

VULTURES

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Vultures, Hugh Longworth thought sourly as he turned a weary warning scowl on the panhandler buckbumming him as he tried to get into the cab. They're *everywhere*.

He was beyond tired, and *god* how he hurt. The plane ride had been pure misery. The stewards had treated him like a leper. The old prune in the next seat had all but beaten him over the head with her Bible in her attempts to instruct him in the error of his ways. The smell of the inflight lunch had nearly driven him to spend the rest of the trip in the head, writing a Ralph Report in quadruplicate-which actually might have been more pleasant than old pucker-mouth's braindamaged pronouncements.

Now *this*. He was tempted, really tempted, to reach into his bag, haul out his piece, jam it up under the glomrat's stubbly chin, and suggest that he get out of his face and go find a new venue, posthaste. Maybe go get his worthless ass run over trying to wash the windshields of passing semis on the freeway.

But he was keeping a low profile. Very soon, far bigger game would be in his crosshairs.

Besides, he still had enough of his old mojo working for the look on his face-and the face that look was on-to send the gimme scuttling away.

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"Where to, buddy?" the cabbie asked as he climbed into the back of the battered yellow Chevy Duodyne and slammed the door. A mid-twenties Latino woman with an orange fuzzcut and tweed mac, she was plenty pretty enough to be a model or starlet. *Welcome to California*.

"78893 Ponderosa Pine Road," he answered gruffly, aware of her dark eyes on him in the rear view mirror. "You know where that is?"

"Sure do." She slapped the flag down and started the hack rolling, the electric motors a muted hum. "Might as well get comfy back there. It's a long ride."

Hugh intended to. Once his seat-belt was buckled he fished a cigarette out of his sport coat pocket, and pointedly ignoring the **NO SMOKING** sign riveted to the seat back, lit up. That first reviving puff came out in a long sigh. After two more restorative hits he opened his eyes and looked up, meeting the cabbie's gaze in the rear view.

There was the expected disapproval on her oval face, but she surprised him by buzzing his window down a notch and saying with a shrug, "Well, at least you're not into cigars."

"Actually I am," he answered tonelessly. "I just needed one of these worse."

A knowing nod. "Been there myself. Quitting was a real bitch. Still, I did start feeling better. I run five miles a day now."

Hugh wasn't in any mood for pious health tips. He took another long pull, let it out. Smiled a death's head grin. "Does it look like quitting's gonna make any difference to me?"

She inspected him in the mirror, taking in his skeletal, emaciated frame, hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, sallow skin marked with the ugly purplish lesions of Kaposi's sarcoma. Much to his surprise her face remained placid, untroubled.

"You never know, man, it might," she answered at last. "What with where you're going and all."

Hugh swallowed a sarcastic reply. Her remark suggested that she knew something about his destination. A little extra intel gathering ahead of time might prove helpful, although he doubted it. Playing buzzard bait took the sort of chops exhibited by a pig carcass used to troll for sharks.

"So you know this Doctor Blackfeather?"

"Know of him. I've taken a few fares out there, brought a couple back."

He took another puff, working up the right tone of voice. "Do you think he's, you know, for real?" He hit it on the money, sounding nervous and cautiously hopeful.

The cabbie shifted over to alky. The cab surged forward, whipped around a ramp, and driving one-handed she effortlessly plugged them in what looked like a bicycle-sized hole in the traffic blowing along the westbound freeway at over seventy per. After a moment he was able to get his fingers pried loose from the upholstery.

"Does it matter what I think? You're the one going to see him."

Hugh crushed out his butt. "Don't tell me, let me guess. You're a psych student."

She laughed. "How'd you guess?"

"I must be frigging psychic." He was too tired for this shit, and it was pointless anyway. So he closed his eyes and settled back, hoping to grab some sort of recharge before he began the hunt. At this point even tying his shoes exhausted him. Banter might as well be a biathlon.

The motion of the cab far more relaxing than that of the plane, he dozed off and dreamed of the bygone times when he too used to run five miles a day, and ride in the occasional bicycle race. Back before a gutshot junkie's blood had washed over the road rash collected from a fall off his bike, putting him on the fast track to a funeral before he'd see forty-five.

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"Wake up, mister. We're here."

Hugh came to with a jerk, momentarily disoriented.

The cab had stopped moving. The cabbie was standing by the rear door, holding it open for him. *Blackfeather. Right.* He groaned, fumbled with the seatbelt. As he began to get out the woman offered her hand to help him.

"I can do it myself," he snapped. Problem was, he couldn't put his money where his mouth was. When he tried to stand his legs went wubbulous, and if she hadn't grabbed his arm he would have gone down. She steadied him a moment, then when he seemed to have his failing body back under control again, stepped back.

"Thanks," he growled, angry and embarrassed.

"We all need a little help sometimes. Give some, get some back. It all balances out."

He stared at her. "I'm *dying*, lady. Nobody can help me, and anybody bad off enough to need my help is in deep shit."

"You're wrong. As long as we've got breath in our lungs we can give help and accept it, and where there's help there's hope."

"You should write a fucking song," he replied to her cheerful brainless platitude. He'd proved time and again that hope was a ticket to ride down a dead-end street of bankruptcy and despair. He reached for his money. "How much I owe you?"

She shook her head. " *Nada*. The California Gay and Lesbian Support Network will pick up the tab."

Hugh's scowl darkened. "Who said I was gay?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm a member, and a friend of mine who is also a member set up a fund to cover the cost of anyone coming out to visit Doctor Blackfeather. I've gotten pretty good at picking them out of the crowd."

"I pay my own way."

"Sorry. Like I said, we've got you covered."

"Fine," he said, hauling out his flashroll and extracting a hundred from the middle. "Then consider this a tip."

She shrugged and took the bill. "I'll consider it a donation. Thanks for your help."

"Fatten your frigging shill fund some other way," he spat, snatching the bill back, tearing it into shreds and letting the pieces flutter to the ground.

Well, there went a good chunk of his cover. Tough shit. He reached into the cab and extracted his bag. When he turned back she was still standing there, staring at him. Her big dark eyes were sad, and her full lower lip was caught in her teeth.

Pity pushed more of his buttons. Fact was, just about everything did these days.

"You got something more to say?" he demanded.

"Nothing you can hear right now." She reached into her shirt pocket, extracted a business card, tucked it in the breast pocket of his coat. "Tell you what. Give me a call when you want a ride back. Maybe you'll be feeling more charitable then."

"Thank you Doctor Feelgood." He slammed the cab door. "I'll make an appointment with your secretary."

"You're welcome." She touched the brim of her mac in salute, then got back in the cab and drove away.

He watched her go, perversely pleased that she'd pissed him off. Anger was about the only fuel left in his tank these days. He was probably gassed up enough for the work ahead.

* * * *

The address he'd been brought to proved to be a fairly large compound surrounded by high stone walls. It was on a hilltop way out in a relatively undeveloped area, well over thirty miles from the airport according to the maprom he'd consulted on the plane. The view was probably pretty good, but the main thing he noticed was how damn hot it was. The early afternoon heat pressed down relentlessly, squeezing what little energy he had left out of his bones.

He had to get moving before he melted. He slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder, then shuffled to the wrought iron gate. Mounted on the stone wall beside the gate was a call box, above it a modest brass plaque reading *Dr. George Blackfeather*.

This low key approach was a change from some of the places he'd been. Places where they'd done everything short of hanging up neon signs to dazzle the suckers. Check that, one clip-joint clinic did have a neon sign, the one run by the woman who called herself Madame Nightingale. Singing behind bars now.

He pressed the bar on the callbox, sweat dripping down his side when he lifted his arm. Lit another cigarette and waited.

A wispy girlish voice issued from the box half a minute later. "Yes, who is it?"

"Hugh Longworth. I have an appointment."

"Sure. Come straight up the drive to the main house. You want me to come get you?"

"I can walk." Brave talk, but he hoped it was a short hike. A ride would be great, but he wanted to ease the joint a little.

"Okay, George has been expecting you."

I just bet he has, Hugh thought with dour amusement as the lock clunked and the gates swung open before him. Waiting for that fresh meat to walk in the door. Little did he know that this time he was biting off more than he could chew.

Just let me bag one more vulture, he thought, taking a puff and gathering his resources. That'd been his mantra for the past couple months, his silent bargain with God. He knew he didn't have many hunts left in him. This one could well be his last.

He hoped not. The only thing keeping him alive was the bitter urge to take down as many TRAIDS quacks as he could before he cashed out. Having one almost within his sights was enough reason to grind his cigarette underfoot and start moving, rather than lying down and dying right then and there.

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Inside the compound walls the first two things he noticed were what a beautiful job someone had done landscaping the grounds, and how bad the place smelled. The flowering plants, shrubs and trees exuded a sweet and heady perfume, but as strong as that fragrance was, it could not quite mask this other thick insinuating stench. The smell of rot and decay, the reek of an OD locked in a room a couple weeks past his expiration date.

The heat bore down on him as he struggled up the drive toward the big stucco house at its end. He'd covered perhaps a third of the distance when he learned what it was that stank so badly. Maybe twenty feet off the driveway, just past an orange tree laden with fruit-something he'd only ever seen in commercials-were the flyblown remains of some creature. He froze, his first thought that it might be what was left of a former patient. But the shape of skull and size of the bones told him it had been either a

horse or cow.

The bad meat wasn't what kept his hackles up and made his gut clench. Crouched over the carcass, naked heads dripping with gore, were eight buzzards doing lunch on the remains. They looked up and met his shocked gaze, fathomless eyes seeming to check him out as a possible dessert.

His gorge rising in his throat, he swallowed hard and started walking again, faster than before. His hand strayed to his watch, hovering over the hidden panic button which would bring ten tons of law down on the place like a big blue shithammer. He rehearsed his moves in his head. Yell for help, dig his .38 out of its concealed compartment, try to make his six shots count.

He watched the buzzards warily, and they eyed him like a walking snack food ad. Just before he passed out of sight they returned to their feeding, probably deciding he wasn't ripe yet.

* * * *

The predatory parasites he ran to ground on these hunting trips tended to come from two major species: the High-Technoids and the Mumbo-Jumbozos. Both used a similar MO, a mix of theatrical flash and well-rehearsed bafflegab designed to boggle and placate the prospective mark.

George Blackfeather-who was at least a real doctor, even if it was only of Veterinary Medicine-didn't immediately slot into either category. When he met Hugh at the door he wasn't all costumed up like a hospital drama doctor or decked out in ersatz shaman's threads.

Hugh found himself looking up at a tall, solidly built, late-fortyish Amerind dressed in jeans, a faded Bob Marley teeshirt, and battered sneakers with no socks. A long jet black braided ponytail curled over one broad shoulder and hung nearly to his belt. His lean, rough-hewn face broke into a big sunny smile when he saw Hugh.

"Hey, glad you made it," he said, offering a large brown hand. "Come on in."

"Thanks," Hugh answered, ignoring the hand and wasting no time in taking him up on his invitation to escape the broiling sun for the cool shady confines of the rambling Spanish style hacienda. At this point he would have gone unarmed into a stonk-house if it had air conditioning.

"Hope you had a good flight," Blackfeather said as he closed the door.

Hugh grimaced and wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve. "Not really."

"Sorry to hear that. We'll try to make your stay here as pleasant as we can." He gestured toward the rear of the house. "Come on, let's go find a place to park so we can get started."

Showtime. Hugh plodded wearily after him.

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Instead of a movie-set examining room or phony lab full of bogus equipment, Blackfeather led him to a cool, comfortably shady glassed-in room looking out on a scattering of gardens, a half dozen outbuildings of various size, and several animal pens. Inside a small white-fenced corral a reddish brown horse cropped the grass under the spreading branches of a tree, taking cover from the sun. Two cats prowled by a tin lean-to, and a big black dog was sacked out in the middle of one flower bed. Although Hugh had never seen a Vet's back yard before, he guessed this was about what you'd expect.

As his host seated them in comfortable wicker chairs, a short woman with a bleached blond shag hairdo

entered through the arched doorway at the far end of the room. Barefoot, and one ankle ringed by chains and bells, her fairly wide hips were squeezed into tight red shorts, and disproportionally large breasts filled a pink knit tube top to the point of blowout.

Can you say bimbo? Hugh thought, taking a wild stab at what her function was around the place.

"Can I get you anything, George?" she asked in the thin, wispy, little-girl voice he'd heard through the callbox. Hugh found himself staring, and not at her braless 38 C's. Her skin had an odd mottling, patches of it shinier and pinker than others. She remained oblivious to his scrutiny. Her attention was focused on Blackfeather, and there was no mistaking the worshipful gleam in her eyes.

"I believe I could use some coffee, Carla," he answered, then glanced at Hugh. "How about you? The coffee around here is great. So's the iced tea."

"Uh, coffee sounds good."

"Java on the way." She turned and left the room, hips swaying and anklets ringing.

"Eczema," Blackfeather said.

Hugh blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I saw you looking. Carla had eczema, along with a whole lot of other skin ailments. Shingles. Psoriasis. You wouldn't know it now, but when I first laid eyes on her she looked like she'd been deep-fried."

So the pitch was starting. Hugh put a properly amazed look on his face. "You cured her?"

"Yep, sure did." The big man settled back in his chair, regarding him with a disconcertingly sharp gaze. "You gay?"

Hugh frowned, taken off-guard by the question. He'd been expecting a follow-up shot of high pressure sales. "Uh, does it matter?"

Blackfeather grinned. "Not to me."

Hugh didn't dare seem too evasive. "Yeah," he admitted. "I'm gay."

A satisfied nod. "But that's not how you contracted Treatment Resistant AIDS."

"What makes you say that?"

"You don't seem like the kind of man who makes mistakes. You're tense, cautious, and wary. If your guard was up any higher you'd grow a shell." He shrugged. "Still, that's not too surprising, you being a lawyer and all."

Hugh hid a wince behind a poker face. This guy had dug deeper than most. "People in my condition don't get to wear badges. I was a Minneapolis cop for fifteen years, but when I got sick I had to take medical retirement." Which was the truth, just not all of it.

"Ah, I see." Blackfeather glanced past him. "Here's the lovely Carla with our coffee." He stood up and relieved her of the tray she carried, then sent her away with some signal Hugh didn't quite catch.

"Tell me," he said as he sat down again and began pouring, "Doesn't the loss of your career make you feel lost and directionless?"

What the hell was this guy getting at? "My present direction," he answered stiffly, "Is trying to stay alive."

Blackfeather handed him a mug. "Excellent choice of priorities. Black, right?"

This whole thing was getting to be like some of the trickier stings he'd run back when he was working Vice and Bunco. The guy was shying from his ex-cop status, and working his way around to blowing him off. Some of these jokers had antennae like cockroaches. All it took was the faintest of vibes to send them scuttling for cover.

"Look, Doctor Blackfeather," he began, putting a desperate note in his voice. He'd wrestled eels like this guy to the mat before, and figured he had one more bout left in him. All he had to do was get the man's greed to kick in.

"Oh, just call me George. All my patients do."

Hugh was left completely off-balance again. "You mean you *are* going to treat me?"

Blackfeather looked surprised. "Sure. After all, I contacted you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did." That was one of the nastier parts of these vultures' MOs, but it also made what he did easier. The world was glutted with information, all you needed to do was know how and where to look for what you wanted. That made it easy for these parasites to locate the few thousand TRAIDS sufferers, select the ones whose consumer profiles made the likeliest target for your style of scam, check the credit references of this group, and go after the fattest pigeons in the flock.

Blackfeather leaned closer, suddenly intent. "I'm pretty selective, Hugh. You fit the profile for the sort of subject I need at this point of the testing stage."

Planted financial records had seen to that. He figured his quarry was about to launch into his 'now don't expect immediate results' rap, handing out the mush-mouthed bet-hedging these pitiless bastards used to cover their asses. He knew how to play along to this particular tune.

"I'm willing to try anything. I've been to a dozen doctors, and none of the standard treatments work." He obligingly opened his mouth wider for the hook, adding, "Who knows, maybe I'll be one of the lucky ones, and your approach will work for me." He did his best to sound like he believed such a thing was possible. Maybe it was. The only problem was that the odds made climbing in an antique Corvair convertible and playing chicken with a 200 car freight train seem winnable by comparison.

Blackfeather shook his head. "Luck's got nothing to do with it. Figure in about three or four days you'll be well enough to leave here if you want, go on with your life."

These fuckers always made grandiose claims, but this was the biggest, boldest-faced one he'd ever been handed. They always left themselves an out. Where was his?

"It must-it must be expensive," he said sounding cautious and worried. If he could get Chief Quack to name his price Hugh's case would be half made.

Blackfeather shrugged. "This isn't really about money, so there's not a set fee. In three days we sit down and have a talk. I tell you what I want. You don't like my price, you walk away."

Hugh nodded. "I guess that's fair enough." Now he had a handle on the dip-phase of the operation. He was working it like the faith healers. They'd trick you into thinking you felt better, get you falling all over yourself with gratitude, then pick you so clean so fast your accounts imploded. Tonto here was in for a heap big surprise. He wouldn't be getting Hugh's wallet, but a warrant. Cash value, zilch. Personal value,

incalculable.

Blackfeather seemed pleased with his answer. "Great. So you're ready to start getting better?"

"Sure. What've I got to do, some herb and sweat-lodge sort of thing?"

Blackfeather threw back his head and laughed. "You are one funny guy, Hugh," he gasped as he tried to get control of his mirth. "I've seen a lot of folks sit there and think that, but none of them have ever had the balls to say it out loud."

He wiped his eyes. "No sweating or chanting, I promise." A wink. "Honest injun. First I give you a shot. Then we get you settled into a room here. You spend the next couple days taking it easy, mostly staying in bed. You get three meals a day, plus anything else you want to eat, whenever you want it. If you've trouble eating, which is pretty unlikely, there's some fairly tasty medical redbud in your bathroom medicine cabinet. Eating all you can and chilling out for a couple days are the only things I insist on. There's a brand new forty inch Gateway rig in your room. You've got full access and some three thousand channels. If you'd rather read real books, ring for Carla. I've got a pretty damn good library."

"Sounds like a vacation." Full access? He'd believe that when he saw it.

"Think of it as one." The big man shook his head. "I envy you, man. Opening game of the Series is tomorrow, and I'm going to be too damn busy to catch it." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "What else? Oh yeah, you eat meat?"

"Yeah." Actually he didn't eat much of anything. Standing six-one and weighing maybe 100 pounds should make that obvious.

"Great. Chan-he's our chef-will be happy. He hates cooking for strict vegetarians." Blackfeather leaned back in his chair. "So what you say? Ready to get poked by the old horse-doctor?"

"That's all you need to know?" No physical, no medical records? Talk about playing it loose!

"Nope. I know everything I need to."

Hugh had thought he'd seen it all, but this guy's routine was something else. One magic shot, three day cure, love offering payment plan. Either he was an amateur, or a the slickest pro Hugh had run across in a long time. Bagging him would be a special pleasure.

"I'm ready if you are."

* * * *

Letting an animal doctor shoot him up with some unknown substance had been no big deal. From the very beginning Hugh's attitude had been that most of these quacks were unlikely to do him any real harm-you needed a living customer if you wanted a paying customer-and even if they did manage to kill him, his suffering would be over and they'd get the chair. Brass from the alphabet soup of agencies behind the Task Force kept saying this willingness to play guinea pig was heroic, but it was easy to be fatalistic when you had your headstone already picked out and paid for.

Blackfeather had injected him with some red stuff, probably colored saline and maybe some vitamins, then escorted him to a large cheery bedroom like you'd expect to get at a pricier B&B. Nice furniture, real art on the walls, flowers on the dresser, private bath, nothing bolted down.

He stood by while Hugh changed into a hospital johnny, suggested that he lay down and take a nap, then

left him to his own devices.

Hugh waited a few minutes, then retrieved his pocket digipad from his bag. Using the tattle concealed inside it, he swept the room for bugs, found it clean. Then he checked the MV. Sure enough, he had the promised full access, but there wasn't a single sign of a lamprey or lurkline. Very odd.

Since he had clear air, he lit up a cigarette and sent a short coded message back to Arlington, letting the Task Force know he was in. By the time that was statted, the exhaustion he'd been fighting all day was getting the upper hand.

Blackfeather wanted him to rest? No problem. He took a leak and flushed his butt, then stretched himself out on the brass bed thinking he'd just rest his eyes a few minutes.

The mattress was just right, embracing him like a lover. A day or two of this wouldn't be so bad. It might even help him rest up for enough for another hunt afterward.

* * * *

"Mr. Longworth? Hugh?"

Hugh awoke with a start, found the blonde standing by his bed. How the hell had she snuck up on him?

"Yeah?" he croaked. *Carla*. That was her name. Looked more like a Buffy if you asked him.

"Time for supper."

He rubbed his eyes, yawned. "What time is it?"

"A bit after seven."

He groaned and pushed himself up so his back was against the pillows and headboard. He'd been down for the count almost five hours. Was it the shot, or just plain exhaustion?

Carla rolled a hospital-type bedtable around so it was within easy reach. "You'll love Chan's cooking," she said as she began uncovering plates and bowls. "Tonight we've got our own squab, roasted with a honey-orange glaze, and stuffed with wild rice dressing. Fresh asparagus, raw bean salad with basil vinaigrette. Fresh seven-grain rolls. Dessert's mince pie." She tapped a small covered container resting in a bowl of ice with a pink-painted fingernail. "Whipped cream for the pie in here."

Hugh stared at this repast, wondering how the hell they expected him to eat more than a couple mouthfuls. His appetite had gone belly-up months ago, hanging on maybe a year longer than his sex drive. This was more than he'd eaten in the past week.

Yet much to his surprise, the sight and smell of the food was setting off a veritable flood of saliva. His gut rumbled hopefully.

"Looks good, doesn't it?"

He looked up. "I guess."

She smiled and pinched her bare midriff. "Believe me, keeping my weight down even this low is the hardest job I face around here."

Hugh scooped around to get more comfortable, picked up his fork and gave the squab a tentative poke. He was pretty sure he'd never eaten one before. It looked like a runty chicken.

"So you work for Doctor Blackfeather?" he asked.

"I help him any way I can."

Interesting answer. He extracted a forkful of dressing. "You like a live-in nurse on the clinic payroll?" Unable to resist, he tasted it. A shiver of pleasure ran down his spine and his taste buds nearly popped their corks.

"I'm not a nurse, and it's not about pay." She jerked her chin toward his tray. "Look, you go ahead and eat. I'll provide some dinner theater."

"I don't-"

"Eat. Listen. They'll both do you a lot of good."

As if following her orders or its own agenda, his fork hand had twisted off a chunk of the orange-glazed breast. It brought the morsel toward his mouth. He had to open up or let his lips get speared. One taste and he knew it had been one of the best moves of his life.

"George told you that he treated me. Probably also told you I looked deep-fried first time he saw me, right? That's one of my lines. I'm a writer. Sold my first story when I was seventeen, my first novel at twenty. Around that same time minor skin problems began turning ugly. Eczema. Psoriasis. Shingles. Hives. You name it, I had it. By the time I hit thirty I looked like some sort of grade Z movie monster. I'd seen dozens of doctors. I was allergic to all the standard treatments and most of the alternative therapies. Infections had turned big patches of my hide into raw meat. By then I couldn't even write any more, the pain and itching were so bad I couldn't concentrate."

She shook her head and sighed. "When George contacted me I'd already saved up almost enough stuff for a nice OD. He convinced me he could help. So I drove myself down here from Seattle. That was hell, but I couldn't stand the thought of a whole plane load of people staring and probably losing their lunches over the way I looked."

Hugh paused between bites, knowing all too well how that felt. "He cured you?"

A solemn nod. "Damn straight. Now I can look in a mirror and not want to die. I'd catch a bullet for that man." Her eyes narrowed and her mouth hardened. "If I thought anyone was trying to hurt him, I'd kill them in a minute. No hesitation, no regrets."

Her fierce and absolutely unwavering sincerity made him shiver. She meant it, no doubt about that. He wondered if this warning was given to everybody, or directed at him alone because of his ex-cop status.

"I'm just here to get well," he said meekly.

"You will." She sighed and her shoulders slumped. "Look, I didn't mean to come on so heavy, but I've got reason to feel this way. George is ... *special* . It's hard to explain. You read much?"

"Some," he admitted between bites.

"Okay, think of it like the plot of a story. Suppose you were close to Pasteur. Or Salk or Sabin, somebody like that whose work could save uncountable lives. Wouldn't you think keeping him safe was worth your life?"

"I guess." Sounded kind of sci-fi to him.

"George is onto something bigger than a polio vaccine. Even bigger than a smallpox vaccine. What he's working on is something that will cure and create an immunity to hundreds, maybe even thousands of diseases."

Hugh swallowed a mouthful of bean salad. "That's a pretty big claim." Out of respect for the food he refrained from using the term *bullshit*.

Her face shone like that of a true believer. "I know. But I've seen it. He cured me. He's going to cure you. He's cured a lot of other people so far, and sometime in the near future he's going to cure more. Millions more. Billions more."

Why was it that every time he tried to talk he had his mouth full? "You said he's cured lots of people so far. How many?"

She considered, shrugged. "I don't know, maybe a hundred."

Hugh thought hard a moment, weighing the risk, deciding to go for it. "Do you think I could see some sort of list?"

Again that piercing gaze. This woman was one hell of a lot sharper than she looked at first glance. The moment stretched out, and he tried to look innocent.

Finally she shrugged. "I'll ask him." She reached for the tray. "Ready for me to take this away?"

Hugh looked down, blinked in surprise. The squab had been reduced to a pile of tiny bones. The stuffing was gone, along with the bean salad and both rolls. All that was left was the asparagus-which he hated-and the pie.

"Uh, sure." No wonder he felt so stuffed.

"I'll leave you the pie," she said with a wink, removing it and the whipped cream from the tray.

"God," he sighed, settling back against the pillows. "There's no way I can eat dessert after a dinner like that."

"Hey, you never know, you might surprise yourself." She picked up the tray and left the room, anklets jingling.

Five minutes later the pie was history.

Five minutes after that he was sound asleep again.

* * * *

The next day passed in a blur; long periods of sleep broken only by Carla's arriving with yet more food. Groggy as he was, Hugh was also ravenous, scarfing down everything he was brought.

At breakfast he was forced to admit that he was too out of it to make it to the bathroom under his own steam. She didn't seem surprised, and helped him from the bed to the pot with the crisp efficiency of a trained nurse. The trip wrung him out, and he was asleep again almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

As his TRAIDS had progressed, Hugh had suffered countless periods of debilitating weakness, most of which he tended to deal with by driving himself to the point of this sort of collapse. He'd been on the verge of a meltdown for a while now. During those times when he was awake he wondered if this was just another episode, or if the shit Blackfeather had injected him with was causing it.

Wondering was as far as he got. Sleep stole away the ability to worry or make any sort of decision, to say nothing of taking any sort of action. He would have asked Blackfeather, but the owner of the clinic never came around when Hugh was conscious. Once, maybe mid-afternoon, he came half-to and thought he heard the man saying, *Hang on, my friend, I want you feeling good and feisty*. Afterward he couldn't be sure if it had really happened, or had just been a fever dream.

Carla hung around when she brought his dinner, once again talking while he ate. She was writing a book on Blackfeather and the ground-breaking discovery he was working on. That she worshipped the man was obvious. She talked about other things as well, but Hugh was so wrapped up in stuffing his face that most of it went right over his head. Food seemed to be the only thing he could focus on, and it felt so good to eat again he didn't really care.

After he'd cleaned his plate, she helped him to the bathroom and back. After promising that she or someone else would be back to help him make a before-bed pitstop, she left him alone again.

Exerting all the force of will he could muster, he tried to stay awake to watch the Series opener.

The last thing he remembered was the second batter of the first inning, and even that was a pretty hazy.

* * * *

"Time to tap a kidney, Hugh."

Hugh woke, found Blackfeather at his bedside. The man looked tired but pleased. "What time is it?" he asked, stifling a jaw-cracking yawn.

"A little after eleven." He gestured toward the screen. "How was the game?"

"I fell asleep. Again."

"Well, I did manage to catch the last inning. You didn't miss much."

"If you say so." Hugh picked up the remote and turned the set off. "Listen, should I be sleeping this much?"

Blackfeather nodded. "Actually, yes. Don't get worried about being so out to lunch. You'll feel perkier tomorrow, I promise."

"Jesus, I hope so. It's like I caught frigging narcolepsy."

"You haven't. Now you'll still be wiped out tomorrow, but you will be able to keep your eyes open for more than five minutes at a knock. So, you ready to go bleed the weasel before bed?"

"Yeah," Hugh managed to sit up and swing his legs over the edge of the bed, then had to pause to rest. "Jesus," he muttered. "I feel like I should be singing Melancholy Baby."

Blackfeather chuckled and helped him stand. His big brown hands were gentle and warm. "Tell you what, kitten. I'll give you a reason to stay awake tomorrow."

"Like what?"

"If you feel up to it, access the file 'Patient List'. I already set it up in a file space under your name."

Hugh had to let this unexpected offer stay on the back burner, it took all of his concentration to keep his legs under him as he tottered to the bathroom. Without the vet's help he probably wouldn't have made it.

"I got to do this sitting down," he mumbled when they got inside. "I try to piss standing up and I'll go in head first."

"It's your potty." Blackfeather steadied him as he got settled on the seat. "You want me to wait outside?"

Hugh shook his head. "A couple years of regular AIDS treatments make you used to working before an audience." He peered up at the man curiously. "You're really going to let me look at a list of your patients?"

Blackfeather leaned against the doorframe, crossed his arms. "Sure. I've got nothing to hide from you."

Hugh doubted that. "What about patient confidentiality?"

He snickered. "I'm a veterinarian, remember? Besides, we're all in this thing together."

"What does that mean?"

"Just that. You done?"

"I guess." It seemed that subject was closed. He took the hand he was offered, managed to get to his feet. He gritted his teeth until the room quit yawing, let the other man steady him while he washed his hands. Then they began the long trek back to his bed. Ten feet, tops. It felt like ten miles.

"Look," Blackfeather said as he helped Hugh get back under the covers. "I know my approach seems kind of strange. I guess maybe it is. All I can say right now is that I'm going about all this in the way that seems best for the circumstances. Most folks tend to agree once they understand the whys and wherefores. I think you will, too. I know it's hard for a man in your position, but for now you just have to trust me." He met Hugh's gaze squarely. "Think you can do that?"

"I guess." In a peculiar way his gentle, down to earth manner did inspire trust. But there was no way for Hugh to forget that he was here on a vulture-hunt. Maybe this man's veterinary practice paid for this big house, fancy grounds, private chef and all, but he doubted it. When money moved in situations like this you could pretty much bet on finding a trail of slime behind it. The man was up to something hinky or he wouldn't be contacting patients on the sly.

Blackfeather smiled. "Only a little, huh? Well, I guess that's to be expected. We can't expect miracles."

"You promised me one," Hugh pointed out stiffly.

Instead of getting angry or defensive, Blackfeather only laughed. "I did, didn't I?" He leaned down, arranged Hugh's covers, patted his shoulder. "Then I guess I better not disappoint you."

* * * *

When Carla woke Hugh up the next morning he found that the mental fog had cleared considerably. While still bone-tired and a bit fuzzy around the edges, he wasn't in any worse shape than the day he'd arrived at the clinic. About average for a man dying of TRAIDS.

Carla tagged along to spot him, but he made it to the bathroom and back on his own. Once back in bed he ate a breakfast big enough to give a lumberjack indigestion.

After she left he snuck a cigarette, then used the tattle to recheck the lines. Once again the system got a clean bill of health. After an **OK** message to Arlington, he went hunting for the file Blackfeather had promised. The man was as good as his word. It was right where he said it would be.

Being given this and free access didn't make sense. It was almost as if Blackfeather not only knew for sure he was still law, but also wanted him to investigate.

Hugh planned to oblige. Odds were that the file and the names it contained were bogus. If that were the case, he'd find out soon enough. He had clearance to dig one hell of a lot deeper than your average Bunco cop. There were one hundred and eleven names on the list. He took a methodical approach, beginning with *Abrazzo, Antoinette Maria* .

By the time Carla returned with his lunch, he was just about done with *Barkley, Deneesha Martina* . Although Blackfeather himself had handed him the list and the access, he still bosskeyed over to a sports channel when he heard her at the door. Those ankle bells made it easy to her hear coming.

After she was gone again he went back to work, moving faster now that he had a search protocol dialed in, and stopping only once before supper time. That was to call and ask for a snack, and this after a monster toasted BLT on thick slices of home-made bread, a mound of fries, two big pickles and chocolate mousse for lunch!

Whatever else Blackfeather had or hadn't done, he sure had raised Hugh's appetite from the dead.

* * * *

"So, you got it all figured out?" Carla asked as she uncovered his supper. When he saw the thick juicy steak on his plate it was all he could do to keep from grabbing it with his hands and wolfing it down like a starved pit bull.

"What do you mean?" he asked in a wary tone.

She shook her head. "Come on, I know George gave you a list of former patients. Remember, I'm the one who asked him for you."

"I was watching sports all day," he answered defensively.

"Sure, I guess that's one name for what was on when I brought you lunch," she agreed, an impish smile twisting her lips. "But somehow I can't see a guy like you getting all that worked up over women's nude volleyball."

He'd hoped she hadn't noticed. Not much point in lying. They weren't coming right out and saying so, but they seemed aware he was still a cop and on the job. There was some sort of cat and mouse game going on, and the big question was who was which.

"Yeah," he admitted, "I checked a few."

"And?"

"It didn't make any sense. It's like he's picking patients at random. If there's a pattern, I can't see it."

"That's because you're looking for the wrong thing." She nudged his tray closer. "Go ahead and eat, I'll talk. Might as well keep our dinner ritual going."

"Okay." No argument there, the smell of the food was driving him crazy. He grabbed his knife and fork, went to work on the steak.

"Let's see. You found me in there, a writer with bad skin disease. A magazine editor with malaria. A software designer with ovarian cancer. How about the Federal Judge with TRAIDS?"

Hugh shook his head, his mouth too full of meat and shitake mushrooms to speak.

"That's right, with a name like Waszczlabski she'd be near the end of the list. Maybe a quarter of people suffered from TRAIDS, right? The rest were all over the map. Leukemia. Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Rotobacter. TB. Encephalitis. Meningitis. Liver cancer. Lyme Disease. A type staph. Did you figure out the one thing we all had in common?"

He paused with a roll halfway to his mouth. "You were all really sick and considered incurable?"

"Right. Too sick to work, and either waiting to die, or working ourselves up to doing a Dr. Jack." She went quiet, clearly remembering what it had been like to contemplate suicide. Hugh waited, stuffing his face and remembering his own dark moments when having his gun for takeout had begun sounding like a really terrific idea.

"Then George came into our lives," she said, her face brightening. "Now we're back among the living. We're useful again, and we wait."

Hugh swallowed his mouthful of baked potato. "Wait for what?"

"The right time."

"The right time for what?"

She grinned and shook her head, blond curls dancing. "It isn't the right time to tell you yet."

* * * *

By the time he decided to call it a night he still hadn't nailed it down. Some of Blackfeather's former patients had given him money, some hadn't. The man had said it wasn't about money, and that seemed to be the case. All he knew for sure was that each one had indeed been terminal before coming here, and all but one who had died in a plane crash were still alive and seemingly completely recovered.

Odder yet, a vague comment about attributing their renewed health to luck made by one of them had sent him backtracking through the others. This led him to find one other unifying factor, and a damned strange one at that: Not a single one of them had ever mentioned George Blackfeather as the source of their cure. It was like each and every one of them had been sworn to secrecy.

On the face of it, Blackfeather's treatment was looking more and more like the real thing all the time—a conclusion Hugh had a hard time swallowing. One shot, three days to a cure for everything from TRAIDS through cancer? Maybe in Oz, but not in the real world. And if you did have a magic bullet, why the sneaking around and secrecy when you had a shot at gigabuck funding and probably the Nobel Prize?

It just didn't add up. He was tempted to stat the list of names to Arlington to see what they could do with it, but held off. Almost every vulture-hunt so far had been an open and shut case, the malfeasance and fraud so glaringly obvious that his investigation hardly deserved that name. This one was different, a riddle wrapped in a puzzle buried in a head-scratcher. He wanted to break it himself, doing one last bit of real police work before he went for his ride in a flag-draped coffin.

Tomorrow was the day he and Blackfeather were supposed to have their talk about what this was costing. He was willing to bet all the pieces would come together then.

Carla stuck her head in around eleven, asking if he needed any help getting to the john. He told her no. While this exchange was going on she seemed to be watching his face closely. Having people stare was

nothing new, but he did have to wonder why this sudden interest.

So when he went into the bathroom, instead of just draining his bladder by nightlight, he flipped on the lights so he could look at himself in the mirror. This was something he didn't do very often any more. He'd never been much of a pretty boy to start with, and TRAIDS hadn't done much to improve his mug.

Blinking against the glare, he focused on his image in the mirror.

His breath locked up in his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut a moment, leaned closer and examined first one side of his face and then the other.

" *No* ," he whispered into the echoing silence, arguing with the evidence. Every one of his lesions had shrunk by five, maybe even ten percent, their retreating edges surrounded pink new skin. Not only that, the sallow, cadaverous pallor he'd had for so long had improved. Just a little, but more than enough to be noticeable.

He straightened up, unable to look away from his reflection, and his heart banging against his ribs. He cautiously touched the healed flesh haloing a lesion on his jawline, half expecting it to be makeup or something like that, and have it come off on his fingertip.

It stayed-it even tingled. His eyes hadn't deceived him.

His hand fell. Could it be that this guy was for *real*?

Cop cynicism tempered by a year and a half of vulture hunting and armored by terminal fatalism said *No way*. It had to be a trick. This was how these bastards worked, pulling some slick bit of sleight of hand that got you hoping, and once you swallowed the hook they reeled you in and gutted you.

Then how to explain *this*? Kaposi's sarcoma wasn't something you could send into remission with the power of suggestion or cosmetic snake-oil.

He shook his head and leaned against the counter. There had to be a logical answer. Maybe Blackfeather did have something that helped the skin. Look better, feel better, right? Say Carla's story was true, and her hero was using one kind of cure to convince people he had another kind. Bait and switch. Oldest trick in the book.

He took a thoughtful leak, turned out the light and headed back to bed. Lit a cigarette and sat there telling himself that he was being scammed. He was no scientist, but he'd been through enough AIDS treatments to reach TRAIDS status, and waded hip-deep in the grifts which had sprung up to fleece TRAIDS sufferers long enough to know that there was no such thing as a one-shot three day cure. It was flat out im-fucking-possible.

He snuffed out his smoke and crawled under the covers. Turned off the light. Lay there waiting for the sleep which had come so easily the day before.

As he stared into the darkness a part of himself which had shut down the day the doctors had delivered his death sentence shifted uneasily, stirring in a case-hardened chamber of his heart.

When he finally fell asleep he was still struggling with that traitor hope, trying to keep it buried where it belonged.

* * * *

George Blackfeather arrived just as Hugh was finishing up yet another enormous breakfast. A four-inch

stack of buckwheat pancakes served with a fresh fruit compote and maple syrup, what looked like half a pound of bacon, grits, fresh-squeezed orange juice. If he kept eating like this he was going to make history as the first TRAIDS victim who went up like the Hindenburg from overeating.

"How you feeling this morning?" Blackfeather asked as he sauntered in. He was dressed in jeans and sneakers again, and wore a teeshirt advertising a band called The Martian Dating Service.

"Okay, I guess," Hugh answered in a guarded tone. The truth of the matter was that he felt better than he had in months. His head was clear and his body didn't feel like a used dishrag.

"Glad to hear it. You up for a walk outside?"

"Do I get to wear real clothes?" The walk sounded wonderful, but no way he was going out with his ass hanging out the back of this damn johnny.

"Sure do. Pants and everything."

Hugh inhaled the last slice of bacon, wiped his mouth. "Sign me up."

* * * *

Blackfeather took him out the back door and onto the rear of the property. Once again the air was filled with the scent of flowers, their sweet perfume stained by a whiff of rot and decay. Competing with this mix was the barnyard smell of manure coming from the barns and pens. Hugh didn't mind. The sun felt good on his face and shoulders, and his legs were steadier than they'd been in weeks. It didn't even hurt to bend and pet a black cat which threaded its way between his feet, and proper homage offered, went flying off again.

The veterinarian guided him toward a tall white building attached to a big covered enclosure filled with posts and dead trees.

"Where we going?"

"To let my friends out for the day."

Hugh assumed the man was talking about animals. "How many critters you got here, anyway?"

"Oh, maybe a forty if you don't count the birds."

"You mean like that squab I ate the other night? What *is* squab, anyway? Some kind of pygmy chicken?"

Blackfeather smiled. "Actually it's pigeon."

Hugh missed a step, his stomach doing a backflip. "I ate *pigeon*? "

"Tasty little sucker, wasn't it?" The big man pulled out a keyring and unlocked the door to the building. "Now I'll warn you, it's kind of rank in here."

"Sure." Hugh answered, not really paying attention. He'd eaten *pigeon*? The damn things were nothing but rats with wings! He trailed Blackfeather into the darkness, stopped dead in his tracks. "Christ! What's that smell?"

"My friends." Blackfeather flipped a switch by the door. There was the dull clunk of a relay closing, then banks of lights high in the rafters blazed on.

"So, Marshal Longworth," he continued quietly, "What do you think?"

Hugh stood there, hands in his pockets, feet rooted to the floor, brain racing a million miles an hour, tongue frozen solid.

There around him was bare concrete littered with bones. Set in the cement were an assortment of short poles and dead trees. Roosting on these perches were twenty, thirty, Jesus, over *forty* of the biggest and ugliest birds in creation. He was surrounded by buzzards, and they were all staring down at him with cool reptile estimation.

One part of his mind was trying to figure out why he'd been led into a room full of vultures, and not much liking the answer he was getting. The other part was working on his just being called Marshal, wondering why that chunk of top secret info was being brought up now, and making some fairly unpleasant connections with what the other lobe was processing.

"Why-why did you call me that?" he stammered at last, trying to divide his attention between Blackfeather and the avian thugs surrounding him. Did he dare take his hands out of his pockets and go for the panic button hidden in his watch?

The man who had led him into this terrible place grinned back at him, giving no immediate answer. Hugh searched his face and eyes for that telltale psycho gleam. It didn't seem possible that he read the man this badly. If he had he was screwed. His gun was back in his bag. Three or four years ago he might have been able to take on a man the vet's size hand to hand, but if it came to that now he was dead meat. He truly would be buzzard bait.

"Because that's what your badge says, doesn't it?" Blackfeather said at last, his eyes sparkling with glee. "But I'll make you a deal. I'll just keep calling you Hugh if you promise not to call me Doc."

"Sure, no problem," Hugh answered cautiously.

"Great." Blackfeather turned aside, flipped up a steel box covering a big red button. When he pressed it an oversized overhead door began to roll upward. A vulture perched atop it let out an aggrieved squawk, unfurled tremendous wings and leapt into the air. Hugh cringed back, but the massive creature only sailed to a vacant perch, primly rearranged its feathers, then sat there glaring at him as if it was his fault that it had been disturbed.

"Now our blood brothers can go out and play," Blackfeather said, turning back and inspecting his face. "You, my friend, look a little green around the gills. Want to go back outside where the air is fresher?"

"Uh, sure," Hugh croaked, relieved he wasn't about to become vulture entree and eager to get away from the smell. He didn't sprint past Blackfeather when he opened the door, but he didn't hang around for more bird-watching either.

* * * *

Blackfeather led him to a corner of the property where several pieces of weathered, well-used outdoor furniture were set on a deck built under the spreading branches of a huge shade tree. Carla and a short, gray-haired Oriental man were there, setting out what looked like a picnic from a big wicker hamper.

Carla glanced up as they approached, smiled. "Whoa, looks like George's babies grossed you out."

"I guess they did," he admitted.

The other man, who he figured had to be Chan, beckoned him toward a chair. "Well sit yourself down,

suh," he said in a molasses-thick Southern drawl. "Have yourself some coffee. We got us some fresh muffins here, but I'm betting some of my beignets will fix you up right as rain."

Blackfeather motioned Hugh toward the chair Chan had indicated. "Sit down, take a load off." He dropped into the chair beside it. "We desperately need two black coffees, Carla."

"Here."

"Thanks," Hugh said as she handed him a steaming mug. Chan placed a basket filled with muffins and what looked like some sort of sugared donuts within easy reach. The two of them sat down, sipped their own coffees and waited for Blackfeather to speak.

"Okay," he said after taking a slug of his own coffee and inhaling two of the beignets, "Where you want to start?"

Hugh took a deep breath. He didn't want to ask, but he had to. *Had* to. "Am I really cured?" He swallowed hard. "I-I haven't felt this good in months. I mean I'm tired, and I know I'm still sick, but something's changed. I don't feel as..."

"As close to death?" Blackfeather suggested gently. "Well, you're on the mend. It'll take time for your viral level to drop to zero and for your skin to clear up completely, but as of now your immune system is no longer compromised. In fact, it's on the attack, and it's kicking ass."

"How?"

"With a little help from my friends."

Hugh stared at him in disbelief. "Those *buzzards*? "

"Be nice, call them vultures. They're why you're feeling better. You see, what I did was fix you up with part of a their immune system."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope." Blackfeather met his gaze squarely. "I really did, Hugh."

He obviously wasn't joking. "Why?"

"Because vultures have some of the best damn immune systems on the planet." He chuckled and helped himself to another beignet. "The way they eat they *have* to."

Hugh remembered the red stuff in the shot. "So you're telling me you injected me with buz-vulture blood?"

"With refined and cultured components originally taken from their blood. A special cocktail of granulocytes, monocytes, lymphocytes and soluble proteins. I call it Blackfeather's Brew. Catchy, huh?"

"I guess." Hugh knew that several different plant and animal biologics had been used in medicine, and some were capable of fighting cancer, AIDS, and other diseases. None of them had anywhere near the kick this stuff seemed to have. But *vultures*! He shuddered, wondering if he was going to develop a sudden craving for roadkill. The way he'd been eating lately, he'd be cruising the highways constantly, maybe even running over stuff on purpose.

"Don't let it freak you out," Blackfeather said gently. "You won't turn into some sort of ghoul." His smile turned rueful. "Vultures have gotten a bad rap. Not many people find them as beautiful as I do. Still, once

they save your life they begin to look a lot prettier."

Hugh frowned, unsure if he was reading this comment correctly. "You? You've taken your, uh, brew?"

"I was the first. See, I've always been fond of them, the vulture being my totem animal and all. Kept a few as pets, at first mostly American turkey vultures I rehabilitated. Then I bought a couple African vultures off a zoo. One night a few years back I had the news on, and it showed the results of another Ebola outbreak in Africa. One shot was of a vulture picking at a corpse. I went *Yuk!* like everybody else probably did, but then I got to thinking. Why, after hundreds of years of deadly disease outbreaks, were there still vultures around to eat the dead? Only one answer made sense. They didn't get the disease."

"Which meant they were immune."

"That was a real forehead-slapper, let me tell you! So I got me even more vultures and began experimenting. To tell you the truth, I wasn't thinking about people. I was working on a sort of immune-system booster for animals. After a helluva lot of false starts and just plain failures, I finally was homing in on it. I had just started to test it on something other than mice when I had my hand forced and went straight to human trial."

"What happened?"

Blackfeather shrugged. "I was bitten by a rabid coyote."

* * * *

Hugh listened to the rest of the story in a daze. Most vets get prophylactic shots to protect them against exposure to rabies. Blackfeather never had because he was allergic to the serum. The same held true for the after-exposure treatment. He knew he was screwed if he didn't do something, and decided to try his brew on himself. The serum had worked just fine, although he had nearly overdosed on it, and being alone during that initial feverish period of sleep and ravenous hunger had nearly done him in.

He went back to animal trials, but a few months later he'd used it on another human, this time on an old college friend with inoperable brain cancer. This time he was there to help her through, and a damn good thing too, for it turned out that in maybe one out of ten cases there was a fever spike in the first few hours, one that could run dangerously high. During Hugh's first conk-out he had been watched carefully, and everything necessary for an alcohol and ice bath had been standing by.

Soon after that second patient he'd read in the paper about a successful restaurateur in New Orleans whose daughter had contracted a virulent form of liver parasite while in the Peace Corps. That was Chan, who afterward became not only his chef, but his business advisor. After that had been an RN from Detroit with antibiotic-resistant Staph A. Then he treated the son of the woman who did most of his computer work for him, saving him from a deadly bout of *E coli*. After that he'd reached out to a heavily decorated female firefighter dying of TRAIDS. Each time Blackfeather's Brew had saved the person it was given to from certain death. Each time the interval before he tried it on another person grew shorter.

Hugh reached the point where he could remain silent no longer. He interrupted to ask the question which had been growing larger and larger in his mind all through this litany.

"Why me?"

"Cause I liked your work," Blackfeather answered in a serious tone. "I admired your dedication."

Hugh shook his head. "I don't get it." Might as well lay all his cards on the table. "I came here to *bust* you, George."

"I know. See, one of my early test patients was the son of this lady named Deneesha Barkley. Dee can make a computer get up on its hind legs and do the tango, and waltz past any security you put in front of her. She got wind of the Federal Task Force hunting down TRAIDS quacks, and she's been keeping tabs on the work you and the other Marshals have been doing since. You, my man, hunted like an eagle, but your hunting days were nearly over. I wanted you on our team, so I lured you here and cured your TRAIDS." A crooked grin slipped onto his face. "Hope you don't mind."

"I'll let it pass," Hugh said tonelessly. "So what happens now? What is it you want from me?"

"Well, first off, I was kind of hoping for a passing grade under Studds-Whitechapel."

That was an act passed in 2002, co-sponsored by two of the strangest political bedfellows ever. Gerry Studds was an openly gay Congressman, and a tireless advocate of rights for AIDS patients. Senator Vincent Whitechapel was an ultra-right wing homophobe whose son died while waiting for official permission to receive an experimental treatment for leukemia. The act they created stated that a person with an untreatable terminal illness had the right to seek out and participate in any unapproved treatment he or she saw fit, and the providers of such treatment were within their legal rights to provide such for so long as said treatments were offered with full disclosure and in good faith.

While this had cut certain killing red tape and opened the door for a multitude of alternative therapies which did in some cases prove to be effective, any number of quacks and charlatans had seized on it as a license to turn a quick buck. Policing this criminal subculture was a job which had been undertaken by Hugh and about three dozen other former police officers suffering from untreatable terminal illnesses. The only cop job where the fact that you were dying-and looked it-could prove an asset. If there was one law Hugh knew by heart, this was it.

"No," he said slowly, "You're okay there. Your disclosure kind of sucks, but the key phrase is *in good faith* ." He looked Blackfeather in the eye. "I have to write this up, but the case will be closed and marked as 'dismissed, no evidence of malfeasance or fraud'."

His eyes widened in sudden realization. "Jesus, this will be my last undercover operation, won't it? I'll be too healthy to pass as buzzard bait."

"You sure will," Blackfeather agreed. "Sorry to put you out of work, but I'd like to make it up to you. See, I have a job offer if you're interested."

"Doing what?"

"We need a Director of Security." The big man jerked his thumb toward Carla. "I can't have her going around and threatening my patients, can I?"

She made a face and stuck out her tongue. Chan snickered and said, "I tole you he knew, sugah."

Blackfeather turned back toward Hugh, his smile fading. "I'm going public with this pretty soon now. Janey-she's a biochemist who works with us-and I have pretty well gotten mass production of the serum worked out. That was one of my big concerns. I didn't want this to lead to vultures being hunted down and bled, and maybe even becoming an endangered species."

His expression turned grim. "When we do go public there are going to be a lot of bases to cover. This place is going to become a zoo, swarming with reporters and people wanting to get better. I know how a vet saying he's got a vulture-based cure is going to sound. Every law agency and government department you can think of is going to come down on me like a ton of bricks. I figure a former Special Marshal who got cured here would be a big help in keeping me out of jail. Then there's the big pharmaceutical

companies. Half are going to be trying to rip us off, the other half trying to bury us because my brew will make most of what they sell obsolete. There's over a hundred former patients waiting to pitch in when the shit hits the fan, but we're going to need all the help we can get. I'd sure like yours."

Hugh sat there, his head spinning. He was *cured*. He was out of a job. Blackfeather wanted him to join his peculiar enterprise and help take on the government, the media, and Big Medicine.

It was all too much to absorb at once, he was still having a hard time coming to terms with the fact he wasn't in hot pursuit of death. He had to get away, had to get it all straight in his head.

"I-" he began, spreading his hands helplessly.

"You need some time to think it over," Blackfeather said in a kindly tone. "That's cool. I want you on our side, but I don't want you to feel pressured. Like I said the day you got here: you don't like my price, you can walk away. No hard feelings as long as you keep what we're doing under your hat."

"Thanks." Hugh stood up and began slowly walking back toward the house.

"Hope you all at least stay for dinner!" Chan called after him. "We're having blackened salmon!"

* * * *

By the time he reached his bedroom he knew what he had to do. He found the sport coat he'd been wearing when he arrived, dug through the pockets and found the card given him by cabbie who had given him a ride. His hands shook as he punched in the number.

* * * *

He was waiting outside the gate and smoking a cigarette when the cab rolled to a halt. The Latino woman was still wearing the same tweed mac as the day before, but her hair had been dyed purple since he'd seen her last.

"Ready for a ride back to the airport?" She glanced around. "Where's your bag?"

"It doesn't matter." First he handed her his cigarettes. "Keep these for me." Then he pulled out his flashwad, peeled six five hundred dollar bills off the top and handed them over as well. "Please put this in that fund you told me about. And thanks for your help. I'm sorry I was such a jerk."

She accepted the money, squinted up at him. "So you're staying here for a while?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

She beamed at him. "Good for you. Any idea how long?"

Hugh smiled back as he crushed his last cigarette out underfoot.

"For life."