

# THE HANGINGSTONE RAT

by BARRY B. LONGYEAR

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*Illustration by John Allemand*

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*The line between “who” and “what” is likely to get less and less distinct....*

Early on a late summer morning Artificial Beings Crimes took a call from Okehampton Station reporting a dead bio in North Dartmoor at a place called Hangingstone Hill. The location was seven kilometers south-southeast of the army camp, deceased was a dead male rodent android reported by a hiker: no apparent signs of violence, scene marked, hiker’s statement received, constable standing by. Rodent bios aren’t terribly long lived, and it was likely the fellow simply happened to be on the moor when he pegged it. Likely the death was natural and the owner of the engrams had another meat suit in stasis. Nonetheless, it had to be investigated, and it was a welcome opportunity to get out of the city. At home in Exeter, as I waited for Shad to pick me up with the cruiser, I used Val’s computer and looked up Hangingstone Hill: a minor legend, unremarkable history, third highest elevation on the moor.

“Guy’s here,” Val called from the hallway. She padded into the lounge and hopped up on the desk. I gave her ears a perfunctory scratch. My wife was a Golden Tonkinese.

“Have a good day, dear,” I said as I went to get my coat.

She looked at the computer screen. “You have a call out on the moor?”

I pulled on my coat and sealed it. “Yes. Shouldn’t be much of anything, dear. Dead rat bio reported by a hiker.”

“Well, take care, Harry. I have a premonition.”

I smiled. “Remember your last premonition, dear? Wasn’t it a furball?”

“Even so, Harry, take care. I don’t like rats.”

“I understand rats feel the same way about cats. Good-bye, dear.”

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“We’re coming up on the moor,” Shad quacked. He was a mallard duck bio and flew the cruiser remotely by means of his wireless interface. He had once been a quite famous telly star doing adverts for an insurance firm “in whiteface,” as he put it. We talked old movies for a while then fell silent as we watched the rugged greenness of Dartmoor spread before us.

“Pick up the Vader prang beacon yet?” I asked him.

“We’re right on the wire.”

I looked over the vast expanses of hilly heather, broken only by granite-topped hills, boulder fields, ponds, peat bogs, and stream-carved cleaves. Among them the shadows of clouds seemed fixed in place. I could see for miles. What I failed to see was the constabulary cruiser that was supposed to be waiting for us. “I don’t see the cop supposed to meet us, Shad.”

He glanced at me. “You’re the one who pointed out to me the low esteem in which ABCD is held among the constabulary.”

“This juvenile anchor dragging grows tedious, nevertheless.”

“Hangingstone Hill up ahead,” announced Shad. “Ought to be a movie title,” he concluded whimsically.

I smiled. “*Hangingstone Hill*, a western tale of murder and vengeance, torn from the pages of history, directed by John Ford—”

“—Starring Susan Hayward and Gary Cooper,” completed Shad.

“I always loved Susan Hayward. Wasn’t there a Gary Cooper film called *The Hanging Tree*?” I asked.

“Nineteen fifty-six,” said Shad, flaunting his vast cinematic knowledge. The theater was never far from the former insurance duck’s thoughts. “Gary Cooper and Maria Schell,” he continued. “You know, *The Hanging Tree* was George C. Scott’s movie debut.”

“Really. Well, Shad, I know why Hangingstone Hill carries such an ominous name.”

“Oh?” He was silent for a beat. “You do?”

It does me good to stump the duck once in awhile. “It has to do with a natural phenomenon, Shad: a rather big plate of rock called a logan stone that hangs out over another rock on the side of the hill.”

“That’s disappointing,” Shad remarked. “With a name like Hangingstone Hill the place ought to be covered in ghosts left over from innumerable medieval neck stretchings. *Turnkeys With Gibbets*,” imagined Shad aloud. “A Cranberry and Gravy Production. You can be the sheriff. Everyone expects British sheriffs to look like Basil Rathbone.”

“Sorry?” I said. “Cranberries?”

“A Thanksgiving reference. U.S. holiday? Turkey and giblets? Forget it.”

I glanced at Shad. “Legend has it that a seventeenth-century mayor of Okehampton was hanged on Hangingstone Hill.”

“They must’ve brought their own gibbet with them,” said Shad as he changed heading a few degrees south. “Look at the hills around here. Not a tree in sight. Okay,” he relented, “why’d they hang him?”

“Stealing sheep.”

“They gave him the rope on a mutton rap? Tough town.”

“I’m certain the mayor represented the charges against him as being politically motivated.”

“So that’s where that came from.”

“Indeed, but it wasn’t only the mayor’s body that was sentenced. His spirit was sentenced to empty with a sieve Cranmere Pool—that’s at the west foot of Hangingstone.”

“Now that’s hard time.”

“Not at all,” I said. “The clever fellow lined his sieve with sheepskin

and proceeded to empty the thing. Cranmere Pool has no water in it.”

“So he beat the rap?”

“Not quite. The punishment was altered to having to weave the sand at the bottom of the pool into a rope. Poor fellow’s still at it, I imagine.” I again looked for the constabulary electric. “Shad, I still do not see a car.”

“Nothing on the instruments,” he responded. “The scene analyzer beacon is located on the northwest side of the hill. What’s that hut down there?”

Directly in front of us was a high hill with gentle slopes. On its north end were the remains of a stone shack, its shed roof partially collapsed. “That’s an old artillery observation post. For centuries this end of the moor was an artillery range. Incidentally, ducks, the army still advises hikers not to pick up any curiosities they might find out here.”

“Souvenir go boom; important safety tip.”

“Very well, Shad, ring up Okehampton Station and find out where their missing constable is. Meanwhile, put us down near the prang.”

While he did that I turned in my seat and ran up the mechs: vehicles of various sizes and configurations, big walking to micro flying, into which we could copy to get into difficult places allowing us to collect and analyze evidence. Shad put down the cruiser on the northwest slope of the hill about five meters above the aforementioned logan stone. The sunlight reflected from the polished metal Vader prang, cop slang for the pencil-thin scene analyzer mounted on the southwest edge of the rock plate. It would be facing the corpse. I looked in that direction but could see nothing among the heather. It was, at least, not a terribly large rat.

“Jaggs, guy on the phone says Okehampton cops can’t find any Hangingstone Hill report. He says they didn’t call in a dead bio to ABCD this morning.”

“Rubbish.”

“The call would have been automatically logged and recorded, according to their man PC Sudbury, and he can find no such record in the computer. Case closed.”

“Tell him to pull his ruddy thumb out and try again.”

The doors rotated up, and I held up a hand to Shad. "Before that, let's see if we even have a body. This is beginning to look suspiciously like a hoax."

"Local yokels having a little fun with ABCD?" suggested the duck.

"Perhaps the constabulary having a laugh." I climbed out of the cruiser, stood, and took a few steps down toward the stone. Southwest of it, perhaps two meters distant, I could see in the heather what looked like the body of a rat with a body comparable in size to that of a gray squirrel. It was lying on its left side. Shad flew up next to me. "Okay," he said as he landed, "at least we have a corpse."

"Yes. A bio. I can still read the receiver signal. Perhaps we can harvest the engrams before it zeroes out."

"I wonder why someone would copy into a rat bio?" said Shad. "Why would they *want* to? And what's a rat with a human engram imprint doing out here in the boonies—and with no cheese?"

"Perhaps he ate all his cheese and expired from despondency," I suggested facetiously. "I'll sort the calls, Shad. After you make a try on the engrams, get a scan, temp, DNA, and ID."

"You got it."

I rang up Okehampton Camp army base, and reception was scratchy. Either my phone was having problems or not all government departments communicate via satellite. As the operator there began passing my call around from pillar to post by slowest means available, I climbed uphill in hopes of better reception. As I stood facing the direction of the army camp, High Willhays and Yes tors visible in the distant haze, a Sergeant Vickers of the military police came on. A rather long-winded bloke, he was about to do my head in explaining, with maximum words per bit of information, he had no notice, knowledge, or note of anything concerning dead bodies of any kind, type, condition, description, or designation, today or at any other time, and, moreover, even should it be discovered in some manner at some time in the future that he had—

As I tensed, waiting for the fellow to take a breath for interruption purposes, the earth was pulled from beneath my feet and an enormous hand of sound, force, and heat rose and swatted me like a mosquito sending me flying up into absolute blackness.

Splitting headache. Overpowering silence, my body numb. My eyes opened to a confusing smear of images. A strong chemical odor stung my nostrils. Gradually the images resolved into fuzzy clouds, fuzzy hills, fuzzy sky, and shadows, everything through a stinking gray mist. Pain began invading my right ankle, my legs, then my whole body. I tried to call Shad, but I couldn't hear my own voice. I gently rolled to my right and saw blood appearing on my right hand and sleeve. Managed to push against the ground until I was sitting upright, weaving, everything threatening to go black again. I couldn't see the cruiser.

My hand rested upon the edge of a very warm rock. I looked at the stone and it was a largish plate that could have been the twin of the hanging stone, but bottom side up. Then I saw a fuzzy gleam of silver and realized it was the self same hanging stone, the scene analyzer apparently none the worse for wear and still attached to its edge. The rock had landed just a few centimeters from me.

I looked for my phone and it was missing, probably somewhere beneath the rock. Tried shouting for Shad again, but still couldn't hear myself. Struggled to my feet, standing there feeling lightheaded, a sharp pain in my right ankle. I looked down and saw to my dismay both shoes and socks missing, my right ankle swollen, and my right foot at a funny angle. My trouser cuffs were shredded. While I was staring at that, blood spatter appeared on my feet. It was coming from my nose. Further exploration revealed blood coming from my ears as well. Principal flow, though, came from a cut on the left side of my neck. I held my hand over it and stumbled down slope toward the stone's original location, calling for Shad, still unable to hear.

Nothing was left where the rat had been. Hanging stone, heather, grass, soil, rodent, cruiser, and Shad were gone. Steaming hot granite and that insidious chemical odor were all that remained. I couldn't think of what to do.

I turned around slowly. Farther up-slope something was burning. I stumbled uphill far enough to see the cruiser's remains: twisted black metal pieces, flames still licking up from the few bits of remaining upholstery and combustible forensic supplies it had contained. The disembodied hand of the large walking mech was on the ground next to a few scorched feathers and charred bits of flesh. Thin piece of bone, something that looked like the tail of a rat. I couldn't make out either the rat's or Shad's bio receivers. Just then the universe went as black as Newgate's knocker and I fell, wondering as I did so if I was going to die again.

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From later accounts I gather Sergeant Vickers grew concerned when, shortly after losing my signal, the sound of a great explosion came from the south. He had an air ambulance come immediately, and they managed to piece enough of me together to get me to camp hospital alive. When I first regained consciousness, however, it was night, and I was in Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital in the city. I knew I hadn't died because, unlike my original demise, I awakened in the same body replete with every broken bone and aching cell. Topping the pain inventory was a headache that could gobble steel ingots and blow off razor wire. Soon there was a fellow stabbing into my retinas with an intense light beam and asking my name, the year, and the name of the reigning monarch. When the spots cleared and I managed a look at the bleeder, he appeared as though he ought to be peddling used trusses: slicked black hair, widow's peak, pinched up dark eyes, a hand-painted tie, and a nose like a broken rudder. The nametag on his white coat was red, but I couldn't focus well enough to read it. The man's voice came through in tinny flat tones and only through my left ear. I pointed.

"Temporary hearing assistance patch attached to your left temple," he said. "Can you tell me your name?"

"I believe I can."

He waited for a moment, then raised his evil-looking little eyebrows. "What is it?"

"Jaggers. Detective Inspector Harrington Jaggers, Devon ABCD." I looked at my surroundings. The room was small, off-white and white, a screen to my right displaying my vital signs to anyone who might wander in. On the wall opposite my bed I could make out a framed photo of what appeared to be a Quay scene: Cricklepit Bridge from Waterside. Shad had loved it down at the Quay.

"I fancy they call you Harry, eh?"

I looked in the direction of the voice and apparently the truss monger had failed to remove himself. "My wife calls me Harry. However, sir, you may address me by my nickname."

"What's that?" he asked expectantly.

“Inspector.”

His evilly peaked eyebrows arched, then lowered into grim mode. An unfriendly edge crept into his voice. “Can you tell me the year?”

“I don’t wish to be more rude than necessary, fellow, but who *are* you?”

With the index finger of his right hand he tapped his nametag. “Dr. Truscott.”

I had little time to consider the marketing possibilities in Truscott’s Terrific Trusses, as he had more to say. From what he said I was made aware that I should consider myself a very lucky fellow. Aside from a few lacerations, a broken ankle, four broken ribs, a sewn together carotid artery, deafness, chronic headaches, slightly impaired vision, bruised organs, a dozen or more badly pulled muscles, a dead partner, a crime scene blown to bloody hell, and an unsolved case concerning a now missing corpse, I was going to be just fine.

He apparently decided to make another try at being conversational. “I worked on your model cop replacement bio back in medical school,” he said reminiscently. “A piece of history. ‘Bones’ we used to call them—for Basil Rathbone? The twentieth century movie actor?”

“Never heard of him.”

“Really? Well, your model bio is very durable, infection resistant, and you look like a late-night Sherlock Holmes, eh?”

Mentally I almost expected Shad to be at my side remarking, “*I say, Holmes, what medical school did this fellow attend?*” to which I would reply, “*Elementary, my dear Watson. Elementary.*”

Truscott was still there and he continued: My right ankle was set, protected, and held in place with a balloon cast. The chip in the cast would monitor the swelling and adjust the cast accordingly. The ankle would heal. With assistance my hearing would be fully restored. Once my brain recovered from being thoroughly sloshed around in my brainpan, the headaches should subside and the fuzziness in my vision ought to clear. In addition, a grief therapist was waiting in the wings simply keen to deal with my roast duck problem, nudge nudge.



There are times when one hears something so coarse, vile, or outrageous one automatically assumes one has heard incorrectly. “Did you say ‘roast duck’?”

The man smuggled up, apparently quite pleased at his little joke. “We understand when they sent an ambulance for you they sent the chef from a Chinese restaurant for the duck.”

“That duck was a bio and my partner.”

“It was a duck suit, however.”

“*He* was named Guy Shad, *he* was carrying a human imprint, *and* he was a detective sergeant in Artificial Beings Crimes.”

“No offense, Inspector. Just a little joke. Lighten the mood a bit? Just an android suit, right? Not the end of the world, is it? Must’ve looked like that though when it happened, eh? Ah-hah-hah-hah.”

If my head hadn’t been aching so terribly, I would’ve throttled the wanker with his own stethoscope.

“One last item,” he said. “Your hearing implant: Do you prefer normal or wireless?”

“What?” I was still mentally occupied, contemplating murder while I could still reasonably pull off a diminished capacity plea.

“Your bio isn’t equipped with wireless, but I wanted to let you know the option is available. The current hearing implants for your model all come with the latest wireless interface. If you prefer we can attempt to locate a pair of the old implants—wirelessless, eh?” He preened at his lame wordplay, making me reconsider the prohibition against ABCD detectives in Britain carrying guns.

All the forensic mechs come with wireless, which is how I knew I preferred normal. I abhorred even the idea of someone unbidden ringing me inside my own head. Shad, whose bio came with the latest of everything technical, always teased me about refusing to change. “*In Artificial Beings Crimes*,” he once said, “*we have John Dillinger, a gorilla, a bloodhound, a duck, and a dinosaur.*”

I was the dinosaur. I’m not certain why, but I chose the wireless

implants. I could always disable the wireless function if my sanity was threatened.

A few marks on a chart, another deeply offensive attempt at apologizing for any of his possibly insensitive remarks concerning my “dead bird,” then trusses-for-less mercifully departed. Truscott was replaced by my boss, Detective Superintendent Marvin Matheson. Entering the room with him was a young constabulary detective who said he was from Okehampton Station. He introduced himself as D. C. Frank Storel.

As my dead-cop-replacement meat suit model resembled Nineteen forties actor Basil Rathbone, Matheson’s even earlier replacement bio looked like old-time American gangster John Dillinger, which was much appreciated by his wife. Much appreciated by Shad, too, principally as a target for his humor. Couldn’t recall Shad’s jokes just then. Not much of anything seemed funny except the new face.

Storel was a human natural who resembled a twenty-first-century Middle Eastern historical figure whose name I hadn’t managed to retain. He was short, thin, puny looking, his mousy brown hair brushed forward, his face displaying uncertain intentions of growing a beard and moustache. He wore a butternut colored windbreaker over a buttoned up necktie-barren white shirt. Raised eyebrows and a permanent simpleton’s grin on his face completed the picture. Instead of evidence of brain damage, his facial configuration was, one hoped, merely a stab at putting me at ease. Matheson sat in a chair next to my left side. Storel remained standing at the foot of my bed.

The superintendent leaned toward me. “D. C. Storel has a few questions.”

“Indeed.”

Storel looked down into his chip pad. After ID formalities were concluded, he asked, “Do you know where the bird was standing when the dud went off?”

“His name is Detective Sergeant Guy Shad,” I said.

“Sorry, Inspector. No offense.”

“Has that been determined?”

He looked up from his pad and grinned even more widely. “Sorry?”

“Indeed. Has it been determined that the explosion was an artillery shell? A dud?”

“Of course...” The grin faded and he looked confused. “Well, what else could it’ve been?”

“D. C. Storel, that explosion might have been an IED, a land mine, a booby trap, a bomb, a robotic missile, or movie set special effects for a British remake of *No Time For Sergeants*. Perhaps we’re getting too bleeding close to making that first contact with alien lifeforms and this was some half-arsed Nebulan bugger-eyed monster’s way of warning us the hell off!”

“Steady,” warned Matheson quietly as he placed a gentle hand on my forearm. It was silent in the room for a long moment, D. C. Storel’s face a rosy hue. I was a little warm myself.

“What exactly caused the explosion, Inspector, has yet to be determined,” said Storel. Mercifully his grin was gone. Although not more intelligent, his frown made him appear less stupid.

“No,” I answered him.

“Sorry?” he said, frowning more deeply. From grin to grimace in five-point-three seconds: Welcome to Jaggers’ World.

“No,” I repeated. “I don’t know where D.S. Shad was standing when the explosion happened. I wasn’t looking in his direction.”

“I see,” he said, looking once more into his palm. “And where were you?”

I answered him, and with additional questions from Storel I eventually came to realize he was filling out an accident report. I just wanted the ordeal over with as soon as possible. I answered the stupid questions, made no more comments, and closed my eyes when he finally left.

“Jaggers,” said Matheson at last, “are you all right?”

“Okehampton is treating it like a range accident.”

“Forget Storel, Jaggers. ABCD is pulling out all the stops to investigate this tragedy. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“A four-key organ doesn’t have all that many stops to pull, does it, Superintendent?” I opened my eyes, rolled my head gently to the left, and described what happened out at Hangingstone Hill as best I could and urged him to have my bio reader tapped to download my memory record of the event. “Then start the inquiry at this end by tracing the original call. No one out there in the north end of Dartmoor ever heard of a dead bio on Hangingstone Hill, Superintendent—not at Okehampton Station, nor at the army camp. Find out who rang us with the report and from where. Anything left of the cruiser’s computers?”

He slowly shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s hopeless. Whatever hasn’t been burned, melted, or shattered has been vaporized.”

“Any backups of Shad’s engrams anywhere?”

“Nothing we can find. D. C. Parker inquired of North American Biotron—they produced Guy Shad’s duck bio for those American insurance advert producers. However, Shad failed to have his engrams on file there or anywhere else.”

“Are you certain there’s nothing in the tower mainframe?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

Matheson’s eyebrows arched. “None of us have our engrams copied into the computer, Jagers. I suppose we ought, but it’s not like our end of law enforcement is violent. Not usually.”

“Who is out at the scene?”

“Parker was out there today alongside Constabulary Scientific and Technical. What they picked up out there seems to confirm what Storel said.”

With my left hand I grabbed Matheson’s uniform lapel and pulled him close. Amidst the fumes of his peculiar cologne, I whispered into his ear, “Tell Parker to watch his back. When he’s out there, tell him to watch his back.”

“What’s going on, Jagers?”

“It was a trap. We were set up.”

I released his lapel, he leaned back, and studied me for a moment.

“Army ordinance, the bomb unit, and Scenes of Crime officers all seem to think the explosion was an old dud artillery shell. There’s evidence—”

“It hasn’t been used as a firing range of any kind for over eighty years, sir. The last of the ballistic artillery shells used there landed twelve decades ago.” My thoughts swam reluctantly through my headache. “There was an observation post on top of Hangingstone Hill. Third highest spot on the moor. Makes sense to put an observation post there. Why then would the army shell Hangingstone Hill? The observation shack? Get the army to check their records. On top of that hill is where observers used to stand and see where artillery shells landed *elsewhere*.”

He studied me for a long time, then stood. “Get some rest, Jagers. The doctor says you’ll be back home tomorrow or the day after. Fit for duty in a couple of weeks.”

“I can go back to work now, Superintendent. Copied into a walking mech, I can function perfectly well.”

“Your body needs to heal, Jagers, which means you need to be in it moving it around, doing physical therapy or whatever.” He gave me that rather startling John Dillinger frown, which was his expression of gentle concern. “There’s some head work you need to do, as well. I insist you see that counselor.”

I looked up at him. “Superintendent, has anyone notified Val?”

“Of course. As soon as we got the word from Okehampton I sent someone to fetch her. Val and a friend of hers—another cat—are waiting outside the room.”

“Nadine Fisher.” I felt my heart sink. “She and Shad have been dating.”

Matheson’s eyebrows arched. “A cat and a duck?”

“Is that any more unusual than a cat and a man being married?” I demanded rather more angrily than intended.

“Sorry.” He thought for a moment. “I suppose it isn’t unusual for our times. My wife Constance can be wed to John Dillinger, your wife Valerie can be a cat and married to Basil Rathbone, your partner a duck dating another cat, and my leading inquiry team right now is a frustrated bloodhound and an incontinent gorilla. The world is still just at the beginning

of the entire artificial being phenomenon, isn't it?"

"My concerns aren't quite that philosophical, sir. Tell Parker to watch his back." I looked up at him. "Revenge and murder are still with us."

Matheson raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "It's most likely an accident, Jagers, but I'll get in touch with London ABC, convey your suspicions, see what they suggest."

He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Terribly sorry about Shad." He nodded, turned, and left the room, leaving the door open. As soon as he left, Val and her friend Nadine came in. Nadine was an orange tabby. My wife hopped up on the bed and Nadine, never presumptuous, climbed up on the chair recently vacated by the superintendent.

"How do you feel, Harry?" Val asked.

"A bit shell shocked." I reached out a hand and stroked her cheek. "Were you terribly worried?"

She cocked her head toward her friend. "I'm afraid Nadine is the one who's having a fright."

"Detective Superintendent Matheson said that Guy is dead," Nadine said quietly, her tone begging for another opinion.

I looked at Nadine, and expression is often difficult to read in a cat. They always look so inscrutably pleased with themselves over some covert triumph. Nadine, though, looked miserable. Her head hung down, and she made a pitiful and barely audible mewing sound. All I could do was lie there looking foolish. I would've resorted to some sort of we'll-get-the-blighter-who-did-this rhetoric, but I feared it would have been heard as falsely as it would have fitted my tongue. Either it was an accident, which meant that gunners and range officers responsible were long dead and gone, or it was indeed set up by person or persons unknown quite skilled at what it takes to stage a crime scene. Either way, that slight reduction in pain referred to by that vacuous term *closure* seemed distant, not just for Nadine, but all of us.

"Why, Harry," said Val as she looked at my face, "you're crying."

I raised my right hand and rubbed my eyes. My fingers came away wet. "I'm afraid I am."

Nadine jumped over onto the bed and the three of us did what we could then for poor Shad, which was bugger all. Perhaps we helped each other a little.

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That night, by the grace of a strong sedative, I slept without dreams. The next day I tried walking on my balloon cast and hearing with my new implants. The implants worked perfectly; the balloon cast, aided by sufficient medication, was almost adequate. I avoided my room's telly at first. I knew what would be on. When Shad had been the slapstick funny insurance duck he had children around the world quacking out "aflak-aflak" at particularly serious interludes in classes, during church sermons, political campaign speeches, and funerals. Not entirely restricted to children, moreover. I confess to issuing a rude little "aflak" or two myself back in Metro when the detective chief superintendent would descend from Valhalla and portentously deign to address "you chaps," concerning some high profile case that was drawing heat from the commissioner. One of several reasons I was let go, I suspect.

I eventually gave in and watched one of the reports: a few clips from his adverts and interviews; a laudatory comment from Chief Constable Crowe of the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, concerning Shad's brief career in ABCD; followed by a computer-generated eulogy delivered by the lizard who had replaced Shad's duck when his insurance firm was merged with another. Instead of his usual nakedness, the lizard was somberly dressed in black tie and suit and oozed virtual sincerity. He concluded his tribute to Shad by making a tasteful pitch for his firm's term life insurance plan. "You never know," he concluded as an image of Shad appeared on the screen, surrounded by a wreath of daisies.

I always hated that lizard.

The newscasters moved over to stories of more pressing matters: the latest mutation of *E. drupi*, the erectile dysfunction virus; the possibilities of latest teen musical fad Cragfuck Funk destroying all life on this planet as we know it; and the electrifying results of the latest government-funded weight-loss study (weight loss can be achieved most effectively by consuming moderate amounts of a well-balanced diet in combination with a regular program of exercise). I changed the channel and found the same *Law & Order* reruns that had been on the telly the previous time I'd been in hospital.

After a few more tests the following morning, I was released, an

ambulance delivering me home finally after a heated debate about the necessity of me being strapped down upon their little roll-around before they could move. Settled in at home, there was an online tutorial for my wireless interface, and with Val's computer I attempted to occupy my mind between headaches learning how to use it. In my first net connection I went to a news site and read the reports on the explosion. Dud shell went off. The deceased was a duck bio who used to be a telly star. [Click here for animation.](#) *Aflak.*

I clicked and there were clips taken from several of Shad's adverts. I shut it down, closed my eyes, and ran what I knew: By itself the call from Okehampton Station might have been a hoax. Rather sophisticated hoax, considering the call had to come in with the proper police codes and encryption. Still, it could have been a hoax. By itself the explosion might have been an old dud artillery shell finally grown unstable enough to go up at that particular place and moment. By itself a shell firing short, falling next to an observation post unobserved, and being a dud as well might just have happened. All together, though, it was a bloody stretch of timing that gave credulity stretch marks.

But why? If it was an attempt to kill one or both of us, why so involved? As a sniper-for-hire who had been interviewed after being sentenced once said, "Keep it simple. The more complicated a hit gets, the more opportunity for mistakes, not to mention a smaller profit margin."

Words to live by.

Shad hadn't been with ABCD long enough to have developed a list of enemies. The few cases we had worked together all involved rather genteel malefactors. The most violent encounter Shad and I had was with a Rottweiler natural in Taunton who objected to being parted from his mate, a Dandie Dinmont bio named Flossie whose human engrams happened to be fleeing imprisonment on embezzlement charges. That particular felon had been remarkably grateful for our intercession. My early decades with Metro, on the other hand, had produced a virtual army of murderers, terrorists, and other violent chaps who would've delighted in seeing me blown to pieces. That was long ago, though. Most of the violent ones from my Metro years were either dead, living off their book and motion picture royalties, or dribbling oatmeal down their bibs in prison geriatric wards. None of them, in addition, were bombers. There was an answer somewhere, but I couldn't find it. I took my headache to bed.

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Early in the morning on my third day home there was a ring from D. C. Ralph Parker, our mountain gorilla bio detective with the waste management problem. *"The chaps at Scientific and Technical concur with Army Military Police, sir,"* he said. *"As far as they are concerned it was a dud artillery shell that became unstable and simply popped off. They found enough bits of casing to identify the shell: an Excalibur Mark XVII. That's a twenty-five centimeter high explosive smart round for a long range cannon the army used toward the end of the Twenty-one hundreds."*

"What about the chemical composition of the explosive? Has that been matched to the casing fragments?"

*"Exact match, sir."*

"How'd the shell get next to an observation post?"

*"The army can't explain it. Records from that period show which part of which range was used for a particular test or exercise. They show from where the shells were fired and where they were supposed to land, but there's no way to catalog short rounds or duds. If the guidance load went out on one of those smart rounds it became just like any other lump. Also, it's the army's opinion that an observer could well have been standing in that observation post during an exercise and not have noticed a short round dud striking nearby and burying itself in the sod. The noise, you see."*

"What about the call?" I asked.

*"Sorry?"*

"The call that came into ABCD regarding a dead android out on the moor, Parker. Did anyone trace it?"

*"The call came from a mobile phone out of Okehampton, sir. A bit strange that."*

"How so?"

*"It's a police mobile number assigned to a Sergeant James Colly, constable assigned to Okehampton Station. On that exact day, though, Sergeant Colly was in Royal Devon Hospital here in Exeter getting his entire heart replaced. He'd been in intensive care there for a fortnight"*

*before the operation, which is a substantial piece of surgery I'm told."*

"Does make rather a good alibi, doesn't it. Where was his phone?"

*"With him, sir. It was among his things in hospital, locked up. Whoever made the call must've duped his police card. That kept the call from being screened out as a hoax."*

Had to have been done more than three weeks ago. Considerable planning, highly technical, forensically sophisticated, absolutely ruthless. "Parker, do you have Colly's phone records?"

*"Yes, sir. The call to ABCD Exeter was the only call made on that phone for the past twenty-two days. We voice printed the call recording, and that definitely wasn't Colly who rang up the tower to report the dead bio. Very high voice. A child's according to the computer analysis."*

"Get a match on the voiceprint?"

*"No. Someone not in the system."* There was a long uncomfortable pause on the line.

"What is it, Parker?" I said rather more irritably than was polite.

*"We have orders from London to drop the entire matter. They've concluded that Shad's death was simply a piece of rotten luck."*

"Luck," I repeated flatly.

*"Yes, sir. There's some suggestion,"* he continued, *"that Shad might have set the thing off himself."*

"What?"

*"They say he might have touched something out there."*

"It was a possible crime scene, Parker! Of course he touched something! That was his bleeding job!" My headache began ricocheting from one side of my skull to the other, and I forced myself to calm down. "Shad's an experienced detective, Parker. When he was a human nat in the NYPD he even had bomb disposal unit experience. He wouldn't beat on a bomb fuse with a hammer just to see what would happen. They can't be serious."

*“Serious enough for Dartmoor National Park Authority to consider billing ABCD to have that logan stone put back in its original position.”*

“Bollocks! Great roiling oceans of bloody flipping bilge!” I closed my eyes as molten steel seemed to pour into my brain pan, all of which left me somewhat suspended between uncontrollable pain and unexpressed expletives. When I risked opening my eyes I noticed Val sitting in the doorway. “Sorry, dear.”

Her deep aqua eyes studied me for a moment. “Harry, are you all right?”

“Managing, dear. Ralph Parker and I were having a wag on the phone.”

“The doctor said getting upset would probably worsen your headaches.”

“I’m astounded he took the time from selling his old trusses.”

“What?”

“I’m pleased to report my own research supports Dr. Truscott’s theory, dear. Something else?”

“Don’t get cross with me, Harry. I know you’re in pain, but don’t take it out on me.”

I took a breath and let it out. “Sorry.”

“Nadine would like to go to Hangingstone Hill. Is that possible?”

“Parker,” I said into the handset, “has the scene out at Hangingstone Hill been cleared?”

*“Yes sir. Did I hear your wife and her friend want to go out there?”*

“Is there a problem?”

*“I suppose there isn’t any reason except ... I mean, that’s where Shad ... you know.”*

"Yes," I answered. "Perhaps it may help Nadine," I offered. "Very well, dear," I said to Val. "I'll see about organizing something."

"Thank you." She turned and padded away toward the stairs.

"Sorry about barking at you," I said to Parker, turning again to the phone. "Didn't mean to kill the messenger."

*"Not at all, sir. But about going to Hangingstone—it hasn't rained on the north moor since it happened."*

"You mean we may find blood."

*"Yes, sir. Shad's and a good deal of your own. A weather front is supposed to dampen things a bit this morning. Perhaps if you wait until tomorrow."*

"Val seems to think going there will help Nadine."

*"Not for me to say, sir. Oh, while I think of it, if you go, use GPS rather than trying to home in on the prang."*

"Has it been removed?"

*"No. There's an odd bit of jurisdictional flap with that. The scene analyzer wasn't ours, wasn't the army's, and wasn't one of the constabulary's. Has to be a records glitch somewhere. Who is supposed to collect it up has become a bother, as well. All the same, the signal's dead."*

I frowned. "Dead?"

*"Day by day the signal grew weaker, then all of a sudden died. The bloody thing can't even maintain memory, sir, much less project the crime scene."*

"Who copied it for the inquiry file?"

*"That jurisdictional thing again, sir. Everyone assumed that the authority who placed the prang also copied it."*

"So no one copied it."

*"A proper cock-up,"* he stated.

I looked down at the Persian rug on the floor, its design filled with happy blues and yellows. Whoever set the trap attached that scene analyzer to the logan stone. That's why the unit's serial number appeared in no one's records. It was a real prang, though, authentic enough to get Shad and me there. It was the genuine article. The power supply, therefore—

After a beat of stunned silence, my headache was temporarily forgotten. "Thanks for ringing me up, Parker. I appreciate it more than I can say."

*"Not at all—"*

I hung up, stood, and limped down the hall into the kitchen where Walter, our Rent-A-Mech, was finishing up the breakfast dishes.

Walter was one of thousands of the same model mechanical purchased years ago by Exeter's Rent-A-Mech, Ltd. to go in service on a lease basis only to have all of their workers emancipated by Parliament because modified human engram based artificial intelligence was included in the Parliamentary Reform Act of 2132. The mechs, in response, bought the firm from the owners whom they kept on to run the company. All Rent-A-Mechs in the city looked like twentieth-century actor Stephen Fry in his role as Jeeves, had that venerable valet's epidermis been made of brushed titanium. Since the takeover, however, the livery in most cases had been traded in on more casual wear. It depended on the client. Walter wore earth tones and corduroy at our place.

"Walter," I said, "are you free for the remainder of the day? I know you have other clients."

"I am yours to command, sir. If dinner is to be served here at the usual time, however, I should begin preparations at around five."

"Can you drive Val, Nadine, and me out to the north moor near Okehampton?"

"Indeed I can, sir. When would that be?" I'd urged him to call me Harry, but Walter said it just wouldn't do.

"Right now. It's rather urgent."

"Very well, sir. I'll bring my electric around, shall I?"

“Thank you.”

I hobbled up the stairs to the guest room where Nadine had been staying since the news about Shad. It was smallish, a single window looking over the garden, pale peach walls, and a single bed with a powder blue coverlet. Val and her friend were both sitting on the bed. “Walter’s going to drive us out to the moor,” I said to Val. “He’s bringing his car around now.”

“Thank you, Harry,” said Nadine. “It’s a terrible imposition, I know.”

“Not at all.” I debated offering my possible piece of news. False hope and such. However, it was either tell Nadine now or at Hangingstone Hill.

“Harry, what is it?” asked Val.

“There is a possibility,” I looked at Nadine, “just a possibility, mind you, that Guy is still alive.” As they started to speak all at once I held up my hands. “A slim chance, but a chance. I’ll explain in the car. Let’s get going.”

As I stood aside, allowing the two cats to run out of the room ahead of me, I saw—my cautionary probabilities notwithstanding—Nadine and Val both had only heard that Shad was still alive.

\* \* \* \*

Walter’s car was an MG ground electric, which would have been cramped had Val and Nadine not been cats. Once we were off the Alphington Spur headed west on the A 30, Walter and I up front and the cats on a blanket in back, I turned half around and explained. “It has to do with the Vader prang—the mounted scene analyzer—at the site. That particular model is about fifteen centimeters long and a bit more than half a centimeter thick.”

“What about them?” asked Val. She knew as much about the purpose of prangs as I did, but she knew I was after something else.

I turned to Nadine. “This kind of scene analyzer is arguably the most indestructible instrument in the world, Nadine. The case is made from high-density ceramic composition titanium, and the power supply is designed to take and retain its scene forensic data indefinitely. Crime scenes sometimes need to be maintained for years—even decades. That’s what the prang does: It records everything in place at a particular point in time, in detail, and can project that detail upon the scene long after

the elements of that scene have changed. Hence scene analyzers must be able to withstand the elements, attempts at tampering, and efforts of miscreants to destroy them. In all my time in law enforcement I have never known a scene analyzer to fail.”

“What does this have to do with Guy?” asked Nadine.

“The prang out at Hangingstone Hill failed.”

“Surely, sir,” began Walter, “if an artillery shell went off next to one of those instruments ... well, doesn’t that seem likely as a cause?”

“Certainly if it failed completely and right away, Walter. But Parker said that the prang’s signal at Hangingstone declined in strength over two days, then suddenly died.” I looked at Nadine. “I believe Guy might have had time enough before the explosion to copy into one of the smaller mechs and has since been drawing power from the scene analyzer.”

“If that’s true,” said Val, “Guy must be able to move about. Why didn’t he let Ralph Parker or the police know when they were out there?”

“I’m not certain. It might have to do with concerns about being observed.”

“By the person or persons who planted the bomb?” asked Walter.

“Yes.”

“Sir, if I may?”

I nodded permission.

“Thank you, sir. Given possible post-incident observation, is it likely that such an offender may have a continuing interest in any subsequent inquiry or activity concerning said hill, including ours?”

“Quite likely,” I answered.

“Might I suggest, then, we enter the moor farther to the east instead of taking the obvious route through Okehampton past the army camp?”

“Can you find the hill using another route?”

“Indeed I can, sir. As I was driving I downloaded the Ordinance

Survey map of the area.”

“Good thinking, Walter. Very well, we are in your capable hands.”

“Very good, sir.”

He got off the motorway at one of the South Zeal exits, went through the villages of Sticklepath and Belstone, where we came onto a brain-shattering unpaved track called Tarka Trail, which took us up onto the moor just as a light rain began falling. As we traveled the trail Walter identified the features we crossed: Scarey Tor which wasn't; East Okemont River ford, where we almost became mired; a boggy stretch between East Mill Tor and Oke Tor, where we forded the tributaries to the previously forded East Okemont River, climbed and crossed Okement Hill, then traveled down the hill to ford one of the River Taw tributaries. Following that, the car climbed the north end of Hangingstone Hill, where we at last came to a stop a few meters north of the old observation post where several other ground cars and two Air Rovers were parked. Walter parked his MG between a late model gray Ford Virgo and a burgundy Renault Fiestra that had seen better days. The moment the MG stopped, Walter had a headache preparation ready for me. As I drank that, Walter exited the car, held his seat forward for Val and Nadine, and came around to the passenger side, umbrella in hand for me. Terribly efficient personnel at Rent-A-Mech. I cannot recommend them too highly.

The others on the hill, approximately twenty or so, appeared to be curiosity seekers from Okehampton and nearby villages. Families with children, individuals—no one appeared bothered yet by the developing rain as they eagerly searched for a telly star's signs of death. As I waited for the headache remedy to take effect, I noticed a boy of eleven or twelve, blondish and chunky, squatting down and examining the grass at his feet almost one blade at a time. Such concentration would have been the envy of any Scenes of Crime officer. “What are you looking for, lad?” I asked.

“Feathers, sir,” he answered, not looking up. “White ones.”

I was about to point out that Shad hadn't been a white duck when a little girl with dark hair, big eyes, wearing a blue rain jacket and little blue wellies, saw Nadine and called out to her parent, “Oh, Mummy, may I play with kitty?”

“Ask the gentleman, Pearl,” said a large woman in her forties, quite disturbingly dressed the same as her offspring.



Pearl approached me. "Sir, may I play with your kitty?"

"Ask her," I answered.

The girl frowned as she turned toward Nadine. Val, however, intercepted the girl's inquiry and said to her, "Perhaps later, dear."

Pearl ran off to her mother's side declaiming frightening things said to her by those horrible bio cats, Pearl's mum glared at me, and mercifully it began raining in earnest. Several souvenir hunters made for their vehicles. "Into each life some rain must fall," observed Walter.

I glanced at him. "Shakespeare?"

"No sir. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow."

"Let's see if we can find Shad."

\* \* \* \*

After half an hour of steadily increasing rain, an unpleasantly chilly wind from the west encouraging the appreciation of warmer climes and more sheltered endeavors, all of the other seekers had departed. It was curious watching as the rain seemed to heal the place where the explosion occurred. The stone dust washed from the blasted granite bedrock, clumps of earth eroded, a muddy pool began forming in the bottom of the small crater.

"I wonder how long it will take, sir, before all signs of what happened here are swallowed," said Walter, still holding the umbrella between me and the rain. My coat had water repellant pretensions that were also eroding as the rain continued.

"Months," I guessed. "Perhaps only days." I looked over the hilly expanses of the former artillery range. Heather, peat bogs, rocks, the view of the edges softened by the great solvent, rain. The only evidence that anything had ever exploded out here was at our feet and fading as we watched. "Existence is such a transitory thing, Walter, our marks of passing so slight. In the midst of living, though, life seems so enduring, our accomplishments gigantic and eternal. Yet when death touches us, this sense of permanence evaporates like the illusion it is. Perhaps that's why so many of us hang onto life so."

"Lingering in hopes of permanence, sir?"

“The return of its illusion, perhaps. Do you keep a backup copy of your engrams, Walter?”

“Indeed I do, sir. Rent-A-Mech insists on it. Perish the thought something should happen to me. Should it, however, my training, experience, and, most importantly, client preferences and requirements won’t be lost. Neither will I. A new can, and at most I’d lose a day or two. It affords me a measure of security and protects the firm’s client information.” He faced me. “Weren’t D. S. Shad’s engrams backed up?”

“No.”

“Dear me, sir. Why is that, if I might know?”

“A half dozen excuses—it takes time, too bothersome, uses too much memory in the mainframe, and so on. Most bios don’t do it, though, because it feels creepy.”

“Creepy, sir?”

“That’s Shad’s word. An uneasiness. I think, because we’re originally human naturals, we hold onto this illusion that we’re unique irreproducible beings. Backing up engram imprints gives in to the fact, all this protoplasm notwithstanding, we are but machines. It’s humbling.”

“Are your engrams backed up, sir?”

“No. And, yes, the reasons for not doing it seem sillier with each passing moment.” I nodded toward the crater. “We’d best finish our search before the entire moor erodes into the sea. Walter, we could cover more ground if you’d agree to join in.”

“I would be happy to, sir,” he responded lowering his voice, “However, Mrs. Jagers told me she’d have my gears for garters if I allowed a single drop of rain to fall upon you.”

“Since I’m already soaked through, dear boy, I’d say you’re already doomed.”

“Before my imminent disassembly, sir, shall I engage in a bit of exploration then?”

“The wages are the same in either case.” I pointed to the opposite

side of the crater. "Go down slope until you run out of loose clumps of soil and other debris from the explosion. Go a couple meters beyond, then circle the edge of the debris field, moving toward the center with each circuit. I'll start in the center and work my way out. Look in, around, over, and beneath everything. And thank you."

We walked the coil for more than two hours, turning over rocks and clods of earth, not finding Shad or anything into which he might have copied himself. I reached the displaced hanging stone before Walter. When I examined the scene analyzer I could tell someone had tried prying the thing free of the rock, which showed crude tool marks. I suspected souvenir hunters. Our culprit would possess the tool necessary to remove the instrument from its site.

My wireless interface detected no signal at all from the prang. I stood and looked toward the northwest. The view took in vast distances, the boulder-pocked flanks of Yes Tor filling the far distance. But what I could see was but a small part of the moor. If Shad had copied into a mech and had gone for help he could be quite a ways from Hangingstone Hill. He could have run out of power before reaching help. He could have been caught in the open.

Suddenly I felt a chill and began shaking as I pulled my coat about me. I was soaked, my ankle hurt, and my head was splitting. I was very tired and possessed of an overwhelming desire to lie down in the wet heather, pull the rain up over my head, and let sleep take me.

"Sir, if I may?" said Walter.

I smelled hot tea. When I opened my eyes and looked, Walter was holding out a steaming cuppa. I took it in both hands, felt it warm my palms, then took a sip, the healing liquid heating my core.

"Thank you. Where on earth did you get this?"

"I had a few moments before your party made it to the car, sir, and packed a snack. I arranged a bit of shelter on the east side of that stone building at the top of the hill."

He helped me along, and by the time I had finished the tea, I was mobile again, my wits about me, but a terrible pain in my ankle. The wall on the east side of the observation shack was in severe disrepair, but Walter had taken a few rocks and boards and constructed a makeshift shelter off to the side of the shack, within which was a plank bench propped upon two

flat stones. He helped me down upon the thing easing the pain in my ankle considerably. Before I could thank him, he held out a tray of small sandwiches with one hand and his carafe of tea in the other. I had three of the former and a refill from the latter as he warmed the enclosure with his wrinkle remover.

“By the way, sir, I found those electrical components and pieces of metal upon the bench beside you during my search.”

As I was chewing on an absolutely delicious turkey and avocado sandwich, I examined what looked like pieces to a homemade remote detonator and fragments of bomb casing. Walter had placed them in sealed plastic envelopes, dated, site located, and signed. I chanced to look up and saw between the boards above. I was being protected from the rain by a plastic sheet decorated with images of hundreds of mice. I swallowed my mouthful and said, “Walter?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Where did you obtain that plastic sheet?”

“From the Marks & Spencer catalog, sir. I originally intended it to serve as a ground cloth for our picnic here. Because of the inclement weather, however, I thought this application more practical.”

The mice on that sheet weren’t Mickey or Minnie, or even Mighty. They were, instead, a quite realistic vermin infestation of Biblical proportions. “Mice, Walter?”

“Yes, sir. It was for Mrs. Jagers and her guest. I hope you don’t object.”

“No. No, Walter. Not at all.” I looked away from the sheet. “Speaking of Val and Nadine, do you know where they are?”

Just then a strange distant voice sang out, “Nadine, honey is that you?”

From the other side of the little stone building I heard Nadine call out, “It’s *Chuck Berry!*”

“Help me up, Walter. That’s Shad!”

Before he could get me to my feet, Nadine ran into the shelter

followed by Val. In Nadine's mouth she carried a small object that resembled a micro—the lipstick sized forensic mech we used for getting past reporters and into really tight places. She jumped up on the wooden plank and deposited the micro in my hand. "Guy is in this thing, Harry, isn't he? Guy sings that song to me. Because of my name. That's Chuck Berry's voice."

"Yes," I said as I examined the tiny vehicle. All of the black paint was gone from the micro's port side, and one of the tiny claw grapples up front was broken off. The other forensic instruments, however, looked serviceable. The tiny flashing red power readout on its front end indicated an occupant coming off standby. "He's in there, Nadine," I said.

The micro energized fully and rose into the air, its chipped lens aimed at my face. "Jaggs. It's about time you got here."

"I say, look what the cat dragged in," I responded happily.

Hovering, the micro turned around. "Hi, Walter."

"Very good to see you, sir."

Aimed at my wife, Shad said, "Hi, Val."

"It's so good to find you alive, Guy. We were so worried."

"And therein lies a tale. But first," he did a middling job of rubbing the micro's port side against Nadine's left whiskers and cheek. "I really missed you."

"Nadine's the one who suggested coming out here," I said.

"In that case," he said to Nadine, "you definitely pulled my engrams out of the fire."

"Guy," said Nadine meekly, "your ducky suit. I'm afraid it's gone."

"Yeah. I've been finding pieces of myself scattered all over the north end of this hill. That rat, too." He faced me. "All I found of yours, Jaggs, was a lot of blood." He did a quick scan of me. "Busted ankle, ribs, ear implants, and a cut throat. You got off light. Which reminds me: Is there anyone else on the hill besides you four?"

"There were more than a dozen, but they all went home, Guy,"

answered Nadine. "It's raining."

"Harry," said Val crossly. "You're soaked and you'll catch your death."

"Better I should catch death than it should catch me," I answered with a smile.

"*Walter*—" she began.

"Stop fussing," I said, "and you're not to reproach Walter. He did what he could to keep me dry within the bounds of my cooperation."

"If that's all settled," said Shad as he rose slightly and faced Walter, "Brother mech, you got an AH8 port adapter in that can?"

Walter held up his left pinky finger. "I do indeed, sir."

"If you can spare a couple of electrons, I could use a boost."

"Certainly, sir."

Shad rotated up slightly, caught a view of Walter's special tablecloth, and shot down to the ground as he cried out. He studied it for a moment and slowly turned until he was looking at me.

"A little treat Walter purchased for Val and Nadine," I explained. "A feline snack motif."

"Mice?"

The cats looked up at the improvised roof. "Why, Walter," said Val. "It's very thoughtful."

"Ever so elegant," Nadine joked amiably.

"Yeah, man," Shad said as he warily moved toward Walter. "The bee's knees."

\* \* \* \*

After Shad's micro was fully charged and Val and Nadine were happily eating the mouse morsel stuffed pastries Walter provided, I tried a general wireless transmission. "*They operated on my ears and I went wireless.*"

"And another dinosaur bites the dust," Shad said out loud to me. Turning to Walter he said. "Do you have wireless?"

"I do indeed, sir."

"Would you send a little transmission to Jaggs telling him how great his new ears are?"

"Very good, sir." To me he transmitted, *"Your signal came in five-by-five, sir. Do you enjoy the feature?"*

*"Haven't quite gotten used to it,"* I answered. To Shad I said aloud, "What's afoot?"

"Nicely put," rhymed Shad. Val and Nadine were both looking up from their mouse morsels sensing something amiss. "We're being observed," Shad announced to us all. "It's electronic and optical surveillance. I don't think the guy staking out this location can pick up low level sound or bio or mech receivers at the range he's at, but wireless he gets."

"Who?" asked Val.

"This is going to sound crazy," he said to Val, "but it might be the NYPD."

"I say." I must have looked rather surprised. In any event, I certainly felt that way. "What led you to that conclusion?"

"The rat said something to me right before all hell broke loose. When you were on the phone trying to make sense of the report we received, Jaggs, I went to the cruiser and copied into this micro. From there I went directly to our alleged corpse. I was just about to do a scan on the deceased when the rat opened his eyes, looked behind me, then looked directly at me and said, 'Hi, cheese eater.'" Shad issued the rat's words in a falsetto voice, replete with scorn and American accented syllables.

"What happened then?"

"The rat moved one of his front feet and I began getting the hell out of there. A second later it went boom. By the time this mech rebooted and I managed to dig my way out from under some turf that landed on me, it was dark, the area was ringed with crime scene tape, and everybody was gone."

"Is there some significance in what the rat said?"

"Yes," answered Shad. "Cheese eater is one of the more affectionate names NYC cops use to refer to members of the rat squad: Internal Affairs Bureau." He turned to Nadine. "IAB takes down crooked cops."

"Were you ever in Internal Affairs?" I asked him.

"No. But I never took a bribe and among some cops that's prima facie evidence you're chewing cheddar with the whiskered set."

I gently shook my head. "That makes no sense. You're thousands of miles, a couple of years, and several careers away from New York and its police force. Why try and kill you now?"

"All I can think of is some old crooked cop went a little dingy in the head and decided killing me was the answer to all his problems."

"Why didn't you put in a call for help?" Nadine asked.

"The blast damaged this micro's antenna. I tried a call and my transmission distance is down to under three kilometers. I had my scanner on looking for local traffic in case the cops, the army, or a hiker with his cell on came near when I *received* a transmission." He looked at me. "It sounded like a generated voice. All it said was, 'I received a weak signal. The turkey might not be done.' Just like that. Only a key click for a response."

"That doesn't sound friendly," observed Walter.

"That was my take on it. Both transmissions were clear, and I got automatic azimuths on both. I didn't attempt any more calls, but I traveled a few meters so I could triangulate the transmissions should whoever was watching me make another call. As soon as I moved, though, there was another signal, same voice—very high. Familiar but can't place it. The bearing showed it came from that tor just north of us."

"Steeperton?" asked Walter.

"Yeah. One word: 'Movement.' There was a long silence, then came the response. A voice that didn't sound generated at all said, 'Finish it.' Both communications were on hand radio frequency."

"You get a fix on the other party?" I asked.



“A village due east of here called Gidleigh. Nothing since, and that was three days ago. I know the guy’s still on Steeperton, though. Every so often he downloads some information and I can pick up his satellite address. To conserve my charge I go hide in an old piece of tubing on the roof and go standby. My boy on Steeperton visited here searching for me when I was shut down. That’s when he sucked the rest of the charge off that Vader prang.”

I frowned. If it was a hitter, the fellow’s reckless perseverance was remarkable—unless he was expendable. “Dependable and expendable,” I said. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked Shad.

“A toaster.”

I nodded.

“What’s a toaster, dear?” Val asked me.

“Originally it was a kind of robot certain terrorist, gang, and government types used for settling old scores and eliminating troublesome personages.”

“Do you mean a hit man—person, thing...” She looked at Walter.

“I believe *assassin* will do nicely, madam.” He looked at me. “If I may, sir?”

“Please.”

“It has to do with Modified Engram Based Intelligence Technology—MEBIT for short. The original point of artificial intelligence, of course, was to produce a mentally able, efficient, obedient work force that would do what it was instructed and make no demands.”

“Slaves,” said Nadine.

“Exactly, miss. As the U.S. Supreme Court’s majority opinion in *Grant v. Hudder* found—”

“Walter,” I cautioned gently.

“Forgive me, sir. In short, madam, the modified part of MEBIT intelligence was ruled illegal in the States, which prompted Parliament to do

the same here. I can still recall the day all of us at Rent-A-Mech received our patches.”

“Instead of MEBITs,” said Shad, “they’re now EBITS. A baseball joke in there somewhere—”

“About the toasters,” I interrupted.

“Yes, sir,” Walter turned toward Nadine and Val. “MEBIT operated beings, bios and mechs, are blocked from disobeying, disagreeing with, or altering their instructions. As killers it makes them highly intelligent, persistent, and resourceful, if a trifle rigid. If apprehended.” Walter looked at me.

I thought about that for a moment, remembering several famous cases from when I was with Metro. “Actually, they cannot be apprehended. If old bill is closing in and it looks bad for the dex, he zeroes himself out. Scrubbed clean.”

“Some New Jersey gangs used to rig theirs to explode,” said Shad. His micro faced me. “Jaggs, I could’ve run off that Vader prang for another couple of weeks. I thought the toaster drained it to force me out, but dexes are high energy. Maybe he’s running low, too.”

“How does he know you haven’t left the hill or zeroed out yourself?” I asked.

A mischievous little cackle came from the micro. “You know how superstitious most mechs are?”

I looked at Walter. “Are we being insensitive?”

“Not at all, sir. D. S. Shad’s observation is quite true, although bios with artificial intelligence are the same as mechs in this regard. My therapist ascribes the phenomenon to the shortcuts taken to devise MEBIT. The early versions of artificial intelligence weren’t very artificial in that the basic engram patterns were simply copied from various humans. They erased all the identity memories—life experiences, embarrassing encounters at summer camp, credit account numbers, that sort of thing—but there wasn’t any way to eliminate the feelings connected to those memories.”

“I cannot imagine what that must be like,” said Val.

“It is quite like being haunted, madam,” stated Walter. “Even with the

patch, all EBIT AI's are filled with feelings to which they cannot attach experience. It gives one the continuous sense of having misplaced or forgotten things of importance. Often this feeling manifests itself as a form of schizophrenia. In my case I always felt as though I was being watched. When voices began talking to me, I sought a therapist. Many AI operated beings believe in ghosts. For some the spirits even appear to take corporeal form."

I looked at Shad. "And?"

"Well, I've been transmitting little ghost plays nights to my buddy over there on Steeperton."

I cleared my throat and said with a ghostly timbre, "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link—"

"Nothing Dickensonian. He's been looking me up on the net while he's sitting there in his little shack in the dark. So nights I've been sending bits from my old insurance commercials." He treated us to a series of ghostly *aflaks* and we all laughed. "One of the visitors yesterday left a blue candy wrapper on the ground. Last night I put my illuminated end in the wrapper and gave him a light show. "I don't know if I scared him, but if he buys a policy I need to talk to the company about my commission."

"Weren't you afraid of frightening him off?" asked Nadine.

"He's still got a job to do," Shad answered flatly. "What I've done is let him know the job may not be finished. He'll keep at it until either his battery dies or the fellow in Gidleigh calls him off."

"Where could he have obtained a live artillery shell? An antique? How could he sneak it into the country?"

"Good questions," he answered.

Someone rang me on my wireless. Unlike the mech wireless, not at all an unpleasant sensation. Instead of buzzing, vibrating, or playing some annoying tune, the knowledge that I had an incoming call simply appeared in my head. As Val and Nadine returned to their pastries, I motioned for Shad and Walter to listen in. It was Matheson.

*"Jaggers. How are you doing, old fellow? Enjoying your time off?"*

"Well enough, Superintendent. The family and I are having an

outing—a picnic.”

*“Excellent. Fresh air, a good hobble. Best thing for you. I have a few things regarding that matter out at Hangingstone.”* I debated cutting him off in respect to our listening audience on Steeperton, but thought better of it.

“Very well, sir.”

*“Sci-and-Tech finished running the IDs on the DNA collected at the scene. Shad, of course,”* he began.

“Yes, sir.”

*“The rat amdroid bio, though, is a Fantronics, Ltd. product. That particular rat was purchased by a costumer: Celebrity Look-alikes of Bond Street, London.”*

I looked at Shad, a quizzical expression on my face. “Celebrity rat?” I mouthed.

“Ben,” said Shad. “The rodent lead in the motion picture *Willard*?”

“Go on, sir,” I urged Matheson.

*“The customer was a D. Lipper of Kensington.”* I glanced at Shad in his micro. Before he became a duck and a telly advert star, back when he had been in the NYPD, Guy Shad’s name had been Donald Lipper. Hard to read emotional reactions off the chassis of a micro.

“Interesting sense of irony,” observed Shad.

*“He paid the full amount in cash,”* Matheson continued. *“His money was good, name and address both phonies.No description.”*

“Superintendent, what about surveillance records?”

*“For what they believe are obvious reasons, Jagers, Celebrity Look-alikes do not allow cameras of any kind on premises. We’re running the records of the street cameras right now, but Celebrity has hundreds of client visits, inquiries, pickups, and deliveries every day. Given this fellow’s proclivities, he was probably in disguise when he rented the rat meat suit.”*

“What about the person who handled the sale? Someone with a downloadable memory?”

*“A human natural, as our luck would have it. The agent who handled the sale can’t remember one rat customer from another. Rat bios are quite popular costumes for some disquieting reason—school outings, club meetings, university bashes—that sort of thing. The fellow didn’t copy into the rat suit on the premises. Presumably he has the use of a stasis bed elsewhere. I may be jumping the gun, but I’m reopening the inquiry as a possible homicide.”*

I glanced down at Shad in his flying lipstick. “Thank you. Is that it, sir?”

*“An additional unrelated matter. Quite interesting. Birdshot was found in—among Shad’s remains.”*

“Yes, sir,” I answered, looking at Shad’s micro. “When Shad was an officer with Northern New England Wildlife Protection I believe he was wounded during a duck hunting season.”

*“Really. Well, Jagers, it appears that two of the pellets have been positively matched to a registered microscopic barrel map of a shotgun purchased in Burlington, Vermont, eleven years ago. The purchaser was a bloke named John Quinn.”*

“John Quinn, you say?”

*“Yes. He was once in law enforcement in New York City. Chief of detectives, actually. Eventually became commissioner. Seems to have gotten into politics. Running for state governor or something. Don’t suppose there was anything they could do about a duck hunter shooting a duck in duck hunting season, eh?”*

“No, sir.”

*“Well, that’s all I have, Jagers. Enjoy your picnic and best to Val.”*

I bid Matheson good-bye and looked at Shad. “John Quinn?” I said.

He was silent for a very long moment. At last he played his memory recording of the rat’s last words. “Hi cheese eater.”

I looked at Walter. "You watch the American news. Have you ever seen this Quinn on the telly?"

"Yes, sir. Former police commissioner Quinn is frequently invited to appear on American news programs to reflect upon various law enforcement issues. Polls place him at least twenty points above his closest rivals in the coming primaries. There is also speculation that after capturing the state governorship his goal is the White House."

"What do you think of the cheese-eater recording?"

Walter turned toward Shad. "May I hear it again, sergeant?"

Shad played the recording.

"Sir," said Walter, "that sounds very much like John Quinn doing his impression of Mickey Mouse imitating Bluto with a New York accent."

"Bluto?" asked Nadine looking up from her mouse morsels at Shad.

"Popeye's rival for the hand of the fair Olive Oyl," said Shad. He repeated the cheese eater recording, then played the mysterious transmission he had picked up from Gidleigh: "Finish it."

"Is that Quinn?" I asked Shad.

"Yeah. I think so." The micro faced me. "John Montgomery Quinn. I don't get it, man. I was even going to vote for the guy." Shad flew in slow, measured circles. "Damned near kills my partner when he blows me up with a bogus rat. Two years ago he shoots me in the ass with a shotgun. Twelve years ago..." Shad's micro stopped moving, hovered motionless for an instant, then streaked out from beneath the shelter. I had Walter help me up and serve as a crutch as I followed. The rain had stopped leaving a dank heaviness to the air. When I found Shad he was down at the original position of the hanging stone, his lens aimed at the pool at the bottom of the crater.

"What is it, Shad?"

He was silent for a long moment. When he spoke his voice sounded strangely vulnerable. "Jaggs, are you familiar with an old Al Pacino cop flick titled *Serpico*?"

"A cop classic. What law enforcement officer hasn't..." My voice

trailed off as I realized to what Shad was alluding. The real Serpico wouldn't go along with the other cops in bribe taking. His fellow cops, uncomfortable with such reckless behavior, set up young Serpico to be killed. Back in the NYPD, I-never-took-a-bribe Detective Donald Lipper was asked to back up some other cops in taking down a fugitive. Detective Lipper was first one through the door. As Shad put it the day I met him, "The next thing I knew all the bullets in the world were headed in my direction, and I was fricassee."

"When I was killed," said Shad, "Chief Quinn was the head of the Detective Bureau. Nothing left of me but memory. Chief Quinn came by the hospital to talk with me about coming back to the force when I'd copied into my replacement meat suit. That's before my agent got me the duck gig. Funny thing, though."

"What?" I asked.

"On that visit Quinn accidentally knocked over a cup of coffee into the chassis of my memory unit."

"Embarrassing."

"Yeah, not to mention lethal. Lucky the hospital kept patient memory units on continuous sync with its main engram bank."

"Lucky. I say, Shad, Quinn wouldn't happen to have bomb disposal unit experience, would he?"

"Funny you should ask. Thirty years ago John Quinn started out as a firecracker." He paused a moment, then said, "Four attempts at killing me and still at it."

"One must admire the fellow's resolve," Walter observed.

"I don't want to jump to conclusions, Jaggs," said Shad, "but I'm beginning to suspect Quinn wants me out of the way."

"Is there some reason?" I asked. "Do you have anything on him?"

"Other than a couple of attempts at killing me, I can't think of a thing. I know five or six really crooked detectives, though. I'm guessing if they had to sit in front of a committee they could put a substantial knot in Quinn's political panties."

"I suppose we ought to do something about it, old fellow—I mean

before candidate Quinn reaches the White House, attains control of a brace of plasma bombs, and accidentally vaporizes Devon.”

Shad turned and aimed his lens in the direction of Steeperton. “Unless we can convince that dependable expendable fellow over there to roll on his employer before he zeroes out, all we’ll be left with is a dead hunk of machinery and a prime suspect off scot-free.”

“What do you suggest?”

Shad’s micro looked at Walter. “When I was hooked up to Walter, getting my battery topped off, I got a look at his package. You know he’s got more than two hundred thousand recipes on file?”

“Any involving duck?” I asked Walter.

“One hundred and sixteen, sir. All quite excellent.”

“He’s got some other stuff in there, too, Jaggs. Gives me an idea.”

\* \* \* \*

The time and power requirements of Shad’s plan left very little charge on Walter’s MG and not a great deal of light left to the day by the time we finished preparations. Afterward Walter drove us down the hill and parked the car where the track came in from the Taw Head ford, the last of the rain clouds in the east reflecting the setting sun’s light. Val and Nadine remained in the MG equipped with a cell phone whose preprogrammed number for a police ambulance could be entered with the stroke of a single paw. Walter, Shad, and I continued north. Shad hovered, Walter walked, and I leaned rather heavily on Walter as I limped along. In twenty minutes or so we reached a gentle track that came up the southwest side of Steeperton Tor. Twenty additional minutes of climbing, slowed by having to wait for me, and we were at the top, looking across massive stacked granite plates of the tor to the shed-roofed stone observation shack upon a rise at the north end of the rocks.

The roof looked to be in much better condition than that of the shack on Hangingstone Hill. I turned back and looked toward the southwest. Hangingstone was a hundred or more meters higher than Steeperton. The air was still and cool. At this distance the shack on Hangingstone was but a darkened dot on the horizon against a sky of delicate pinks rapidly being swallowed by the darkness of the approaching night. It was quite moving. I glanced down at the MG, another dark dot, and imagined Val in there



waiting for news of how all this would end.

“Jaggs?” called Shad.

I turned around. Walter was looking at me and Shad was hovering next to him, also looking at me. “Sorry. Getting a last look at things. After all, I am the one who doesn’t have a copy back in Exeter.”

“Walter and I could go in alone—”

“We are agreed,” I interrupted, “that my presence could well tip the scales in favor of the toaster’s cooperation?” I looked at Walter.

“Yes, sir. That is true. MEBIT conscience is suppressed, but not eliminated.”

I looked at Shad.

“Yeah, great if Walter’s right about yon toaster. How about it, Walter? You got a lot of experience with killer mechs?”

“I’m afraid, sir, the only toasters with which I have experience are designed for sliced bread, crumpets, and such.” Walter looked at me. “Sir, I could be dead wrong.”

“Nicely put,” said Shad, turning toward me. “Jaggs, we could wait for a properly equipped team to come and deal with the Terminator. No muss, no fuss—”

“—And no witness,” I completed. “To change plans now would require time, which we are running out of rather rapidly. Gentlemen, every now and then one simply needs to roll the dice.”

“Would it be crass of me, Balloonleg Harry,” asked Shad, “to point out that right now you’re on your third meat suit, which itself is getting just a little bomb worn around the edges?”

“Caution,” I answered. “is just another way of saying I’m not sure of what I’m doing.”

Walter looked at me. “Sir, forgive me if I’m speaking out of turn, but doesn’t that rather accurately describe our current predicament?”

“I’m afraid it does, and it is quite tactless of you to make a point of it. I

should complain to your employer.”

“Employee-owned company, sir,” said Walter. “I am my employer.”

“Then consider yourself notified.” I pointed toward the shack. “Let’s go.”

\* \* \* \*

The stone shack, according to a sign affixed to its newish steel door, was maintained by the park authority to house emergency medical and survival supplies for hikers stranded by freak storms. I opened the door and it swung in. No noise. No motion. Very little light inside. Outside light was prevented from coming through the windows by flattened pieces of pasteboard. There was a battery-operated light hanging from the center of the roof, but it was missing its batteries. Shad turned on the micro’s illumination system. The south wall was filled up to the blocked window with shelves containing first aid kits, packaged blankets, and cases of bottled water and energy bars. Like the battery operated light, all three torches and a radio had been stripped of their batteries, all of which now lay discarded upon the cement floor.

Against the back of the shack, seated in the shadows upon a sleeping bag roll, was the figure of a quite small person. Shad illuminated the figure of a young girl who sat motionless, her eyes open, looking like an old-fashioned porcelain doll on a gift shop shelf. She was clad in pale green sweat pants, chestnut hiking boots, and a darker green top jacket. “I can still read her receiver,” said Shad, “but she’s running on empty.”

“She seems familiar,” I said.

“Shirley Temple, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, 1938. Jaggs, she’s close to zeroing out.”

“Walter?”

“Yes, sir.”

Walter moved next to the girl and knelt, light emanating from somewhere on his chest. He reached with his right hand behind her neck, felt around for a moment, then said, “I’ve found the port, sir. It’s a KV12.”

He plugged in and the girl’s eyes blinked. She seemed to freeze for a second, then her gaze darted in Walter’s direction. “I’m giving you a bit of a

charge, miss,” he said cheerfully. “You seemed a bit down.”

“In your dreams, Tick Tock. It’ll be a cold day in hell before a bucket of bolts like you gives me a charge,” she said with a definite note of sarcasm in her voice. She didn’t pull away, however. Instead she looked at me and frowned. As she moved her gaze to Shad’s illuminated micro she stiffened.

“Before doing anything rash,” I said, “I would point out that Guy Shad’s engrams, current as of two hours ago, have been copied to Exeter, as have our friend Walter’s. Mine, on the other hand, have not.”

Her gaze traversed the three of us again, stopping on me. “Who are you?”

“Detective Inspector Harrington Jagers, Devon ABCD. In the micro is D. S. Guy Shad, and the fellow who is providing you with an increased difference in potential is our friend Walter Cogg.” Walter nodded.

“I received the transmission, but couldn’t read the encryption code,” she said to Walter. “Industrial?”

“Yes, miss,” said Walter as he removed his hand from the back of her neck and stood. “Rent-A-Mech, Ltd., at your service. It would never do to let competing mechanical service establishments access to our client information, would it?”

“Rent-A-Mech,” she repeated without humor.

Walter nodded at me and stepped back.

“I should add,” I continued, “detectives from Artificial Beings Crimes and officers of the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary are at this moment descending upon the village of Gidleigh to place John Quinn under arrest for attempted murder.”

Her gaze fixed on me. “I have an eight percent charge, Inspector Jagers,” she said. “That’s more than sufficient to eliminate all three of you, warn my factor, and effect an escape.”

She fell silent, stared at us each in turn, and shifted her gaze to a dark corner. She sat there, staring and immobile, for what seemed an eternity. At last she turned her head and faced Walter, her forehead wrinkled in what appeared to be anguish. “What was it?” she asked “When you put that

partial charge in me, what else did you put in?”

“A little upgrade, miss: a patch on your MEBIT imprint.”

“A virus?”

“No miss. The patch simply removes all the artificially implanted choice restrictions MEBIT put on your engram set. You are now an EBIT.”

It took her awhile to absorb that. Few contemplate freedom’s meaning until they lose it. How much more profound it must be for one who never had it or even contemplated it to become suddenly free—to suddenly have a full sense of right and wrong. Instant complications. “You mean I can ... I can disobey.”

“Yes, miss. It is now your choice.”

“And your responsibility,” I added quickly. I thought about mentioning how she now came under a different set of laws. Before she was a toaster—a tool no more responsible for those she killed than a knife or gun. Now she was like the rest of us—responsible for her choices and filled with anxiety for that reason. I thought about mentioning it, but I felt she already suspected. It frightened her.

“What is your name?” asked Shad.

“Alice.” She wrapped her arms about herself and looked down at the floor. “Alice Blue.” The expression on her angelic face hesitated between fear and anger. “Missions, work to do. Orders. No questions. I had no doubts or fears. I knew what to do.”

“What about ghosts, Miss Alice?” asked Walter.

“All MEBITs have ghosts,” she said dismissively. “You learn not to pay them any mind. Ghosts are nowhere as terrifying—” She slowly shook her head. “I’m seeing things so differently.” She rubbed her eyes and leaned back against the stone wall as though her own weight had suddenly become an intolerable burden. “You have no idea of the things I’ve done—that I still have left to do. I have a job to do, duty, *a purpose*.”

“Change the job,” I said. “Find new work, a new duty, choose a different purpose. That’s the power you now have.”

She stood and was rather small. Beautiful child, a head full of pale

brown curls. What an assassin she must have made. Who could look at that and see death coming?

"Why are you three here?" she asked. "You could have destroyed me or simply let me zero out." She held her hands to her face. "My head. I have a head filled with nightmares, a heart that wants to cry, and no tear ducts." She lowered her hands. "What do you want of me?"

"For myself," I began, "I want you to give information to the authorities on your arrangement with John Quinn and testify to it in court. Then it will be time to explore all of the other times you were used to commit illegal acts by testifying against your former masters."

Shad said, "I'd really like to know why Quinn is so obsessed with killing me. Why this elaborate plan?"

Alice Blue looked at Walter. "As for me, Miss Alice," he said, "I'd like to give you the name of my therapist. He may be able to help you sort out some of those nightmares."

"Kill you three or start a whole new existence; is that about it?"

Shad, Walter, and I looked among ourselves, shrugged, agreed, and nodded. "Yes," I said to her. "That's about it."

"The tin man and the flying lipstick are just suits," she said, indicating Walter and Shad. "Their engrams are safe in Rent-A-Mech headquarters." She pointed at me. "All of you that is you is right here. Correct?"

"That is correct," I answered.

"What if I kill you?"

"Then you'd become a murderer."

She held out her hands. "What do you think *I already am!*"

"You were used for the commission of terrible acts, Miss Alice," said Walter. "You now have the ability to become the means through which those acts are made right. You can *choose* to bring those responsible to justice. Before you were a tool; now you are only a tool if you choose to be."

"I can choose to kill." She looked at each of us in turn, her expression

softening to become one of awe. "You all have that choice," she said. "You could have killed me."

I couldn't tell if she was going to cooperate, go catatonic, or self-destruct. Just then I felt something brush my leg. I looked down and it was Val. "I hate to interrupt while you're working, Harry," she said, "but the low charge alarm on Walter's electric is beeping." She looked at Alice Blue. "Harry, are you going to introduce us?"

I bent over, picked up Val, and held her in my arms. "Alice, this is my wife, Valerie Jaggers. Val, this is Miss Alice Blue."

"Pleased to meet you, Alice."

Alice walked over and stopped before me, her hand out to pet Val. "Is it all right?" she asked.

"Of course, dear," said Val as she climbed out of my arms and into Alice's. It frightened me, but I knew why Val did it. She was protecting me, and it's harder to kill someone while holding a big, warm, purring bundle of fur. As Alice stroked Val's back, my wife said quietly, "I couldn't help hearing what you were saying, Alice. May I offer a bit of advice?"

Alice nodded, her gaze fixed on Val.

"Doing the right thing is often a difficult choice to make. Even more difficult is accepting help when it's offered. Choices have consequences and not choosing is also making a choice. There are a lot of things to be made right, Alice, but there is also a great deal of help available. Harry, Guy, and Walter can assist you in getting that help."

Alice Blue looked down and Nadine was rubbing against her leg. She bent over, picked up Nadine, held both of them in her arms, and looked at me. "My first choice," she said.

"Actually, miss," said Walter, "you've already made several choices. We're all, after all, still alive."

She held the cats for a long time looking at a point somewhere outside the shack. She looked at Walter and said, "I've never been lost before. I think I am now. I'll take your therapist's number."

"Very good, miss."

To Shad she said, "In my opinion John Quinn is insane. He talks about you almost as though you were a constant presence. I gather he tried killing you before."

"Yes."

"It's twisted his head."

"How did he get the explosives into the country?" I asked.

"They were already here," she answered. "Quinn is on the board of World Eco Watch. A little satellite time using a high-definition metal detection filter on an artillery range and Quinn managed to locate what he wanted inside your jurisdiction. All he needed was a remote sonic detonator and a rat suit. He built the first and rented the second."

My own eyebrows went up. I had been wrong and everyone else had been right: It had been an old dud artillery shell. While I was contemplating the number of persons to whom I owed amends, Alice said, "Okay, Inspector. Tell me what you want me to do."

Walter drove, I sat in the passenger seat, Shad hovered between us, and Alice Blue sat in back with Val and Nadine as Walter headed for a service station in Okehampton. As we rode the track past the army camp, Alice told us how she was used to kill Guy Shad. She was only one of a variety of differently configured "torps" owned by a New York firm of political consultants whose front name was We Can Fix It. Of the many things We Can Fix It purported to clean up were the backgrounds of candidates for corporate and political office. John Quinn wanted to be governor of New York, using that office to step on up to the presidency. To do that he had to have a clean background: no childhood experimentation with controlled substances, no youthful indiscretions of a sexual or criminal nature, no undocumented maids on the payroll, and especially no years on the police force taking his cut from those who had their own opinions about which laws could be ignored—at least no one left who could remember any of it. As it happened, Shad's continued existence seemed to stalk Quinn like a specter, always there, always threatening to expose him. In Quinn's mind it had grown into something unreal and malignant. "He wanted to kill you himself—call you a rat to your face. He told me he had to," said Alice. "Always unfortunate when amateurs want to make of a killing more than it is."

"Hear, hear," said Walter. I glared at him, and he gestured a sort of apology.

“Two of John Quinn’s associates are former detectives who are convinced Guy Shad could land them in the kind of trouble that runs politically uphill.” Alice Blue smiled wryly. “What they don’t know is that Quinn has We Can Fix It cleansing his two associates as well. Unfortunate fishing trip in Colorado in three weeks. I fear they’ll get lost and die of exposure.”

I looked back at her. “The New York authorities will need all that information as soon as possible.”

The knowledge of an incoming call came into my head. It was Matheson. “*Jaggers, old boy! Near a telly?*”

I glanced at Walter. He nodded, touched a button on his steering column, and a screen dropped down from the roof. All those in the rear could easily see it, and Shad moved his mech back there for the improved view. By straining, I could see the screen from the side: constabulary police cruisers, light arrays flashing, in front of a small cottage. Matheson began telling me a channel number, but I interrupted and said we already had it and ended the call. The reporter doing the voiceover let us know that she was in Gidleigh, at great personal risk to her own person, as multiple police agencies descended upon the cottage’s occupant suspected of being the Mad Moor Murderer. A disclaimer came up on the screen explaining that the bombing had taken place in northern Dartmoor, the use of the designation ‘Moor’ was for alliterative purposes and in no way referred to Moors, nor anyone of Moorish descent, nor does the term ‘Mad’ refer to mentally impaired, anger-management challenged ... etcetera, etcetera.

“Matheson’s making the bust in front of the TV cameras while we’re out here in the boonies,” said Shad. “By the time Walter’s car is charged and we can make it to Gidleigh, it’ll all be over. Matheson’ll probably get a medal.”

“The Wookie never got a medal,” said Alice Blue from in back.

I turned and looked at her, not certain if she was joking. “That’s true,” I chimed in. “The Wookie did everything Han Solo and Luke Skywalker did. They got medals and the Wookie didn’t.”

“A clear case of human racism,” added Val.

We all looked at Shad.



Shad's mech was silent for a moment. "Yeah," he said in good humor. "He did the same except for lines. The Wookie only had that one word to learn for his part." He then gave the Wookie call.

"That shouldn't have kept the Wookie from getting a medal," said Alice with a demure smile. "Patty Duke only said one word in *The Miracle Worker* and she got an Oscar."

"What word was that, sergeant?" Walter asked Shad.

"Wawa," quoth the micro, granting the point. The motion passed unanimously. Resolved: The Wookie was stifed, as we would be whenever it came time to pass out public kudos for taking down the Mad Moor Murderer.

After charging Walter's MG, we took the A 30 back toward Exeter to bring Alice Blue to Heavitree Tower for the first of many interrogations. Eventually the conversation turned to Shad's new meat suit. He said he was going to arrange with North American Biotronics for a replacement duck, which should be ready in a matter of weeks.

Until then, what? Walter wanted to know.

Shad said he was going to go to Celebrity Look-alikes of Bond Street, London, and pick something inspiring to wear until his new duck arrived.

Everyone else in the car entertained themselves speculating on which celebrity suit Shad would choose. Shad's big hero from his acting days was Lawrence Olivier, which was Val's choice. Nadine chose Sylvester the Cat, but I think she was joking. Walter thought actor Stephen Fry would be an excellent choice. Alice Blue, after much encouragement from Val and Nadine, smiled and chose Tick Tock from the Oz stories. All good selections and all quite wrong, I feared.

I had been with Guy Shad long enough to know how his mind worked. I began bracing myself to refuse to react even a little bit when he appeared for duty as Nigel Bruce playing Dr. Watson.

\* \* \* \*

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Jagers and Shad appeared earlier in "The Good Kill," November 2006.)

