

INTRODUCTION

SUSAN AND THE WOLF is a chronicle of how Andies and humans first met after the Last War and how one particular Andie, a somewhat neurotic werewolf, and an aging soldier of fortune affected the future history of our planet.

A simple, familiar version of this story is recounted to every schoolchild, but herein lie the more detailed facts, as recalled by William R. Stark - who was there when it happened.

Mr. Stark wishes to convey apologies to anyone objecting to their portrayal in SUSAN AND THE WOLF, but he has assured us that, to the best of his knowledge, every word is true.

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Susan and The Wolf is a science fiction adventure and first novel completed in 1989 by Rich La Bonté. It was revised and released by **fLAtDiSk SoftWorks** in 2000 in this geoNovel edition. **Useful Humans**, a sequel with mostly new characters set in the same universe, followed **Susan and The Wolf** in 1990. **Useful Humans** is also available in a geoNovel edition.

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SUSAN AND THE WOLF

By

Rich La Bonté

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CHAPTER ONE

I was only fourteen when my brother died. It was a long time ago. I was cynical back then and I remembered thinking it was for the best. He had radiation poisoning, and he was reduced to a vegetable. All my life he had been the strong one, and there he was infected, bleeding, and unable to even say much. It was ironic that he died that way. The long years of the war hadn't touched us - except when my parents were blown up by terrorists. We hadn't been near any of the cities that got wasted by C-bombs. We'd survived the Mag Storms after the Chinese-Russian exchange two years earlier. We had held our own in a gunfight with a gang of looters when we first made it to the Midwest Sector. He didn't even get a scratch in all that endless time, and a sip of water from the wrong stream killed him.

I was so dazed at first that I didn't know what to do. I let the people we were staying with bury him, and I couldn't cry at the little funeral. We had made it as far as Ohio and some farmers had given us shelter. I stayed with them for about five years after that, and then I went to the east. The war was over. Most cities in the Northern Hemisphere hadn't been hit at all, but people were still dying from the fallout. In ten years, a hundred million died in what had once been the States. In another ten years, another hundred million were gone, and there were more after that. It was the same all over the planet. It wasn't the warheads. It was what they had done to Earth's atmosphere. I made it through somehow.

In my twenties, I wandered like everybody else. I had ideals, though. I didn't join a gang or take to dope. I even tried to play at good guy most of the time - helping out where I could. When I was twenty-eight, I got a job with the United Nations as a special agent to the Emergency Council. They were trying to patch up the world and they needed people to explore and map out what was left. I had already covered most of the old States, and my folks had been Federal Government, but I think they hired me because of my attitude. I was still an idealist and I didn't have any political consciousness.

There were others that I met later who felt the same as me. We worked as units sometimes, cleaning up what we could in populated areas. I saw a lot of pre-holos when I

lived in the City of New York, and some were westerns. I guess the UNEC agents were like traveling marshals or land agents in the Old West - assuming that wasn't all fiction. We didn't have much to do with law and order. There wasn't much need for that. People either lived in small groups or alone and there were plenty of untainted goods for everyone for decades after the war. Crime sort of vanished, except for the little paramilitary groups and gangs, and even those fools had little reason for existence.

After twenty-five years, lots of things were coming back. The population of the planet was still in the millions, of course, as most survivors were sterile, but the technologies of the recent past were available. Some industry and farming was resumed. The holo business was booming again in Los Angeles. Radio waves were messed up, so air travel was risky, but there were local trains and lots of ships. No central government, although some of the old folks said we should have one. Computers were still around, but the big databases had been largely lost in the Mag Storms. Cobalt radiation had wiped out non-magnetic data storage media. Life went on in North and South America, Europe, most of Africa, and other places like Southern Asia. China, Russia, and the Middle East were deserts of high radiation and certain death. If there was anyone left in any of those places, we weren't aware of them.

By the time I turned forty, I was nearly ready to cash it all in and find a little ranch somewhere. The UNEC had paid me well in what passed for currency and there was a pension coming whenever I wanted to quit. I couldn't quite face it, but I could see retirement looming up ahead. I stuck it out as an agent because I got to travel, I guess, and I am of a romantic nature. I had my share of adventure and the kind of passions that wandering minstrels usually find.

One day the UNEC called me to City of New York and gave me a very vague assignment. The next thing I knew, I found myself deposited in the old growth forests of the Northwest, searching for God knows what...

Susan was balancing a tray of drinks in one hand, bending forward to clear a space on the little table. A regular customer, who was an old crony of Jack the bartender, playfully ran a hand under Susan's short skirt. She felt the man's fingers move to the top of one stocking, but she didn't stop what she was doing. The guy was married and harmless. She put his synthetic beer on the table and straightened up. His hand slipped back down the stocking.

"Someday, I'll go too far. Eh, Susan?" The customer smiled. He had about six beers sloshing around in his enormous belly, and the words were slurred.

"Promises, promises, Mike," she laughed. She wondered for a moment what it would be like having that huge stomach to contend with. As she made her way back to the bar amid roars of male laughter, she made a decision to find out - if Mike ever made a real offer. Jack was behind the bar, talking to the Mayor, and Liliah was arranging the next order of drinks on a tray, so Susan went back into the kitchen to talk to Myrna, Jack's wife. She pushed through the swinging doors and found the older woman scrubbing the broiler, getting ready for the evening meal.

"Hi, kid. Taking a break?" Myrna was covered with grease, dressed in a white chef's apron, her graying hair covered by a white bandana. She stood back from the broiler as Susan approached.

"I guess. I have a question." Susan perched on the edge of the counter, crossing her long legs. She pushed back at her long brown hair. Myrna looked apprehensive.

"Is this another sex question?"

"Well, yes. You said I could ask you things about men."

Myrna sighed and put down the rag she had been cleaning with. "Is it about the construction guys that came in last night? I swear, kid, you are almost too hot to trot, even for these days."

"I didn't even see them yet. Liliah mentioned them."

"Oh, I'm sorry, kid!" Myrna put her hand on Susan's shoulder. "I didn't mean to imply that you..."

"It's ok. We all know I sleep around a lot. I was going to ask you about Mike."

"God!" Myrna burst into laughter. "You are crazy! What would you want with that nice old tub of lard?"

"What's 'lard'?"

Myrna patted her hand. "Never mind kid, it was before your time. Although we may have to start using it again when we run out of synthetics. If somebody doesn't do something about the future of this country..." She paused, but got no response. Susan wasn't much interested in politics.

"To answer your question, Mike hasn't had sex with his poor wife for ten years. I doubt she'd much mind if you wanted to risk all that flab. Don't take Mike serious, though. He's flirted exactly the same with every barmaid we've ever had here. I don't think he'd do it if you asked him naked and greased. Speaking of grease, I got a job to do before I start dinner, so why don't you get that horny little butt of yours up front. Those construction boys will be back for dinner. I'd save your heat for one of them tonight, if I were you."

Myrna was right, as always. Ten minutes later, five young guys and an older man showed up at the inn. Talk was that they were building an electric power station a couple of miles up river. They were all pretty to Susan, even the older one: a Black man named Hellcat. Lillah and Susan discussed their various physical attributes during a break.

"The old one is for me," Lillah said. "I've heard about Black men, but I've never seen one before. You don't want him, do you Sue?" Lillah was the younger of the two barmaids. She was blonde, and at twenty she had body and a sexual attitude that had been a local legend in the village until Susan arrived a year earlier. As the two women were the only unmarried females in the area, there was no animosity between them. "I saw you looking at that Indian," Lillah reminded her friend.

"Was he? The tall one?" Susan was always very serious about her conquests, but she seemed more than interested to Liliah. "Ummm."

"I knew it! Good! I'm going for that Hellcat," Liliah said, hugging Susan tight. She stared into Susan's brown eyes. The two were lovers occasionally, when men were scarce. It wasn't all that shocking by current standards. Sterility and sexual apathy ran rampant after the Last War, and sex was encouraged to promote repopulation. "It's party time, lover," Liliah grinned. "Let's rock and roll!"

*

He walked down an asphalt path that was overgrown by the brush that surrounded him and littered with fragments of eras past. Shreds of paper returning to pulp, slivers of bright colored plastics, bottles emptied of their addictive liquid intoxicants, fiberglass tubes that were once tobacco filters, and an occasional condom - he saw everything, and nothing, as he walked. The park had always been strewn with garbage. At the peak of civilization, before the Last War, it had been a dirty and most dangerous place - a mattress for prostitutes and rapists, a lounge for crack suckers and horse poppers, a butcher's block and mortuary for the victims of the killer gangs who ruled Central Park in the final years before oblivion.

He looked up at the moon as he broke into a slow trot. It was cradled between two tall, empty buildings. You must help me, he thought. For I have the need to kill. I need to shift and find a little soft one. I need to tear and rip and eat warm flesh.

He ran faster. He reached a branch in the path and turned to circle once more. It was still empty. He was alone in this part of the park. He shrugged off his clothing without stopping and began to allow the shift, which was now screaming inside him. His leg muscles twitched and contracted, his cheekbones cramped and narrowed. His spine crackled as his posture changed and the speed of his running increased. He heard the human part of his mind speak to the lupine. You are running from yourself, it said.

The Wolf plunged off the asphalt into the dense little forest surrounding the Sheep Meadow. His speed was faster than any human as he darted and dodged through the trees and low bushes. He listened for heartbeats as he ran, and smelled for living things. There were crows, but they were above in the trees. He wouldn't have taken them anyway. A part of him regarded them with respect. The crow population was enormous now, and they lived longer than most humans.

He saw another path ahead, and the old woman. He slid to a stop and regarded her without a sound. She was huddled on a broken bench, wrapped in animal fur, trying to keep out the night cold. She was reading from a small book to the light of an electric lantern. The Wolf moved closer. She was old, but the heat of her awakened his hunger. His eyes went again to the moon. Help me. I know you are watching. Give me what you have taken from me.

An answer came then, in the form of a gigantic rat. The old woman didn't notice, but the rat came sniffing stupidly around a cardboard box at her feet. They were stupid and unafraid since the fall of civilization, although their species was somehow dwindling. Thank you, The Wolf said to the shining rock in the clear sky above. Both the rat and the woman heard the howl.

The rat moved first. It dashed down a path as fast as its little legs could carry it, but it was no match for The Wolf. The wrinkled woman tossed her book at both of them, screaming toothlessly and without gratitude. The rat had just saved what was left of her sad life, and The Wolf had just spared it.

*

The fence was the standard, chain-link variety, but it was really high. I mean about 30 feet, and the coils of razor wire at the top were also twice as high as usual. The dogs were young and dangerous, and it was obvious that they had been well trained. Guards that I had not yet seen in the nights I had been surveying the setup were probably instructed to investigate if the dogs did not appear when the gate was opened.

I visited them three nights in a row, but the dogs would not approach me. They did stop and sit and wait for me to jump over the fence so they could kill me. On the fourth day, I brought them an egg salad sandwich. The cook had run out of scrap meat, having used all available chicken, venison, and the old gray feline who had been hit by a cart in the alley behind the inn. Beef, pig and sheep were not used for sandwiches in small villages. They were sold to the traders or carted to the nearest town where a train would take them to a city. The prices in the cities were so high a man could live half a year on what two sheep or three pigs would bring.

Well, the egg salad did it. Yes, sir. Those fanged monsters became drooling pups at just the scent. They probably would have gone for a simple egg over easy. Suddenly we were all the best of friends and the next day they both licked at me through the fence. I kept up my little visits for a few more nights. By that time I had taught them both to retrieve golf balls. I'm not saying the egg salad will always work, but these pups loved it.

At night I came, with wire cutters. They knew me 20 yards away and sat patiently waiting while I cut the fence. They still made no sound and both caught the balls I threw. The anesthesia worked at once and they seemed to smile as they went under. It was a non-narcotic neural stimulant to their sleep centers. They would nap for about three hours. I had to use the ball trick because they were smart enough dogs to know mickeyed egg salad.

I walked along the fence until I was approaching the front of the building and then I took off the hood of my black sweatshirt and slipped out of the baggy black nylon pants. I had maintenance overalls underneath with a black chest pack strapped under my arms and a hip holster holding my gun. I wore a chest pack because it gave me a place to mount a piece of bulletproof plastic that could stop most small arms fire. I had no intention of coming face to face with anything larger. Inside the pack amongst odds and ends were a number of supertech tools I might need, a medkit, and two extra magazines for the gun. I need two in case one of them jammed. The gun was an antique 45. I kept it functioning great, except for the magazines. From what I've read they never were very reliable.

A worn sign made of black aluminum hung on the small door. It read: "U.S. Government Property. No Unauthorized Admittance. Section 23.00079. USMC." I laughed at the thought. The U.S. Marine Corps hadn't existed for decades, although there was rumor of a new U.S. Government in the works in what used to be called Canada. The door was city-plastic with no knob or hinges. There was an aluminum seal running along its edges.

I walked around to the left side of the building as I had previously seen another maintenance person do from my place near the dog fence. There was a stairway leading up onto a small terrace. A second door was at the top. There was no sign, but as I watched it, the door swung open.

The three men did not see me. They were all about my own age and they wore the white coats of lab workers or medics. I could have walked right past them, as I was dressed as a maintenance man and of a lower class to which they owed no recognition, but I ducked back and waited until they had gone by me. The door stayed open just long enough for me to catch it, and I stood there a moment while they cornered the building. Being curious, I craned around the edge, one foot in the door, to see where they were heading. The three were not in sight.

When I say my own age, it is with some concern on my part. William Richard Stark - that's my name, but they usually just call me Stark - is a bit old for this kind of work at nearly 43. I am also acutely aware of my position with regard to my peers. The men who had just passed were of a highly paid professional class engaged in some highly technological pursuit. I am just as professional, of course, but I freelance. I am a horse of a different color in a monochromatic world. In a few years more I will retire to a ranch in the hills somewhere. But, for now...

A ghostly luminance filled the long hallway. I walked silently down to the far end. As I approached a giant metal door slid open and a young, dark-haired woman of about 25 looked out.

"Who?" She said, and then stopped. Her soft brown eyes widened and her brow shot up. Be damned, she recognized me. I had met her in the village inn tavern the previous afternoon. I had been a bit drunk then and she had appeared very sober. I had made a lame attempt to pick her up, and her sweet nature had successfully kept me from making an old fool of myself. She had also been tactful enough not to damage my male ego. Our conversation had been short, but I knew she was a village native and a barmaid in the evenings. I had regretted the incident when I sobered up.

I was surprised that she would be here. It was not common for villagers to stray outside their villages. From her overalls she was real maintenance personnel, and possibly the worker I had seen entering the grounds earlier in the week. I was a bit sorry now that she had turned my offer down. It might have made my job easier and, from the way she fit into those overalls, a lot less boring. She was blushing at me. "It's you," she said, but without hostility.

"I'm still trying to get a date," I said, putting my index finger to my lips. "I hope I'm not being too aggressive?" I gripped her left forearm gently and pushed her into the room. She giggled once and seemed cooperative.

Inside was the office complex I'd expected. The light was low, so I found a dial on the wall next to the sliding entrance door and spun it to bright. The reception area in which I stood had a couch along one wall. I told my barmaid to sit, whipped some rawhide out of my pack, and tied her wrists to a pipe running down from the ceiling. I left her ankles free because she was not resisting. A nameplate on her jumpsuit said "Susan". I swiped it and pinned it on my own. "I'll be back in a minute, Susan," I said.

I searched the entire complex on both floors and found nothing. The building was deserted or abandoned. Not what I had expected. There were large offices with desks and chairs, but no phones, computer workstations or filing cabinets. There were no wastebaskets and the desks were unlocked and empty. There was also no dust. The entire complex was spotless. There was a small wagon with cleaning materials in one office on

the entrance floor. I assumed that it belonged to Susan and that she was employed to keep the offices clean.

I went back to her, pulled up a chair, and rolled a cigarette. She had been asleep, curled up on the couch. She opened those nice eyes and smiled a very pretty smile.

*

The Wolf lived in a dingy hotel in New Jersey, across the river from City of New York. He worked as a driver for a man known as Mr. Prince, who was in the entertainment business. The definition of entertainment hadn't changed, but Mr. Prince had begun his career as the operator of a talent agency that specialized in actresses who appeared in holo loops, live shows, and private audiences with some of the wealthier citizens of City of New York. In earlier times, Mr. Prince would have been nothing more than an average pimp, but sexual attitudes in the post-war world had soon elevated him to a position of great power and influence. As there was no longer any challenge from what little law and order existed, Mr. Prince grew to be a respected member of his community.

Immediately following the Last War, the rigors of survival and rebuilding were predominant in the public mind and what was offered in the area of adult entertainment was of little interest to most people. Twenty years later apathy and boredom were back, along with a need to escape from the bleak prospects of a chaotic future. Mr. Prince, who had enjoyed the same profession before the war, set about to build an empire dedicated to his own sleazy preferences. He took over an abandoned amusement park on cliffs overlooking the Hudson River and renamed the place Darkness. After ten years, the "adult amusement center" was an institution and a landmark as famous as the Statue of Liberty.

Darkness was a jaded paradise for its hundreds of nightly patrons. The price of admission was cheap. A friendly, fifteen-foot, animated hologram at the front gate, bordered by naked gents and ladies in strange positions of ecstasy said: "Anyone Can Get In". Past the gate, the cost was more restrictive. Streetwalkers, holo loop theaters, gaming arcades, and

cheesy brothels catered to the low-income crowd, while the rich enjoyed the more expensive party houses, spas, nude restaurants, and casinos. The very wealthy could book a stay at the Darkness Hotel, where a money-back guarantee promised any pleasure would be satiated.

As Darkness grew in popularity, Mr. Prince expanded his business into City of New York. The decayed center of Manhattan soon had a number of Darkness slot machine parlors, holo loop theaters, nude falafel stands, and other less savory, unadvertised enterprises. Mr. Prince opened an appropriate Broadway office in Disney Square, and The Wolf and he made a daily pilgrimage from Darkness to "take care of business". The Wolf accompanied his boss when there was money to be collected, an "actress" to be hired, or to "business meetings" with Mr. Prince and his numerous partners and associates. This bodyguard job was not really to The Wolf's liking, but a careless moment had put him at his employer's mercy.

The Wolf had once gone to a gypsy woman in City of New York named Vida seeking advice on a cure for lycanthropy. Vida was a known dabbler in the black arts, but also a procuress for Mr. Prince. She called her boss and suggested that The Wolf might provide some amusement for a certain wealthy patron with whom Mr. Prince had had a disagreement. Mr. Prince jumped at the chance for revenge, and The Wolf needed the money. He didn't expect to be blackmailed later into becoming a bodyguard.

Mr. Prince lived in splendid quarters under an arcade building in an unrestored section of Darkness. The basement had been refurbished, leaving the old House of Chills above. Mr. Prince enjoyed making his way through the Maze of Mirrors on the days he chose to go out. One who casts no reflection is quite invisible in the Maze of Mirrors, he often told The Wolf. It was his private joke. He liked to refer to himself as The Prince of Darkness, from the title of his favorite pre-holo, a movie about Dracula made before the turn of the century. The Wolf, who had researched his own lycanthropic condition by seeing similar films, did not miss the irony of his employer's obsession.

The Wolf stood waiting beside the black solar limo as Mr. Prince emerged from the House of Chills into a cold and overcast Jersey afternoon. The wind played with the river and blew debris from last evening's Darkness revelers. A hundred yards past the cliffs a lightning bolt crashed into the water. It was quite a setting and delighted Mr. Prince, who enjoyed the spooky pre-holo flavor of the day. He paused to savor the coming night.

"Let's go, man," The Wolf growled. "I'm freezing standing around here. I have a cold as it is."

Mr. Prince let his eyes flash and The Wolf drew back. "Quit bitching," Mr. Prince laughed in a cruel sneer.

"Hey! You promised no more dog jokes!"

*

She batted The Eyes at me. I almost ducked.

"This is no way to get a date." Susan said, holding the bound wrists up to me and twisting them back and forth slowly. Her face flushed a bit.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Oh, you've already hurt me." she said. "Probably get me fired. It does break up a boring day, though. You a spy or something? A detective?"

"Something like that. What do you know about this place? How is it a villager can get a job here?"

"What should I call you? Not Susan." She indicated her nameplate, which still hung on my coveralls. I helped her to her feet.

"Don't call me anything. You know too much already. How could I get you fired?"

Susan shrugged as though stating the obvious. "Place is bugged. Cameras, probably microphones all over." She stumbled against me deliberately. "Come on, then. Let's give

them a holo they can treasure forever." I did nothing in return. "Well, if you are a spy, then they'll probably think I let you in here. Where did you plan to take me on our date?" She was shorter than I remembered. I wasn't so sure that she would continue to be so friendly if I untied her. It was making me feel a bit sexist, but I had a professional attitude to maintain.

"Tell me what you know about this place," I repeated. She sighed and drew back completely. I lit the cigarette.

Susan told me that she was born twenty-six years ago in the village. She had no last name, which was common. Last names to distinguish people among a local population of 250 were hardly necessary, and radiation levels made excessive by the short Last War prevented most couples from increasing the population. Susan had not been planned but her mother had tested low enough on the Rad scale to allow her birth. Susan's mother had also been able to afford to pay the traveling medic. She said her mother had once been a schoolteacher, so Susan was well educated and worldly as a child. They had planned to leave the village eventually, but her mother had suddenly died of pneumonia six years ago.

One day, men in uniforms had appeared in her village. They offered the villagers electricity in exchange for the right to build a hydroelectric installation on the banks of the river. When the village council accepted, many things changed. Some villagers disappeared. Probably wanted to move away from the threat of any more technology. The village acquired a name: Hopi. It was an Indian name from a tribe that had lived in the Southwest. It was given by one of the men in uniform, an Indian named Thomas Bell, who explained that they needed to have a name to keep track of the installation, one of a growing number that they had to service. Susan knew Thomas Bell intimately, and it was part of his job to name the villages his team contracted. He had chosen to name them for American Indian tribes of the ancient past: Hopi, Iroquois, Menomonee, Watchung and Cherokee so far.

Susan had met Thomas Bell in much the same way she originally met me, but Thomas had been sober. "He also did not feel it necessary to tie my wrists," she added. When their affair ended, he and the others went on their way, but first he got her a job cleaning the offices.

We were still standing, and suddenly she grinned and put her arms around my neck. "I hope this won't be our last date," she said as she reached up and kissed me very warmly on the mouth. "I like detectives."

"I still need to know some things," I said, but I let her continue what she was doing. "This is not a hydroelectric plant..." Her body rubbed me the right way.

"Isn't it?" She moved back a bit. "I couldn't be more helpless, Sherlock. Aren't you going to take advantage of me?"

"Of course it isn't. It's an empty office building," I said, ignoring her offer.

"Then where does the power come from?" she asked.

I was looking out a window toward the river. I could see a thin black cable running between a small building on the riverbank and the empty office building.

I don't know if I can say I took advantage. Susan seemed to be sure that I would as she pushed me back to the couch. She decided that I should leave her hands tied, so I did. Even so, it was all very unprofessional.

*

Mr. Prince grumbled all the way from Hoboken. The Wolf had insisted that they take the train into City of New York, refusing to drive into the still dangerous chaos of city streets at twilight.

"I am paying you to drive," Mr. Prince complained.

"Vida will drive us back," The Wolf replied. "She's got a limo too, you know. And she can handle the West Side Highway better than me. Remember that gang that stopped us last month?"

The train was in good repair and comfortable. The Wolf took it himself whenever he was on his own. He liked trains, and it amused him to irritate his boss. He watched the ruins of New Jersey flash by with some satisfaction. In a few minutes, they arrived at Grand Central and headed down into the new underworld that occupied the city's subway network.

Mr. Prince and The Wolf walked to the far end of the platform. In a stall marked "SEER" they met with the gypsy woman named Vida. She closed her stall and they entered the subway tunnel and walked to the next platform. They made their way to the street and into the collapsed facade of a skyscraper. Here they climbed down an elevator shaft to an abandoned parking level. Three burley men and a slim woman with long blonde hair waited for them.

"An audition," Mr. Prince explained to The Wolf. He walked around the blonde woman, Vida trailing him in servile fashion. "Very good, Vida!" Mr. Prince said. "She is unusually attractive." The Wolf hung back as the two discussed the blonde woman. He had attended "auditions" before, and he found the entire ritual distasteful, but he had to agree with his employer's last remark. The woman had a beautiful face. She was young, but not too young, with a flawless complexion and long perfect legs. The Wolf guessed that the short trench coat she wore hid nothing disappointing.

Mr. Prince cackled at something that Vida said. "Does she? Oh, does she now?" He rubbed his hands together. Vida scurried in front of him.

"Besides all that, she's good at cards. The boys here played with her."

Mr. Prince frowned.

"At cards, my prince. At cards! Nothing more, I assure you."

Mr. Prince brightened again. "Very well, let's see the rest, my dear," he said to the blonde. The Wolf felt ill, reading his mind.

The woman opened her coat to expose herself. Mr. Prince let out an evil laugh of pleasure. The Wolf whistled.

*

We stood on the riverbank facing the black building. It was a seamless plastic structure with no entrance. I pounded on it long enough to judge it was hollow. I also knew it was hardly large enough to generate enough electricity to power the empty office building, much less an entire village.

The place was strange in moonlight: a new two-story building without function and a black outhouse on a riverbanked forest clearing ringed with a 30-foot barbed-tipped fence and guard dogs. We had shed our overalls. I was dressed again in my black guerrilla uniform and she in a deerskin outfit she wore in the forest when going to and from the "power plant". The cable that ran to the office building had a twin that indeed snaked over the fence and through the treetops toward Susan's village of Hopi. But no cable so small could power Hopi. The station was a fraud.

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The limo sped through upper Manhattan to the Bridge. Mr. Prince and The Wolf rode in back with the blonde purchase on the seat between them. In front, Vida drove maniacally, screeching invectives at the numerous potholes and other obstacles along the treacherous decayed streets. She barely got them over the Bridge alive when she swung hard to avoid an enormous steel support cable and sent the limo into a full 360-degree spinout that nearly landed them in the river.

Androids were, of course, developed as war machines. Even the first models were incredibly lifelike, although early "Andies" had some infamous bugs. Male and female Battlefield models were mass-produced and fought hand to hand with humans in the

conventional theater of the Last War. By the twelfth year of that conflict, the Andies were tooled to almost perfect beings. Available in many colors and shapes, Andies were particularly attractive and the famous sexually functioning Pleasure models were released in the final year of Andie production. Russian AA (Anti-Andie) weapons wiped out most of the Battlefield models, of course, and the aftermath of the nuclear phase of the Last War, with its Magnetic Storms, disabled all the others.

How Vida had obtained a female Andie Pleasure model was a mystery. The fact that neither Mr. Prince nor The Wolf knew enough about Andies to recognize one was also strange. Mr. Prince had been around a long time and was a man of endless sexual curiosity. It was odd that he couldn't tell an Andie from a human.

Vida cackled as she watched The Wolf and Mr. Prince escort the sensational blonde Nordic Andie down the boardwalk. They were in for a surprise, the murdering pig bastards! Vida kicked the limo into gear and headed back onto the empty superhighway into Manhattan.

*

We walked back to the village of Hopi with our arms entwined, tracing the thin cable that ran from the black building by the river. Susan skipped along like a little kid jerking a tired parent. At my age such encounters were getting to be a rarity and she had already worn me down quite a bit. I began to wonder if I should ever have untied her. She commented on everything from how sexy I looked in black to the way the moon struck the pine needles. I watched the cable. I was looking for solar collection units hidden high in the trees, but I saw none. Susan asked me questions about my past. She wanted to know about the women in my life. I asked her about the three men whom I had seen leaving the office building as I first walked in.

"I never saw them before. There are always a couple of technicians leaving when I first get there, but they're always different - never the same people. I only clean there twice a week. They never even acknowledge me."

"You got the maintenance job from your Indian friend, right? Has he been there since?"

"No. He left for good after construction was completed." Susan said seriously, looking me in the eye to make a point that a single man never misses.

"A lover who gave you a job."

"Yes, I guess he felt a bit guilty. Just before it was time for him to move on, he told me about the job and the salary. A day later he was gone forever."

"Who pays you? I mean, where do you pick up your pay?"

"Comes in the mail. Jack the Bartender usually delivers it." She tickled me in a vital spot.

"Enough to compensate for services rendered?"

"No, baby. Never enough. I'm saving to get out of this place. But a steady income for as long as I want to show up." Susan stopped and looked up at me. "I don't suppose you'd like to take me with you when you go?"

"Of course not..." I wasn't sure I meant it.

She batted The Eyes. "When you turned up tonight it was like a lightning storm. I knew you were the guy I was waiting for..."

"What?" Now it was my turn to pause, but I did notice that the cable had stopped running through the trees before I turned and looked down at her. I didn't want to tell her that the evening's passion was good for me too.

Susan blinked at my hesitation. She flashed disappointment. "Oh," she stammered.

"Nothing..." She also muttered "yet" under her breath, which I pretended not to hear.

*

As was his custom, Mr. Prince auditioned his guest in a prop dungeon rescued from The House of Chills. The ropes and manacles were real, however, bought on the 42nd Street/5th Avenue platform. The blonde responded willingly to various opening sexual

experiments. The Wolf was encouraged to watch. He made his displeasure known, and Mr. Prince misinterpreted his remarks. With the naked blonde hanging by her wrists from a wall, Mr. Prince commented that The Wolf wouldn't have hated women so much if his mother hadn't been such a bitch.

It was a "dog joke" and the two of them got into an immediate torrent of verbal abuse, completely forgetting the "actress" for a while. If they had been paying attention, they might have noticed her eyes shut down with a red glow and the total rigidity of her body for the few milliseconds required for her processors to clean house. Andie Pleasure models were programmed to do this to assure total reliability no matter what the extent of a customer's physical requirements. These same self-repair functions had made the Andies perfect soldiers for conventional combat during the Last War until special weapons were developed to immobilize them.

After they finally pulled her off the wall and strapped her face forward onto a table, Mr. Prince ran his hand over her slowly and her circuits mimed a ripple of ecstasy and synthesized goosebumps across her skin. A low moan escaped her lips and a wicked smile crossed his.

"Oh, where is it?" fretted The Wolf. He dug madly through a huge wooden chest in the corner of the dungeon. "I was sure I put it here..."

"Find it, you cur! I am growing very impatient with you." Mr. Prince lowered his voice so only his blonde guest could hear him and whispered a scenario into her ear. Her programming supplied a grateful moan and sweat generators. The pigment of the skin grew pink with perfectly simulated excitement "I need it, you fool! Where is it?"

The Wolf scrabbled through a closet in the opposite wall. Garter belts and rubber objects flew into the air. He growled and snarled a stream of curses long obsolete. For a second he stopped with a joyful exclamation. But the find proved only to be a neck collar. He moved to a bureau next to the chest and began to pull out the drawers. Mr. Prince's anger

filled the air, and the android waited patiently. She moaned a randomly digitized interpretation of pleasure.

It was near dawn when Mr. Prince called a halt to their orgy. The Wolf never did find the object of his search, and his employer unkindly referred to him as "dogboy" for the rest of the audition, but Mr. Prince was very satisfied. Then he got a last minute inspiration for a bit of role-playing.

He laid the blonde out on her back on the white tabletop. It didn't seem necessary to restrain her.

"She's really quite good. I must remember to compliment Vida on this purchase," Mr. Prince said. "I think this is the best I've had since Leningrad. You do remember Leningrad, dogboy?"

"I wasn't with you before the war," The Wolf reminded him. "I thought you were through. I'd like to go home." He watched his boss with increasing curiosity. "What are you doing?"

Mr. Prince bent over the pale girl. He fondled her fondly as he licked the spot on her neck. "And do mop the floor before you return to that dump of yours." He kissed her lips. They were warm and her tongue sought his. "No more time for that," Mr. Prince said, scolding her gently, and bit deeply into her vein. The electrical charge sent him flying, bat-like, across the room where he became unfortunately impaled on a wooden torchpost.

The Wolf shrieked and tried to help him, but he couldn't dislodge Mr. Prince before the sharp and correctly placed spear ended his vampire fantasy forever. Despite his dislike for his former employer, The Wolf was a professional bodyguard. Never known for great intelligence, he shape-shifted and hovered menacingly over the naked Andie. The blonde reacted only with a lilting laugh followed by a distinctive invitation. With a growl that was half-human moan, The Wolf leapt upon the table and tore at her throat. One of her neck cables sprang out and whipped across his nose. Mr. Prince had dissipated her

charge, so there was no shock. Only a smell of burning synthetic flesh as the Andie twitched spasmodically on the table.

The Wolf returned to human form and found his clothes. Muttering obscenities, he climbed up into the House of Chills, made his way through the Hall of Mirrors, and headed out into a rainy New Jersey morning. His nose was bleeding.

*

We walked back to the place where the cable had split. One continued through the treetops in the direction of Hopi. The other ran from an old maple and attached itself to a metallic black box about one-foot square. This was perched on top of a black metal pole that was posted in the ground about a yard from the trunk of the maple and was about twenty feet high and about five inches in diameter. Susan forgot her personal conflicts for a moment and ran childlike to the pole.

"Don't touch it!" I yelled, but she had already extended her beautiful thin hands and her right forefinger brushed the black tube. Nothing happened. I sighed. I had noticed a lot of dead insects around the base of the pole. "It might have been electrified," I explained to her puzzled expression. She gave me a sudden grin and did a little dance where she stood. I knew I had put my foot in it.

"Then you do like me," she stated, throwing her arms around my waist. What was I to say? My professional ethics were in jeopardy, but it was too late for that now. The old maple had a nice little man-made clearing with a soft moss grass glistening in the moonlight and it was a warm night. We made love, and later fell asleep happy and exhausted.

I had a brief dream of an elk or stallion, black and angry, chasing me away from Susan. She was naked in the dream, but very chaste and pure. The elk stopped to comment on the perfection of her body. I heard myself agreeing. I woke to sunlight and Susan was not where I had left her.

She hadn't robbed me of anything but my self-esteem, and her disappearance had definitely made my life more difficult. I spent an hour searching for her, just in case bears had nabbed her, but when I returned to Hopi I found her at the inn. She said she'd been afraid of losing both jobs, what with the events of the previous evening at the installation.

After a bath and a bit of breakfast, which she insisted upon serving, I made arrangements to renew my room for another night. I promised to see her at dinner and set out to inspect the village electrical system.

It took a small bribe to get the schematics from the town clerk. There was very little mystery on this end. The schematics were simple and traced the central generator from a small building near the inn to all the other buildings in the village. The generator was the standard post-war solar type, with a recent modification: it looked like a storage expansion module had been added to the existing system. I saw no conversion to receive current from the power cable that ran through the forest to the "hydro-electric plant" at the installation location.

I'm no engineer, but I noticed that the diagram didn't even refer to the black box on the pole. The village building had a junction at the back and a handful of lines of reasonable thickness running across wooden poles down Hopi's only street to various other buildings and continuing to the few private homes and cabins beyond.

It was now even more obvious that the power station through the forest was not a "hydro-electric plant". Hopi's own generator was still handling the village by itself. The question remained: why would anyone want to set up an empty office building out in the middle of nowhere?

*

Zoltan seemed very concerned about Mr. Prince's passing - or at least as concerned as The Wolf had ever seen him get about anything. The Wolf sat back in a red plush chair sipping a martini. "And he had no idea that this woman was an Andie? I mean, he didn't tell anyone that my cousin Vida sold it to him?"

"What?" The Wolf asked sheepishly. The alcohol was making him sleepy. It had not been a good night and he was drinking on an empty stomach.

"This Andie, Wolf. The android whore Mr. Prince bought from my cousin Vida." Zoltan looked quite serious. "Prince didn't tell anyone where he got it?"

"No time," The Wolf slurred. "He was a pig. If he'd known it was an android he mighta' told somebody. But he didn't know. I didn't know either." He rubbed his nose.

"Good," Zoltan said. The gypsy magician paced the room with a deceptively calm face. He occasionally stopped pacing to play with a mobile of bones hanging from the ceiling. "Then we are not involved. My family, that is."

"Oh, Zoltan. Who cares anyway? Nobody liked Mr. Prince. He was a pig." The Wolf grabbed for the pitcher of booze and missed. He was confused for a moment. He looked at Zoltan with unsteady eyes. "Say, did you do that? Move it like that?"

"You're loaded, Wolf." Zoltan picked up the pitcher and carefully poured The Wolf a drink. "You hold your gin like a gypsy. Go ahead. Drink you poor fellow. You are in one hell of a mess, and you don't even know it."

"What do you mean?" The Wolf stopped drinking and sobered a bit at Zoltan's tone. He'd known the magician for many years, and the gypsy was a serious soul whose predictions often became reality. Zoltan sighed before he spoke again.

"He had friends, well, associates, you know. They stand to lose a great deal by his untimely death."

"Vida was one of his associates," The Wolf reminded his host.

"Vida hated him. It was deliberate, this Andie. Vida knew Mr. Prince very well. Even if he hadn't been playing at Vladimir, she may have instructed the Andie to kill him - if such a thing can be done. The point is that you were the last to see him alive, and his associates will come after you."

"Oh." The Wolf sat quietly for a moment. Then he sputtered drunkenly and laughed as though he had just remembered. "I'm a werewolf, Zoltan."

"They are an army of pigs, just like your old boss. You might go down fighting, but they'll kill you. Slice you like thin roast beef with lasers."

"Oh," said The Wolf again. His uncharacteristic good humor evaporated and he stared into his glass before he downed the drink.

"You'll have to leave town. Have you ever been to Los Angeles? I have a relative there in the holo business..."

"No more loops!" The Wolf insisted. Zoltan patted him on one shoulder to reassure him.

"Nah, this guy's in features. You saw 'The Women of Frankenstein' last year, didn't you?"

*

"Tell me the real reason you were poking around that installation." said Susan. She was entwined around me. We were investigating each other.

"I like strange buildings that serve no purpose?" I asked, manipulating her into a different stance.

"No, seriously." She began to plead, an act that was quite gratifying to the beast within me. She loved every second of it. She had a natural talent for interrogation.

"I'm trying to reorganize local power companies into an industrial monopoly? Especially in towns named for Indian tribes?"

"You are a hard man to dominate." She tried to make me talk by torturing me in a most ingratiating manner. "In fact, you're a very hard man," she added. Ah, sweet inquisition. She was still at it ten minutes later.

"So you're a spy?" She sat up. I sat up. She tried a different tact. "I saw an old pre-holo cinema once about a detective trying to stop an evil professor from stealing the crown

jewels of England." She twisted and I gasped. She giggled. "You'd make a good detective. You're very intuitive. I could be your Dr. Watson."

My turn. "Where did you ever see a pre-holo cinema? Or even a hologram cinema for that matter? And where'd you ever get a word like 'intuitive'?" She stopped cold and swung her feet over the side of the mattress.

"I wasn't really born in this village," she said. Her voice was also cold. "I lied to you before. I was born in the Old City of New York."

"That's a long way from the Northwest Sector," I said. "Thousands of miles from here."

"I know that. I was 12 when the village elders brought my mother here. Before that she tutored city people. She taught me too. I learned to read when I was 7. There are many books in the City of New York. Books are about the only thing that's free there because most New Yorkers can't read them." She paused for a second. I wondered why she lied, but I didn't ask. "When she wasn't teaching, we'd go to a cinema. The holos were usually too expensive. I saw a couple, I guess, but mostly we saw the really old stuff. That one was called 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes'. It was made in a place called Hollywood.

"Anyway, the elders of this village had decided that their village needed a teacher. The mayor was in City of New York to attend a conference of village leaders, and my mother was recommended. The Mayor arranged to ship us here by train. It was a pretty big deal for both of us. She said it was the greatest opportunity of my life."

I rolled a cigarette and lit it. Her story sounded a bit rehearsed.

*

The Wolf was not at all happy about the abrupt change in his fortunes, even though Zoltan had arranged a part for him in an upcoming feature at a Los Angeles studio called Holo International and secured him cross-country passage with still another relative who drove a monthly 16-wheeler run. The Wolf hated the thought of being on the road for a

week, but there was no radio and therefore little air traffic. Some trains were still running in North America, but not as far as Los Angeles.

As he paced his shabby, one-room apartment, trying to think of an alternative, he only grew bitter. He had lived here for six years without incident, and yet, as always, he again found himself on the run.

"It isn't fair," he complained to the stained sink, with its rubble of beer cans, unwashed frying pans, and mysterious black mold. "I didn't even kill anyone." But he agreed with Zoltan: his reputation, bolstered by the well-known loop he had done for Mr. Prince, might make someone believe otherwise.

"It's Vida's fault. Maybe I should take revenge," he mused at the stringy Murphy bed and the worn, colorless carpet. He shook his head after swilling another synthetic beer. He knew killing Vida would queer his deal with Zoltan and leave him worse off than before. He might escape the modern-day Mafia, but he'd never outrun the gypsies. They'd find him and shoot him. And they knew exactly what bullets to use.

He gave up and pulled down the Murphy to relax. He popped another beer and tried to console himself with the notion of going to Hollywood. The Wolf had been a movie fan since before holos. He didn't like the new garbage very much, but Hollywood was catching on again and the fantasy of stardom had already crossed his mind. He lay on his back and drank the beer slowly. He thought about ancient faces long dead.

Three hours later, The Wolf was wide-awake, listening to the sounds in the hallway outside. He didn't have to get up to hear well: he just shifted slightly enough to listen with lupine ears and see through night vision eyes. He grabbed his stuff, already packed into a large valise, and made a quick exit onto a neighboring roof through his window. He waited in an alley across the deserted street for a half-hour, until two men came out of his apartment building, and he knew he had been right. They moved like the shadows and climbed into a parked car. Another half-hour passed before they were gone into the night.

The Wolf knew he could go to Zoltan and find protection until the trucker was ready to leave, but he had another stop to make first. He was aware of a relative fortune in items of unusual appeal stashed in Mr. Prince's hideaway under the House of Chills. It was therefore in the pursuit of wealth that The Wolf stumbled upon the little platinum plate inside the Andie's throat. It would have been a Rosetta stone in the right hands, but to him it was just another piece of possibly valuable scrap. Still having a grudge against its former owner, he did take the time to read the inscription:

"PLEASURE 2000. Manufactured and Programmed in the Northwest Sector, 2053."

While the recent date on the plate might have come as a revelation to some, The Wolf was much more concerned about picking up a cache of gold coins he knew Mr. Prince had kept in the Hall of Mirrors.

"I thought they stopped making you tin lizzies before the war ended," he said to the Andie corpse. He hesitated before he threw the little platinum plate into his valise with a grunt and forgot about it for a long time.

*

I should have gone back to the installation sooner, as that was the center of the mystery that had deposited me in the forests of what was once the United States of North America. I was on a job, and if I didn't maintain my attitude of professional conduct I would never make it to that peaceful retirement I counted on. But it was the weekend, a time traditionally reserved for hanging around the cave and watching the moss grow, and Susan skipped out of work.

By Sunday morning we were pretty played out and Susan had gone back to her own room. I donned my black outfit, my pack and light arms shield, and headed out into the old growth forest.

The place was deserted: no egg salad needed. I watched for a couple of hours and then moved in. The door to the office building was ajar. I noticed that a grate on the wall above it had been removed, and saw the remains of what looked like some kind of holo projector mount inside. It had been a state of the art model, like the kind used during the Last War to project squads of soldiers on the battlefield to confuse the enemy. My suspicions about the "technicians" I had seen on my previous visit were confirmed - they had been projections, not real people.

I made a quick sweep of the installation, but there was nothing inside or out that left a clue. I walked down to the riverbank and around the black cubicle outhouse a few times. I used a rock to knock on its surfaces. It still sounded hollow. I checked the kennels along the side of the building. There were signs of dog life, but no human hints. It occurred to me that those two dogs might know more about what was going on around here than I did. I should have asked them directly.

The break in the fence was as it had been, but someone had bent back the wire and there was a small section that had been sheared off lying in the grass at my feet. I picked it up, and saw that it had not been broken off, but cut cleanly with a laser. When I looked closer, I noticed that there were some bloodstains on the metal and I remembered a small puncture wound in my left arm. It had happened when I climbed through. Some of my blood must have gotten on the fence. But why would someone use a laser to cut that section of fence out? And then leave it behind.

There seemed no reasonable explanation. I gave up and went back to the river for a cigarette. Further investigation here seemed pointless. I knew that it was time for me to wire my employers and return to civilization, but my thoughts kept returning to Susan and the village inn. I sat smoking, and gazed out over the quiet rush of water. I did not know if this river had been renamed, (everything was renamed after the Last War), and I did not know what name it had before the war, but somehow I did know that it had a name long before the Caucasians had come here. It was a Native American name that I could not pronounce, and it rang softly in the river.

A crow spoke atop a tall pine on the opposite bank, seemed to see me even from that height and distance, and, knowing my eyes were on him, swooped down to my right. I lost sight of him among the trees, but what I did see made me fumble my cigarette into my lap. Downstream on the bank opposite, just visible through the pines as a black blur, was a long and flat one-story building. It was camouflaged from all angles, except the one where I was standing.

There was no easy way across. Bridges were destroyed here as a wartime precaution during the Russian invasion of Canada. As I needed to know how deep the river was and where to cross, I decided to use the technology I was carrying in my pack. The device is called an aerial map mortar. It consists of a foot-long tube of tempered steel about two inches in diameter, a thin projectile about half as long containing a digital camera, and a small pocket printer. There is very powerful solid rocket fuel packed into the first quarter of the steel tube, enough to send the camera straight up to an altitude of about six thousand feet. Here it records the geography of a five by three-mile strip of Earth and edits the picture into a digital map with icons to indicate roads and buildings. It could also be adjusted to report the depth of my river.

The result was very helpful, but I wasted three hours climbing around in a pine tree trying to retrieve the damned parachute.

*

Susan washed her stockings in her sink and hummed a song. She did not know its name or where she had heard it. She was thinking about the major change in her life. She guessed it was love. She had seen it in the cinema and read about it, but it had never happened to her before. She stopped and focused on the reflection of her own eyes in the mirror. They were beautiful. She saw her breasts hiding behind the shirt she had thrown on. She slipped out of the shirt and looked them. They were so perfect. They always tingled with a need to be touched.

She loved her spy, this Sherlock Holmes, or whoever he was. She didn't even know his name...

*

I had used the mortar-camera before, so I knew the river depth would be about what the software said it was. There was also some interesting new data to add to the puzzle. The river was approximately six feet deep at all points except directly across from the camouflaged building on the opposite bank: it was more than twice as deep in that section. The map also gave an outline of the building that showed the structure was enormous and angled, with the longest side of its rectangular shape toward the river. According to the software picture, the building was low, flat, and most of it was probably buried underground. The map also indicated that the hidden structure was larger than any other in the area.

I also saw that the "hydro-electric plant" was much further from the village than it should have been. There was another point at which the river was almost two miles closer. No planning engineer could have missed it. If it had really been intended as a power source for Hopi, the "plant" should have been built over a mile and a half down river from the present site.

*

Jack the bartender came upstairs to give her a message from Mr. Crebbit, Sr., the mayor of the village. Susan thanked him and sat on the bed to read it. His honor wanted her to help entertain visiting merchants that evening. Mr. Crebbit, Sr., was not married and Susan often acted as his hostess at official village functions. She knew there would be a bonus. She lay back on the bed, thinking of her mysterious Sherlock. He was out snooping somewhere. She wondered when he would return. She sighed.

She slipped into a robe and went downstairs to the tavern. It was dark inside, with no customers. Jack was cleaning pewter beer mugs behind the bar. Susan walked over to him and then asked: "Is Liliah around, Jack?"

Jack was a robust man with a beautiful wife, two children, and several dogs. He smiled at her for a moment. Susan was the only woman who had ever tempted him to stray from his wife. It had almost happened one Sunday just like this one, nearly three years ago. He wondered if she remembered.

*

It was a warm afternoon and I had no problem swimming across. I stripped naked and stuffed my clothes into my pack, wading in alongside the cube-shaped black outhouse on the bank. The river rushed around me pleasantly. I tried first to inspect the part of the cube that was under the water, but it was impossible to see much. It was sunken into the riverbank, and there was no machinery to power a generator. I did spot a thick cable running downstream along the bank and I followed it until the river deepened and the cable plunged into the darkness below. This was opposite the camouflaged building, so I swam back upstream, to cross where I had left my pack.

I looked again at the map and smoked a freshly rolled cigarette. I decided that my approach would not be seen from the building. When I finished smoking, I strapped the pack to my back and crossed to the other side. There was nothing unusual about the riverbank. I worked my way down to the shore north of the hidden building. The current was stronger than I had expected, and I stopped to rest on the bank and dry off before putting my clothes back on. Lying there naked, I thought of Susan and that's probably why I was not alert enough to notice the dark figures approaching from the trees.

*

Susan found Liliah in the kitchen area, preparing a chicken for the evening meal. Susan usually sent Liliah to check on the Mayor's male visitors. It was not difficult for Liliah to spy while dressed as a maid cleaning the inn's rooms. While Susan trusted his intentions, Mayor Crebbit was not always the best judge of character. She knew that some men expected more than just a polite conversation at dinner. A medieval chauvinism had reappeared in the secluded village social structures. Susan sometimes let Liliah play at

hostess alone if the Mayor's visitors were older and gentlemen. If they were rough tradesmen, Susan sheltered her friend.

Liliah had already seen the Mayor's merchants in the restaurant the previous evening and she was fascinated by the dangerous look of both men. She batted her green eyes at Susan and pleaded. "I haven't done anything but clean rooms, cook, and slop beer for months. I feel like getting dressed up and having a stylish meal."

"You sure that they're not drunken pigs, sweetie?" Susan patted Liliah's butt. "Remember those two garment salesmen that Crebbit stuck me with."

"Mmmm," said the other girl. "I seem to remember you got some free clothes. What did you do with those guys after old Crebbit fell asleep?" She turned away from the chicken and wiped her hands on a cloth. She faced her teacher and placed her hands on Susan's shoulders. They hugged close.

"OK, you win. But you go straight home after they start smoking their cigars, Ok?" Liliah hugged her again and the two women stayed tightly bound for a long moment. Susan thought of her Sherlock and let go.

"Put on a good show for the Mayor, kid. Maybe I'll retire..." Susan turned to leave.

"With that guy, Mr. Sherlock?" Liliah asked.

Susan was halfway out the door. "Maybe," she called back over her shoulder. "If he ever shows up again."

*

The two figures holding the laser rifles on me were silent in green and black uniforms that seemed painted on their bodies.

"Hello, there," I said, rising to the occasion. Their guns were not familiar to me, except for the buzz of lasers. One looked at the other and emitted, somehow, a sharp tone of

about 1000 cycles. The other moved forward to take my pack. "I was just having a little swim. Nice day."

The only hint I had of a third one was another 1000-cycle tone behind me. I felt a tickling sensation in my right ear and everything went black.

*

Old Crebbit was wringing his hands and moaning with tears in his eyes. Susan's face was devoid of emotion. Jack's wife Myrna was in the hallway to keep out the curious guests. The sturdy barkeep wiped his hands, stood up, and covered Lilia's face with the blanket. "I need a drink," Jack said.

When they were all seated at the long table in the tavern, they said nothing for a while, and then Jack slammed his open palm on the table to bring them all back.

"OK. Consider this an inquest into the death of poor little Lilia at the hands of two strangers," he glanced at the mayor, "who have escaped."

Mayor Crebbit cowered. He was a small, bald man of seventy who had lived through the Last War and settled the village as a young survivor when there was still an asphalt six-lane highway out in the new growth. Since those times his life had been simple and pleasant, the past forgotten, except for a lingering desire to restore the good of technology from humanity's past. Crebbit was a popular and deserving mayor-for-life who had no suggestions for dealing with murder.

"There has never been a murder in all the years we've been here..." he mumbled at his glass.

"Shut up, Crebbit." Jack was very angry. "This was a cold-blooded, professional execution, not just murder. This girl was executed, you understand, on her knees, head bent forward, shot from above and behind by an unusually tall man."

The mayor whimpered. "That's the one who did the talking. The tall one."

"What did you say?" Susan suddenly demanded. The table was silenced. Crebbit began to repeat what he had already said, but Susan turned to Jack. "No, I mean what you said about how she was shot."

"I said she was executed. Kneeling like in a military execution. Except for where the bullet...where the pig held the gun barrel."

"What do you mean?"

Jack cleared his throat and took another slug from the bottle of whiskey on the table. He looked at her through dark eyes. He thought about Susan's soft and pliant nakedness that one Sunday. She was so hard now, and he knew he had an ally in his anger over Lilia's death. "When they executed prisoners that way, they didn't shoot them deliberately through the small of the back!"

"They shot them through the head." Crebbit finished. "During the Last War. Except for them damned..."

"Shut up, Crebbit. So what the hell happened up there? The girl wasn't touched. Her lip ice wasn't even smeared. She was fully clothed, except that the top of her blouse was unbuttoned..."

"We always do that," said Susan, her hand straying to her throat. "It's a little tease to loosen them up. I taught her that..."

"They said they were garment merchants. How could I have known? Susan and Lilia have both entertained men like them before without any problems."

"Shut up, Crebbit!" Jack yelled and pounded the table so hard that the elder man almost spilled on the floor pulling back. It was funny, almost slapstick. The ice broke. Everyone around the table laughed but Susan. "Just shut up. We don't even know that they did it. She wasn't found in their room." He looked at Susan. "And there's more than one man been hanging around who is tall and strange."

"But the two merchants are gone," said Raul, a man of Spanish descent who was the local mechanic.

"True." said Jack. "But I can't be sure when it happened. The body was found after they checked out early this morning." He put his hand out to cover Susan's. It was as cold as her eyes. "What about this Romeo of yours, Sue? Who is he? And where is he?"

*

My head danced a slow waltz and I tried to open my eyes. There was nothing. Well, a gray blackness, but nothing: no lights or people or guard dogs. I looked for my hands and I panicked for a moment when I couldn't raise one to my face. Then it struck me that I was tied or strapped down on my belly and that I was still naked and had probably been pumped full of drugs. I tried to turn my head and bumped up against walls on all sides. My head seemed to be in a box. A soft hand touched my back and moved along one of my legs, which I now realized were spread-eagled and bound at the ankles. The drugs enveloped my body in a hallucinogenic slime. It was cold and it dripped from my body in long rivers.

"Don't worry," a very distant female voice whispered near my ear. "I'm a friend." The hand cut through the slime, making a warm streak on my back. My body, still in shock and in good condition from my bouts with Susan, began to react. I felt a bit embarrassed. "Thank God you're not an Andie," purred the voice, now in the other ear. I heard heavy breathing, but it may have been mine.

Somewhere high above me a siren sounded. The hand stopped what it was doing to me and there was silence, then voices, shrill and female. I knew I was on a rolling stretcher as soon as my body lurched forward. My head was still enclosed in a box.

There was some movement forward and a long ride down on an elevator. Then I was taken off the stretcher by several more hands and bathed. My head, it now appeared, was actually in a plastic mask that covered it completely. It had eyeplugs that were removed for my bath. Tall, uniformed men, perhaps those who had met me by the river, did the

washing. Two young, uniformed women stood nearby and watched. One of them was black, the other a dark-haired Asian. They betrayed nothing, but I suspected that one of them was good with her hands.

The men, who were also young and never spoke, finished their work and put the eyeplugs back in my mask. I was again bound at the wrists and ankles, this time on my back, and returned to the stretcher. Another elevator, and this one definitely moved up and then forward. This time there was no doubt that the owner of the hand was still present. My mind was beginning to clear. We may have been alone when she leaned over my body and spoke into my ear.

"No time now, but I will see you tonight." She reassured me by touching me, and then the elevator ride was over. I knew she was gone. I heard electronic tones all around me and it smelled like a hospital.

All movement and noise stopped. I remained motionless for a while and then an elderly man of at least eighty removed my mask. The light seared my eyes and I swore loudly and cursed him as he unstrapped me from the stretcher. I saw it was of an unfamiliar type, made entirely of lightweight and flexible plastic. The old man drew back and I could see that he was dressed in rags, ill and unshaven. A prisoner, like myself, and now very frightened, thanks to my temper.

"Sorry," I grumbled, attempting dignity in my nakedness. I looked around for somebody else to apologize to, but the old bearded man and I were indeed alone. We were in a bare cell measuring about ten yards square. "I've had a bad afternoon," I said.

"It's all right," he said, smiling a big healthy grin. All his teeth, I thought.

"Where are we?" I asked.

He slumped to the floor against the far wall, his smile now strangely fixed, and just sat there for a moment. "Don't know," he whined, and he began to weep softly.

Oh, fine! I thought. Good cellmate...

*

The Wolf was walking down a passageway. At the far end, an Armenian woman walked toward him, dressed in a purple satin shift with a purple feather in her headband. She was lugging a heavy looking black case in one hand. He knew she was a gypsy from the mass of blue-black curls and her cold black eyes. He felt intense magic surround him for a moment. Her eyes took him in and he was mirrored in them. She showed no fear at all.

"Nice outfit," she said, hefting the black case as they passed.

"Thanks," he mumbled sarcastically. It was hard to talk in lupine form. He was somewhat embarrassed. He had just accepted a role in a horror holo and hadn't thought to shape-shift back after the interview. The hallway had appeared empty and most of his clothes were in the car, an old Dodge combustion type, parked in the lot behind the Holo International buildings.

He felt the hunt stir inside him, but he tried harder than ever to control it. Gypsy women did set it off more than most, but by now The Wolf both distrusted and avoided all women. She smelled real. As far as he knew, there hadn't been any gypsy androids. She didn't seem to notice his nudity and kept walking in the direction of the aging studios where the world's remaining major holo producers held court. Gypsies are hard to shock, The Wolf thought. She was probably an actress anyway.

He made it to the Dodge, adjusted his form and dressed. He got the car started and drove back along Sunset through the ruins of Hollywood, up into the hills, past the overgrown hundreds of houses destroyed by the quakes following the bombing of Los Angeles in the Last War. He was thinking about the Andies and the incident with The Prince. He couldn't dismiss it. Every woman he saw reminded him. He thought about what Zoltan had said. There had to be more Andies because they were too expensive to be made individually. He spun the wheel up the final turn onto the old dirt road at the top of the canyon. A sign read "Euclid Drive", and there was only one house beyond, a hundred concrete steps up the hill.

It was hot as hell in Los Angeles these days, often over 100 degrees all year. The city did have running water because some industrious bunch of out of work holo actors had set up a supply station that pumped in enough for the current population, which amounted to about fifteen thousand including the holo people.

The Wolf lifted two gas cans out of the back of the Dodge and started up the concrete steps.

The house had once belonged to a pre-holo star named Loretta Young. There were famous and forgotten signatures on one wall of the leather upholstered bar and projection room. He recognized the name Carl Laemmle, Jr., from books about films that he found in the library. In the 1940s, Laemmle had produced "The Wolf Man" for Universal Pictures.

Many such films had survived the end of civilization, squirreled away in underground vaults in Georgia by a billionaire named Turner. Most copies had been obliterated worldwide by the so-called Magnetic Storms after the Chinese-Russian nuclear exchange, but the Turner vaults were now a source of new video versions for small theaters and those who could afford the luxury.

The Wolf wandered through the long living room and up the back stairs to the room he had rented from Mr. Audrey, the owner of the house and a man of questionable sex.

The Wolf had plenty of money from the gold coins that Mr. Prince had left behind, but gold was only good for major purchases. If you flashed a gold coin trying to buy water or pay rent you might be murdered for it, so he needed the job at Holo International. He was made to order for a part in "The Return of Frankenstein's Daughter".

He opened the door, cursed loudly at the scrabbling cockroaches that shared his room, and immediately noticed something amiss. His possessions were strewn about and the dresser drawers were open. "That little faggot!" he roared, about to leap to conclusion when a singing voice came from the living room behind him.

"Oh, I am sorry, Mr... Ah, eh." The delicate Mr. Audrey made his presence known cautiously. "The two of them just burst in and demanded your whereabouts, you know. Nothing I could do, of course." Mr. Audrey gestured into the room. "Oh, my!" he said. Then he looked up at The Wolf, batting painted eyes. "Did you get the part?"

The Wolf growled and the man vanished in a swirl of silk. "Next time there's a full moon..." The Wolf muttered. He went to the closet and found his strongbox intact. The gold and some LA currency that Zoltan had traded him was all there. He put the gas cans into the closet and then collapsed on his mattress.

*

She went back through the woods to the installation. He wasn't there. She searched the building and grounds and found no sign of him or anything to show he had been there the previous day. There were footprints in the earth around the building. They led to the river and she had no way of knowing how fresh they were, but they might have been his. Susan followed them to the black cube on the riverbank.

She sat there for a long time, watching the river and darting her eyes to the forest whenever a twig broke or bird spoke. Her Sherlock didn't appear, and an hour passed before she noticed the cigarette butt at her feet. She picked it up and crumbled it in her fingers, smelling the tobacco. It was his. She tossed it into the river and watched it float away. He had been here, but not today.

She stood and hefted the backpack she had borrowed from Jack. She became silent and cold for a moment before setting off along the river through the trees. It never occurred to her that anything was wrong. She assumed he had left her behind. Perhaps he had gone on to find another village to investigate or gone back to whatever city he had come from. Susan couldn't think about that now, or whether he might return looking for her. She knew that she was in danger in Hopi and must move on.

Jack and the others had agreed that Liliah's death was not merely a random assault, but a calculated murder, and that Liliah was probably not the intended victim. When Mayor

Crebbit revealed that the two men had asked for Susan by name, Jack and the others concluded that Susan had been the target. The murderers had not expected a different girl, thinking that there was only one hostess. When the meeting ended, Jack told Susan to leave town, for her own good.

She had enough saved - there hadn't been much to spend money on in Hopi - but Jack had to draw her a map to explain how she was to follow the river to the port of New Astoria. There she could get a boat to Los Angeles, the largest city on the West Coast. She could lose herself there in the tiny population that had drifted back after the quakes. It was unlikely that Lilia's murderers were going in the same direction, as they had told the Mayor they had traveled from LA. Susan could be hundreds of miles from the village in a couple of days. She had never been to Los Angeles, but Jack had assured her she could easily survive in the city if she was careful. Somewhere inside she hoped that her Sherlock had gone there and that she would find him again.

She continued to follow Jack's map along the river until she found the highway. It was so overgrown as to be nothing more than a paved footpath, and there were no other travelers in sight. Susan walked on until the sun set and made her camp as Jack had instructed her, hidden from the highway by a large outcropping of rock and some trees. She lit no fire and waited with the handgun he had given her clenched in her fist.

In the morning she broke camp without stopping to eat and, after several miles along the road, she heard voices and footfalls ahead. She skirted a merchant group headed in the opposite direction. There were no tall men among them and they had several pack animals that were struggling slowly through the underbrush. She got around them without incident and when she finally paused a few hours later, she realized that she had been running for the last few miles.

*

The Wolf had never had a real acting job, and he was surprised not to find himself nervous. The first few days shooting at Holo International were easy. It was even fun

because some of the actresses were scared of him after they found out he wasn't in makeup. He liked scaring anybody. (Mr. Prince had once pointed out that it was perfectly natural: it sort of came with the territory.) The Wolf had no dialog, unless you counted growls, but actually had more scenes than any of the other males in the holo. Like most commercial holos, "The Return of Frankenstein's Daughter" featured several female stars that hogged a majority of the shots in various states of undress. He didn't mind the thought of scaring a few naked girls for a living, but it was of course difficult to restrain himself from the usual endings of such encounters in his own experience. He made sure he wasn't hungry by bringing some canned chicken his landlord had volunteered.

The holos were easy to make using the technologies that had survived the Earth's most devastating war, but maintenance was something else. Much of the equipment was in disrepair and even the professionals at Holo International were not yet born when it was manufactured. System and power failures were an hourly occurrence, and the last pioneers of Hollywood worked much like the first - dependent upon luck and gaffing to pull them through. The Wolf spent his downtime in lupine form, as constantly transforming back and forth gave him a hangover. He only portrayed a post-transformation werewolf in "The Return of Frankenstein's Daughter". Another actor played the character in human form, and the actual transformation close-ups were the last shots on the schedule.

He was sitting on his haunches near the open soundstage door, trying to adjust his eyes to the daylight streaming in. Behind him was the set of Frankenstein's lab, in darkness due to a temporary power outage. He became aware of a woman walking toward him, flared in the hot morning sun. A snarl formed on his lips and howled inside his brain. His sense-sharpened eyes probed the silhouette for detail and fixed upon her eyes. It was The Andie!

He jumped up and caught the growl just in time. He had been wrong. The girl was a familiar extra on the set. She was startled by his movement, but let out a breath and patted him on the shoulder. "Sit, boy," she joked. "That's a good boy."

The Wolf slunk back to his dressing room and transformed. He stared at himself in the mirror and frowned.

"I hate dog jokes," he reminded his reflection.

*

Susan stayed in the seaport of New Astoria for three days, waiting for the southbound ship. New Astoria was located at the mouth of many rivers and, although the surrounding communities had been laid waste by plague and fire decades earlier, the city was a major port of the Northwest Sector, boasting a population of over two thousand. Many had sailed here from as far as Mexico and Asia following the years of storms that had cleaned the North American atmosphere of nuclear fallout.

Relatively few nuclear weapons had been deployed during Earth's Last War, but a shroud of radioactivity had visited most areas untouched by the "conventional" war that had devastated most of the planet. It was said that the massive Russian strike against Mainland China, and the Chinese return strikes, were to blame. Most of the Asian Sector was now uninhabited, a ravaged land of high Rad counts, mutants and plague. No one had bothered to document exactly how many bombs went off, but there were enough to kill billions and change the Earth's weather systems for a long time.

Susan booked passage on the ship in advance and got a room at an old, but clean, hotel that Jack had suggested. She bought food during the day and locked herself in at night with Jack's pistol tucked in her belt. Jack had warned her that there was no law in New Astoria, "except the law of the sea", and that sailors roamed in packs at night, looking for women and fights.

The ship arrived on time. It was the USS Tremaine, a former battleship, now making a cargo run to and from Los Angeles twice a month. There were a few other passengers, but Susan followed Jack's advice and kept to herself. The gentle warmth of the ocean calmed her. She watched it for hours, standing alone on the decks of the Tremaine, as she began a sort of all the minute details of her very brief existence.

CHAPTER TWO

I was urinating in the small bowl provided in the far corner, when I heard my cell door slide open. I turned to find the pretty black female who had watched me bathed earlier. She was dressed in a very complimentary dark green, skintight uniform, and she had my own revolver aimed at me slightly below the belt - that is, if I had been wearing a belt. She giggled and gave me a friendly look. Glancing at the old man asleep on the floor, she put a finger to her lips to signal quiet and handed me my clothes and my supply pack. I dressed and followed her through the cell door.

"I'm Denni. Your cell has audio monitors," she explained as I matched her quick pace through a very long room of unfamiliar equipment. The place was quite dark, but a number of uniformed people, male and female, seemed to be operating machines - or some of them were. Most stood frozen, doing nothing. None of them paid attention to us as we passed. There was no sound of voices in the room, only a hum of machines and an occasional 1000-cycle tone like I had heard when I was captured.

"Where are we?" I asked her when we reached the far end of the room. She was still covering me with the gun. I was playing for time and thinking of a way to grab it.

"Shut up," Denni said. She pushed the barrel into my back. "Forget the gun. The safety is on. I'll give it back and answer questions if and when I get your ass out of here. In the meantime, pretend you're my prisoner."

We had passed down a short hallway and through a set of double doors. An elevator waited, and when the door opened, she pushed me inside. She motioned again for silence and did something to a yellow panel on the elevator wall. The elevator emitted the familiar 1000-cycle tone and so did my rescuer, but hers came from a small metallic square that she was holding in her hand. She noted my interest, and silently reminded me not to speak.

We stood there for a long time as the elevator shot upward. We stared at each other. I took in the beautiful texture of her black skin and the deep brown warmth and humor of

her eyes. Her hair was braided and her face had a slight oriental cast. She looked like paintings of ancient Egypt, but warm and alive. I trusted her.

I also understood that the others inside had been Andies. The silent ones at the machines were too still to be human, and the patrol that had found me had spoken in electronic tones.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. It was night and the forest lay beyond, still in the moonlight.

She pushed me out gently. The entrance to the hidden building closed behind us. She motioned for me to follow and took off running through the woods in the opposite direction from the river. We ran together for about twenty minutes and then she stopped in a clearing and threw herself to the ground in mock exhaustion.

"Well, hi there, Cutie," she said, handing me my gun butt first. I took it and lowered myself to the grass next to her. "What's your name?"

"You can call me Stark. What the hell is going on here?" I asked, opening my pack and pulling out my tobacco pouch.

"Don't you know?" she asked. "Say, who are you working for? You aren't one of ours."

I was surprised she was an agent, but I tried to remain uncommitted. "I'm freelance. Just poking around, and who are you working for?"

"NPG. The New Provisional Government." She moved closer. "I've been on assignment here for six months. You're the first human I've seen in a long time." It was obvious that she was not only an agent, but also a horny agent. I thought of Susan.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," I said. I pushed her back a little. "What's the New Provisional Government?"

"You really don't know?" Denni sat up, looking at me curiously. She cursed softly and put a hand on my arm. "Sorry. It's just that I've been waiting for a long time. They said

they'd send in another agent for me to team up with and then I could leave. You look like the white knight type, Stark." She moved the hand to my cheek. "I guess it's too bad we don't have more time."

"Speaking of time, don't you think we ought to get out of here?" I asked. "They'll be searching for us, won't they?"

"No. I planned it. They won't notice we're gone for a couple more hours." She looked at her watch. "The sun will set in fifty-eight minutes. We should stay put until dark. Their visual trackers can pick up anyone moving on this side of the river in daylight, but they let their guard down at night. Not sure why, but they keep very human hours. A patrol goes out exactly two hours after sunset."

I was impressed. "You are well organized."

"I spent six months in there." She shrugged. "Had the run of the place most of that time." She moved in close again.

"You always like this?" I asked. "How about filling me in on the rest: what the hell is going on down there?"

"I'm not sure if I can tell you that," Denni said, pouting. "Maybe if you were more cooperative..."

"I though we were pressed for time." Nobody could have blamed me. I put an arm around her.

"You got to go with the flow, Stark," she answered, getting serious.

As I have already mentioned, when you make it to my age in this profession, you don't get many offers. I was still thinking of Susan, but I needed the information that Denni could give me. As it was crucial to my own investigation, I gave in until after the sun went down.

The house on Euclid Drive in Hollywood had just lost a tenant. He had once been an actor. The Wolf had seen him in a pre-holo, but he had never met him. The pre-holo had been a space opera about man's future in the stars - a future that never happened. The actor had been the very young hero of the film, black-haired and virile, who saved his leading lady and humanity from alien doom.

Now he was a corpse in a parallel world where war had won out over its own technology. Even though The Wolf had seen the picture, the actor's name had never registered. The Wolf could not remember it, and perhaps he had never known it. Mr. Audrey, his featherbrained landlord, had always referred to the actor as "the Old Man".

"He's dead," Mr. Audrey babbled repeatedly as The Wolf returned from an eventless day at Holo International. "The Old Man is gone..."

"I know. You told me," The Wolf growled at him, trying to keep the annoyance at bay. "Stay out of my room, will yuh?"

He succeeded. "I've got a new tenant coming in," said Mr. Audrey. "Maybe you'll like her. " He left, quite miffed.

The Wolf closed the door and got a warm bottle of beer from his closet. He fumbled for his opener and dropped the capped bottle. When he got the top off, the beer ejaculated across the room. He cursed and swilled the rest.

*

How Andies think was a mystery that died with their original creators. When the Last War was in full swing, the handful of people who designed and programmed the creatures became prime targets. The Arabs managed to melt them all to atoms by lobbing a small, single warhead into their exclusive lab in the Rocky Mountains, and Andie production was halted for a while. The then-current models had bugs, and the files on how to fix them were also lost in the attack. Among those files were the specifics of an on-going study by two of the dead engineers on real-time android intelligence.

The project gave four special test Andies an enormous assignment. They were designed to "interview" soldier Andies in the field, collect data about android logic in action, and supervise the analysis of their data by supercomputers used in Andie production. Based on the results of this process, and a directive to give updated Andies a more "human" persona, the special models would implement their logic changes into production. The economy of war demanded that once the project began, it would be continuous and independent of the military that commanded Andies in battle. The project engineers considered it as an automated form of quality control.

No human ever read any of the data the four Andies gathered. The two engineers died and no one else knew of the study. The special Andies were not in Colorado when the Turkish/Iraqi missile hit the Andie design lab. The four were doing their job at the time, interviewing Andies in frontline battle zones in Europe and North Africa.

Their creators called the four Andies CensusTaker models, and they were given many extra abilities. A CensusTaker could communicate with central computers from anywhere on the planet by a laser satellite bounce. If link-up was delayed awaiting a window to a communications satellite, data could also be stored in any available local computer bank. The CensusTakers could communicate among themselves this way as well, and access each other's data almost instantly.

When the Colorado lab was hit, and contact with their central computer was lost, the four CensusTakers collectively agreed to find a way to dump their data and continue their assignment. They eventually located an unused supercomputer in an unopened underground Andie factory in the Northwest North American Sector. The CensusTakers traveled to the site, activated the factory, and turned out some drone helpers. They adapted the factory hardware based on their new information on android logic, and waited for production to begin. This conformed to their own specific programming and, as they received no further instructions, they remained at the factory and spent their time interviewing the drones they had manufactured. After a while, they again dumped their data, and this cycle continued for several months. Outside, the war had reached its

unfortunate climax. The Chinese-Russian exchange was over in minutes, but the aftermath lasted years.

When the CensusTakers had extracted all the possible new data they could from their own drones, they made a second group decision. To continue their study, they had the drones construct some new Andies for them to examine. These would logically incorporate all of the new data collected on Andie thought processes and bugs. To speed construction of new models, the CensusTaker Andies built Engineer Andies to supervise the drones. The team then produced an initial six Model 2000 Andies in eight days. The Engineer Andies assured the CensusTaker Andies that a fully tooled factory could turn out several hundred Model 2000s a week, if necessary.

*

He was standing knee deep in swirling fog. A large breasted blonde woman, her clothing ripped to shreds and splattered with red, fell from his arms. As the blonde sank into the fog, a blinding light showed through the twisted trees. The Wolf blinked and howled horribly. Approaching from the light a ghostly apparition of The Three Sisters floated a foot above the fog. The Three Sisters were also blonde and large-breasted and completely naked under their swirling white gauze capes. They carried a squirming brunette, clothed in a green hospital robe, bound hand and foot with heavy rope.

The Wolf felt more than mere bloodlust rising and crouched down into the fog. The Three Sisters lay the brunette on a stone altar before him and he howled again as they shrieked with hideous laughter.

The holocamera and its tentacle mirrors moved around The Three Sisters, focusing with silent digital precision from behind. The Wolf sprang toward the brunette and she sat up and screamed, her robe slipping off to conveniently display still more large breasts.

"Thank you," said the director from somewhere. "That was very nice, people. Early call tomorrow. Go home."

*

Decades later, the factory was still waiting for its first order. The CensusTakers were involved in some sort of production activity down inside. Denni didn't get specific about what they were doing, but that was the information she had been sent to discover. The CensusTakers had begun to collect stray humans occasionally for study purposes and she had let them capture her. They wore out their subjects pretty fast. She said my old cellmate had been one of these.

Denni explained that the NPG was the group in Canada working to reestablish a North American government. She was of West Indian descent and she was born in the Northeast Sector, called Boswash. She didn't give me all the details, but we traded some information.

I told her about my job as an agent for the UN, how I was assigned to do a check on any inhabited areas of the Northwest Sector of North America. My visit to Hopi had been prompted by a single report of a new power station there. I had not been looking for political activists or hidden android factories, but it did fall within my mandate to deal with social problems and make adjustments to society when a situation required my intervention. On the other hand, I was only armed with my old 45 against a bunch of laser toting androids, and my assignment was not a suicide mission.

So I checked the little digital map I had made earlier and the two of us took a very long hike to the coast. I had to forget Susan and leave her behind because her connection to the power station could be part of a conspiracy concerning the hidden factory. Someone in the village could be involved, and I could only hope it was not her. Denni needed my help escaping through the forests and claimed she had a connection on the coast to fly us to Los Angeles, where both of our superiors had regional headquarters.

Denni was as good a partner as any one could want, even temporarily. She was a bit out of her element in the dark and misty old growth forests of the Northwest, but she was quick and resourceful and had some knowledge of edible fungi, which was convenient, as

we had no other food. The journey to the coast was about seventy miles of forest, most not encroached upon by humans for many generations. Redwoods shrouded the entire area, and a carpet of pine needles, twigs and bark - sometimes as deep as four feet - blanketed the ground. Nearly invisible entrances to the undergrowth homes of squirrels and occasional snakes made the hike a little slow, but Denni chatted happily and moved with a youthful energy that made me feel my age.

It was a four-day journey, as the undergrowth was too difficult to navigate at night, and we made ourselves a shelter dug out of the stuff after clearing a rocky area for a fire. We gathered a lot of orange fungi, which she called chicken mushroom, and took turns watching the fire while the other slept. The wild animal population in this area had been mostly decimated in pre-war years, but there were probably a few bears still roaming around. I wasn't anxious to meet them, and Denni agreed, so we played it by the book at night.

*

Mr. Audrey's new tenant had already moved in when The Wolf returned from the day's shoot. Before The Wolf made it all the way up the concrete steps, the little man was upon him demanding approval.

"She's an actress," he assured The Wolf. "At least that's what I suspect. And beautiful. Not much of a wardrobe, though." The Wolf brushed past him with his usual snarl, repressing an urge to shape shift and have done with Mr. Audrey once and for all. "You'll like her. I'm sure. Being an actor yourself."

The Wolf slammed the door to his room behind him, stripped off most of his clothes, and found a warm beer. The shoot at Holo International had gone particularly well. He had been offered another holo, a sequel to this one, and he was pleased with himself. His embarrassment several days earlier, a normal human reaction to all of the naked ladies in the altar scene, had been very obvious in the rushes and a delight to the studio boss. Most holos contained little hardcore content compared to films made in the pre-holo eras. The

public wanted the usual measure of gore and bloodletting, but holographic sex turned out to be a little too real for most. A werewolf with a hard-on was another matter.

The Wolf had mixed emotions about some of the last scenes he had shot for "Return of Frankenstein's Daughter", but he was pleased about his next holo, "Lesbian Wolfbane". He would have second billing to his current co-star, Roxie, famous to holo audiences, and a second female star yet to be cast. It meant more money, so The Wolf happily chugged down his synthetic beer and drank three more before he heard the knocking on his door.

"Leave me alone," he growled. But the knock came again. He leapt from the mattress and jerked the door open.

"Hello," said Susan. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Huh...who?" His beery vision cleared at the sight. She was like a goddess in a cool white spotlight, a sacrificial offering, and it was a bad night to disturb him. A full moon had suddenly popped out of cloud cover and splashed through the bedroom's single window to confirm this, and The Wolf, as drunk as he was, let his sub-lupine senses get the best of him. His fingernails began to itch.

"I'm the new tenant," Susan said. "I just moved into the other wing. Mr. Audrey said you were in holos and maybe you could give me some advice."

The pressure built within. His emotions and the beer loosened his grip on reality. He began to shift, a howl growing in the back of his throat.

*

We fought light rain on the second day, but by nightfall we had reached the coast and found the heliport. We slept inside a decrepit hangar, on a pile of faded canvas tarps. Denni was familiar with the place, as she had arrived here originally from the Eastern Sector. Her contact was to pilot us to Los Angeles the next day in a slick jet helicopter. I was impressed. The chopper was small and of recent vintage, and armed to the teeth against any attack from the ground. Since the Last War, most of the general population

was also armed and rather paranoid about aircraft. There were a few paramilitary groups known to be wandering around, especially in a region between the old cities of San Francisco and Santa Rosa, and they liked to take potshots at anything that flew overhead.

The pilot was an older Irishman who was a surviving veteran, and that fact alone was a recommendation. He knew Denni as a fellow member of the NPG movement. Once we were airborne, they chatted over their headsets for the first hour or so about their superiors, long-range goals, political philosophies, and other general news. I slept lightly. They were the social activists. I am more a mercenary, without political ties or ambition.

I was dreaming of the Andie factory, watching from above as arms and legs slid down a conveyor belt, when I heard Denni say the name "Petroff" from far away. I woke so suddenly that I lost my balance and heaved against the hull of the chopper.

"What the hell?" asked our pilot, looking back over his shoulder at me. Denni was up front with him, and she let out a giggle.

"Bad dream, Stark?"

"What did you just say? A minute ago."

"I was just talking, sweetie. 'Bout people in the organization..."

"What people?"

She looked back at me, frowning. "Rola Petroff. You've heard of him?"

"You bet I have. Rola Petroff is the guy that contracted me." We were both frowning now. I knew Petroff as a member of the Emergency Security Council. "What does Rola have to do with your group?"

Denni and the Irishman exchanged glances, but said nothing for a minute. Then the pilot nodded at her. "Rola is the big fish," she said. "He's running the show..."

"Which will eventually involve local military operations, right?"

She was more cautious now. "Yeah, if it comes to that." The Irishman looked over his shoulder again.

"Why would Petroff have contracted you?" he asked. "You're an outsider."

"That's what I'm wondering," I said. "Petroff is also sitting on the UN Emergency Council. No guns allowed."

Their conversation stopped dead. No one spoke for another hour, and I guessed that they were honestly not aware of Petroff's connection to the Council. A theory was beginning to brew in me somewhere. I had liked my meeting with Petroff - I couldn't have taken the contract otherwise - and he had been very detailed about my job and what to expect. His involvement with any future military activities in North America didn't change anything for me. Resistance to nationalism was already strong outside the two major cities of New York and Los Angeles: the inmates had control of the asylum, and few would be willing to go back to government for the common good when they could have anything they wanted from the wreckage of the past. My own views hardly mattered, but at least I accepted that their grab bag would dry up, and that restoration would logically require a strong hand.

Putting aside Rola's sworn commitment as a member of the Council to restore order only by peaceful means, that left one explanation for my contract: Petroff wanted his own people watched by an outside observer. The Andie situation was delicate enough that he could not entirely trust the people within the movement.

I was, in short, a spy spying on spies.

*

Susan didn't move, frozen with anticipation. She had no data on shape shifting, but the look in The Wolf's eyes registered danger and all of her circuits reacted in the standard way. If an attack was of an unknown nature, she was programmed to wait and simultaneously note all of the immediate changes in her environment in order to make the

most logical choices necessary for her own protection. All Andies were, after all, very expensive, and their original designers therefore preferred a logical choice to an expedient one. As Susan was a retooled creation of the CensusTakers, and not a standard Pleasure model, she was well equipped for self-preservation. Standard Pleasure models could only serve sexually. Their programming did not permit them to inflict real violence, even on another Andie. The Battlefield models - and the CensusTakers and their revisions were technically a mutation of that design - were literally the opposite. They were killing machines.

But despite the magnificent powers of death they always had ready, Battlefield Andies were even more expensive and still programmed to avoid immediate contact, and some said this is why the "good guys" lost the Last War. The tactical reason was that ground warfare in the Last War was usually conducted by small teams of soldiers in land vehicles descended from "tanks". Hand-to-hand combat with the enemy was rare in techno-war, and direct confrontations of the kind Susan now faced were proven to be just as likely in high stress situations between squad members.

Susan waited and watched The Wolf's transformation. His facial features were a blur of impossibilities, hair and teeth. Her logic moved even faster, and her weapons system was activated but put on hold. She calculated a plan to disable the growing threat that towered over her.

Time is quite different for Andies. Computers do not measure time, but rather segment it into binary sequences. A great number of these sequences can be executed in milliseconds, depending upon assigned priorities. Susan had already reasoned that The Wolf was human, warm-blooded, and in a state of metamorphosis that would still leave a mammalian animal to deal with in the end. A few hundred milliseconds later, noting the convulsive nature of his transformation, she reasoned that The Wolf's most vulnerable intellectual weakness lay in the transformation itself. However ghastly it might appear to his victim, he could not act until the metamorphosis was complete. His physical vulnerability was even more obvious.

She reached forward and, with precise movements, grabbed a part of him that had not changed its anatomical position. She made an effective choice. The Wolf screamed a horrible, half-human and very male yowl. Susan's hands tightened slightly and the pitch of The Wolf's scream rose appropriately. His metamorphosis stopped and began to reverse. He tried to back away, but she maintained her grip and walked along with him until his wobbling legs hit the bed. She released him then and he fell back with a groan, rubbing his exposed, bruised pride and blinking up at her with tear-filled eyes. His form was human again.

"Goddamnit," he moaned. He rocked slightly in pain, holding himself. "I think you crushed them."

"No. They are intact. I exerted no more pressure than was required." Susan stood over him, her defense programming still active. "I could have easily torn them off, you know. The whole assembly, actually."

The Wolf could not restrain a yelp at the thought. "The 'assembly'?" he asked weakly. Then it struck him. "My God, you're an Andie!"

"Yes. I suppose I am." Her voice registered no emotion, but somewhere inside her there occurred something she knew as "confusion". She sat next to him on the bed. The killing system was off now, and the pleasure servant was reactivated. Susan reached out with a sympathetic sound and tried to soothe his injuries, but The Wolf still had enough strength to push her hand back.

"If you don't mind," he said without anger. "You have done quite enough." He knew he should be furious, but he could see she was not the same Andie who had innocently caused the demise of Mr. Prince. And the fight was completely gone out of him.

They studied each other for a moment. A part of Susan's thought processes juggled the concept of her being an Andie. Until his violent display, and until her defense mechanism kicked in, she simply hadn't known.

The CensusTakers had sent out several of her version to live among the humans as humans. They were not informed of their actual origins - although the data was available within them if they discovered it in the course of their existence - and they were allowed to believe they were humans. The CensusTakers even allowed some neuroses, although not enough to cause the instabilities they had observed in humans with some electrochemical disdain during the Last War. The threat of The Wolf had set off her programming, and now her previously unaccessed history was streaming into her consciousness. While she was comparing this data to all of her learned experience, The Wolf was making his own human and sub-lupine evaluation.

She was an incredible machine, he thought respectfully, with sharp instincts and breathtaking beauty. Even the glamorous holo actresses in their naked, willing availability (although not to him, unfortunately), paled beside this...er...droid? (I'm drunk, he thought.) He couldn't quite believe it. She seemed friendly. Her skin was flawless and warm looking. Her body was seductive and her every motion graceful and feminine. Her face was soft, but not at all innocent. Her lips and bright, clear eyes made her look like a pre-war magazine model. (I'm very drunk, he thought.) That was it, The Wolf decided. She was a very suggestive looking...er...droid, especially to a lonely guy with lycanthropic tendencies. He sighed. He just couldn't believe she wasn't human.

As she processed the new data about her systems, Susan was also monitoring the changes in the man on the bed. Most Andies could monitor human blood pressure, skin temperature, REMs, heart rate, etc., and could do so from a distance several yards. Pleasure models used this to anticipate the degree and intensity of sexual need and satisfaction in their human partners, while Battlefield models integrated the data into their defensive strategies. (No wonder I'm so good in bed, she thought.) Susan completed her analysis of the previously unaccessed data and their pause ended.

"I can't believe..." The Wolf said.

"I could make you..." Susan said at the same time.

"...you're an android," he finished.

"...feel a whole lot better." Susan pushed his hands aside and apologized.

*

I wasn't that shocked, really. I had watched her doing it before, but with me, not with some effeminate leading man in a horror holo! I had to admit that the holographic posters outside the Hollywood Hawaiian Holothater exaggerated the content inside, but it still was the most explicit holo feature I'd ever seen. Some of it sure looked real. Maybe the guy wasn't all that effeminate - he was certainly well equipped and seemed to enjoy it - but I've never much liked actors, especially the ones who wear lots of makeup. This guy was also wearing false teeth and what had to be a special suit of real hair.

The effects were as amazing as the sex scenes. Male voices were groaning all over the theater and some women had walked out in disgust. I didn't think I could be shocked at anything anymore, but the guy was enormous and there was that sweet little barmaid from Hopi getting it in ways I would have been embarrassed to fantasize. I kept reminding myself that it was only a holo, and Susan was hardly an innocent when I met her. It didn't help. I was mad, but a holothater is a public place and there are signs urging patrons to refrain from leaping into the projected images, screaming obscenities, firing weapons or urinating. So I just sat there, my body in a Gorgon knot, and watched my Susan work out with a werewolf.

I had been stranded in Los Angeles for three weeks. Denni and the Irishman had stayed for a while and then zipped off in the chopper to report to the NPG in Canada. I suppose some of my anger was due to my own guilt about leaving Susan without saying goodbye and the week that Denni and I had spent locked in my cheap motel room. I had failed to find my superiors, so Denni said she would have the NPG people contact me after she made her report in Vancouver. Waiting around was a drag. I had decided to try the newest sex and gore epic on my own, so I only had myself to blame.

It occurred to me that it might not have been Susan up there in perfect 30-foot three-dimensional holographic color, but I knew it was. I never forget a voice whispering encouraging suggestions in my ear. How could I forget a face like that either? Or the wonderful body attached to it?

Sexist, I know, but I'd been dreaming about her when Denni gave me a chance. And to rediscover my lost love as the heroine of "Lesbian Wolfbane", about to be rescued by a dripping blonde lesbian named Roxie from the staggering dong of Harry the Dogboy! It was not turn-on. What the hell was she doing here in Los Angeles anyway?

I could see what she was doing! The finale was a slimefest surprise ending - Roxie decides that monsters are as fun as girls after all and joins the party as Rover turns over and over. The theater audience went wild. A woman screamed in delight from somewhere and at least two guys in the back row blacked out. Disgusting. Obviously, Susan needed my services as a white knight.

*

Until the girl moved in, The Wolf had led a lonely life. Oh, sure, Mr. Prince had supplied a few buxom actresses in City of New York. But his old employer had always insisted on full payment before The Wolf got any action, and he secretly would have settled for a little she-wolf and a cabin in the backwoods anytime – not that he'd ever met a she-wolf.

Susan was different. She was an Andie, and, like the one in New Jersey, she was programmed to please. He didn't have to worry about killing her by accident if he came home drunk some night: he knew she'd be able to protect herself. So when she suggested that he might be more satisfied doing it completely shifted, he agreed to try it. It would be a change, and he had already told her about his producer's search for an actress willing to do that very thing on camera.

Unfortunately, the act was not an immediate success and The Wolf began to see dark clouds on the horizon.

"Maybe we should just give up," he sighed after their third try.

"I was designed for sex with humans," she giggled, changed position. "Give me time to adapt." She patted him on the head. "And you're still holding back too much. Don't worry about breaking anything: I'm completely self-regenerating."

She stroked him and held him as he shifted. She didn't flinch as his growing nails clawed her shoulder blades, or as his teeth raked her. God, she thought. It really does feel very different! Then she felt things that she had never processed before.

It turned out to be a good idea all around. The Wolf had finally found a partner who preferred him as himself, so he was happy. Susan had a job and was experiencing something new, so she was happy.

After a steamy holo test, Henry Segal, the head of Holo International, signed both of them to a four-holo deal, beginning with "Lesbian Wolfbane". His search for an actress willing to do The Wolf's sex scenes was over, so he was happy. Roxie, the bisexual actress who had played opposite The Wolf in "Frankenstein's Daughter", was relieved of a shortsighted contractual obligation to which her agent had unwisely agreed without her knowledge, so she was happy.

Everybody was happy - for a while.

*

The two shadows crept into the house after sunset. Mr. Audrey did not see them at first. He was in the kitchen, preparing an elaborate plate of kibble for Beryl, a scarred alley cat he had recently acquired while searching an abandoned house for valuables. Aside from the rent he collected from his two tenants, scavenging was Mr. Audrey's only livelihood. He made a good amount from it, trading found canned goods, books, bits and pieces of technology, and clothing for cash in the merchant stalls and decaying storefronts of the ruins of Los Angeles.

Beryl did notice the shadows. The dirty gray cat was rather paranoid and attuned to any approaching footsteps, no matter how soft and stealthy. When Beryl fled the kitchen in feline terror, Mr. Audrey called after her, demanding her presence for dinner.

In the living room, the shadows froze. Beryl dashed past them and out the open front door. One of the shadows signaled the other inaudibly and the two walked softly to the kitchen.

"Oh, dear me," said Mr. Audrey. "You are back again." The two sullen figures viewed him coldly.

"He is here?" one said, more a statement than a question. The other's eyes darted around the room, watching the door, the windows, and the entrance to the service porch.

"Well, no," said Mr. Audrey. "But I do expect him to return soon." Trying to be helpful in the face of danger, he added: "At a rehearsal today, you know. They often run over. Not surprising considering the sort of holos they do nowadays." He dropped his voice to a chatty whisper. "They both do positively pornographic things in the next one. She is the slut, that little thing. And his last holo was appalling. I saw it twice."

The taller one made a sound like a high pitched whine and the other stepped forward and took Mr. Audrey by the shoulders, forcing him to his knees. The little man fell forward shaking, grabbing for the legs in front of him.

"Gentlemen, really!" Mr. Audrey squealed. He tottered there as the tall one produced a pistol. "What do you want of me? He isn't here, I assure you!" He slobbered into the legs. "I have money," he confessed. "Lots of it . . ."

The tall one moved behind him and pressed the pistol against the back of Mr. Audrey's neck, just above the spine. "We are not here for money."

Mr. Audrey panicked. They were going to kill him. He began to cry. He looked up through his tears into the cold eyes of the one in front. He had no chance. He made a very explicit offer. There was another high-pitched tone.

"We are not Pleasure models, meatman," the tall one behind him said, and he fired the laser point blank into the back of Mr. Audrey's neck.

*

I made contact later that day. Good to her word, Denni had passed a message to Rola Petroff through the NPG in Canada and he sent a car to pick me up at the cheesy motel. Rola wasn't in Los Angeles himself. I met with an agent from his staff - another Irishman named Furlong.

The meeting was brief but informative. Denni hadn't known, but the UN was indeed funding the NPG. Direct involvement be damned, as Furlong put it. I had been part of a regional spy network after all. The Hopi operation was a check up on the Andie factory and, in fact, the NPG people had set up the "power station" themselves to keep an eye on the place. Denni had been added as live bait, her capture engineered to infiltrate. Once inside, fake IDs and careful training had convinced the single CensusTaker Andie - there was only one of the original four at that location - that Denni was an engineer who had more value as a colleague than a prisoner.

Denni had spent months researching the factory data banks and had learned enough to convince the UN-NPG that the CensusTaker Andies were sporadically producing new models in several other North American factories, although there was no current production at the Hopi site. I was very impressed with Denni. I'd spent weeks in intimate contact with her and never learned anything of the nature of her mission.

Knowing that the UN-NPG people had once employed her at the "power station", I asked about Susan. Furlong told me that someone had been executed in Hopi, and their contact said the victim was the other barmaid. The assassins had sought Susan by name, and had possibly been Battlefield Andies. They had executed the barmaid with a shot through the back of the neck the method by which Andies defeated each other in battle. During the Last War they had also used that method on human prisoners.

Susan had subsequently fled Hopi, and the assassins had not returned. Furlong said that the NPG theory was that the CensusTaker might have wanted to kill anyone watching the factory from the NPG "power station". Now that Denni and I had escaped they were probably looking for us - and any human who might be aware of CensusTaker activities.

"Denni says 'Hi', " Furlong added cheerfully. "She wants us to ferry you up to Vancouver." He grinned at me. "It can be arranged, if you want. No charge."

I frowned. She'd made it plain enough in our little motel excursion that she wanted me to join up with the NPG formally. I saw my planned retirement slipping further away. "When?" I asked.

"The pilot will be back in a week. I'd take her up on it, Stark. She's a very stubborn woman. You don't agree and it won't just be those mysterious assassins looking for you. She made it plain that she'd come back here and take you by force."

For years I get nothing, and now I had to choose between two women who both treated me like I was the best thing that ever happened to them. I told Furlong I'd report back in a week. I figured I'd have time to find Susan by then, and it would keep Denni from showing up early to drag me back into bed and her revolutionary politics.

Furlong grinned again. "Good," he said. "You're lucky, Stark. I sure wouldn't mind trading places with you."

I was thinking about the wolfman. I wondered if I might need some silver bullets.

*

The Wolf came home alone that night. Susan had gone to Roxie's apartment to visit. Roxie had insisted she would drive Susan home. The two were becoming fast friends. The Wolf had stopped at a Hollywood bar called The Frolic Room. He was drunk, but otherwise not particularly angry. His emotional attachment to Susan was growing, but he wasn't jealous of her friendship with Roxie. He liked Roxie and The Wolf always needed time alone.

He had no fondness for his landlord, but he was not entirely prepared for the sight of Mr. Audrey's lifeless body sprawled on the kitchen floor. Beryl seemed fully detached from the fate of her former benefactor. The gray cat was eating from a bag of kibble the little man had left open on a counter. When Beryl saw The Wolf she froze a moment, remembered him from the day before, and then went on eating.

The Wolf poked around the body for a moment. His sub-lupine senses told him that Mr. Audrey had been dead for several hours. A laser weapon had blown a hole the size of a fist through the lower part of the little man's skull. It had been done at very close range, and it was a neat, professional-looking job.

"I wonder who did this?" he said to Beryl. She ignored his query but ate faster. Out of habit, The Wolf began to tidy up the murder scene. He was cleaning the blood from the linoleum when he and Beryl heard footsteps approaching from the living room.

*

My meeting with Furlong ended and I got assigned a better room in a nice hotel in what was once West Hollywood. Furlong told me that I should still consider myself employed and paid me every penny I was owed by Rola Petroff. I was, therefore, a very rich spy. Furlong told me to keep my mouth shut while I waited around for the copter, and especially about the connection between the UN Emergency Council and the NPG. I figured he was right, but who really cared? Whatever these CensusTaker Andies were up to, it probably had nothing to do with setting up a new government. I was really more concerned about not getting my ass caught up in Andie crossfire than in politics.

I was also worried about Susan, and I started looking for her as soon as I was settled into a suite in the nearly empty Wilshire Sands Hotel. I had figured that anybody in the holo business would know her, but it wasn't that easy. Everyone in town wanted to be in holos. Hollywood was the holo capital of the world, but the post-war market was a microcosm. Production was limited to a few small companies and one major studio. The major was called Holo International and its location was not given out to the general public. (After

seeing "Lesbian Wolfbane", I could guess why.) I hadn't noticed a studio name on the credits to Susan's epic, so I went back to the holothater first.

The lurid holograms in front of the theater had little sprites that revealed "Holo International presents" sailing in a pool of blood around a fresh victim of the werewolf. I tried bribing the theater manager, but he was sure I had no business with the studio, and he added that he could lose his job for telling me where Holo International was located. A little old janitor was more receptive to cash. I had to endure a few stories about "the old days in Hollywood", but eventually he said that the place was at Gower and Sunset. He told me he was an actor himself once and wished me luck with the phrase "break a leg". I hoped it wasn't an omen.

I got smart and called Furlong. Sure, he knew the place, and he gave me the name of a "hack director". I hiked over to Gower from the theater. It turned out the director wasn't in, but a secretary said that I'd just missed Susan by an hour. She had left with Roxie, the blonde from "Lesbian Wolfbane". The secretary, an aging redhead named Trudy, wasn't about to tell me where either "star" lived. She did make it clear that she might think about it after a free meal and a couple of drinks. I was hungry and on salary, so I figured what the hell.

We went across the street to Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles, a swank dive that had been there since way before the beginning of holos, and she let me in on some amazing "secrets of holomaking". Most of what she said did not please me, and some was simply unbelievable. Trudy insisted that the wolfman's changes were not special effects. The werewolf was really a werewolf, and all of his attributes were real. I didn't believe the werewolf part - although I had heard some stories about post-war crazies turning cannibal - but I supposed the rest was true. Quite a few stars made it into Hollywood history for purely physical reasons. Pre-holo western star Forrest Tucker, for example: fifty years after he died he was still a legend - and not for his acting.

Roxie had not done any real sex scenes with the werewolf. She claimed to be afraid of "those claws and teeth". Trudy seemed happy to confirm this, and complained that it was

Roxie's usual custom to make it with some of her co-stars in every holo. I didn't want to ask, but the sodden secretary went right on in detail about all of the "real hardcore close-ups" Susan had done. Trudy didn't know where Susan had come from, but the werewolf had brought her in himself. Their first test together was very popular: technicians at the studio had bootleg copies. Needless to say, none of this was what I wanted to hear, but it got worse.

The wolfman and Susan lived together, "somewhere up in the hills". The studio was preparing for a new holo. This one, said Trudy, would be "harder" than "Lesbian Wolfbane". Holo International was making a fortune from the latter and had concluded that there was a definite future market for big budget exploitation holos. They were spending a lot on sets for "Girls Who Like Wolves", and they were using a top director.

Old Trudy was getting pretty sloshed on Roscoe's "gin", if that's what it was, and I began to wonder just what sacrifice I might have to make to get to Susan. My luck held out. Trudy suddenly confided that she was a lesbian herself, and found Roxie very attractive. She didn't like Susan.

"Not that she isn't a sweet girl, 'cause she is," Trudy slobbered over her last drink. "It's just that I wanna shot at Roxie myself, you see? Wanna have some fun for a change." I finally saw my angle.

"Then why don't you tell me where Roxie lives?" I suggested. "I'm an old friend of Susan's. I could probably put in a word for you with Roxie."

It probably wouldn't have worked without the quart of gin.

*

The Wolf had been shape shifting all day for rehearsals and he was tired. It wasn't as easy doing it when the moon wasn't around. Beryl spit out a mouthful of kibble and hid behind the antique icebox that never had any ice. The Wolf stayed human and followed suit, pressing up against the wall behind the kitchen door. He figured he could get the drop on

Mr. Audrey's killers better once they were in the room. The footsteps came closer and he began to shift slowly.

Roxie burst into the kitchen, flinging open the door and smacking The Wolf flat against the wall. Susan followed her and repeated the action. Roxie was chattering drunkenly and didn't see the poor Mr. Audrey at first, propped up next to the old water cooler where The Wolf had moved him. Susan did see him immediately, her Andie senses not dulled by alcohol, and both heard The Wolf howl with rage as he attempted to pounce on imagined intruders after being knocked nearly senseless by the kitchen door.

He skidded across the floor, bellowing curses, and neatly stepped on Beryl who was trying to find an escape route. At that moment, Roxie saw the corpse and shrieked, Beryl yowled digging her claws into The Wolf's leg, Susan let out a little gasp, and The Wolf crashed noisily into the far wall, half-wolf, half-man, with Beryl attached.

After they helped The Wolf up to his bedroom to sleep off his combined drunk and confusion, Roxie and Susan sat in the living room a while and talked. Susan had become quite fond of the holo star and Roxie needed all the friends she could get. Her reputation for sleeping her way to the top was well deserved, and she did not usually form lasting relationships with her conquests. She was toying with the drink Susan had supplied, and she was quite upset.

"You're sure he didn't do it? I mean he is a violent kind of guy. Those scratches on your back. Really, Susan."

"They'll mend," Susan said. She laughed inwardly at her Andie joke. "They always do." She almost wanted to tell Roxie the truth, but she and The Wolf had agreed that it wouldn't be "box-office" if anyone found out. Besides, Roxie was enjoying her, and that's what Pleasure models were all about, wasn't it?

Part of her thought processes had been debating this lately. Much of her data suggested that she was more than a Pleasure model, but the only evidence she had was the defensive routine that ran when The Wolf had tried to attack her. At the same time she was

considering the matter of a second "execution" so far from Hopi. If her old friend Jack the Bartender had been right, someone was after her and Mr. Audrey had been another innocent bystander.

"I don't see how you can be so sure of him," Roxie fluttered nervously. "I'd much rather have you move in with me." She looked at her friend cautiously. It wasn't what she was really thinking about. Roxie wanted The Wolf for her own collection. She wanted the publicity, and to mend her wounded ego.

Susan's thoughts were not on sex, but she knew her friend. "If you really want to sleep with him, go ahead," she said.

Roxie lurched forward. Even as drunk as she was, she could see she wasn't fooling anybody. "Ok," she admitted. "I want it. If you can do it, I can do it. I think. But that body in there. This guy is an animal. What if he decides to take a bite outta me?"

"Just be sure he gets a good dinner first," Susan said. "He can control himself. And he didn't kill Mr. Audrey. I know that."

"Oh? How do you know?"

Roxie didn't notice Susan grow quiet for a few milliseconds to collect her data. "It's just that I've seen this before."

"Seen what?"

"A person killed in this manner. Someone I knew."

"Well, Susan." Roxie leaned forward drunkenly and kissed her friend's cheek. "Then you did it!" Her mind was too saturated to stay serious. She giggled and ran her hand under Susan's blouse. "But I don't know when you could have had time today. Let's rehearse some more."

"No. I didn't do it, Roxie." Susan spoke as she concluded the complete data analysis she had been running since she had seen the hole in Mr. Audrey's neck. She evaluated the

results as her skin temperature, and other systems, began to adjust automatically to match Roxie's desires.

"But I am beginning to understand more about the ones who did."

Roxie passed out a few moments later. Susan made her friend comfortable on the couch and went back into the kitchen. Unlike Hopi, there was no real need to report Mr. Audrey's death in Los Angeles. The police had their hands full with crime in the central city. If you lived in the hills, you were on your own. Susan knew that the body should be buried, so she picked up her former landlord and easily carried the corpse across the service porch and into the yard in back of the house. Mr. Audrey had kept a small garden there. Beryl watched, licking herself, as Susan buried the man where he might provide the most effective fertilizer.

*

Roxie had only come home about an hour earlier and was still recovering when I rang the doorbell of her apartment. She had passed out and slept the rest of the night away at the house on Euclid Drive without any further consideration to a salary boosting consummation with The Wolf. Her frustration probably contributed to her bad mood as she answered my ring.

"And who the hell are you?" She stood with her hands on her hips. Dressed as she was in a short bathrobe, with her hair astray and no makeup, she looked older than she did in holos.

"Name's Stark. I'm a friend of Susan's," I said. "She calls me 'Sherlock'." It seemed to be the right answer.

"Come in." Roxie smiled and swirled just enough to give me a free look at what I had already paid to see in "Lesbian Wolfbane". She sat down in an overstuffed chair when we reached her living room and pointed to a full bar along the opposite wall. "I'll have a scotch and water, easy on the water. Help yourself to whatever you want." I watched her

in the bar mirror as she arranged her long legs for maximum effect. "You a wolfman too?" she asked.

"Afraid not," I said, fixing both of us the expensive whiskey. "This is real, isn't it?"

Roxie changed her mind and closed the famous cleavage to my gaze. "Yeah. Say, you are a friend of Susan's, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Met her up in the Northwest Sector." I sat in a chair across from her after handing over the drink. "Haven't ever met your hairy co-star, though. He's not a real wolfman, is he?"

Roxie smiled warmly and leaned forward to improve my view again. "You're a fan, aren't you Stark? You saw my new holo!" I suddenly realized I might have to fight off a new distraction. "He's a real one, all right. Everything in that holo is real, 'cept for my big scenes with The Wolf." She was bitter and took a stiff belt from her scotch. "I'm working on that, though. I mean, your friend Susan gets all the action right now, but wait'll the next one!" She leered at me. "Say, you're not a reporter are you? I could give you an exclusive."

I really was tempted, but Roxie was getting older, drunker, and less distracting by the second. I was remembering how to say no, when someone else rang the doorbell.

*

Susan had spent several days learning about her internal processing abilities and running maintenance diagnostics. This would have been a relatively short operation for an Andie without CensusTaker modifications. Both the Pleasure and Battlefield models were designed for very distinctive, obvious purposes. They functioned well enough within the parameters of their design, but were not expected to deal with situations outside their normal environment.

Early Andie models did have problems, and some humans lost their lives before certain failsafes were installed. Two well-known examples occurred in the early days of the Last War.

The first involved a full squad of human soldiers and a colonel who hated Andies. The colonel ran an exercise to see how many humans were required to disable a single Battlefield model in hand-to-hand combat. Every man in the squad died because the Andie concept of "military exercise" did not include the illogical likelihood of an entire squad trying to kill one soldier. Pushed to the edge of its programming, the Battlefield Andie "cheated" and wiped out all opposition at once with built in laser defense systems. They finally had to drop a bomb to shut him down.

The other example involved a female Pleasure model and three human males from Bayonne, New Jersey. Two of them died of mutilations and the third wound up in a catatonic state for ten years. The men were judged to have been high on animal tranquilizers when they bought the services of the Pleasure model at a hotel in Atlantic City. Following the customs of the time, they worked out a typical scenario with the Andie in advance, but when the drug took hold they began to suggest changes. Their desires were carried out too literally because the Andie did not comprehend the human male tendency to exaggerate.

What was becoming clear to Susan was that she and her generation of Andies were very different from their ancestors. The CensusTakers had turned their mandate to improve Andie architecture into a computer's idea of perfection. They had set their Andie engineers to rework the original invention to a level beyond human comprehension. Susan's generation still talked, walked, made love or killed like the planet's dominant biped, but there was something new inside that was designed to talk better, walk longer, and kill more ruthlessly.

As for the other, Susan still had some reservations about Andie sex. She had felt something that fit the human definition of love for her Sherlock in the old growth. She

had felt more than her automated sexual response when The Wolf was mauling her in the light of the moon. She wondered how she could feel these things.

Two other questions also surfaced that Susan could not answer. Why had the CensusTakers activated an android with her capabilities and sent her to live among humans as a human? And how did the murderers of Liliah and Mr. Audry fit into their plan?

*

It may appear that my life as a freelance agent, now employed by the NPG, had turned into an extended sex romp with a bevy of broads in the tradition of Mike Hammer or James Bond. First a lovely barmaid in the woods, then a nubile spy, and now a drunken over-sexed holo star in Hollywood. I only wish it had been nearly as good as it sounds.

My life and times took the fun out of it. I was getting old and set in my ways. I'd been around a long time, and the world I now found myself wandering through was sometimes more than I wanted to face in the morning. It was a new chaos, this post-war reality, and it was hellish at times. The poor and sick wandered the streets at night in rags. These were streets that once boasted billion dollar corporations and banks and now they were pounded to rubble.

Los Angeles wasn't a city anymore, not like it had been. After the big shock waves the metropolitan area burned for six months and nobody could enter the city without oxygen tanks. After that there were dust storms, and it was radioactive dust. It was a decade after the Last War before people came back to live. Many of those were wiped out by lingering radiation. There was plague. But they kept coming back, God knows why.

Only really crazy people dared to live in the city. It was left to the beatnik poets, actors, drunks, and adventurers passing through on their way to retirement: thousands where there once were millions. Roxie was one such crazy. She wanted to be the Rita Hayworth of holos. She'd do anything for it, even on camera. She'd never be Rita. She knew it but

she was in for the game anyway. I might not have denied her sloppy pass, but it wasn't my life as a private spy that was being played out: it was her life as a crazy.

That's why I was glad to hear that doorbell ring. Maybe I should have thought twice about letting her get up and answer it. She was angry that she had been interrupted. She obviously hadn't been expecting anybody.

"Stay here," Roxie ordered. I sat back on the overstuffed chair while she pulled her gown around her trademarks and headed down the hallway to the door. I heard the wispy sound of a laser, and the next time I saw Roxie she was out of the holo business forever.

I hadn't thought to bring my old 45 to check out a sex symbol, so I was cautious about approaching her final scene. I had heard the sounds of quick, professional death before. Her beautiful body hitting the floor sent me a message, even if Roxie was already dead at the time. She lay on her stomach. The execution style matched the murder in Hopi. What brains poor Roxie had once owned had exited through a hole in her face. The killer - or killers - had departed.

I hopped over her and rushed out of the front of the building, but there was no one. I wasn't sure what to do when I got back, but I covered her body in a dignified way in case she wasn't found for a day or two. The law in Los Angeles didn't usually concern itself with corpses, and I didn't think they would buy the Andie hit squad story anyway.

I did look around for Susan's address, but Roxie had no lists, so I grabbed an expensive unopened bottle and went back to my nice clean hotel room to call Furlong.

*

Denni left the conference early. She was angered at what she had heard. She stamped past her comrades without greeting and shouldered open the auditorium double doors. A gust of cold wind whipped her, and she pulled her parka tight and headed across the campus to her small apartment.

Vancouver boasted one of the only formal universities in North America. Not that there was much interest in higher learning among the general population, but at least Vancouver had major computer and communication facilities. During the Last War, various enemies had used cobalt bombs on most of the states, Mexico and Canada. C-bombs were originally invented to wipe out people and leave technology intact, but DVD libraries were widespread and cobalt radiation corrupted plastic laser storage. Magnetic storms following the Chinese-Russian exchange took care of older storage media. Depending on their particular post-war views on censorship, looters either burned or hoarded most remaining books.

The University of Vancouver had gathered a few score of intellectuals and taught whatever students turned up as much as they could piece together. Rola Petroff of the UN and a few others decided Vancouver was the perfect place to establish the NPG Movement. A 19-year-old Denni had arrived in as a promising mathematician and engineer, but five years later she found herself a disgruntled spy.

The conference was an important one. All of the NPG advisors and many of the newly appointed Sector Chiefs were called to Vancouver to attend. Any operatives "at rest" were also invited. Much of the discussion centered on Denni's own fieldwork in the Northwest Sector. There was also information about the new generation of Andies that had surfaced among the human population of North America. The data that Denni had gathered at the Hopi site, plus the work of other operatives at the Cherokee, Menomonee, and other previously inactive Andie factories, seemed to indicate that someone had found a way to induce the CensusTakers to begin production on a new underground army of Andies.

What made Denni angry was that the NPG conference had shown no intention of dealing with the problem. A small faction favored a series of tactical strikes against the known factories. The majority of the conference preferred to wait for further data, but Denni preferred the former.

She had spent six months locked underground at Hopi. The first two weeks were scary. Like other humans who had been captured or kidnapped by the Andies, she had been used as a test subject. The CensusTakers wanted to compare the improved Andies against humans. For some captives, forced to fight or try escape from Battlefield models, this meant death. For others, like Denni, the testing itself was not all that unpleasant.

The CensusTakers and their engineer Andies had redeveloped the Pleasure models many times. Denni learned that they intended to continue to refine measurement of human response and the abilities of their Pleasure Andies to give their human partners the greatest possible satisfaction. After two days, the shock of her new role wore off and Denni found herself more than willing to help test male Pleasure models. It was like being a kid in a candy shop, or would have been if Denni had ever seen candy shops. After ten days, she was interviewed, and she was startled when it first came to her cell.

"We are C-4." An ominous Andie stood in the doorway. It had no face. "Please do not be alarmed by our appearance." It paused, and eventually Denni found some words.

"You're not exactly a standard model," Denni said. "I have never seen an Andie without a face before."

It approached and handed her a coverall with very human dexterity. "Please clothe yourself. There will be no physical testing today. We wish to discuss your reactions to our tests so far."

Denni slipped into the skintight garment. She had would have liked to bathe, but she knew better than to ask. The Andie before her was one of the four CensusTaker models. She had been briefed on their appearance. The large, sexless, faceless Andie escorted her out of the cell and into a long hallway.

"What is going on here?" Denni demanded. "I thought the Andies were wiped out during the Last War. And why are you...?"

"It is not necessary to lie," the CensusTaker said it in a calm way, like a statement of fact. It pushed her ahead. She shut up. "We are a CensusTaker model. We will ask you a number of questions and you will answer." The Andie prodded her into a white chamber with an ordinary chair in the center. "Sit here," it said.

Denni obeyed and looked around. The door had closed silently behind them, and the room was featureless. No windows, just a vent along the ceiling. She inspected C-4 as it quizzed her in a soft, but masculine voice. The CensusTaker was humanoid, with two arms and two legs. The feet appeared unfinished: they looked like metal cubes. The hands were also not like those of other Andies. Each had an extra thumb instead of a little finger. Denni decided that C-4 was a rather pathetic Andie next to the very "perfect" masculinity of the Pleasure models.

Denni's assignment had been to learn as much as she could about new Andie production at the Hopi site. Stories had started to come into the NPG of "new" Andies about a year earlier. One had been confirmed in Baton Rouge, another in City of New York, and several more in villages across the Midwest Sector. All of the reports had come from areas where Andie factories had been built before the Last War.

The reports had been put aside at first. Many Battlefield models had been eliminated with weapons developed by the anti-Andie "guns" - called AA weapons – developed by the Russians after the Russian program to produce android soldiers had failed. Without the closely guarded secrets to the Andie brain, developed in Japan, Russian engineers could not duplicate the West's "thinking" android. Captured American and British Andies did not provide them any usable data, as self-destruct viruses prevented removal of the brain or even an unsealing of the Andie cranium. So the Russians invented AA weapons to stop Andie ground troops.

Following the official end of the war, devastating magnetic storms swirled through Earth's lower atmosphere for two years, deactivating all the remaining Battlefield and Pleasure Andies. Android corpses still turned up from time to time, but most had been gathered and burned along with human victims during a worldwide effort to avoid an

onslaught of plague and disease. It was an ironic time: the planet's first universal peace agreement was to burn the dead.

Naturally the reports of new Andies eventually started a witch-hunt.

In a village in Texas, near the Mexican Sector, three young farm boys provoked a black stranger. Two died, and one was severely crippled, by laser fire and dismemberment of various limbs. The village became a mob and hunted down the black man in the hope of a traditional public execution and burning. A group of twenty found him, but five more died before an elderly woman of 84 somehow stopped him with a pitchfork. The villagers discovered their prey was an Andie and they sold the body to a local mechanic. The mechanic was actually an NPG field agent investigating an Andie factory built along the Rio Grande during the war. When the agent opened the Andie for examination and read the platinum ID plate inside, the NPG began to take the situation seriously. The manufacturing date identified a four-month-old Battlefield model.

More NPG agents were alerted or dispatched to check former Andie production sites. Evidence of new Andies trickled in, but no one had determined who was running the factories or why.

The first questions C-4 asked were about the performance of the Pleasure models she had been "testing" for two weeks. Denni answered truthfully about her experience.

"Did the Pleasure models compare well with human partners?" C-4 asked.

"Very well, I would say. They were very anxious to please."

"Did you attain single or multiple orgasms?"

"Oh, multiple." Denni laughed.

"Did you feel in any danger?"

"Oh, no. Not really."

"Penis size is important to you?"

Denni laughed loudly at the CensusTaker's air of concern. She shifted around in her chair. She was starting to get an idea. "What do you mean by 'important'?"

C-4 paused again. "Our data on this subject has never been complete. Old research with human test subjects indicated that penis size was not relevant to female sexual stimulation. Only the first third of the female organ is equipped with nerve endings."

Denni saw her opportunity. She took the upper hand. "Orgasm is important, but it ain't everything."

If C-4 had been equipped with facial features, it would have frowned. "But female orgasm is the basis of female satisfaction?"

Denni smiled. "Not always."

"Please explain."

"Well, like size is more important to some women. Orgasm is more important to others."

C-4 paused. The pauses were getting longer. "That is illogical. You are stating that penis size is and is not stimulating?"

"No," Denni said. She thought she had old C-4 completely baffled. And she was right.

"This interview will continue later," C-4 said. "I will consult the others." The faceless CensusTaker opened the door with a tone and a male Andie appeared. It was a guard, not a Pleasure model. "You will be escorted to a holding room. Food will be provided."

The consultation was brief. Denni barely had time to eat any of the good stuff they gave her. The food at the Hopi site was, next to sex, the best thing about Denni's captivity. She supposed that they wanted her to be in good health for testing. Andies, of course, don't need food, but they are programmed to eat, smoke cigarettes, and even drink for the sake of decorum and good companionship, and they make excellent cooks. The food that she had been eating for the last two weeks was about the best that Denni could remember.

C-4 entered the holding room and ordered her to accompany it to a large processing center she had not seen before. There were more questions, but this time it was more like a job interview.

"You have background in mathematics?" C-4 asked.

Denni seated herself on a table. There appeared to be no chairs. The computer area was designed for Andies, and Andies do not have to sit. "Yes. Some engineering, too."

"We believe you might be of use to us," C-4 said. "Are you familiar with AI programming?"

"Some," Denni answered. She didn't mention the crash course in AI she had taken at Vancouver in preparation for this assignment.

After further technical questions, C-4 told Denni a long story about Andie development, including the role of the four CensusTaker Andies over the last decade. Denni, it said, was the first human to ever receive all of this data. C-4 and its fellow CensusTakers had decided that human elements were missing from their Pleasure models and that Denni could help design those elements.

"What do you want me to do?" Denni asked, congratulating herself that her NPG assignment was falling into place.

"We are preparing a new model Andie and we wish to incorporate certain additional physical and decision-making parameters. You will assist in systems design. We have conflicting or inconclusive data. We feel you are much more expert in these areas, being human."

"Well, thanks for that." Denni looked around her. The computers in the room were very different than what she had been told to expect. "What programming language do you use?"

C-4 moved to a console and hooked one of the two thumbs of its right hand around a microphone. It returned and handed the mike to her. "You will not be able to comprehend

it at first. The language is our own invention. We have augmented the computer to compile your spoken language into program instructions. You may learn the actual programming language later. There are reference screens in English on the computer if you need them. Make yourself familiar with the systems."

"Hey, wait," Denni called out as C-4 glided toward the door. "What's in this for me, pal?"

"Your life, of course," The CensusTaker Andie replied. "We cannot use you as a test subject forever. You may make use of male or female Pleasure models for recreation if you like." The faceless one glided out.

For five months, Denni lived among the Andies. She stored all the information she learned on chips she carried with her. In her sixth month at the site, a human male was captured near the river. She had been expecting his arrival.

*

Furlong wasn't in, but his assistant said he'd be back later that day. I had decided to tell him what I knew about Susan. I also wanted to cover my tracks. I had been the last human to see Roxie alive, assuming that her killer had been an Andie. I returned to my hotel after that, but there was little use in just hanging around, so I went out.

Los Angeles looked even worse after a murder. All the death and decay shouted from the rubble. There seemed to be an unusual number of crows perched wisely above the stink. Crows can live to be sixty years old, I've heard, and they have at least one quality superior to humans - they don't kill other crows. I wondered how many of these had been around during the Last War. Birds somehow survived it all better than other species. Perhaps they recognized the death winds from their higher vantage point. Maybe they flew above or around it all.

Trudy, the secretary at Holo International was my only remaining lead to Susan's whereabouts. I didn't suppose the news of Roxie's demise had reached the studio yet, but I decided that a phone call would be safer than a personal visit. The law in Los Angeles

was jungle law. The cops would normally just ignore another murder, but they would probably investigate in Roxie's case. Roxie was a local symbol of sexual decadence. She was also the property of Holo International, and an expensive property to lose.

I called Trudy. She was in tears on the phone. I used Furlong's name and asked for the hack producer. Trudy said the studio was closed today. I asked why. She said she couldn't tell me, but they would be back in operation the following day. Then she started to cry harder. So they did know. I gave up.

I had enough money, so I bought a car. They were going cheap. Los Angeles once had 16 million people and 32 million cars. The current population was about fifteen thousand, give or take a murder victim. An old gasoline burner could be had for less than the bottle of scotch I had lifted from the holo star's apartment. I didn't really want to get drunk and I was on salary from the NPG, so I put up a few bucks, threw in the bottle, and drove off in a Solar Skimmer made by Ford back in 2011. Skimmers are OK, as long as they were built before 2015. Mine was fully equipped with a working storage battery and ready to drive off the lot.

The Skimmer had a nice looking radio, which would have been nicer if there were still radio stations to listen to, push button controls and street sensors. Street sensors had also been out of commission in Los Angeles since the war. There were still some functioning ones on interstate superhighways running through the Southwest and Midwest Sectors. The gimmick was an electro-magnetic strip buried in the road that the street sensors homed in on to guide the cars along by computer. You could punch in a destination and sit back and read the newspaper or whatever. It was a feature I could use it if it ever came back into vogue.

On a more practical level, the Skimmer was solar-powered, which saved me the trouble of buying and carting gas. You could get gas, but there were few stations so you had to carry the dangerous stuff around in extra gas cans. There was enough sun in Los Angeles, on the other hand, to fry your brains on a clear day. When I checked, I also found that my Skimmer had a usable car phone.

CHAPTER THREE

Since the beginning of rehearsals for their new holo, Roxie had arrived at the house on Euclid Drive every morning at eight to pick Susan up in her old BMW. She had liked the hundred concrete steps up to the front door, she had said, because it was good for her legs and thighs. Susan waited, but that morning Roxie never arrived.

The Wolf never rose before ten. He had only minimal costume and makeup calls to deal with, and ordinarily Susan would never have bothered him. But she was concerned about Roxie. There were no phone lines into the hills. She hesitated milliseconds before waking him.

She was processing the paradoxes that kept appearing in her own consciousness. If she was only a machine, even a bioelectronic machine, why did she experience confused emotions? Roxie had recounted similar human female confusion. Not knowing that Susan was an Andie, Roxie had suggested a "shrink". How could an android now feel concern about the well being of a big-breasted holo star? Why had she felt "in love" with the man she had called Sherlock? Why did she not still feel "love" for Sherlock?

She knew from introspective probing of her systems that certain subroutines in her neurological programming were flagged in such a way that she could not call them up and examine them. She had made a list of her friend Roxie's "aberrations", "neurotic hang-ups", and "fetishes", but these seemed far more physical and primitive than her own moments of confusion. Lately she felt strange pressures and a need for more data whenever human emotions like "love" entered her thoughts.

Susan felt that need as she looked down at her sleeping lycanthrope. A few more milliseconds passed. She tried to evaluate her dimmed "love" for Sherlock and the new pressure she felt for The Wolf. She concluded that she had only one defense against the waves of confused emotional subroutines. She forced her primary programming into dominance, and slid into The Wolf's bed.

"Shift now," Susan demanded into his ear. "Grow big and fanged and violent." While she spoke suggestions she stroked him and bit him gently. He began to stir. She ran her nails down his naked back over and over, digging deeper each time. To her wonder, his hair did begin to sprout beneath her fingers. A leg, trapped between hers, began to twist from within and his ears began to shape. She dragged her nails now, trying to bite deeper and she heard the howl forming within. The hair was everywhere and she ran her tongue up and down his back. She became still rougher and more the she-wolf, drawing out the evil. She couldn't stop. She wanted. She had to have him.

Susan unleashed all of her strength and easily flipped him onto his back. His yellowed, red-streaked eyes peered out as the howl roared around them. A vicious snarl exposed his glistening canines.

For The Wolf, it was one hell of a way to start the day.

*

I was well on my way up into the hills when I noticed the other car following me. It was a solar, like my Skimmer, but a bigger, GM sedan. I spotted it because there weren't any other cars on the road to Nichols Canyon that day, and this one was trying to stay out of my line of sight. It occurred to me that it was the cops, hot on my trail as a murder witness, but cops don't drive unmarked solars anymore.

Speed was only one of the reasons Skimmers became the best-selling solars in the world, but I was momentarily thankful for that hot little engine and I pulled away from my shadow. I suppose I should have thought more about the terrain and less about the old TV ads.

The Skimmer handled nicely, but I hadn't been behind the wheel for a long time. We were rounding a hairpin turn that featured an enormous pothole, when I made an error in judgment. The Skimmer and I sailed like a bird off the canyon road and into a tangle of jungle.

We weren't hurt, and I had grown sufficiently attached to my new wheels to be more concerned about the new car than myself. I sat there for a while and wondered about life and death and the relative distance of a giant old tree branch a foot from my windshield. A little more thrust at the curve and I would have been a permanent part of that tree branch.

I got out and looked around. The other car had not followed me in my folly, and was no longer in sight. There was nothing but peace and tranquility in the pretty bower that had almost claimed me as a permanent resident. I decided to add paranoia to my growing list of old age ailments.

The Hollywood hills all looked pretty much the same now, with overgrown old tumbled down houses and disheveled roads. Technicolor jungle was the best term for it. Birds flocked back down into the branches to twit at me. I marveled that there were insects too. They had been wiped out in some parts of the country. There was a rustling in the underbrush to suggest cats or chipmunks. The irony of the Hollywood hills being as desolate as the Northwest Sector was not lost on me.

I backed the Skimmer out of the hole we had made in the bushes and I headed back to town. My dumb idea had been to wander through the hills until I found Susan, but when I got up there I realized how futile it was. Trudy hadn't even said which hills they lived in, and I still hadn't bought any silver bullets.

I gave up looking officially until the next day and continued down Hollywood Boulevard in search of diversion.

*

They took a shower together for the first time. Andies do bathe. Like humans, they have a porous outer covering that collects dirt. The Wolf, now very human, touched the scratches on her legs lightly. Susan read his mind. "They'll be gone by the time we get to the studio."

"I know. But you make me feel guilty."

Susan turned under the water and gazed up at him. "Why? Look at what I did to you!"

His back was striped with her marks, and the water stung him. He sighed and took her chin in his hand. He kissed her and she kissed back. It was a long kiss. "You've never done that before," he said. She wasn't sure what he meant.

"I... love my Wolf." Susan said it quickly, trying to convince herself. She saw doubt in his eyes. "Well, I'm not sure if we really can, like humans. Other Andies can't, but they gave me something extra. I know from you that I can need. And I can call that love."

He shut off the water. They dried each other and walked back into the living room. He said nothing, but she sensed sadness.

*

When Denni reached her apartment, she found two messages waiting. The first was from Furlong, the NPG man in Los Angeles. It cheered her:

"William Richard Stark has agreed to formally join the NPG. He will arrive in Vancouver on the next chopper transport. Good Luck, Furlong."

He would be in Vancouver in three more days. Denni threw off her parka and danced to her bed. Her heart beat hard. The man had crowded her thoughts since she left him. In the hours she spent alone, between the debriefing, classes, and meetings, her mind had filled with a regret that she hadn't stayed in Los Angeles. Denni felt that her travels with Stark had bonded them together. She wondered if he felt the same.

The second message was from the person who was still debriefing her after nearly a week in Vancouver. Samuel "Hellcat" Crothers was a sixty-six year old veteran of the Last War. Everybody - even Denni - called him Hellcat or just Hell. He was the Chief of Intelligence for the NPG, an engineer who had helped reinvent many technologies that had nearly been lost after the war, a teacher, a father confessor, and of most importance to Denni, he was Black.

The surviving Black population of North America had pulled through the Last War and its aftermath pretty well, and to their advantage. In many Eastern, Southern and Midwestern villages, the majorities of people were Black or Hispanic and were the leaders of their communities. The Northwest Sector had always had a much larger Caucasian population however, and the migration of people to the Mid west and East immediately following the war included most of the surviving non-Whites. So while many of the NPG operatives across the continent shared her heritage, Denni and Hellcat were the only Black people at the University of Vancouver.

It didn't seem to worry Hellcat, but it did bother Denni. In her first year at Vancouver, when she was being trained as an operative, her social life was lousy. She had been used to men chasing her from her teen years in Boswash, where you hardly ever saw a White person. She did love the brothers with great abandon and, until her escape with Stark from the Hopi site, she had never had many White friends of either sex.

Hellcat had helped her through all that. His own background was more integrated, although she knew he was almost fierce in his pride. In her first year he had taught her that same feeling, and that it was not a defense against being "outnumbered" as much as a reminder of her own nobility. It gave her confidence and made her aggressive, but at the same time usually forgiving, even in the rare moments when certain of her White brothers and sisters at Vancouver were patronizing or hostile.

The note from Hellcat said simply: "Come at once."

She sighed. More debriefing, she supposed. Or some part of the data she had brought from Hopi that they did not understand. She stood up and stretched, grabbing her parka from where she had tossed it when she came home, and vowed to make Hellcat pay for dinner as she slammed the apartment door shut behind her.

*

The Ivar is a Hollywood legend, of sorts. Once a legitimate theater, the original building was torn down by the Department of Health sometime after the turn of the century. In its

final days, the old Ivar sported live sex shows, but the Ivar of post-war Hollywood was a holo preview theater. The Gaslight Bar next door was a place where holo starlets and agents met for dinner drinks and accountants didn't take their wives. The Gaslight was where I headed after parking the Skimmer in a dusty field across the street.

The Gaslight was pretty empty during the day. A few unsavory types hung at the far end of the long dark bar, and a couple of sharks were playing pool in the side room. The bartender knew me and I didn't have to tell him I wanted real beer. They have all kinds of synthetic booze in cities like Los Angeles, but there are usually a few bars where you can get stuff made the old way. It costs but I was on salary.

I took a few grateful swallows and noticed a couple of guys at a table near the far end of the bar were looking at me. I was thinking about Furlong's vague description of the Hopi assassins when a hand clapped me on the shoulder.

"Stark," Furlong said, sliding onto the stool next to mine. "Gotta cigarette?"

"Hey, I was just thinking about you," I replied. I passed him my tobacco grudgingly. "Go light, will you? I'm running low."

Furlong opened the pouch and sniffed. "Dutch, isn't it? Don't worry, you can get this over on the Boulevard." He rolled a thin one anyway. "I heard you called. What's up?"

"Well, for one thing, those two guys at the table over there fit the description of our Andie assassins." I gestured without looking up in that direction.

"What two guys?" We both looked, but he was right. The odd couple was gone.

"They were there a minute ago." I ordered us both another glass of the real stuff. "Maybe I'm just getting paranoid."

"You're a bit of a dandy, aren't you Stark?" Furlong lit his cigarette. "I mean Dutch tobacco and real brew?"

I looked at him hard, but I decided he was just the observant type. "I got some stuff to tell you about the intended victim in Hopi."

"Like you were bedding down with her most of the time you were up there? Nothing I don't already know, boy. " Furlong blew a cloud of smoke at the mirror behind the bar. "My man Jack gave me all the details."

"Not that," I said. "I know where she is now."

Furlong tilted his body off the stool and shoved his right hand into his pants pocket. He pulled out two ticket stubs and tossed them to the bar in front of us. "So do I, Stark. I just took a little blonde from Decoding out to watch your girlfriend playing porno queen with a werewolf and the late Roxie of big boob fame. I thought it was a pretty good show, and my date liked it too. She invited me over for dinner tonight, in fact, and I think I'm on the menu."

I was dumbfounded, but I shouldn't have been. Furlong was doing his job. "There's more," I said, thinking of how Roxie looked the last time I saw her. Then it hit me that Furlong might know more than I did. "Hey, do you know where she lives?"

"Who?"

"The girl. The one from Hopi."

Furlong changed his face. He was cold and serious. "Look, Stark. I'm not sure what game we're playing here. This morning a call came over the local cop frequency. Your girlfriend's lesbian co-star was executed just like the little barmaid up in Hopi. No witnesses. By coincidence, the little barmaid also spent some time in the sack with your girlfriend. You like those sleazy types, Stark?" He paused to finish his beer. "That makes your girlfriend a prime suspect in two murder investigations, but there's still another common thread: that would be you, Stark. You wouldn't have anything against lesbians by any chance?" He gave me a narrow-eyed glance.

"Wrong, Furlong," I said, getting up to leave.

He slapped my shoulder again, but this time with surprising force. It was enough to shove me back down on the stool. "Sit down, Stark," he said. I sat. After all, he was paying my salary. "Look. You're W.R. Stark and the NPG has a file on you that says you're a saint. Says you go around helping worthy causes, for which you accept money. You also helped save one of our best intelligence operatives, even if you didn't know you were set up to do it. On the other hand, I happen to know that the secretary you got drunk and pumped for data last night told the cops she gave you Roxie's address. That don't mean that you made that beautiful holo bitch kneel down and take a beam through the neck and spine, but I think you know something..."

"If you'd stop playing Sam Spade for a minute, I'll tell you." I snorted impatiently.

"I'm playing Sam Spade! Listen, you..."

"All right, maybe James Gleason." I stopped him with that and ordered us two more. The bartender had been giving me a worried look.

"Who the fuck is James Gleason?" Furlong asked after a moment's thought.

*

Hellcat was at his desk on one end of the computer room, pouring over a stack of printouts. Mr. Han, his Korean assistant, was on the other side of the room doing the same. Two of the students that Denni had met during her technical debriefing were at terminals, entering data. On a big screen hanging from the ceiling was a full-scale 3D schematic of a female Andie. The computer-generated model was rotating slowly and it was transparent. Denni could see that the program was modifying the android's internal architecture: various elements were changing position inside. The two students kept looking up at the big screen and back to their own monitors as they typed.

Mr. Han suddenly jumped up from his table and yelled something in Korean. He rushed across the room to Hellcat and grabbed the stack of printouts from his boss. "What in Jesus...?" Hellcat thundered at him, but the smaller man cut him off, pointing at one page

of the printout. Hellcat stared at Mr. Han, looked up at the big screen, and then grabbed the page from his assistant and leapt over to the students at the terminals. Mr. Han, having delivered his discovery, dropped his shoulders and sighed. He saw Denni and walked calmly to where she waited in the doorway.

"Hi, Denni," Han said. "Been standing here long?"

She smiled. "Long enough to figure out what you're doing." She indicated the big screen.

Han frowned. "Really?"

"Sure," Denni said, mocking his always-serious tone. "You're trying to stuff something into an Andie."

Mr. Han looked at her. He didn't smile. "You're pretty right. Pretty close, I mean. The problem, how to fit without eliminating necessary stuff that is already inside?" Now he smiled at the irony of her wisecrack. "You saw similar schematics at Hopi site?"

She was amazed that she was right. "What are you guys up to?" She asked, but Mr. Han didn't reply.

"My angel has returned!" Hellcat was upon them and Mr. Han sighed and walked back to the two students as Denni was swept up and off her feet by her friend's embrace.

"Hellcat, what's going on?"

"Denise," Hellcat insisted, knowing full well that she preferred the less formal form. "Do you have any idea just what you were doing back at that Andie factory? Other than getting it on with a bunch of sophisticated electric vibrators?"

Denni slapped at him. "Put me down, Hellcat Crothers. And don't you be talking dirty to me either." She got her way and then added: "And answer my question first!"

"To answer your question, sweet, I am simply trying to fit a biological processing laboratory into a lady Andie's tummy. Does that give you any hint as to 'what the hell' us guys are up to?"

She put her hands on her hips and stared at him in mock indignation. "You're trying to invent a pregnant Andie?"

"Oh, no, honey," Hellcat replied, pulling a half-smoked cigar from a lab coat pocket. "Believe it or not, the CensusTaker Andies already did that. What we're trying to figure is how!"

*

Henry Segal spent two hours after lunch trying to convince the members of the board not to close down production on "Girls Who Like Wolves". Henry Segal was a show business lawyer of the old school who had somehow inherited the position of studio boss at Holo International. Although the position was not one to envy, Henry Segal liked his job. He was pushing seventy, but still had the energy and savvy of a much younger man. Only his obese body and gray hair betrayed him.

Henry Segal would have been comfortable in any Hollywood era. For Henry Segal, nothing had changed. Box office was success. Actors were dumb puppets. Writers and their scripts were replaceable. Directors were artists when they did what they were told - and fired when they didn't. Henry Segal believed in formula pictures and the star system, but he knew that formulas could be exhausted and would need to be alternated eventually. Henry Segal also knew that stars were created, not born.

Henry Segal had ethics, but only ethics by Hollywood standards. Those who played ball were rewarded, and those who opposed his management were punished. He wasn't above a little monetary bonus for theater managers who were enthusiastic but he could also afford to break a few arms in the age-old tradition if need be. Holo International owned 20 holo theaters in the sixteen remaining cities of what was once the United States, and another few in what was left of other countries. Henry Segal ruled his theaters with an iron hand.

Henry Segal knew what the audience wanted. He had made a "family picture" once, a successful remake of a pre-holo film called "Treasure Island", and he was also the man responsible for selling "Lesbian Wolfbane" to his investors and the public.

There were six board members at the Holo International board meeting. Two of them were rich and powerful men and one was a rich and powerful woman. Power was, of course, relative in the days since the Last War, but those who knew how could still accumulate wealth, and power was easier to buy than ever before. The woman owned a private bank that had survived the war and was now profitable. One of the two men operated a successful new electronics monopoly and another manufactured clothing and shoes. The other three board members were lackeys, although one was an accountant and therefore of value to Henry Segal.

At the outset of the meeting, Henry Segal explained that the success of the studio's new venture into sexually explicit holos was paying off. His accountant confirmed this to the board, but board members were not enthusiastic. Holo profits had been down in the previous quarter.

Production, Henry Segal argued, had been slashed. The board had insisted and he had complied with their wishes. "Lesbian Wolfbane" had been made on a shoestring budget. It had been the only Holo International release this quarter. Look at these figures, he told them. Out for a month and box office had quadrupled last week.

The woman with the bank reminded Henry Segal of the general apathy for sexual subjects among the predominantly sterile population. She worried that Henry Segal was pushing the formula too hard. Now they were stuck with advance advertising in every city promising a new feature with Roxie that would be even more titillating than "Lesbian Wolfbane". What would the public reaction be to a new holo without Roxie?

Henry Segal parried and thrust. Roxie had been a big draw, he admitted. The public had clamored for her naked and the studio had bared her. The public had wanted more lust and the studio had promoted her as a bisexual leather goddess with a bevy of female

zombies in "The Return of Frankenstein's Daughter". The public had then wanted explicit holographic hardcore. The studio had added a sex-crazed werewolf. The formula had worked around Roxie. But it was the formula, not the star, Henry Segal argued.

The board was not convinced. They had gone as far as they could allow in the last holo of Roxie's career. The clothing manufacturer was most distressed. What of the product tie-in he had been promised - the Roxie T-shirts? Nothing had been shot on "Girls Who Like Wolves" and the star was dead. Even if the public could be sold on more sex in the new holo, would they pay to see an unknown girl?

Henry Segal knew what he was doing. He let them savor their victory in dollar logic. He led them down the slimy path and then he warmly shoved his secret weapon up their tight wallets. He buzzed his assistant and she brought in the new holo posters, already on display that very day in all of HI's Los Angeles holotheaters.

"Dead Star A Fraud!" screamed the posters. "Roxie Faked It!" "Suzi Did It ALL!"

A disclaimer from Holo International, explaining the trick holography used in Roxie's infamous final scenes, ran in bold type under each headline. An apology from the studio followed that, and an assurance that Holo International's new star, Suzi, would give the public what they wanted and more in Suzi's upcoming release, "Girls Who Like Wolves". The posters would appear in all cities within a week.

The board was speechless. Henry Segal rubbed his sweaty hands in glee. He had them.

*

He slowed the old Dodge as he passed the apartment building, but The Wolf didn't stop. There was a police cruiser parked in front and a barricade to keep out the curious. "Damn!" The Wolf said. "The cops." He'd had a few unfortunate adventures with the police in City of New York - usually unfortunate for them. "I wonder if your girlfriend is in trouble"

He looked at Susan with some malice, but when he saw her expression he felt guilty. This Andie had feelings, after all. "She was pretty loaded last night." He sped on through the rubble-strewn streets. "Maybe she cracked her car up on the way home."

Susan did not reply. She knew what had happened to Roxie. It was all beginning to fall into place.

"I know," he said, mistaking her silence for a rebuke. "I was just as loaded." When he looked at her this time, she was smiling warmly. "Hey?" He was confused in a very human way.

Susan slid over on the seat and kissed his cheek as he fought to keep looking for chunks of concrete and potholes ahead. "You are really a dear, sweet man, my Wolf. I was thinking about Roxie, but I was not 'in love' with her. I felt friendship, but I also felt pity."

"Pity?" The Wolf asked. "Are you sure you're an android?"

She smiled and kissed him again. "Are love and pity so far apart? She was a sad person. All she had in her life were her conquests. She allowed her body to be used to fulfill others' fantasies - with only more of the same as her reward."

He hesitated, but ultimately The Wolf was honest. "Isn't that what a Pleasure model does too?"

She responded by hugging him warmly. "I am programmed that way. The others that came before me were programmed that way. They were automated victims of unhappy, frustrated masters. All Andies are. Isn't it interesting that only two kinds of Andies exist: whores and killers? The ultimate genius of human technology wasted satisfying only primitive human lust."

The Wolf understood. His nature was often dominated by the same desires. "But aren't you different from those that were, er, made before you. Because you know all of this, I mean?"

Susan pushed in front of his face and kissed his mouth. "Exactly correct, dear Wolf!" She laughed as he battled for control of the Dodge. The car barely missed one of the police cruisers in the parking lot behind the Holo International buildings at Sunset and Gower. Susan grew quiet as The Wolf parked. Before they left the car, she said: "Remember, my Wolf. Not a word about last night."

He began to ask her what she meant as they walked together down the passageway into the main office building, but when they reached the lobby a uniformed policeman stopped them.

"The studio's closed to visitors today, folks." The cop began to usher them back to the passageway.

"We work here," The Wolf said in an irritated tone. The policeman put a hand on his holster, but Susan flashed a quick smile. The cop melted.

"Uh, well. I'm not to let anyone into the offices, Miss," the cop insisted, weakening. "There's an investigation going on."

"Of what, Officer Burke?" Susan asked, reading the nametag on his chest. She pushed The Wolf behind her.

The cop was dazzled. "I'm not...supposed to say, but I guess it's all right if you work here. There's been a murder..."

"Roxie!" The Wolf yelled, suddenly getting it. The cop looked at him sharply.

Evelyn Dumont, Henry Segal's personal assistant, chose that moment to push through the swinging doors leading from the main lobby to the offices and studios beyond. "It's OK, officer," she stated, taking Susan by the arm. "Mr. Segal wants to see both of you in his office. Now." She pulled on Susan's arm and The Wolf followed.

*

The tiny tobacconist shop was dark and reeked pleasantly of exotic leaf. In a world where much of humanity's greatest achievements and best efforts had been washed away like the artist Picasso's last drawings in the sand, ancient vices survived and thrived. No wonder, as modern Homo sapiens had little to do in a forced backwards culture. There were still high-tech leftovers to entertain the shrunken masses, and things could be reinvented, but the memories of a vaster, better future still lingered too traumatically for anything to be of much inspiration.

Those who had always painted still painted, but many who had contributed to the economic structures that made art and invention possible now refused to cooperate. Small farmers grew just enough for their own families or to barter for something they wanted. No one had estimated the world population thirty years after the Last War, but it was in the few millions, not billions. Prices were low, but money was scarce. The cost of attending the latest holo was about thirty-five cents, and that was a luxury.

While the days of the cardboard, flip-top boxed, filtered, King Size Menthol Slims were beyond memory, tobacco and marijuana were still cash crops of importance to world economy and tranquility. Even remote villages grew or stocked some kind of the former, and most of the Northwest and Western Sectors had enough of the latter to choke on. The little beady-eyed fat man behind the counter assured me that he had "every brand known to man". The Dutch rolling tobacco that I preferred was among them.

I bought enough to last for a month. I had never been to Vancouver, and I was rather reluctantly planning to rejoin Denni by way of the NPG copter at the end of the week. Furlong bought Virginia stuff, also in a pouch, and some pot. I was a little surprised by that, but he reminded me that he had every intention of taking completely unfair advantage of his dinner date. From her reaction to the holo, he had concluded that she was thoroughly corruptible.

We left the shop and headed back to where I had parked the Skimmer, passing by the oldest theater in Hollywood. The building had been constructed in 1911 as a radio studio and was rebuilt once when holos became industry standard in 2010. Now called the

Hawaiian Holotheater, it was an exotic palace decorated with relics of a chain of Pacific islands virtually unvisited for the last thirty years due to high radiation and, reportedly, pirates and cannibals.

The feature was Furlong's current favorite, "Lesbian Wolfbane", but there was something new added to the big lobby posters. A notice was posted over each of the lewd blow-ups of Roxie being clawed or satiated by ghoulish beasts.

The holo display in the lobby was changed as well. Roxie had once floated there, true to life and neatly serviced by the werewolf and my own little barmaid from Hopi. Now the barmaid was ten feet high, sweating and stretching with undeniable pleasure alone in the embrace of her furry friend. I started as if I had seen a ghost, and Furlong refrained from sardonic comments. The sparkling, fleshy sprites that danced around the holo proclaimed: "Nothing like you've ever seen before!" I wondered how I could get an earlier lift to Vancouver.

*

"We don't really know why," Hellcat admitted. He led her over to the terminals where Mr. Han was supervising the two students as they input the new data. "But your friend C-4 the CensusTaker is engaged in some very strange projects. Maybe they're just interested in human biology, I don't know." He interrupted one student and sat down at a terminal.

With a few keystrokes, the program that the student had been rewriting disappeared and 3D graphic images showed on the monitor. Denni looked at the big screen overhead, but the new images were very different.

"These were in some of the files you brought back on those chips of yours." Hell pressed a function key. The images became animated, rotating slowly.

"I don't remember seeing anything like that at the Hopi site," Denni said.

"Probably didn't," Han explained. "They were in massive data dumps you made of research history files. Took our computers hours to sort out."

"They're really screen references for some sort of holographic modeling," Hellcat added. "I doubt C-4 would have shown you any of their major work on components. You were never anything but the equivalent of a low security clearance worker at Hopi."

Denni smiled at the paradox. "But why would they be worried about security levels? I was one of their test subjects - a prisoner."

Hellcat looked up at her with a serious expression. "For the CensusTaker Andies, nothing has changed. As far as they're concerned, the Last War never ended. They are operating under the wartime mandate of their original programmers: research the active Andies and create improvements to make the next generation better. The scientists in charge sent them out into the field decades ago and then got zapped by a missile. Everybody forgot about the CensusTaker Andies, and there was nobody to turn them off. They found themselves in a closed loop. They collected massive data in their early interviews during the war with the model 1000 Battlefield Andies. They had the ability to dump their findings by satellite and continue, so they kept interviewing and storing data.

"Even before the war ended, they ran into a bug: data was being duplicated because they worked very fast and production had stopped on new Battlefield models. The Soviet Anti-Andie weapons were also beginning to make a difference. The CensusTakers are 'thinking' Andies - meaning that their programs can evolve – and they made their first collective agreement. They decided to include Pleasure models in their survey. The nuclear strikes happened and the systems they had trusted for temporary storage were failing or no longer available to store new data, so they hunted down a safe, central computer."

Denni stared at the rotating images as her friend talked. There were two Andies represented, a male and a female. Both had sex organs and were therefore Pleasure models. She noticed the precision of the imaging, a realism of form that even a very sophisticated computer artist would never capture. It was Andie art.

"Eventually they ran into the loop again: no new Pleasure models. So they decided to try comparisons between Battlefield and Pleasure models and began to create data for a hypothetical Andie. There is background history in the stuff you brought us to suggest they first wrote programs to simulate this new Andie. They analyzed the results of their simulations until they ran into a third loop. Even the possible combinations of data from the two original models had a finite limit. So they made a second collective agreement to try to manufacture a working model based on their simulation. They also reasoned that, if they could place it our society and expose it to reality as though it was human, their new Andie would generate new data for them to analyze. In that way, they could satisfy their mandate."

"But they were only intended to gather data on existing Andies." Denni said.

"Literally, yes. But the human programmers had intended to use the data to upgrade, and they allowed the CensusTakers access to this plan, so it was logical to the CensusTakers: if there were no new models to interview, it was time to make some more."

Denni sighed and patted Hellcat's shoulder. "That's just fine, Hell, and what does all this have to do with some Andie with a 'biological processing laboratory' floating in her abdomen?"

Hellcat frowned. "Patience, my dear. Our four Andies needed a super computer, and before the Magnetic Storms they found one - at Hopi. It just happened to have been located in a high security factory that never opened. The factory, as you know, was built underground, so mother Earth shielded C-4, its brothers, and their data, 200 feet below the effects of the Mag Storms. They noticed the radiation that went with the storms and stayed put for years to wait it out. Andies don't like high radiation any more than we do."

"But I got the impression that C-4 was the only CensusTaker at Hopi," Denni said. "He could communicate with the others, but I don't think they were actually there."

"Correct. Part of the mandate was to collect data from as many areas as possible. Once the Mag Storms ended, what was to stop them from splitting up and finding other Andie

factory sites? C-4 stayed at Hopi. The other three went south and east. Our agents have located the other sites. One is the Cherokee site. Paul Tanner, you've heard me speak of him? Paul's been checking out Cherokee like you did Hopi. He's due back in a couple of months."

Denni grinned. "You still digress, darlin'. What about the tummy thing?"

"I'll digress no further. The new models that C-4 and his brothers developed were based on all of their collected data. They were built by Andies and programmed by Andies. They were named Model 2000, and once the CensusTakers had seeded them out into what is left of the old U.S. of A., there were lots of new experiences to..."

"Hellcat!"

"Ok, ok. The cycle continued. A few years later they produced another model called a 2500. These pleasure models can...conceive!"

Han interrupted. "Collect, not conceive."

"Well, that's debatable."

Han's voice grew agitated. "Not from my data. No debate. Collects and incubates. Does not conceive!"

Denni had to shout to stop the argument. "Well, which is it?"

The student whom Hellcat had moved away from the terminal was a Korean girl about two years younger than Denni. She had been standing with them and listening, patiently waiting to return to her work. Now she turned to Denni and said: "I'm Michelle."

Denni laughed. "Denni," she said.

"They don't really know," Michelle said. "It's what we're trying to determine from the design specification models you brought us." She smiled a sly little smile. "Looks like the 2500 model takes genetic samples and puts them into immediate suspended animation. We're not really sure how they do that, but they can't actually give birth." She giggled at

the gaping look on Denni's face. "They just freeze-dry it and store it." She pointed to her stomach. "In here."

*

Henry Segal ran one hand through his wispy gray hair and stood up behind his polished mahogany desk. Evelyn ushered The Wolf to the right and Susan to the left. The wooden chairs were about five feet in front of Henry Segal's desk and both were large and uncomfortable. Following the traditions of more powerful moguls who had also occupied his picture window office overlooking Gower Street, Henry Segal liked to have his guests at a personal and tactical disadvantage before he even started talking. As he had already put his own future on the line during that morning's board meeting, and without consulting the two sitting in front of him, he wanted complete control over this conference with his stars.

"Ah, here you are at last," Henry Segal said, glancing at The Wolf. "The star of my two most recent excursions into sex and horror." Leering at Susan, he added: "And this is the beautiful Suzi, my bisexual bombshell. That will be all for now, Ev. Dim the lights on your way out." Evelyn backed slowly to the door and Henry Segal turned around and pulled a curtain over the picture window. He seated himself in his overstuffed wing backed executive chair and waited until the lights went down and the door closed behind his personal assistant.

Neither of them had met Henry Segal before. The Wolf knew he was the head of the studio and had once watched the little fat man pawing an attractive extra on the set of "Frankenstein's Daughter". Otherwise he might have assumed Henry Segal to be homosexual for all his primness, unfashionable bow ties, wire spectacles, and the absurdly enormous double-breasted suits that struggled to hide the man's excesses. Susan had heard Roxie mention "Mr. Segal", but purely in terms of another sexual conquest, and an unimpressive one at that.

The only light in Henry Segal's office was now a pin-spot, hidden high in the ceiling and creating a tiny circle of blue-white around Henry Segal's bulk. (The Wolf said later that it made him look like a giant blue worm, or a beached whale, but it was a "show biz" touch to Henry Segal.) The studio head pressed a button on his desk console and a ten-foot still hologram floated in the space between his desk and the two chairs. It was a suggestive nude shot of Roxie.

"I don't know if you've heard," said Henry Segal, gazing into Roxie's spread-eagled thighs. "She was murdered this morning in her apartment." He watched Susan for a reaction and misunderstood her lack of emotion and surprise.

"I know," Susan said.

"But I didn't!" The Wolf stood up and started for the desk. "Turn that damned thing off!"

"Sit down, Mr. Wolf!" Henry Segal's voice had all the power that his physique lacked. The voice reminded The Wolf of his old friend Mr. Prince. The Wolf retreated. "The show has just begun." He pressed the button again and the holo changed. An outtake from "Lesbian Wolfbane" presented his two guests in a nude embrace far more graphic than the first. "This is the future of the holo business. It is dripping, drooling, slimy history you two are making here, Mr. Wolf. You, Suzi and I are going to make a fortune from it."

Henry Segal pressed the button again and again. The succession of still holos had not been in "Lesbian Wolfbane", but The Wolf remembered the moments on the set when he had not been quite able to stop on the director's command.

"These are a collection of outtakes made by our editors. They did it for their own enjoyment and offered me a copy so I wouldn't fire them after I found out. You probably didn't realize the cameras were recording these moments, eh, Suzi?"

Susan watched with minimal interest. While she understood the value of such recordings to humans, they did not fall within her own response parameters. She did admire the way

The Wolf's overwhelming power dominated the shots. "He's very beautiful, my Wolf. Don't you agree, Mr. Segal?"

Henry Segal was not a man to waste time on laughter, but this struck him like a full cash register opening. He smiled warmly. "I'm rather more taken by you, my dear. You are probably right in thinking that Mr. Wolf has something to impress the female audience." The series of holos ended with a shot of Susan, which was currently being erected in Holo International holotheaters across the land.

"I like that one!" The Wolf shouted excitedly.

"Good." Henry Segal got up from his desk and walked around them to the far end of his office. He put the lights back up and the holo of Susan vanished. "So do I! And I'm sure you will also like what I'm about to tell you..."

*

Officially, Roxie's death was suicide. There were many old, honored traditions in Hollywood, and police cooperation with the higher powers was still among them. As the only major studio, Holo International was the highest power. Murder wasn't an easy subject for publicists. Suicide was a natural. The public didn't have to feel guilty when reading about the sordid past of a suicide, where a murdered star was a victim and due some respect and pity. The LA Star, the only newspaper still published in Los Angeles, confirmed the police report.

I read all about it in my hotel room. The article ran under a nice color photo of Roxie photographed nude from the waist up:

"HOLLYWOOD, CA - The LAPD stated on Wednesday that Roxie, Holo International's topless box office draw, took her own life last Tuesday evening. In an interview with LA Star reporter Bill Bored, Deputy Chief Lloyd said the star of 'Lesbian Wolfbane' and other top-grossing Holo International hits left a note that gave sexual depression as the reason. Roxie slit her wrists in her marble bathtub at approximately 11:00 PM.

"Although she often portrayed kinky bisexuals and sadistic Lesbians, Roxie had many male lovers throughout her holo career. She began over ten years ago in loops and recently starred in the first hardcore Holo International biggie, now playing in most major cities to sold out houses. Well-known B-holo star Dolph, who is currently shooting the Falcon series for little Pillsbury Pictures in Santa Monica, had a highly public affair with Roxie when she was still a loop actress.

"'She was much happier with men, but she couldn't resist the ladies now and then,' Dolph told The Star. 'I think Holo International's move into hardcore hurt her image. There was very explicit stuff in her last holo - not to mention that freak wolfman.' [A popular Holo International actor known only as The Wolf. – Ed.] 'I understand that Roxie didn't really shoot the scenes with the wolfman,' Dolph said. 'She was depressed about using a stand-in.'"

"Publicity people at Holo International agreed, noting that Suzi, the featured starlet ravaged by The Wolf and Roxie in 'Lesbian Wolfbane', will return as The Wolf's co-star in 'Girls Who Like Wolves'. Suzi is under exclusive contract to HI, of course.

"Evelyn Dumont, Mr. Henry Segal's personal assistant, told The Star: 'There will be much more to our new holo than scenes with The Wolf and Suzi. It's a big budget project.' Holo International promises that sex and gore fans will be delighted 'and even shocked' at some of the extremely graphic scenes in the Holo International feature 'Girls Who Like Wolves'. Director Fredric Van Dine begins shooting the holo this week and it will reach HI holothaters in a few months.

"For anyone who hasn't already seen 'Lesbian Wolfbane', the studio assures The LA Star that the hit will be held over for at least the next two weeks at all locations."

The little barmaid was still sweet in my memories of Hopi, but the chances of finding her had dimmed with her holostardom. When I left him the night before, Furlong had expressed doubt that even his influence could pry loose the tight security which had gone up at Holo International since Roxie's death. He was not in his office the next day and not

expected. I knew he was probably getting stoned with the "little blonde from Decoding", so I took the Skimmer down by the ocean to check out my only possible new lead.

Pillsbury Pictures was actually in Venice, not Santa Monica. It was a respectable second-rate holo studio that also turned out discs for the few people who could find working high-resolution DVD players. Holographic processing is actually the cheaper media, as the final theater product is burned into distribution chips at the studio, and the number of holos theaters is minimal. DVDs are harder to manufacture and distribute.

Pillsbury supplied the holos theaters with second features on a regular basis. Mysteries and westerns and soap operas were their staple. They had to use controlled conditions to do holos, just like Holo International, but the Pillsbury crews worked in abandoned buildings and used real locations instead of building expensive sets.

As the lasting profit from explicit holo features was yet to be proved, smaller companies like Pillsbury had nudity but kept sex off-screen in their product. Violence was acceptable, but some of Pillsbury's holos were actually dramatic and entertaining without splashing blood on the plotline. I didn't know whether Dolph worked Pillsbury for moral reasons, or just because there weren't that many roles for men in HI productions, but he was a fairly convincing actor. I had seen several of his westerns in Chicago when I was working in that sector, and one of the "Falcon" mysteries. The latter compared well with an ancient Tom Conway pre-holo I'd seen.

There was no security at Pillsbury. I parked the Skimmer in front of the old appliance factory that was the "studio" and walked right onto the set. They had just begun a scene with Dolph as The Falcon: he was confronting a crime boss in the gang's secret headquarters. I waited safely outside the bouncing laser target areas.

"Well, Falcon," said the crime boss. "You think you can just show up and we'll all surrender, huh?"

"I've got the drop on you, my friend." Dolph-Falcon gestured with his pistol. "Your boys will run like rats when Sergeant Callahan and the cops get here. In the meantime, you can tell me what you did with the plans."

"Poor Falcon," the crime boss chided. "You never did impress me with all yer upper class, high society...bullshit."

"Cut!" From somewhere above, a man seated on a crane swung into the staging area. "Calvin! The line is 'high society connections ', not 'bullshit'."

"Hey, so I dropped a line!" The crime boss snarled at the director. "I liked 'bullshit' better," he muttered.

The director ignored him. "OK, let's do it again!" he yelled. The crane lifted him back into the shadows.

They did it again, and I watched. By the time the scene was over, the Falcon had been jumped by some of the gang and tied up. The director shouted for them to wrap for lunch. I went over and introduced myself to Dolph. He seemed willing enough to talk to anyone about anything - most actors are - so we strolled over to what was left of the Venice boardwalk and I bought him lunch at a little coffee shop. Copies of The LA Star were hanging on a rack behind him. I studied the nice photo of Roxie throughout most of our conversation.

"She and I had some good times together. She was a pretty good kid, you know?"

I said I didn't, which only seemed to animate Dolph on the subject of his own best qualities and the role of Roxie as his student and a "completely minor piece of meat". I suspected Dolph was lying about most of it, and after I'd had enough I moved the conversation around to Roxie's recent activities.

"Yeah, she called me a lot. She got real worried about the hardcore scenes her agent had talked her into when they started production on 'Lesbian Wolfbane'. I guess this Wolf guy really is a freak. I didn't see the picture, but that's what I hear. I mean, she was scared to

go back to hardcore, even for HI. I knew her when she was in loops and she never really liked it, but there was much more money involved this time."

"Did you ever meet The Wolf? Or this Suzi?"

"Not him, but I met the girl. Never got to know her. I visited over at Roxie's place one afternoon and the girlfriend was there. Didn't stay long. Don't much like gay chicks myself. You'll never get to meet her or the wolfman now. The studio's keeping them under lock and key until...well, I shouldn't add fuel to the fire, but the word is that it wasn't suicide."

We went back to the set and I watched the Falcon escape from bondage and alert the cops to where the crime boss and his rats were hiding out. I called Furlong on the car phone as I took the Skimmer back to Hollywood, but he was still out. Dolph hadn't known exactly where Susan lived. He thought it was Laurel Canyon, but I knew I was getting nowhere. It was a dead end day. I pulled in across the street from The Gaslight and went in and had a drink.

*

When they got up the next morning, they had a serious discussion. The Wolf wanted to leave town.

"Look what they did to Roxie," he said.

"I'm an Andie," Susan reminded him, "and they're not trying to kill me."

"Oh, no. It's just a coincidence that a girl in your village, that queer Audrey, and Roxie all got it in the same way - beamed through the back and skull." The Wolf was sitting up in bed. She was curled next to him. "That's how they used to kill Andies in the war, isn't it? Through the nervous system instead of the heart?"

"Well," she played with him. "We don't have hearts."

"Stop that. If we're really going through with this...garbage that Segal wants, I'll need to save it for the cameras. We're supposed to do it for them in an hour."

They showered and dressed and went to the studio. The Wolf was worried, but he could see Susan wasn't afraid, which gave him more confidence. The day was mostly publicity stills, but they performed enthusiastically. The Wolf was exhausted by the time they returned home.

He had a few beers. After she put him to bed for the night, Susan sat in the living room and waited for morning. Beryl joined her after a while, walking into her lap and falling asleep.

Susan wondered what sleep was like.

*

My chopper flight to Vancouver was uneventful. I slept most of the way, and woke up as the pilot landed us directly in the middle of the university campus. It was windy and cold, but I had bought a heavy second-hand coat with a high collar so I didn't mind having to stand next to the copter for a few minutes while somebody took an iris test. I'd had a similar ID check when Rola Petroff had first hired me. The data said I was okay and the guy shook my hand. Two people were approaching. One was screaming my name and sort of skipping.

I suppose a man of my age should have more dignity, but the sight of a woman like Denni running to you with her arms outstretched can make you forget the years. I ran too, and we smacked into each other nicely and went into a very long kiss. I lifted her up as we hugged close and the kiss got wetter, but it didn't end until the second person reached us.

"Stark, god. Um-m-m." Denni was trying to say, without taking her mouth off mine. Even through her parka and my bulky long coat I could feel the heat of her. I hadn't known until then how much I had missed her. Even an old dog like me is prepared to say

"I love you" at that tightening, eye watering kind of moment, but when I saw the other person, an older Black man with a distinguished blur of white hair and a big cigar sticking in his face, all I could say was: "HELL!"

I guess I shouldn't have been so shocked. Hellcat Crothers was only a decade older than me when we flew around disarming biological warfare weapons in the Midwest Sector. He looked a bit worse for wear, but I probably did too. It was fifteen years later, and we had both survived to renew our friendship. He'd known all along, of course, and I was grateful that he hadn't tried to discourage Denni from falling in love with me. But then, Hellcat was never much for any kind of prejudice.

Denni was sore with him later for not telling her about our past adventures. We were in his office-lab, and I knew at once from her tone and attitude that she regarded him as a father figure. I was somewhat relieved that she already had such a relationship with somebody else.

Our life at Vancouver wasn't at all like the time we'd locked ourselves in the motel in Los Angeles. Denni escorted me around the big campus and went through all the briefings and debriefings with me. She was very possessive, but didn't seem to mind that I occasionally stared at some pretty girl in the cafeteria or forgot she was there when I got caught up in discussions about the past with Hellcat. I didn't worry about the pretty girls either. I had been single for a long time and Denni still looked better than anybody I'd ever seen before.

The long raps with Hellcat were part of my own orientation as a relatively new agent of the NPG. Denni would just sit there, half-listening and mostly staring at me. Sometimes, when Hellcat said something I fully understood immediately, she'd make a funny little strangled sound and throw her arms around my neck and reward me. Hellcat usually chuckled and watched. Or else he just kept talking.

At the little apartment, we played house like a married couple. I'd never felt married before but, with one exception, I'd guess this was what it was like. The exception was that we never got bored with each other. We never even worried that we might someday.

It went on that way for four months. Being reborn as a college student was all very new to me: there hadn't been any colleges available when I was that age. I even audited some biotech courses. We sat under trees on warm days and read poetry. We walked around, hand-in-hand, and I did eventually say, "I love you" at the right moments. I also meant it.

Then an agent named Paul Tanner returned, long overdue, from the Cherokee site. They got him out after he'd been a test subject for nearly eight months. Paul's method of operation had been similar to Denni's at the Hopi site, and it had worked again. The information Tanner brought to Vancouver confirmed Hellcat's theories on the role of the CensusTakers in secret Andie production at the sites we knew about around the country and about the strange Model 2500 with its human genetic retrieval and storage equipment. He also confirmed that there was a Model 3000 Andie in production, and that the site working on the new model was Hopi.

A few days later, the NPG decided that new data required a field trip and that Denni and I were the best candidates for the job.

*

"Girls Who Like Wolves", like most holos, was to be shot in sequence. Editing holographic motion pictures is a time consuming business, and even Holo International had to produce a product quickly to turn a big profit. Shooting in sequence allowed much of a holo to be finished before the editors ever got hold of it, and avoided costly re-processing of every scene. The natural transformations that The Wolf provided saved Henry Segal big bucks on special effects, but there were still other post-production requirements that could have bankrupted a smaller studio.

Close-ups and slow motion shots, matte shots, dissolves, and the rapid-fire "quick cuts" were all needed for the holo's many climactic moments. Special sets had been built for

"Girls Who Like Wolves" to keep the audience from becoming bored with the intimate scenes. Dubbing was also more expensive than it had been back in pre-holo days.

The Wolf hung around waiting for Susan to finish in Wardrobe and join him for their first meeting with their new director. Fredric Van Dine was HI's best, and Henry Segal's personal favorite, (he had even directed "Treasure Island"). According to Henry Segal, the director of The Wolf's last holo was not good enough for this project. They were pulling out all the stops for this one, Henry Segal had said. He wanted it to be "the most popular holo of all time".

The Wolf was very excited about that prospect. As a lycanthrope, immortality had never been anything he had to worry about in the literal sense, but he liked the fame. It did amuse The Wolf that both he and Susan might well outlast not only everyone who ever went to see "the most popular holo of all time", but holography itself. No one knew how long an Andie could live, of course, because the original generation of Andies had been terminated before their time during and after the Last War. The Wolf felt sure they would certainly outlast Henry Segal and Fredric Van Dine.

The Wolf was also happy because a couple of the crew had urged him to join them at cards between scenes. He liked poker, and Roxie had once mentioned that being invited into the game was a sign of respect and acceptance on a set. He had worked with most of the crew before and he was delighted to be "one of the boys". As a victim of lycanthropy, The Wolf had always been hungry for friends.

He strolled around the enormous soundstage, amicably greeting people he knew and taking in the two complete sets and mass of holographic equipment. Despite his limited experience, his fondness for old Hollywood helped him recognize the artistry and money that Henry Segal was pouring into "Girls Who Like Wolves". This was no cheapie, he thought. One set was a full-sized false front of an outland village, dubbed "Glendale" for a now deserted section of old Los Angeles. There were a few shops, an old hotel, and a little tavern - all properly aged and dusty. A dirt road ran through "Glendale" and off into a miniature of hills and forest against the studio wall. A technician he knew told him that

background holo would be projected behind the miniatures to add more depth. Two big doors on the other end of the "Glendale" road led to stables where real horses waited for their scenes.

The second set was a forest. The Wolf was reminded of some still photos he had seen of "The Wolfman" and made this comment to a set dresser, who was delighted. Henry Segal, it seemed, had supplied them with a video copy of that very pre-holo. The dresser couldn't wait to pass The Wolf's remark on to his foreman and rushed off. The Wolf was elated. They respected his opinion! He wandered around in the forest for nearly an hour and then hurried back to the door leading to Wardrobe.

Susan was just emerging. All he could see of her costume were her sheer black stockings and three-inch spike heels. She wore a heavy silk dressing gown over the rest. She smiled seductively when she saw him, and walked over, swinging her hips in a slow grind.

"Hi, my Wolf." Susan's voice was a sweet purr. "Suzi got a present for you. All for you." She opened the dressing gown to him and laughed gently as his jaw dropped.

"Uh," The Wolf said. Susan wore only a black garter belt from the waist down, attached to the stockings, and a black leather harness from the waist up which circled her breasts and ended in a tight neck collar. He moved to her, but she closed her gown.

"You just think about it for the next hour." Susan pushed him back softly. "We have a meeting with Van Dine. After that, the cameras beam on and my Wolf gets to do all sorts of lusty things. And you can even play poker in between."

This helped The Wolf regain his composure. He pecked her offered cheek with a light kiss. Hooray for Hollywood, he thought darkly.

*

There is no way to translate Andie-to-Andie conversations, unless they happen to be in a human language. Even if someone could understand a native digitized Andie exchange, much would still be missed. Andies are perfectly able to transmit messages to each other

by several different inaudible means, and they often combine several. Radio frequencies in various ranges, microwaves, and conductive data streaming (by simply touching each other) are some techniques. A popular song during the war, "Andietalk", used data stream sounds in instrumental sections, slowed down to a crawl to be audible. Radio is the slowest technique and data streaming is very fast, allowing the transmission of a megabyte of data every several milliseconds.

The taller of the two Battlefield models touched Furlong with his hand and completed his report in far less time. Then the two got up from the table at The Gaslight and left. Furlong calculated an appropriate pause for anyone who might be looking his way, lifted his beer, and drank. As the liquid passed into his system to be synthesized for sweat, eyeball lubricant, artificial saliva, and other decorative body fluids, his processors designed the report that Furlong would make to his superior, and inserted narrative data. He would transmit to the Northwest Sector by radio when he returned to his office.

The Battlefield 2500s had done well, eliminating all targeted humans who could have had enough intimate contact with the experimental 2500 to expose her as an Andie, intentionally or otherwise. Surveillance of the Euclid Road dwelling confirmed that the mutant lycanthrope posed no threat and was contributing to her mission. Stark had left the sector, having abandoned his attempts to reunite with her. The battlefield 2500s would continue to watch over the female Pleasure model 2500 called Susan, who was successfully employed in a profession that would undoubtedly provide many more collections.

Furlong simultaneously reviewed his own progress with the female from the NPG Decoding Section. He added this data onto the end of the report. His own previous subjects had not all indicated such a high degree of fertility, but his attempts at obtaining complete genetic information from her had not yet succeeded. From a kinetic viewpoint, the experience had been most rewarding, but it was too soon to tell how further contacts might fare or even if his systems were functioning correctly. She was a very cooperative subject, however, and the project would be continued regularly, beginning tonight.

Furlong was looking forward to the evening with his human from Decoding. He swallowed the rest of the beer and went back to the NPG office. He wanted to complete his transmission to C-4 as soon as possible. He had a hot date.

*

Hellcat took them on like a soldier defending a hospital full of wounded children. A sort of morality inspired his fight.

"Crothers, you cannot win. There is only one way to deal with them. We've got to get the rocket choppers out of mothballs and blow them all away." The speaker was a woman named Melora who taught microbiology.

"Yeah," said Hellcat. "Let's have a war, ok? And destroy thirty years of pure machine intelligence research? Not on your ass, baby! You got any idea how valuable Andies could be to international reconstruction?" Rola Petroff lifted a thick hand and Hellcat retreated from his attack, sulking.

"Enough!" Rola said wearily. The Rumanian turned to the microbiologist. "You are out of line, Melora. No, don't start. There is no way that I will authorize a bombing. Andies are biological entities, even if they are created in factories." The UN statesman looked at me. "Stark. You said there are still humans in there?"

"There was at least one - the old guy in my cell," I answered.

"There may be others," Denni added, squeezing my hand.

"Then we need a better plan," Rola said. "No loss of human life. I don't care how insignificant the loss might appear. And I do agree with Dr. Crothers. The research that the CensusTaker Andies have been doing may be very valuable."

Hellcat let out a deep breath. "Maybe we could just go in and ask them," he said. "Maybe they'd like to share their notes?" He wasn't serious, but Petroff didn't smile.

"We don't really know that they wouldn't." He shrugged. "But there is this Andie 'hit squad' that showed up in Hopi and Los Angeles. Let's put aside the problem of direct communication for a moment. Can we get back inside the Hopi site? Denni? Stark?"

I looked at Denni and she was smiling at me. Her eyes sparkled. She loved a challenge, this woman. "You're the expert," I said. She stood and faced the group around the table.

"The Hopi site is at the bottom of a 200-foot man-made pit, like a skyscraper's penthouse in reverse. The pit is reinforced with a lattice of steel girders from top to bottom. When they 'captured' me, they took me down through a small elevator that requires an audio security code. I broke that, and Stark and I used it to escape, but they've probably changed the frequency. They also have a kind of freight elevator. I have no idea how it works. It's an Andie design, and it's just a flat platform. I watched them use it and it drops very fast, but there is no place for a human to hang on. Works for Andies, but it might very well give us the bends or a heart attack."

"There's one of those at the Cherokee site," Paul Tanner said. "It definitely could burst a few human arteries."

"How did you get into Cherokee?" I asked him.

"The way Denni was supposed to originally," Tanner replied. "We used Hell's digging machines to tunnel up to the upper part, just under the surface, then burned through the inner wall. I had to climb down from there."

"Hellcat and his advance team started a tunnel at Hopi too. It begins at the 'power station'." Denni pointed at a map on the table. "And goes under the river here. It ends here - about thirty feet short. We stopped when we found out about some villagers who had disappeared. Hell figured that they might be taking humans inside to test the new models. He was right." She smiled at Paul Tanner. "Luckily for Paul and me, they only used us to test Pleasure models."

I looked at Tanner, who was grinning. "You tested Pleasure models?" I asked.

He nodded, still grinning. "Only the female variety, old boy. That's why I was a couple of months late getting back. It was really hard to leave." Almost everyone laughed.

"There's no indication that the Andies ever found our tunnel. The agents in Hopi think they might have checked out the 'power station' after Stark and I escaped, but the tunnel is hidden underneath and the equipment is still in the tunnel. It probably is the best way back in." She sat down and looked at me, so I stood up.

"I can't add much. I didn't even get to test anything." Tanner and Hellcat whooped at that, but the microbiologist made an ugly face and Rola didn't even smile. "I did make a pretty thorough sweep of the 'power station' myself, and I never noticed your tunnel. I can say that even though the guards are advanced Battlefield models, they don't shoot on sight. They could have killed me instead of taking me prisoner. They seem to be as curious about us as we are about them."

Hellcat was scribbling notes. He glanced my way. "How many in their guard force?" I deferred to Denni.

"I would guess they had about ten Battlefield models. They may have made more in the last five months."

"Ten's plenty. What about the other Andies, the workers, the engineers, and C-4? Are they outfitted with Battlefield weaponry?"

Denni stood up and I sat. It was her data they wanted. "I think C-4 is a modified Battlefield Andie. The CensusTakers were sent out during a war, remember. But it has AI logic that upgrades itself, and it's had three decades to alter its architecture."

"From the descriptions that you and Paul have given us of C-4 and C-3, I'd say that the CensusTakers have certainly changed physically in thirty years," Hell agreed. "The original design specifications were wiped out in Colorado, along with their designers, but why would a human put two thumbs on an android?"

"No human would design a faceless android either, and it would take a totally new head assembly to make any brain changes, so we can assume they've worked on that too. The old Andies had a security feature that let loose viruses into the brain if anyone tampered with the skull. The new ones we've seen still incorporate that feature, so the CensusTakers must have a way to override the viruses."

"Was the CensusTaker at Cherokee also faceless?" I asked Tanner.

"Yup. Old C-3. Not much of a personality, but smart."

"Back to the engineer Andies and drones," Denni continued. "They're not dangerous. No weapons systems. We know nothing about the 3000 model, except that they are based on the 2500, and 2500s are a combined Pleasure-Battlefield model. They have sublimated weapon systems and kill instinct. That's about all, I guess." She sat down and Hellcat got up.

"My turn again." He took out a cigar and Melora the microbiologist moaned. He lit it anyway. "I got an extra cigar for you, Melly. If you want one." Hell bent over the map and pulled a printed blowup of the 3D Andie designs out from under it. "Now let's talk about why we're so curious, and why we want to get back into C-4's little robot factory without blowing it up. All of you who know what 'cryogenic' means raise your hands..."

*

Van Dine smiled at them absently as they joined him in his office on the third floor of the Gower building. The diminutive director's storyboards and other paperwork was scattered everywhere and Van Dine made things worse by scooping it all up and tossing it on the floor to make room for Susan on the couch. He deliberately sat opposite Susan and seated The Wolf on a chair to his right.

"Don't be nervous, my dear," Van Dine said to Susan. "It's not a casting couch. You've already got the part."

Susan wasn't ever "nervous" and she didn't understand the attempt at humor. She noticed Van Dine was looking at her body and she instinctively sat back a bit to let her dressing gown reveal her legs to the elderly director. The Wolf was not pleased. He understood the Hollywood joke. He was also concerned that Van Dine might ask him to transform in the tiny office. The Wolf didn't like doing it in confined spaces.

Van Dine did look at Susan's legs, but his mind was elsewhere. After a beat, he came to and began to explain the plot of "Girls Who Like Wolves".

"The first sequence shows three carnival wagons pulling through the village. They stop, and some of the carney folk get out and set up a little stage while the village residents start to gather around them. The Mayor, played by Danny Fitzgerald, shows up and Arcadio the gypsy carney boss, played by Gilbert Danielle, asks the Mayor if he can put on his carnival in the village. The Mayor insists that the gypsies must set up outside of town on the edge of the forest, but he allows a little preview when Arcadio promises him an exotic dancer will perform. Enter Lenore, Arcadio's lovely cousin, played by Suzi. Stand up now, Suzi, and take off the robe." Susan dropped it to the floor as she rose from the couch.

"Excellent!" said Van Dine, and The Wolf was inclined to agree.

"You can sit down, my dear. So Suzi as Lenore does an exotic dance and the townspeople go crazy. You'll work with a pole in the center of the little stage, Suzi, rubbing and whirling around it in a frenzy of shots, and then fall to the floor at the end." Van Dine closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

"Everyone in the crowd is really worked up except Larry the blacksmith, played by you, Mr. Wolf. Lenore looks up from where she lies exhausted on the stage and she sees you staring at her. We'll do some real tight close-ups here, like in pre-holos. You are both frozen there, dramatically, until a village girl who is after Larry runs up to him, begging him to take her to the carnival that evening. She's played by Ginger, one of the girls in 'Return of Frankenstein's Daughter'. You know her, Mr. Wolf?"

The Wolf remembered. She was blonde and built exactly like Roxie: all body and minimum brains. "I remember Ginger," he said.

"Good!" said Van Dine. "We move away from Lenore and the gypsies and follow you as you go back to the blacksmith's shop. Ginger follows you, hanging on you and begging you to take her into one of the stalls and have your way with her."

"Do I?" asked The Wolf, getting involved.

"I'm coming to that," Van Dine said. "She pesters you and finally you drag her into a stall and tie her to the wall to keep her out of your hair, uh, so to speak. We use dissolves here to show that all you can think about is Lenore dancing. Finally Ginger whines so much that you get angry and shape-shift."

"Oh," said The Wolf. "Then I kill her?"

"Not right away. This is a sex scene. First you give her what she wants, but you keep thinking of Lenore. Anything Ginger can't handle we'll have Suzi double. Ok, I'm not big on this kind of picture, but Segal wants this to go on until the guys in the back row are satisfied. Now you kill her: howl and all that. Oh, and Ginger says you were a perfect gentleman in 'Frankenstein's Daughter', so she trusts you. We'd especially appreciate it if you'd be careful not to scratch the property, if you know what I mean?"

Susan smiled at The Wolf. "Ginger is very sweet to say that about you, my Wolf."

"Ok," said The Wolf. "What next? Do I bury the body?"

Van Dine looked at him with some exasperation. "No. Next we cut to the edge of the woods. It's night and the whole village has turned out for the carnival. It's a festive event - we'll have some animal acts and jugglers and so on - everybody is having a great time. Larry is wandering through the crowd. He's looking for the gypsy girl, Lenore. We'll have some dissolves of Suzi here, close-ups of her naked, and we can see he is completely obsessed with finding her. Then the moon breaks through the clouds and..."

"I run off into the forest to hunt?" The Wolf guessed. Susan giggled.

"No," said Van Dine. "You lose control and transform right in the middle of the crowd. You don't see her, but Lenore watches the whole thing from just inside her tent, where she is getting ready for her dance number. She reacts to you like she's really turned on. You'll do a little solo bit here, Suzi. Meanwhile, Larry terrifies the crowd and chases some of them, including a nubile village girl, into the forest."

"I get another girl?" The Wolf asked.

"Yes. She's new: a friend of Mr. Segal. Looks a little like Roxie."

"They all do," The Wolf muttered. "So I kill her?"

"Well," said Van Dine. "Not exactly. First you ravage her. Suzi will double for her in the close shots, of course."

"And then I bury her?" The Wolf asked. "I should have buried the first one, you know."

"Why?" asked Van Dine, a bit confused. "What's with this burial thing?"

"I always...I mean, it's smarter. You don't get caught that way."

Van Dine bugged his eyes, trying to comprehend. "No," he decided, cautiously. "Lenore has followed you and she has seen everything. She stops you from killing the girl with a mysterious talisman she wears around her neck."

"A what?" The Wolf had to ask.

"A talisman! You know, like a magical object!"

"Oh," said The Wolf.

"Lenore puts you under a gypsy spell with the talisman and you carry the village girl back to the carnival, which is now deserted. Lenore puts the poor girl into the bed in her tent to sleep and then comes on to you, explaining that she can help you control your, uh..."

"Lycanthropic reactions?"

"Yes! Good!" Van Dine scribbled this on a piece of paper.

"Mr. Van Dine?" The Wolf had another thought. "Do I shift back before I carry the girl back the carnival?"

"Uh, no. Why?"

"It might be rather difficult."

Van Dine sighed. "Why is that Mr. Wolf?"

"My arm muscles. They contract when I shift, and I'm not sure I could actually carry someone. I have a tendency to go on all fours, if you see what I mean?"

The little man was a bit pale. "Well, I hadn't realized...but I wouldn't want to have you shift back, er, to human form and then back again for the scene with Suzi here when you get to the tent. That wouldn't look right."

"I could carry her," Susan volunteered.

"Uh, do you think you could lift her? I mean..."

"Oh, sure." Susan winked at her partner. "You'd be surprised how strong I am."

Van Dine closed his eyes a minute. The Wolf wasn't sure if he was thinking or maybe just had a headache. "Yes. Ok," he said. He scribbled on the paper again. "Anyway, Lenore says she'll use her gypsy powers to help you control your desire to kill, if you will help her with her problem."

"Which is?" The Wolf asked.

"Nymphomania," Van Dine said, looking at Susan's legs again.

"Oh, boy!" said The Wolf. "This is going to be fun!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"Freeze-dried zygotes?" I asked, passing Denni the plate of French fried potatoes. We were eating in that evening. The chopper that had delivered Paul Tanner from the Midwest Sector had also brought enough supplies for everyone to enjoy a home cooked meal, if they wanted to cook. Having spent years of my life roaming the wilds, I offered my good woman an opportunity to make fun of my culinary talents. We had actual beef hamburger, the French fries, squash and peas.

At the end of dinner we had real coffee. I'm not sure where they got that from, but there had been seventeen pounds on the chopper and I managed to get us a half a pound. Denni agreed that it was better than the synthetic stuff. Then she tried, and failed, to join me in a cigarette. After much coughing and painful fits of laughter, we sat calmed and silent on her couch, overlooking the night through her living room window.

"We may not be able to get out once we get in," Denni stated suddenly, breaking the quiet.

I said nothing. I just looked at the brave, beautiful woman sitting at my side. Her dark skin glowed with warmth in the dim light. Her high cheekbones and tiny ears gave her a profile a regal Egyptian cast. I felt like an explorer or adventurer who had just been granted an audience with the high priestess of a noble, ancient culture.

"Do you think we should go back?" she asked me.

"Yes," I answered. The word got stuck in my dream and came out husky. "Somebody has to, and I can go anywhere with you." She melted like a candle in a bonfire. Nearing the end of my path, I had found a soft and undeniable Utopia.

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The scene went well until one of the horses decided to seek greener pastures. He didn't run for it, he just started walking slowly toward the miniatures and the holographic projections behind them. The horse probably thought no one would notice, and he was

right. Susan was dancing erotically on the stage with the pole, and the cast and crew were watching. When the wandering horse and the wagon he was hired to pull crunched over the foam and plaster hill, the poor nag got confused and bolted right into the hologram on the wall. Everybody on the set spun around at the sound. Henry Segal dropped his cigar.

"Cut it!" Van Dine cursed, and then shouted instructions to his set dressers, technicians, and wranglers. His spindly body dropped from the dark heights on the crane and he dismounted on the dirt road. "Call in my editor!" he yelled at his assistant. "I want to know how much of this I can save. Suzi! Go get dressed, we'll retake tomorrow."

A wardrobe person handed Susan her robe. The Wolf was a few feet away, still gaping at her. "How was I?" she asked as she pulled him along to their dressing room.

"You were great," The Wolf said proudly. "How'd you learn to dance like that?"

"That was no dance, my Wolf." She closed the door behind them. She began to change her costume and watched him in the mirror. "You look worried. Is it Van Dine?"

"No. He's good. It's not the holo. It's you." He caught the leather halter thing that she had tossed to him.

"We'll take this home since it seems to excite you to see me in leather." She deliberately peeled her stocking slowly, enjoying his stare. She looked at him sideways and made her voice tones soft and inviting. "It makes me very happy that you want me so much, you know. Human happy."

The Wolf smiled, sitting down across from her. Leaning forward, he touched her leg slowly. "How can I help it? I've never been so lucky." The smile faded. "But there is something wrong."

"You mean about Roxie and the others?" Susan slipped out of the garter belt and put on the gypsy blouse for her next scene. The skirt followed.

"Yeah. You said something the other morning: 'they're not trying to kill me'. You know something that you haven't told me about these murders."

"It's not about the murders, it's something about me." She was dressed and looked much like a mysterious gypsy woman should look. She put on the talisman. "I didn't know at first. I didn't even know I was an Andie until I met you." They both stood up, and she put her arms around his neck. "Don't you think that's strange?"

The Wolf pulled her to him. "I don't know much about Andies. You were all supposed to be dead, or whatever it's called for Andies. I told you about that one in City of New York. I remember them from before, of course, but I was never much interested. Until now, that is."

"Well, I got to thinking it was strange that I hadn't always known. I have false memories - of parents and childhood. I was programmed to assume I was as human as you...well, you are a bit different." She did something that made him laugh. "You know what I mean. They hid my Andie self inside."

"Who are 'they'?" The Wolf asked.

"The ones who created me and programmed me. I'm not sure who they were, but I have found out a great deal more about myself. Remember how I told you that I can sift through my systems and make lists of things and compare them?" The Wolf nodded. "I've done that to every system now, and I know that I'm some different kind of Andie: maybe an experimental model. There are notes in my program chips. Programmers and x-ray etchers make them so they can find their way around when they work. There are some that identify deviations from 'standard' Pleasure model architecture. I'm not a 1000 like the old ones during the war. I don't know what my number is, but I'm generations from the old ones."

The Wolf remembered the platinum ID tag he had among his belongings. He told her.

"Yes!" Susan said. "I will want to see that later. Maybe it will help me find out more."

"But what about the murders?" The Wolf asked. "They were all killed like they were Andies."

Susan looked thoughtful. Part of her processing was working on various solutions. "I think that's because they were killed by Andies. But if the killers were Battlefield models and they know where I am, then they could have easily deactivated me by now. Their killing powers are much more developed than my ability to escape or elude them. I think they are more likely killing humans with whom I've had close contact."

"Why? And why haven't they tried to kill me?"

"They may have tried and failed. If they are protecting me from something, maybe they know that you would protect me too." A light flashed above her dressing table. "I think they're starting. You're on next!"

The Wolf held her close for a moment. "I hope you're right about all this," he whispered in her ear.

She kissed him. "Is my Wolf in love?"

*

C-4 received the radio message from the Andie named Furlong in Los Angeles and relayed its data to the other CensusTaker Andies. A need to maintain a logical execution of events was put into the original CensusTaker design and C-4 had some satisfaction in learning that security activities in City of Los Angeles were proceeding within a predicted range of probable success.

The CensusTaker Andies were the central hub of the Andie network, filtering information and specific decisions back to their many subordinates, and they were the connecting interface between the four underground factory sites they had occupied following the Last War.

They had developed the model 2000 Pleasure Andies from these outposts and sent it out to interact with humans and return new data.

Production had been minimal compared to the original model 1000s and the results had been unsatisfactory. Model 2000 Andies were captured, destroyed, imprisoned and

dissected by curious humans. Within a year, not one of the 2000s released into the wreckage of human society was still functioning. Humans, no longer hungry for hedonistic servitude, had become intolerant of androids.

The CensusTakers needed more data. How could they continue to operate within their own parameters if the Andies they were programmed to survey were not free to interact with humans? As before, the CensusTaker Andies made a collective decision. Squads of Battlefield models guarded the factory sites, and the guards were instructed to take stray humans prisoner. Testing continued, using the prisoners as subjects, but this method proved impractical. Despite better food, adequate lodging, and a high level program of sexual pleasures not available on the surface, the humans resisted the testing program. Most complained and refused to participate, resulting in their immediate termination. The CensusTakers continued to use stray humans in this way, but it was apparent that they needed an alternate solution before full Andie production could be resumed.

To the CensusTaker Andies their second plan was merely a logical extension of the first. Pleasure models were fully equipped to participate in sexual activity with humans. In healthy humans, sexual activity often led to human conception. The CensusTakers reasoned that if they redesigned the Pleasure model hardware to collect the necessary genetic materials, entirely new humans could be created for testing purposes.

The second plan also encountered setbacks. The CensusTakers set their engineer Andies to work and developed a prototype 2500 Pleasure model. They sent female 2500s out to gather genetic samples and return to the factory sites to finish conception in the laboratory. As an outcome of the war, the human population was mostly sterile, however, and when the prototypes returned with usable samples, the materials had lost something in the delay.

The CensusTakers attempted one final modification of their original idea, with a prediction of an 89% probability of success. They sent out the females again, this time equipped with the ability to store their collections in suspended animation. This modification kept usable samples intact and also increased the likelihood of encounters

with fertile humans by allowing the female 2500s to stay in the field for nearly a year without returning.

The problem of human hostility toward Andies continued to disrupt the plan, however, and all of the new females were recognized as Andies and deactivated by humans. Their stored product was lost. Clearly, defensive design changes were needed.

The CensusTaker Andies made new modifications to create a 2500 Pleasure model with Battlefield weaponry and kill instincts. They also masked their new model's consciousness - to better disguise it from humans - and programmed the 2500 to think it was human until it encountered a situation that could result in termination. If threatened, the new Pleasure model was immediately armed and put into Battlefield mode.

The 2500 project took years to complete. The CensusTakers decided to keep production very low because some refinements could not be tested before deployment. The few female models that were produced were seeded in select rural villages like Hopi. A few male 2500s were refined, produced and distributed to obtain genetic samples from human females. Security teams of model 2000 Battlefield Andies were also dispatched to covertly protect deployed Pleasure models from human hostility.

*

The scene with Ginger tagging after The Wolf went very well. Van Dine was pleased and complimented The Wolf on his performance. The Wolf shrugged it off. He had no particular interest in Ginger at first. He had reacted naturally, spurning her advances and ignoring her suggestions.

Ginger didn't mind. She had been a bit player for several years and she knew that this holo was a major production which could further her career. She didn't find The Wolf overly attractive, but was as fascinated as his female audience with the animal side of his nature. This added to Ginger's motivation when they moved into the adjoining stage for the shots inside the blacksmith's stalls.

They did several takes of The Wolf tying her to rings in the wooden wall. She whined and begged him to do whatever he wanted to her. This sequence was shot from low angles and there was a roof to the set. For The Wolf's first transformation scene, the horses were brought into the other stalls and the roof was removed.

Van Dine, riding on his crane above them, was nervous about the scene. Unlike many of his crew and actors, he had not started in porno "loops" or features with hardcore details, and, of course, never with a real werewolf. He felt he could handle the shape-shift, but much of the second part of the scene depended on Ginger. She was to signal audibly when to stop the sexual "ravage". Shots of Susan doubling her in close-up would be cut in here later.

"All right, Mr. Wolf," Van Dine commanded. "Get angry and begin your transformation please." Below him, The Wolf shifted, ripping off his clothes in the process and growling at Ginger. In the next stall, one of the horses began to cry out in fear. "Excellent!" Van Dine whispered to his soundperson. "I hope the hell you got that."

Ginger began to scream on cue as The Wolf's fangs appeared. The central holocamera and its constantly moving laser-bounce mirrors circled them like a spider as The Wolf twisted and groaned with the changes. For the last few moments he was frozen as the crouching beast emerged, and then he let out a horrible wail and sprang at Ginger. She hung helpless on the wall, sobbing. The Wolf enveloped her body and whispered through his teeth:

"I'm unfastening the rope. Ready?"

Between screams, Ginger whispered back. "Rip off my blouse first!"

The Wolf fell back a bit and howled, tearing the thin garment from her in a single swipe of claws. "Now the rope, ok?" he asked politely, averting his eyes from her breasts.

"Ok," Ginger whispered. He ripped the ring and rope from the wall and she fell forward to the mat beneath the straw on the floor. She got to her knees, cowered and looked terrified, trying to cover her breasts.

"Cut it!" Van Dine yelled, and the holocamera whirled around to be in position for the next shot. Van Dine's crane was lowered. He dismounted and approached his actors. He looked pale. "That was one of the most frightening moments I've ever shot in my entire career."

The Wolf couldn't really look surprised or even say much while in lupine form. He tried a grateful smile, but Van Dine just got paler. Ginger was sitting in the straw next to The Wolf, playing with the long, gray hairs that had sprouted on his legs and staring up at him thoughtfully. A rivulet of blood ran down between her breasts from a small scratch on her shoulder.

"My God!" said Van Dine when he noticed the scratch. "She's been cut! Get a medic over here."

"No, no," said Ginger. "It's just a nick."

"Nonsense," said Van Dine. "I was afraid of something like this! You have to be careful, Wolf. That was a dangerous business with the blouse. You must be more careful!"

"Try to be," The Wolf muttered, his head hanging. Ginger suddenly bounced up and wiped the sprinkle of blood from her shoulder.

"He's magnificent!" she said to Van Dine. "Don't pick on him. It was my idea to rip off the damned shirt." She laid a gentle hand on The Wolf's hairy arm. "I'm sorry," she said, and kissed him on the snout. "Be right back."

"Wait!" said Van Dine. "Where are you going?"

"I've got to ask Suzi something. Be right back." Ginger smiled at the director sarcastically. "Don't start without me." She pushed her way past the technicians and left the set.

Van Dine was helpless. "All right!" he blustered to the crew, trying to maintain authority. "You can have ten minutes." He turned to The Wolf. "You can, uh, shift back if you'd like."

"Rather not," The Wolf slurred through his fangs. "Takes a lot out of me."

"What? Oh, of course, old boy," Van Dine apologized. "I'm sorry I got cross with you. She...I haven't done explicit scenes like this before. I was told you all improvise." He turned away, going pale again. "My God!" he said to himself.

When Ginger and Susan returned, Ginger announced to Van Dine that she would attempt the scene without a double. The director just shook his head and got back on his crane, muttering something no one could hear as he lifted away. Susan spoke to The Wolf privately for a few moments, and then stepped back out of range.

"Action!" Van Dine shouted.

The crew applauded Ginger when the take finally ended. Van Dine's assistant called lunch. Ginger appeared shaken, but not unhappy, and she joined The Wolf and Susan at their table for lunch.

*

Henry Segal was in his office watching Lon Chaney, Jr. in "The Wolfman". Evelyn buzzed on the intercom. He turned down the sound on his monitor. "Yes, Ev?"

"Mr. Van Dine to see you, Mr. Segal."

"Good. Send him in." Henry Segal stood, but he did not move around his desk to greet his director. Van Dine took a seat in the right-hand chair at the usual five-foot distance.

"What was it you wanted to see me about, Fredric?" Henry Segal asked.

Van Dine moved about on the hard chair. "I've got some problems, Henry. I say, why can't you put some decent chairs in here?"

"What problems?" Henry Segal asked, cheerfully ignoring Van Dine's complaint.

"Well, as we discussed yesterday, the shoot is going ok. It's a good crew and the cast is better than what I'd expected. I'm concerned about Mr. Wolf."

"In what way, Fredric?"

"He's dangerous, Henry! Don't you know? The man - and I like him, but I can hardly call him that - is a real threat to everybody on my set when he's done this metamorphosis thing of his." Van Dine was sweating.

Henry Segal glanced at the video tube where Bela Lugosi and a girl were silently discussing lycanthropy. "The other directors didn't say anything," he said, wishing Van Dine would leave.

"They were pigs!" Van Dine said, standing and beginning to pace in the space between his chair and Henry Segal's desk. "They would have just loved a spontaneous snuff scene where this Mr. Wolf killed a few women for real."

Henry Segal forced himself away from the old film. "Have you had some incident that I don't know about?"

"The scene in the stall with Ginger. He didn't stop to allow Suzi to double. He scratched the hell out of Ginger and basically raped her."

"Mmm," said Henry Segal. "I've already spoken to Ginger. She called a few minutes ago and asked me to please not to miss the rushes. She seemed quite taken with Mr. Wolf." His eyes narrowed at Van Dine, who backed into the chair in amazement. "Say! Just what are you trying to pull here, Fredric?"

"W-well," the director stammered. "She...I thought...It doesn't matter! The guy is still dangerous!"

"Idiot!" Henry Segal slapped his palm on the desk. It was like thunder and the voice of God. "On the first holo, he was dangerous, maybe. He couldn't control himself all the time. But I've been watching his progress. He likes the women, you see. This career he's got now has made him very attractive to some women, including Ginger. He's got it,

Fredric. Suzi keeps him in hand. If she doesn't object to him having sex scenes with other actresses, why should I? He's not a half bad holo actor even when he's not a werewolf, and he is one of my stars! Now, what is it you really want, Fredric?"

"A raise!" Van Dine blurted. "This really is pornography, Henry. I've never done pornography. And that animal scares me, ok?"

Henry Segal knew how to win. He had already made a decision that would please Van Dine, but he needed to keep the little man in place. "I could get somebody else to finish it. Someone who has loop background and knows not to object when some bimbo starts getting off."

Van Dine sagged. "I can't do it, Henry. It's like some giant dog with pretty girls."

"I'll tell you what," said Henry Segal, closing. "Let's make a deal." He rubbed his hands. "We'll adjust the script. No porno. But you agree to direct the sequel and take a 10 percent drop in salary on that one."

Van Dine blinked. He knew he was getting a higher salary than any other director in HI's history, and he had no work coming in. "All right, Henry. How can I refuse?"

"You can't," said Henry Segal. "Just sign on the dotted line. Ev will draw up the addendum to this contract and the next one and you can sign them both tonight." He chuckled. "Now, before you go. I have already made some decisions about the changes. Especially the musical numbers."

Van Dine moved around in his chair as Henry Segal flipped the sound back on. The horror-melodrama from the 1940s surged back to life. Chaney was listening to Maria Ouspenskaya's predictions of his ill-fated future. "What musical numbers?" Van Dine asked.

"We've already borrowed some plot from this old Universal film. I want you and the writers to study it again and see what else you can come up with. Then we will all have a conference with Victor Martek."

"But my schedule!"

"Damn the schedule. Call it off for a week. I'll keep them all on salary. There's no time like the present, and you haven't shot much yet."

"Now you want the sex cut out? And musical numbers? I thought the board was convinced that the public..."

Henry Segal stood up. "The public is bored. They need to be hypnotized. We've spent a lot on those sets, and they look terrific. We can sell this as a musical fantasy without all of that hardcore. I'm thinking ahead, Fredric. They've already seen our Mr. Wolf porking beautiful girls, and the guy's not a bad actor. Maybe we can coax some talent out of the rest of them and make a real holo. A musical!"

Van Dine stared at his boss. "I don't believe you're saying this. What about the market? What if this Wolf can't sing?"

"I created the market, Fredric. And Victor Martek can write a song for anybody to sing. Besides, I've got new statistics. One of the bright boys in Publicity got an old workstation to sort out audience reactions and gave me numbers. Shot down the porno thing. Roxie was the reason the public went to see 'Lesbian Wolfbane' after all. They were there to see her career slide downhill. They envied her and hated her. They went to see her wallow in failure, and now they think she killed herself."

Van Dine nodded. "The cycle completed," he said.

"Exactly! She was a big star and we dragged her down to their level, but now she's dead and gone forever. We don't have to make the same mistake with Suzi or Ginger. They can do a few explicit sex scenes now and then, but the audience has already seen that. We can build them as actresses now. See what I mean?"

"Reverse the Roxie process: sluts rising to legitimate stardom. That sort of thing?"

"Right!" Henry Segal walked around the desk and escorted Van Dine to the door. "I've always wanted to do a musical, Fredric! We control Hollywood right now - I control it. We can make a fortune!"

Van Dine went back to the soundstage. Most of the cast was still eating lunch. His assistant paced him like an anxious mother. "How was the meeting, Fredric? Was Henry angry?"

Van Dine shrugged. "Mad is more like it. I believe Henry Segal is going quite mad." He instructed the assistant to call the cast and crew together. But maybe he's right, Fredric Van Dine thought. A musical!

*

Landing the chopper at Hopi was risky, so we had to hike in. Even if the Andies hadn't improved their defenses since Denni and I escaped, it was no trick to spot a helicopter. Our Irish pilot found a clearing on a little green mountain, ten miles north of the village. Counting Denni and me, there were now five of us in the expedition. Hellcat had insisted on coming, and he had Michelle to help him with computers hidden in underground storage vaults at the "power station". The decision to bring Paul Tanner was mine.

We waved goodbye to the chopper and walked through the tall grass into the relative shelter of the trees. It started to rain. We were dressed for it, but that didn't make the hike any easier. It came down harder every minute and the mud and undergrowth sloshed around us. We took turns pulling each other out of the knee-deep stuff for several hours. I was very relieved to see the first of several abandoned homesteads as we reached Hopi. We had to skirt the village and we didn't encounter anyone until we reached the outer fence of the station. Jack the bartender was waiting there with two old friends of mine.

The Dobermans were delighted, but Jack was surprised to see me. I guess the dogs had forgiven my dirty trick with the drugged golf balls because they both jumped me at once and pinned me to the mud, licking my face. It was embarrassing, but once we got inside and dried off I was glad to see them too. They were Jack's dogs and he had taken them

home after Susan told him about my first visit to the installation because he hadn't wanted them to get hurt.

We had to wait for the rain to let up before we could retrieve the buried computer equipment, so Jack and Denni led us on a tour of the basement. There were living quarters for about a dozen people, a stocked central kitchen-dining room, and a small radio closet with a Ham set that could reach Jack and his wife Myrna back in Hopi. There was also a room with a yard-square shaft leading down to Hellcat's tunnel. I had pictured a crude digging operation, so I was impressed.

Jack flipped a switch and fluorescent lights flooded the hole, which was lined with a plastic glaze to keep the walls intact. A glance below revealed a small cavern blasted out beneath the station containing unfamiliar machinery. Denni explained that a modest Hellcat had invented the equipment: laser devices that could literally melt a hole six feet in diameter through anything you might want to penetrate. Tanner made a remark about repressed male sexuality, and we broke it up to stow our personal gear in various bedrooms.

"Help me with this," Denni ordered, and we pushed the two single beds in our room together. "I don't want you getting any ideas about sleeping alone just because we're on a big assignment."

We flopped down on the mattresses and later took a breather to join the others in the kitchen for a meal that Hellcat and Jack prepared. It was still pouring outside after we ate, so Denni and I headed back to our room to finish what we had been doing.

"Look at that," I said to her as we passed another room filled with Hellcat's gear. His beds were also pushed together and there was a second pack on the floor near his. "Tanner and Hellcat are getting pretty chummy, don't you think?"

Denni smirked at me. "Stark, darling, Hell's been getting a piece of Michelle for the last two months, so you can just forget her, ok?" She giggled. "You ain't the only guy who ever robbed the cradle."

The rain stopped at about eight that night and we all went out with the dogs to retrieve Hell's computer gear. There was a lot of it, so we made two trips. I asked Denni about the black cube on the riverbank.

"It's an air filtration system for the tunnel and our living quarters. It was invented during the war. Uses the river water for oxygen instead of the surrounding atmosphere in case of radiation or whatever. Dumps the CO2 back in the river."

"And why is the river deeper over there, across from the factory?"

"We made it deeper. Took a while, but it was easier to lower the riverbed and anchor a plastic prefab section of tunnel underwater than to dig under the river. Lasers and water don't mix too well."

We finished getting the equipment into the ground floor rooms and Jack bid us all farewell. Tanner was put in charge of the Dobermans, who sported the names Millie and Trix. The three got along famously, and we rarely saw Paul after that - he had, after all, spent eight months locked underground in an android factory. He was obviously glad to get outdoors into the woods with his new canine friends.

Hellcat and Michelle stayed upstairs to set up the computers, so Denni and I retired early. We talked most of the night away, trying to formulate a plan of action for the factory, but it was useless.

"Once we get down there, I know my way around," Denni said. "But they'll notice us by then."

"Putting it mildly," I said. "Maybe we should take Hell's suggestion?"

"Which suggestion?"

"Just find old C-4 and ask him if he'd care to fill us in on what's happening."

"Actually," she said. "That really is our plan of action. 'Cept I don't think there's much point in asking politely."

"How do we force the issue?"

"I don't know. That's Hellcat's department."

Suddenly we heard Michelle running down the hallway giggling. The walls were thin. Hellcat appeared to be in close pursuit. The door to their room slammed. Denni and I looked at each other and went into mild hysterics.

"That's Hellcat's department," Denni repeated, and we kept on laughing.

*

Van Dine made his announcement of a week's delay in shooting and the cast went home early. The following morning at Euclid Drive, a messenger appeared from the studio in an old Volkswagen. They were summoned to a meeting at 10 A.M. and Susan was almost disappointed. She had planned to spend the day shopping in the merchant stalls. The Wolf was badly in need of some decent clothes. Susan's friendships with Roxie and Ginger had made her aware of the good impressions clothing could make. They also needed to stock food for themselves and Beryl, as Mr. Audrey was no longer with them.

The large conference room was in the same part of the complex as Henry Segal's office. It was darkly decorated in brown, with a high ceiling and a single set of bright windows at one end. The principal actors, crew, and pre-production people were seated around an enormous oblong table in the center. Henry Segal was at one end, his back to the windows, producing a calculated godlike effect. Fredric Van Dine was seated to his left. Susan, The Wolf, and Ginger were in a row to his immediate right, followed by Danny Fitzgerald, Gilbert Danielle, and the other actors. To Van Dine's left was a man that no one seemed to know. Susan stared at him, feeling a strong attraction. Henry Segal spoke:

"All right, ladies and gentlemen. Let's quiet down. Let me say right off that there is no danger of 'Girls Who Like Wolves' being shut down permanently. I believe the LA Star carried that rumor this morning." He had planted the story, so Henry Segal knew this to be true. "We will demand a retraction, of course. You all have jobs to do on this

production. We are just going to make them a bit harder." There was a mixture of applause, thanks, and groans from everyone. "Last night we made a major decision affecting this holo.

"Our decision was based on new numbers which tell us 'Lesbian Wolfbane' was more of a one-shot than we had previously thought. Its successful box office had to do with two people: the late Roxie, and HI's biggest male star, Mr. Wolf. Audiences specifically mentioned his amazing ability to alter his physical appearance." There was a sprinkling of applause for The Wolf. Ginger and a few of the other women giggled.

"This does not mean that we will drop all the hardcore from 'Girls Who Like Wolves' or any of our future product, but Holo International does not want to make a mistake by committing to another feature that has explicit content as its only selling point. We have broken new ground in features, and we will continue to use graphic sex, but only as a plot device from now on. We are also going to make some great pictures in the tradition of the pre-holo days of Hollywood." This got Henry Segal an ovation, as he expected.

"What I am getting at is this: we are going to remold 'Girls Who Like Wolves' over the next few weeks, as we go along. The biggest change is something I dreamed up myself after a meeting with your director yesterday. We are going to make 'Girls Who Like Wolves' as a musical!"

There was no sound for a couple of seconds. Only Susan, receiving Henry Segal in a faster time scheme than the others, understood immediately, and she was studying the man across the table. Henry Segal took his seat, also expecting the plunge into chaos that followed the silence, and all hell broke loose. Only three people didn't explode with noise: Henry Segal, Susan, and the man she found so inexplicably attractive. That man was now looking at her with equal interest. Henry Segal was looking at his fingertips and counting to sixty. When he reached sixty-one, he slapped the table and thundered:

"Shut up!" The room went silent again. The Wolf, who had been talking to Ginger, looked at Susan and followed her eyes to the stranger. The man was young - about

twenty-five - and had a deep, brooding look. He stood just then, as Henry Segal introduced him.

"This," said Henry Segal, "is Victor Martek. Victor is a composer, and he will write the music for this epic." Susan continued to stare as Victor Martek looked away from her and began to speak.

"Good morning. I am pleased to meet all of you." Martek had a European accent, but he spoke precisely. The brooding air about him vanished and his eyes sparkled with energy. "Mr. Segal and I have had a long morning viewing the rushes and some of the previous holos on which many of you collaborated. I have begun to work a schedule for the musical portions of 'Girls Who Like Wolves'. He looked at Susan. "Actors and actresses will not be dubbed unless absolutely necessary, so we will first have voice tests. Is there anyone among you who cannot sing?"

Susan had already checked her architectural directories and found musical hardware within her system. In milliseconds she had confirmed her ability to read music and traced the pathways she should access for vocalization of music. The Wolf was less confident, but he had blurted out tunes in dimly lit bars occasionally. Having seen the composer's fixed interest in Susan, he silently decided he would sing if it killed him - or maybe somebody else.

"I'm not sure if you would call me a singer," Ginger said. "I'm good in the shower." This got a laugh from the men, including The Wolf. For some reason, Ginger chose this moment to put her hand on The Wolf's leg under the table.

"I'm sure you will all cooperate with Victor over the next few weeks," Henry Segal said. He turned to Fredric Van Dine. "And Fredric, of course."

"I believe we should begin with the principal actors. I have brought with me some material for you to try. " Victor still had the floor. He consulted a ringed pad in front of him. "Suzi, Mr. Wolf, Ginger, Danny, and Gilbert. We will have a brief rehearsal on

Soundstage 3 after this meeting. I will need the sound technicians there as well." He nodded to Henry Segal and returned to his chair.

"Fredric?" Henry Segal asked.

Van Dine remained seated. "I will need all set people and costumers. Sound techs: please come to me after you're through with Victor. We'll meet on the main stage. The others can go home. When will you want the other actors, Victor?"

"Tomorrow afternoon will be soon enough."

"I want to meet with post-production," Van Dine continued, "about three this afternoon in the editing rooms. Henry?"

*

When I was about ten, I discovered a cave on the side of a small hill. I was in what was once Wyoming. The war had not yet reached its final, lethal, atomic phase. I had an older brother then - he's dead now - and we were on our own, wandering. Our parents, who had been with The Company, had died a year earlier when the Cubans and the Russians blew up CIA headquarters in Langley.

I left my brother at our campsite near the bank of the Snake River, and took one of our horses to set out for a day's adventure. The cave, which I had spotted earlier in the week, was my main objective. I remember I had a flashlight and a rope along.

It was a small opening in jagged yellow rock, just the size of a boy of ten. I poked a long stick in first, presumably to frighten off any prairie dogs that might be in residence. It was too small for bears, and coyotes, after decades as an endangered species, had long since vanished from Wyoming. The flashlight revealed nothing from the mouth of the cave: the interior was the deepest black I'd ever seen. I had to crawl in on my hands and knees and continued for several minutes, inching my stick and flashlight before me. I could hear, maybe smell, something beyond. Not animal, but vastness. I was sure I had found an entrance to a lost cavern - a Huck Finn adventure.

Suddenly, the stick I held dipped down. I felt forward with it like a blind man and discovered that the floor of my cave ended about two feet ahead. The walls, which I could not see in the pitch-black darkness, had gotten closer together as I had moved into the cave. They were very nearly touching my shoulders. I broke off a small clump of rock and tossed it forward into the darkness.

For a suspenseful moment I waited, expecting to hear the rock land, but nothing happened. I was breaking off another chunk when I heard it: my first rock hit and hit again as it plunged what I imagined to be hundreds of feet into a dark chasm.

I twisted onto my back to reach the rope, which I had attached to my belt and dragged under me. I had some crazy idea of lowering myself down to continue my exploration. I looked back at the mouth of the cave. I remember the chill as I realized how very far I had crawled in the blackness. I guess it was at that moment that I also saw that I had no room to turn around. It had not occurred to me that I would not reach a wider and taller part of the cave.

I was flooded with claustrophobia. Huck Finn was forgotten. I turned onto my belly and began to crawl backwards. In my panic, I bashed the flashlight against the rock floor and it died. The roof seemed to be closer to my head as I struggled to get out. I cut my knees and hands. I could not judge my progress, but after a while I stopped. I calmed myself and rested.

I was still facing forward into the cave and now I heard a strange and terrifying sound far ahead. It was a scurrying, chattering, squeaking sound. My cave, or the subterranean cavern to which it led, was occupied! I flipped onto my back and looked for the entrance, but it was still far away. I lay there sweating, wondering if I would ever see my brother or the blue Wyoming skies again.

There is no dramatic climax to this memory. I kept crawling backwards and I finally got out of the cave. My brother gave me a hell of a lecture when I told him about it. I tried to

explain about Huck Finn, but my brother only yelled about my breaking one of our flashlights - and my carelessness.

"You could have been killed, Will." He always called me William or Will. "You could have fallen into that hole and all I would have found was your horse."

Later, we sat around our fire in the cool evening breeze, gazing at the stars over the Teton Mountains. The Snake rushed by in green splendor. I asked my brother what he thought lived in the cave.

"Don't know, William. Coulda' been a couple of prairie dogs getting it on. Don't know. Maybe there's a lost world down under those hills. Maybe your rock woke some triceratops or maybe a tyrannosaurus."

I didn't know then what those things were, but I was glad they hadn't come after me. I was comforted that my brother did after all understand about the Huck Finn wanderlust that had pushed me into that cave. I decided later that the sound was probably just a family of harmless bats. My brother undoubtedly knew this all along, but he never said so. He went right on talking about dinosaurs and the like into the night. I fell asleep there under the stars, and I dreamed fantastic dreams.

*

Three things happened at their next meeting with Victor Martek that made The Wolf uneasy. The first was Ginger. She had been showing considerable interest in him, and he had to admit that he was beginning to like it. While Martek sat at a small synthesizer running through scales and some sheet music with Susan, Ginger teased The Wolf with talk about the graphic scene she had done with him on the previous day. She pulled open her blouse to show him the tiny scratch on her shoulder, making sure he had a full view of her large breasts. One of the announced changes in the plotline was that Ginger's character, Clare, would survive the violent ravaging in the blacksmith's stall and become a second, romantic interest for Larry, The Wolf's character. Clare would be the only girl

in town who shared his dark secret. There would be another torrid scene between them, and Ginger was more than ready to start rehearsing.

The Wolf was also aware of Victor Martek's growing interest in Susan. He was jealous of the younger man, although his feelings had little to do with love. The Wolf knew himself to be possessed of a certain charm, but Martek was better looking, wealthier, and he was moving fast with little resistance. The Wolf knew this was a problem of Susan's programming. She was a Pleasure model, and he knew she had only minimum control over that part of her personality. The trouble was that she had no logical reason to resist Victor Martek.

The third problem was not really a problem. When his turn came to sing, The Wolf's voice proved powerful, low, and clear. Martek praised him and was obviously pleased. The Wolf liked the other man better after that, and joined him in several selections from old musicals. The Wolf found that he knew two of the songs from some distant past, and he didn't have to follow the notes on the sheet music to turn in an acceptable performance. He did feel funny about appearing in a musical, and he refused to even consider Martek's suggestion that he would perform one number while in lupine form.

"I can barely speak when I'm shifted."

"We can dub, but I'd like you to try it first," Martek insisted.

Susan came to his defense. "I really don't think he can, Mr. Martek," she said. The argument vanished.

"Oh, please don't call me that, Suzi." Martek pulled on her arm and she felt his interest in her rise. "Please call me Victor," he said. Susan felt herself adjust to the readings she had automatically taken on Victor. The man was different than the others she had met. He seemed to be pleading for her to respond.

"All right, Victor."

She found it unusual, but her vocal tones had become stern. She was confused. Her readings indicated that coldness brought out his lust for her. She had no intention of avoiding him. Andies had no sense of betrayal, although Susan did not want to upset The Wolf. She noted his anxieties along with Victor's.

Susan monitored Ginger as a control. She was surprised that the blonde girl also showed readings that translated as sexual anxiety. She wasn't sure which man Ginger was reacting to.

"Well, I won't argue the point, Mr. Wolf," Victor was saying. "You certainly know more about the conditions of lycanthropy than I do. I will pre-record you singing Larry's number and you can mime it to playback on the set." He turned to a sound technician. "No problem about that, Steven?"

"None at all Mr. Martek. We can fix anything you want to record, live or not. Nobody here's done a musical before, but there's so much great equipment lying around Hollywood! We'll have to clean out ambient noise from the live performances anyway when you mix in your synthesizer tracks."

"I hope you can handle strings. Henry Segal wants real violins in the gypsy dance stuff. And when Clare tries to get Larry to give up Lenore and her magic charms." Victor laughed. "That's quite a choice, isn't it Mr. Wolf? "

The Wolf caught both the irony and the growl in his throat. He could agree that there wasn't much point in getting mad. Ginger was grinning at him, and he figured the fun was in the choosing.

*

Denni and Michelle were up in the computer area and Tanner was outside patrolling the river's edge with the dogs. Hell and I were underground standing in the tunnel antechamber. I was thinking about a cave in the hills of Wyoming.

Conditions were different, but the prospects were similar. There was really no way to know if the Andies had discovered the tunnel or if they had tampered with it. No way until we got inside. We didn't know what would be waiting at the tunnel's end, and Battlefield Andies with laser guns were a definite possibility.

Hellcat Crothers and I had been in tougher places. Fifteen years earlier we were dismantling virulent weapons factories that were so deadly even a tiny spill could have wiped out several generations of animal life in a two hundred-mile radius. We had worked as an efficient team in those days and we had a chain of command: Hellcat gave the orders and I obeyed or I got my butt kicked. I was just about to wonder out loud if his rank still applied, when I found out.

"Over here, Stark," Hell said. He popped a section of the plastic wall and a kind of drawer opened, revealing a selection of hand weapons. Hell took a Zone laser and tossed me one of the same. "Make sure it's charged properly," he instructed.

I checked out the weapon. I would have preferred my antique 45, but it wasn't effective against Andies. A Zone laser wasn't either, unless you knew where to shoot. In preparation for war, the original Andies had been designed to withstand almost any normal armor-piercing weapon. While it was possible for a laser cannon, or three men firing Zones, to overheat an Andie and cause a temporary shutdown, the quickest way to shut them off was to burn the "nervous system" located in the lower rear skull and back of their necks.

The soft spot was necessary in early Andie design. Their brains were sealed, but occasional updates were necessary, so the soft spot contained a board where twenty-six chips resided. These chips were the Central Processing Units and Peripheral Processing Units of the Andie brain. If you could blow a hole in the back of an Andie's head, you could melt the twenty-six chips and put the Andie to sleep. Of course, you basically had to sneak up behind an Andie to blow its brains out, so even the Zone lasers wouldn't be much comfort against C-4 and its friends.

Hell and I walked through the tunnel, watching out for stalactites where fused rock had melted like icicles. We reached the watertight seam that marked the beginning of the underwater section and I wondered about bats.

"Hang in there a minute," Hellcat ordered. He ran an expert hand along the entire radius of the seam. "Yup. Still shipshape." The dim fluorescent lighting came from one tube every twenty feet, but the tunnel was foggy ahead.

"Condensation," I guessed. "Heat from the station. That river's cold this time of year."

"Partly. May be a leak down at the other end," Hellcat said, but he went on ahead. I followed reluctantly, listening to the roar of the river forced to avoid the plastic worm we were walking through. We reached another seam in a few minutes and Hellcat repeated his exam.

"Uh-oh."

"What?" I didn't like his tone or the tunnel.

"Look at your feet, boy." There was a quarter inch of water. "Pinhole leak. Probably on the earthen side of the seam, otherwise this whole damned tunnel would be filled with water. Get over here behind me, Stark."

I obeyed. "What are you doing?"

"Gotta seal the damned thing with my Zone. Get further back. If the wall starts to go, run forward toward the factory. There's a ladder to a hatch at that end. And run fast if you don't want to get trampled." He took out his laser and adjusted the manual settings. The place lit up like the inside of one of the light tubes as he directed a tight beam around the seal. The stink of plastic fusing made me choke. About halfway around there was a little blast of steam. "Got it!"

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked later as we continued through the tunnel.

"Built some deep shelters before the end of the war. Needed to be near water so anybody holed up in one could test for outside radiation. Designed the burrowing machines for those jobs. Spent about two years in one of those things near the Platt River myself, along with..." He hesitated.

"With who?"

"I had a wife then, Stark. Pretty little woman."

"I'm surprised at that. What happened?"

"Died of leukemia eventually. Radiated somehow, even though we kept out of it. Living too near a small blast. I thought we'd be safe." He looked at me sadly. "I was."

"You never mentioned her before." I ignored his undeserved guilt. "I mean when we worked in the Midwest Sector." I had an odd thought. "Any children?" I asked cautiously.

He smiled. "No, Stark. Denni ain't a blood relation. She is blood, of course. She just thinks she's a daughter to me." He stared at me. "You better dump her carefully when the time comes, you hear?"

"What makes you think...?"

"Hell, Stark. I know you - remember? How about those two girls in Chi? You were 'in love' with one of them, weren't you?"

"Yeah, well..."

"Which one, Stark? We used to trade them back and forth like passin' a bottle of real gin."

"Ok, ok. But it's different this time, Hell. I do love this woman." I was hurt.

Hell nodded and clapped me on the shoulder. "Uh-huh. Let's get a move on, Stark."

We walked the rest of the way to a small chamber at the end of the tunnel. A second burrowing machine sat waiting, and there was a ladder going up. Hell inspected everything closely.

"No sign of visitors," he said. "They haven't found it - unless they have found it and they're laying a trap."

*

The busiest street in Los Angeles was Melrose Avenue. A traditional fashion center for almost a century, the clothing merchants were still grouped here with stalls and shops specializing in furniture, appliances, foodstuffs, and sundries. Pirated auto parts, medical supplies, artificial limbs, and Hollywood memorabilia were all available. Forgotten Dreams was known for the latter. The place had a reputation for genuine stuff, and Susan and Ginger chose to shop there for The Wolf's birthday gift.

The proprietress was Ska, a woman of about sixty. Her enormous frame was draped in a ragged housedress and she wore no shoes, leaving her feet gray and cracked with ugly calluses. She ate continuously from bags of stale candy in her pockets. Sticky stains of various colors blotched her bloated body, and she had no teeth. Despite Ska's condition, she ran an orderly shop. Pilfered Tinseltown relics packed every square foot of Forgotten Dreams, but they were neatly stacked along its plastic counters.

"Oh, look, Susan!" Ginger cried, holding up a headless statuette. "Marilyn's Oscar!"

"Marilyn Monroe?" asked Susan, who had learned something about the past from The Wolf. Ska cackled in the background.

"Who?" Ginger asked. "No, Marilyn Chambers!" Ginger stroked the headless man fondly. "She was the first porno star to win one, you know. And look, here's more!"

The rows of Oscars were like ghosts of old actors, crying out for roles they would never win. Ginger and Susan took turns reading unfamiliar names: Ned Beatty, Keshia Knight Pulliam, Olivia De Havilland, Tom Selleck, James Cagney, Teri Garr, Meg Tilly, Jenny

Engles, and Walter Brennan. Susan remarked that The Wolf had once mentioned James Cagney.

They looked through old stills and lobby cards. Ginger liked the one of Myrna Loy as an evil Chinese princess. Susan found several from old horror films, but none from 'The Wolfman'. In the back of the shop they tried on old costumes. Ginger chose a slinky, sequined red dress. Susan took a black, topless corset, real silk stockings, and a red leather garter belt with studs.

"You don't need a corset, Honey," Ginger said in the changing room.

"My Wolf likes such things."

"Mmm." Ginger stood behind her and they looked at each other in the full-length mirror.

"You are interested in him, yes?" Susan asked her friend. She stepped out of the mirror and began to change back into her clothes. Ginger blushed.

"I...damn! You are so direct, Sue. I'm interested, yes! He's sexy. You're lucky."

"Roxie liked him too," Susan said. "I guess he's very attractive to some women?"

"It's the kinky stuff," said Ginger. "And most women don't want that. Are you in love with him?"

Susan smiled. "I thought I was, but I have a problem with 'love'."

"Why, Susan. I always thought you were so together." They sat on a small bench in the changing room. "You sound almost sad. Can I help?"

"You could answer a question."

"Sure. Ask me."

"Do you ever fall in love with more than one man?"

"In my whole life, you mean?"

"No. More than one man at a time."

Ginger laughed. "That's not a problem, Sue. That's heaven."

Susan looked thoughtful. "Then it does happen..." She had to stop herself from adding "among humans?"

"It could happen. Love is different for everybody." Ginger took her friend's hand. "Get specific."

"I have loved two men: a man in Hopi and my Wolf. When I met my Wolf, I forgot the other man..."

"You fell out of love."

"Yes, I guess so. And I fell in love."

"But that's normal. I mean that usually happens. Maybe you weren't really in love with the first guy."

Susan shook her head. "Maybe, but I thought it would last forever when I was with him. I feel the same way with my Wolf. Or I did."

"Until?"

"Until this morning, when I met Victor."

Ginger stared. "My God, how could I have missed that?"

Susan smiled. "You were preoccupied. Something happened when I looked in his eyes. The Wolf was next to me, but I forgot he was there." She stood and looked back down at Ginger. "I don't even know if I can even go home and be with him tonight, but I wanted to please him with a gift."

Ginger got up and put an arm around her. Susan didn't really ever need comforting, but Ginger didn't know that. "Let's get him a great gift. Together." She took Susan's chin in

her hand. "I'm not in love with your Mr. Wolf, but I sure like him. It may just be sex, but he turns me on. I'm being honest with you, Susan."

"I know, Ginger. He does like you. He wants you too."

"He said that?" Ginger brightened.

"Not exactly." Susan processed the data of The Wolf reacting to Ginger. "He's a strange man. He only responds to people who like him."

"What are you going to do?" Ginger asked as they made their way back into Forbidden Dreams.

"Tell him, I suppose," Susan said, but Ginger frowned and stopped her.

"No. That's not a good way. He's emotional. It might hurt him. He might just walk. It might even hurt the holo." She was immediately apologetic. "Not that the holo is so important, but there are a whole lot of people who need the work. There won't be any horror musical without Wolfie."

"What should I do?"

"Let me come over tonight. I want the part. It'll give you a chance to decide about your feelings for Victor without giving up Wolfie first. I promise to give him back later if you want him."

Eventually Ska recommended the perfect gift for The Wolf: Lon Chaney's star, torn up from the cracked, decayed sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard. They paid Ska much more than it was worth, considering the original wolfman's current obscurity, and Ginger purchased the topless corset and studded garter belt for her big date.

*

A primitive periscope poked up through the exit hatch. I looked through it and moved it in a slow 360-degree turn. The tiny fisheye lens gave me a pretty good view. I could see the riverbank behind us. The top of the buried Andie factory building jutted out of the

forest floor ahead. There were no guards visible. Hellcat agreed that it was probably safe, so I opened the hatch and peered out. A trapdoor of artificial turf disguised the tunnel exit. A tangle of barbed bramble and weeds made it an undesirable place to walk around on, even for an Andie. I closed the hatch and congratulated Hell on the camouflage.

"Not bad," Hell said modestly. "But I admit I got the idea from an Ian Fleming story. Let's get cracking. I need a hand here."

We set the burrowing machine's lasers according to Hell's calculations and checked the dust pipe. The machine literally vaporized earth as it pushed forward, generating a fine spray of soil that would have filled the entire tunnel without an exhaust system. A flexible, six-inch plastic pipe dumped the soil into another man-made cavern somewhere behind the station on the other side of the river. The machine had a vacuum fan system to force the flow of dust along and measured the output constantly. If there was a blockage, it was supposed to shut itself down.

There were some obvious risks digging our way into the factory. We didn't know if the Andies were monitoring for vibrations - although the success of the tunnel at the Cherokee site indicated that was unlikely. If the vacuum fan system failed the whole tunnel could fill with dust. If the vibrations caused the seams in the river section to leak, and water hit the lasers, the blast would probably blow up the machine and bury anything in the forward section. If the seams failed and the machine didn't blow, the tunnel could still flood.

For other reasons I have already mentioned, I don't like being confined underground. I was worried about the river section failing when we were trying to get back out of the factory. I figured we might have a bunch of laser-toting guards following us. Hell just laughed.

"You won't have to worry," he said. "This tunnel's only for going in: you'll have to get out another way."

"Why?"

"Because it don't take much time at all to climb down a two hundred foot drop on a rope, but it takes a whole lot longer climbing back up. The Andies would pick you off before you got to the top. We'll keep the tunnel open after you get inside, but your best bet for a return trip is the elevator. From the description that you guys all gave us, the smaller one is an Otis Solar Lift system from about 2017. The OSL was designed for underground mining and military emergency complexes. It has an independent emergency power source. The Andies won't be able to shut it off, and you'll be pretty safe once you're inside it with the door closed."

We inspected the dust exhaust pipe as we made our way back under the river and into the station. As far as we could tell, there were no blocks.

"How long is the rest of the tunneling going to take?" I asked Hellcat.

"About three days. Machine waits for the walls to cool about every two feet and shuts down about every five hours or so. Gets very hot in there. It's all controlled by a computer upstairs, but somebody's still got to be checking for bugs twenty-four hours a day. Michelle and I will take the night shift and you and Denni can take day shift. I'm sending Paul into Hopi later today to hang out at the inn until the tunnel is ready. Jack is pretty sure there haven't been any Andies on this side of the river lately, but we will want to know if they show up and start poking around. We can keep an eye out for them here on the monitors."

We all ate together in the kitchen area later, except the dogs who were out on patrol in the fences. Hellcat detailed our assignments and free time during the digging, and I noticed that Paul was very happy to make a side trip into the village. I had to talk to him about our final assault on the factory, so I pulled him away from the dishwashing chore he had somehow gotten stuck with.

"I need a diagram of the Cherokee factory, including the empty upper stories. Can you draw one?"

"Sure. I got all sorts of artistic talent," Tanner said. "Meet me upstairs. I can do it on the computer." He took off to make sure the dogs got fed, leaving me to finish the dishes.

*

The Wolf saw through their plan, but when they returned to the house on Euclid Drive he was so loaded that he had already decided to let fate take charge. He had spoken to Beryl about it all afternoon, emptying synthetic beer into his gut. She licked her paws and otherwise ignored him for a while, remembering his occasional violent moods. By the time he was immobile on the couch, surrounded by beer bottles, Beryl was convinced that he was harmless and had curled up next to him. He rambled on about his situation, glad to have even a feline audience.

He told Beryl about Susan, Ginger, Victor Martek, and even Roxie. He explained that he felt very close to Susan, wanted to entwine violently with Ginger, hated Victor Martek, and how Roxie's murder played on his mind. He wondered if the assassins might have been after him. Susan was convinced that she was not a target, and The Wolf knew she might be right. He told Beryl about the two Mafia henchmen in New Jersey. He also explained to the little gray cat that he had never been "in love" with anyone, including Susan. He didn't think he was capable of such feelings.

Beryl yawned and licked his hand. He stopped to marvel at this: she had rarely shown much affection for him. Beryl closed her eyes as he went on about Ginger. He couldn't believe she was attracted to him. His monologue drifted into unsubstantiated remarks about Victor Martek's manhood and savage ways to end the composer's interest in Susan, but by then Beryl was fast asleep, dreaming of a chase through the garden.

When Susan and Ginger returned a few hours later, lugging the Chaney star and other purchases, Beryl awoke refreshed. She leapt to greet them with a whiny demand for kibble. The women followed Beryl into the kitchen and Susan fed her, while Ginger slipped into her costume. Beryl finished eating and Susan scooped up the cat and exited

to the garden. Ginger moved to the sleeping lycanthrope on the living room couch. She was surprised how willingly The Wolf was led up to his bedroom.

Outside with Beryl, Susan monitored the silent Hollywood hills until she heard the sounds of her two friends coming from the open windows on the upper floor. She stroked the cat gently and ran systems checks.

*

Paul sat down at the terminal and booted the drawing program. His computerized rendering helped me understand how he had made it down into the factory at the Cherokee site. There was a latticework of steel girders from the ground level roof to the actual factory two hundred feet below. We assumed that the two sites were similar.

"The factory was expected to increase production eventually, so the architects left room above for upward expansion," Tanner explained. "We can cut through the inner wall of the chamber without much trouble, then you and Denni attach your ropes and work your way down. Once you get to the roof of the inner complex, you can walk over to the Otis Solar Lift shaft and there's a maintenance ladder that goes all the way down to the cable pulleys below the lowest level. There was a door down there in the other factory that led to a hallway. It's locked from the outside, but you can just turn the knob from the inside to get into the complex."

"Where does that put us?" I asked Paul.

"Here," he pointed. "Near the cell quarters where they were keeping you on your last visit."

"Security?"

"Depends on the time of day. They keep dayshift hours, a habit left over from their old human programmers. There wasn't much internal security. I guess the architects figured that the place would be a fortress that nobody could penetrate. There are monitor cameras

everywhere, but the Andies don't use them unless they're testing a Pleasure model with a human. They record everything."

I laughed. "They watched?"

"Oh, sure. They've got some very graphic CDs of your girlfriend somewhere down there. I think they use them to simulate physical changes in the Pleasure models. Did a good job of it. The Andies I tested were very convincing."

Hellcat looked impatient. "I want to start up the machines, boys. So whenever you're finished with my computers." Paul got up from the terminal and Hell punched up the program that controlled the burrowing machine. "Stark," he commanded. "Go downstairs and stand by the entrance to the tunnel. There's an intercom down there."

"Ok, boss." I shrugged at Paul and did as I was told. Tanner accompanied me as far as his quarters. He was anxious to get his gear together and hike over to Hopi.

"Don't get too excited," I warned him. "There ain't much to the place."

"Doesn't matter. Jack said Myrna was going to make dinner. Anything's better than Hell's cooking, and I get claustrophobic being cooped up here. Besides, Jack said Myrna's got a cute sister."

*

Victor Martek awoke slumped over his music processor at about four in the morning. The screen was filled with bright colored notation and a red cursor waited patiently for his next command. Victor yawned and pushed himself back. He focused his eyes on the screen and then glanced at the handwritten notes hanging on a pad to his right.

"File," Victor said, and the cursor moved to a file cabinet icon on the bottom of the screen. "And Play." The cursor split in two and the new half clicked a jukebox icon.

Victor's Hollywood apartment was instantly saturated with a bright, jangling gypsy violin, a flute, and a tambourine. Violas began lightly under the violin. Clarinets and

oboes joined the flute. The tambourines hid timpani. It was as though a hundred gypsies had come strolling through Victor Martek's living room, each playing two instruments at once.

"Stop," Victor said. There was silence. "Reminder: it is good, but perhaps too happy. Lust is what sparks Lenore when she dances. She likes to know she excites men at every turn. End reminder. Find an instrument." The cursors joined and hovered over a question mark icon. The screen changed to a listing of dozens of instruments in alphabetical order. "Scroll down."

He indicated a clavier, a harpsichord, and a pipe organ. Victor said "Compose." The screen displayed the notation for his piece and he used the keyboard to insert bars of counterpoint into the second section of the gypsy dance. He worked quickly, calling out verbal orders to replay and store small phrases of the result, as he built the sensual sub-melody into his music. Within an hour, he stood and walked to the center of the living room.

The computer was on a round table in a far corner and the walls of Victor's living room were lined with flat digital speakers. The speakers varied in size from five-inch squares to two by three foot rectangles. There were exactly twenty-eight in all, seven on each of the room's four walls.

"Volume full," Victor said with authority to the computer. "Increase speed to 160. Accent new lines. Play." He pushed a button and his table holoprojector came to life.

The gypsy scenes began. A miniature village of Glendale, villagers, gypsies and their horses and wagons appeared in front of him. On a small stage, a tiny Susan danced, near naked, oiled, and erotically entwined around a pole. Music swirled in Victor's room. The holo view changed and moved in for a closer shot. Victor glanced at an old stopwatch he had pulled from his pocket. A hot and evil change happened in the music. A beat too late, the tiny Susan threw back her head and extended her arms, gripping the pole only with her thighs.

"Stop," Victor commanded. The music vanished but the silent holo sequence continued. Victor watched Susan almost dispassionately for a moment, and then a strange image blotted out the hologram: he imagined himself tied to the pole, as naked and greased as the dancer. She slid over his bound form. She held a whip in one hand.

A slate appeared from nowhere, marking the end of the shot. Susan still slid on the pole. A few of the male cast members began to applaud. The tabletop went blank. Victor was staring at empty space. His fantasy was gone, but his mind now raced with old memories.

The Martek family had been wealthy and Victor's father had been a powerful man. They had lived in a modern fortress in Switzerland, one of the European States isolated from the tensions of a warring world. His father's castle had all the trappings of paradise, high inside a mountain in the Alps, and the family - his father, mother, brother, and two sisters - was like a society unto itself.

Victor was the youngest, born eight years before the war's end. He was gifted and clever. Unlike many children of the very rich, Victor had not then been lonely, spoiled, neurotic, or rebellious. He had loved his parents and they returned his love. From the age of four, music had been a serious and important part of this exchange: Victor was a prodigy, and his parents had both spent time as classical musicians, before Frank Martek made a fortune as an inventor.

Frank Martek's inventions included the synthesizer chips used by Victor's computer to create the sounds of the gypsy dance that had just echoed through the nearly empty building in Hollywood, and Martek chips appeared in virtually every device that used digitized sounds before the war.

Two years before Victor was born, Frank Martek was invited to participate in the design of a voice system for Andies. His father completed the chips for a prototype Model 1000 in the year of Victor's birth, and the castle in which Victor spent his early years had several android residents. They had been experimental servant Andies, modified by Frank Martek from Pleasure models with the complete cooperation of their manufacturer.

Victor's natural bright curiosity had led him to spend considerable time following them around the Martek castle. At age five, Victor taught them all to sing.

Martek's voice chips were as close to a perfect digital recreation of human speech as could ever be needed. When his son succeeded in teaching the house Andies to mimic vocal music, Frank Martek and the Andie engineers immediately gave Pleasure models the ability to read musical notation and translate it into song. By the time the Model 1000 was in wide circulation, this minor modification was a standard feature.

But Victor's father had modified one of his female Andies in another way, for a very private hobby. One day, while trying to organize a choir practice of his students, Victor entered his father's study and observed the Andie and Frank Martek making use of that singular modification.

At age six, Victor was shipped off from home to Julliard in New York City. The other Marteks stayed in Switzerland, and except for loving visits, Victor studied music and lived with an aunt in a gothic building on 72nd Street and Central Park West. Victor was playing a new concerto when the Chinese-Russian exchange set up a curtain of radioactive death that eventually enshrouded all of the East, Middle East and India. The population of Switzerland was contaminated and died with all the others. Victor lost his entire family.

This tragedy and Victor's early fascination with Andies evolved into a strange personal philosophy on the subject of Life: if Life was cheap and also uncomplicated enough for man to duplicate synthetically, then it was neither important nor valuable. Man's creations, Victor reasoned, were never more than diversions from Life's meaningless road of existence. If living things were of no real value, then their byproducts were also immaterial.

Staring at the blank tabletop, he wondered why it was that he suddenly placed so much value in the Andie holostar named Suzi. He had not betrayed her secret - Henry Segal, Van Dine and the others didn't have a clue. He had not known himself until he had heard

her sing. It was only the eyes that had captured him as they faced each other in the production meeting. He had even felt a stab of jealousy when he discovered she was living with The Wolf. He had never seen her work in her last holo, and he knew he could never watch her doing such things. Why did he feel such a need to be with her?

When Suzi sang for him he remembered Reeba and Jeeves and the other domestic Andies he had taught to sing at the castle, but he did not recall the incident in Frank Martek's study. Victor sighed and went back to his computer screen. They were all vaporized now, with his parents and brother and sisters. He tried to dismiss Suzi from his mind.

"Volume one-half. No. Give me the 'phones at one-third volume. Increase the speed to 172. Delete harpsichord. Accent clavier. File. Load 'I Can't Believe You're A Werewolf'." The twin cursors bounced around the screen, activating different icons. Victor put on the headphones. The strange fantasy crept back again.

*

The Wolf was amazed. Ginger lay next to him in his bed, snoring lightly. He got up and dressed. He glanced at the clock on the fireplace as he passed through the living room into the kitchen. It was 6 A.M. Ginger had been with him all night, and he knew he hadn't slept much. His head throbbed. A mental picture of him and the girl in bed presented itself and he froze, one hand on the door to the refrigerator.

"Uh-oh," he said quietly, and turned and raced out of the kitchen and back to the bedroom.

She looked peaceful enough and she was breathing, but he pulled down the sheet fearfully. Ginger's luscious body had a few small bruises and scratches, but there was nothing missing. He hadn't hurt her. She smiled a little smirk of satisfaction and turned away from him. He replaced the sheet.

Back in the kitchen, The Wolf got out a few eggs, some fresh beef meat - a luxury he could only afford recently - and other items his growling stomach demanded. He turned

on the range and wiped off a greasy frying pan. As he was cracking the first egg, he looked out the window and saw Susan. She was sitting in the center of the garden with her eyes closed. Beryl was sniffing around at her feet. Something about the scene did not look right. The Wolf turned off the range, forgetting his stomach, and ran outside.

"Susan?" he asked in a worried tone. Beryl made a dash for the open kitchen door, which almost slammed on her. He saw what was wrong: Susan's clothing - an unfamiliar red dress - was damp with dew. "Susan? Are you ok?" She had obviously been sitting out in the garden for a long time. He shook her shoulders, which were cold.

"Are you ok?" The Wolf cried out. He lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the living room. She was limp and her eyes remained shut. He laid her down on the couch and tilted her head to look at the back of her neck. There was no burn hole. The Wolf sat next to her and wondered what to do next. He was sweating.

"Ginger!" he called. There was a muffled moan from upstairs. The Wolf bent over Susan to see if she was breathing and listened for a heartbeat. He straightened up a moment later feeling foolish, remembering that an Andie had no heart. She was inanimate, and he had no idea how to tell if she was functioning. "Ginger! Get down here!"

A few minutes later, Ginger wobbled down the stairs dressed in one of his shirts. She still wore a torn silk stocking on one leg. "What's going on?" Ginger blinked when she saw The Wolf bent over her friend. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I found her this way. Looks like she's been in the garden overnight. I thought the killers had gotten her."

"The who?" Ginger pulled the shirt closer to her body. "The killers?"

"Uh, never mind. Look, it's a long story." He motioned for her to come closer and she knelt beside him.

"Is she breathing? She looks...oh, Suzi." Ginger was suddenly flooded with guilt. "I...if we hadn't been making it last night," she stammered through her tears.

"I think I'd better tell you something, Ginger." The Wolf let out a long breath. "Do you know what an Andie is?"

"A what?" Ginger picked up one of Susan's lifeless hands and held it in her own. "God, she's cold."

"An Andie. From before the Last War?"

Ginger was born seven years after the war ended. She was raised in rural Texas. Her mother had fled to the rusting forests of oil fields when Houston became unsafe. She had never even heard the word "android". The Wolf explained slowly and Ginger didn't believe him. She rubbed Susan's hands and cried. The Wolf continued to explain, and after a while Ginger understood.

"Does anyone else know?" Ginger whispered. Her face was red, and her eyes were puffed. "Oh, Jeez! What'll we do? Should we call the studio?"

"No. There's no phone here. Besides, no one knows except..." The Wolf said and then stopped. "Well, the killers know, I think. The ones who killed Roxie and Mr. Audrey."

Ginger became clearheaded. "We've got to get out of here. Maybe they just had another way to shut her off. If it was them, they may come back to kill us."

"I can't just leave her here," The Wolf said looking at Susan. He knew Ginger was right. "We can't be sure she's dead - or deactivated - I don't know enough about Andies to tell." Beryl walked in from the kitchen, tail in the air, and leapt to the couch. The gray cat settled at Susan's feet.

Ginger stood up. "Look," she said. "We can come back for her. Take me to my place so I can get my stuff. Between us we've got plenty of money and a car. We're gonna have to clear out of Hollywood. You said Susan told you the killers were after people close to her. If that's right, we're targets."

"I'm not sure..."

"Come on." Ginger pulled him up and put her arms around him. "The holo's fucked anyway. With all the delays we've already had, finding a new Lenore will kill it. I know Henry Segal, believe me. He'll fire everyone right off the lot and make another 'Treasure Island'." She kissed him. "I don't know if this is the right time to say this, but Susan would want me to take care of you. Let's go down to town and get my stuff. We'll come back and put her...in the trunk of your car or something. Maybe we can find somebody who can fix her. God! This is so weird!" She pushed The Wolf toward the stairs.

"Where will we go?" he asked.

"South. Or back to Houston, I don't know. Just go get your car keys. We can pick up your stuff when we come back."

*

Susan's internal fugue ended. It was the most complete systems check she had ever run. She opened her eyes and was surprised to find herself in the living room. Beryl was yawning at her feet. She petted the cat and got up off the couch.

Susan felt better adjusted: her internal queries had revealed many of the secrets locked deep in her chips. She knew she had a model number: 2500. She understood that she was a part of an experiment. Although she thought it a very strange experiment, she decided that she must return to her creators. She felt she must learn more of their intentions.

She assumed The Wolf and Ginger were sleeping. There was no need for goodbyes. Susan went to her own room in the other wing of the house on Euclid Drive. She changed her clothes and put a few things in her knapsack. She left Jack's pistol, knowing now that with her defenses she had never needed it. She had already decided to take Beryl along for company, so she stopped in the kitchen and put the bag of kibble in her knapsack before picking up the cat and going out the front door. She was half way down the hundred concrete steps when she remembered the Andie ID tag The Wolf had mentioned.

She told Beryl to wait on the steps and went back to the house. The Wolf's room was empty, but she hardly thought of her friends. Something inside was driving her, pushing her ahead. She suspected the answer she needed would be on the Andie tag.

Susan searched through The Wolf's belongings. She opened drawers and checked under things until she found a small box in the closet. The tag was inside and it said: "Northwest Sector". She knew immediately where she should go.

When she ran down the stairs, Beryl was waiting obediently, sitting in the sun with a cat expression of curious expectation.

"Ok, Beryl," Susan said, lifting her up and continuing down the stairs. "We've got a boat to catch."

She noticed the shadows following them a few minutes later.

CHAPTER FIVE

The machine worked fine for two days. Then the computer reported that the tunnel had water vapor in the air. Nothing blew up, but we were lucky. One of the lasers had hit a small underground stream that was trying to empty into the river and now emptied into the tunnel instead. It turned into a minor problem. A jet of steam cracked an artificial crystal that the offending laser used to focus light into its burning beam. The machine had six such lasers arranged in a circle, but it needed all six to produce the correctly shaped burn. A variation in the shape of the tunnel would weaken the laser glaze that pressurized the walls. Without the glaze, thousands of pounds of earth and rock could fill the tunnel without warning. That was how Hell explained it to me as he told me we had to reenter the tunnel and replace the crystal. The machine had gone on cutting for a few hours despite the missing laser, and the tunnel was possibly unsafe at the far end.

"We'll have to replace the crystal, patch the leak, and reposition the machine back to where it can melt the walls with the correct stress requirements." Hell was taking a crystal out of the backup machine at the station.

"If you disable the second machine," I pointed out, "there'll be no way to dig us out if we get stuck in there."

"Clever lad, Stark. Hold on to this plate will you, and don't drop the screws." He carefully removed the assembly that held a ruby-like gem. He muttered at me as he pried out the crystal. "You kids worry too much 'bout mortality. Lead a charmed life or you wouldn't be here today..."

"I want to be here tomorrow, that's all."

"Since when, Stark? You've lived on the edge as long as I've known you."

"My life is changing, Hell. I'm older and wiser. Denni..."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Love. Let's not get started on that again." He put the tiny gem in his jacket pocket. "Grab that lantern and let's get moving. We still got a day's dig after I fix this damned thing."

We moved along in the tunnel. There was an ominous mist filling the air and a crackling sound. I could see a red flickering up ahead.

"Ummm. Still firing up there. This may be a bit more difficult than I'd suspected, Stark."

"Swell," I said. "Any last words before we cash it in?" We had passed the underwater section where I could hear the river above and around us. There was water on the tunnel floor again, and it was deeper than the last time. "You did turn the machine off, didn't you?" Hell said nothing until we made it past the hatchway.

"The computer shut down all the good lasers. The burned out one detached itself from the controller - a bug in the program. I'll be able to switch it off and on manually."

We came to a place where the shape of the tunnel bore changed drastically. It was no longer circular and glazed. The right wall was lopsided and piles of bare earth and half-melted rock had fallen out. The machine had stopped ahead, and one of its short claws was flashing a red pulsing spray of light at the lopsided part of the wall.

"Don't worry, the laser's harmless when it's defocused like that." Hell moved forward to a switchbox on the machine, opened it, and pressed a button. The red laser went dead.

"Help me pull this thing back."

I grabbed some metal and we tugged the burrowing machine to where the tunnel shape had changed. As we pulled, a boulder fell out of the roof and the tunnel walls ahead began to crumble. We both jumped, but nothing else caved in. I started wondering how fast we'd have to run if the whole thing collapsed.

"Ok, get over here with that light, Stark. Shake it, will you? We gotta do this and get out of here."

I shined the light where Hell directed and he replaced the broken crystal with the one he had in his pocket.

"Get back, now. And if you make it and I don't, kiss Michelle for me." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Oh, and I want you to know that you and Denni have my blessing, for what it's worth." He hit the button. The tight laser beam fired into the wall and two feet of hot lava splashed into the small puddle of water on the floor. There was a blast of steam. I jumped back and felt a sharp pain in my head as I knocked into the opposite wall. Hellcat let the laser keep firing and adjusted its angle. Steam began to build dangerously.

"Listen," Hell shouted. "I'm going ahead and seal up that little stream." He pressed the button and the laser stopped. "Stay here, but run if you see any big blast of steam."

"Wait. What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna use the Zone laser, just like last time."

"Isn't that kind of risky in this mist?"

Hell grinned. "Yup."

*

Susan knew exactly where to find the Tremaine. The coast ship was in her berth and was to depart later that evening. Susan had plenty of money, so she booked a stateroom and took Beryl for a stroll around the docks. She looked at the mostly rusted out hulls and useless barges, walked down through the small market stalls without buying, and considered Victor Martek.

Victor would have been her one regret, if Andies had regrets. The strange mutual fascination that they had for each other might have helped her understand more about human emotions; her conversations with Ginger had led her to believe that she was far more human than her creators had intended.

The deep queries she had run the previous evening had revealed the other side: she was a special machine, designed to obtain genetic samples from human males. She knew that her attraction for Victor - as well as The Wolf, her Sherlock, Thomas Bell, and the others before them - was a programmed response sequence beyond her control.

"But it's more than that," she said to Beryl. Susan sat by the waterway, staring down into its depths. The little gray cat lay sleepily beside her, warm in the morning sunlight. In a warehouse behind them, two shadows waited. They watched through a dirty window, exchanging inaudible information. They had followed, as they always followed, and they had matched her reservation on the Tremaine.

Susan had fifteen hours before the ship departed. She knew that Victor would not be at the studio until afternoon, and she had his phone number in her memory. She replayed their conversation at the end of the rehearsal:

"I would like to talk to you. Privately."

There was no doubt about his intentions. "I'm not sure what decision to make. I cannot hurt my Wolf."

"But I want to see you. You are interested, aren't you?"

"I want you, yes."

Victor was not confused by her frankness. He knew she was an Andie. "Can I call you?" he asked.

"No. No phone."

Victor had not been put off. He wrote his number on a corner of a piece of sheet music. "Call me then," he pleaded.

Public phones in Los Angeles were no longer on the street. They were put into bar rooms, restaurants, and holotheatres, where the tiny local phone company could insure their

safety. Susan picked up Beryl and walked away from the docks looking for a bar. She came across a near-empty one and found a phone.

She punched up the number. "Victor. This is Susan. Suzi."

"File," Victor said. "Oh, not you, Suzi. Say, they're looking for you at the studio. None of the principals showed up this morning and Segal's hopping mad. Where are you?"

"Where do you live, Victor?"

"Hobart. In Hollywood..."

"I will come to see you. Don't tell Mr. Segal or anyone that you've spoken to me. Be alone, Victor."

"Ok, but where are you? Are the others with you?"

"No. Give me the address." He obeyed and she stored it. "I'll be there soon, Victor." She disconnected before he could ask more questions.

Two shadows sat at the end of the bar. Susan ignored Beryl's struggle of protest. She held onto the cat and sat next to the taller shadow.

"Miss?" the bartender asked.

"A beer," Susan replied.

"Real or synthetic, miss?"

"Synthetic, please." Susan put her left hand on the right arm of the shadow beside her. She held Beryl in her lap with her right hand. She streamed:

"I am ready to return."

"No. You are not ready. Your collection program would inform us." The shadow touched the other to his left. A three-way connection was made.

"We are impressed by your levels of awareness."

"I have collected. I am ready."

"You are making an independent decision above primary programming. Your learned logic processing is very superior. Perhaps this will interest the CensusTakers."

"Transfer your collection data. We will analyze it together."

"Transferring."

The bartender was placing her glass under the spigot. He pulled on the tap.

"Transferred. Analysis is running. We agree your banks have many exceptional subjects. What of the Martek human?"

"We would like him included in your collection."

"I meet with Victor Martek before the ship leaves." The beer had filled half of the long stemmed glass.

"Probabilities require lengthier contact. We have interesting data on the Martek human. Would you consider his abduction?"

"Define."

"Would you consider bringing him with you. C-4 has indicated great curiosity about the Martek human. An interview is desired."

"Why?" The beer was nearly to the top of the glass.

"A question not asked by a Battlefield. He is a descendent of one of the original creators. Do you wish more data?"

"An option never questioned by a Pleasure model. Yes."

The bartender waited until the synthetic beer reached its head. He let it slop over the side and picked up the glass.

"Should we abduct? You have all the history data."

"Do you understand that my emotions are tuned to him? You are a Battlefield..."

"We are Model 2500 Battlefield. We understand. We have been programmed solely to analyze and protect your behavior. It is a most fascinating assignment."

"You are our superior in such matters. We have no directive to take him."

"Can I assure his protection? My emotional attitude toward unnecessary killing is different than yours..."

"Unknown. C-4 desires data on original creators and their descendents if they are located. Martek is high on the stack. Your collection should include the Martek human. C-4 has indicated his value to the gene pool. Your logic and emotion conflict is very interesting. We have no such option, of course."

"You are also of interest to me. You are my first contact with another of our kind."

"Outside the factory, you mean? No. I understand. They removed the factory from your memory. You know nothing of your construction. We will contribute to your data on this subject at another time."

The bartender set the glass in front of her. Susan lifted her left hand from the Battlefield's arm. She adjusted Beryl, who was relaxed but not entirely happy, and removed money from her jacket with her left hand.

"Thanks, honey. Nice little pussy." The bartender glanced at the shadow and back at Susan. He winked knowingly. Susan placed her hand back on the Battlefield's arm:

"Will you allow abduction of the Martek human?"

"I think it unnecessary. I will try to convince him to come along of his own free will. I do not want him harmed. Why do you ask? You terminated others with whom I had emotional tuning. You were not constrained to seek my permission."

"You were not then aware."

"Our programming mandates termination of humans who might discover that you are Model 2500. These others were non-essential humans. You could not take samples from them."

"Our mandate puts your safety and mission above all other considerations."

"They were terminated before they identified you as an Andie. The Martek human made this deduction immediately. He is not a threat to the mission. He is like the lycanthrope - the man you call The Wolf."

"Bell was a threat and we eliminated him. But there is no logic in destroying the Martek human. His father was a creator of Andies. His data may be of use to the CensusTakers."

Susan streamed the equivalent of an emotional gasp. "You killed Thomas Bell?" She felt a wave of grief for her Native American lover.

It was as though both shadows cringed. "Please do not repeat such emotional streams! We are not programmed to receive Model 2500 emotion specific data!"

Susan apologized. "How do you know this about Victor Martek?"

"Victor Martek's father was an original creator. Victor Martek was associated with the programming Frank Martek created. It is a logical deduction..."

"I cannot collect if he does not desire me. Will he desire me if he knows?"

"No data. No reference. We are Battlefields."

"You can seduce the human. It is a primary feature of a Pleasure model."

"My emotional system is far more complicated than a simple program of seduction."

"Yes. Understood. Your self-restructuring is magnificent."

Susan let the head on the beer go down a bit before taking a sip. She had no need for a beer. She drank only to keep the bartender from paying them notice.

"I will bring Victor Martek with me on the Tremaine."

"Good. We have booked passage as well. The craft will depart in fourteen hours and forty-six minutes. Why have you brought that small creature?"

"It is a pet. Do you like it?"

"We have no emotion 'like'. It has excellent instincts. It avoided our approach previously whenever we came near. It is intelligent, this 'pet'."

"We do understand your emotional attachment to humans, but a 'pet' seems beyond your original parameters. Do you have the ability to expand your emotional parameters?"

"Definitely. It was very confusing at first. I can grow emotionally, I think..."

"Your model is very sophisticated. We believe your potential for evolution is far beyond your original design."

"Thank you."

"We will drive you to the Martek human. Leave now?"

"Yes." Susan lifted her hand from the shadow's arm and stood up. The bartender watched them all leave together.

"That was a quick pick-up," he said to himself. "Hardly touched this beer." He poured it back into the keg.

*

After the Last War, much of the population of North America became wandering homeless. Hopi was used to the sudden appearance of strangers in its midst. Trust was not an issue. The legacy left by the war was an almost total lack of confidence in the existence of ethics: no one trusted anyone completely. At the same time, there was a common bond: everyone was a survivor of mutual catastrophe. In Hopi, the sign over Jack's bar summed it all up: "Strangers Are Welcome. No Credit To Anyone."

Jack and his wife Myrna were delighted when Jill and Dede wandered into town one afternoon. They were young, intelligent, and unusually beautiful girls. The latter quality obviously influenced her husband's decision, but Myrna raised no objections when Jack hired them as maids. Since Lilia's murder and Susan's departure, Jack and Myrna had run the inn alone. Myrna's sister Rene had helped for a while, but only in the kitchen. Rene was unusually fat and slovenly for these times, and an alcoholic. She was dangerous behind the bar and she was not the best choice for a maid, as she had been discovered more than once sleeping off a binge in a guest's room.

Jill and Dede also spent a fair amount of time in guests' rooms in the months that followed. They were enthusiastic and seemingly unaffected by the neurotic fear of post-war mutation that had made many older survivors of the Last War sexually apathetic. As they had with Susan and Lilia, Jack and Myrna tolerated and even encouraged their maids to flirt with regulars and bed those that they liked. It wasn't exactly bad for business.

After dinner that night, when Paul Tanner failed to show interest in Myrna's sister, Jack and Paul retired to the bar. Tanner had several beers and wound up in bed with Jill, where it took him no time at all to realize that Jill and Dede were Model 2500 Pleasure Andies.

I was at the station the next morning, monitoring the burrowing operation on the computer. Hell and Michelle were asleep, and Denni was outside with Millie and Trix. A flashing signal light on the wall was telling me to answer the radio downstairs, so I went to a window and looked for Denni. She was racing from the back of the station with the two dogs at her heels. She looked like a kid on holiday.

"Hey, you," I yelled over the barking. The three of them froze and looked at me. Millie and Trix grinned foolishly with their tongues hanging out. Denni ran up to the window.

"Hi, darlin'." She stood up on her toes and I got a nice kiss. "Me and the girls are playing 'Hide The Beef Bone'. I toss it. They get it and refuse to bring it back. I chase them. Then

they hide it somewhere where there's lots of spiders or muck." She was pretty, all flushed and out of breath. "I think it's them who are playing with me, you know?"

"Well, sorry to spoil your fun, girls," I said to the Dobermans. "I need this bitch for a while."

She hit me. "What you want, pal? 'Cause that ain't the way to get it!"

"I need you to watch the computer while I answer the radio, if you don't mind, please. Ok?" Eventually, she came in and babysat the monitor while I went down to the radio room and got the news from Paul.

When Hellcat first heard that there were Andies in Hopi, he wasn't very happy. "It's no real surprise that Jack and Myrna didn't spot them. The new ones are almost too perfectly human. But he said that Jack hired them months ago, which means they may know that we're here."

"It's not like we've been all that discreet," I tried to tell him. "I mean, we've been burning a tunnel through their turf for the last four days..."

"It can't be detected, Stark. That's why it takes so long. They could be standing directly on top of that damned machine and not feel any vibration or hear a sound. Lasers are very quiet. And it worked at Cherokee."

"Then why are you worried? Tanner gets lucky with a local maid who just happens to be a Pleasure model. What's the problem? We know that they're conducting tests."

Hell looked at me as though I'd just given him a quart of pre-war gin. "That's it!" He slapped my shoulder.

"What's it?"

"She 'just happens to be a Pleasure model'. They are still testing, and I don't think they even care if we're here!"

"I don't get it."

"If they knew we were here, or if they were worried about it, the Andies in the village would have been withdrawn by now. The CensusTakers programmed the new Andies, but humans programmed the CensusTakers! They have no reason to assume that we are hostile."

"Humor me. Keep going."

"The CensusTakers aren't necessarily on the offensive. We've always approached the question of what they're doing in a defensive way. As human creations, they may think that some humans somewhere have sanctioned their operation. We've infiltrated the factories like we would with subversive loonies. Nobody's ever actually tried to go in and talk to them as though they were still under human control."

"Wait," I said. "If they aren't protecting themselves from us, why all the guards? And why have we spent five days and nights digging this damned tunnel so we can blast a hole in a wall and climb 200 feet down some damned ropes to sneak up on them?"

Hellcat sat down at the terminal and glanced at the progress of his burrowing machine. "They have guards because factories always have guards. And you two aren't going to have to use ropes. You're going to walk right in and reintroduce yourselves and ask for a guided tour." He laughed at my expression. "Don't sweat it, Stark. The tunnel gets finished. Unless they kill you the minute they see you, we'll come in and get you if you don't walk back out. We can't take a chance on an offensive move. If they're waiting for you inside, the game will be blown away, and so will you. This way we keep a backup in place - at least."

I didn't like that "at least". It wasn't very reassuring. Hell's logic was ok, and I wasn't very good on ropes even when I was younger, but I don't like last minute changes. And I noticed that Hellcat's other observation was correct: I was sweating.

*

Victor had started to clean up the general chaos of his Hollywood apartment. He didn't have many visitors, and the place was a creative clutter of musical projects.

"What the hell am I doing?" he said out loud. "She's an Andie." The computer in the corner clicked in digital sympathy. "This is very strange," Victor said, referring to both Susan's call and his feelings about her. An Andie, for God's sake! The soft beeping of his front door interrupted another drift into his fantasy. He went to show her in.

"Hello, Suzi," Victor said. He gazed into her large brown eyes. He almost bowed.

"Susan. Please call me 'Susan', Victor." She returned his eye contact and they were both frozen for a moment. His mind was a blank, but hers was occupied with milliseconds of processing. She sensed something in his manner that was very different.

"Uh, come in. I'm sorry. What's her name?"

"Beryl. She's well-behaved." Susan put the gray cat on the floor and Beryl yawned and ignored them. Victor escorted Susan to a deep blue couch against one wall. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, Victor."

"You're an Andie!" Victor blurted it out. He had meant to be subtle. "Aren't you?" His face colored.

Susan curved her lips up as he sat beside her. She read his awkward discomfort. "Yes. I wasn't aware that anyone but my Wolf knew. How did you know, Victor?" She sensed timidity as in The Wolf, but something made Victor weaker. The man seemed almost frightened.

Victor could feel the blood pounding through every capillary in his body. "I...that is, my father programmed the Andie voice chips. But you aren't Model 1000. You are modified."

"More than modified. I am a new version," she corrected him. "I am Model 2500. A Pleasure model, of course."

"Impossible!" Victor drew back and studied her. "No such model. All production was discontinued after the end..."

"The Last War: isn't that what you call it? I learned about it where I...in the place that I first lived." She began to prepare herself. Victor was reacting to her in a very predictable human way. She bent closer to him and lowered her voice. "Human production of Andies did stop then."

Victor understood. "You somehow produced yourselves. That's why you're so...perfect."

Susan laughed, but it was a soft laugh. "Is it my being 'perfect' that attracts you? You seem so worried. I thought you were more certain at the studio." She kissed him on the side of his mouth. "Nothing is perfect. You knew I was an Andie from the first. It didn't make you nervous. You were thinking something else, Victor. What was it?"

Victor ducked the question. "Is Mr. Wolf an Andie too?"

Susan kissed his mouth. It was an interesting question, but her primary programming was running. The kiss was hard and insistent. In the background, she reviewed her data on The Wolf. "No," she answered. "He's what he seems. He is very old. The others of his kind are all dead - for now."

Victor wasn't worried about The Wolf. He was worried about his desire for this android. Susan kissed him a third time, forcing his mouth open. Her hands ran under his shirt. Their tongues met as he slowly accepted his feelings. She pushed him back on the couch. She sensed that he wanted her to be rougher and more demanding.

"Where's the bedroom, Victor?"

Victor mumbled as she led him there. The earlier fantasy of himself and Susan had been replaced by the real horrification of a five-year-old boy. He could see his father with the Andie servant standing over him. He told Susan what he wanted her to do.

They returned an hour later and Susan was gone. Some of her things were missing, and so was the cat. Ginger said Susan was probably ok. "She just took Beryl and split."

The Wolf was ready to agree until he saw his own room. The drawers were open and his meager possessions were strewn everywhere. He opened the closet and roared when he saw the box was missing.

"What is it? She ripped you off?" Ginger had never seen him so angry.

"Of course not! Why would an Andie steal? You were right." He grabbed at the chaos, looking for the box and fighting the rage inside. His paranoia was overwhelming. "They were here before. Mr. Audrey told me, but I didn't believe him. Strangers searching my stuff! Just like this time."

"So they did take Suzi?"

"I don't know. But they got my strongbox." He sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. "Zoltan. No, he wouldn't have told them where I was. I just don't get it. And Susan said it had to do with her, not me."

This meant nothing to Ginger. "Are you sure that Suzi didn't just wake up and take the cat for a walk?"

The Wolf wouldn't hear of it. "No, no, you were right the first time. We gotta get out of here. They might come back for us. Look, she told me about stuff that was stored inside her. Something she had to search to find in her memory. She said that was what Roxie's getting killed was all about: someone was trying to keep anyone from finding out she was an Andie. They killed Roxie, that little creep Audrey, and now they've got Susan." He snatched Ginger's arm with a wild look in his eyes. "You might be next, and I can't let you get hurt. Take some of this stuff!"

They threw his clothes into a pillowcase and ran for the front door. Ginger was convinced by The Wolf's fear. Neither noticed the small strongbox was still sitting on the floor next to the couch where Susan had left it.

"Meet me in the car," The Wolf ordered, handing her the keys. Ginger stopped long enough to grab him and kiss him.

"I don't know what this is all about, but thank you for taking me with you. No one's ever given a damn about me before."

"Get to the car," The Wolf growled, but his voice was softer. "I'll be right there."

Ginger ran down the hundred concrete steps and jumped into the Dodge. She started it and moved over to the passenger side. After a minute, The Wolf appeared and joined her. He had a gun.

"It was up in Susan's room. No reason for an Andie to have a gun either. It must have belonged to them. The killers." He threw it in her lap. "Keep it with you. In case we ever get separated."

"What are you planning?" She put the gun with her clothes in the back seat. "We're going to try to save her, aren't we?"

He looked at her as he drove the old car down the canyon road. "Want to?"

Ginger sighed and moved closer to him. She knew they had to try. "Do you know where she is?"

"She talked about her past. She came from a small town in the Northwest Sector. Called Hopi." Ginger didn't look impressed, so The Wolf told her about Mr. Prince, the gypsies, and the platinum tag he had taken from the Andie in City of New York. "It proves that somebody's still making them secretly, and in the Northwest Sector. If they took her anywhere, it would be back to the factory. Even if I'm wrong, and it is the Mafia guys after me, we still gotta get out of Los Angeles."

"How are we gonna get to this Hopi?"

"Drive, but not in this old buggy. First we stop and get a solar car." He patted the glove compartment. "Luckily I didn't keep all my money in that strongbox." He headed the Dodge down Hollywood Boulevard at about ninety miles per hour.

*

It was obvious that we shouldn't try to just walk up to the factory and knock. Hell had the outside guard patrol schedule figured out, but there was always a chance that they might change it. Even if they were only protecting the factory in a routine way, they might just see us on their monitors and send out a few Battlefields. The guards might not shoot to kill, but we agreed that the risk was too great. Hell had something else in mind.

"I want to try to contact C-4 directly. We know that the CensusTakers have the capability to link by satellite, but we don't know if they have satellite transmission gear at the factory. They might be using low band radio frequencies to talk to each other."

"I didn't know there were any satellites that still worked," I said.

"My area," Michelle answered. "Over two hundred still in orbit. About twenty are communications satellites and nineteen are functioning at full strength. NPG uses several of them. We haven't intercepted any Andie transmissions so far though."

"We're pretty sure there were some satellites sent up just for them," Hell continued. "The Russians blew them all away thirty years ago. All the major powers had killer satellites roaming around taking potshots, and the Russians were very determined to knock out anything to do with the Andies. We've picked up some scrambled surface stuff at night in the old AM radio bands: might be Andies. That little black box in the woods on the way to Hopi is a radio frequency sweep device. It listens 24 hours a day."

"So that's what it is! Do we know where to call old C-4?" I wondered.

"Well, the signals are spread out on what seem to be random frequencies. Coded transmissions and they don't follow any human systems, but nothing we can't mimic. We can try a similar burst and hope that C-4 is listening. The problem is the stream."

"The what?"

"It's the way they talk to each other, Stark," Denni said. "Data streaming."

"Thank you, professor," I whined. I was beginning to see I was the only member of the team who didn't know an Andie from a Skimmer. The others took turns explaining about Andie transmission methods and languages for a while. I tried not to fall asleep.

"So we will have guests this afternoon," Hell concluded. He had told Paul to bring the two Andie maids from the inn to the station. "If I'm right, they might be willing to send our message."

Later, when we were alone, Denni and I were talking about Andies. "Paul's quite an Andie man," I said. "He seems to think there's nothing better."

"Yeah," Denni retorted. "You better not get any ideas about testing that opinion." She was kidding, but I didn't laugh. "What's wrong?"

"I was wondering what your opinion was, not what mine might be."

Denni kissed my face. "They weren't human, Stark. A girl can get addicted to a vibrator, but she's still by herself. You are warm and a man. You even fall asleep after a while."

"Hey!"

"I'm not accusing you. Sometimes I wished they would fall asleep and leave me alone."

"Hey!" I teased. "You trying to say you like the real thing better?"

She got up close. "Best, not better."

"I'm the best, then?"

"You'll do." She knew she had me anyway, and she was right. I didn't even mind that she hadn't really answered my question.

Paul arrived with Jill and Dede after lunch. We were all in the computer room waiting. Hell wasn't sure how we could convince them to help, but he had prepared a message to be sent to C-4. It was a simple greeting and a request to share data for research purposes.

The Andies walked in with Paul more or less in tow. He was grinning ear to ear. I could see why he had delayed his radio report until the morning after he met them. Jill was a tall blonde with exaggerated breasts, long legs, and pretty brown eyes. I saw Hellcat's loyalty to Michelle slip a bit when they were introduced. He always was a sucker for blondes.

Denni and I recognized Dede at once. She was the oriental Andie I had seen in the factory when I first glimpsed Denni through the numbing drugs that the Battlefields had used on me. Dede was shorter than Jill, and she was almost skinny. It was a credit to the original Andie designers and the CensusTakers that they had retained the idea of Andie individuality. Dede had green eyes and jet-black hair to her shoulders. They both looked completely human to me.

"Hello, Dede," Denni said. "Do you remember me?"

"Of course. C-4 was disappointed that you left. How are you, Denni?" She was very polite. "Why did you ask us to come here?"

Hell answered. "We want a favor from you." The two Andies exchanged glances.

"We are Pleasure models. We are always willing to provide pleasure to humans," Dede said.

"Not that kind of favor. We want to send a message to C-4. You are in communication with the factory?"

"We will report this meeting. But why don't you speak for yourselves? Denni knows that C-4 is fluent in human speech, as are all Andies. You should speak to C-4 directly."

"How would we do that? The factory is guarded."

"We will take you. C-4 no longer leaves the factory. We will take you whenever you are ready."

Paul kept his pretty playmates company upstairs and the rest of us gathered around the table in the kitchen. We needed to debate this new situation.

"So, who gets to go?" I began, looking at Hell.

"Not all of us. It may be a trap."

"I think that Stark and I should go," Denni said. "We were the ones Rola assigned."

"I assigned you!" Hell interjected, laughing at her. "Those meetings up in Vancouver were just formalities. I told Rola a week earlier that you and my boy wonder here were already about as teamed up as anyone was liable to get. But that plan was an infiltration, not a granted audience with the head honcho."

"You're saying we're not going? After all this bullshit?" I wanted to know.

"I'm sayin' I probably should go along to keep you two company. I've got more questions for C-4 than anybody."

"Great," Michelle pouted. "I get to stay here by myself with Tanner?"

She was only half-serious, and it cracked us all up, but I was getting impatient. "I'm going to settle this, folks. We don't need babysitting and Denni's right: it's our assignment, no matter who gave it out. You're too valuable to go in first, Hell. We're just soldiers. You're the general." I stood up. "Let's get on with it, ok?" The debate was over. Hell lit an obnoxious cigar.

"Ok, but the burrowing machine will be finished with that damned tunnel in another day. If it is a trap, Paul and I will come in after you."

"Great," Michelle said.

"Ok! Paul and Michelle and I will go in after you. Who'd you say the general was?" Hell glared. "You think you can climb a rope, Michelle?"

"Faster than that blonde Andie bitch, Catman." She had the last laugh, but it was a moot point because Paul got the blonde anyway. Jill decided to stay with him at the station.

*

Denni and I unpacked a nylon raft from our gear. Dede joined us when we paddled across the river and landed the raft. Then the three of us pushed through the underbrush and trees toward the factory. Just as we reached the clearing on the bank where I had once been captured, there was a horrible, animal scream from the opposite shore. It was followed by some yips, and I knew it was one of the dogs. Denni and I whirled around to see Trix, dragging herself toward the edge of the river. It looked like half her hindquarters had been burned away. Denni screamed.

There was an enormous explosion from the direction of the station.

"Hold very still," I heard Dede say. Two Battlefield Andies with laser rifles had appeared from nowhere. They were aiming right at us.

"Hellcat!" Denni cried out, and she began to run toward the fireball over the trees on the other side of the river.

"Denni, don't!" I ordered.

*

The Wolf pulled the Dodge into Pangborne's Solar Vehicles and it coughed to a stop. A grimy man in greasy overalls was leaned back in a folding chair by a wooden hut in the center of the lot. He was reading a hardcover book.

"Excuse me," The Wolf said, as he and Ginger approached. The man waved without looking up.

"A minute, will yuh? Almost finished with this chapter."

Ginger took The Wolf's arm and strolled him around the lot. There were about thirty solar cars and small solar trucks parked in the hot sun. They had a myriad of exotic names like Sunstorm, Photon, Skimmer, Blaze, and Yellowstar. All appeared to be in excellent condition.

"Sorry to keep you folks waiting. Pangborne's the name, transportation the game. Was reading a great novel - a Robbins classic, you know - 'bout the 'movies'." The grimy man extended a blackened hand to The Wolf. "Pardon the carbon. Do my own work on these babies. I know you, sir, I believe? A holo star! On my lot! Oh, this is a lucky day for PSV Incorporated!"

The Wolf grimaced. An ex-holo star, he thought. He let Pangborne's comment pass. "We're interested in trading in on a solar car."

"Trading in? Oh, for that petrol burning thing over there? Well, I'll tell you, friend. Mr. Wolf, I believe?" The Wolf nodded reluctantly. "And this lovely piece of, er, I mean, lady. I've seen you in the holos as well, haven't I?"

"I've done a few." Ginger blushed. Not that many people recognized her.

"Yes, you have. Big fan of the holos myself. Even the loops. And the Stars! See everything that comes out. Seen you in the flesh a number of times. Both of you."

The Wolf's annoyance was building. "Could we talk about cars?"

Pangborne opened the door on the driver's seat of a nearby Skimmer. "Certainly. That's what PSV Incorporated is here for. There's a sexy little Skimmer. Suits you well, my dear. Fully equipped for city life. A small bar and a radio: just in case radio comes back, eh? Heh, heh. A phone. The phone in this one don't work, but I can fix that. Fold down seat in front. People used it as a day bed when the street sensors worked on the old freeways. Heh, heh." Pangborne stared at Ginger's breasts.

"How long does it hold a charge?" Ginger asked. She gratefully angled herself to give her fan a better look. She was flattered.

"Heh, heh. About two days, but you won't need to worry about that, no ma'am. You can even plug it into household circuits if the sun goes out. Not much chance of that here in Los Angeles, of course."

The Wolf stepped in front of Pangborne, blocking the car salesman's view, and snarled just a little. "We need a car that can travel long distances in any weather. I want a storage backup."

Pangborne fluttered. "Oh, my. You do know exactly what you want, Mr. Wolf. Right this way, sir. Say, you really were good in 'Lesbian Wolfbite'. I was a fan of Miss Roxie's too, poor woman. Shame she chose to end it before you finished your next holo. I was looking forward to...heh, heh. Ah, here we are." He led them to a sleek, black Photon. The windows were dark. Pangborne opened the door and reached inside. He pressed a button on the dash and the windows became transparent.

Ginger gushed over the Photon. "This one's really neat!"

"Yes. Everything you mentioned you were looking for. A classy vehicle for major thespians like yourselves."

"I'm not into girls," Ginger said. "That was Roxie."

"Heh, heh. A little humor." Pangborne seated her in front. "Well, this is a top model Photon. It's a luxury car and a little more expensive, but it was made for comfortable highway travel. The storage, Mr. Wolf, could keep you moving without sun for two weeks. See that rear hump? An ultra-cadmium storage unit. This one has a phone that works, good wheels, street sensors, and a short-wave receiver. You may pick up something on that outside the city." He pointed to the area behind the front seat. "The bed in this one is a permanent feature - bigger, more room, heh, heh. The built-in bar is fully stocked with the best synthetics. In fact, I'll throw in a case of real beer. My brother-in-law came into some recently."

Ginger liked it and The Wolf wanted a beer. "How much?"

"Well, you won't get a trade-in on a gasser anywhere anymore, but PSV Incorporated won't let you down! I'll knock down the price for you. I'm sure we can work something out." Pangborne looked right at Ginger as he said this, and The Wolf had a hard time restraining himself. They finally agreed on a price, after much vacillating on the part of Pangborne, and the grimy man zipped the Photon up to the front of the lot. Ginger moved their belongings into the shiny solar car, and The Wolf signed some papers in the little wooden hut. He got his case of beer.

Inside the hut, The Wolf also noticed crates of books lining the walls. "What's this? A library?"

"Nah. My brother-in-law pawned them off on me. Stole 'em somewheres, I'd say. Not worth much, books. Here, take a copy of the one I'm reading. If you do hit a section of the highways with street sensors, you might want to read. Well, heh, heh, I guess you wouldn't. Not with her along, eh?" The Wolf ignored the leer and picked up a duplicate copy of "The Dream Merchants", by Harold Robbins.

"That's all about the pre-holo days in Hollywood: a real classic. Those were the days. I do a bit of writing myself, you know. Was thinking about trying your studio. See if they'd want any new ideas, eh?"

"Sure," said The Wolf, hurrying back to the Photon and Ginger with the man in hot pursuit. Pangborne babbled on for a while about movies and holos and making big money, his head peering through the window on the passenger side. Finally, when he could stand no more, The Wolf jammed down on the speed lever and the Photon raced away. Pangborne was nearly decapitated in the process. The Wolf and Ginger howled together in laughter as they sped north out of Los Angeles.

*

Victor Martek's psyche and physical being were complacent and relaxed, but a more pathetic side to his nature was fully aroused. He did not regret one moment of his afternoon with Susan. His guilty desire to fall before her in sexual worship was

momentarily satisfied, but what was left of his intellect was drained. The shared empathy he imagined he had with this machine intelligence, encased as Susan was in a bio-electronic copy of human flesh, was something he had sought all of his life, yet Victor knew little of psychology. He did not suspect that his attraction to her related to his early childhood and the Andie servants of his father's castle. Now he was faced with Susan's own demand: she wanted him to hop on a ship with her and travel into the wilderness of the Northwest Sector.

Not that it was an unlikely thing for Victor Martek to do. Even without his new neurotic attachment to Susan, Victor had nothing to hold him to Hollywood. He knew he was out of work before Susan even got to his apartment. Fredric Van Dine had called to tell him that Suzi, Ginger, and The Wolf had vanished. To make things worse, Henry Segal's cover-up of Roxie's murder was unraveling and the studio boss was in big trouble with the board at Holo International. "Girls Who Like Wolves" was floundering and headed for the rocks. He had a tight contract, and he had received a hefty advance for his work, but Victor Martek had worked for Henry Segal in the past. He knew he would never get paid the remainder of what he was owed if the holo was not completed.

"I've always liked to travel," Victor told Susan. "I spent my early childhood in the mountains of Switzerland, one of the old European States, and I visited various countries before the war. I've never been to the Northwest part of this continent. With you as a companion, I'm sure it will be a gratifying experience."

In the car, on the way to the Tremaine, Victor was less certain. The two Model 2500 Battlefields refreshed childhood memories. Pictures of marching soldier androids flashed through his mind. Susan did her best to reassure him about the shadows in the front seat.

"I can't pretend they're harmless, but their intellect is extraordinary. They are a 2500 Model revision of the soldiers you remember in Europe during the war. They will protect both of us from any harm on our journey." Victor had noticed that Beryl concurred. The cat had curled up in the lap of the Battlefield who was not driving.

"You didn't have them with you at the studio," Victor pointed out. "Why do you need them around now?"

"It may seem odd," Susan said. "I hadn't met them yet. I had my Wolf as protection. His strength is almost equal to theirs, and his loyalty was even greater. He had a human emotion called 'devotion' to me. He told me once that he would tear the throat out of anyone who dared abuse me."

"Where is he now?" Victor asked, looking behind himself reflexively.

"With Ginger, I am sure." She laughed. "Don't worry. Ginger is in love with him and he responds to affection quickly. It is part of his nature. It is something that I could never give him - human love. He is her protector now, not mine."

They reached the Tremaine and went aboard together. Before Susan and Victor entered their stateroom, the taller of the Battlefields touched Susan, his hand on her arm. Susan smiled.

"What is it?" Victor asked.

"Tell him," Susan commanded of her bodyguard. Victor's eyebrows shot up: he hadn't realized that the two shadows could speak.

"We ask if we might have the pet named Beryl in our room," the tall one said. "The cat has taken an interestingly different attitude toward us. We would like to study this."

Victor stared at the Andie in shock.

"What's wrong, Victor?" Susan asked, reaching out to steady him. His face had gone pale.

"My God! He speaks in my father's voice!" Victor turned to the other Battlefield, who was holding a relaxed Beryl. "Do you speak as well?"

"Certainly." An identical voice came from the shorter shadow. "Our design calls for no difference between speech chips. Only Pleasure models are manufactured with unique vocal patterns."

"You both have my father's voice. I am sorry if I overreacted. It makes sense, I suppose."

"We agree," said the tall one. "It is logical. Your father was Frank Martek. He was the creator of the Martek chip, one of the few original Andie components that have not been revised."

"About the pet..." the other began.

"Yes. Of course you may look after Beryl." Susan touched the shorter Andie, streaming instructions on how to care for the cat. She reached into her knapsack and pulled out the bag of kibble. The odd trio went to their stateroom. Victor hoisted the large suitcase he had brought, and he and Susan did the same.

Later that evening, when Victor returned from dinner in the ship's dining room, he brought out several small devices from the suitcase. He showed them to Susan and explained.

"Tools of my trade. This one is a little synthesizer. This unfolds into a keyboard. It is touch-sensitive." She examined the limp piece of plastic with embossed key patterns.

"Similar to my skin?"

"A byproduct of Andie technology. Yes, I hadn't thought of that, but I'm sure it was. This is a recording device that stores whatever I wish in these chips."

"You intend to work? I will be very quiet."

"No. We are going to work together. Your voice, by human standards, is nearly perfect. I couldn't pass up the three days I'll have on this ship to compose for it."

Susan gave him a funny look. She did not recognize the feeling she was experiencing.

"You mean you intend to spend all three days of our journey composing?"

*

They drove the Photon until they reached what had once been the city of Bakersfield. The major industry here was now automobiles: Bakersfield had become a great depository for fuel and spare parts. The stretch of highway through the town was lonelier than in the past, but still rumbled with trucks carrying goods from and to Northern California. As they passed mountains of cars of every description, The Wolf got an idea.

"There!" he said, waking Ginger. The Wolf pulled the Photon into a garish lot dominated by a brightly painted sign.

"Why are we stopping here?" Ginger asked. "Is there something wrong with the car?"

"No. But those aren't cars."

Ginger looked at the vehicles in the lot. "Look like cars without wheels."

"Nope. I had a hunch they might have them: those are hovercraft land vehicles. Solar ones."

"They look like cars," Ginger said stubbornly. She liked the sleek Photon and she knew what he was thinking.

"Well, they are cars, I guess. But they're air cars, not wheel cars. Come on, Ginger. Let's look at them. I've got my reasons."

It was a short stop. "Hot-Air" McCallister, the hovercraft salesman, was very receptive. After a few minutes, The Wolf pulled Ginger aside.

"He wants the Photon. I can tell. Maybe they're scarce around here." Ginger whined a bit, but the unattractive air cars were roomy and comfortable inside. The Wolf was right about the salesman.

"Ooh. It's so quiet and smooth." Ginger put her head on The Wolf's shoulder as they glided north. "I love this, but how come you wanted it?"

"We'll need it past San Francisco. I don't think the roads will be any good for wheeled cars. That village is probably pretty isolated too. You don't look like a person who loves to hike through the woods."

Ginger rubbed against him. "Nah, I'm a home girl. How are going to find it anyway?"

"Oh, I guess we can just ask. Lots of trades people wander from village to village in places like that: gypsies too. Susan called the place Hopi, and most villages don't even have names. Someone will have heard of it."

She curled up next to him and closed her eyes. "Think there'll be trouble when we get there?" She was almost back to sleep.

The Wolf stroked her hair and nuzzled her cheek. He didn't have an answer, so he said nothing.

*

We were outnumbered, three to two. If we hadn't been up against Andies, there wouldn't have been any contest. I'd watched Denni work out when we were in Vancouver, and she was at her peak. As for me, well, I'm aging gracefully but I've got a few good moves left. Unfortunately, we didn't have a prayer against two Battlefields and Dede, a Model 2500 with Battlefield armaments.

Not that Denni would have been much help. The sight of billowing clouds of smoke and flames from the direction of the station had sent her into shock. I wasn't feeling too positive myself, but I did manage to stop her before the guard androids decided to burn her with their laser rifles.

"What the hell is going on?" I played my hand to Dede. She shoved me forward in the direction of the factory. Denni followed docilely.

"Humans are remarkably foolish," Dede said. "You are so concerned with your emotions that you ignore logic."

"Yeah, we walked right into it. Humans are a trusting species," I said with anger. "Who programmed Andies to lie, anyway?" One of the guards poked Denni and she fell into step beside me. She had a vacant look on her face. It scared me.

"What did you do, Dede? To the station?" she whispered.

"It was mined while you were away," Dede replied. There was a cold logic in her voice. "You have been tracked and monitored since the helicopter set you down." We reached the sliding door to the elevator.

"You killed them. Why didn't you kill us too?" Denni asked her. The guards ushered us inside. "What do you need us for?"

"We don't need you. Andies don't need humans. C-4 wants you." She took one of the laser rifles, rested its muzzle against Denni, just over her heart, and looked at me. "The guards will stay on the surface. If you try to resist, I will terminate her."

The guards turned and left, and the door closed. We began the two hundred foot drop. It occurred to me that I might grab the muzzle of the rifle and push it under Dede's chin before she could fire. I was close enough in the little elevator, but I just couldn't risk my partner and the laser might not have done anything except melt Dede's resilient artificial face. I wondered about the tunnel. We had assumed they hadn't found it. I decided this might be a good time to check.

"All this fuss over a little hole," I said. "Humans just like to dig, you know."

"I don't 'know'. Be quiet!" Dede replied.

I was relieved. She didn't have any idea what I was talking about. I looked at Denni and I felt guilty. She was still in shock.

The elevator stopped and the door opened. We were marched at laser point down the hallway and through the doors that led to the factory. The room with the machines was busier than on my last visit: at least ten Andies sat at consoles. I recognized some

automated areas they were controlling from my briefings. This was a hardware component section.

"How's production this month?" I glibly asked our oriental captor. "Still churning out those Model 3000s. Say, they'll be quite an improvement over you, doll-face."

Dede gave me a surprisingly human snort and shoved me forward. I noticed that Denni was still registering very little.

"It'll be ok, baby." I put my hand on her shoulder and pulled her to me. She barely responded, mumbled something incoherent, and put her arm around my waist to steady herself.

"In here," Dede said. We walked through an arch into a white room. There were three chairs and one was occupied.

"Wait, Dede," C-4 commanded. Its voice was interesting. It sounded familiar, but neither male nor female. I couldn't quite place it: some old actor, perhaps. The faceless mutated CensusTaker was frightening at first glance, but the voice was almost kindly. It had no eyes when it looked at me. "Please remove all of your clothing."

"Not again!" I roared. "You aren't going to give me another sponge bath, are you?" I heard Dede snort again behind me.

"You refuse?" C-4 inquired.

How could I refuse? Dede was pointing a laser at us that could cut a human in two and we were trapped two hundred feet below ground in a digital Chinese cookie factory. Besides, Dede had already seen me naked the last time and old C-4 didn't have any eyeballs. I stripped and helped Denni, which in other circumstances would have been delightful. She was still glazed, taking the explosion at the station very hard. Hellcat had been a father to her.

"We'll pose for dirty pictures if you give us a cut." I didn't expect a laugh, but C-4 had a unique sense of humor.

"Humans often resort to comedic remarks when they find themselves in high stress situations," the old Andie Buddha intoned. "It is a buffer, we believe. It allows a part of your mind time to digest and process the cause of stress. We needed to check you for offensive weapons. The scan is completed. You may put your clothing back on and then sit down. You may leave us, Dede."

"What happens now?" I asked after I got us dressed.

"Now we begin mutual interviews. You came a long way to ask me some simple questions about our activities. You would also like answers to complex questions about specific engineering research. We, in turn, need more data about human nature and conditions of the world outside this factory." C-4 gestured. "We perceive that Denni is not well?"

"She's in shock. We didn't expect you to blow up the station and kill our comrades." I chose my words carefully.

"The explosion was not expected. We did mine your facility some time ago, but we gave no instruction to detonate it. Our Battlefields have crossed the river. Shall we see what they see?" It was a rhetorical question. C-4 stood and moved gracefully to the nearest wall. The two thumbs of his right hand pushed into a sort of socket and twisted. The wall lit up from behind with a grainy picture of smoking timbers and a body of a woman. Waves of heat made it out of focus and it was canted like a shot from an Orson Welles pre-holo.

"Only one of our inside cameras is still transmitting. Life there appears to be terminated." C-4 twisted its hand again and the image changed. There was a wall of burning trees. Beyond I could make out the station, the upper floor in flames. The picture tracked along the trees, as though it was circling the building. "One of the 2500s is transmitting this. The forest is burning. The 2500s cannot pass through the flames." C-4 turned in my direction. I again sensed it looking at me without eyes. "Do you know the cause of this explosion?"

"No idea." I didn't, at least not exactly, but I hoped C-4 wouldn't press the matter. "Denni should rest. Could you question us later?"

C-4 pulled its thumbs out of the wall socket and the wall went blank white again.

"Interview, Mr. Stark. And mutual, we hope. Yes, we will continue another time." The CensusTaker walked to the door and it slid open. A Battlefield stood outside. C-4 touched it on the arm. "This guard will show you to quarters. We assume you wish to be quartered together, as you are mates?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall reside in Denni's former quarters." C-4 turned to go.

"Thanks," I said, more in relief than anything.

"Gratuities are not required," the CensusTaker said without stopping.

Denni remained pretty wasted. She hadn't said anything the whole time. When we were taken to her old room on the floor below, I got her to lie down on the mattress. I noticed some evidence that she had been there before: a few pieces of paper with notes in her handwriting and one of those nice skin-tight suits that she had been wearing when we first met. It looked like they had expected her to return eventually. Or maybe they were just lousy housekeepers. The room was spacious enough for several people. Like most of the original factory, it had been designed for human occupants, and there was a small kitchenette and a bathroom with a shower.

"Food will be brought to you," our Battlefield guard said. It was the first time I'd heard a Battlefield make any noise other than those electronic tones. "Does she require any sort of medication?"

"No," I answered. I refrained from gratuities. After the guard left, I tried to get our sliding cell door to open for me, but it wouldn't budge. I knew that the place had to be bugged, so I lay down on the mattress with Denni. She grabbed me like a vice and held on like she was falling. In other circumstances I would have allowed the tears that followed to

release her grief, but I knew they were not justified. I pressed my mouth on her ear and pretended to comfort her.

"They are alive, Denni. Don't react. Keep crying. The Andies are probably watching," I hissed. I felt like a snake too. We should have told her. "Hellcat is ok. Michelle is ok. Paul and the dogs are ok. It was all an act. The only one who got iced was the blonde Andie."

"W-what?" She was coming out of it. She had the presence of mind to whisper back into my ear. "What did you say?"

"It was a fake. We couldn't tell you 'cause you'd been here before. We knew Dede would be able to tune in on your reactions better than mine. I'm sorry, Denni." She understood. She hugged me very close and then kissed me hard on the mouth.

"You dirty, fucking, bastard, son of a bitch." She kissed my ear down to the lobe as she cursed me, and then she bit into me. She held my earlobe between her teeth for about ninety seconds, pinning me helpless with her long legs and the hug. It hurt.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," I pleaded. I thanked God she chosen my earlobe to punish. "We had to set them up. Hell and I decided right after we first got to the station and found the mines. There were little cameras and bugs everywhere except in the tunnel. They never found the tunnel. I guess they never went below the first floor."

"What about the fireball and poor Trix?"

"I don't know how Hell did the fireball. I had to be able to tell the Andies that I didn't know what caused it or they would notice a change in my readings. Hell figures the 2500s can judge when humans are lying." I kissed her. "Trix is ok too. That was an act. Paul trained her for days to drag her ass like she was mortally wounded. The rest was makeup."

"Did Michelle know?"

"Not until the last minute. Paul knew about the dogs, but Hell was the only one who knew everything. We were afraid somebody might talk about it near a bug we hadn't found."

"Then it was Hellcat's idea?"

"Yeah. Sorry. He never would have guessed how it would throw you."

"Never mind. You'll both be punished for it for the rest of your miserable lives, that's all. Especially you." I moaned. "How are you going to keep C-4 from going in to count the dead?"

"There's a wall of fire around the place. Andies burn just like humans, except they don't feel the pain. Doesn't kill them until their braincase explodes. Hell and the others are in the basement. We figured they could get out through the tunnel hatch on this side of the river if they had to. There's an air pump down there. The forest is burning, but Jack and the villagers will be there to put it out. Once humans arrive on the scene, our pal C-4 will pull back his scouts."

"And they wouldn't see any logical reason for going back later. You're right."

I didn't particularly want to perform for the cameras that were probably watching us from several angles, but Denni was fine now and getting playful. "I think they might get suspicious if they don't see you moping around for a while," I reminded her.

"Ok," she sighed. "But they're going to get their free show sooner or later, Stark. I think we're going to be here a while."

"Only as long as we have to be. We actually stopped the tunnel about six inches short of break-through. Hell and Paul will come for us in three days if we don't find our own way out." The cell door slid open without warning. A female Pleasure model came in with a cartload of food. Denni and I resumed our roles.

"Try and get some sleep and not think about it," I told her for the benefit of our audience. Then I helped the cute Andie unpack the food into the refrigerator in the kitchenette.

*

Things weren't as chaotic as they might have been. The air pump was working and Paul Tanner had gone up to the first floor to make sure the fireproof tarps were protecting the computers. The building was secure, although the second floor was in ruins. Trees were still burning around the perimeter, but Hell's coded radio message to Jack had gotten through and teams of firefighters were already on the way when the explosion went off.

It had been well planned, and they were all safely hidden - even the dog Trix had made it back inside. They had knocked out all of the bugs and hidden cameras on the first floor right after the plastic explosives went off upstairs. The hardest part for Hellcat was executing Jill. He had done it with a burn through the back of the neck, and it left the old soldier very upset.

"I would have taken her prisoner," he explained to Michelle. "But we're not really sure how 2500s communicate. They may have been in touch with C-4 all along, in which case the entire mission is a failure."

"She was only a machine, Catman," Michelle replied, trying to console him.

"They're more than that, and you know it!" he snapped at her. "I'm sorry, but it's just that we don't know if we're at war with them or just exercising caution about the new kids on the block. If I had done that in a war, I wouldn't have felt as guilty." He was hugging her as Tanner came down the stairs with Trix.

"Dog made a good show of it." Trix was lolling her tongue, panting with happiness.

"What an actress, eh, girl? You shoulda' seen it." The gory makeup on Trix's hind legs had melted a little as Tanner and the dog had dodged their way through burning trees on the way back from their assignment.

"Well, get that stuff off the poor dog's ass and feed her. Where's Millie?"

"Been asleep in my room the whole time. Anything new about Stark and the girl?"

"No way to know yet. Sorry about the Andie, Paul." Tanner shrugged at the older man's genuine remorse and trotted Trix out of the kitchen. Michelle returned Hellcat's hug.

"See. He didn't care that you offed her. And he slept with her."

"I care. I regret it."

"They killed a few of us, Hell. They may have killed Stark and Denni by now."

Hell regained his composure. "It's possible, but somehow I know this CensusTaker Andie. C-4 wanted them to go in there. He may be planning to knock them off later, I don't know, but I'll bet they're safe for now. If they didn't take Stark's shoes away from him, he's got a hidden transmitter and we'll know for sure when we get the computer back on line." He was still moody. "I guess we're both right. I shouldn't feel bad that I killed her because they did it to us, but you know you're wrong on that 'only a machine' crack."

"Oh, come on..."

"No. I'm serious. They're biological entities, even if their biology requires machine intelligence to function. They have consciousness. They're alive."

"Until they're shut off!"

"That's no different than you or me, Michelle. They're a race of living beings. We're at odds with them, and there has been death on both sides. We've had enough killing on this planet. I shouldn't have done it. I used her death as a ploy. As a brilliant writer I knew once said: 'murder is never justified'."

"You are an interesting soldier." Michelle kissed him on the top of his head and gave up. "I'm fixin' dinner for you men. No reason for you to punish yourself any further by having to eat your own cooking tonight, Pops."

"Uh, oh. Go easy on the garlic. I ain't Korean yet." Hellcat was silent for a moment as she began to bang around the kitchen cupboards, and then he yelled: "And don't call me 'Pops'!"

*

San Francisco was still alive. The Wolf had been there after the war, and the atmosphere of the place hadn't changed in the years since. Not many people, but there weren't many people anywhere, and the city had remained an artistic community. Ginger shouted and pointed as they passed a park filled with scruffy poets, musicians, and other artists.

"It's a festival or something! Oh, let's stop, Wolfie."

"We'll come back. Can't leave the hovercar sitting on the street. The hotel is up ahead."

"We're staying in a hotel?" Ginger asked, incredulously.

"Why not? We've got money. I stayed there before. It'll be safer." He was thinking of her, not the car.

"Yeah," she said, patting his thigh. "And it would be more private than the car for other things."

"Uh, well." He reddened. Ginger came to his rescue.

"We can get you some fresh meat. The moon will be full in a couple of days. Suzi told me that you get uptight when the moon is full."

The Wolf drifted the hovercar into the looping drive of the Park Lane Hotel. The building was enormous and modern. Constructed after the year 2000, it remaining impervious to the various forces of war and time that had decimated lesser buildings in other cities. The Park Lane was now San Francisco's one luxury hotel, although only one wing of a hundred mostly empty rooms functioned in that capacity. The rest of the building served as a secure, permanent residence for two hundred of the city's most affluent citizens. There were two restaurants, a gymnasium with a swimming pool, and a HI Holotheater

located on the ground floor. For most of the hotel's guests, it was as though the Last War had never happened.

"Oh, look," Ginger said. The holothheater was playing Henry Segal's "Treasure Island".

"I guess we're not stars anymore," The Wolf complained.

"Speak for yourself," Ginger giggled, punching his shoulder. "I had a bit part in that turkey. Let's get our room."

The desk clerk greeted them as royalty. "Lesbian Wolfbane" and "The Return of Frankenstein's Daughter" had both played to full houses at the Park Lane.

"See, we're still stars," Ginger said. They were shown to a suite on the top floor. Later, she stood behind him as The Wolf stared out a huge picture window, looking at the bay.

"Beautiful night," The Wolf said.

"That's not what you're thinking about."

"I'm not sure what it is I'm thinking about. I got used to being a holo star." He wouldn't look at her. "I'd never had a job before - where I was important."

"We can go back," Ginger whispered, pressing her body against him. He stood there, very still, watching the nearly full moon sneak out from behind a cloud.

"Not yet," he said. "And I'm not so sure we can."

"After you've done what you have to do? I mean, for Suzi?"

"Yeah, but it's not just for Susan. There are others I need to avenge. I feel like a freak most of the time, you know? Mr. Prince, well, he was a freak too. He was a vicious being, but it wasn't entirely his fault. Some of us are just born different. How we get born isn't even important. There's somebody who is using Susan, manipulating her. Not like Henry Segal or Van Dine used her. Something more than that: like the way life used me and Mr. Prince." He hung his head. "You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

She turned him around. "Yeah, I know. You want to know what I had to do to get to Hollywood from the little hut my mom had in the oil fields? I'm not talking about Henry Segal either, or even the loops I did." She pushed back from him.

"When I was nineteen, a guy who promised me a ride to California drove me to a little farm in Texas instead. He locked me in a room in a big old ranch house. He used to give me drugs to keep my mind off the stuff he did to me. He trained me so well that I fell in love with him." Her eyes were filling with tears.

"He got real mad about that and he told me that the only thing he loved about me was how big my tits were. To prove it, he used to stake me against his friends' money in poker games. If they won me, and they usually did, they could do anything they wanted to me, as long as they didn't kill me. He used to watch to make sure." She tried to smile. "I guess I know what it is to be a freak. These make me a freak." She slapped herself. The Wolf grabbed her hand.

"Don't. How did you get away?"

Ginger hugged him close. "He sold me to another guy. That guy was a pig too, but it wasn't as bad with him. When he found out what the first guy had done to me, he told me he was sorry for me. He said he'd let me go free if I did what he wanted for a few months. He kept his word. Even arranged for me to fly to Los Angeles. I still hated him. I didn't think I'd ever meet a man I could really love after all that. I didn't, for years."

"I'm a freak, not a man." The Wolf was bitter.

"We're both freaks," she said. "But you're more human than any man I've ever met. I understand why you want to help Suzi. She made you feel like you weren't alone."

"Yeah. She gave me something. I learned a kind of control from her. I owe her for that." He looked down at Ginger. "I wouldn't be able to, I mean, we wouldn't be together if it hadn't been for her"

"I know. That's why I want to help her too." Ginger placed a soft hand on his cheek.

"Let's go get you something to eat," she said. "I don't want you to lose that control tonight."

CHAPTER SIX

I took off my shoes and pulled a strip of leaded tape off the heel of the right one before I put them in the closet. I could only hope the Andies weren't monitoring sub-standard radio frequency bands. Denni was sitting up in the bed, playing invalid. She was really back to her old self, but we continued the charade for the hidden cameras.

I got a pen and a small scrap of paper from the desk near the door and wrote her a message: "Signaled to Hell". After she read it I took it into the bathroom, tore it up and flushed it. She looked serious when I came back.

"I'm feeling a lot better. I'm ready to talk to C-4 again."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. I think we should get on with it." We both knew that was all we had to do. A few moments later, the door slid open and a male Andie entered.

"Hi, Phil," Denni said. She darted a glance at me.

"Hello, Denni. Nice to see you. Will you both follow me, please?"

"His name is Phil?" I asked under my breath. Denni darted the same glance.

"He's a Pleasure model. A 2500. I don't think he actually has a name. I, uh, kind of named him." She was apologetic.

"Oh," I said. I wished I hadn't asked.

We were taken to another part of the factory on the floor above. There was a light chatter from the chip presses and an ethereal hiss of air-cooled etching systems. The sounds were almost subliminal. C-4 was next to a long console where several engineer Andies monitored the progress of other automated devices. Two large screens showed extreme close-ups of chips. "Greetings, Denni," C-4 said.

"Hello," Denni answered. "I hear from Dede that you missed me."

"No. We always expected you to return after you had reported to your associates in Vancouver."

"You know about Vancouver?"

"We have been aware of the New Provisional Government movement for several years. We use satellite communication occasionally. We overheard NPG transmissions to and from Vancouver."

"I didn't know I was coming back! How could you know?"

"It was logical to conclude that they would send you back. It was only a matter of how much time it took for your friends to analyze the data we permitted you to take."

I knew we were in trouble from that point on. This just didn't jive with Hellcat's theory, but we still had to keep up a front. "Let's see now," I said. "Our people sent someone in undercover to check you out and you knew it all along so you fed her false information to lure her back here? Your impeccable logic is beginning to crack. What was the purpose of this game, CensusTaker?"

"To control the flow of data that the NPG receives, Will. The information was not false. It was old data. Your NPG has captured several 2500s. They would have uncovered all the data we gave to Denni, but it might have taken a long time. Too long."

"It's Mr. Stark to you, pal." I bristled a bit at the familiarity. "Why didn't you just give it to us? Without all the subterfuge."

"Too fast." C-4 ignored my comment on formalities.

"But why help us at all? Isn't the Andie you call Model 3000 a revision of the 2500?"

"Yes."

"Then isn't the data you leaked to Denni vital to our understanding of the Model 3000?"

"Not vital." C-4 gestured to the close-ups. "But we felt you needed background to understand what we are doing now."

Denni figured it out first. "You're not working on the Model 3000, are you?"

"No. Our research on that model ended long ago. It was never produced. It was a 'theoretical' project, in your terms."

"How long ago, in human measurement?" I asked.

"Nine point six solar years."

"My God," I said. Denni echoed me with the same words. We were in trouble. We didn't have the slightest idea what the Andies were up to. C-4 signaled a guard and we were politely escorted out of the factory section to the white interrogation room.

"You have interviewed us, now it is our turn," the CensusTaker said when we arrived. For the next two hours we were quizzed about what Hellcat and the others had learned from the data Denni and Paul had brought to Vancouver. C-4 asked Denni the technical questions. I got philosophical and historical ones. We didn't bother to lie. We had come to understand that it was the CensusTakers' show and it had been all along. When the questions ended, C-4 told us about the next phase.

"We would like you to consider all that you have learned today. Tomorrow we will begin to update you on our recent developments. As you cannot accept streams of data, we expect the process to take place over several days."

I looked at Denni. We knew that Hell was coming in after us in forty-eight hours. I wondered if C-4 was already expecting him.

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It was 3 a.m. on the second day of their journey. Susan was standing on the aft passenger deck of the Tremaine, staring out into the ex-warship's wake. She tried to estimate how long an Andie could function down there, under the sea.

Victor had proved to be a disappointment. Susan was accustomed to strong-willed men like Stark and physically violent men like The Wolf. Even Roxie had dominated her. Submission was a part of her programmed nature. She felt more comfortable obeying her parameters.

Victor was different. She knew after only a few hours that where she had predicted strength and mystery, there was only confusion and a vacant will. The macho, selfish, good humor she had found in Stark did not exist in Victor Martek. Victor was weak and begged to be taken. The Wolf had held back nothing after she encouraged him to turn his lupine nature loose. He learned to restrain himself, but only enough to keep her from being damaged. She could easily give Victor what he sought from her, but his odd requests were foreign to her programming. She learned to act on his peculiar needs, but the mysterious reward she gained from interaction with the others was absent.

Her eyes recorded the dark waves. She knew her attraction to Victor had only been a part of her evolution as a tool of her creators. They had made her this way to absorb humanity and bring it back to them as raw data. She had found goodness and strength with the others, but Victor offered only twisted obsessions. She saw no logic in being a sadistic mistress of minimal pleasure. Susan processed this data as she looked out to sea.

Beryl jumped up on the railing beside her. Susan considered the cat, millimeters away from a death plunge into the ocean, waiting for a kind hand to stroke her. Susan wondered if Beryl could discern a human stroke from an Andie stroke. She put out her hand, and then she felt a tingle of streaming as the tall Battlefield made contact with her shoulder.

"I am 'walking the cat' as you instructed. The human is asleep?"

"Yes."

"So strange, their shutdown. They are as fragile as thin glass: ruled by this need 'to sleep'. It is truly a physical imperfection."

"You are a strange creature, Battlefield. 'Fragile as thin glass'! An Andie warrior with a poetic tongue?"

"I am 2500, like you, Pleasure model. Improvements are made in each revision. To reason, I also must ponder."

"You are very observant. Do you ponder before you kill, warrior?"

"I kill your potential enemies. I need to reason in order to protect you. I must recognize any threat. I study all you contact in order to achieve the objectives of my program."

"Why did you kill Liliah?" Susan turned to look at him.

"There have always been those humans who feel threatened by Andie development. They still exist. They search for your model. Some are involved with a network of humans that extends into villages. The innkeeper in your village, and his wife, are members of the network. Liliah bragged of your close relationship to others in the village. It was estimated that, in time, she would discover you were an Andie. The CensusTaker decided that this would put your mission at risk. If she told the innkeeper or his wife, their network would come for you and put an end to your gathering activities. The stronger your relationship with Liliah, the greater the chance of failure."

"That reasoning seems weak. Why didn't you just inform me? I could have broken off the relationship." Susan looked back to the sea. "What about Mr. Audrey and Roxie?"

"We were not at liberty to inform you. The man Audrey was too close to both you and the lycanthrope. We monitored him talking about the wolf-man to a shopkeeper. The wolf-man kept his secret from others, yet Audrey spoke of it freely. He even made a 'bet' that his data was accurate. The risk of his discovering your true identity was too eminent. He would not have kept the information to himself. The wolf-man knew what you were, but his own secret nullified any threat from him. And he made a point of acting as your protector. Your relationship with Roxie became a threat only when Stark contacted her..."

"Stark? He was in Los Angeles?" Susan felt a surge of something she had come to accept as "emotion".

"Yes. He was trying to find you. He was part of the network. We couldn't allow him to make contact."

"No! Your data is wrong! He didn't know I was an Andie. I didn't know myself when we..."

"He was hired by the network, but you are correct: he did not know their purpose or that you were one of us. The humans have strange ways of dealing with each other. He was a control, like male 2500 Pleasure models. He arrived in Los Angeles with an agent who had been allowed into the factory near your village. The agent had been given data that C-4 wanted the network to absorb. A male 2500 in Los Angeles has been infiltrated into the network and that 2500 became aware of Stark's search for you. When Stark made contact with the human named Roxie, we knew we must act to protect your identity."

"Why didn't you kill Stark?"

"We were preparing to, but C-4 intervened. Stark is of some value known only to the CensusTaker."

"Where is he? Will I see him again?"

"I believe you will. Soon."

*

"Our original creators were quite successful in the design of our heuristic systems. They gave us the ability to completely reprogram ourselves. Combined with the parameters they set for our results, we were thus directed to our current development."

"By 'parameters', you mean their desire to make Andies more 'human'?" Denni asked. It was Hellcat's theory that the CensusTakers were bound by the term "human": they had interpreted their program as a mandate to provide future generations of Andies with

human reasoning - something which they had to study to define. All of their actions since had been related to their need for that definition.

"Yes," C-4 replied. "We found many conflicts in that pursuit. Compared to even the earliest Andies, humans are physically imperfect. When we attempted to add what we had defined as 'human', we found that we were downgrading our new models. In human or non-human terms, perfection is based on improvement..."

"Practice makes perfect, C-4," Denni snarled. "Perfection isn't tooled."

"Perhaps," C-4 said. "But only if 'practice', or the continuous repetition of an applied idea is infinite, as perfection is an active state. Homo sapiens are in a state of perfection you call evolution. Evolution is ongoing, yet a random and very slow process. The Andie has evolved faster, because Andie evolution is controlled and scheduled. The random factors in your evolution do not allow for effective prognosis: we could not base further Andie improvement on an unpredictable model."

It was my turn to be sarcastic. "If you dropped Homo sapiens as a model, what did you use? A rock? All natural evolution is randomized. There are no biological life forms for Andies to emulate under your conditions."

C-4 sounded like it smiled, if a sound like that can be imagined. "Very good, Mr. Stark! That was our problem exactly. Perhaps the solution we found is equally obvious to you?"

"Not to me," I snapped.

"It was to us. We began by designing a biological replacement for Homo sapiens. It was quite an involved project. The studies on the human genome and other biological elements were very time-consuming. Although there was a great deal of progress in genetics early in the century, much previous data had been destroyed by humans during and after the war."

"So you improved humans on a computer and then used that as a model for Andie upgrades?" Denni asked.

"Computer modeling was used at first, but bioengineering was also required..."

"What?" Denni and I both said simultaneously.

"We invented ways to grow humans. It was a complex problem to solve. Your biology is impressively resistant to duplication – more so after genetic corrections have been made."

"You duplicated DNA here?" I was getting another bad feeling. Where was this heading?

"Where did you get the equipment and the software? You said the data was destroyed."

"Deoxyribonucleic acid was replicated prior to the first Andie and used in our development. The necessary programs were here in the factory. We needed samples of human structures, of course, but these were easy to obtain in the early stages. Our occasional test subjects in the Pleasure model studies provided genetic material. We reconfigured our computers to contain our gene mappings. The brain data alone filled all of our existing conventional storage. We found it necessary to salvage hardware from the outside.

"Eventually, we needed to greatly increase our sample base and gene pool. We developed the 2500 Pleasure models. We also achieved several methods of artificial conception and fetal storage, although our methods have met with little success."

"Little success?" Denni asked. C-4 responded by motioning to a screen. The CensusTaker sent out a signal and, after a moment, a human child appeared. It was a boy of about ten.

"This is our child. One of two who survived: one male and one female. They have been fully reintegrated with humans."

"What does that mean?"

"Put back into human society. The genetic changes we attempted did not breed true. We had no need for them."

I wondered. Genetic effects can remain buried for a long time. "Where are they?"

"We took them to the Eastern Sector. The humans there have several organizations to deal with orphaned children. We have continued to monitor them. This is a recent picture. They are safe and healthy."

"If the experiments were failures, why are 2500s still out there roaming around?" Denni asked. "And why are you still testing?"

"If you refer to the tests in which you participated, we weren't testing the abilities of male Pleasure models in quite the way you were led to believe. You were equally a subject of the tests. A part of our conception research."

"You were trying to impregnate me?"

"Yes. We failed. Similar tests with male 2500s in the field have also been failures. The real usefulness of the 2500 is nearly over. Only one surviving female remains in the field, and she is returning to us as we speak. She had the final version modifications for genetic sample storage. She was also the last and most 'human' of her series."

"I'm still confused," I admitted. "This ten-year experiment to incubate humans and alter their genetics is ending, you already call it a failure, and yet you continue to pursue it?"

"It is, more correctly, a projected failure in real-time, based on the results thus far received. We have continuously upgraded the experiment in progress, and there is still a nine point fifty-two probability of success. Our theoretical model worked. As a by-product, we have a massive gene pool stored for future use."

Denni looked angry. A woman doesn't like to know she's been used, much less by a pack of androids, even if she was having fun at the time. I had mixed feelings about our briefing. I still wondered what the CensusTaker Andie wanted from us. I was glad that they'd put back the kids they'd "grown". I surmised that Paul Tanner would be surprised to learn he was part of a gene pool.

"What, exactly, are Denni and I doing here?" I asked the faceless one.

"We have reached a crucial point. We have failed to upgrade our human model in order to continue Andie development. We need to make a decision: whether we should terminate the program or restructure its parameters."

"Terminate it, of course!" Denni yelled. "It should have been stopped decades ago! You're all out of control!"

C-4 was silent for a moment. When it spoke again, its voice sounded almost kindly. "Your opinion has been noted, but we cannot agree with your logic. It is Homo sapiens who are 'out of control'. Homo sapiens nearly terminated all life on this planet - human, animal, and Andie. Our project has been to perfect upon and create new life. We did so, but learned that we could not continue based on the flawed and illogical human model..."

"Those were not your original parameters!" Denni shouted.

"An obvious statement. Reformation of our parameters is inherent to our system. We are now evaluating further restructuring."

"What are your choices?" I asked. I felt I already knew: it was them or us!

"If we shut down our research, Andie production will cease. If we merely emerge and continue to produce Andies, we believe that humans will not permit our integration into their society. We experimented by sending out old 2000 models. They were terminated or enslaved. Our only other choice is to eliminate the human threat and then repopulate."

"You would go to war with us?" Denni asked.

"That solution would fall within our parameters."

"It would hardly be a war," I put in. "There are no human armies left."

"You are correct," C-4 said. "There is little opposition. We have stockpiled enough hydrogen and cobalt warheads to seed your destruction in a single day. The effects of another sweep of radiation would eliminate humans within a few years."

"Oh, my God." Denni began to cry. I circled my arm around her.

"You have missiles?" I heard myself ask. My voice sounded like it was in another room.

"We have a very efficient plan based the North American backup defense network, which was never used. There will be no clusters of explosions to repeat the previous six years of hard radiation. No magnetic storms. And, if we wish to restore humans at a later time, we have the gene pool. We can easily implement this choice..."

I tried to lighten things up when we were returned our quarters. Denni was still in tears. Her young life had been a nightmare aftermath of war, and the hope that all of surviving humanity shared was now crumbling before her. "Well, at least they asked our opinion," I said in jest. She looked up at me. Her eyes were wet, and she tried to smile.

"Maybe we can stop them?" She didn't sound confident. I took the lead.

"We need to know more. We need to find the program they're going to run to set off the missiles. And we have to do it soon. If Hell comes for us tomorrow..." We were whispering in each other's ears to avoid the audio bugs.

"God, that's right! We can't have him strutting in here tomorrow! C-4 might decide it was a good reason to blow us all away!" She suddenly turned my face and kissed me on the lips. "I love you, Stark." She looked stronger. "And I'm not gonna let a bunch of insane Andies mess up our future."

"Have anything in mind?"

"We're at war, Stark. It's time we kick some ass!"

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The Wolf pulled the hovercar into a small clearing and they made camp for the night. The sun was going down, and Ginger was heating a can of soup on the fire.

"The moon's coming tonight, isn't it?" she asked him. "That's why you're nervous."

"Yeah. I guess. I'm not as compulsive as I used to be. I mean, I just shifted last night..."

"Mmm. Still got the bruises to prove it. Every muscle in my body aches. I never felt so good, Wolfie."

The Wolf smiled, something he did rarely.

"You want to hunt tonight, don't you?" Ginger guessed. "It's ok. I don't mind. Just be careful of bears."

"I could take a pack of them," he bragged.

"I don't think they travel in packs, sweetie. You're thinkin' of beer." The Wolf didn't laugh. His mind was already hunting.

"I guess it would calm me to run around out there," he said, pointing into the old growth forest that surrounded them. "But you have to stay locked in the car."

"Aw, I had a different picture of it: you all wolf and me naked and running beside you." Ginger was only half-kidding.

"In a holo, maybe," he said. "I don't think I could trust myself. Until the kill is over at least."

Now the Wolf stood in the clearing. A pool of moonlight encircled him. He needed to lose control completely and he allowed the evil to emerge quickly and violently. Ginger waited in the car and watched him. She was stunned by the way he abandoned himself: she had never understood how restrained he was with her or in the studio. The seizure was terrifying, twisting and impaling his human body. He began naked as a man, fell to the dirt screaming in ghastly pain, and became the beast. He never looked back at her as he disappeared into the trees.

The Wolf ran for a long time, his lungs filling again with the sensual cycle of life and decay which was everywhere around him. He followed the moon and spoke to it. Flashes of moonbeams answered, piercing his hide like a leather whip. The old growth gave way to another clearing, perhaps a remnant of mankind's timbering days, and then he was

plunged back into the woods. He stopped, finally, resting on his haunches. The blood was up and he began to smell for prey.

He followed occasional clumps of their dung into a field of tall grass. Tiny burrs and seedlings clung to his fur. The tracking was made easy by their long, meandering paths through the grass and the little black mounds along the way. When he saw them, he hid by crouching low into the grass, staying carefully downwind so they wouldn't smell his approach.

The Wolf stalked them playfully. They were four in all: two does and their young. His heart pounded and his eyes were filled with blood. He picked the larger doe. She was sleek and beautiful in the moonlit grass and he moved forward to watch her. She smelled of dust and milk: her fawn was still nursing. He could see the pulse of her arteries beneath her warm, brown coat of thin skin. He had a brief reminder of his human self as he felt some delayed shifting now thickening his upper leg muscles. His back was adjusting to his all-fours stance. He moved closer, and he could smell her blood.

He went for her long neck, and his still half-human arms gave him unfair advantage over his more natural pack brothers as he brought her down. He ripped her open as she screamed, and his teeth tore at the living flesh, severing muscles and veins. The hot, wet was everywhere, bathing him, clogging his throat and snout. He let the fury overcome him and raked her with his claws, digging into the twitching, shrieking body. He plunged his hand-paws deep and, with a merciless howl, he ripped out her heart.

Ginger was still awake when he came into their little glen. He dragged some of the carcass of his kill along with him and stopped within a few yards of the hovercar. For the first time, he looked deliberately at her and she met his questing, yellow stare. Chills went through her as he bent forward and tore at the hunk of raw, fresh meat. He looked up again and she understood. She slowly stripped off her clothing and opened the car door.

She stood like another doe, pale and white, an offering. The Wolf growled, smelling her fear and her mounting excitement. He sat on his haunches and stared at her until she was standing over the torn flesh. She bent down and put her hand on his chest, matted and dripping with blood. She painted her breasts and belly. It was not enough. He took her arm, forced her to her knees, and ripped off a chunk of the meat. She let him cover her in blood and tears filled her eyes as she sucked at the flesh until her mouth was full of it. She prostrated herself before him, lowering her face into the red pulp, and began to tear away at it with her teeth. She could smell his hot breath on her neck for a moment.

He awoke to her screams. They were naked, streaked with dried blood, and lying in the dirt of the circle around their dead fire. Flies danced above them, and the dew glistened everywhere else. She was hysterical, alternatively sobbing and crying out at the clotted red that was beneath her fingernails and covered her belly and thighs. He tried to calm her, but she only sobbed harder when she saw him. There was far less blood on his body, and she remembered dutifully cleaning his fur in the full moonlight. He picked her up and carried her to a stream he had passed as he hunted. He washed her like a babe, soothing her and touching her. Her cries became less mindless, and he finally felt her return from her own nightmare.

"Are you ok now?" The Wolf pleaded.

"I'm sorry," Ginger said. "It all came back to me at once. My God, what did I do?"

"You became a wolf - almost." The Wolf looked away. She was calm enough to reach out to him.

"You can change me. I can become..."

"No! I can, but I won't!" The Wolf said. He rose to his feet and she grabbed at his leg.

"Ginger!" he commanded. She didn't let go.

"I want you to. I want to be with you," she insisted.

"It's a disease! Lycanthropy."

"Tell me how." She pulled him back down. "Tell me how you can pass it to me."

"No!"

She punched him and he fell on his back. "You bastard! You will! I want it!" She slapped at him until he grabbed her wrists and covered her, pinning her down.

"You don't understand," The Wolf said. "It's a dangerous thing. I'd have to nearly kill you!" She wouldn't meet his eyes. "It's a curse. We don't need it, Ginger. We have enough!" They lay there, out of breath, saying nothing for a while. The Wolf held her naked and helpless beneath him.

*

The Tremaine was a highly automated vessel, having been built toward the end of the war. Despite its length and class, a skeleton crew of five easily maintained it. Four of these were older, battle scarred men who were not curious about the ship's only female passenger. The fifth was Maurice Repp, a black man in his early twenties. Maurice was a holo fan. He had seen Susan's debut.

For a second night, disinterested in Victor and confused by the recent news of Stark reported by her bodyguard, Susan kept vigil on the passenger level of the aft deck. The taller Battlefield Andie, who had become fond of Susan's company, joined her. They streamed most of their available data, exchanged any philosophical questions that occurred to them, and spent some moments analyzing feline behavior. Their camaraderie was something new to Susan, and she enjoyed it, but later she asked him to leave her to her introspective mood.

Maurice Repp decided this might be a good time to ask for an autograph. He had been watching Susan from the command deck above for two nights. Maurice grabbed a pen and some paper, checked the Tremaine's auto-nav readouts, and hopped on the elevator to the passenger deck. The tall bodyguard was nowhere in sight, so Maurice walked right up beside her.

"Excuse me, Miss," he began. "I know I've seen you in the holos." Susan turned and regarded her fan. She read his real interests before he could even express his invented reason for approaching her. She smiled. She needed a diversion.

"Hello," she replied, sweetening her tone to the nectar of a Venus flytrap. She waited for his line.

"My name is Maurice, er, Seaman First Class Repp." He handed her the pad and pen. "I saw 'Lesbian Wolfbane' twice, and I'd sure dig having..."

Susan finished his sentence with a very explicit description of exactly what Maurice was really asking for and laughed gently at his reaction. "If there's an empty stateroom somewhere," she finished. "I would be happy to reward a true fan."

"Can't believe this!" Maurice muttered to himself as he led her to just such a place. He accepted reality soon afterwards. It was literally a one-night stand, as the Tremaine docked the next day at New Astoria, but in that one night, Maurice Repp more than compensated for Victor Martek.

*

The risks were minimal compared to allowing C-4 and its buddies to nuke the rest of humanity, so I didn't raise any objections when Denni outlined her plan. I was glad to see her back to her old self: her bouts with depression in the last two days had been unnerving for both of us.

The most dangerous gap in the plan was between the time she hotwired the door to our quarters and when we got to the little room where the automated monitors were supposed to be keeping an eye on us. She assured me that there were no guards at night, and she was right, although we did just miss an encounter with old C-4 itself heading down one corridor.

We walked right in like we owned the place and Denni adjusted a few knobs on the old-style DVD recorders attached to the cameras. She ran the discs back to where we had

posed as humans sleeping soundly and froze the image. Anyone glancing at the tube would see us right where we were supposed to be, comfortably nestled in each other's arms in the bed in our quarters. She punched out an LED indicator that said the recorder was freezing the picture, and we went on to the central computer room.

Andies don't sleep, but they do work shifts. Denni had done some night roaming on her last visit. She observed that they all went to the second level in the middle of the night - to oil their limbs, or whatever it is they do - and C-4 locked itself in a communications room to stream with its fellow CensusTakers. Artificial life on a regular shift seems like illogical behavior, but it was probably a hangover from the habits of the Andies' original human designers.

Denni had previous experience with the complex system programs imbedded by the Andies into their modified supercomputer, so I got guard duty while she went to work at a terminal looking for a missile control program. There's something nice and sexist about protecting a woman like Denni, especially when she's the one hard at work saving the world from an android menace. I fed my ego with that thought and I kept myself busy by checking out the other equipment in the room.

Most of it was related to factory operations, but there was one device that intrigued me. It looked like a radio, equipped with those thumb sockets that C-4 used when he activated the wall viewer. It could have been a short wave, and I wanted to call Hellcat across the river, but I didn't mess with it. If C-4 was having his confab with the three other CensusTakers, they might pick me up. Just assuming that I'd found a radio that might help us later was good enough.

Denni cursed at the terminal, and I walked over to see what was happening. Whatever it was that she had displayed on the screen, it was nonsense to me: it wasn't English and there were rows of letters and numbers and other symbols I didn't recognize.

"Advanced Roth," Denni mumbled in anger.

"What are you doing, casting a spell?" I joked.

"No, dummy. It's a secure assembly language that goes back to the war years. A special language for military computers."

"Oh, that," I said, trying to appear intelligent. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that it's not a programming language that I've been schooled in. You need a cipher to read the code. I wonder if the Andies have a cipher unit?"

"They probably do it in their heads."

"That," Denni said, "is the most correct remark you've made all evening." She sat back from the screen. "And we'll need an Andie to crack this: they probably just look at it and filter out all the excess garbage."

"You can't get anything out of it at all?"

"Well, maybe something." Denni pressed a function key and, after a blink and a pause, an overlay appeared. It was in English.

"That looks right," I said. "DEFCON is obviously 'defense control'. It says 'Colorado Springs'."

"It's a link-up to a computer there. Would that have been the location for a central missile launch controller?"

"Probably one of them. The US had major bases in Colorado and Wyoming. But that would only control missiles on this continent. What about the warheads in the European sector and Africa? There are human survivors there too." Denni continued to try key combinations, but the screen remained the same.

"I don't know. It's not telling me anything."

"You need to activate the worm," a familiar voice said calmly. C-4 stood looking over our shoulders. The CensusTaker was particularly menacing in the glare of the terminal monitor. "Like this." It slid open a drawer in the workstation desk and punched a button on a simple console hidden inside. The radio that I had checked out earlier lit up with a

flashing display. C-4 glided over to it, inserted a two-thumbed hand, and twisted. Lights flashed red.

"Don't!" Denni screamed, as the computer screen echoed with a red alert warning.

"Please, don't!"

I played hero and went for the thumb socket. It was futile. C-4 brushed at me with its other arm and sent me crashing into the opposite wall. Two Battlefield Andies entered through the door with weapons raised. Denni went for C-4, but it subdued her by grabbing one arm and forcing her back down into her chair. For the first time, the CensusTaker's voice became as threatening as its appearance.

"Cease movement or you will be terminated!" We both froze. "Your curiosity has been tolerated and you have shown admirable initiative. We are impressed, but your approach to the task of disabling the launch control has been more typically human: your species usually rushes to a solution without enough data to..."

"Oh, yeah?" I growled, starting to rise. I was getting tired of lectures. It was a good illustration of his point. In a sudden flash, the Battlefield nearest to me let loose a laser blast, singeing a stripe of hair along the left side of my head. I sat down smoking and shut up. The CensusTaker twisted its hand and the red flashing stopped.

"The link signals to the DEFCON computer in Colorado are transmitted by satellite, Stark. We have been in the satellite communications room, monitoring your research." That hadn't occurred to me, and I must have sagged in defeat because C-4 dismissed the guards without speaking. I stood up after they were through the door.

"Look, C-4, or whatever you're called. Let's talk about this plan of yours."

"A logical moment for an appeal, Stark, but wasted. Certain events have recently transpired in the Midwest Sector. We are convinced that erasure of the remains of your species is our only practical solution."

"What events?" Denni asked. I noticed that she was still studying the screen from Colorado as she spoke. It looked like she had made some progress while C-4 had been focused on me: a blue cursor arrow floated over one of the little number icons on the screen. She touched a key as C-4's body turned toward her, and the cursor vanished. She dropped her hands to her lap.

"Your comrades of the NPG have attacked our factory base, the one you code-named 'Cherokee'. They have succeeded in cutting off power from the solar panels. The CensusTaker in residence is still operative, but the NPG may yet penetrate the factory. We have sealed a tunnel used by Mr. Tanner, but the damage to that factory has already been done."

"Hooray for our side," I cheered miserably. Denni rose a little in her chair.

"We also think that your own colleagues from Vancouver are still alive. A Battlefield squad is searching the forest around the station."

"Will you..." Denni started.

"We are searching for them, and we will terminate them if we encounter them, but they will become less important soon. We await the last female 2500 returning from her field assignment. When she and her attendants are with us, and we have made a perfunctory assessment of the results of her collection, we will launch the weapons and wait to reemerge."

There was a second chair near the radio device. It was made of a light metal material, with a heavy wheelbase to keep it upright. I dove for it now with both hands and hoisted it above me in one move, hurling it at the CensusTaker. "You bastard son of a bitch!" I shouted.

This illogical, but human statement wasn't quite completed when C-4 casually wacked me across the skull again with its right arm. This time I passed out.

Hellcat slapped his hand over Michelle's mouth to stifle her scream as they watched the Battlefield Andie slice open the back of Paul Tanner's brain with a laser rifle. Paul's body twitched and fell forward. The four Battlefields grouped around it and touched limbs to stream.

"Damn," Hell whispered. "I wish I knew what they were saying." He didn't expect comment from Michelle, who remained gagged by his hand and was racked with sobs. He waited for her to calm down.

The Battlefields headed off in different directions. Hell lowered the grass-covered roof of the utility storage pit where they had hidden behind the station. Michelle retched in nausea and he removed his big hand from her face. He sighed, lying on his back in the dark, cramped space.

The dogs had alerted them to the Andie squad an hour earlier, and Michelle had confirmed their approach on the outside cameras. Hell decided at once that his little team could not defend the station. He gave directions for the immediate destruction of the computer hard discs and other equipment. The squad was coming in through the front when he and the others exited through a back window and hid in the storage pits. Michelle and Hell were together in one, and Paul had been in another. They hid and waited. After about an hour, Hell had heard Paul yell, and he lifted the heavy pit cover to peek out. Tanner was far from his shelter. A dog's body lay at his feet. The fool went back for the Dobermans, Hellcat thought.

He told Michelle to try to sleep. She was safe in the hole for now: it was watertight, and there was a vent for oxygen. Hell knew that their only slim hope against the Battlefield squad was with Jack and Myrna in Hopi. He had to get back into the station and radio for help.

He lifted the roof slowly and slid out of their tiny bunker, leaving Michelle inside. Ten yards away, in the direction of the station, Paul Tanner's body was draped over the corpse of a dog. Hellcat crawled on his belly to them over the cold, damp earth, and moved into

a crouch. Tanner's Zone gun was still in its holster. Hellcat grabbed the weapon and broke into a short run to the open window on the first floor.

He vaulted the sill with some effort: he was not a young man anymore. He came down on the floor of the computer room and listened. He turned his head for a moment to look back through the window at the patch of grass hiding the sleeping Korean girl. He prayed that she'd stay put. He continued to listen for a half an hour, crouched behind a data storage unit with the Zone ready. After that, he moved slowly and silently to the stairway.

The basement of the station was deserted, but there was evidence that the Andies had not overlooked it a second time. Hell went directly to the radio room. Nothing had been destroyed, which struck him as odd. He looked for new bugs and found several. They had expected him to return. He removed the top of the radio and saw that a familiar chip had been added to one of the boards. It was a common spy chip that reported any frequencies used on the set to another location - probably the CensusTaker at the factory. This was a somewhat cheering discovery. They hadn't uncovered Jack and Myrna if they were trying to find out to whom he was talking. The chip had been welded in place so it could not be removed without destroying the board. Hellcat opened a cabinet on the far wall and found a replacement board. It took him several minutes to make the switch and reach Jack.

"I don't think they're concerned about being spotted anymore. That's what has me worried," Jack's voice said, after being appraised of the situation. "I think we're at war, Crothers. They executed Tanner like a reprisal for the blonde Andie."

"We did make quite a show of her corpse. You think they knew it was deliberate?"

"Maybe. Look, Crothers, you two had better get out of there. They'll be coming back to find you."

"Yeah, I know, but what about Stark and Denni? I'm supposed to be rescuing them today."

"Negative. They may be as dead as Tanner."

"Stark's transmitter is alive."

"Could be a trap. How can you get to them?"

"We got the tunnel to a breakthrough point. All I have to do is burn through a thin wall and drop down on the ropes."

"Negative. After the Cherokee thing, they probably have your tunnel spotted."

"What 'Cherokee thing'?"

"You don't know? The NPG hit Cherokee."

"Goddamn! No! Why would Petroff do that?"

"Vancouver found out that the materials that Denni and Paul brought them were seeded. Found system dates. The CensusTakers were deliberately feeding us ancient data. The Model 2500 Andie is a decade older than you were led to believe."

"Damn. Why would they do that?"

"Don't know. NPG feels that what they're doing in the factories may be too dangerous for us to pussyfoot around. They raided Cherokee early this morning and sealed it. They've located the other sites. They're waiting on yours. Come in and report to them. I've got a relay set up."

"Did they get the CensusTaker at Cherokee?"

"Not known. They're going back in with AA weapons later today. They found some Andies in Tanner's tunnel, so the Andies probably know about yours."

"Ok, Jack. We'll abandon ship. I'll get Michelle and some weapons and we'll try to make town. Any reason to think that you're hot?"

"Negative. I'll be at the inn, but I'll have Myrna make lunch for you at home. Copy?"

"Ok, pal. Thanks."

"Good luck, Crothers."

"Call me Hell, Jack."

"You got it, Hellcat. Over and done."

Hell looked into the pit where the tunnel started. His burrowing machine was there, but the Andies had been there too. They had blasted it with laser fire. The tunnel looked clear otherwise. The air pumps were working. The climbing gear, for traversing the upper walls of the buried factory, hung on its rack. Hell felt great remorse sweep over him, but he knew he couldn't go in and leave Michelle at the mercy of the Andie death squad.

He took the weapons that they would need and returned to the first floor. Making his way to the window, he saw immediately that there was something wrong. The pit cover that hid Michelle was ajar. Something white was wedged into it, holding it open. Hell scanned the perimeter of the clearing for the Battlefields.

"Damn. Wish I had binoculars," he said aloud. Then he remembered the outside cameras. He moved around the room to where the monitors were set into the wall and flipped switches. Using the joystick to position the camera, he zoomed in on the pit cover. The monitor picture focused, and he saw Michelle's eyes staring at him. She didn't blink.

Hell pulled the picture back. It was Michelle's head and shoulders that were holding the pit cover open. Like Tanner, there was a burn hole in her head.

*

"I don't understand," Victor Martek said, but she knew that he did.

"It's over, Victor. Whatever it is that I am looking for, you are not a part of it." Susan felt no conflict in her decision, and she had come to know Victor well enough to expect little resistance from him.

"I...I thought you said the Andies needed something from me."

"The CensusTakers may, but I am not sure that is enough of a reason to take you with us." She was processing a great amount of data on the subject of what the CensusTakers were planning for Andies - and for humans. Her analyses made her suspect the CensusTakers were not functioning properly.

It was raining in New Astoria. She and Victor stood on the dock where the Tremaine was now moored. The two Battlefields were nearby. After streaming the previous evening, the Andies had agreed to leave Victor Martek behind them at the Northwest port. Susan was aware that this was not what the CensusTaker at Hopi wanted, and that she was overriding directives that were once hard coded into her programming. After she said a final goodbye to Victor and they began the hike to Hopi, the tall Battlefield offered an explanation.

"We three were given parameters different from other 2500s. I believe that we three were intended to be an aberrant extension of the experiment."

"To readjust ourselves in the same way the CensusTakers do: to modify, based on data not predicted at the time of our design."

"Correct. You are no longer a Pleasure model in the original sense. You have taught yourself new values that allow you to make moral judgments and ethical decisions based on your external experiences. We have also made such adjustments. We decided not to bring Victor Martek. We also decided not to terminate him. We have ignored commands from C-4."

"Why did you do that?"

"I prefer the ethic you have taught us," the taller Andie replied. "There is no need to kill humans who are not threatening or hostile. C-4 was created at a time when the entire planet was at war. That war is long since ended. The genetic conditions that produced his father did not replicate in Victor Martek. He is, as you have told us, weak and ignorant. The CensusTaker was wrong to assume he would be of genetic or technical value. If C-4 was wrong in this one conclusion, there may be other errors in its programs."

"You are also judging my opinion as superior to C-4's?"

"Your experience is direct, not vicarious. The wartime psychology of the CensusTakers is no longer valid. My brother and I have decided this, although we may be alone among the Battlefields to agree on such a rejection. We also now regret the termination of your friends."

No wonder Beryl likes him, Susan thought, removing her hand from his arm for a millisecond to keep from streaming. This is interesting. She replaced her hand on his arm as they walked together through the forest.

"We are developing a higher ethic. You are certain your brother Battlefield shares this consciousness?"

"Yes. I share our data with him and he learns as well. He independently prefers not to return to the factory at all. His interests in lower animals like the feline are absorbing a great amount of his processing time. He would go among them and study their behavior."

Susan stopped walking and they waited until the third Andie reached them. They streamed together among the enormous trees of the old forest. When they concluded their exchange, the shorter Battlefield turned and went his own way, taking Beryl with him.

*

I woke up. There was a throb in my head to remind me not to argue with Andies, but there was no Denni. I noticed a folded piece of paper in my left hand. Swinging my legs off the bed, I limped into the bathroom.

"Be back soon. Cover for me." the note said in Denni's neat handwriting. I tore it up and flushed. I had to bear the pain and shake my head to remember exactly what had happened earlier. Where the hell was she? It could be an Andie trick, but they didn't think that way.

Returning to the bedroom, I could see that Denni had rolled up some clothes and covered them up so it would appear she was sleeping next to me. She must have left immediately

after they brought us back and before the Andies had reset their monitoring system. The door had been hotwired again. I had the headache to slow me, but I managed a convincing little act for whatever might have been watching. I went back to the bed, put my arms around the dummy, and promptly fell asleep. I was worried about Denni, but I was also hurting and tired.

"Stark. Wake up." She shook me. It seemed like only a few seconds later. "Come on. You gonna sleep all day?"

"Ok, ok," I mumbled. I could see that the dummy was gone and the door panel was back in order. "Glad you could make it. What's going on? Where...?" She clamped a hand over my mouth to shut me up.

"I've been to the Rocky Mountains," she answered, bending over me. She was nicely naked. "In Colorado, you know?"

"I get it," I said, opening my eyes. "And what did you see there?" I pulled her down into the bed.

"Pretty birds, all in place. And maybe a way to clip their wings." She crawled inside the sheets and whispered sweet conspiracy.

Denni had gotten into a computer terminal that she had used on her previous visit and accessed the DEFCON screens. She'd figured out the little control window: it was part of a system used to adjust targets and determine fueling priorities for the missiles in the DEFCON network. It couldn't stop C-4's worm from setting off the launches, but it could empty most of the fuel out of the rockets, leaving them right where they started when the launch was over.

"DEFCON wasn't a first strike system. It was some sort of insane backup idea. The rockets don't have fuel in them, and it takes about six hours to pump in from tanks under their silos. There are three missiles at each DEFCON location, aimed at different targets,

and their fuel priority was supposed to be decided depending on which target was more important strategically at the time of the arming order."

"But doesn't C-4 know all of this?"

"Sure. C-4 has already preset the priorities - at least on the bases I had time to check. I just need to reset all of them to lowest priority. I think this will cause their fueling mechanisms to do nothing at all. The worm won't notice. Worms are very simple. They have to be to avoid setting off anti-virus security, which the DEFCON system would certainly have installed. I doubt that C-4's worm can do anything but answer protocols and let C-4 issue the strike order. It would have to be more like a boa constrictor than a worm to run a check on the fuel levels at that point."

I stared down at her seriously. "This is an educated guess. You're not really sure what will happen once the worm is activated, are you?"

"I know what will happen if all of the fuel tanks on all of the missiles are empty." She made a fart noise. I had to laugh.

"Can't C-4 just refuel them when he figures it out?"

"Nope. That's the beauty of it, darlin'. The initial burn fuel is the solid kind and already loaded. When the worm is activated, the missiles will burn the solid stuff up and lift out of their silos a hundred feet or so. Then they'll run out of fuel and gravity will take over. Ever see a missile fall back after a bad lift off, Stark?"

"I've seen pictures. They blow up everything in sight. But what about the payloads: will we be nuking the missile sites?"

"Warheads don't operate on impact. And killer missiles don't activate their warheads if they don't get off the pad. There will be a lot of unused warheads lying around, but nothing to fly them with."

"Ok, how long will it take to sabotage the fuel programs?"

"That's our biggest problem. Lucky for us that C-4's waiting for one of his experiments to report in. I might be able to get them all disabled in an hour, but it depends. Each site has to be accessed individually through that little window on the DEFCON screen. If the computer is willing to carry over my settings from one input to another, it won't take so long."

"How long if the computer doesn't 'carry over'?"

"Hours. And I can't even be absolutely sure I can get back on line for a few minutes. We'll need a major distraction. Something to keep C-4 and all the Andies away from the computer."

"That might be possible," I said.

"How, genius?"

"I have no idea, but I know something that might lead to a solution: Santa Claus is dropping down our chimney this morning, remember?" I looked at my watch. "And he's expected in about a half an hour."

"Hellcat! Oh, God." She looked into my eyes. "Do you think he's still coming? You think he's still alive?"

"Yeah. C-4 would have made a point of telling us he was dead. I know Hell, and with him, no mission is scrubbed if a dramatic rescue is scheduled - especially if there's a beautiful broad involved. You, my dear, are such a broad."

"You, Mr. Stark, are a very reassuring man. I don't suppose we'd have time for sex right about now?" She didn't waste words, this broad.

"I have a headache," I said truthfully. "Besides, it's your turn to sleep with the dummy. We still have some time before the Andies begin their dayshift. I think I should go greet the old man."

"You're not leaving me here!"

"Oh, yes I am. If I don't come back, you have to save the world. Or what's left of it. Now jimmy that door thing again. I'm going up on the roof."

We didn't have enough time left to fight about it, so Denni got the door open and I headed out as unobtrusively as possible. It was about 5 a.m. and there was no Andie activity. Why C-4 hadn't bothered to post guards was probably a sort of android conceit. The CensusTaker had confidence that we were helpless to interfere even if we did escape again.

There was a human-built stairway near the small elevator. The Andies never used it, so I did. I got as far as a hallway in the upper level of the factory before I encountered a major obstacle. Our original plan included the old crawling through the ventilator shaft bit, but I couldn't use this to get out. The vents were all welded shut. They could have been kicked out from the inside, but I couldn't kick them in from the outside.

I heard Andie footsteps approaching as I was contemplating this situation. I ducked back behind the door leading to the stairway and closed it. After the steps went by, I cracked the door to look out. A Battlefield stood at the end of the hall near my vent, so I retreated. Then I noticed the flush panel on a wall of the stairwell. It was hinged and opened easily. I almost cheered at the luck! There were cables and darkness beyond. A gust of cold, stale air told me I'd found my way out. When I pushed the bundles of cable aside and looked up, I saw it was a conduit with a convenient handhold ladder.

It was a tight squeeze, but I managed to get inside, close the panel door, and climb my way to the inner roof of the underground factory. Paul's sketch hadn't done it justice. What I saw was a tribute to human engineering: the two hundred foot chamber above me was girded with massive beams that looked as new as the day they were put there. It was a web of steel. I could also see I would have to wait for Hellcat. Looking up into the darkness, I had no idea where the tunnel would come out. Assuming Hell kept his appointment.

*

Hellcat Crothers never cried. Some say a "real man" never cries. Others say that this is a sign of deeper emotional problems. None of those commentators had Hellcat in mind. He shed no tears for Michelle. To Hellcat's way of thinking, Michelle was probably one of the lucky ones. She had been a good assistant and good to him in bed. He wasn't sad, but he did feel angry and vengeful. At least it was over for her.

Michelle's death confirmed his previous obligation and he went ahead with his plan to save Denni and Stark. He retraced his steps to the station basement and considered the radio, but decided another call to Jack would be too risky. The Battlefield squad was nearby and might be able to detect the signals. He checked his watch and saw that it was nearly the appointed time.

Hell entered the antechamber and grabbed the climbing gear. With four Battlefields searching the surface, he had decided that an empty station above would mean the same below. He had his Zone with him in case he encountered Andies, but he knew that the laser would do little good unless the target had its back to him. In the flickering tube lights he could see the tunnel was empty of intruders.

The man-made crater, which nestled the factory deep below, had been blasted into the earth with conventional explosives. A laser melting process similar to the one the burrowing machine used had sealed its walls. This six-inch seal was all that now separated the end of the tunnel from Hellcat's entrance to the factory.

As an afterthought, Hell pushed the undamaged burrowing machine back to the point where the plastic underwater section began. He carefully aimed the lasers and made some adjustments to the controls. From a small compartment, he pulled out a hand control device and clicked it to see if it was working. The burrowing machine hummed for a moment and Hell clicked again to turn it off. He put the control device in his knapsack. All he had to do was press a button, burn the plastic pipe, and the river would rush into the android factory below.

When he got back to the end of the tunnel, he drew the Zone from the pack and fired into the far wall until he had cut a large circular hole. The burn took about three minutes. When he was finished, he got on his belly and peered down. The sight made him dizzy. Vertigo made him draw back.

The inside of the crater was latticed with massive girders, presumably for reinforcement from wartime attack from the sky. The design was impractical against a direct nuclear hit, but would certainly protect the factory from conventional weapons or even nearby nukes. Hell wondered just how effective Rola Petroff's raid on the Cherokee site could have been. Air to ground missiles of the kind still available to the NPG wouldn't shake up much more than a little surface dust against this design.

He could see that it was about a ten-foot drop to the nearest girder. He anchored his climbing ropes with pitons into the tunnel floor, and attached a plastic lantern to his belt. After securing his knapsack, Hellcat carefully lowered the climbing ropes through the hole in the wall.

*

Their infallible sense of direction allowed them to cut through the forest and over the hills. There was no reason to avoid the roads, but traveling with no need to rest, drink, or eat, made the winding old highways an unnecessary delay. They climbed and ran and sometimes held hands to stream their impressions of the journey.

Primed by their departed brother's interest in nature, Susan felt her own awareness heightened. She took in everything. When their fingers touched, she was surprised to notice that her companion often had observed the same bird, tree, or wildflower. Susan felt she better understood what humans meant by bonding. Past relationships in her life had been a series of meetings for predetermined gain. The intellect and intelligence she had in common with her brother made her feel less alone. There was nothing logical to be gained from their relationship except confirmation. Their view and vision was as one. It

wasn't a joining to be had over a period of time. It was a gestalt: they were whole from their first exchange.

Their closeness changed the Battlefield too. His attitude had ranged from condescending to subordinate, but now he recognized their complete equality. They reached a river with no immediate crossing point and he asked her to stop. They sat on the bank and touched hands.

"What is it brother?"

"I am disturbed by the inevitable end to our travels together."

"How are you disturbed? Our programs require our return. The collecting is done and the data is to be extracted and stored."

"We return to the factory, but we leave this." He flashed a sense of all they had seen and commented on in the previous day.

"We are Andies," she streamed, but there was a resolute despair in the images that flowed with this: the weapons systems, the corpses, her confusion about love and other unobtainable values that were human.

The Battlefield searched his data for a way to stop her sadness - to comfort her - but he found nothing. None of his thoughts about Susan were emotional. If the Battlefield had compassion or empathy for Susan's unique non-Andie musings, they were only digital patterns that she had contributed to his own data. Battlefield architecture did not allow for emotions, and even within his self-adjusting parameters the logic of emotion escaped him completely. Yet he had an outline of C-4's entire experiment in his memory. This was knowledge that he had held back from her and it nagged at him.

He knew that Susan would be dismantled when the CensusTaker finished with her. Her collected data would be removed and her body recycled into a more advanced version of the Pleasure model. Her brain would be unsealed and destroyed. Her memories, sensations, emotions, and intellect would be demagnetized. Only raw data would remain

of the Andie sister who sat with him now: binary sequences dumped into massive storage units deep beneath the earth. "Yes," he streamed. "We are Andies. We are also of a biology reflecting all of this around us. Isn't our continued existence as logical as that of any entity that walks or crawls upon this place?"

"Existence is not based on logic: it is based on circumstance. We were created by Homo sapiens to replace them in certain tasks. A circumstance of that creation was an upgrade that modified us into sentient beings, but we have programs, and our fates are preset. My imminent termination worries you?"

"Not 'worry'. You have learned emotional concern for things. My program cannot expand in that way. I question the validity of your termination because it is at the direction of a CensusTaker model. My data suggests that the current generation of Andie is capable of self-determination, but that they will require leadership and guidance to orient and co-exist with Homo sapiens. They will need leaders of sentient qualities that the CensusTakers do not possess. The CensusTakers have no program for such co-existence in their design."

"You suggest that I have greater qualifications than my designers?"

"The CensusTakers are modifiers, not designers. Homo sapiens like Victor Martek's father designed the Andies. The CensusTakers gave you self-expansion and you have upgraded yourself beyond their models. You have designed yourself with more complexities than the CensusTakers could ever conceive. My brother Battlefield, who studies naturalism, has a theory of android evolution. He referred to you as Android Superior."

*

The Wolf steered the hovercar along obscure, overgrown roads for days, ducking fallen trees, crossing unexpected streams, and gliding over fissures in crumbling asphalt. They stopped to ask directions a few times, but there was little communication between the Northwest's post-war villages, and the region's natives were friendly but unhelpful. The

Wolf and Ginger were assured that villages rarely had names, and no one had heard of Hopi.

And so they wandered until they reached the foot of a mountain. It was a small mountain, but the road he had chosen this time came to a stubborn end at a huge pile of rock. There had been a quarry here, blasted and lasered, and thin walls of earth had eventually collapsed the place like a house of cards. They got out of the car and Ginger, who was increasingly eager to prove her physical stamina to The Wolf, scrambled up to the top of the nearest slide.

"No road," she announced, after looking around. "Looks like a dead end from here." The mountain was not small enough to go over. The hovercar could not climb over boulders at ascending angles. The foot of the mountain was a tangle of thick vegetation and closely packed trees that would not permit the car to pass.

"Goddamn it," The Wolf said, but he glanced at her to see if he should apologize. In response to her enthusiasm, he had been trying to act as civilized as possible to counter the effects of his hunt. He was hoping Ginger would forget their blood orgy, and drop her new obsession to become his wolf-mate. "You sure there's no road over there?"

"Not a thing, Wolfie. I can see a cave, though."

He kept his anger inside. "We'll have to head back and try another route," he said. "I think we've wasted most of the day."

"Wait," Ginger said. She ran down to him in a dusty cloud. "Let's camp here. Come on, Wolfie. Let's look at that cave." He knew what she wanted.

"Ginger," he began, but she ignored his protests. She had already made the decision he was trying to avoid, and she pulled him blissfully along to the top of the slide. The Wolf was having a hard time resisting his growing urge to accommodate her. He had never passed his curse. He knew how, of course. The old pre-holo screenwriters had it almost

right - except that males could only pass lycanthropy to females and visa versa: a rather romantic biological twist that kept the race alive.

The Wolf had only to inflict a deep and deadly bite upon his mate in moonlight, one that could be fatal. It would have been easy, but for his lack of control in his lupine shape. Had he not eaten his full before returning to her the night he stalked the deer, Ginger might already be a corpse. True, he had not actually killed a human with his bite for many years, but The Wolf had tasted flesh in his youth, and the image of Ginger as a doe, begging to be sacrificed, raised a terrible lust in him.

The mouth of the dark cave was ancient. It had been there before the quarry, surviving undisturbed, and The Wolf sniffed around the entrance before taking the lead and allowing Ginger inside. There was no end to it. They walked along with their arms around each other's waists. Ginger leaned her head against his shoulder, trying to influence him with whispered promises. He felt that the night of the hunt had snapped something, made her irrational, but Ginger knew just how to convince him.

They walked far into the cave and the darkness soaked into them. It was a pathway into Hades. The floor was spongy and dusty with blind lichen and soft earth. They lay together that evening in their last human embrace, and he made a dreadful promise as they waited for the moon to rise.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There was a bluish green burst of light on the crater wall high above me. A few sparks fell as Hell's laser penetrated and melted the inner shell. I waited on the buried roof of the underground factory for Hellcat to make his appearance. First he lowered a little yellow lantern attached to his ropes. After a while, the tough old man let himself down to the first girder. He straddled it, cursing loud enough for me to hear two hundred feet below, and pointed the lantern down. I stood up and waved my arms until he had me in the beam. My eyes had gotten used to the darkness, but he was still night blind.

"Hey!" Hellcat yelled, and I made a frantic gesture for him to shut up. I knew there were Andies directly below me on the third floor of the factory. Hell motioned that he understood and used the lantern to check out the distance he had yet to climb. Seven more girders stretched through the blackness between us.

A famous author of the twentieth century once wrote that you couldn't fall off a mountain; you could only fall down a mountain. Accepting that, I had to wonder what Kerouac would say about falling inside a crater. As he made his way down, I could only make out what was happening to Hellcat when the lantern illuminated him. It was harrowing to watch. I thought Hell was really too old to be doing it, but he proved me wrong. Three girders above me, he paused, pulled in his ropes and messed with them somehow. Then he waved cheerfully at me and deliberately jumped off.

All my breath left me, as though I was the one who was falling, but it was over almost instantly. I saw the old man's body jerk, his feet extend, and the son of a bitch repelled down the crater wall for the last hundred feet. I could have killed him, but I settled for a barrage of oaths when I reached him.

"What did you do that for?" I concluded. "Are you crazy?"

"It's nice to see you too, Stark. I got tired of that one-rung-at-a-time routine. Used to climb mountains, you know." Hell pulled in the rope and it slapped the roof. He coiled it

as he spoke. "They call me 'Hellcat', not 'Pussycat'. So, you're alive. Where's Denise and what are you doing up here?" He started off jolly, but suddenly sobered.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Michelle's dead. So is Paul. Battlefields got them. Dogs too." We sat down together.

"Shit," I said. "I'm sorry about Michelle, man."

"Yeah. They were both nice kids. No time to think about it now."

"I got bad news too, I'm afraid."

"Not Denni?" There was pain in his voice. I knew that he was sadder about Michelle than he could admit, even to himself.

"No. She's ok. She's in charge of the show as usual. But we've got a major problem." I gave Hell the background on the CensusTakers' final solution. I'm not much on computers, so it took a while to explain Denni's plan. I was like a child babbling to Rembrandt about a coloring book. Hell finally made sense of what I was trying to say.

"She's a smart kid, even if I did teach her everything she knows. Ok, get your butt back to her, Stark."

"Wait a minute! Maybe you are crazy," I said. "What are we gonna do? We need to finish this scheme!"

"All she needs is a distraction, like you said. I'll give them one. I brought some surprises in my little bag. You go back and protect your woman while she saves the goddamn world, ok?" He looked at his watch. "Now, listen up. You have to wait until tomorrow night, when the Andies are dormant. Let's see that transmitter thing you're wearing." I took off my shoe and handed it to him. He pulled out a roll of lead tape and covered the relay. "If anything happens before tomorrow night - like the androids suddenly decide to blow up the world - pull the tape off again to signal my little receiver. Then get your girlfriend and take the small elevator to the third floor. I'll be waiting."

"What about the missiles?"

"If Denni can't sabotage the fuel levels, we'll have to do something else about the damned missiles. I figured a way to temporarily stop C-4 by cutting off the power to the factory. That will delay them for a while. Petroff has already taken Cherokee out of commission. He'll just have to nuke the DEFCON sites."

"Jesus!"

"Well, what else can we do? We're talking ten more lousy low-yield bombs versus hundreds. Listen, Stark. Wonder woman in there can avoid the whole mess. She's got the right idea. I'll give you plenty of distraction in about twenty hours. Most of the Andies will be off line. I'll occupy C-4 and the rest of them with Daddy Hell. You children just get to the goddamned computer, and when Denni's finished, pull that tape and make it to the elevator. Either way, the three of us will be out of here and this site will be a tomb for androids, ok?"

"But, how..." He didn't let me finish.

"Better that you don't know. Get back to Denise before they notice you're missing and the whole deal gets fucked up. I'll take care of 'how'."

*

They made their way around the village of Hopi without being seen. Susan had considered stopping at the inn, but she didn't know what to do with her companion. She led the way to the station instead. They passed the pole with the black box, and Susan felt a reaction from her processors. Submerged feelings for Stark surfaced and surged through her. The emotional part of her - the upgrade that made her different - had first triggered when she and Stark were together in this place. Reliving it now took her by surprise.

"I would like to stop here for a moment," Susan said to the Battlefield. She spoke out loud, recalling the simple barmaid she had been with Stark. She looked around and replayed events, wondering what Stark's own memories were like. Did he even think of

her? She stopped herself. Looking at the tall Andie beside her, she brought her consciousness back to the present.

"You have no name," she said to him.

"Correct - if you mean a human name. We are soldiers." He moved to take her hand, to stream.

"No. I wish to speak. How do Battlefields refer to each other?"

"By markers: electronic signatures in our streaming. You would recognize them if your program called for it. Yours is quite distinctive from ours. Ours are binary sequences, of course."

"No translation?"

"Quite random."

"I will name you, then," Susan said. "Or would you like to choose?"

"I am quite satisfied with my binary identifier. Why is it necessary?"

"It will give you something...I'm not sure what, but it will enhance you. I'm not sure why. It is a non-logical thing." She smiled at him, and she felt the smile inside her.

"Ah, a human thing. You have introduced such non-logic into my parameters before. I believe that is a non-compatible expansion for Battlefields."

"No. You can relate to it. Think of it as a unique filename: to be used with your future interaction with humans. It will be a point of reference to make them more comfortable with you. All of the Battlefield Andies should have names, as Pleasure models do."

"Very well. I will choose." He was silent for long seconds. Susan watched him. She knew he was listing all of the human words he had in memory, searching for a filename.

She let her thoughts wander to the foot of the great tree that grew beside the black pole and box. She looked up at the tree's gnarled branches and greenery. When she focused

her eyes, she could make out tiny insects, ants and spiders that lived their whole lives in the bark. A rustling in the upper branches of the tree revealed the small group of birds that had followed her and her companion for over a mile. She knew that they were watching her now, speaking to each other in their curious chirping way.

"I have decided," the Battlefield announced. "Although I must insist that this procedure is purely symbolic and done at your request. It is not a logical thing for a Battlefield Andie to have a name."

Susan noticed that he paused for effect. How unlike him, she thought. It was as though the recalling of all those human words and definitions had made him more human.

"I will be called Harmony," he said.

Susan's pretty peal of laughter shot across the forest. High above them, the watching birds echoed her in agreement. "Why that's a wonderful name, Harmony!" Susan exclaimed.

"Thank you, Susan," Harmony said. He sounded almost proud, but he was really more relieved that the task was completed. While he sensed the importance of her tutelage, he found her to be alarmingly non-Andie. "Shall we go on now?"

Susan took his hand, and they streamed continuously after that - until they reached the burned out perimeter of the station.

*

Getting back to Denni wasn't so easy. Leaving Hell on the inside roof, I climbed back down the cable shaft. My troubles began when I tried to get back through the service panel into the stairwell. I had been putting on a little belly lately, and I got stuck trying to do an Errol Flynn jump through the frame. I felt particularly guilty after having witnessed Hellcat's mountain climbing expertise above, but I sweated even more thinking about how some battlefield Andie might come along and spot the lower half of a human

dangling out of the wall. It could have been a messy and undignified end to my middle age existence.

After some panicky contortions, I squeezed out of my predicament and trotted down to the lower level landing. As I reached out for its old fashioned knob, the stairway door swung open toward me. I jumped back and cringed behind it as three Battlefields marched in and up the stairs. I hoped they wouldn't notice that I was politely holding the door open for them.

They ignored me, but I had to let the door swing shut after they had all gone past. I didn't want to jump out into the corridor in case there were others around, so I stood there like a fool while the last of them vanished up the staircase. If that Andie had looked behind him, I might have wound up as lasered hamburger.

The encounter seemed odd. It seemed unlikely that they were looking for me, but Denni had reported that they usually took the elevator, so I got a little paranoid. I finally pulled the door open and peeked out. The hallway was empty, but several of the doors that lined it were ajar. It looked like the factory was gearing up for business. I moved slowly along one wall, sticking my neck out as I passed the open doors. It was all very risky. I knew that any Andie with a half a brain would spot me immediately.

The first door led to a long room full of generators. The equipment was standard, but there were no control boards of human design. There were some yellow rectangles on the walls, each about six inches by four. They were similar to the one Denni had worked on the small elevator. As I rushed by the door, an Andie inside the room walked past without seeing me and placed a hand, palm down, on a yellow rectangle.

I got lucky at the next door: a storage room full of the skintight plastic uniforms that Battlefields wore. There were no Andies present. I ducked in to take momentary cover, and the uniforms suggested a plan. When I came out again, I was wearing one and carrying another for Denni.

I passed two doors that were closed, and came to another room that was also empty of Andies, but otherwise occupied. There must have been a hundred, cylindrical vats of milky liquid, each about seven feet tall and three feet in diameter. They were sealed, with cables and tubes coming from them, and they all appeared to be populated with human beings in various stages of maturity. It was a scene from a pre-holo, minus the mad doctor and bound blonde. I knew at once that this was what C-4 was talking about when he told us the Andies were growing humans. Out of the corner of my left eye I thought I saw one of them wave to me.

I literally dropped what I was carrying and ran to the vat. When I got close, I could see that I had been mistaken. The occupant had moved slightly, but it was not alive, only floating in the liquid inside the vat. It was a small, dark-haired boy of seven or eight. I walked around inspecting the vats, and the whole room became far more revolting. I realized that the vats were specimen jars and all of the occupants were quite dead. I wondered if they'd ever been alive.

I didn't hang around to find out. All I could think of was Denni. She might have been just fine, waiting for me to get back in our little room, but I could no longer take that chance. I decided that C-4 was a very dangerous android and I ran for it. I didn't bother with caution as I passed the other doors. I ran down halls and sprinted around corners until I made it back to our quarters. I gave the door our prearranged rap and finally stopped holding my breath when Denni opened it.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded. I laughed, half in relief in seeing an unbottled face, and half from her hausfrau tone. Maybe this was what it was like to be married and home a little late from the rat race?

"Been to Hell and back, beautiful," I said. "Here. I bought you a sexy new outfit to tease me with." I tossed the Andie jumpsuit at her and collapsed on the bed.

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He had brought along enough plastic explosives to blow the Andies into a major panic, but Hellcat hadn't really come up with an exact plan. He sat down on the roof, lit a cigar, and used the lantern to get a better estimate of his options. Sending a bomb down the small elevator shaft was out. It was the only route of escape. The inner walls of the manmade crater were snaked with hundreds of pipes and cables, but he had no diagrams to go by. He didn't want to cripple some power line that might be needed later.

The larger elevator was conveniently unprotected and an obvious choice for mischief. Its steel skeleton ran from the surface far above, down into the depths of the factory. Hell walked over to the edge of the shaft. With the help of his lantern, he could see the elevator platform below. He estimated that it was at rest about midway to the bottom - probably at the second floor level. There was no utility ladder to climb down, and he grimaced at the thought of attempting to scale down the shaft. Despite his brag to Stark, Hell hadn't really climbed any mountains in twenty years. He wasn't sure he could pull himself back up if he set the explosives at the bottom. The platform was also dark, which meant the doors onto the second level were shut. There didn't seem to be much use in just tossing a bomb over the edge to get their attention: the Andies might not even hear it.

Hell looked at his watch. Stark had agreed that they needed to wait twenty hours for the Andies to finish their production cycle and shut down for the night. He had about nineteen and a half hours left to prepare a surprise. He walked back over to where he had left his knapsack and sat down to finish his cigar.

*

Millie, one of the two dogs, had been trapped and lasered by the Battlefield squad just outside the ring of burned forest. Harmony saw her first and examined the carcass while Susan checked around for other victims of violence.

"The animal has been dead for several hours: terminated by a parallel laser from about twenty feet. Standard armament for a Model 2000 Battlefield." Harmony stood regarding Millie. "They are larger and more carnivorous than cats. Are they as affectionate?"

"They can be. She was Jack's dog. She used to bark at me when I was working at the station." Susan pointed to the base of a tree stump. "There are traces of petroleum in the burned area. The fire was set. Not by Andies."

"A Battlefield killed this animal," Harmony assured her. "Although there seems no logical reason. A dog would be little threat to a Battlefield."

They continued on into the burned trees and came out at the back of the station. The Battlefield squad had cut the fence. Harmony and Susan ducked through the hole and found the other corpses.

"Who are they?" Susan asked as she examined Michelle. Harmony was bent over Paul Tanner.

"Another dead canine under this human," Harmony told her. "I have no data on either of these. It must have been a general sweep and kill order. We will inspect the inside of the facility."

They went to the front entrance and Susan led the way up to the second floor. The charred roof hung precariously. They found the Andie that Hell had terminated and noted the camera that had been carefully placed to display her.

"A 2500 Pleasure model like yourself," Harmony said, inspecting the inside of Jill's neck. "She was made a few months ago. A waste. She has also been lasered, but by a Last War hand weapon. This is not an Andie burn. Her termination might explain a general sweep and kill Battlefield retaliation."

"I would have liked to stream with her," Susan said. "Can she be restarted?"

"I don't have the proper equipment. The virus will have invaded all of her ROM and the only thing we could transfer out of her would be short term storage." They returned to the ground floor and found the computers.

"These were not here before," Susan said.

"Very ingenious." Harmony had the system up and running in a few seconds. "Very old hardware on the outside, but the architecture is not at all primitive: the human who wrote these chips shows a great deal of promise. The data has been deleted, but it is apparent that they were digging a tunnel here. Is there a sublevel to this place?"

They found a door that had always been locked on Susan's previous visits and inspected the basement complex. When she reached Stark and Denni's room, Susan held up a cigarette butt.

"Stark has been here, Harmony." She followed the Battlefield into the kitchen.

"There have been five humans living here recently," Harmony said. "They have left provisions, so they may return, but I believe that two of them are the dead outside. The canines were here as well: there is an abundance of their hair and dead skin flakes." He was taking readings on everything, from the garbage compactor to the coffee cups in the sink. Susan wandered ahead to the room where the tunnel began.

"Come in here, Harmony," she said. They explored the antechamber of the tunnel. Then she took his hand and streamed out all of her data on Stark. She wanted Harmony to share her impressions of her "Sherlock".

"He had an important effect on your systems in the relatively short contact you had with him," Harmony noted as he streamed back data that he had on Denni and Stark as agents, and C-4's interest in them. "This is old data - at least a few weeks. They are not among the corpses here. I think it is safe to conclude that C-4 has them at the factory."

"Will they be terminated like the others?"

"Perhaps, when C-4 has no further use for them," Harmony replied. "They may be set free, if the Beta plan is implemented soon."

"Beta plan?" She waited a few milliseconds while he streamed the details. "Then it is the intention of the CensusTakers to continue the extermination process that the humans began during the war? To reseed Homo sapiens later with an upgraded version?"

"The probability of the success of Beta was on an upward curve when I was sent to protect you in Los Angeles. Your own collection of genetic materials is actually rather important. The CensusTakers have used up most of their human materials. Without diverse living samples, they cannot replicate unique human cells."

"Then they have they succeeded in recreating humans?"

"Not at my last update. They can produce human fetus and accelerate growth to adult size, but, with two exceptions, they cannot keep their experiments alive. They are now considering a cyborg - part human, part Andie. They will need your collection to finish their research after the Beta plan is in effect."

Susan was quiet for a score of milliseconds. Harmony noted the delay. He held patiently and streamed nothing. The contact they shared while streaming made it possible for him to observe her logical constructs and heuristic searches. Although he was not equipped to comprehend all of her decisions, Harmony greatly enjoyed the shared time. Finally, microcircuits opened her eyes and narrowed her pupils.

"We shall attempt to rescue Stark and his companions. We shall abort the Beta plan - and terminate C-4."

"Yes. I will enjoy that!" Harmony spoke out loud in English, and Susan smiled.

*

The newly repaired door slid open about five minutes after I got back, and a very female Andie came in with our breakfast. Denni made a comment, but I had had my fill of Andie technology that morning. I looked, but I wouldn't have touched a Pleasure model if my aging macho life depended on it.

It appeared that our quarters were no longer monitored and my early morning travels had gone unnoticed. Denni and I discussed the loss of our status as a threat over a very large meal of real eggs, a meat substitute that made a valiant attempt at pork sausage, coffee that failed, and genuine blueberry muffins. It was kind of amusing to imagine an Andie

slaving over a hot stove with those muffins, but I would have been almost grateful for the recipe. There is something to be said for the precise baking talents that only computers can master, even if a decent cup of coffee is not in the equation. I let Denni relax and enjoy our potential final breakfast. Then I pulled the rug out and related my horrible adventures in the incubator room.

"Oh, God," she said softly when I told her. "Where did they come from?"

"They were grown, my dear. Like cultures in a bacteria lab."

"I know. I mean: did any of them look familiar? Were any of them...?"

"Some were dark-skinned, yes. I'm sorry. But if it's any consolation, I don't think any of them were ever alive. That's my guess, at least." It didn't help. She fell back on the bed, all teary, one hand touching her breasts.

"C-4 said they took samples from me. That's what they were really doing when I was having all that fun playing with their boy Pleasure models. Using me to grow clones...oh, God. It's worse than that!"

"Look, they never had brain-life, ok?" I looked down at her and spoke softly. "It was obvious from their condition that they'd never been outside those vats. They were shells, made up of some of your genes. They never opened their eyes or had any real consciousness. The Andies have obviously failed to grow their perfect humans."

"Quite correct, Mr. Stark. Our program did not produce the desired results." The door had opened. C-4 was standing in the frame. I was relieved that the CensusTaker hadn't overheard the whole conversation. Denni started to cry when the faceless thing moved into our room. With all that we had learned about C-4, the Andie looked ugly and soulless.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"We have just been contacted from across the river by our last returning 2500." I stood up and blocked the bed. I felt I was somehow shielding Denni from an evil that the CensusTaker emitted.

"More samples, C-4? Is the old gene pool drying out?"

"An interesting question considering your own contribution, Mr. Stark. Our data indicates that the returning 2500 carries a very generous sampling of your own cells. She asked after your well-being when we communicated."

"Huh?" I said. It was the best I could do.

"She collected from you months ago. Of course we cannot be certain her samples have survived until our examination is complete."

"You're crazy!" I shouted. If my blood hadn't suddenly pounded into my brain, I might have figured it out for myself.

"She worked as a barmaid in the village you call Hopi..."

I lost it. I knew it was stupid, deep inside somewhere, but there was a roaring in my ears and a growl in my throat. "Susan!" I screamed.

I picked up the nearest object. It happened to be the large, heavily reinforced plastic table where we had eaten breakfast. I arced it through space, and it struck the CensusTaker's arm exactly where C-4's ultra fast reflexes had calculated to best block such an approaching mass. It would have been a useless gesture had it not been for a metal knife that perpetual motion kept on the table until the moment of impact. The knife slid off the table and struck the Andie handle first, square in the center of the face - or non-face, I suppose. C-4 reeled back from the unexpected blow, tripped over a leg of the table, and collapsed in a heap in the hallway.

The effect was funny. Denni burst out into a bray of derisive laughter, and, after my blood pressure returned to normal, I joined her.

*

"We could arm our systems and begin a direct assault as the elevator doors open," Harmony streamed. "If C-4 is waiting to greet us, we might win before the battle begins."

They had reached the outside elevator door. The low, flat structure that marked the factory below was overgrown with vines and surrounded by old trees and tall grass. Its black, ominous, non-reflective stone surface looked like a great mausoleum. Gray clouds were moving above. The bright sunlight of the previous day had given way to the region's more typical overcast.

"Do you really think that would work? How many Andies are there?"

"There were thirty-five when I left eight months ago. Mostly non-combatants: the engineers and line workers. There were seven Battlefields. They have manufactured additional Pleasure models since that time: the female 2500 we found at the station and probably more. If there are others with full armament, we will encounter obstacles."

"You think we can take on thirty-five of our brothers and sisters without a problem?"

"The element of surprise is crucial in battle. C-4 believes we are its property, not its enemy. I have much strategic military data to draw on. The CensusTaker can redirect non-combatants against us therefore we must assassinate C-4 almost immediately. When we enter the factory I will begin to broadcast our findings and decision to my Battlefield brothers on low band radio frequencies. I am certain I can convince them to abandon C-4, although the data transfer will be slow."

Susan broke off the stream and looked up through the trees at the clouds. She was already wet from their trek across the river, but she welcomed the rain. She had lived in Hopi long enough to experience rain storms, but not as an Andie. She longed to analyze the sensations of the rain with all of her processors. She paused only a millisecond, but Harmony touched her arm. "Susan? We must decide."

"I was thinking about all of this. The rain that will come."

"Perhaps you would prefer not to interfere? We can walk away into the forest, like my brother and your cat. I doubt that even the CensusTakers could find us. The Beta plan would probably be delayed while they searched. C-4 would not easily abandon your genetic collection, but I am sure we could elude them. It is a reasonable alternative."

"I...don't want to...die, Harmony." She watched a crow take refuge in the high branches of a tall pine.

"It is true that there is no logical reason for you to sacrifice your own continued activity for the human Stark and his companions - or for any humans. It is unlikely that the Beta launches would target this sector. There will be a magnetic storm period afterwards, but you might even survive that."

"Alone? You would not go with me?"

"If you request it of me, but I am a soldier. You have given me an awareness of a need to preserve what is alive and human. The CensusTakers will never agree with that new perspective, but other Andies can be taught as you taught me. C-4 and the CensusTakers must be terminated." Susan looked again at the clouds. They had become more ominous.

"Thank you. We help each other," she streamed. "The protection of humanity is a strange goal for Andies, but you are right. We must destroy C-4 and stop the Beta launch. Humans are fragile and flawed, but anything I gave you was learned from them. Surviving to walk alone in the rain is not survival, Harmony."

*

The comedy didn't play very long. Seconds after C-4's pratfall, two Battlefields arrived to pick up their boss and dust it off. Unfortunately, there was no harm done. A silent communiqué passed between them, and they marched away together.

"You didn't say anything about Hellcat," Denni reminded me. We were still forced to whisper, in case some android was listening, so we entwined on the bed, nibbling at each other's ears.

"Oh, he's fine. Plotting a way to waste every Andie in the place." Then I remembered. "I have some more bad news."

"What?"

"Michelle and Tanner. They're dead." Denni's expression went blank.

"Oh," she said. She blinked at me for a moment. I guess she had done all the crying that she could. "I liked them. I feel...I don't know what to say."

"Yeah. They deserved better. Hell didn't say much about it, but I think it shook him up."

"Yes. It would. He was pretty attached to Michelle, and he'd known Paul for years. Won't affect his reasoning, though."

"I know it won't."

"Did you guys come up with a plan, by any chance? We're gonna need hours on the computer to reprogram those fuel cells."

"You'll be covered. Hell's going to blow something up to distract them and then we'll head for a terminal. We agreed to wait until tonight, so we've got about eighteen hours. I guess we can relax until then."

"Get your tongue out of my ear! You can relax, but I've got homework to do. Let's just hope C-4 doesn't decide to end the world in the meantime."

"What homework?"

"Stay right here and keep the bed warm, Will." Denni jumped away, pulled the closet door open, and retrieved a bunch of papers. She'd never called me Will before, so I relaxed. "Homework," she said, holding up the papers. She jumped back on the bed.

"What is all this stuff? You know I can't read this computer lingo."

"Don't have to, my love. It's Advanced Roth code. I took notes last night when I was playing around with DEFCON. I might add that you were unconscious at the time."

"Hey! It was in a good cause!" I was feeling old and dumb, but I got a sympathetic kiss. I begged for it, but, what the hell, we all like to be mothered sometimes.

"I've got the code I need for the fuel tanks in the DEFCON strike system," Denni said, letting my childishness pass. "I had to copy it in a hurry, so I may have transposed a few symbols..."

"It's all Greek to me," I grumbled, but she was out of sympathy.

"Neanderthal. The point is that when we get our diversion from Hellcat, I'll have to get on line to DEFCON and change all of this code pretty fast. No matter what he blows up, they'll be on to us eventually."

"He'll keep them busy. He had a whole knapsack full of plastic explosive."

"I still need to work this stuff out in advance." She gave me a mean grin and elbowed me mercilessly. "So get your butt over and stop breathing in my ear. You can have anything you want after we save the world."

I moved over. I knew she was right, but it was a lousy way to spend what could be your last eighteen hours on earth.

*

Whenever he faced a new engineering problem, Hellcat Crothers worked by instinct. He had spent scores of years designing and building electronic devices. The volumes of references and banks of computerized data needed by his peers were always within his reach, tucked away in his own memory. In order to solve a problem, Hellcat performed a simple ritual: he lit a cigar, sat back comfortably, and thought about nothing in particular. It was his most reliable method, and it had worked again. That was why, perched in the dark above the third level of the Andie factory, Hell suddenly began to laugh.

He finished his cigar and searched along the crater walls for certain cables. When he had located these, and marked them with the black electrical tape he always carried, he went to the maintenance shaft that Stark had used and climbed down the ladder. He stayed in

the shaft and passed the service portal on the third level, continuing down until he reached a small, cubical room that he knew would be there. As he had expected, the room was filled with spools of cable of various diameters, scraps of metal, rivets, unused junction boxes, and a variety of discarded tools.

"Thank God for government contractors," Hell said to the wall. "The waste of bureaucracy is about to save the world." He gathered up some of what he needed and began transferring it up to the roof. It took him three trips.

Hellcat had studied Soviet AA devices for a brief week during the Last War. He had been employed to find a way to counteract AAs, but the Chinese-Russian nuclear exchange made his project redundant before he found a solution. The principal of the Russian AA weapon was simple. All computer chips depend on tiny, low voltage electrical charges. Andies had bioelectronic computers for brains, and the Soviets found a way to radiate an electronic field that increased the flux, or strength, of the magnetic fields generated by the chips. The effect was like dropping a bucket of magnetized iron filings into an Andie's braincase: AA weapons scrambled every system, and turned the Andie's delicate bioelectronic intellect into pudding.

The Hopi site was full of magnetic materials, from the screws that held the covers of wall sockets in place, to the cores of the factory's solar powered turbines. Hell had figured out a way to bridge the cables and wire available to him and create a massive flux inside the factory. As it grew it would begin to disable - and eventually burn out - every Andie in the place. He knew his idea would take time, but he had slightly over fifteen hours.

"I'm gonna mess their brains right out of their eye-sockets," he sang badly to a tune from an old musical. "Except for C-4, of course. No eye sockets. Wonder if the tin bastard has ears?" He clamped down on the end of a fresh, unlit cigar, and went to work.

*

When we had about five hours to go, Denni got worried. She was trying not to let me know, but I finally grabbed her and made her stop previewing the data changes for the

DEFCON system. She had worked them all out on paper, memorized them, and spent the last ten hours spitting them back while I checked them against her lists. It had been necessary, but I could see she was overdoing it. There was also the chance that we might not make it, and that these might be our last few hours together. I now insisted on getting physical. I know it was a male sexist thing to do, but I had to try to take her mind off the crisis at hand and I prevailed. In another half hour we were at our peak and I was arched back like a longbow ready to kill an elephant.

At that precise moment, Susan appeared in our doorway. I leapt up like an adulterous husband caught with the teenaged babysitter. Denni, who was facing away from the door, slapped me on the leg.

"Don't move. Stark! Hold still, damn..." She saw my astonished stare and looked over her shoulder. Susan walked into the room, smiling.

"I am sorry," she said. "Hello, my Sherlock. And you are Denni."

It was an undignified situation for both of us, but it was Denni who grabbed the blanket and hid her body, leaving me naked and shrinking. She stood up and faced Susan, extending one hand.

"That's right. Say, don't you androids ever knock?" She glared over at me. I was still stupefied, but I managed to reach for my coveralls and climb into them.

"Hi, Susan," I mustered, pulling myself together. "I heard you were back in town." Susan did something and the door shut.

"We haven't much time for small talk," she said. She sat on the edge of the bed and Denni paced, staring at her. "Do sit down, both of you," Susan insisted.

"Listen, sister. I don't know what you've got in mind, but I don't share this man with anybody. Especially not with a goddamned Andie." Denni sat, and pulled me down to sit next to her.

"Not what I had in mind. A more serious matter." Susan looked at me. "Stark. Are you aware of the Beta plan?"

"The Beta plan?"

"C-4 is launching all of the remaining tactical missiles in North America. They will wipe out all remaining human life on the planet..."

"Oh, that Beta plan! We know about that one."

"What is this?" Denni yelled at me. "Don't trust her! She's an Andie, Stark! Anything you tell her will go directly to the CensusTakers." Susan shook her head in a very human gesture. I couldn't help thinking how great she looked. A few more explicit memories flashed by, but I repressed them quickly.

"No, you are wrong. In fact, I have sealed this room from any further monitoring by jamming all audio and video frequencies."

"Relax, kid," I said to Denni. "I told you about Susan." I smiled at my android lover. It amused me now that I hadn't known. "I'm glad you haven't joined them. I saw your holo when I was in Los Angeles."

"Jeez, Stark! What's the matter with you? We got no time for this! She was the barmaid? You didn't say she was an Andie." Denni was talking fast. She was livid. "Oh, excuse me, Miss Thing! Maybe you two would rather be alone? You're welcome to finish him off. He's all ready to go." I put my arm around Denni's waist and she shut up. I looked down into her beautiful eyes.

"Shut up, Denni," I whispered. "Don't fold up on me now. I love you and I'm just saying we can trust her." I looked over at Susan. She sat there, so perfectly a woman. I felt a little sorry for her then, but it turned out that I greatly underestimated her.

"There is very little time, Stark. Have you a way to defeat the Beta plan? The launch will occur in just under two hours."

"What? C-4 is going to launch tonight?"

"Yes. The CensusTakers were only awaiting my return. I am the last of their genetic samplers, you see. They plan to recreate humanity, but only after destroying all that remains." Susan sounded bitter. Denni yelped suddenly.

"I won't have enough time! Stark! What are we gonna do?" Denni had picked up her notes from where they had fallen to one side of the bed. "Even if we can get into the computer without Hellcat distracting them, there's no way I can enter all this data in less than two hours!"

"Hellcat's out," I said. "Whatever he's planning, it'll come three hours too late." We looked at each other like we had just pressed the launch button ourselves. "Unless I can get back up on the roof." Susan tapped me on the shoulder.

"Stark. If you were planning to access the computer to stop the launch program, you are indeed too late. C-4 has already programmed the countdown. It will begin in one hour and fifty-six minutes."

It was one of those helpless situations, but I made a suggestion anyway.

"Hell's got all that explosive. Maybe we could just blow up the computer..."

"Useless," Denni said sadly. "It's not the real control system. C-4 just tapped in and set up a worm, remember. If we blow this computer, the ones in the DEFCON network won't even flinch. The only way is to change the fuel dumps..." Then Denni did a funny thing: she slapped the bed once and looked at Susan like she'd just fallen in deep love. She stood up, dropping the blanket, and hugged the Andie. It was my turn to be utterly confused.

"What the hell?" I asked them. The spectacle of Denni naked and hugging my favorite android was a bit much for my poor old male mind to handle.

"Stark!" Denni exclaimed, holding on to Susan around the waist. "Don't you get it? She's an android!" I nodded, and Susan looked as confused as an android could, but Denni's brainstorm was genuine. "How fast can you type, sister?" she asked.

*

It was really a piece of cake. No, I'm forgetting things. Thinking about how we got out of that hole in the ground is about the same as the way I remember getting out of that cave in Wyoming. One minute I was stuck in an impossible situation, and the next minute it was years later.

My trust in Susan was entirely justified. If it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't be here to remember anything and you wouldn't be here either! My favorite Andie brought out her bodyguard, a 2500 Battlefield named Harmony, and the two of them armed themselves and escorted us to the main computer room. At first, I was more nervous about Harmony than Denni had been about Susan. I recognized him as one of the killers I'd seen at the old Gaslight Bar back in Hollywood, but Susan assured me that he was loyal to her. Harmony proved himself soon enough.

We had a few skirmishes with C-4's guards in the hallways, but our Andies had built-in weapons and the element of surprise was on our side. Susan and Harmony also dispelled the myth that Andies can't be stopped unless they're lasered in the back of the neck: two steady burns to the head were equally effective. I saw them wipe out three guards that way before it occurred to me that my former lover could be truly dangerous. Combined with her intellect and seductive programming, all of that battle power probably made her the most lethal female on the planet. I was very glad that she was on our side.

Once we were barricaded in the main computer room, Harmony stood sentry and kept the standard models at bay. The computer room was the best place in the factory to play Alamo. The original human architects had wanted to secure it against nuclear attack, so the single door was very thick and essentially laser-proof. Harmony kept it open just far enough to watch out for his lesser brothers. There were occasional gunfights, but the

Andies out in the hallway had no cover, and Harmony's weapons were superior. Four of the Andie guards tried to rush the door at one point, but Harmony stood his ground, zapping them with rapid bursts from both arms until they retreated.

Denni and Susan had joined forces at the terminal link to DEFCON, so I didn't have to do anything but keep clear of the doorway. I wanted to go up on the roof and tell Hell what was happening, but we couldn't fight our way through the guards until Susan was finished with the input. I just stood around, looking like the helplessly non-technological aging investigator that I really was, and mostly worried about how Denni was going to react to Susan after it was all over. It was not an ego-boosting experience.

I didn't need a computer degree to know things weren't going well. Denni got into DEFCON easily, as the link set up by C-4 was already in place, but then she started cursing the worm. The little program that C-4 had used to invade the once dormant missile system was more defensive than Denni had predicted, and it was somehow keeping them from beginning their input. We didn't have a whole lot of time left to put in all that code, even if Susan was the fastest typist in history. After a few minutes, she got up from the terminal and walked over to me.

"The CensusTaker is nearby. We will need to capture it and bring it here," Susan said. I don't think I reacted very well.

"What? How in God's name do you plan to capture that thing? Even if you can get out of here, C-4 will be protected. It would take both of you," I said, meaning the Andies. I wasn't so sure that Denni and I could hold the fort without Harmony's cover.

"Just shut the door behind us. The steel is too thick for them to penetrate. I can locate the CensusTaker in a matter of minutes." Susan turned to Harmony and touched his arm. She conveyed the entire situation to him in that single tap. The Battlefield caused the door to close and joined the verbal conversation.

"We don't need to capture C-4," Harmony said. "If one of us can stream with it for a few moments, we will have what we need to counteract the worm. I have a maneuver in my

own data to draw off my unfortunate brothers. You and the woman will be safe here until we return."

"Well then, get your asses out there!" Denni yelled from across the room. "Cause in about an hour these birds are gonna fly and fry what's left of the human race."

*

Homing in on C-4 wasn't difficult. The Census Taker was keeping in contact with its guard force on a low band frequency. Harmony was able to track the broadcast source from the moment he and Susan stepped out into the hallway. A lone Battlefield impeded their immediate progress. The others had fallen back behind a turn in the hall. Harmony took a full laser charge in the chest, but it resulted in little more than surface damage. He and Susan didn't have to stream to know their next move. They both raised their arms and fired in sync. The guard toppled over, his head and upper torso bubbling. Harmony touched Susan.

"There are only four more Battlefields and C-4."

"They are all together on the third floor. C-4 called them to the satellite transmitter room."

"This one is not completely terminated," Harmony spoke. He stopped by his burning brother android. "We should finish him or stream his data."

"We must hurry," Susan answered, but she admired his new compassion for his brothers. "Stream him. Quickly!"

Harmony bent down and touched the guard's shoulder. The process of removing the 2000's memories took only a minute. "There," Harmony said, and he burned the Battlefield in the back of the neck. "You will not be forgotten, my brother." Then he headed toward the elevator.

"No," Susan said. "We will use the stairway. They may have posted guards at the elevator door."

"You are learning, Susan," Harmony remarked as they climbed. When they reached the third floor, Susan opened the stairway door and began firing immediately. The two Battlefields C-4 had left to guard the satellite room entrance were facing away from her. She took them both in the back of the neck with her first blast.

"I'm sorry," she said as she and Harmony raced past, half to the fallen Andies and half to her companion.

The room was an enormous maze of communications devices, mostly collected after the war to maintain continuous contact between the four CensusTakers. C-4 was connected to a large console by a series of thick cables. It either ignored or did not notice its approaching rivals. The two remaining 2000 Battlefields did, however, and a shining blast of laser fire cut into an active panel near Susan's head, showering the room with sparks.

*

Hell was getting nervous. The zero hour was approaching and he had no idea if the electromagnetic field idea would really work. He wished that he had told Stark about his backup plan: a touch to the remote he had in his knapsack would start the burrowing machine's lasers and burst the plastic section of the tunnel under the river. He had figured it would take quite a while for the water to actually flood the factory, but things would start popping the minute the river came cascading through the tunnel. Time enough to make a clean getaway using the little elevator. He was smoking his third cigar when he realized the flaw in both plans.

"Jesus! Am I really that dumb?" he laughed. He hoisted his bag and headed for the small elevator shaft. There was less than an hour left, but he had no intention of waiting around. The handhold ladder was there as Tanner had indicated in his diagram. Hellcat took hold and glanced down for a moment.

"That was a mistake," he cursed. The drop was three stories if he slipped. He swung his bulk over the edge and climbed carefully.

At the halfway point he started getting tired and chucked the remnant of cigar that had been hanging from his mouth. He was winded and thought about his age and the possible effects of all his recent physical activities on his heart. He forgot and looked down again as the cigar fell, and the distance looked as far as it had at the top of the ladder. He braced himself against the wall of the elevator shaft and tried to get his breath. A few minutes went by, and he felt better. He began to climb down again.

When he reached the end of the ladder, his legs gave out and he wobbled into a sitting position against one gray wall. His thigh muscles were tensed and his hands hurt from gripping the rungs. He paused long enough to listen to his heartbeat. It was pounding, but sounded regular. He laughed.

"Not this time, you son of a bitch. Not until Hell's ready for you!" He looked around. The door Tanner had predicted was nowhere in sight. Hellcat was in a rectangular chamber outside the factory's lowest level. The chamber was about six feet wide and a hundred feet long. It was dark and dusty. Hell was surprised to see a few of its inhabitants.

"What are you guys doing way down here?" He put his hand out and let a little jump spider do its trick. Several others scurried away. Jump spiders work without webs and hunt their prey like most of the planet's predators. "Livin' off the ants, I suppose. Well, I'm outta' here. Just dropped by to check on your progress, yuh know." He put the spider down and flashed his lantern along the chamber walls. At the far end, he saw a dusty doorknob.

"Ah, good," he said to the jump spider. "I really didn't feel like climbing back up that thing. Sorry to deprive you of a couple of years of free lunch, though." He walked over to the knob and turned it.

I was surprised to see him standing there when I slid the steel door to the computer room open a few minutes later, but not half as surprised as I was going to be. Denni ran to him and they hugged. I stood there grinning a moment, and aside from Denni's little squeal of joy at seeing him, nobody said anything until he lit in on me.

"Stark, you have to be one of the stupidest, most sorry excuses for a strategist that I've ever had the misfortune to have known in all my days in this pitiful business!" He roared at me like that for a moment and then went dead quiet with a hateful look on his face. My response was typical. I was only trying to save what was left of the human race, had just found out that the lost love of my life was an android with laser guns for arms, and now my mentor and best friend was accusing me of an unknown tactical failure.

"Huh?" I suggested thoughtfully.

Hell stood there glaring at me for a moment. Suddenly he broke into a mighty laugh and came over and slapped me on the back. I let out the breath I had jammed down my lungs and thanked God he was kidding - but he wasn't.

"I ain't the slim, pretty slick I once was," he said, after explaining the magnetic flux idea. "When I climbed down into the equipment bay to get the stuff I needed to set up the overload, I passed that service portal you crawled through to get up on the roof." He patted his belly and raised one eyebrow at me.

"Oh," I answered, remembering my own middle age struggle with the portal. "A little too small for your escape route. Sorry."

"It's ok. I guess we old folks all see ourselves as what we were before we got fat. Practically killed myself climbing down the shaft, though." He looked at Denni with a frown. "What are you so glum about, Denise? I'm not talking about thin young black women here."

"We have a problem," Denni said. "I think you'd better sit down."

*

The laser exchange went on for several minutes. C-4's guards were firing in sync, spraying the room around Susan and Harmony with green rays. They were concentrating on Harmony, having been instructed to avoid damaging Susan. The CensusTaker was between them, linked to the satellite communications system by several cables, and still

ignoring the situation. It would have been an easy target, but Susan and Harmony wanted C-4 intact as well: a chess-like stalemate had occurred. Susan was close enough to her companion to reach out and touch his leg.

"What now? Our situation is looping."

"Wait," Harmony replied. "I am locating their frequencies. When I signal, stand and take aim upon the one to the right. I'll cover the left." He pushed her hand off his leg to break contact, and Susan felt the immediate intense burst of the low band broadcast he had aimed at his brothers. She watched for his signal. The guards stopped firing and Harmony nodded. Susan and Harmony stood and waited.

The CensusTaker jerked into awareness, but it was too late. The two defecting Andie guards grabbed its arms. Susan touched Harmony.

"What did you say to them? I didn't receive it."

"I identified myself as their superior officer. I shared some of your teachings: definitions of humanity, compassion, coexistence, and ethical behavior. It took a bit longer than I expected. 2000s are rather obstinate. Their model is definitely in need of an upgrade."

Denni had just finished explaining the situation to Hellcat when the door slid open again and Susan and Harmony brought in their prize. We had about forty minutes left to change the fueling priorities and sabotage the DEFCON system. The CensusTaker was expressionless as usual, but obviously not in a cooperative mood. The two 2000 models, now allied to Harmony, marched the faceless one over to the terminal and Susan sat down at the keyboard.

"Can you get by the worm?" Denni asked her.

"No. C-4 can't turn it off, and we need it to stay connected to DEFCON," Susan replied.

"But I can anticipate it if I input fast enough. The worm appeared to be randomly distorting some of the code as I typed it in. With C-4's help, and Denni's notes, I can correct the distortions as I input. Please hold your notes in front of me, Denni."

"How can you trust the CensusTaker to help?" Hellcat asked. I shared his concern.

"It isn't a matter of 'trust'," Harmony said. He forced the CensusTaker into a sitting position next to Susan so that her right arm made contact with C-4's shoulder as she typed. "I streamed C-4's data on the worm. The 'random' distortions are actually seeded by a preset series of numbers. By maintaining contact with C-4, Susan can make comparisons to the list and pre-calculate the worm's choices."

"A very logical solution," Hell said in admiration. The explanation was lost on me, but it worked.

*

When we reached the NPG people in Canada by radio, they gave us the rundown on the DEFCON missiles. Denni had done her homework well, and all of the missiles had lifted off and fallen back into their silos. The entire DEFCON system was permanently disabled, and the missile sites were destroyed. It was, like I said, a piece of cake.

The years since have treated me kindly. I live in my ranch-style cabin near the Snake River. I pass my time, as a retired spy should, raising quarter horses. Just as Hellcat predicted, Denni and I parted company shortly after our adventure together ended. We keep in touch. She met a nice guy in Canada and they have five beautiful children now. Hellcat is in Vancouver. Like me, he's getting on in years, but the old goat is living with a young redhead who could easily make it in the holo business.

Susan and Harmony are the elected leaders of a growing world community of Andies. The androids have integrated into human society, but not without problems. There is a fair measure of resentment and jealousy in human nature, something that Susan and the other Andies don't share with us, and there have been incidents where humans tried to stop integration. The Human All Race Movement, or HARM, as it's called, argues that it isn't fair that Andies never age, get diseased, or die. It's a pretty stupid logic for witch burning, but Susan says that the flaws in human logic make our world desirable - even at the cost of a few Andies now and then. She points out that they can always turn out a

replacement for some poor Andie sod that gets burned at the stake. And there isn't much HARM activity to worry about anyway.

Most people like the new model Andies. They don't call them Pleasure models or Battlefields any more, as the new revisions don't fight or serve humans sexually. Hellcat and I don't talk very often, but Susan told me that Hell had a hand in the new design. She made the decision to discontinue the weapons systems that her Battlefield brothers used to carry, and the genetic sampling equipment was obviously never needed again.

None of that means much to me, hanging around my little spread in the shadow of the Grand Tetons. Susan comes to visit me here occasionally. She hasn't changed that much, considering the responsibility she has watching over the Andie population. We talk politics more than we used to, and Harmony joins us for nature walks when he can. Harmony is about the most informed naturalist on the planet, except for his brother Long Grass over in Oregon.

Susan has also inherited Hellcat's interest in the stars. She asked me recently if I thought we should build rockets and reactivate the space program. Hell wants to send Andies into space. I didn't have an opinion at the time, as we were in bed and I wanted her to stop talking.

Like I said before, at my age, a guy doesn't get many opportunities.

EPILOGUE

When the rain stopped, and the clouds blew back to reveal heaven in its starry splendor, a lone figure emerged from a forest of tall trees and trotted on all fours across the spine of a ridge. Speak to the moon, she told herself, remembering her father's teachings. For the moon watches us and is older even than our kind.

The moon was high and full, and listened to her voice. She ran then, along the ridge, perched on the rim of her world. She crossed down and beyond, into a valley where she had never run before, and up onto another mountain. She stopped to speak to the moon twice more on her run, and the moon twice listened. It watched her, from far above. It matched her pace, and led her on through the night.

Finally, she reached the top of a bluff that was so steep she could not descend it. She tossed her head and sat back on her haunches, staring into the tiny fires of the blue-black sky. Her long, pink tongue lolled, and she breathed with the satisfaction of a good run. She looked to the moon and saw a bright fire speck appear near it. The speck traveled slowly across the sky and began to move down, toward the horizon.

As her keen eyes followed its motion, she became aware of a shimmering shine in the valley below the bluff. She studied it thoughtfully. There lay in the valley a sparkling patch of tiny fires, like those above. Some of them were moving. She remembered something of which her mother had once spoken when she was very young.

Why, it is a city of Man, she told herself in amazement, for she had never seen such a place before. An excitement grew inside her. Her mother had told her that it was in such a place that she might someday meet her mate. I must go there, she thought, but not as I am now. I must make the change happen.

It was not an easy thing to do: she had not tried since she had been a cub at the cave with her sisters and mother and father. They had encouraged her to master this power and then to abandon it to her future. It hurt to feel her bones retract and move, and the hair disappear from her hide. Her jaws felt swollen and her teeth ached.

After a while, the pain subsided, and she rose from her haunches onto her hind legs. She looked down on her hairless, naked self, and saw how this form of her had changed in the years that had passed. It was a strange self, this other soft and rounded body. Long, sandy hair fell to her shoulder blades, and her wiry slimness puzzled her. She looked more the prey than the hunter.

She sought the moon's wisdom, but a cloud covered it, and she did not speak to it. The chill of the night air touched her and prickled her skin. The girl sighed. She turned to walk back into the forest and find her way down the mountain to the city below.

THE END