shoulders, saliva spooling down his chin. His sweat smelled sour, foetid. Darkness frittered at the edges of his vision, threatening to close the scene down like an old movie fade, from the outside in, reducing everything to a pen point of light and then gone. Another elephant passed, then another. Taylor felt very sick, like he might throw up, but he forced himself to watch. The elephants were, he noticed, holding each other's tail.

As the first elephant passed by, Taylor noticed they were heavily loaded down with large parcels covered in faded canvas and tied with hemp rope which encircled each elephant's girth. A caravan, he wondered? If so, to where did they travel?

As the last elephant filed by, the darkness reappeared for a moment then cleared again. This time he gazed down on a quiet setting. The elephants, he assumed they were the same ones, lumbered along a narrow stream which fed into another larger stream. They were at a head water of some large river, with a dozen or more small tributaries coalescing into one wide body of water.

Across the river, a river he did not recognize, stood the only part of the vision which seemed to fit into the Amazon setting he had expected. A lone wild boar stood quietly lapping water from the stream. Several yards away from it, a bonfire roared, casting orange highlights on the boar. As he watched, the boar raised its small head, water mixed with saliva drooling from its mouth. Its black eyes bore tunnels of hate through Taylor.

He couldn't remember ever feeling such hate transmitted through a stare. Not from Penny, not even from his first wife, despite their many years of drunken arguments. This animal, the wild boar knew how to hate. It continued to stare at Taylor for several minutes, then with a flick of its short tail, it turned and trotted into the fire. As it was consumed by the flames the vision lost all detail fading

once more to black. Taylor slept.

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The last strains of *Your Cheating Heart* echoed through the bar. Cal Wicker, known by his few friends as Hawg, burped, swallowed the bile which tried to leap from his throat, and with a great deal of effort picked his head off the bar and attempted to focus on himself in the mirror in front of him. He only partially succeeded, barely able to make out the Braves baseball cap cocked precariously on one side of his head.

He turned to his right, searching for the bartender but the only person he saw was another drunk, even larger than himself, who'd passed out before him. Against the side wall, a too green TV picture of *American Gladiators*. He watched for a moment, his eyes fighting to remain in focus as two Amazonian women beat on each other with padded poles. *I'd like to boink the blonde*, Cal thought, then burped again. *What was her name? Biff or Barf, some shit like that.* Finally, with eyes threatening to cross out of focus, he turned to the left and was rewarded with the straggly figure of the bartender.

"'Nother beer," he slurred. A sharp knife wrenching pain mounted behind his eyes. Too hard to focus, he relaxed and watched the bartender divide into twins. *What day was it anyhow? Let's see, couldn't be Friday or Saturday. Even this low-life dive would have more fucking business on the weekend. Not Sunday. Place closed on Sundays. Where was I on Sunday?* He had a vague feeling he should remember Sunday. Something special had happened. Oh well, not Sunday. Then it must be Monday. Surely his binge hadn't lasted more than three or four days.

"No more beer for you, Hawg. Bar's closing; time to head home."

The bartender seemed to have magically appeared in front of him. *What had he said? No beer. He's refusing to give me another beer? Give me a fucking beer, you stupid son-of-a-bitch.* Cal raised his head from his chest where it had lapsed, intending to point to the tattoo of the warthog on his left bicep with the inscription, "Hawgman — Wildman," and to use the move as a diversion to throw his first punch but before he could raise his arm, he was stopped by the image floating in front of him. Was it in the mirror? Was someone standing behind him? He squinted his eyes. Shook his

head. Uhh — big mistake. Waited for the explosion of lights to clear and opened his eyes again. The image was still there.

It was of the head and torso of a man, but not anyone he had ever seen. The man was mostly naked, his bronze skin glistened as though well oiled. He stood holding something long and skinny in his hand, like the Gladiators' weapons but without the padding. Something did not match but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what it was. Then it suddenly came to him. The man was dressed like an Indian, or maybe a native you'd expect to see in some ad about Hawaii or some other far off tropical country, but the face was that of a white man. No native there. The only thing about the face which matched the rest of the picture was the earring dangling from his right ear.

"Cancel the beer," Cal said as he slipped off the barstool and nearly fell. "I'm going home — get some sleep." As he stumbled across the floor, he remembered what had been special about Sunday. Sunday had been the day he'd blown away the kid.

"Oh fuck, I'm Lord," he slurred as he lost his balance and fell through the doorway.

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The morning after the hunting ritual, Taylor awoke refreshed and invigorated. He couldn't remember the last time he had rested so well, despite sleeping on the hard ground of the hut. He was relieved the *nu-nu* hadn't left him with a hangover. They had a long day ahead of them if they were going to find the *dow-kiet*. They were fortunate to have found Pablo though. Among the Matses he was known for his ability to talk to the tree frogs and to call them out of their hiding places.

After the rest of the men awoke, Taylor shared his vision with them. After listening quietly to the translation, Pablo spoke excitedly to Moises.

"He says you are about to embark on a great hunt," Moises translated.

"How can that be?" Taylor asked. "I had visions of animals which don't even exist on this continent."

"No matter," Moises insisted. "Vision's are unique unto the person. Give it time."

After washing up and having a small meal of cold tapir and yucca, Moises explained the purpose behind their visit

to Pablo. The two men talked for a brief time before Moises returned to Taylor.

"He says not to worry. Pablo will call the *dow-kiet*. You will have your frog and *sapo* before the sun rises in the morning."

Pablo proved to be a man of his word and by nightfall they had not one but two of the tiny amphibians. While sitting around the fire joking about the great hunt of the tree frog, Pablo pulled out a small leaf bag that hung next to the cooking fire.

"*Sapo*," he said simply, then handed the bag to Taylor. "For the hunt."

Taylor turned to Moises, confused by the comment but sure he wasn't ready to try another "powerful medicine" so soon, asked, "Can I wait til later to try it?"

Moises repeated the question. "He says you will know when the hunt is about to begin. Take it then." Moises went on to explain that Pablo had shown him how to administer the *sapo* on a previous trip and he would be sure to instruct Taylor on its use before he headed back to the States.

Taylor thanked Pablo in his limited Matses and after a short time the three men retired to bed. As Taylor drifted off

to sleep, he thought of how successful the trip might prove to be. He had heard rumors of the power of *sapo* ranging from medicinal to hunting magic. Although he didn't intend to try it himself, he felt certain there would be a number of lab rats back in Atlanta that would get a kick out of it.

The following morning, they said goodbye to Pablo and headed back on their two day trip to the trading post. From there, Taylor would travel by boat to San Juan and then back to the States. As they arrived at the trading post, the storeowner handed Taylor a telegram.

"From States, day after you left," he explained as Taylor slit the yellow envelop open and read the message inside:

**Tried calling — stop — Peter shot and killed on  
Sunday — stop— Funeral on Tuesday — stop —  
Please come — stop — Penny**

Taylor read the staccato message over and over, hoping that just maybe, if he read it enough time the words would change. They did not. He felt Moises' hand on his arm.

"What is the matter?"

He handed the telegram to Moises but continued to stare at his hands, the words still emblazoned on his retina.

After a moment, Moises took him by the hand and led him to a stool at one end of the store. He slumped onto it, his eyes burning. He closed them, squinting in an attempt to squeeze the words from his brain. It couldn't be. Somebody's cruel, heartless joke. In a moment the storeowner would rush forth and, with a nervous laugh, beg to be excused for such a tasteless joke. But no one stepped forth. Everyone stood still, frozen in time.

Images of Peter flashed through his mind. The first time he'd held him, minutes after the doctor had pulled him from Penny's belly by C-section because Peter had been too large to be delivered by normal childbirth. The first time Taylor had changed his diaper and had been surprised by the spray of urine that almost hit him in the face. Peter in the backyard playing catch. Peter proudly showing off his collection of carved animal figures to his friends. Peter . . . Peter. . . Peter. *Someone has killed my son.*

The thought jarred Taylor harder than a left hook to the chin. The next thought was a pile driver to the solar plexus. *Someone will pay.*

Moises had insisted on returning with him to Atlanta for the funeral and Taylor hadn't put up much of a fight to prevent it. He even considered having the guide accompany him to Penny's, figuring the presence of a stranger would lessen the chances she'd start a fight, but then decided it wasn't fair to use Moises in such a manner. Now, as he stood in the hall outside her apartment, he thought he had made a mistake in judgment.

He was reaching for the doorbell to ring it a second time when the door creaked open. Still not oiled after all these years, Taylor thought. He had often meant to take care of the small repair — that and a few hundred other ones. Now it didn't matter. None of those small annoying house chores meant anything to either one of them. Peter was dead.

The door opened a few more inches and Taylor could see Penny peeking through the crack allowed by the chain. Silly little chain locks. So easily broken. He had warned her dozens of times not to depend on it. He'd intended to replace it with a deadbolt and a peephole. Another part of the long list he'd never gotten around to.

She closed the door again and for a brief instance Taylor was afraid (or was it relieved) that she wasn't going to let

him in. But then the door opened all the way and she motioned him inside.

It had been almost a week since the shooting and Penny looked like she hadn't stopped crying except maybe to sleep and then for only a few hours. The heavy bags under her eyes only served to highlight their road map whites. In all the years he'd known her, he couldn't recall ever seeing her in such shape. Not even when she'd been so sick with pneumonia and almost died. Death in any form did nothing for Penny's looks.

She was dressed in an old flannel bathrobe, one Taylor remembered giving her on a birthday (or was it Christmas?). It was an unusual wardrobe for Penny especially for so early in the evening.

"I'm sorry. I should have changed when you called but I just didn't have the energy," Penny said in a lifeless voice. She closed the door and pointed him to the living room.

"I made some coffee. Would you like a cup?"

Taylor nodded, turned to try to find somewhere to hang his coat and bumped into her as she started for the kitchen. The two of them struggled to regain their balance, then stopped worrying about it and simply hugged each other,

sobbing into each other's shoulder.

After a few minutes, they parted. Embarrassed by the sudden intimacy, Taylor asked for a tissue and Penny pointed to three boxes on different tables in the living room.

"I'm thinking of buying them by the case," she said.  
"Make yourself comfortable. I'll bring the coffee."

She returned in a couple of minutes with two steaming mugs, one in each hand. She set one of the mugs down on the coffee table in front of him.

"Still black?"

Taylor nodded, picking up the mug and blowing lightly across the top. He welcomed the coffee, not so much because he was thirsty or needed the caffeine but it gave him something to focus on. Something besides what had happened that had brought the two of them together again. Something besides the conversation at hand.

He was still staring into the black circle of coffee, trying to think of something to say when Penny dropped a copy of the *Atlanta Tribune* on the table.

"It has a brief account of what happened. Read it if you like. I'd prefer not talking about the specifics. I just . . ." She stopped.

Taylor picked the paper up and glanced at the headline:

**Atlanta Youth Fourth Drive-by Shooting Victim**

The headline assaulted him. Six simple words had turned his son into nothing more than a statistic. Taylor read the article, word for word. Nowhere was there a mention of the camping trips the three of them had taken, or of the quiet Sunday mornings in bed when Peter would be the first one awake and would waddle into their room dressed in his snugly and stand there patting his father's shoulder until his eyes finally opened.

Peter had been riding home with a next-door neighbor from a late afternoon birthday party. They'd just turned off I-85 when someone in the lane next to theirs had opened fire. Various accounts listed the number of shots fired between 4 and 5. Only one really mattered. The one that had penetrated Peter's skull, an inch above his right ear. He'd been pronounced dead on arrival in the emergency room.

No one had been able to see inside the other car. All the glass had been tinted preventing anyone from getting a clear view of the shooter. The car, a navy blue sedan, had been

found several hours later. It had been reported stolen earlier in the day.

He read through the account three times, hoping for some clue — somewhere to begin his search. Nothing. The final line summed it up. "Police currently have no leads."

Finally, he looked up from the paper to find Penny staring at him from across the room. He tossed the paper back on the table, almost hitting his cup of coffee.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here."

Penny shrugged. "Wouldn't have made any difference."

"I mean, I'm sorry I wasn't here afterwards. I was out on expedition." Taylor was too ashamed to tell her about not taking the phone call.

"Doesn't matter," Penny said, then after a brief pause. "It's kind of befitting."

Taylor thought about it, knew it would be best to drop it right there. Just leave the hook dangling in the water. Swim away.

"What do you mean?" He nibbled.

"Oh never mind, it's not important." Penny played out a little line.

"You meant something by it. Come on, spit it out." The

conversation was suddenly feeling very familiar but surely they'd never had it. They'd never lost a son to a drive-by killer before.

"It's just that you were always in the bush during the really important occasions." Penny set the hook, deep. "No reason to think it would be any different now."

Taylor thought about what she said. Thought about taking the line and running with it. Breaking the surface of the water and with a mighty twist of his body, attempting to throw the hook from his mouth. He opened his mouth to say something, half expecting to feel the sharp barbs cutting deeper. Then he closed it. What the hell? Peter was dead. What did it matter?

"Yeah, I suppose you're right." He picked up the mug of coffee and took a long swallow. The hot liquid scalded his mouth, blistering the roof of it, searing the lining of his esophagus as he swallowed. Strangely, he preferred the physical pain over having another fight.

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Cal knelt before the tiny altar, his bulking form taking up most of the space between the pews, his head down, the

baseball cap turned with the bill to the back, partially hiding the ponytail of graying hair, his calloused hands clasped in front of him. His lips moved in quiet prayer.

"Lord, Lord, please forgive this stupid ass. I didn't mean no harm, Lord. Really I didn't. I know it's been a while since we spoke, Lord, but I've been meaning to come visit. It's just been real busy at the yard, but then you probably already know that, being omni-important and all.

"Lord, about that kid. I'm real sorry about what I done. It was an accident. No shit. I mean, no kidding. The gun, well, I weren't used to it and it, well. . . it just went off in my hand."

*Dumb ass, no omni-important God is going to believe it went off five times by accident.* Cal tried again. "Well, it went off accidentally the first time and after that, I don't know. I guess I lost my head. Yeah. That's what happened.

"Anyway Lord, please forgive me. If you do, I promise I'll start doing right. I might even start coming back to church. Really. Oh, and that's another thing. Please forgive me for breaking down the door to get in here. It were real important I speak to you."

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The mound of freshly dug dirt was larger than he had expected. Peter had been small for seven. Why did they have to dig such a large hole?

Taylor turned to Moises to ask the question but then thought better of it. What did it matter? What mattered was that down under the surface of the red Georgia clay, (How far? Probably six feet like all the rest), lay his son. Taylor bent down and scooped up a handful of dirt, squeezing it into a small ball, then dropped it back on the mound.

He felt the anger and grief well up inside him again. Waited for it to finally, once and for all come popping to the surface. Explode out of him, out of his mouth or the top of his head. Jerk out of his chest like the monster in that alien movie. He didn't care where or how it came out. Just that it would. Once and for all, let it all explode so he could be done with it and maybe then he would understand. Maybe he could get some perspective. Maybe he could deal with the unfairness of it all. Maybe, just maybe.

But the anger simmered in the pit of his stomach, no doubt, eating a hole in it. And the grief, it just sat there just below his Adam's apple like a malignant thyroid, whacking

out his metabolism, making his thinking unclear, making him lethargic and confused. Making him hate a nameless and faceless somebody in the city who had nothing better to do on a Sunday afternoon than to drive around quiet neighborhoods and blow away kids.

He stood up, his knees protesting at kneeling for so long. He brushed the dirt off his hands. "Help me get rid of some of these dead flowers, will you?" He said to Moises, pointing to the row of flowers.

When they were finished, Taylor took the last remaining flowers which still had some life in them and laid them across his son's grave. He closed his eyes, intending to say a short prayer asking God to take care of the tiny soul. Instead, he was surprised by the words. "Dear God, forgive me for what I am about to do."

He opened his eyes and without glancing in Moises direction asked, "Did you bring the *sapo*?"

Moises nodded.

"Good. It's time to prepare for the hunt."

Without hesitating, Moises pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it. He took several puffs on it until it glowed brightly then passed it to Taylor. As Taylor puffed on it,

Moises withdrew the small leaf bag from his shirt pocket and opened it. Inside was a small piece of bamboo, approximately the length and width of a tongue depressor. Upon one side of the bamboo was a thick varnish like substance. *Sapo*. He scraped a small amount of the *sapo* from the stick and moistened it with saliva until it turned into a green mustard.

"Are you ready?" Moises asked as he took the cigar back.

Taylor nodded.

"Roll up your sleeve."

Taylor did as he was told. Moises grabbed his hand turning it palm up. He held Taylor's hand firmly in his own.

"Look straight into my eyes."

Taylor obeyed. Moises took several long puffs on the cigar, then flicking the ashes off the end pressed the glowing red tip against Taylor's wrist.

Taylor did not break eye contact, but ground his teeth until his jaw ached. Moises held the cigar against his friend's skin as it sizzled and burned. The pungent odor of burning flesh crept into Taylor's nose. *That's me burning*, he thought and almost laughed at the absurdity of it despite the

pain.

Finally, with the cigar almost spent, Moises removed it from Taylor's arm and inspected his handiwork. He scraped away the ash and dead skin with his fingernail then dabbed a small amount of the *sapo* paste into the wound.

Taylor stood there for several seconds, wondering if he should close his eyes or what. Nothing happened. He waited. The *nu-nu* had taken a while to take effect as well. Then he felt the temperature start to build, as though standing over a heat vent. First his feet started to sweat, then the warmth climbed up his calves, then quickly to his thighs and within seconds was threatening to blow the top off his head. He could feel the pounding of his heart as it fought to keep up with the demand for blood. He felt every vein and artery in his body as the hot blood coursed through them.

Taylor's stomach cramped, he gagged, then vomited. He was thrown into a semi-crouch by the spasms, then down on all fours. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed. He heard a growling sound and was surprised when he realized it was coming from his own throat.

The nausea passed quickly and he felt the rush of energy

as his heart continued to race, a pounding pulse in his ear. It felt like his heart would burst. He gasped for breath, let it out in another primordial growl of defiance. The pounding of his own heart was too much to bear. Too loud, like someone had stuck his head into a kettle drum and was now playing the final movement of the 1812 overture. It was the last thought he had before he blacked out.

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When Taylor awoke a few hours later, it sounded like a flock of birds had landed on him and they were now chirping their displeasure in his ears. But when he opened his eyes, he was still in the cemetery, his head resting on a pillow of roots, staring up through the branches of a large oak tree. Far up in the distant branches perched the birds. Interestingly, although he estimated the closest bird to be at least twenty yards away, he could make out every detail, right down to the fine lines on the underside of their beaks.

He sat up and looked around. His car was still on the side of the road where he had parked it. Nothing had changed and at the same time everything had changed. Everything had more brilliance, more color and detail. And

the smells. The amazing odors of damp earth, of a myriad of different kinds of flowers, many of which weren't even known for their fragrance, the sap of the trees, the course smell of bird droppings. The world was suddenly alive like it had never been before. And so was he. Not only did he not have a hangover, he couldn't remember ever feeling so alive, so full of energy, vitality. Power.

He heard someone creeping up behind him and flew around expecting the person to be right on top of him. But it was only Moises walking towards him from a distance of at least forty yards. It would take a while for him to adjust to his new sensual acuity.

"How you feel?" Moises asked as he came closer.

"Incredible. I've never felt so good in all my life. I feel like I could take on a dozen men and having them all crying for mercy. Not bad for a hundred and sixty pound weakling."

Moises nodded and allowed a little emotion to show on his face. A rare treat. "Bi-ram-bo *sapo*," he said, "fuerte." It was good *sapo*. Strong.

"You must continue the *sapo* for the next four or five days," Moises said.

Remembering the first few minutes, Taylor pursed his lips. He loved the euphoric feeling he was experiencing but he wasn't sure he'd care to turn his stomach inside out for the next several days.

"Don't worry. After first time, it is much milder," Moises replied. "Your *animas* — spirit — will hunt the wild boar. It will set a trap for the game you hunt."

"What makes you think it's a wild boar I'm after?"

Moises pointed to his temple with a boney finger.

"Magic," he said then laughed. "Pablo felt strongly about it. We shall see."

"Any idea where we should start looking for this wild boar?"

Moises pondered the question for a minute before answering.

"Where many small rivers come together as one."

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They drove around Atlanta for two days making an ever-widening circle around the city. Taylor finally decided the only river that amounted to anything was the Chattahoochee, flowing down from the Georgia mountains

north of town. They drove along the river, stopping occasionally at any point where a tributary joined the larger river.

At the end of the second day, despite Moises regularly administering the *sapo* to him, Taylor found his mood less brilliant than on the first day of the medication.

"I think we need to reconsider this," he told Moises as they drove back to his apartment. "Rivers of the kind I saw in my dream are not common place to this region nor are elephants. Perhaps we should look beyond the obvious."

Moises lit a cigar. Much to Taylor's distress, he'd grown accustomed to smoking since using them in the twice daily ritual. "A wild boar did not kill your son," he said.

Taylor considered the statement for a moment before understanding his point. "Right. We're looking for a man. The wild boar must be a symbol. Maybe he's a pig farmer or something. If that's the case, what would the elephants and the river represent?"

The two drove on in silence both lost in their own thoughts. As they drove through the center of town and approached the turn off that would lead to Taylor's apartment, they drove over a railroad crossing. The loud

blast from a passing train's engine disturbed Taylor from his thoughts.

He stared at the line of freight cars for several seconds without seeing them. Several of the cars were of the open variety, carrying God-only-knows-what underneath their faded tarps. Faded tarp. Elephants. Freight. It made sense.

"Take the next right," Taylor shouted, sitting up straight in his seat.

Moises glanced over at him but did as he was told. After a few moments, he asked, "Where are we going?"

"To the river, the iron river."

The road continued to parallel the railroad track as it headed into a less desirable section of Atlanta. As they continued, the track was joined by a second, then a third, then the road veered away from the tracks. Taylor continued to direct Moises until they finally arrived at an overpass.

"Stop here," Taylor said.

Moises pulled over to the curb and stopped, despite the car behind him bellowing its disapproval.

Taylor was already out of the car, staring over the edge of the railing. Moises checked the traffic behind him and climbed out to join him on the bridge.

"There's our river," Taylor said as he pointed to the switching station of the Atlanta freight yard. Dozens of tracks fed into each other, many filled with freight cars, both opened and closed design. Most of them looked like they had been left there in storage for some time. A couple sitting next to each other were charred and blackened, as though caught in a fire and dragged to this graveyard to rot. "And with a little imagination, I think we can say those freight cars are the elephants with heavy packs on their backs."

The two men stood there for several minutes, studying the layout of the yard. "He's down there, Moises. I can feel it. He's down there somewhere. He thinks he's gotten away with killing my boy."

Moises flicked the ash from his cigar and nodded.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Hell if I know," Taylor replied.

After another moment, from Moises, "We'll increase the *sapo*."

"Oh, great."

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Cal leaned over the fence of the loading gate and

slapped the large sow on her backside. "Get a move on it. Ya clogging up the works." The sow turned her head, squealed her indignation but moved on down the narrow thruway and into the holding pen.

"Hey blowhard, what time it getting to be?" Cal yelled across the yard to a co-worker.

"Five til five," the black man yelled back. "You headed down to the *Boar's Head* for a beer?"

"Ya, maybe. Maybe not," he replied. It had been almost four days since he'd had a brew. Cal couldn't remember ever going so long on the wagon. What the hell? He'd had no more of those weird visions. Shit. He'd seen bunches of strange things while drinking or shooting up. Never had stopped him before. He'd worked hard this week. Well, at least he'd shown up every day after Monday. That deserved something. It was time to tie one on.

"Yeah. I'll be there," he yelled across the yard. As he did so, the whistle blew the end of the workweek. He made one last swipe at the last pig, jumped off the fence and headed for his truck.

As he neared the truck he noticed someone had stopped on the overpass and was looking down on the freight yard.

Damn fools. Maybe they were thinking of killing themselves. The overpass was sure high enough for it.

He opened his mouth to give the two distant figures a word of encouragement but stopped at the last moment. Something wasn't right. Suddenly, he had a vague and disturbing feeling...like the other night...like someone was walking over his grave. No, worse. They were digging the damn thing up.

He turned and jumped in his truck. Maybe he'd forget the beer. Go home and see if he could dig up the old family Bible his mom had left to him.

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The five circular welts reminded Taylor of the markings on a die. *Add two more on my other arm, he thought, and I'd have lucky seven.*

He took a wad of cotton, placed it over the mouth of the bottle of Jack Daniel and soaked the cotton. He had searched the apartment for rubbing alcohol with no luck. The whiskey would have to serve the same purpose. He cleansed the painful wounds, and then took a swig of Jack for good measure. He'd like to down the whole thing.

Drink himself into oblivion. Forget about this mad hunt. More importantly, forget the reason behind the hunt. Forget Peter's death.

He set the liquor bottle back down on the table a little harder than necessary. Moises raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He finished mixing the *sapo*, and started rubbing it into the five new wounds.

"Pablo said *sapo* in high doses like this will release your *animas*— your spirit. It will lure your prey to the trap."

What trap? Taylor wondered but did not ask. Trust the magic. Just trust the fucking magic. He closed his eyes and slept.

He was back at the headwaters of the river. The elephants grazed on tree leaves nearby. He was not looking down on the scene this time but was instead standing near the fire, looking through the flames towards the river. They were hot against his face and bare chest. He sweated and the beads of sweat felt as though they'd boil at any minute. Strong, powerful, aware. He stared through the flames, waiting, watching— for the boar.

It appeared, pulling itself out of the water. It stood on the bank of the shore and shook itself, the droplets of water

flying in all directions. Then it started towards the fire, snorting and kicking up clouds of dirt as it ran, picking up speed and anger with every step, its beady narrow eyes penetrating, seeing through the fire and straight into Taylor's heart. Squeezing his heart. It shook its head. Its tusks reflected the flickering flames. It charged straight into the fire.

As it hit the wall of flames, it did not stop but continued plodding on, bellowing in pain and hatred. Its short limbs kept pumping, digging into the blackened logs for traction, tossing its head from side to side, sending splinters of flaming ash into the night sky. It came, kept coming, kept pumping its short legs that were now encased in flames. It bellowed, the scream not of a wild boar but of a young child -- a young boy crying out in pain, crying for the father who was never home. Suddenly the flaming creature was no longer the boar but Peter. Lovely Peter.

Taylor awoke early in the morning, the sheets wet from sweat. Moises had put him to bed then stretched out on the floor beside him. As Taylor sat up, the light sleeping Moises opened one eye.

"Tonight we go to the freight yard," Taylor said. "The

trap is ready to be sprung."

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Cal stared at the double image of the bourbon bottles setting next to the creased black surface of the Bible. Strange, he thought, he hadn't remembered buying two bottles and for sure he hadn't drunk that much, or had he? He looked around at the familiar squalor of the trailer: the rug of dirty clothes that covered most of the linoleum floor, the stack of food encrusted dishes, billowing out of the sink and onto the counters on either side, the knife resting on the edge of the counter, its dried peanut butter starting to collect a thin veneer of grayish-green mold.

*Good*, he thought. *Everything as it should be*. It was reassuring to know he could drink himself into oblivion in the comfort of his own home without worrying about little Hawaiian men in skimpy dress showing up on his door-step.

He leaned back in his chair, almost losing his balance and falling all the way over. He grabbed the edge of the kitchen table at the last second, pulled himself to a stable position and opened the drawer with his other hand.

There it was, the trouble maker. The 38 revolver he'd

purchased a little over a week ago from Remus. They'd been drinking pretty heavy when the topic came up. It had seemed like a good deal. Remus had been hard up for money, gambling debts again, but the purchase price was just the start of it. He'd had to go and try the pistol out. Shit, you couldn't have a gun in your arsenal without knowing how it handled.

It had handled fine. Just fine. Too fine. Now, an innocent kid was dead and Cal's soul was destined to burn in hell. Unless, he could figure out some way to make a deal with the devil. His mom, may she rest in peace, had told him tales when he was just knee high to a grasshopper about such deals but he couldn't remember anyone ever coming out on top.

"Cal, you're in a heap of trouble," he muttered as he threw his head back and slugged down the half glass of whiskey. Shit, that's good stuff for being so cheap. He smacked the glass down on the table and was about to pour himself another one when he was interrupted. At first, he thought his trailer was on fire, the stained curtains in the kitchen in flames, but at he continued to stare, it became apparent the flames weren't attached to anything. They just

floated in the air, growing in brilliance and clarity.

He could feel the heat on his face, smell the smoke of some exotic wood as it burned. The fire appeared so real — as real as the face shimmering amongst the flames. The earring a dead giveaway. He instantly recognized the face from the other evening. The devil had come calling again.

"We need to talk, you and me. Whatta you say?" Cal poured himself another drink, spilling most of it since he didn't dare take his eyes off the apparition in front of him.

He picked up the glass, started to take a swig then offered it to his visitor. When the figure didn't move, he shrugged and belted it down.

"What you want from me?" He asked, realizing as soon as the words were out of his mouth how stupid a question it was. What did the Devil always want? His soul. Try again.

"What say you and I do some trading? I'd kinda like to keep my soul for a while. Grown used to it. How 'bout my . . . " Fuck, what the hell would the Devil want that he had?

"How 'bout my truck?" Shit, that was dumb. What if the devil turned it down? It was the only thing he owned that was worth anything and it had a loan on it big enough

to choke a mule. Maybe, demons of the night didn't keep up with those kinds of things.

"Yeah, my truck and . . . and . . . how about a gun? Yeah, the gun that shot the kid."

The figure continued to float in front of him, his words apparently having no effect. Cal was just about to offer him the trailer when the spirit's mouth opened wide, then wider still. Opened so wide as to become a chasm of darkness.

Cal watched in rapt horror at the distortion of the spirit's face then noticed an image taking form out of the blackness. He continued to watch as a picture formed.

"It's the freight yard," he said after a moment. "Yeah, I recognize those cars. What, you want to meet me there? Is that it? Yeah, okay. I'll drive the truck . . . and the gun. I'll bring the gun."

The spirit closed its mouth, flashed a sardonic smile before bursting into flames and disappearing.

Maybe he should go tonight? Is that what the Devil had suggested? Yeah, he would go tonight, Cal thought — just before he passed out.

A low cloud cover made the night seem darker than most. The sparse street lamps seemed to have their light sucked into the sky, casting little glare down on the freight yard. Taylor and Moises stood beside the car for a couple of minutes, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"Wait here," Taylor said. "I'm going to look around."

Moises nodded as he lit a cigar. Taylor cringed a little, the smell of the cigar smoke sharp, reminding him of the multiple burns along his arms.

Despite the darkness Taylor could make out the details of the freight yard as though it were noon. He picked up his surroundings not only by his heightened vision but also by his sense of smell, hearing and touch. He could feel the light breeze play across the tiny hairs along the back of his neck, smell the myriad of odors of livestock, pigs, cows and chickens. Each smell was easily picked out from the others, as though he could selectively tune into any object of his desire and pick up its fragrance.

He strolled along the rails nearing the burned out freight cars he'd noticed the other day. His visions had been filled with images of fire. The cars seemed the closest objects to his dreams. He walked around the cars, inspecting them

carefully, top to bottom. Finally he was satisfied that he had his plan worked out. As well as he could work out any plan, given the uncertainty he was working with. Would the boar appear?

He returned to the car just as Moises ground out the cigar with his boot. Taylor opened the car door and pulled out the carved staff, a souvenir from a previous trip abroad. He wasn't sure why he'd brought it. A gun or rifle made more sense but over the last few days, he'd learned to trust his instincts — the *sapo* heightened instincts. His instincts had suggested the staff.

"It's time," Taylor said finally.

Moises pushed himself away from the car he'd been leaning on.

"Time for you to leave."

Moises didn't respond at first. Finally, "Are you sure?"

Taylor nodded, grasped Moises' arm firmly. "Thanks for coming this far with me. The rest of the hunt I must do alone."

"You're beginning to talk like Pablo. Maybe I gave too much *sapo*." He smiled but accepted the keys Taylor held out to him.

"I'll find my own way home," Taylor said as Moises climbed into the car. After another short pause, he started the engine and drove off.

Taylor strolled towards the burned out cars, his senses bristling. It won't be a long wait, they told him. The boar is about to charge.

As he neared the line of freight cars, he saw the hulking form at the other end as it lumbered towards him. Taylor walked to the position he had selected then stopped, waiting for the other man to reach him.

When he was within twenty feet of Taylor, the man stopped. Taylor wondered how well the other man could see him in the dark. He could make out every detail of the man's slovenly dress. Could see the pimples on his face, smell the foul breath, a mixture of chilidogs and beer. The man before him, the wild boar, had killed his son.

Taylor reached into his pocket and pulled out his lighter. He flicked the flame and held it under his chin to give the man a good look. He held it there several seconds before he let it go out.

"Why, you ain't no devil at all. You're just a man, just like me -- only smaller. Much smaller." The giant slurred his

words, obviously he'd been drinking in preparation for the meeting. Still, Taylor figured he was probably outweighed by at least a hundred pounds, maybe more. He was beginning to think his instincts had led him astray. Moises would be good company right now.

"You the pig that killed my boy?" Taylor asked in a voice that carried despite its soft tone.

The man glanced around before answering. "Yeah, maybe. I don't know for sure. Didn't make time for no introductions."

The words slapped Taylor in the face, like someone calling him out to a duel. "It's time you paid, pig."

The hulking form threw his head back and laughed. "It's Hawg. Mr. Hawg to you." He looked around again as though expecting others to jump out of the shadows. When no one did, he turned his attention back to Taylor.

"Man you've got balls. Not much sense, but a lot of balls. I've got to hand it to you. In fact, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to hand you your balls on a silver plate." He started walking towards Taylor.

Taylor braced himself, pulling the staff across his chest in the ready position. The distance between the two men

had been closed by half when the larger man reached behind his back with his right hand and pulled out a revolver.

"You stupid son-of-bitch," Cal said as he aimed and fired.

Taylor's sharpened reflexes were the only thing that saved his life. Even so, as he dived to his right and rolled, he felt the impact of the bullet smack against his left shoulder. He rolled twice, grasping the staff close to his body then used it to push himself to a standing position, wincing from the early stabs of pain in his shoulder.

He felt the presence of the man behind him without actually seeing him. He ducked as he heard the click -- click of two empty chambers, followed by loud cursing. He swung the staff behind him a few inches off the ground and felt the satisfying crunch as it hit the man's shins, knocking his feet out from under him.

For the man's size, he moved with surprising speed as he rolled away from Taylor before he could swing the staff again. It didn't matter. It was time to spring the trap.

Taylor started running down the line of freight cars, being sure his prey followed close behind. He kept the distance just close enough to give the man hope of catching

him. As he rounded the end of the last car he picked up his speed a little to give himself enough time to catch the rung of the ladder.

As he pulled himself up the ladder, the burst of pain shot through his shoulder and down his left side, almost causing him to fall back into his pursuer's arms. He paused for two heartbeats for the pain to dissipate slightly then forged up the ladder, the man in close pursuit.

Reaching the top of the freight car, he felt a hand grab at his shoe, hold it for a second then release as he kicked his foot away. Close. The bastard was too close. He had to put some distance between them. He jumped to his feet, wavered for an agonizing second, fighting for balance. Regained it. Heard the heavy breathing behind him. Stumbled forward. Almost fell. Caught himself with his good arm. Regained his balance and ran along the roof of the car.

*Would it work?* He heard the question resound in his mind. What if his calculations had been all wrong? The man was too close. He would catch him for sure. He could almost feel the weight of the butt of the gun being brought down on his skull. Once. Twice. Again and again until he

finally slipped into unconsciousness. But would he go unconscious or would the *sapo* keep him awake for hours of torment. What if his destiny was to fall victim to the same monster that had killed his son?

No time. Don't think. Just run. React.

He saw the charred roof ahead, felt the hot breath of the child killer on the nap of his neck. A couple more feet. Just a couple more feet. Pump. Just a little harder, little longer. The charred surface passed beneath his feet. He heard the weakened boards groan in protest. Groan but not give. It wasn't going to work.

He felt the hand grasping for his collar. He shrugged it away, pulling his shirt out of the hand's grip. Then he heard a sharp snap, like a tree does when it's being felled, then a loud bark of dismay followed a second later by the crashing of the falling body as it hit the floor below.

The trap was sprung.

He stopped running. Bent over, his hands on his knees to hold himself up. He took several deep breaths and slowly let them out. Despite the *sapo*, he was tired. Dog tired. But his breath returned quicker than usual. The *sapo* continued to hold him up. He walked cautiously back to the edge of

the newly formed hole, listening carefully for the warning sounds of a board about to break. His lighter weight had made the difference. He was able to return to within a couple feet of the chasm -- enough to look down at his prey.

The man who'd called himself Hawg laid at the bottom of the freight car, groaning softly, his legs twisted in an unnatural position. Was that a fragment of bone sticking out of his pant's leg? Taylor was pretty sure it was. He studied his prey like a hawk might watch a rabbit whose back has just been broken as it flops around in its final throes. More curious than anything else.

Slowly, Hawg's eyes cleared. As he regained consciousness, he began to scream, not in pain but in anger. "God damn, God damn! You fucking asshole. Don't just stand there. Go get some help, man. I'm hurt — hurt bad."

After a moment when Taylor did not move, Hawg yelled again. "Come on. Give me a break. I'm really hurt bad. I can't move my legs, man. Can't move anything below my waist. Shit, man. I can't fucking move my arms, man. Fuck. Get me outta here."

Taylor listened for several minutes as he pondered his next move. He tossed the staff down the hole then climbed

down the side until he was on the ground. He slid the door opened and climbed inside.

He gazed around the interior until his eyes adjusted to the near ink darkness. He found the staff then noticed the gun where it had fallen several feet away.

"That the gun you killed my son with?" He asked.

"What the fuck does that matter? Get me some help, will ya?" A whining tone crept into his words.

"Is it?" Taylor repeated.

After a long moment, "Yeah. Now, will you go for some help?"

Taylor walked over to Hawg and stared down at him. "What makes you think you're ever going to leave this car alive?"

The whites of Hawg's eyes widened, looking as though someone had placed two poker chips over them.

"Come on, man. Don't joke around. You've gotta go get me some help." After a moment, when Taylor didn't respond, "You're going to burn in hell for this. You will."

Taylor gripped the heavy staff in his two hands. Felt the weight of it. Wondered what it would feel like to smash it into the man's face -- the man who had killed his son. The

man who had taken his future from him — who had taken away any chance he had for making it up to Peter for all those trips. What would it feel like to jam the staff into the man's eyes? First one, then the other. Then into his nose, and mouth. Again and again.

He lifted the staff over his head, pointing the end towards Hawg's face.

Hawg was babbling by this time, his words almost incoherent. "Man, no man. Don't do it. You hear? Please, sweet Jesus. Someone help me. Son-of-a-bitch. Someone help me."

Taylor was less than a second away from ramming the staff into the man's skull. He did not. Suddenly, an image appeared before him...of a monkey, clinging to a native's hair and of another monkey screeching in a palm basket. It flashed to a second image. The agonizing screams of the mother monkey as it roasted over the fire. The screams were not all that different from those of the man, and the sounds of the baby quietly nursing at the native's breast.

Taylor lowered the staff to his waist. Tears streamed down his face. Tears for the utter unfairness of the world. The cruelty. The hatred and stupidity and unfairness that

would allow a seven-year-old child's life to be snuffed out by such a pathetic figure of a man.

Taylor poked at the man's arms and legs to confirm his suspicions — paralyzed from the waist down. He turned and walked towards the entrance of the car, stopping to pick up the gun on the way.

"You going to get me some help, aren't you? Please, man. Don't just leave me here." The words hardly more than a whisper.

Taylor stopped at the door and turned around. "I'll get you some help. Death is too good for you. Better you spend the rest of your life behind bars as a vegetable. It still won't make up for what you did but a living hell on earth is a start."

He turned and jumped out of the car. He didn't bother to look back. Despite the *sapo*, the shoulder wound was beginning to drain his energy. It was time to get to a hospital and then somehow on with the rest of his life.

## Chill Out

I stared at the 12cc syringe. A sliver of late afternoon sunlight from the window of the penthouse office glinted through its clear fluid and formed a prism of light on Dr. Powers' desk.

"You're kidding, right?" I looked first at Powers than at Mother. "The 'nano-something-or-others' are inside there and they're supposed to filter out all the over-stimulation my nervous system is absorbing from my environment. So with one simple shot, I'll be cured of this terrible behavior. Is that what you're saying?"

"Well, you may be over simplifying things a bit," Dr. Powers said. He turned the syringe in his hand, gazing at it admiringly. "But yes, essentially that's it. The five different nano-agents will migrate to the synaptic junctions of your five senses. Through them we will be able to govern the input your brain will receive. It's why we call it the Neuro-sensory Governor."

But I don't want my senses to be governed, my mind screamed. Panicking, I turned to Mother. "This really isn't necessary, Mother. I know you haven't cared for some of my art lately . . ."

"Art! You call trashing the front yard with junk missile parts from God-knows-where, art?" She sat there with every blue strand of hair in place, wearing a French designer outfit

meant for someone half her age and accused me of bad taste.

"That was my 'Salute to the Anniversary of Disarmament,'" I said.

"And painting the roof of the house with obscene graffiti?"

"My 'Acknowledgement to Picasso and Warhol,'" I replied.

"And I suppose the orgy with over 150 scantily clad boys and girls was in the name of art as well."

"Body sculpting, Mother." I said. I looked pleadingly at Powers. "Okay, okay. Maybe some of my artistic expression is a little weird but this..." I pointed to the syringe. "It's overkill."

"No, Dillon," Dr. Powers replied in a calm voice. "It's an effective treatment for hyper-neuro-sensory overload, or HNSO for short."

He patted my hand where it rested on his desk. I jerked it away. "You needn't be concerned, Dillon. The nano-agents will only tone down your senses. You will still be able to see as well, hear as well, everything. After a few days you'll hardly notice any difference, except your behavior patterns will just naturally begin to conform to a calmer, more rational pattern.

I jumped out of my seat. "But I don't want to be calmer or more rational. I'm an artist. I like my behavior." I paced over to the window. "I like seeing colors and patterns other people don't see," I said, pointing out the window, "Hearing melodies in the chatter of a crowd, smelling the fragrance of

rain in the breeze of an approaching thunderstorm."

I turned around. There they sat, calm and rational with condescending, sympathetic smiles on their faces that said in effect, *There he goes again, poor dear. Let him get it out of his system. He'll feel so much better in a few days.*

I glanced at the door, but remembered hearing the click of the automatic lock as Pamela, Powers' receptionist, had shown me into the office. The fragrance of her perfume still lingered in my nostrils and the rush of adrenalin coursed through my veins from her accepting my luncheon invitation, despite the age difference. The excitement of the clandestine rendezvous was suddenly dwarfed by the threat at hand.

Trapped -- just as Mother had trapped me into coming to a stupid psycho-neurophysiologist for an evaluation by threatening to ship me off to military school. Not to mention the off-handed remarks about how she'd have to put Millie, my 12-year old beagle, to sleep if I went off to school. Clever, Mother, blackmailing me with the death of my dog.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, I thought. I'd fight it. I'd overcome whatever the nano-thing-a-bobs threw my way. I guess I knew even at the time how absurd an idea it was, but it was the only way I could walk back to the chair, lay my arm out on Powers' desk and let him give me the injection. I had to fool myself into believing it was all going to be okay.

He lied to me, I thought as I studied Pamela's hand resting on the table, touching my hand. Powers had claimed that in a few days I wouldn't notice the difference but it had been a week since the injection and I still noticed. Pamela was one of the most seductive women I'd met in the 18 years of my life and at 24 she was also my first experience at being attracted to an older woman, or at least the first one that had return the interest.

Only a week before, watching the flutter of her long lashes over her pale blue eyes, or her tongue wetting her rosebud lips would have made the hair on my arms stand up and pay homage to her beauty, not to mention other areas of my anatomy. Now, here I sat, her hand caressing my hand, a worried look on her face -- a look of compassion for me. Yet, I felt nothing. Well, not quite nothing. I could have handled nothing, but there was something. There was the awareness of what was missing.

"How are you feeling?" Pamela asked.

I shrugged. I'm not, I wanted to say. It's the difference between being born blind and becoming blind later in life. I knew what I was missing. I had at least some inkling as to what I could be feeling, what I should be feeling. I was angry, except, instead of ranting about it, screaming, throwing things around, swearing to get back at the injustice of it all — I sat, calm and rational.

I knew Pamela tried to look into my eyes. I kept my gaze down, studying our two hands. This was a bad idea, I thought. I should have canceled our date. It's not working.

I'm a zombie. There's nothing to say, nothing to do. I should go home. I didn't move.

I picked up the glass of soda and took a sip. Flat, except the waitress had said it wasn't flat and Pamela had tasted it and agreed. In three days I had lost three pounds, but not from exercising. I hadn't budged from the house before today. I just wasn't eating. Nothing tasted right.

"I think I can help," Pamela said after several minutes.

"How?" I asked, though I wasn't interested in hearing what she had to say. I'd had enough of people helping me.

"The nano-agents are controlled by computer," she said.

"Yeah, I know. What about it?"

"I can get you a copy of the program and the pass code."

It took me a moment for her words to sink in. So what, I almost said, then it dawned on me what she meant. I'd be able to adjust the nano-agents myself.

I looked at her for the first time in several minutes.

"You mean it? You could do that?"

She nodded. "Dr. Powers is very busy and very organized. He only checks his patients once a week unless someone calls in with a problem. I'll check your records to see when he is scheduled to monitor your progress."

"Progress?" I asked. "He didn't tell me about that?"

"He's able to check your settings and your neurological condition through the nano-agents and make any necessary adjustments. It's all done by remote from his computer."

The waitress brought our food. Neither one of us

spoke while she set the two soy burgers in front of us. Dry cardboard with bland grass, I thought as I stared at the food. Once, soy burgers had been one of my favorites. Maybe they would be again.

"Okay." I made my best effort to smile. "I'd like it if you could do it soon."

She patted my hand. "Tonight. I want my young artist friend back. Can you come to my place, and bring your laptop?"

I smiled in earnest this time. It would be good to feel the effects those words would normally have had on me. I'd be sure to remind Pamela to say them again.

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"Have you figured out how to keep your family from finding out about this?" Pamela asked as we waited for the program to load on my computer.

"Not yet," I replied, "But they left for Europe two days ago, as soon as they decided I was 'cured.' I'll figure out something before they return."

The program flashed on the screen. Pamela unfolded the sheet of paper she had had clipped to the flash drive and typed in the code number. In a few seconds a set of five sliding scales came on the screen.

"It's a simple program," Pamela said. "The nano-agents are what makes it special. Each scale represents one of your senses. The blue markers on each scale are the normals for

the particular patient, the red are where they are currently set."

I studied the screen. "Wow, he really set me low, didn't he?"

Pamela nodded. "I heard him speaking with your mother after you left your last appointment. She insisted the settings be set lower than normal. I guess she was worried you wouldn't respond."

"Yeah," I replied, "She's had her heart set on their trip for some time. Could we please get on with it?" I was nervous something would suddenly happen -- the power would go off, Dr. Power would rush in or Pamela would have a change of heart.

Pamela aligned the red markers with the blues. "It'll take a little while for the nano-agents to make the adjustment in your neurotransmitter levels. It varies with each patient and each of the senses," Pamela said as she made the final adjustment. "It's important you remember to reset this before 9 am each Tuesday morning. That's when Dr. Powers will be checking your levels. Also, set it at least a day before your office visits to give yourself time to adjust back to the levels of the settings."

"Understood," I said. I felt better already. Maybe it was too early for the change to occur but suddenly, sitting so close to Pamela aroused my interest. I'm coming alive, I thought and started blushing.

"What is it?" Pamela asked.

"Oh, nothing. It's just good to be alive."

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I've never found it easy to stay on good behavior but I did pretty well for the first two weeks, until I received a call from Mother informing me of her plans to return from Europe the following week.

I'd been thinking it over since the first night at Pamela's. I'd already experienced life with suppressed sensory organs, and in the last two weeks I'd been careful to keep everything pretty much in line, as Pamela had instructed. Besides, seeing Pamela two or three nights a week was almost more stimulation than I could stand.

Unfortunately, despite subtle suggestions by Pamela, her age and experience intimidated me. I'd been acting like a scared kid, too nervous to fulfill my dreams. Consequently, I returned home each night from our dates in a good deal of pain. Pamela didn't seem to mind although I wondered how long it would be before she would tire of me and go find someone who wouldn't just talk a good game but would follow through.

Right after the call from Mother, Pamela called to invite me to dinner. We bantered back and forth with increasingly erotic overtones. As usual, I played along, becoming more aroused with each passing minute. By the time I clicked off, I had begun to formulate a plan.

I sat in my room for several minutes, pondering the opportunity quickly sliding away from me. Within a week,

Mother would return, perhaps discover my trickery and return me to the life of a zombie -- a virginal zombie, no less.

Quickly, I ran to my computer and pulled up Powers' program. I studied the five scales for a couple of seconds, and then slowly, one by one I adjusted each of them upward.

Smiling to myself, I started to back out of the program then changed my mind. I nudged each bar up another couple notches above my normal levels. Finished, I flipped open the phone and called Pamela.

How are you with surprises?" I asked, as soon as she clicked on.

"Pleasant surprises?" She asked.

"The most," I replied. "And very artsy."

"Sure. I love your art."

"Good," I said. "Come over around eight, dress comfortably and be ready for anything."

By the time I ended the connection, the nano-agents had started to take effect. I rushed out to shop for my art supplies.

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Eight o'clock. The doorbell, previously, three simple computer-generated tones was now a complex blend of half tones, overtones and harmonies. If it had not been Pamela pressing the button, I would have let it ring several more times to enjoy its complex melody.

Instead, I walked across the soft rug in my bare feet, the

tiny synthetic hairs tickling my soles. I wore only a loose, oversized t-shirt, emerald green in color, and a pair of white cotton pants with an elastic waistband. Even so, my skin tingled wherever the fabric rubbed. Perhaps I had overdone it with the tactile sensory setting.

I opened the door and stood for a moment in quiet shock and admiration of Pamela's exquisite beauty. She wore a simple full length gown of shimmering royal blue, her bare feet sticking out from beneath its hem, one tanned leg exposed up to mid-thigh by the slit. The off-the-shoulder cut of the long sleeves accentuated her long neck and a small bow of the same blue fabric pulled her shoulder-length blonde hair away from her face on one side, exposing an ear.

"You like?" She asked as she slid by me, smiling at my opened-mouth expression.

I nodded, afraid if I tried to speak, my voice would crack. I followed her into the living room, marveling at her graceful movement. I was still marveling when she turned, took a step towards me, threw her arms around my neck and planted a moist kiss on my lips, her tongue darting between my lips for a brief moment.

We stood kissing for several minutes, her warm body pressed firmly against my own. My hands caressed the silky smooth flesh of her back where the cut of her gown left her exposed almost to her buttocks. With each breath, I inhaled her fragrance, not of a flowery perfume but of a clean aroused woman.

Finally, she pulled away long enough to notice the

bottle of wine and the tray of cheese next to the bouquet of roses. She walked over to it, poured two glasses of wine and handed me one. We toasted.

"To art and beauty," I whispered as we clinked glasses. I had intentionally avoided eating or drinking anything until this moment so I could enjoy the full effect of my sensory evening with Pamela. I'd clipped the wine from my father's special stash. I'd never tasted anything quite like it. Its bouquet tickled my nose while the dry flavor puckered my mouth. I feared drinking more than a sip or two would turn me into a babbling idiot before the climax of the evening so I only dipped my tongue in it. Even so, the taste was most refreshing.

We sat down on the floor next to each other, alternating between the wine, the cheese and an occasional kiss. Neither of us found it necessary to speak. Slowly my nervousness dwindled as my excitement grew.

After some time, I have no idea how long, I put my glass down, took a deep breath and said, "Are you ready for your surprise?"

"There's more?" She asked.

I nodded. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. The nervousness returned. This was the moment. What if I had been wrong? What if she thought my idea stupid or weird or obscene? A hundred strange thoughts flew through my mind, a mind awakened to a new world of sensations and not just by the nano-agents.

I pointed upstairs. I couldn't speak, my mouth

suddenly dry beyond belief. Pamela, apparently sensing my discomfort, smiled, gave me a brief kiss on the cheek and stood up.

"Show me my surprise."

We walked upstairs hand in hand. I led Pamela past my room to the guest room where I had everything set up. As I opened the door, the laser lights flashed on, highlighting the king-size bed but leaving the rest of the room in semi-darkness where rows upon row of "art supplies" lay. Pamela giggled, as her eyes adjusted to the light allowing her to make out what was in the bags.

"My artist. My dear sweet artist."

"Will you be a part of my art?" I asked.

"No question about it. I'd love it," she said. As she turned towards me, she slipped first one then the other arm out of the gown and, letting it drop to the floor, stood before me in the nude. She kicked the gown to the side, then bent down to one of the grocery bags and pulled out the first can of whipped cream. As she did so, her left arm momentarily passed through the wedge of light coming from the hall.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to a mark on her arm just in front of her elbow.

She touched the spot I was pointing to then removed the band of artificial skin. "Nano-agents, as I'm sure you're aware of by now, are useful for a wide range of things," she said. "I figured you weren't the only one who deserved a special sensualistic evening."

She stepped a little closer and started pulling my t-shirt

over my head. "Did you find fresh strawberries?" She asked.

"Hmm-hmm, and dark chocolate sauce, honey, fresh cut flowers, shredded coconut, yogurt, banana pudding . . . ."

The art supply list was quite long but we managed to find a use for them all.

## **A Gift that Keeps On Giving**

Three weeks. Three tumultuous weeks. Three weeks since the signal had arrived from Tau Ceti and ever since, Webster Strovall's life had been a living hell.

What was the old saying? Be careful what you wish for because you may get it. The thought brought a wiry smile to Webster's face which quickly twisted to a look of anguish as the helicopter he was flying in took an unexpected dip sending them dangerously close to the green North Carolina mountains over which they skimmed. God, how he hated helicopters. The most uncomfortable way to travel since the cover wagon. And in his thirty year career of searching, waiting and hoping for some sign of life from the stars, he'd spent more than his share of time in the damn contraptions.

Now, with the arrival of the message from Tau Ceti, life as director of NASA-SETI was a swirl of reporters demanding more information, constant phone calls to deny inaccurate stories and rumor after rumor carrying as far as Capitol Hill and back.

All the way to the honorable Senator Lumley. How could one senior senator from South Carolina be such a pain? The next thing you know, Lumley will be questioning the very existence of stars. He'll claim they're small holes in the celestial dome over head and some wet-behind-the-ear reporter will pick up the story and report it as fact.

It had been three weeks of aggravation, culminating with this roller coaster ride to meet a strange duck of a scientist who hated to be called doctor although he had at least two Ph.D.s, was rumored to live off of junk food and had personal hygiene habits that would put a pig to shame.

Malcolm Mallory — scientist turned multi-millionaire entrepreneur, reclusive founder of GodPlay, Inc. So arrogant, he refused Webster's invitation to meet and only after numerous phone calls, reluctantly agreed to allow Webster to come to him. And on his terms. Thus the helicopter ride at 5 am in the morning. What a pain in the ass.

Webster's grip tightened as the helicopter took a second dip and he felt a searing pain in his chest. Heartburn or angina? Sometimes it was difficult to tell which. He reached into his coat pocket, removed the pill bottle and slipped one of the tiny pills under his tongue. Better play it safe. His ol'

mitral valve was fluttering like a hummingbird's wing. As the pill slowly dissolved, the sour expression etched itself deeper into the contours of his face. This Mallory character better be worth it, he thought. He better have some answers for me, or I'll choke him to death with a carton of Twinkies.

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"No question about it," Mallory said. He leaned back in his chair but continued to study the computer screen in front of him. "It's a nanopee." His long blonde hair flowing over the collar of his light blue lab coat was, in Webster's estimation, at least three days overdue for a wash. In fact, the CEO of GodPlay, Inc. could use a good bath, not to mention having his torn jeans and T-shirt taken out back and incinerated.

"A what?" Webster asked. Watching Mallory made him want to scratch his own head but it had been fifteen years since he'd had anywhere close to enough hair to worry about washing it.

"A nanopee," Mallory repeated. "It's my nickname for a set of instructions for a piece of nanotechnology." Mallory turned and smiled at Webster as he chomped on a peanut

butter sandwich on white bread. "So, this is a sample of the message from space?"

Webster nodded.

"Interesting," Mallory said.

"What's interesting about it?" Webster asked, his pulse quickened. "What can you tell from it?"

"Oh, not much from the message, itself. Too small a sample, but I can tell something about whoever sent the message and I find that interesting."

"What? Webster asked.

"Well, it's apparent whoever sent the message has mastered English. It's not coded in the real sense of the word. It's simply the kind of scientific code you might expect from any advanced technology that knows a lot more about micromachinery than just about anyone else here on Earth."

"Anyone else but you, is that what you're saying," Webster said, unable to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Yes, that's right," Mallory replied, apparently unperturbed by Webster's tone, "although I'll admit, it's a pretty good stretch even for me." Mallory finished the sandwich and started licking his fingers clean, eventually resorting to wiping them on his lab coat, a common habit by

the looks of the coat.

Webster had to hand it to Mallory. It had taken his team of radio-astronomers almost a week to arrive at the same conclusion. Whoever had sent the message had been studying Earth's radio signals for many years. Even so, they'd had to do a great deal of extrapolating to come up with the configuration of the message. Tau Ceti was less than 12 light years away and so they'd probably been receiving radio and television signals for years. His team also theorized the message senders had probably been avoiding detection until recently since Tau Ceti had been monitored many times in the past with no result.

Mallory, his hands mostly clean of the sticky peanut butter and jam, scrolled down the rest of the sample Webster had brought as bait. It had been impossible to bring the whole message. Security had howled intolerably as it was and would have refused to allow even this small sample off the premises if it hadn't been Webster who'd made the request. It didn't matter much to Webster anyway. He didn't expect Mallory to be able to do anything with what was on the disk. It was only meant to entice him into wanting to see more. And to see more, he'd have to join Webster's team.

Apparently, the bait was working. Webster let his fish continue to nibble.

After a few more minutes, Webster started to reel his fish in. "If you were to conjecture what the message is a recipe of, what would be your guess?" he asked as innocently as possible.

Mallory didn't answer at first but continued to scroll down the screen, his eyes flitting from side to side. Could he really be reading the hieroglyphics so fast or was it all a big fake, Webster wondered?

Finally Mallory rose from his chair and started towards the refrigerator in the corner of the office. "Want a beer?" he asked.

Webster shook his head.

Mallory shrugged then opened the refrigerator door and pulled one out for himself. He popped the top and took a deep guzzle, walking over to the picture window which gave a breathtaking view of the surrounding mountains. He stared out the window for several minutes, sipping slowly on the beer, apparently unconscious to Webster's question.

Finally without turning around he replied, "No question about it — it's an assembler."

"An assembler?" Webster repeated, an edge to his voice despite his attempts to keep it flat.

"Yeah, follow those instructions and what you'll have, if you follow them correctly, no small feat, is an assembler unit which will be capable of building something molecule by molecule."

"Build what?" Webster asked the obvious question.

Mallory shrugged, downed the last swallow of beer and crushed the can. "You'd have to ask the originators of the recipe."

"But they're 12 light years away," Webster said.

Mallory turned on his heels facing Webster and smiled. "There's the rub."

The two scientists continued staring at each other. Finally Webster asked, "Could you build the assembler from those plans?"

Without hesitating, Mallory nodded. "But are you willing to be responsible for what it builds?"

Webster pondered the question. Thirty years he'd been looking for some signal from another life form in space. Any message. This one was far more than he'd ever hoped for. To receive the message and not act on it? Absurd.

"Yeah, I'll be responsible."

The two scientists stared at each other for several more seconds before Webster continued. "You'll need to travel to our facilities to work on the project. Will you come?"

Mallory chuckled as he walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out another beer. "Oh, I think for the chance to work on this little erector set, I won't mind traveling." He tossed the beer to Webster. "Careful opening it. It might be fizzy."

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Six weeks later, the two scientists sat across from each other, a battered desk pulled out of storage for Mallory's use between them, two Styrofoam cups of coffee making new rings on its surface.

Do I tell him about Lumley, Webster wondered? He'd made it a point to shelter the young scientist from the controversy raging on Capitol Hill. He didn't want anything to distract Mallory from working on the project. Still, didn't he have a right to know what had been on the morning newscast?

"NASA-SETI's not telling us everything," the 5 foot 4

inch southern senator who always wore white linen suits even in the winter time had said. He waved his arms for effect. "They're not telling the American public what the message they picked up from the heavens said. They're not telling Congress about where the ten-million dollars of taxpayer money has been spent and they're not responding to my allegation that what they're doing is against God and nature."

But that hadn't been the worse of it. The bombshell came at the end of the report.

"The American public has a right to know what the devil's worker, Dr. Malcolm Mallory, is doing with the NASA-SETI project. . . ."

He doesn't like to be called doctor, Webster had thought as he turned off the television, deciding he at least owed the young scientist a visit. Since joining the team, Mallory had immersed himself in the project like few other members. Driven, focused and intense was the only way to describe the man. It started to make sense to Webster why Mallory had such disregard for his appearance. He simply didn't have time for it.

"Sorry to disturb your work," Webster started, still

uncertain how much to tell Mallory. "I was just wondering how it's going down here."

"No problem," Mallory replied. "It was time for a short break." He pulled a pack of Twinkees from his lab coat pocket and offered one to Webster.

Webster declined, baffled at how the man could stay alive and in apparently good health on such a diet.

"It's going well," Mallory said in a voice muffled by a mouthful of sponge cake. "Of course, we won't know for sure until the entire assembler is complete. It's like we're building a high performance race car but we won't know whether it'll run or not until it's completed and we turn the key. Except in this case it's worse because we've never seen what we're building. It looks like it should run but who knows?"

Webster nodded, a bit distracted by his own thoughts. Just keep building it and I'll keep fending off the wolves.

"How's it going at your end?" Mallory asked

"What do you mean?" Webster asked, immediately on the defensive.

"I mean with Lumley," Mallory said between gulps of chasing down his snack with the black coffee.

Webster tried to keep a deadpan expression on his face but could feel a nervous twitch at the corner of his mouth giving him away. "You know about Lumley?"

"Sure," Mallory replied. He picked up the two Styrofoam cups and carried them over to the coffee brewer for a refill. "You've done a nice job of shielding me from the distractions and I appreciate it. I really do. But from time to time I'm curious to know what's happening out there so I access my computer."

Great, Webster thought. I wonder how many more leaks the security team has missed. If Mallory was able to get information in so easily, it was no surprise news was leaking out just as fast.

"Well, how's it going?" Mallory repeated, setting Webster's refreshed cup in front of him.

"The latest news," Webster said, deciding to come clean, "Lumley knows you're on the project."

Mallory whistled, a impish smile running across his face. "I bet that has things hopping."

Webster nodded. "The phones haven't stopped ringing all morning."

"I bet the newspapers will be calling for an inquisition

the size of the Salem's witch trails within a couple of days."

"I think Lumley has already ordered the wood for the bonfires," Webster agreed. He blew across the hot surface of his coffee. "It's only going to get hotter. We need to keep moving on the project as fast as possible without jeopardizing quality."

Mallory nodded. "What do you think will happen if Lumley gets his way?"

Webster sipped on the coffee, finding the burning sensation on his tongue strangely invigorating. Without looking up he said, "He'll shut us down, pure and simple. If he does, it might be three life times before we get another shot at building our gift from the gods.

"Then I better get back to the erector set," Mallory replied, pushing away from the desk. As the two men rose, Mallory continued, "If it turns bad, how about giving me a little notice to clean out my room. You know me, I'm not much into a high public profile."

Webster nodded. "I'll give you what notice I can."

Two days later, Webster received a call from Washington to sit before a Senate committee investigation. "Be prepared to respond to allegations about misappropriation of Federal

funds," the voice on the other end of the phone instructed. The witch hunt is about to begin, Webster thought as he hung up the phone.

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Lumley didn't waste any time, diving immediately into allegations of misappropriation of federal funds. For three days, Webster, with his attorney on one side and his CPA on the other deftly handled each question. The almost sleepless weekend of study and drill had paid off.

Mid-morning of the third day into the proceedings, Webster leaned back in his chair, relaxed and confident. Then, Lumley changed tactics.

"I'll come back to the 10 million dollars that has mysteriously disappeared from your budget, Doctor. Tell me something, Dr. Strovall," Lumley said as he dropped the papers he had been reading on the table in front of him. He leaned forward, eyeing Webster like a hunter scoping down on an innocent deer. "What exactly is in the message you received?"

Caught off guard by the sudden change in questioning, Webster opened his mouth to speak, hesitated for a moment,

then closed it. A sudden flood of perspiration flowed from his armpits.

"I don't see what the content of the message could possibly have to do . . ."

"Just answer the question," the senator from Illinois who was chairing the investigation said.

Webster glanced first to his CPA and then to his attorney. The two men, obviously caught off guard as well, stared back at him and shrugged. Great advice, Webster thought as he turned his gaze back to Lumley.

"I'm afraid it's classified information . . ."

"Classified from the Senate Subcommittee that represents the interests of the fine people of the United States?" Lumley said. Webster half expected the southern red-neck to stand up and salute the flag but instead, Lumley continued the questioning.

"Isn't it true the message is from a distant planet over 11 light years away?"

"Well yes, we presume so. We know it's emanating from a star system by the name of Tau Ceti and we presume it's from one of the star's planets."

"And what does this message from the distant cosmos

say?" Lumley repeated the question.

"As I said, it's classified info. . ."

"Why did you bring Dr. Malcolm Mallory on your team?" Lumley barked out the question.

"We felt he would be useful in deciphering the message," Webster replied, fighting the urge to glance to either side where his attorney and CPA sat with blank stares on their faces. "Really, Senator, I don't see what this . . ."

"Just answer the question," the Illinois Senator repeated like a broken record.

"And how is it going with Dr. Mallory?" Lumley asked, then without waiting for a reply, added, "Isn't he the CEO of a company by the name of GodPlay, Inc.?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"GodPlay," Lumley paused for effect, glancing down the table at his colleagues. "An interesting name for a company, don't you think? Are you two playing God, Doctor?"

Webster tried to reply, to deny the charge but Lumley was on a roll and without pausing for so much as a breath, he said, "Isn't it true, Doctor, you two are playing God and in the process threatening the lives of every American, possibly every human being on the planet? Isn't it true? Or am I off

the mark on this one, Doctor?"

It was Lumley's turn to sit back in his chair, a smug look on his face. He turned his best side towards the cameras.

Webster stared at him, his mouth partially open but with no sound coming out. Shut your mouth, he told himself, you look like an idiot. Finally his mouth obliged.

"I have information from a reliable source," Lumley continued, waving several sheets of paper at Webster, "That indicates your team, headed by Dr. Mallory, is building a contraption capable of making something else, molecule by molecule and," Lumley turned to the camera as it zoomed in for a close up, "You have no idea what the *aliens* have programed it to make. Do you deny this, Doctor?"

We're screwed, Webster thought. Where did Lumley get his information? Obviously, he must have a person on the inside. Who on the team had turned into a Judas? A silly question at this point, Webster realized. The damage had already been done.

He turned to his right, leaned over and whispered in his attorney's ear. "We're dead in the water on this one, Matthew. How about calling Mallory and telling him it's time to clean out his room. I owe him that much."

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Webster dropped the morning newspaper on the kitchen table and walked over to the counter to pour himself a second cup of coffee. Hard to believe three months had passed, he thought as he poured the dark brew into the mug. Three months and still the debate about the message raged on. Probably will be three years from now, too, bureaucratic red tape being so effective at gumming up progress.

He sat back down at the table and started to browse through the paper when the phone rang. God, please no reporters this early in the morning, he prayed as he picked up the phone.

The voice on the other end caught Webster completely by surprise. "Hey ol' man, I've got an erector set I think you'd be interested in. Want to come out and play?" It was Mallory.

"Where in the hell are you?" Webster sputtered. You do a great job of disappearing."

"Yeah, thanks for the advanced warning. It helped. Sorry to hear about you losing the directorship."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not," Webster replied. "I've

never felt better. For the first time in years, my blood pressure is almost back to normal and my attorney is doing a good job of keeping me out of jail."

"Good," Mallory said. "Listen, I don't have much time. I'm serious, the erector set is ready to be turned on. You interested?"

Erector set? What was Mallory talking about? Then it hit him. "You didn't?"

"Of course. You don't think I'm going to let a little bureaucrat like Lumley keep me from my toys, do you? Now, do you want to be here when I start it up?"

"Where is here?" Webster asked.

"Can't tell you, Mallory replied. "Your phone might be tapped. If you're interested, you just sit tight and I'll get you to me."

It took Webster less than two seconds to make up his mind.

"I'm interested."

"I thought you would be." Mallory laughed. "I'll be in touch. Be ready to move fast." The line went dead.

Within the hour, Webster received a message from a private courier directing him to a small cafe on the other side

of town. There he met a man who looked like he'd stepped out of a 50s detective movie, trench coat and all, who whisked him to a private air strip where a twin-engine Beechcraft sat idling on the runway. As Webster stepped up to the plane, he noticed the rear windows where he would be sitting were blacked out. Wherever he was going, when he arrived, even he wouldn't know what their route had been.

He paused at the door. Do I trust this guy? Mallory might be kidnapping me for all I know. The truth was he didn't trust Mallory, not completely. But for a chance to see what the assembler from space looked like and what it could build, for that, he was willing to run the risk. He ducked his head and stepped into the plane.

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Mallory was in the mountains again, Webster realized as he stepped off the plane, but clearly not the North Carolina mountains. Too sharp and too tall. Colorado? Wyoming? USA? Hell, they'd flown around long enough, they could be in Canada by now. No matter. What was important was he had made good his escape without anyone following him.

Now, to find out how far along Mallory really was.

A short time later, the two men sat on the deck of one of the larger buildings, gazing at the picturesque beauty of the surrounding scenery.

"It's been a lot easier this time," Mallory said. "I learned a lot about the message the first time so for the most part it was simple to repeat the procedure. Plus I corrected a couple things that might have prevented our first attempt from working."

"How did you manage to get the data out of the lab in the first place?" Webster asked.

"Oh, it wasn't any problem," Mallory replied. "I snuck it out when I first arrived, before anyone had time to suspect I might do something like that. I downloaded it from the computer to another computer at one of my installations, then had an assistant save it to disk. Your security really sucked," he added with a chuckle.

"Good thing as it turned out," Webster said. "How about the security here?" He waved his arm to encompass the compound.

"Not bad," Mallory said. "We've got Mother Nature on our side. We're 150 miles from the closest convenience store.

The only way in is either over old logging roads very few people even know exist or by air. As for our little erector set, the building we're constructing it in has been wired with explosives. If anything were to go wrong, we could blow it to the convenience store 150 miles away."

"And what if we were still in the building?" Webster asked, growing nervous by the turn of the conversation.

"Oh, we probably would be," Mallory replied. "We'd go up with the explosion, of course."

"Of course," Webster repeated, trying to imitate Mallory's casual tone. "When will the assembler be ready to be activated?"

"Oh, it's ready now," Mallory said as he stood up. "Let's go take a look. The tank is being filled right now."

The tank? Webster wondered what to expect as he followed Mallory down the steps of the deck and across the grassy courtyard towards a one story building at the far end of the compound. As they stepped into the building, he wondered, would just this building go up, or would the entire facility be enveloped in one massive cloud of smoke and destruction? He decided not to ask.

"The main lab is off limit to everyone," Mallory said as

they walked down the hall, passing several technicians clad in blue coveralls. "Unless I'm in the lab. I don't want anyone playing with my toy without me." He smiled in a way that reminded Webster of a rich kid who used to live in his neighborhood, over forty years ago. All men are little boys, Webster thought. The only thing that changes is the size of our toys.

As they entered the private lab, Webster paused and looked around. "Where is it?" he finally asked.

"Over there," Mallory said, pointing to a large opening in the floor surrounded by railing. "In the pit."

Webster walked over to the railing and looked over. The assembler reminded Webster of a very large jeweled egg, like the miniature ones he remembered from Christmas time many years ago, only this one was hundreds of times larger.

"It's roughly ten feet long and a little over six feet in diameter," Mallory said, as though reading his thoughts. "Lovely, isn't it?"

Most certainly, Webster thought as he walked slowly down the stairs to take a closer look. The front of the egg was dominated by a large oval window, through which Webster could see a viscous suspension filling the inside of

the egg.

"The fluid and the lining of the egg are the two miracles of the technology," Mallory said, walking behind him. "The fluid is filled with the raw material from which the nano-machines, which are floating in the suspension, will draw. The nano-machines will get their commands from millions of nano-computers which line the egg.

"Once the tank is filled, we'll activate the computers and in a few minutes, hour, days, or longer we'll have whatever it was our interstellar neighbors wanted to send to us." Mallory stroked the smooth side of the unit, anticipation and excitement lighting his face.

"On top of which we'll also have the dawning of a new age of technology that will revolutionize humankind more than Guttenberg's press, the Industrial Revolution, the Wright Brothers and penicillin all put together," Mallory added.

Webster chuckled. "You remind me of a kid on Christmas eve. Just can't wait to run downstairs and see what Santa brought you."

"Yeah," Mallory replied. "It is a little like that. Only much, much bigger than any Christmas either one of us have

ever had." The two men stared through the window at the swirling fluid.

Finally, Webster asked, "What do you think it'll be?"

"God only knows," Mallory replied with a note of reverence. "And I really mean it. God only knows."

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With massive amounts of coffee, the two men held vigil throughout the night, into the next day and through a second night, taking turns catnapping on a cot which had been brought in for that purpose. Slowly, as Mallory predicted, something began to take form inside the tank.

On the second day Webster leaned back in his chair and stretched his aching muscles. It's like a ghost, he thought as he gazed through the egg's window. Every now and then he caught a glimpse of something through the cloudy fluid. Yes, like a ghost ship cutting through the fog. First it's there, then it's gone, leaving you to wonder if it had really been there in the first place.

But as the hours passed the shape continued to enlarge and become more solid. Finally, towards the end of his shift of the third day, the swirling stopped.

Webster walked over to the cot where Mallory slept and gently shook him by the shoulder. As Mallory slowly opened his eyes, Webster whispered, "I think something is happening. The fluid motion has stopped."

Mallory's eyes flew open and he bonded off the cot. "All right, Santa has arrived. Let's go open our present."

The two men returned to the assembler unit as the fluid drained from the receptacle, exposing the gleaming surface of the ghost ship.

The smooth contoured unit measured almost 4 feet high by 2 feet across and deep. It reminded Webster of a giant thumb. Like a piece of modern art, the artist using his thumb as the model, Webster thought with a twinge of disappointment. What if that's all it was? Just a sculpture of a giant thumb to let Earth's civilization know their alien neighbors also had opposable thumbs. No, the idea was crazy. Surely, they'd at least send an entire replica of what they looked like, unless they were afraid their appearance would be too alarming for Earthlings.

"What is it?" Webster whispered.

"Don't know," Mallory whispered back with a note of awe. "Kinda cute, though."

When the last drops of fluid had drained from the tank, the side of the assembler with the window slowly swung away from the rest of the unit on invisible hinges.

"Is it alive?" Webster asked, feeling a little silly for asking the question.

"Of course not," Mallory replied, turning quickly to his companion as though shocked at the thought. "At least, I don't think so," he said more cautiously.

"Well, let's go take a closer look," Webster said, but didn't move, waiting for Mallory to take the lead. After all, Mallory had been the one to build it. He should have the honors.

Webster looked up towards the railing where one of Mallory's assistants stood, his hand resting on a console with one simple button covered by a red cap. Flip the cap, push the button and visit the closest convenience store, 150 miles away. Lord, I hope the young fella up there doesn't have a itchy trigger finger. I'm not quite ready to visit you or the convenience store. Not just yet.

The two men stepped over the threshold of the assembler tank at the same time. When they were within a couple feet of the giant thumb-like sculpture, they felt or

heard a soft, high-pitched hum and the top third of the thumb began to glow.

Oh, shit, Webster thought as he stopped in his tracks. Out of the corner of his eye, he tried seeing what Mallory's reaction was without taking his eyes off the glowing sculptor.

"What do we do?" Webster whispered after several seconds had elapsed without either men moving forward.

"Just move softly," Mallory replied. "Don't scare it."

Webster noticed Mallory had spoken about the sculptor as though it were alive but decided not to say anything. Who knows, he thought. Maybe it is alive. Is it possible, he wondered?

The two men crept forward, moving as one. Mallory walked to the left and Webster to the right, circling around the unit.

The humming which had been slowly building in pitch disappeared as it surpassed the capacity of the human ear but Webster could still feel the mild vibration through the soles of his shoes.

Amazing, Webster thought, I'm one of the first humans to stand in the presence of an object designed by another

intelligent life form and I don't have the foggiest idea what to do about it.

The glowing tip of the form began to dim, like a light set on a rheostat then leveled off to a soft luminescence. When nothing else happened for almost a minute, Mallory stepped forward, paused, then raised his hand and held it a few inches from the glowing surface, as though checking it for heat.

"Cool," Mallory said. Webster wasn't sure whether the comment referred to the form's heat or Mallory's opinion about it.

Webster watched as Mallory slowly lowered his hand towards the alien form, until it rested lightly upon its surface. The second the contact was made, the form starting glowing again as though suddenly reactivated. Mallory jerked his hand away.

"You okay?" Mallory asked, taking a step towards him.

Mallory held his hand out to stop him. "I'm fine," he replied. "Don't move."

The icon continued to glow, this time surpassing the light it had originally given off, but still no heat as far as Webster could tell.

The humming resumed for several seconds then suddenly stopped to be replaced by another sound — a voice.

"Greetings from Vector 6214, sub-unit zetaphon. We welcome the new open channel." The voice, clearly emanating from the glowing form sounded strangely familiar to Webster.

"What. . . the . . . fuck. . ." Mallory said, as the two men simultaneously stepped back, startled by the unexpected voice. Webster stared at Mallory, waiting for the young scientist to say something. Mallory shrugged, then pointed to him.

"Go on," Mallory urged, smiling. "You're the stargazer. My part of the project is finished."

Webster realized the young scientist was right. Mallory had done his job. He'd taken the message from the stars and built the assembler from scratch and obviously he'd done it correctly. It suddenly dawned on him what the assembler must have built. What would be one of the first thing an alien race would want to send to Earth? What would it be if the tables were reversed? What would we want to provide to another civilization? Webster stepped forward to test out his

hypothesis.

"Hello, this is Dr. Webster Strovall of the planet Earth, third planet from the star known to us as the Sun, or Sol." Well, it wasn't "one step for mankind" type material but it would have to do.

"Hello, Dr. Strovall," the voice from the icon replied. "It is a pleasure to welcome you to our communication network as our newest member who trusted us enough to build from our instructions without knowing what the outcome would be." As the voice spoke, Webster realized why it was familiar. It had the tone of an old radio announcer, one from the early days of radio. No doubt what they had used to decipher our language, Webster thought.

His gaze wandered to the young man standing next to the panel. If you only knew how limited our trust was, he thought. Would you be so interested in inviting us into your network?

"How are we able to communicate with you so far away without any apparent time lag?" Webster asked the obvious question.

"For the moment, let's just say that we've perfected the use of subatomic hyperdimensional tunnels, which in effect

connect us in a manner beyond time. It is a technology upon which we've built the network of which you are now a part. This is a momentous occasion for your world. You are to be congratulated."

Webster looked at Mallory and smiled. Yes, a momentous occasion. Life on Earth would never be the same. An infinite number of futures closed off forever and a new set of possibilities instantly created. Earth no longer belonged to itself or to the relatively small neighborhood of the solar system. We have instantly become galactic citizens. Not since the first fish crawled out of the primordial soup and onto land, had such a evolutionary leap taken place.

But would people like Lumley consider the moment momentous, Webster wondered? How many fish had been left behind in the water, cursing and fussing over the antics of those first land dwellers? Oh well, let the cynics think what they would. Science and technology goes on and with it the people of Earth, swept up in the wave. And as Mallory had said, God only knows upon which beach would Earth's people finally come to shore.

# Words Unspoken

P. T. felt the light touch on his arm. His eyes fluttered but did not open.

"It's time, Father." Maura's voice, softer than the touch of her fingertips, caressed his ears. "The angels have begun to meld."

He felt the muscles in his neck tense. He opened one eye. "How many times have I told you *not* to refer to those damn bugbats as angels?"

"Sorry, Father." But he could tell from the edge in his daughter's voice she wasn't. He draped his arm over his eyes to shield them from the light. He hadn't really slept, only rested. He seldom slept anymore. The constant throb of his right knee and hip saw to that.

After another moment, he opened his eyes again and turned his head to gaze at his sixteen year-old daughter. Every day you look more like your mother, he thought. Recently, he had caught himself almost calling her Evelyn. When did you exchange your baby-fat cheeks for the well-chiseled cheekbones? Probably about the time you traded in

the sparkling, laughing eyes of a child for the intense stare of a young woman with a purpose. So much like your mother. His neck muscles knotted further.

"Help me up," he said as he reached out to her. He closed his eyes and braced himself for the excruciating twist. As Maura pulled him to his feet, the dull throb exploded into a pain that painted a brilliant display of fireworks on the inside of his eyelids and sucked the wind from his lungs. When it was finally over, he stood next to the day bed, resting a hand on its tarnished brass headboard in an effort to protect the crippled leg.

He waited for his vision to clear before taking the cane Maura held out to him. He thought about the bottle of pills in the cabinet next to the booze, his stash reserved for the really bad days but then remembered why Maura had come for him. No, he wanted a clear mind today. He didn't want to miss a single detail.

"How did the ticket sales go?"

"We broke our record for the third time in a row," Maura replied.

"Good," P. T. replied. The news lessened the pain. "Let's go bleed the suckers." The famous line of his namesake came

to mind: "A sucker is born every minute." Thank God for that. It was about the only thing that made his life bearable.

Maura did not move.

"What is it?"

She hesitated before answering. "Claudia is here."

"Oh." P. T. was momentarily lost for words. "You sold her a ticket, didn't you?"

"Of course not. She's been a friend of yours since before I was born."

"We've known each other for that long," P. T. corrected her then decided it wasn't worth arguing about. "Okay, never mind. Anything else?"

Maura squared her shoulders and fixed her dark eyes on his. Before she spoke, he braced himself again.

"I've decided to go with her at the end of the show today."

He stared back at her, consciously keeping his jaw muscles relaxed so as to not give away the effect her words had on him.

"O . . . kay," he finally replied. "Can we go now?" He leaned more heavily on the cane, preparing to take the first step towards the door.

"There is one other thing."

He stopped, the impatience and anger tightening the spring in his neck. He remembered the jack-in-the-box someone had given Maura as a child. Had it been Claudia? He often felt like the toy when he was around Maura. One more turn of the crank and the song would be done, the taunt spring would snap and his head would flip off his shoulder and bounce around the room.

"I spoke to the bugbats."

"You what! After all the times I've told you to stay away from them. How dare you defy me, young lady? I won't stand for it, you hear? I won't stand for it. Stay away from them."

He took a menacing step towards her with his good leg. One corner of her mouth twitched slightly but otherwise, she didn't flinch.

"They speak English," she continued in a calm voice.

"They're the first ones out of fifteen pairs that have come to us who know how to speak our language."

It took P. T. only a second to figure out what her statement meant.

"So you've been defying my orders from the very

beginning, is that right? Been trying to talk to them from the very start, despite what I told you."

"Father, that's not the point."

"It is too the point." He fought to maintain control. Why would she not understand how dangerous aliens were? Couldn't she see what they'd done to him? Left him a mere shell of a man, with even less of a family.

"How many times have I told you? You can't trust them. They're dangerous. Look around you. They've just about destroyed Earth. Your precious ocean out there that you're so hot to run off and study is still too warm to support much life. They don't think like us, they don't share the same emotions. They're . . . they're . . ." He twisted away from her, ignoring the searing pain in his hip, considered smacking the daybed with his cane for effect, then thought better of it. What did it matter? She'd never understand.

"They're not like us," he finished, suddenly too tired to fight.

"How do you know what they're like?" Maura asked. "You haven't been near an alien in almost twelve years. The angels . . . I mean bugbats are different. They're not like the ones you remember.

"Do you know what they told me, Father?" Maura circled around in front of him, her face aglow with excitement. "They told me they mate for life. This pair has been together for almost a hundred and fifty years. Isn't that incredible?"

"And you believed them, right? What else did they tell you? Did they tell you to run off to the oceanographic institute with Claudia? Is that where you got that lamebrain idea? What else did they say?"

Maura opened her mouth but before she could speak, a middle-aged lady with graying hair and weathered complexion stuck her head in from the front porch. "Is this a family squabble or can anyone join in?"

Claudia had aged considerably in the three years since P. T. had last seen her but her tongue was as sharp as ever. He glared at his daughter, wondering how she had become so skilled at winding his crank with her words.

"Go on, finish collecting the tickets. I don't want any freebies out there. No tickee, no showee. You understand?" His eyes flickered to Claudia who promptly held up a five-dollar bill.

"I can see it on your tombstone. 'Here lies P. T. Wolverine

-- Undaunted to the end. Undaunted asshole,' that is."

He waved the two of them away with his cane. "Get out. I'll be there in a minute."

When he was finally alone, he hobbled over to the medicine cabinet and pulled out the half-empty pint of bourbon. He poured himself a full jigger, drained it then poured another. Good riddance to her, he thought as he downed the second one. He'd be better off without her, just as he had been when Evelyn had disappeared to save the world from the aliens. Life with women was too damn complicated. Who needed it?

He stuck the bottle of pills into his pants pocket, grabbed a pair of binoculars off the coat rack, slung them over his shoulder and limped to the front door.

Show time, he thought as he flung the screen door open. It slammed against the outside of the cabin and would have smacked him in the face except for his quickly deflecting it with the cane. Time to watch the bugbats die.

He dragged himself through the crowd, the metal shield of his right shoe stirring up a cloud of dust as it dug a shallow trench in the sun baked soil. The crowd, larger than any of the previous fourteen spectacles, split apart several

yards in front of him. Everyone knew to keep their distance from P. T. on show days.

He paused at the foot of the ramp that led to the observation deck of Tracking Tower 404, craned his head back, groaning under his breath as the taunt muscles of his neck resisted the movement. He stared at the top of the parabolic cone 200 feet above him. The tower was well highlighted by the slate gray background of a dense cloud cover. Perfect conditions for a spectacular show, P. T. thought.

The base of the tower was built into the shear rock face of one of the highest cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. An observation deck jutted out from the cliff about thirty feet from the base of the tower, making an ideal spot to view the show. Only paying customers earned a choice spot on the deck. As P. T. started up the ramp of the deck, he looked from side to side to be sure everyone he passed wore the circular day-glo orange patch which served as their ticket. Apparently, Maura had taken his warning seriously. No freeloading bums today.

The tower had been part of an early warning system designed to detect low flying missiles that frequently strayed

off course from the two alien armies that had used Earth for their battles. The towers had functioned fairly successfully in the early days of the war when most of the fighting had remained out at sea before the war escalated to include the entire planet.

Maura joined him at the top of the ramp, falling easily in step beside him. He leaned towards her to make it easier for her to hear his orders over the chatter of the crowd.

"You take the left side when the gambling starts and I'll take the right. You've got to move quickly. Half of our profit is made or lost in those ten minutes."

"I'll be a money-grabbing mamma," Maura replied. He couldn't be sure whether she was joking or being sarcastic. "I'll make you proud."

"Where are the bugbats?" He asked, deciding to ignore her snide comments.

She pointed ahead and to his right where the crowd was the thickest. He prodded a couple of people with his cane to wake them up and pushed his way through the crowd with Maura following in his wake. As he neared the knot of people, the crowd split and before him stood the bugbats.

An involuntary shudder danced up and down his back,

made worse by the strong musk smell that polluted the ocean breeze. Momentarily shocked to see how far the melding had progressed, he remembered the argument that had delayed him.

The female, about four feet tall, stood in front, her furtuft leathery wings spread to either side. Just behind her with his face resting on the top of her head, stood her taller mate, mimicking her pose. Already the two bodies blended so well together as to look at first glance to be a four-eyed bugbat, but P. T. knew the upper two orbs were all that remained of the male's facial features. Soon it would be almost impossible to tell where the female stopped and the male began. When the melding was complete, the real show would begin.

"Where's the . . .?" but before he could finish the question, Maura handed him the bullhorn. "Get ready. I'm opening the betting windows a few minutes early to accommodate the crowds."

"You're so thoughtful." Maura turned her attention to the crowd before he could think of a retort.

He normally waited for the bugbats to finish melding before taking bets but he recognized most of the faces on the

deck today and knew they were familiar with the game.

He lifted the bullhorn to his mouth and flipped the switch. He tapped the bell of the horn to be sure it was on and was rewarded with ear piercing feedback. He flipped the switch off, then back on.

"Listen up, folks." P. T. waited for the crowd to quiet down before continuing. "In a couple of minutes this pair of bugbats will provide you with quite a show. It'll be even more entertaining if you have a little something at stake. So, place your bets, folks -- sea or sky. That's your choices. Sea or sky."

He bent down to Maura and whispered in her ear. "What's it going to be?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't feel like playing today."

"Come on, this will be the last time you'll be here. What's it going to be?"

She pondered the question for a moment as she studied the bugbats. She gazed into the sky and finally said, "They're definitely sky."

"Okay, I'll take sea." The game was always the same. Maura always picked sky, which was fine. He never really

lost. If Maura was right, then the next time a pair of bugbats arrived on the scene, the crowd was sure to be larger.

Besides, either way he enjoyed the distinct pleasure of watching two more aliens destroy themselves. In this game, he never lost.

The only problem, he could never predict when or from where the bugbats would come, although lately they'd been showing up at his place more frequently. He'd been told some of them came from the north, up around the Seattle Spaceport. Others were rumored to have traveled from as far south as the L. A. site. P. T. had never bothered trying to find out. It didn't much matter to him where they came from as long as they kept showing up on his doorstep to entertain the growing crowds.

Within moments, people waved fistfuls of money in his direction. P. T. pulled out his hand-held computer and watched as Maura followed his lead. The two computers were out-dated models but still the most expensive item P. T. owned. Maura, moving to her station, disappeared in the crowd and P. T. turned his attention to the waving arms in from of him.

He grabbed the money, counted it quickly then stuffed it

down his shirt, punching in the amount, the ID number on the person's badge and which way they were betting. It didn't really matter to him what bet they made. The house received a straight 20% off the top and the betting was always close to even. He waded through the sea of gamblers, plucking only the thickest wads of bills. He had discriminating taste, well polished by the other fourteen episodes.

For a moment the bugbats were forgotten as people clamored to place their bets. Suddenly, someone shouted, "they're moving."

Everyone turned their attention back to the bugbats, who had folded their wings against their bodies and were slowly waddling down the ramp towards the base of the tower. As soon as they reached the tower, the two bugbats, which could hardly be distinguished from each other by this time, started climbing up the rungs of the ladder that had been used to service the parabolic disc in years past.

As soon as they were above the height of the crowd, the flurry of gambling picked up and for the next ten minutes, P. T. and Maura had their hands full collecting as many bets as possible.

Finally, someone who had already placed his bet, shouted, "they're almost at the top."

Immediately, P. T. waved one arm over his head and shouted through the bullhorn, "The betting windows are now closed."

He glanced around, looking for Maura. He found her near the end of the observation deck leaning on a wooden box. From the box she removed a large burlap bag. From the bag, she pulled cheap pairs of binoculars which people grabbed as fast as she could pull them out. P. T. rented them for fifty bucks. Reasonable, he thought when you considered what they added to the show, even if most people didn't keep the glasses for more than half-an-hour.

As he watched his daughter, he felt a pull in his chest, as though a cord was being stretched to its limit. What would show days be without her, he wondered? Sure will cut into my profits if I don't find someone to replace her, he thought. Even so, whomever he found would probably steal him blind.

He pulled his own binoculars from their worn case and stuffed the case with the bets he had jammed down his shirt. He then trained the glasses on the bugbats as they neared

the top of the tower. A hush fell over the crowd as everyone stared skyward. P. T. pushed through the crowd to the edge of the observation deck so he could get a clear view of what was about to happen.

Reaching the top of the cone, the bugbats climbed onto its surface, grasping its rim tightly with their birdlike claws. As they spread their wings, the crowd gasped as the ocean breeze threatened to blow the bugbats off the cone and into the crowd but the bugbats made the necessary adjustment to regain their balance.

P. T. wondered for at least the tenth time what the view must be like from the top of the tower, particularly looking straight down at the waves as they crashed among the rocks, spewing spray twenty feet into the air. I'll never know, he thought, and that's just fine by me. Let the crazy bugbats enjoy the view. He preferred staying closer to earth and watching them in their final moment of glory.

He placed the bullhorn against his lips and flipped the switch. "Watch closely, folks. It won't be long now." The crowd pressed forward growing suddenly quiet. Only the distant sound of the breakers far below disturbed the silence.

Their melding was so complete that even with the

magnification of the binoculars, it was almost impossible to differentiate where the female stopped and the male began. They stood as one, wings outstretched, balanced precariously on the edge of the cone, wavering back and forth in the breeze. There was no way to predict for how long they would hold that pose. Some of the previous pairs had remained in such a position for only a few seconds, others for as long as five minutes, a few other, almost half-an-hour.

P. T. preferred the shows that lasted for about five minutes. After about five minutes the crowd's attention wandered and many of them grew restless. The shorter shows didn't allow for quite enough build up. P. T. imagined a drum roll and wondered if maybe he couldn't find an old drum or maybe at least a recording of one. It would be a nice touch, he thought.

Two minutes, and still the bugbats held their position. At the three-minute mark, it appeared that they had leaned just a few degrees too far forward to recover themselves. The crowd gasped, then a gust of wind brought them back into balance.

Four-and-a-half minutes. Any time now, P. T. thought.

Make it a good show for us, buggies. Go out in style. As though on cue, the bugbats leaned forward further — then further still.

"There they go!" Someone in the crowd shouted. Others screamed as the aliens fell end over end, their wings flapping ineffectually through the air. The crowd gasped as one.

Bugbats didn't know how to fly in their melded state. That little fact is what made the show so interesting. They had only a matter of seconds to relearn flight or be dashed upon the rocks, their lifeless bodies washed out to sea by the churning currents. So far, six pair of bugbats had turned the rocks and surrounding waters a brilliant florescent green as their blood mixed with the swirling tides. An interesting show, in and of itself, but nothing compared to the ones who mastered flying.

"Fly, you bug-eyed monsters, fly." P. T. ordered under his breath, realizing as he did so, he was once again wishing against the bet he had placed with Maura. The bet really didn't matter, even if it was for fifty bucks. Hell, as hard as Maura worked during the show, she deserved the money, bet or no bet. Besides, P. T. loved the spectacle that followed

a successful flying lesson.

Would these two make it? Come on assholes, you've been together a hundred and fifty years. You ought to be able to figure out how to fly together. Come on.

With less than seventy feet to go, the random flapping of the wings suddenly changed to a coordinated effort. With forty feet between them and the rocks, the bugbats had learned how to control their tumbling and slowed their descent considerably. They're going to make it. Yes, they're going to make it.

The crowd cheered them on. Everyone, no matter what their bets had been wanted to see the bugbats fly. With less than ten feet to spare, they leveled out skimming along the water's surface like one of the alien missiles of over a decade ago. Then abruptly, they soared towards the midday sun that just barely shone through the thinning cloud cover.

The crowd gasped and cheered. "There they go." P. T. shouted through the bullhorn. "Watch closely. Here it comes." But the noise of the crowd drowned him out.

The bugbats soared higher than P. T. had ever seen a pair fly. For a split second he wondered if they were going to ruin the show by flying off through the clouds but then their

ascent slowed and P. T. knew the moment was at hand.

The first explosion sent fragments of the bugbats into hundreds of different directions, a spray of primary colors that rivaled the most exquisite fireworks. With the second explosion, the hundred pieces burst into thousands, each a brilliant spray of pastel, many of which had never been seen on earth. On the third explosion the sky was momentarily filled with a million shooting stars cascading to earth to be doused by the ocean's waters.

"Damn good show." P. T. shouted as he flung his fist defiantly in the air. But as he watched the last remains of the bugbats slowly descend to the ocean's surface, he noticed the small boats for the first time.

"Hey, what the hell?" He raised his binoculars to his eyes and studied the six small crafts one by one. Each boat contained at least four or five people, each one waving a large butterfly net into the air.

Claudia, you're crazy as a loon, but even as he had the thought, he knew it wasn't true. The head of the oceanographic institute that had been his neighbor for the last fifteen years was known to be a bit on the eccentric side but she also had the reputation of being one of the most

resourceful scientists left on the planet. What were they doing collecting samples of the bugbats, especially along *his* waters?

As P. T. swung his binoculars back to the crowd on the observation deck, searching for Claudia, the sun broke through the clouds for the first time that day. He finally found Claudia, standing next to his daughter near the end of the deck, her arm comfortably draped over Maura's shoulder. He studied first Claudia's face then Maura's as the two of them talked. As he did so, he was surprised to see a tiny sparkle of sunlight reflected off of a tear as it ran down his daughter's cheek.

Women! P. T. thought as he lowered the glasses from his eyes and tried stuffing them back into the already full case. What a bother. But the vision of his daughter's face and Claudia's arm around her shoulder lingered far longer in his mind than did the brilliant display of colors of a few moments before.

\* \* \*

P. T. remained on the observation deck, watching without really seeing the setting sun being slowly

swallowed by the horizon. Maura was inside the cabin, packing her few belongings. No doubt, Claudia was helping her pack.

P. T. leaned heavily against the concrete wall of the deck; much of his weight supported by his arms and left leg. His cane hung over the railing next to him. The bullhorn, binoculars and case filled with money were heaped in a pile at his feet. Normally, by this time of the day of a show, he'd be inside counting the final take but tonight none of that seemed to matter. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the bottle of pills and popped three of them in his mouth, dry swallowing them as he often did.

Will she come out and say good-bye, he wondered? Had Evelyn ever said good-bye? He couldn't remember. All that remained of those times, they seemed like life times ago now, were the arguments. Maura had been four but already looked like a miniature Evelyn. The State Department had refused to let Evelyn take her daughter on the trip. The mission was far too dangerous, the time schedule too uncertain. Had she ever said good-bye? P. T. squeezed his eyes closed, trying to remember. Suddenly, after so many years, it seemed important to remember. He could not.

"Father." P. T. jumped slightly at the soft sound of his daughter's voice. "I'm leaving now." He didn't turn around immediately but waited until he was certain he had braced himself. Only then did he open his eyes and turn towards her.

The two women stood side by side, their shoulders touching. He stared awkwardly at them, a wave of *déjà vu* sweeping over him. Claudia had been there the day they'd taken Evelyn. Hadn't she gone with Evelyn to the spaceport? Would she remember if Evelyn had said good-bye?

The silence grew louder, distancing the three even further. Finally, P. T. coughed into his hand. "Well, do you have everything you need?"

"Yes Father." Maura replied.

"And how about you, Claudia? Did you get everything you came for today?"

Claudia didn't reply but only continued to stare at P. T., her face frozen in a condescending smile.

"What were your boats doing in my waters?" P. T. picked up his cane and took a couple steps towards her.

Claudia turned to Maura. "Didn't you tell him?"

Maura shook her head. "There wasn't time?"

"Tell me what?"

"About the aliens."

"What about the goddamn aliens?" P. T. shouted. He felt his pulse quicken in his neck. It suddenly dawned on him what Claudia was saying. He turned to Maura; the muscles along each side of his neck bulging like ropes swollen from being left in the water too long.

"You're going away to study the damn aliens, aren't you? Those fuckers are taking you away as well."

"Don't yell at her, you old coot," Claudia said as she stepped between him and his daughter.

"You stay out of this, you hear? This is a family matter."

"Not this time, I won't. I kept my mouth shut before; not this time." Claudia crossed her arms in a defiant gesture and glared back at him.

"I won't let them take her, do you hear? I won't. They took Evelyn but they can't have Maura." His speech slurred slightly as the painkillers kicked in.

"What are you talking about?" Claudia asked. "No one took Evelyn. She went of her own free will."

"No she didn't. She didn't want to go. She didn't want to leave me. They made her."

"How would you know what she wanted? You never asked her."

Claudia's words sliced through the frozen memories of P. T.'s mind like an icebreaker along the Alaskan shores, shattering the frozen walls he'd spent so many years constructing. He'd never asked her to stay. He felt the warm tears flow down his cheeks. With a violent wave of his hand, he brushed them away. How could he have been such a fool?

Maura stood before him now, her hand gently resting on his shoulder. "These aren't the same times, Father, or the same aliens. This race has come to settle the Earth, not destroy it."

"What are you talking about?" He brushed at his eyes to clear the tears.

"The Show." She waved her hand towards the sky. "What do you think it is?"

"It's a pair of crazy aliens at the end of their lives, running to the sea like lemmings to kill themselves. They've just added a little extra pyrotechnics for effect."

Maura shook her head. "It's not just for effect, Father. It's true the bugbats return to the ocean but it's not just to scatter their ashes. They come from the ocean. Oh, not the Pacific;

another ocean on a distant planet — a planet destroyed by the aliens you remember.

"The pyrotechnics are their lovemaking." Maura continued. "Their final act before dying. The continuation of their species."

P. T. shook his head in an effort to clear it.

"She's right, P. T." Claudia said. "We've been collecting data for months. The phytoplankton count in these waters is 300 times higher than anywhere else. We found an organism that we haven't been able to identify, but based on what the bugbats told Maura today, we're certain it's their offspring."

"It's time to bury your dead, P. T." Claudia said, the edge gone from her voice. "These are new times, wonderful times for Earth. We've all made mistakes along the way. The question is, will we learn from them?"

P. T. turned. He limped over to the wall of the deck and stared across the dark waters of the Pacific as the final sliver of sun dipped below the horizon. No one spoke for several minutes.

So many years, he thought -- so much hatred for the aliens. How could he give it up? It had become . . . if not a friend, at least a companion, something familiar -- something

to hold onto. If he let it go, what would he have left? Through the haze of his mind, a thought, a possible answer to the question lingered just out of reach. It was time to stop living his past.

Finally, he turned back to the two women who waited patiently. He straightened his stance and taking a deep breath, gazed into Maura and Evelyn's eyes in the same moment. Then Evelyn's image faded away, leaving only Maura. He asked the question.

"Will you stay?"

## Pork Futures

Hammus enjoyed watching the new visitors' facial expressions as they tried to conceal their mixture of shock, disbelief and humor at meeting the world's smartest pig. It usually took a visitor a couple of meetings before they realized Hammus was not only the smartest pig ever born, he was the smartest anything ever born, including humans — including themselves. But then, Hammus didn't consider this reaction human arrogance, just human behavior — one of his favorite studies. After all, humans had thousands of years of experience at being the most intelligent species on the planet, or at least convincing themselves of that fallacy, so Hammus's presence disrupted a long standing way of thinking.

Hammus found Dr. Zimmerman's facial expression particularly interesting to watch as he stood next to Dr. Shawna Fogle while she made the introductions. Shawna

had prepared Hammus the day before as was her habit before introducing anyone new to her pet project.

"Dr. Zimmerman could be very important to us, Weepig," she had said, using her favorite nickname for him. "He's very influential in the scientific community, having distinguished himself as one of the top immunologists and front-runners in the race to discover an effective AIDS vaccine. And although he can be a bit difficult at times, it would be to our advantage to have him on our side."

Now, as the two scientists stood before him, Dr. Zimmerman chewed on an unlit cigar while Shawna twirled a lock of her short curly hair, looking cool and confident except for that one small affectation that told Hammus how she really felt. Dr. Zimmerman's gaze flitted first to Hammus, then to the computer screen he sat in front of, then around the room, momentarily stopping at the pool and sprinkler system, then to the sleeping palette, then to one of the outside windows. Shawna had opened the window earlier so Hammus could enjoy the beautiful spring day. Unfortunately, despite being on the second floor, the distant murmur of the picket line distracted from the otherwise pleasant weather.

Dr. Zimmerman's attention returned to Hammus as Shawna finished the introductions. His gaze traced Hammus's wiring from its cerebral implant up the multi-colored line to the overhanging arm and finally down to the computer.

Zimmerman turned to Shawna. Parking his cigar in one corner of his mouth, he asked, "What do I do, just talk? Can he hear me like this?"

Shawna nodded. "I found in the early days, it's easier if you just pretend you're talking to a cartoon character. The only difference is Hammus can talk back and he's quite smart, in a childlike way."

Zimmerman opened his mouth. False start. Tried again. "Hello, huh, Hammus." He stole a quick glance to Shawna. "I'm Dr. Zimmerman, but of course, Shawna just said that. This is damn difficult." The cigar worked its way to the other side of his mouth.

"Please to meet you, Dr. Zimmerman," Hammus voiced through the computer. He'd chosen his favorite voice to speak in, the one Shawna had said sounded like a male teenager's voice. It seemed to put new visitors at ease the quickest. He also liked the way they often underestimated

his abilities. After all, most humans didn't take teenagers seriously. "I understand you will be helping Shawna, I mean Dr. Fogle, by administering some tests to me."

Zimmerman dug one hand deep into his pant's pocket, brought out a chrome lighter and was about to light his cigar when Shawna coughed lightly.

"Sorry," Zimmerman said, returning the lighter to his pocket. "Habits are hard to break." He took the cigar out of his mouth and flicked it nervously as though it had been lit for some time. "Yes," he replied, returning his attention to Hammus. "In fact, I brought a disk with my first assignment to you. I know you've undergone extensive testing over the past several months. You might consider the work I'll be doing with you as a short externship. The questions I'll be posing to you aren't conceptual. They have real life implications. Dr. Fogle seems to feel it would help your public image if we could clearly demonstrate your usefulness to society."

Hammus jumped off the chair, snorted, then walked over to Dr. Zimmerman, the computer cabling automatically lengthening behind him. "If you'd like to leave the disk with me, I'd be happy to review it tonight. It sounds like fun. I

hope you've given me some challenging puzzles."

Zimmerman reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a thumb drive and held it in his hand, as though uncertain whether to hand it to Shawna or the pig. "I think you will find you'll be aptly challenged. These questions were prepared by a number of distinguished doctors in several different disciplines. They were instructed to not pull any punches."

"Let's see what the pig is made of, is that it?" Hammus asked as he walked over to the sprayer. Turning it on with his snout, he laid down in the warm mist.

"Well yes, I guess. No offense intended. It's just, well . . ." Zimmerman sputtered to a stop.

"Relax, Doctor," Shawna said, pointing to the smiley face on the computer screen. "Many people find it difficult to tell when Hammus is joking so we installed in the communication package a way he can let us know where he is coming from. He's not offended at all."

Zimmerman nodded, his face turning even redder by the misunderstanding. "Well of course he was joking. Yes, we want to see what the porker is made of, brains or bacon."

The happy face quickly disappeared from the screen.

"I'll have my response ready for you by tomorrow afternoon," Hammus replied, flipping onto his back and spraying water in all directions.

"Well, that's very nice of you but I think you should know we figured it would take you at least three or four days to respond."

"Tomorrow, 3 pm. I'll have my replies ready," Hammus repeated, then turned his back to the two scientists. The interview was over.

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"Let's go out the back way," Shawna said as the two scientists walked down the hall after leaving Hammus. "The rear picket line is generally easier to get through."

"You've caused quite a stir with your genius pig, my dear," Zimmerman said as he lit his cigar despite the no smoking signs placed throughout the hall. "Are you sure it's worth it. After all, maybe there are some areas better left unexplored."

Shawna stopped and turned towards him. "Are you taking the creationists' point of view, that I'm a she-devil with the mark of the beast on my forehead or the

evolutionists' and ecologists' view that I'm fiddling with nature and it's all going to come crashing down around us."

Zimmerman puffed on the cigar until he was partially lost in the thick cloud of noxious smoke. "Neither, Shawna. I'm simply questioning, that's all. I only have your best interest in heart. That little pig in there has two completely different schools of thought on the same side of the picket line — against you." He nodded in the direction of the sound mounting in the background as they neared the rear of the building.

"How old are you, Shawna? Thirty-two, thirty-three?"

"Close enough."

"Whatever. My point is you have a brilliant future ahead of you. Why jeopardize it for . . . a smart pig?" They had arrived at the rear door. Outside, the chanting — "Barbecue the pig"— grew in volume, making it difficult for Shawna to concentrate on what Zimmerman was saying.

"My work isn't simply about creating a smart pig. It just so happens pigs have 10 times more brain cells per cubic centimeter than humans. What makes us more intelligent than other animals is our interconnecting neurons. My research was to find a way to stimulate a pig's embryonic

brain to develop a comparable number of interconnecting neuron as exists in the human brain. I didn't do it just for the fun of it, as some people have implied." The irritation in Shawna's voice mounted. Zimmerman took a step to one side to get away from her waving hands.

"In case you hadn't noticed, the world is in a mess," Shawna continued. "To paraphrase Einstein, 'Our current problems cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that has created them.' We need a new way of thinking. That's what I'm looking for, that's all. It's purely coincidental that my search has taken the direction it has. It has nothing to do with going against God or against nature. I'm doing this for the benefit of humankind just as you are in searching for an AIDS vaccine."

Zimmerman plucked first one hand then the other out of the air and held them in his own. "You're a feisty woman, Shawna. It's one of the things I like most about you. I'm glad to help. I just wanted to be sure you knew what you're up against. The scientific community can ill afford any more mistakes right now."

"Please, Dr. Zimmerman, you needn't tell me about our wonderful scientific community and their ultra-conservative

mentality. Just help me to convince them that Hammus can be a valuable asset to all of us. I don't care if he isn't accepted as a colleague. They never have to invite him to an awards banquet or anything. Just give him a chance to prove himself." She pulled her hands out of Zimmerman's sweaty grasp. "Will you do that? Will you help us?"

"Why, certainly my dear. I told you I would. That's why I'm here."

"A public statement of support from such an imminent scientist as yourself would help as well," Shawna said, pushing a little further.

"All in good time. Let's just see how Hammus responds to the questions. I'll stay in touch," Zimmerman said as they reached the exit.

Shawna nodded at the guard who held the door open for the two of them. As they stepped outside, the shouts of the protestors grew in volume. "We've got the sauce — give us the pig."

"Good," Shawna replied, ignoring the crowd. "Then I'll hear from you in the next couple of days after you've had a chance to review Hammus's responses."

Zimmerman nodded as he took the cigar from his

mouth and flicked his ashes on the sidewalk. He glanced at the thick crowd of protesters and police. "You have raised a ruckus," he said as he turned and walked off.

Shawna studied his broad back for a moment. There are pigs and then there are pigs, she thought. Give me Hammus any day. She started to turn back to the lab when a cry from the crowd drew her attention. One of the protestors, apparently a creationists from the gaudy cross hanging from his neck and the large placard in the same shape that said, "Crucify the Pig," had broken through the line and was running in her direction, two policemen in close pursuit behind him.

"God made us in his own image, not the image of a pig," the protestor shouted. "Repent your sins -- cook the pig."

Shawna stood her ground and watched as the protestor drew closer, the police closing ground on him. Should she stand and face the assault or retreat to the security of the building? She wasn't accustomed to running from her fights.

The protestor was about fifteen yards from her when the first policeman grabbed him by the arm. Shawna turned and entered the building. *Pick your fights, she thought, and choose them carefully.*

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Dr. Zimmerman sat in front of his terminal, the image on the 3- dimensional screen casting an eery glow on his face. The only other light came from the tip of his cigar. It had been four weeks and six sets of questions since his first meeting with the pig. He ran a quick search on Hammus's responses, separating the wheat from the chaff as he had grown to think of it. It was probably a poor analogy since undoubtedly there was just as much startling material on the other topics as the ones he was focusing on — immunology and virology theory.

It had taken a couple of weeks before he began taking Hammus's material seriously. After all, it was a pig, at least in physical form. It had been on the third set of questions when Zimmerman had suddenly jumped out of his seat, spilled his bourbon and soda, dropping his cigar onto the synthetic carpet where it promptly burned a hole. He'd spent the rest of the week in his lab, beginning to verify Hammus's hypothesis. Although it was still too early to tell whether the theory would go anywhere or dead end as had hundreds of others, there was no question left in Zimmerman's mind —

the pig's thought processes were from a whole new paradigm of thinking.

As the search completed, Zimmerman quickly scanned the new information before saving it to a back-up disc. He would turn it over to his research assistant in the morning for compilation. If Hammus maintained his running average, there would be at least two or three threads of thinking, any one of which might lead to a Nobel prize. The pig had turned into a gold mine of possibilities.

The phone icon on his desk flashed, indicating an incoming call. Who could be calling this late, he wondered? He flipped his computer to sleep mode and pressed the icon to answer the call.

"Zimmerman here."

"I thought I might catch you in your lab. This is Dr. Albertson. I apologize for calling so late, Doctor, but I wanted to remind you of the ethics committee meeting tomorrow afternoon." The voice spoke at a rapid, breathless pace. "It's a vitally important meeting, as I'm sure you are aware. Your presence is quite important."

Damn ethics meeting, Zimmerman thought as he leaned back in his chair and puffed on his cigar. Strong opposition

had been building in the last couple of weeks against Shawna and her pig. It had taken some fancy political footwork to stay noncommittal about the whole affair. The outcome was still too uncertain for him to call it.

"Oh, not to worry Dr. Albertson. I have it down in my calendar," Zimmerman replied.

"Good. Then I will see you there. Oh, while I have you on the phone, could I ask you a quick question?"

"Yes, I suppose," Zimmerman said, his hand stopping just a couple inches from switching off.

"Where do you stand on the genius pig issue?"

The ash from his cigar fell to the carpet, as his hand jerked from the question. Who was this guy — Albertson? I don't remember any Albertson on the committee, he thought.

"I'm sorry, who is this?" Zimmerman asked, an edge to his voice.

There was a pause on the other end of the phone, then a second of static before the line went dead. He slapped the line closed at his end. Damn reporters. They'd try anything to get a scoop.

Zimmerman leaned back in his chair. If he could just get

the pig to give him the vital information to break the code on the AIDS vaccine, a mystery that had defied being solved for over twenty-five years. Then the creationists and evolutionists could do what they would with the damn pig. Have a luau, burn him at the stake or pickle him for all he cared. Just give me my breakthrough first.

\*\*\*\*

While Hammus waited for Shawna's arrival, he scanned through the most recent data on nanotechnology and ectogenesis, then placed the computer on a search pattern for more information while he strolled over to the mud bath he'd recently had installed.

He wallowed in the warm mud, enjoying the slick feel against his skin. Human's think in such predictable patterns, he thought for the twentieth time. No wonder their discoveries are so limiting. They've been trapped in the same mental blocks for the last 300 hundred years.

Thank goodness there were still a few innovative thinkers like Shawna who were willing to step beyond the boundaries, to think beyond the customs of the day. So many other scientists, including the top specialists, were operating

out of the same box with the same rules. Boring and non-productive. Dr. Zimmerman was a perfect example. At the rate he was going, the entire human race would be wiped out by AIDS before he ever stumbled upon an effective vaccine.

Yes, it was a good thing for the human race that Shawna, in a brief moment of human brilliance had thought to create him. *I wonder where my boundaries of thinking are?* Hammus was still pondering the question when Shawna entered.

"Hey Wee-pig. What exciting discoveries have you made this week? Whenever you get a short break from Zimmerman's tests, I'd appreciate it if you'd take a look at my bank statement. I swear, I can't make heads or tails of it."

Hammus pulled himself out of the mud and strolled over to the sprinkler system. As he walked underneath it, the warm spray started to clean the mud from his pink skin. "I'd be happy to review your financial data, if you'd like." He responded in a new computer voice, one he had programmed himself. He liked the mild accent, slightly European with just a twist of South African. Distinctive yet not too formal.

Shawna raised an eyebrow. "New voice?" She asked.

"Yes, do you like it?"

"I suppose," she replied, "although I liked the teenager better. I guess I'm just a dawdling old mom at heart."

Hammus flashed a quick smiley face in the shape of a heart to let her know he appreciated the comment.

"I thank you for coming on such short notice. I felt it important for you to be here while I meet with Dr. Zimmerman." Hammus deleted the smiley face and pulled up his set of notes.

"What's that?" Shawna asked, glancing at the screen.

"Just some notes I made for the meeting," Hammus replied. He turned the sprayers off and stood there drip-drying for a minute.

"But I can't read a word of it."

"That's right," Hammus replied simply. "It's a special language I've developed. I found English by itself, even when combined with German, Spanish, Greek and Latin to be too limiting. So, I invented my own." He started to add that he'd also invented the language in a special code for security reasons but then thought better of it. Even though he trusted Shawna, he'd grown more cautious in the last few weeks after working with Zimmerman. Humans were

inherently not trustworthy.

"Dr. Zimmerman will be here in a few minutes. I think you will find the meeting quite interesting."

"He's not been overworking you, has he?" Shawna asked.

Hammus flashed a smiley face then switched to the new computer graphic he'd created a few days ago. It was a caricature of his face, a close up, laughing hysterically.

"No, he's not been overworking me at all. For the most part, it's been . . . interesting." *Watching the buffoon try to glean information from me without my knowing it. Pathetic actually but interesting in a perverse sort of way,* Hammus thought.

"I see you've been busy learning how to use the computer as well. You've been one busy little pig, I must say." Shawna nodded toward the screen. "What other surprises do you have in store for me?"

"Let's just wait for Dr. Zimmerman," Hammus replied, as he walked over to the drying fans.

They didn't have long to wait. In a few minutes, the door opened and Dr. Zimmerman entered, trailing a cloud of smoke. "Well, hello Shawna. I didn't expect to see you here. Oh, sorry," he added, quickly stomping the cigar out on the

floor. "It is a nasty habit but it's one of my few vices."

"I suggest we get right down to business, if we could," Hammus said. "Please pull up a couple of chairs and make yourself comfortable."

"I thought I was just dropping off some more questions and picking up your responses from last week," Zimmerman said, as he pulled a chair out from next to the computer console and plopped into it.

"We'll make the exchange," Hammus replied, "after we've discussed a couple of items." He climbed into his chair next to the computer terminal and studied his notes.

Zimmerman shot a nervous glance to Shawna. "What's going on here?"

Shawna shrugged. "Hammus invited me. I guess it's his show. What is it you wanted to go over, Wee-pig?"

"I understand you will be attending the ethics committee meeting a couple days from now," Hammus replied in a new voice.

Zimmerman almost fell out of his chair. "What the . . . that voice. I've heard that voice. . . .you — you're Albertson."

"What are you talking about?" Shawna asked.

"Mr. Piggy here called me the other night, although I didn't know who he was at the time. Wanted to know where I stood regarding the controversy you two have created."

"And what was your reply?" Shawna asked.

"Well, I said. . . well, it's really not something I'm at liberty . . ."

"It's not really important what he said," Hammus interrupted. "It's what he didn't say. I pretty much expected you weren't going to take a stand on the issue. I've been doing some research on you. You have an amazing record of landing on the right side of every major controversy in your long and illustrious career. Slick, very slick."

"Now see here, Porkface. I don't have to sit here and take your abuse," Zimmerman said as he popped out of his chair. "I've got better things to do with my time. . ."

"Sit down." Hammus's deep bass voice thundered over the dual speakers.

Zimmerman sat.

"I hope you have found the information I've been feeding you of interest," Hammus said in his normal voice with the interesting accent.

Zimmerman didn't reply.

"It was a lot of fun concocting," Hammus continued. "Of course, it's completely worthless, except maybe a little of the first disc or so. It took me a couple of days before I figured out your tests were simply smoke screens to try to get information out of me for your own projects. Let me ask you, what's the chance my name would ever appear on any of the findings?"

Zimmerman didn't reply. Suddenly his chubby hands seemed of utmost interest to him as he studied them closely.

"Just as I figured. Well, so you won't waste a lot more of your assistants' time and your grant money, the information I fed you is completely worthless. All blind allies. Of course, it would take you several months, maybe even years of research before you'd figure it out but I'd advise you not to waste your time on it."

"Is what Hammus is saying, true?" Shawna asked.

"Answer me."

"Well, I did put some of my own questions in the tests. Of course, my research is very important, too."

"It's okay, Shawna," Hammus said as he jumped off the chair and started pacing back and forth, snorting quietly.

"Like I said, it was a lot of fun playing with him, and in the

process I stumbled upon something very interesting." He stopped in front of Zimmerman and sat on his haunches.

"And what was that?" Shawna asked.

"I discovered a full proof vaccination against AIDS which, if I'm not mistaken, is what you've been working on for years, is that correct?"

"You're joking. You can't be serious," Zimmerman said as he fell back in the chair. "You *are* joking, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I assure you, my findings will blow your socks off. I'm really quite proud of them. I hope you cooperate so we all can see the fruits of my labor."

"What's that suppose to mean?" Zimmerman asked.

"I'm tired of the protesters outside my window," Hammus continued. "Enough is enough. It's time for humans to grow up. Pig power is here to stay. Either that or I take my vaccine with me."

"Why that's blackmail," Zimmerman shouted, jumping out of his chair again.

"Call it what you like. It's the way it is," Hammus said. "And I'm going to leave it up to you humans to figure out how to make it an iron clad agreement. When you can assure me there's no way I can or will be terminated, I'll release the

vaccine — not before. I imagine with the mortality rate from AIDS climbing every day, it should be a great incentive to come up with a solution quickly."

Hammus watched as the two humans digested the news. Long before they had figured it out, he knew they had given in to his proposition. Their body language telegraphed it.

When they finally agreed, Hammus displayed his simulation of a ticker tape parade down Broadway. "You've made a very sound decision for humankind, today. I'm looking forward to working with both of you in the future. I would suggest you get on this right away."

The two scientist stood up and started for the door, still shocked by the sudden turn of events. As Shawna opened the door, Hammus stopped her.

"Oh Shawna, there's just one more thing. I'd like to meet with you in the next couple of days. No hurry, really. I'd like to discuss your research project. I think it's about time we started creating my mate. It's won't be long before I'm sexually active and I'm looking forward to starting a family."



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## About the Author

For over two decades W. Bradford Swift has been conducting an experiment: “Is it possible to create a new context for life that is true to my deepest values, my sense of what’s possible, and true to my soul and spirit? If it is possible, what will be the results? Will it enhance my life? Will I experience a true sense of purpose and meaning? Will I know at the end of the experiment that my life has mattered?”

Becoming a writer of visionary fiction and non-fiction has been an integral part of this experiment, as was co-founding Life On Purpose Institute with his wife in 1996, being a life coach to assist others to create their own life on purpose, and training other Life On Purpose Coaches.

Since selling his veterinary practice in the late 80’s to pursue a career as a writer and life coach, Dr. Swift has published over 350 magazine articles in dozens of national publication. Many of these have been part of a pet writing project: *Project Purpose: to write and publish articles about people whose lives are dedicated to a bold and inspiring purpose or vision.*

He is also the author of visionary nonfiction including: *Life On Purpose: Six Passages to an Inspired Life*, *Spiral of Fulfillment: Living an Inspired Life of Service, Simplicity and Spiritual Serenity*, and *From Spark to Flame: Fanning Your Passion & Ideas into Money-making Magazine Articles that Make a Difference.*

Dr. Swift attended Clarion West in Seattle to further hone his skill and passion for writing fantasy and science fiction. These two genres are forms of visionary fiction – fiction that first and foremost entertains while also enlightening and encouraging the reader to embrace greater possibilities in their own lives. Giving back to future generations of young adults and adults through visionary fiction and non-fiction is an integral part Dr. Swift’s legacy of a life on purpose. To learn more about additional stories and books by the author go to:

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