

M.D. BENOIT

Jack Meter
Investigations

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SMETERED SPACE

A JACK METER CASE FILE

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METERED *SPACE*

BY

M. D. BENOIT

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METERED SPACE

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DEDICATION

To Jim, Peggy and Robyn

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU CALLED THE WRONG GUY, JOHNSON,” I SAID TO my janitor. “I need a plumber, not a cop.”

“He followed me up,” Johnson said. He threw a vicious look at Sergeant Aplin. “Buddy Face here wanted me to let him inside. I say, not without a warrant. Told him to sit on the stairs and wait for you. Didn’t sound happy about that. Ain’t that true, Buddy Face?”

Aplin shrugged. “No harm in trying. How about a little chat, Meter?”

“Didn’t you know, Aplin? I’m out of the PI business.”

“Yeah, I heard you keep a low profile these days.”

“That’s right.”

Johnson poked me in the shoulder.

“What?” I said to him.

“Got to check that pipe before I decide to call a plumber.”

I unlocked my door and pushed it open. “You’d better fix it,” I said. “That dripping is murder on my hangover.”

Johnson slipped past me, and I followed him in. Aplin jammed his shoulder in the opening to stop me from closing the door in his face.

“Which hangover?” he said. “I hear you drink pretty steady these days.”

“You seem to hear a lot of things about me.”

"I get around."

"Good for you."

I walked to the kitchen and dropped my paper bags on the counter. The thick glass of a bottle poked out of the bottom of one bag wet from the rain. I rummaged through the other and extracted a package of Gitanes. I took my time unwrapping the cellophane then lit up. Beside me, Johnson mumbled and tapped the pipes under the sink.

I dragged the smoke deep into my lungs. "I'd invite you in," I said to Aplin, who'd followed me to the kitchen, "but it seems you've taken care of it yourself."

I blew the smoke through my nose. Aplin fanned the air in front of his face.

"God, that stinks."

"Stinkweed, dried dung, turd butts—I've heard them all, Aplin, so save your breath." I pulled the booze out of the bag and broke the seal. "Want a drink?"

"Ten in the morning is too damn early for me."

I opened a cabinet door but couldn't find a glass. I took a highball glass from the sink and examined it. It still had traces of beer foam around the rim and smelled vaguely sour. Otherwise, it looked fairly clean. I slopped Scotch into it.

"What's the verdict, Johnson?"

The janitor backed away on all fours then jumped up. "I can fix it," he said. "Got to get my tools, though."

"Come back tomorrow then."

"Can't, buddy. How 'bout later in the week?"

"Fine, fine." I waved him away. "Before Friday, at least, okay?"

"Sure thing."

I watched Johnson leave, took a drag of smoke, swallowed a mouthful of Scotch then turned back to Aplin. He'd walked into the living room.

"Jesus, Jack, you live in a fucking pigsty."

I looked around the room. Cigarette burns on the carpet. Beer cans on the TV. Wilted, rotten flowers in a vase. Dust everywhere.

I pushed a couple of empty pizza boxes off the couch and sat down. "What do you want, Aplin?"

He planted himself in front of me. His tall frame blocked the light from the ceiling fixture. A bit of his belly, covered with dark, fuzzy hair, poked between the gaping front of his shirt just above the belt. His cheap pants tightened over his thighs as he shoved a hand into his pocket. He rocked back and forth and rattled his change.

"Ten pounds of gelignite disappeared from Drummond's quarry yesterday."

"So?" I schooled my face into an impassive mask, even though I could feel my heartbeat accelerating.

"I thought you might have an idea who stole it."

"Does the RCMP make a point of harassing all PIs, or just me?"

"Come on, Meter, you know why I'm here."

"Why don't you refresh my memory?" I took a swallow of scotch and nearly choked on it. My hand shook, so I put the glass down on Annie's antique table. She'd brought it with her when she moved in. I stared at the top while I listened to Aplin.

"You know...gelignite—the same type of explosive that was used to blow up your girlfriend's lab."

"So you added two and two and came up with five."

"Let's just say I don't like coincidences. You're gone for two years. Nothing happens. The day after you come back to your apartment explosives disappear. You wouldn't have a little revenge in mind, would you, Meter?"

I got up and, pushing him out of my way, walked to the window. It was still raining, a cold, driving rain that whipped against the window with a solid sound like hail. It was one of those September days that announced winter's arrival with the next sunrise.

"Did you hear me, Meter?"

"Revenge, Aplin?" I laughed and turned to sneer at him. "On whom? There's no motive, no trace, no clues."

"You had two years to find out."

"Two years." I turned back to stare at the rain. "You

know most of what I did during those two years?" When he didn't speak, I continued. "The night Annie died I lost it. The city cops found me bleeding beside her body, fighting anybody who got too close. They say I screamed until my voice gave out. Then I started again.

"I spent six months in a psych ward, Aplin. Tied up. Screaming. Totally nuts. All I wanted was to be with her and, God help me, I tried. When I calmed down enough, they released me. I came back here. You didn't know that, did you? But I found it just too hard without her, so I left again. Wandered for a while. Lived at my sister's until she kicked me out. I don't remember much of those days. Except that, everywhere I went, she was still dead."

I lit another Gitane, took a deep drag and exhaled slowly. The glass was fogged with my breath. I walked back to the couch and threw myself onto it. I let the silence thicken between us.

Aplin cleared his throat. "I'll..." He coughed, avoided my eyes. He backed up a few steps then made his way to the door. "Keep us informed if you find out anything."

"That's not very likely."

I dismissed him as soon as he disappeared from my line of vision. The pain had sneaked its way back, the lingering pain of losing Annie that never faded completely, no matter what I did. I'd always thought I was impervious, the tough guy. Annie had flattened me in seconds.

The Byward Market steamed the night I met her. A sultry July night, perfect for lovers and muggers. I was looking for a guy who was cheating on his wife—a messy divorce case—when I saw a knockout package all wrapped in black standing on the corner of Dalhousie and George. She had a body to die for—long, well-muscled legs; hooters out to here and a delicate neck that supported the face of the Blessed Virgin.

The ladies had come out in force that night, and they'd used the excuse of the heat to peel off as much clothing as possible. The bombshell in black didn't fit. First of all, she wore a knee-length skirt. Secondly, she didn't wear makeup, cheap jewelry or high heels. And the look on her face...she

was either very angry or very frightened but I couldn't tell which.

I wasn't the only one interested in her. From opposite sides of the street, two punks had seen her and were strutting in her direction. By the way they eyed each other and her, I had a hunch it might turn ugly so I decided to place myself on the lady's side. She misunderstood my intentions, thought I was trying to pick her up. As soon as I got close enough, she grabbed my lapels and yanked me close, so close I could see the black ice of her eyes under the street lamp and a little bit of green stuff between her two front teeth.

I was struggling to unclench her fists from my almost-new jacket when she lifted me from the sidewalk. My toes didn't even touch the concrete.

"You get away from me, you shit," she said in a rusty voice, her lips curled outward like a rabid dog's. "I'm not in the business and I'm not interested. Is that clear?"

I nodded. She dropped me.

In that lightning moment, I was a goner. Thirty seconds after I'd met her, I'd fallen in love with Annie.

That night, we ended up in my apartment. She stayed for three years. Then she was dead.

I walked to the counter and picked up the open bottle. This was a good day to polish it off.

* * *

I opened my eyes to utter darkness; in the flash second it took for me to come fully awake, I knew I wasn't in my apartment.

This darkness was like nothing I'd ever experienced. It was thick, closed, absorbing. Suffocating. My body floated, aware of its cells disconnecting from each other, as if they drifted in a vacuum but stayed together out of whimsy rather than choice.

Maybe I'm dead, I thought. But if I were dead, how could I think I was dead?

I'd always been certain that death would bring oblivion,

but I still remembered everything. I remembered the pain. I remembered I'd lost the only thing worth living for. I remembered I'd wished I'd died for the past two interminable years. No such luck.

If I was alive then where the hell was I?

I couldn't see. Either the darkness totally surrounded me, or I'd gone blind from my last encounter with Grant's Scotch. I scrunched my eyes closed and opened them again. Spots of light danced in front of me then faded back to darkness.

I was lying on my back. Maybe. Where was up or down? I couldn't feel my arms or legs. I couldn't even move my head.

I breathed down my panic and tried to concentrate on the moments before I'd passed out. I'd sat in my apartment in front of the tube, packing it in like every other night. What was I watching? Preseason hockey game, that's right. Habs against the Leafs. The game had just started. I'd turned the sound off and put Rigoletto in my CD. The players danced to the opera tunes; the coaches sang the arias. Funniest thing I'd seen in a long time.

But I hadn't lost it. I didn't scream or break anything. Just got slowly drunk in my own sweet time.

I tried to move again. I could wriggle my fingers. I could curl my toes. Bend my knees a little. Turn my elbows out. I was definitely tied up. A vague memory of a white shape with two heads flashed through my brain. I couldn't be back in the psych ward at the Royal Ottawa, could I?

"Hey," I threw out to the dark in front of me, "anybody home?"

My voice fell flat, as if walls I couldn't see sucked in the sound. I squirmed and bucked. This had gone on long enough.

"Okay," I said through clenched teeth, "let me up, whoever you are, or I swear I'll mush your face as soon as I break free."

Sound ripped into me like a tidal wave pounding the shore. Screeches battered my body from all sides. I pulled on my restraints, my only thought to free my hands so I could shut out that godawful caterwauling.

This has to be a dream, I thought. Then: no way. My brain could never produce that kind of noise, even as a sick fancy brought on by too much alcohol. Which didn't answer my question—where the hell was I? More to the point, what did the noisemakers want from me?

I was swearing up a storm when the lights came on and the shrieks stopped. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. Not that there was much to adjust to. With my head immobilized, I could only see a small portion of a plain white ceiling. I slid my eyeballs down to see my feet then to the sides as far as I could push them.

Unrelenting white.

I twisted and pulled. Wait a minute, I thought, something didn't feel right. What had happened to the croak in my voice, my proof of dutiful cigarette smoking and hard drinking? Come to think of it, where was my hangover? Apart from being tied up and mad about it, I felt great. Physically, at least.

"Please do not move, John Meter, it impedes your recovery," a high-pitched voice said.

I couldn't figure out where it came from; it hovered beside me, around me, through me.

"Jack," I said.

"Pardon me?"

"It's not John, it's Jack," I said more loudly. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"Our information indicates John as your given name. Why would we call you Jack?"

"Because it's my name, okay?" The guy was a moron. If it was a guy. "Where am I and what do you want?"

The Voice stayed silent. I thought it had left until I heard a rustle. "We brought you here because we need your services, Jack Meter. But first we had to repair you."

"Repair me? What am I, a toaster?" I yanked on whatever was holding me down. "Let me up, will you?"

"We cannot do that, Jack Meter."

"What did you do to me?"

"You were dying."

"Of course, I was dying, you moron—that was the whole point."

"You wished to die?"

"Give yourself an A-plus, bozo."

"This complicates matters." The Voice sounded worried. "We thought you would wish to repay a debt. This is the custom of your race, is it not?"

This situation, already strange at the outset, had degenerated into the bizarre. The Voice acted as if it didn't know much about my "race," as it put it, but claimed it had reversed years of abuse to my body. And it played the weirdest music I'd ever heard. I threw out a wild guess.

"The next thing you'll tell me is that I'm not on Earth anymore, right?"

"In a manner of speaking," The Voice said, "no. Yes."

All of a sudden, my restraints fell away. With a sigh of relief, I lifted my hands and rubbed my face—at least, they'd left me my beard. They'd also left me my clothes. I pushed myself up, even though I seemed to be lying on a cushion of nothing, and searched for The Voice.

As I watched, part of the white wall in front of me coalesced into a human form. It closely approximated a middle-aged human male, except that the features on the pink face were inverted, with a mouth on the forehead and eyes on the chin.

"You should have brushed up on human anatomy, bud." I pointed at my face. "You've got yours upside down."

The eyes on the chin looked sad and the head bobbed up and down. "Strange incidents have been occurring, Jack Meter. Strange incidents, indeed," The Voice, now The Body, said.

A chair materialized right under my knees. It pushed forward, and I plunked onto it. The Body used a similar one.

"My name is Trebor, of the world Thrittene," The Voice said. "Welcome."

I was staring at his forehead, trying to figure out how he could eat without the food coming out of his nose, when what he said sank in.

"Thrittene, eh? Personally, I don't care if you live on Mars or the moon. You can just return me where you found me, friend, and in the same condition I arrived in."

He stared at me from his chin, clearly puzzled. "Our research indicates that your race has a fear of death and disease. Is that not so?"

"It's because there's so much of it around," I said.

He pursed his mouth, and his forehead puckered. "Please explain the difference between you and the others."

Time to change the subject. No way would I spill my guts to an alien, if what he'd told me was the truth. Wait a minute — what the hell was I thinking? This setup had to be one huge practical joke. Or maybe I'd been kidnapped by a lunatic, and this whole proposition was all special effects. Then again, maybe I'd gotten out of the psych ward a little too fast...

One way or another, it was time to get out of there and get back to serious drinking.

"You said you needed my help. What for?"

Trebor accepted the switch of topics with a nod. "You are a detective, are you not?"

I snickered. "If you're looking for a PI, count me out. I haven't been in the business for two years."

Trebor's nose reddened and his chin turned positively bashful. "I have to confess that we tried to get someone more..." He hesitated, and his eyes traveled around the empty room.

"More vertical?" I tried helpfully.

"...conscious," he finished. "But yours was the only mind we could reach. We think this is because it was so..."

"Pickled?"

"...open." His forehead turned green. "We pulled you here, and we thought if we repaired you, you would be grateful enough that you would want to help us. You see, someone has stolen one of our Transworld Portals. We need you to recover it."

That last part did it. How could this weirdo think I'd buy a story like that? As far as I knew, science fiction was still

that—fiction. I shrugged and looked at my white surroundings. This was one dull place. Whoever was yanking my chain was no interior designer.

“Okay, bud, let’s cut the crap. Last I knew, there was only one world with people on it, and it’s called Earth. This is a pretty expensive setup you have here. What do you really want?”

Trebor’s face turned the color of chalk and started melting, along with his body. My chair turned into Jell-O, and I sank into it. I jumped to my feet and wheeled around just in time to see the chair change into another body with an inverted face. It looked exactly like the first one.

“We have not lied to you, Jack Meter,” it said.

“Who the hell are you?” I said, at the same time looking for an exit. I backed into Trebor and sank into him, jerked out of his body and turned around again. This didn’t feel like a joke anymore. I’d rather have lost my mind the old way.

“I am Trebor of Thrittene,” the twin said. “Everything here, except you, is Trebor.”

“Which part of you have I been sitting on?” I said, trying to figure out what kinds of booze I’d mixed to end up with the most loco dream I’d ever had.

Trebor looked at Trebor. “He does not believe us.”

“Damn right, I don’t. If you’re from another world, how come I can understand you? How come you speak English?”

“You can’t, and we don’t,” one of the Trebors said. “When we repaired you we also adapted your brain for telepathic transmission.”

“Now I’m a radio tower.”

“In essence, yes. Your brain is now able to connect with alien transmissions and decode them then interpret and present the signals to you in the form of human thoughts. The reverse happens when you communicate outward. Of course, we have tapped into an unused portion of your brain, so your normal functions are not affected.”

I snapped my mouth shut. I understood all the words, but the combination didn’t make sense.

"I don't have time for this," I said. I grabbed the throat of the Trebor closest to me. His neck instantly dissolved, and I held thin air. He wasn't there anymore. I looked down. The white floor was crawling up my legs. It swirled around me, and I felt myself sinking into it like into quicksand. I swore then patted my back pocket. My knife was still in it. I grabbed the handle, flipped the catch and sliced down. The entire room burst with a high-pitched keening that hurt my ears. The floor receded, and Trebor rose in front of me. He didn't look happy. I held the knife in front of me, unsure of what he was capable of doing. He lifted his arm, and the ground gave under me as if he'd pulled a rug. I fell on my back. I could see murder on his face.

Finally, I thought, I'll be free. I closed my eyes and hoped for a quick death.

CHAPTER TWO

I WAITED.

"Come on, come on," I muttered. "Get it over with."

"What would you have me do, Jack Meter?"

I opened my eyes. Trebor and I stood face-to-face, which further confused my already baffled mind. A moment ago I lay on my back, hoping for a quick death. Now, I was staring at the mouth on his chin. Either Trebor was floating in the air above me, or he'd tilted the entire room so I could stand on my feet again. With all this white around me, I couldn't distinguish the ceiling from the walls or the floor.

"A minute ago," I said, "you were ready to cancel my ticket. What happened?"

"We did not repair you so we could damage you, Jack Meter."

"What a letdown. You guys don't even put up a good fight."

Trebor smiled, silent, cross-eyed. The other Trebor approached him, and they melted together into a distorted human shape.

I examined the result, certain my knife had done some damage. The blade had made contact; it had felt like I was slicing flesh. I searched around me. I couldn't see any tear, cut or hole; and there were no traces of my knife or of blood.

Could it be that Trebor was telling the truth? They'd brought me to a world other than Earth?

I shook my head to dislodge the idea.

Even during my stay at the funny farm, I'd never had visions of pink elephants dancing on the ceiling. My delusions always stayed within the limits of my own personal horrors. In my dreams, I relived the explosion and felt Annie, over and over again, bleed away in my arms.

During those periods of madness, it was as if one me watched the meltdown while the other stayed remote and impassive. But here, with Trebor and his body double, physics apparently didn't apply. I rejected the idea of an elaborate setup. I knew I'd made a few enemies in my job, but none had the kind of money to arrange special effects like these. Hell, I was dealing with someone who could melt into the floor and split himself into his own copy, upside-down face and all.

I squinted, confused all over again at his appearance. Now he had a proper face, but his body was all mixed up like a Picasso. Just watching it made me dizzy; I staggered, but the air around me thickened and kept me upright.

"This tendency of your race toward violence is fascinating," Trebor said, "albeit unproductive." His voice came out muffled, as if he spoke through water.

I jumped at him – and bounced against an invisible barrier. I grinned, amused. "Can't be too careful with the mad PI, right, Trebor?"

"A mere precaution until we arrive at an agreement."

"Let me give you a news flash. You got the wrong guy. I can't help you."

"You mean you won't."

"Can't. Won't. What's the difference?" I walked away then turned to face him again. "In case it didn't occur to you, my experience with alien life forms is somewhat limited. And what do I know about Trans-whachamacallits?"

"Transworld Portals."

"Whatever. There are a few things I want to know, though, before you send me back. How'd you find out I was

a PI? For that matter, how did you even know what a PI was?"

While I paced up and down in front of him, Trebor fluctuated from one shape to the other. I thought maybe I could attach an electrical cord on him—he'd make a perfect lava lamp.

"We had limited time," Trebor said. "Of course, we cannot know everything about your world. We concentrated on our need." He waved at his own body. "We thought it would make it easier for you if we adopted your form."

"You need more practice."

"Our inability to conserve a consistent shape is related to the problem that made us bring you here."

"What the hell is a Transworld Portal, then? How can it be gone?"

"We don't know how it was stolen," Trebor said. "Part of your task will be to discover how it was done so we can prevent such an occurrence in the future."

I frowned at him. "When did it happen?"

"I am not certain."

"You don't know much, do you?"

Trebor just stared, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Why not use someone from your own world to get it back?"

"We are prevented from leaving our world, lest we disintegrate," a voice behind me said.

I whipped around. Another Trebor stood behind me.

"Unfortunately, you lack the necessary framework to understand the scientific explanation," he said. "Imagine trying to explain to a Neanderthal how one of your computers works. Impossible."

"Naturally," I said, my voice falsely casual. "But this dumb jerk is the one you come to when you want your property back."

"The Portal is not our 'property.' It is a part of our totality. We are one and many, Jack Meter—oneness and plurality, sound and silence, emotions and logic, insubstantiality and mass."

"You mean you haven't tried to confuse me on purpose?"

Trebor gave me a half-smile and pointed to my body with his chin. "You are limited to operating in discrete space and time; it will allow you physical access to worlds we cannot reach. We will provide you with the proper equipment to help you track down the thief."

"You don't even know where to look next."

"We would not have called upon you otherwise."

I sighed. My skin itched, a warning that either things weren't quite what they seemed or that the situation held danger. I'd learned to pay attention to my hunches in the past. Was Trebor holding out on me, or was he as naive as he sounded? Then again, would my instincts work with aliens?

Regardless, I didn't have much to go on so far, and it didn't look like I would get much more until I gave them my decision. Despite the strange situation, I was intrigued. I never could resist a challenge, especially when I thought a prospective client was hiding something from me.

I laughed, even though the situation wasn't all that funny. "If you think that making me healthy was payment enough for this stint, Trebor, you'd better come up with a better idea. And fast."

"Then, you will help us?"

"As I said, it depends."

Trebor's face melted then slowly reshaped itself. "I will strike a bargain with you, Jack Meter. Upon return of our Portal, we will grant you what you desire most." He paused and moved closer, eyeball-to-eyeball. "If you still wish to end your life at that time, we will do so."

I could hear my heart beating a rhythmic pattern on my eardrums.

"And if that's not good enough?" I couldn't resist asking.

Trebor's mouth molded itself into the semblance of a smirk. "If you refuse this offer, or if you fail to recover our lost Portal, we will return you to your world unharmed...in the condition you are now."

I jerked forward, sudden, explosive fury threatening to break loose. Trebor stood his ground, but his body split and

several of him faced me, in different stages of bodily disarray.

I glared at the row of misshapen Trebors, and my anger deflated as quickly as it had risen. They all had the same gray-green eye color. And all those eyes held a mixture of confusion and hope.

I looked around at the pitiful bunch of aliens. What the hell, I thought, there was nothing holding me to Earth. From the looks of it, if I didn't agree to help them I'd have to go back healthy and start the process of abusing my body all over again. Tracking down a thief who'd stolen an alien device wasn't like being with Annie, but at least I wouldn't be reminded of her every time I turned around.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly then grunted in capitulation. "Trebor of Thrittene, you've got yourself a deal."

Trebor reshaped himself into one. I was about to ask him for more details when screeches speared my gut and made my heart vibrate. The light around me changed. It took on a tinge of pink then blue. After a while, the walls settled on purple.

"I take it your friends decided to join us," I said.

Trebor bit his upper lip. "Now that you have agreed to assist us, they ask to attend the remainder of this discussion."

I lifted an eyebrow and smirked. "I'd bet a case of my finest rotgut your friends thought I'd turn you down. Now that I said yes, they want to dump me and try to recover the Portal on their own."

"How could you know that?"

"It's always the same clowns using the same tactics." I turned to face the purple wall. "If you have business with me," I said to the new colors, "why don't you show yourselves. I'd like to get going."

The wall swirled until a magenta figure shaped like a model Titian would have loved to paint formed in front of my eyes. Definitely female. She could've made me salivate, except there were so many holes in her she looked like she'd been blasted by a meteor shower.

"I am Nasus," she said. "Trebor should have held his ground. You did not have much with which to bargain." Her

voice was raspy and mellow, making me think of a dimly lit café and languid blues ballads.

"By the looks of you, sweets, you can't afford to bargain, either." I stared her up and down. "I'd say you need me more than I need you."

She snorted, a most indelicate sound for such a great-looking babe. Before she could open her mouth again, a blue creature came out of the floor. He didn't look much better than the others with his face under his left arm.

"We can handle our problem ourselves, Trebor," the shape said. "This is a mistake."

"By all means, go ahead," I said. "Although I should remind you that, after the repair trick you pulled, it's a miracle I even agreed to help you."

Trebor lifted a hand and stilled the others. "Enough. We had already decided that enlisting Jack Meter's assistance was the only course of action possible. He has agreed to help. We must give him all the support we can."

It turned out the two newcomers, Nasus and Leinad, were the ones who'd first noticed their world was losing "unity throughout its mass." They had built the stolen Portal, although I still wasn't clear on what, exactly, that was.

"How long ago did you build this Portal?" I said.

The room darkened to deep purple, and multiple faces molded themselves from the wall. "Five years ago, we experienced a storm, similar to one of your Earth's hurricanes," several Leinad faces chanted in chorus.

"Outside of Us," the Nasus features intoned. The dozen echoes of her voice wrapped themselves around me like a cloudburst.

"Sounds serious, but I don't get it," I said.

"We should not have been conscious of...outside," Trebor said, his voice impatient.

"You came to get me," I said. "That's more than just being aware of outside."

"Before the storm," Trebor said, "we did not know of any other world but ours."

"How many worlds are you aware of now?"

Trebor's body moved in what I took for a shrug. "I suppose they are innumerable, but we could identify fewer than ten. They all function along space and time dimensions, although each world has a very different nature."

"For a reason we are still attempting to understand," Leinad said, "the storm opened links from our world to several proximate worlds. Think of it as a wheel without its rim. Thrittene is the hub, and each world is at the end of a spoke, although each spoke may not have the same length."

"You traveled to those worlds?"

"No," Leinad said. "In attempting to do so, we discovered that we cannot leave our world. We have, however, established stable Portals that permit us to keep the links open and attempt communication. So far, we have not been successful in contacting any but your world."

"You didn't contact me, pal, you kidnapped me."

Leinad's color deepened.

"Why would the stolen Portal cause your loss of cohesion?"

"We are not certain," Trebor said. "Perhaps it destabilized our world, or perhaps the unbalance is caused by something else the thief did. All we know is that it is getting worse."

"When did you first notice you were losing cohesion?"

"Approximately two and a half years ago," Nasus said. "According to your measure of time, of course."

"It took you that long to figure out your Portal was missing?"

"The imbalance was subtle at first," Leinad said. "Then, the speed and severity of the disturbances increased. We investigated and found the Portal missing. We concluded that this theft caused the loss of cohesion. And it is worsening, Jack Meter. We can barely hold ourselves together."

My skin itched again. My instincts told me that Trebor and Leinad were lying. Their story sounded too lame. I'd lived with a scientist for three years, and I knew how rigorous and thorough she was. Annie would never have neglected to check on something she'd built, especially for as long as two years.

At this stage, however, I didn't care if the Thrittene told me the truth or not. I preferred to make up my own mind; and in the end, I always dug up the whole story, anyway.

A chair molded itself behind my knees and forced me to sit.

"Why would it take that long for the effects to become noticeable?"

Leinad shook his head. "We do not know, but we have a theory."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"If the worlds are connected in some way to Thrittene then we may be a Whole. Let us follow the idea of the wheel, although it is not a perfect analogy. To break one link would be similar to using a wheel with a broken spoke. With time, uneven pressure on the hub weakens it."

"At the same time, it affects the balance of the entire wheel," I said.

"Exactly."

"So, a broken link might strain the entire structure. The hub wouldn't necessarily break, but if other links broke the wheel would eventually collapse." I frowned. "If the thief stole another Portal, Thrittene might be in a lot of trouble."

"Yes," Leinad said, his features somber. "By extension, so would the other links. Including Earth."

The question is, I mused, why steal a Portal? What would a thief do with it? Until I found a reason for the theft, I didn't have a chance of finding the culprit.

I lifted my head to the expectant faces of the Thrittene who stood in front of me. Their bodies undulated and changed, the room adopted the colors of the rainbow and I registered a medley of sounds that ran from soothing to discordant. I knew they wanted me to discuss what to do next, but it wasn't my style.

Leinad interrupted my thoughts by placing his hand on my arm. A thin strip of his body wrapped around my wrist then moved up under my sleeve jacket.

"Hey!" I jumped to my feet and tugged, but Leinad stuck to me for a few more seconds. When he withdrew, the strip

remained. I pulled up my sleeve and tried to rip it off, but every time I thought I had a grip on it, it would become viscous and cold and slip through my fingers like water.

"This telecarb will hold you within your space-time dimensions during your passage from one world to the other. It will allow you to find the thief and bring us back our Portal."

"What's it made of?"

"We are not certain how you will be affected by this type of travel, Jack Meter. The telecarb is set to bring you back to us should you lose yourself."

I shrugged. "I'm not worried about it. I already know what that feels like. You haven't answered my question."

Trebor colored slightly. "It has the same composition as this room."

"You mean it's a piece of you? I thought you couldn't leave your world."

"We cannot. The telecarb is only a minute part of our world, Jack Meter."

I looked more closely at the telecarb and saw an infinite range of swirling colors.

"How does it work?" I looked up to see all the aliens scowling. "I know, I know—I 'lack the necessary framework.' You said I could travel with it. I just want to know how I go from one place to the other."

"You need simply desire it."

"But if I don't know where I'm going, how can I wish to go there?"

Trebor frowned then blushed, but stayed silent. He was flakier than even I could begin to understand, but this place sure wasn't Kansas and I didn't have any magic red shoes to click together.

My eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You didn't just repair me, did you?"

"The telecarb has its own form of intelligence," Leinad said. He had jutted out of the floor between Trebor and me. "It understands your thoughts and will take you where you wish to go."

He lifted a hand, as if to stop me from thinking what I was already thinking.

"Only along a forward, linear time thread, Jack Meter. You cannot go back in time. The telecarb is interactive and will respond to your conscious thoughts only. To permit this, we had to alter your neurological system." Leinad gave me a self-satisfied smile. "Fortunately, although we are losing cohesion, we have not lost coherence so we could still perform a logical connection of the diverse elements contained in your body and the telecarb."

These aliens sure knew how to push my buttons. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to control my outrage.

"You had a lot of nerve tinkering with my body without asking my permission."

Leinad frowned. "We had no choice, and we were already performing repairs. Besides," he added, "you said you did not want your body anymore."

"You didn't know that at the time, now, did you?" I said, my teeth clenched. "I ought to punch your face inside out."

"Enough." Trebor's voice boomed, and my muscles quivered. "This bickering is becoming tiresome."

These guys would drive me to drink, I thought. But however much I wanted a shot right now, it was out of the question. I never drank on the job. I dropped my face into my hands and rubbed my eyes in the hope they would all be gone if I didn't look at them for a while.

I thought about the pack of smokes left in my apartment and decided that lighting one would be an acceptable alternative to getting sloshed. The blue smoke of my Gitanes might also make a nice complement to the colorful characters in the room. I recalled my apartment longingly, despite all the details that still reminded me of Annie. I had to agree with Aplin, though—it was a compost heap. I could even smell the stale beer and cold pizza I'd left on the floor beside the couch before I'd passed out.

I let my hands fall with a sigh then stared, disbelieving. I stood right in the middle of my living room. The TV and CD player were still on, the sound muted. I walked over to the

coffee table, grabbed a cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply. Every sensation felt real, especially when I choked as if I'd never smoked in my life.

Of course. I'd been repaired.

I looked at the telecarb. Hot damn, I thought, the thing actually works. I hadn't believed Leinad had it in him. They couldn't even hold themselves together, so I had my doubts about their ability to develop any kind of sophisticated device.

I was debating whether I should do a bit of cleaning before I went back to Thrittene when I heard a shuffling sound from the spare room Annie had used as an office. I crushed my cigarette in the ashtray and moved to the door as quietly as I could. The beep of the computer being turned on drowned out whatever noise I made.

In front of my desk, his back to me, stood a man. He was about five-eleven, one hundred and fifty pounds. Blond hair, graying. Wire-rimmed glasses, according to the gold threads behind his ears. Casual clothes, expensive. Leather shoes, probably Italian. The man was either rich or vain. One thing was certain, though. I'd never met him in my life.

I coughed to catch his attention. He whipped around, a gun in his hand.

I lifted both of mine shoulder-high, palms out. "Easy," I said.

He let his gun arm fall, relaxed his stance and smiled broadly. "Ah, good morning, Jack Meter. I've been waiting for you."

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPUTER BEEPED AGAIN IN THE SILENCE BETWEEN us.

"Who the hell are you?" I said. My wrist with the telecarb tingled. I pulled at my sleeve to hide it better.

"Really, Meter, you're not very hospitable," the man said, his tone more mocking than insulted.

"I have an aversion to guns," I said. "How did you get in here?"

He shoved the gun into the pocket of his linen jacket. "The front door was open."

I raised my eyebrows. "It's self-locking."

"I knocked, and the door moved." He shrugged. "I came in to wait for you."

It wasn't likely the door had been ajar, I thought, since Johnson checked on my apartment at least once a day. But I didn't bother pointing out that fact to him. My place wasn't exactly the Mint—any enterprising Joe could get in with a minimum of tools.

He picked up a glass from the desk and sipped at the amber liquid. The guy was drinking my scotch!

I leaned against the door jamb. "Looks like you made yourself at home."

"I have been here a while."

"You haven't answered my question. Who are you?"

His head turned to the computer screen, which showed a box requesting a password. He looked back at me with a slight frown and a speculative look in his eyes.

"In a moment, Meter. We have many things to discuss. Shall we retire to the living room?"

"Shouldn't that be my line?"

He barked a laugh. "So it should, Meter, so it should." He took a sip of scotch, a cocky smile on his lips.

I strode to the desk. He sidestepped to the opposite side of the room, a wary look in his eyes, his hand in his pocket. I turned the computer off and motioned him toward the door.

He hesitated for a heartbeat. Then the smile was back. "After you," he said.

I studied him, weighing the odds he would jump me as soon as I turned my back to him. I could feel the tension emanating from him, could see it in his stance, as if he were wired for electricity. Slowly, so as not to provoke him, I backed up through the door. I stopped in the center of the living room while he continued straight to the window and looked out, his hand still clutching the gun in his pocket. The musky, sour smell of his aftershave trailed after him.

I had two choices: I could get him out of my face and never know what he wanted, or I could wait, let things slide for a while. My curiosity won out. He dressed like a dandy, spoke English like the gentry, held a gun like a pro and lied like a cheating husband. I decided to give him his space and use the time to make the place more livable.

I picked up a green garbage bag from the kitchen and stuffed it with the trash that littered the living room, all the while keeping an eye on my guest. For the next five minutes, the rustle of plastic, the clank of beer cans and the drumbeat of the rain against the window were the only sounds in the room. Once the furniture reappeared, I tossed the bag in a corner of the kitchen and turned back to my visitor.

He'd moved from the window and was standing in front of my CD stand.

"You have an impressive collection of opera," he said. "I

would have thought that sort of music too irrational for a person in your line of business. I never could abide it, myself. Too much screaming."

"Opera is a lot like real life," I said. "Love, jealousy, murder, revenge...a template for the sins of the world."

"My, I've found a philosophy-minded private detective." He laughed. "Almost an oxymoron. Come on, Meter. Are these records really yours or did they belong to Annie?"

I felt her name like a punch in the gut. I schooled my face to remain blank then moved around the couch to stand beside him. "They're mine."

"Ah." He picked up a copy of Siegfried and turned it around in his hands.

"That one's interesting," I said. Even to my own ears, my voice sounded flat, dangerous. "Siegfried is looking for the magic ring, but Mime wants it for himself."

The man's hands stilled.

"Classic story of greed and treachery," I continued.

He stayed silent and motionless for a few seconds then shoved the CD back between two others. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

"Well. Enough of this idle talk. I'm sure you are anxious to know why I am here."

"I suggest you get on with it."

"Are you certain you don't know me?"

"I've never seen you before, if that's what you mean."

"Dr. Stefan Mueller." At my frown, he continued. "Surely, Annie mentioned me once or twice?"

"I know who you are. You were Annie's project director at the Center. She didn't like you."

"She said that?" He raised an eyebrow. "What else did she say about me?"

"Not much," I lied. "She rarely talked about work." I remembered the distaste on her face every time she mentioned Mueller's name. Annie had disliked him not only because of his arrogance and conceit but because he was, she said, into short cuts.

"He makes me nervous," she'd said. "Every time he

comes into my lab I have the urge to hide every scrap of my research. I wouldn't dare turn my back on him. He gets his results so damn fast he has to be cutting corners. I can't prove anything, of course. It's just a feeling, you know?"

Yeah, I'd answered, I knew all about those kinds of feelings.

I focused back on the man in front of me. "Should she have warned me about you?"

"Of course not. I don't want to bore you with facts you already know, that's all."

"You're boring me now. Are you always this evasive?"

"Ah, that's the rub, isn't it? I came here for help, but I'm not sure if I can trust you. The only reason I think you might help me is because of my relationship with Annie."

"And what relationship would that be?"

He lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "Annie and I were colleagues. We may not have seen eye-to-eye on certain matters, but we shared a dedication to science and a passion for the exploration of the unknown."

"You're the first scientist I've ever met who visits people with a gun in his hand."

"I wondered if we would come to that. I suppose you'll want an explanation."

"Right."

"You may not realize it, but Annie was recognized as a ground-breaker and a pioneer in her field. Considering the scientific developments in the past fifty years, it is not a mean achievement. A mind like hers..." He shook his head. "Her death was a great loss to the scientific community. She should have been honored properly."

Mueller flopped down on the couch, as if talking about Annie had robbed him of muscle tone. His eyes looked sad and calculating at the same time.

"That's why I believe you will not refuse me," he said.

I dragged a chair from the dining room, set it in front of him then straddled it. I wrapped my arms around the top and leaned my chin on my fist, gazing at him in silence. He pinched the crease of his pants and crossed his legs. He

stretched his arms over the back of the couch. Tapped his fingers. Scraped his throat.

"Listen, Mueller..." I finally said.

He straightened on the couch.

"Either get to the point in the next thirty seconds or get the hell out."

He raised his eyebrows. "Temper. Very well, I shan't prevaricate any longer. I have reason to believe that you may know where Annie kept duplicates of her research notes."

"She told me they didn't allow her to take anything out of NARC."

"Of course. All research material is property of the Northern Alliance Research Center, and, in principle, nothing must leave the premises. All work done there is highly classified. Backup notes and data are kept in a vault onsite. I am quite sure, however, that Annie kept another set of data outside of the Center."

"What makes you so certain?"

"Annie's material is not in the Center's vault."

"Really."

"Annie was on the verge of a breakthrough. There are two possibilities for the disappearance of her data. Either someone stole it, or she took it out herself to protect it. I suspect the latter."

"It's a wonder you need my help. You're doing fine by yourself."

"Don't be daft, man. It doesn't take a genius to come to that conclusion. The next question is—why did she want to protect her data? The obvious answer—someone else wanted it. I want to continue Annie's research, and for that I need her notes. But I'll be damned if I'll end up dead like her."

He clutched the gun through the jacket material.

"You think she was killed because someone wanted her data? That sort of defeats the purpose, doesn't it?"

"Maybe. Nevertheless, I am not taking any chances."

"Someone else might already have her notes."

Mueller shook his head quickly. "No. It's been two years.

Ours is not a large community. I would know if someone had appropriated her data as his own."

"What was Annie working on?"

He laughed. "Are you testing me, Jack? The research is still classified. I am not at liberty to reveal anything. I can only promise you that it is...out of this world."

I concentrated on Mueller's face for a moment. My skin itched. The telecarb under my sleeve still sent tingling sensations up and down my arm. Either the device was warning me of danger, or it read my thoughts and reacted to my inner agitation.

Mueller was lying outright, or he was manipulating the facts to suit his own purpose. I found it strange that it took two years for him to approach me with such a project and told him so.

He lifted his shoulders in an elaborate shrug.

"You haven't exactly been around for the past while, have you? Besides, I haven't been idle during that time." He paused, eyes glittering. His hands shook slightly. "What do you say, Jack? Will you find Annie's notes? Will you hand them over to me?"

"Why should I do that?"

"I assure you that I am the only one who can carry on for her, the only one who is uniquely qualified, with the expert knowledge, intelligence and flair, to do her research justice."

"If the notes exist, they're not in this apartment."

"I know." His smile was cocky again. "As I said, you've been gone for a while."

I had to give the guy marks for arrogance. He'd rifled through my apartment; and when he found nothing, he'd decided to ask me to continue the search for him. It confirmed my suspicion he was making another sweep of the place when I appeared. He might even have thought about using me only after I caught him snooping.

"You won't find anything on the computer," I said. "It's mine."

"Yes. A bit too obvious, as well."

"So, I'm your last resort," I said.

"This is important to me, Jack. It should be important to you, too. Whatever the retainer, I'll pay."

"I don't need the money."

"Everybody needs money."

"I don't. I'm loaded. Never had to work a day in my life. That's why I only took cases that interested or challenged me."

"Doesn't this one do both?"

"Maybe."

Mueller unfolded from the couch in a fluid movement that brought him close and forced me to look up.

"Do you have any idea where Annie might have left her notes?"

I did, but I wasn't about to tell him. I wanted to check things out myself before I handed anything over to him.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I'll think about it. Where can I reach you?"

"I'm going out of town for a while. I'll call you when I get back."

"Suit yourself."

He ambled to the foyer.

"I usually do," he said over his shoulder. The door closed slowly after him, and the lock clicked shut.

I replaced the chair in the dining room, more for something to do than out of a sense of order. My thoughts jumbled one onto the other, and for a brief moment I had the odd impression that Mueller and Annie and the Thrittene were all connected somehow.

The idea was too weird, even in light of what had happened to me in the past few hours. The only one connected to another world was me, and I'd agreed to take on an investigation that would lead me God-knew-where. I noticed the telecarb didn't tingle anymore. Maybe it was getting adjusted to my body, or vice versa.

I went into the bedroom, took off my jacket and lay on the bed. I savored the contrast between heated skin and cool sheets for an instant then re-focused on the problems at hand.

Even more so than Aplin's visit, Mueller's presence had reminded me that Annie's death was unfinished business. Up to now, there had been no motive for it, except, maybe, someone's wish to take revenge on me. But what if there had been another reason? What if it had been tied to Annie's research? Would her notes give me the lead I needed to find her killer?

Her notes. She had never said anything about hiding duplicates, but maybe she hadn't had time. Surely, if she'd been in danger, she would have told me.

The familiar pain returned, nauseating like the metallic taste of blood; and I exhaled slowly. Think of something else, I told myself. Don't lose yourself again.

I rubbed my forehead, and the swirling colors of the telecarb caught my attention. Like any good lie, some elements of the Thrittene's story were probably true. In the first place, they'd taken great pains to explain the structure of their universe, which seemed to include Earth. Whatever disappeared had to be important to that structure. The only part I really believed about their crazy story was that whatever had been stolen was affecting them. No one would choose to look like melted cheese, even if it was just a pretend shape.

If they were brilliant enough to design a device that allowed travel across the universe, they should be able to maintain their shape.

That was probably where the truth stopped. The Thrittene had to have an idea of who or what the thief was.

But why had they chosen me? Maybe the fact I was human made me eminently qualified to chase after the thief. The Thrittene chose me then repaired me, knowing my body had limitations, like having to breathe oxygen. They'd have defeated their own purpose if they'd hired a detective who couldn't go everywhere he needed to go.

If something had really been stolen, it probably wasn't one of their so-called Portals. Starting from the assumption it wasn't one of their own who'd done the stealing then it had to be someone who not only was aware of Thrittene's existence but who also had the ability to get to it. So, the thief had a means of transport.

I stared at the ceiling, unblinking, my mind churning. If you're a thief and you want to go somewhere but you don't have a vehicle, what do you do?

You steal one.

I sat up straight in bed and stared at my telecarb. It was definitely a means of transportation, one of the fastest and most effective I knew. What if someone had stolen a telecarb? What was he doing with it? Was the thief jumping from world to world, creating all this havoc?

The telecarb's swirling colors distracted my thoughts. I contemplated it for a few moments, uncomfortable with the idea my neurological system was connected to this thing. What if it malfunctioned? What would it do to me?

Wait a minute.

I flipped the idea around. What would it do to Thrittene? Would a telecarb's malfunction echo on Thrittene? After all, Trebor had said I carried a piece of their world with me.

A stolen telecarb. One that was malfunctioning. Could that be the source of their problem?

I felt the sense of rightness that came from knowing I was on to something. I pushed off the bed, shoved my fists into the sleeves of my jacket and marched into the living room. I took out a cigarette, lit it then coughed the smoke out. I felt dizzy and nearly threw up. Damn. I kept forgetting I had pink lungs again.

I'd have to search for Annie's notes—and soon. I'd see what I could dig up before Mueller found them. It was a good bet he would continue his search, and there was no way I'd let him put his greedy paws on Annie's work. First, though, I would get the real story out of the Thrittene. If there was one thing I hated, it was being played for a fool.

Just wish it, Trebor had said.

I wished for Thrittene. In a split second they were all there—Trebor, Nasus, and Leinad, with their individual body parts still tangled. Their eyes widened when they saw the glowing end of my cigarette. It was time to turn the tables and have a bit of fun.

CHAPTER FOUR

I PULLED ON MY CIGARETTE AND INHALED. I VISUALIZED the smoke as it rushed into my lungs, where thousands of blood vessels waited to absorb it. For the first time since I was ten, when I sneaked a puff behind my mother's house, I found the whole exercise disgusting.

The appalled look of the Thrittene, however, was worth the risk of choking to death. They'd turned a golden tobacco hue, and the room filled with sounds that resembled churning stomachs. When they started to turn a deep shade of gray, I puffed a couple more times then searched for somewhere to snuff out my cigarette. When I couldn't find an ash-tray, I used the heel of my shoe then stuffed the butt in my pocket. The sounds deflated like a sigh.

Trebor, dressed in white again, glided to me.

"Kindly refrain from leaving without warning, Jack Meter," he said. "It is most annoying. We had not finished giving you instructions."

"You've been waiting for me all this time? I'm flattered."

"Time?" Trebor said. "Why, you have only been gone for two or three of your minutes, at the most."

"What do you mean? I was gone at least a couple of hours."

Leinad surged up beside Trebor. His eagerness was painful to watch. "Did the telecarb take you where you wished to go?"

"Wait. Trebor, are you telling me time doesn't flow at the same speed here as in other worlds?"

"That is correct," Trebor said. "I thought you understood that, Jack Meter. Every world runs on a different time thread."

I found the whole idea a bit disconcerting. I would have to think about the possible repercussions on my case, but not right this minute. First, I had to test my theory and find out if the Thrittene were missing a telecarb. I knew it was a shot in the dark, but my instincts had served me well in the past.

"You have not answered me, Jack Meter," Leinad said.

"Yes. Your gizmo works very smoothly. It took me home and back, no problem. It's amazing, a marvel of engineering. I can't believe you whipped that up in an evening."

Leinad's chin puckered into a frown. "Oh, no. Its development took years of study and experimentation."

"Really?" I made my voice sound as naive as possible. "I'm sure I wouldn't understand how you developed it, anyway. I'm more interested in how you went about testing your device. I have no choice but to put my trust in you, Leinad, and in your telecarb. But I don't know you, see, and I can't tell if you're good at what you do or if you're just a hack."

"How can I be certain the telecarb won't conk out on me? I'd hate to be stuck in some boonies world and have to call a repairman. From what you told me, you couldn't even come get me. So, what I want to know is—am I wearing the first one of these babies?"

"Of course not," Leinad said in an offended tone. "I do not know what a 'hack' is, but I surmise you mean someone who is incompetent. I assure you, the telecarb has been thoroughly tested. We have been researching a means of traveling to other worlds for at least ten years in your measure of time. You will be safe."

"But you told me you'd begun to be aware of other worlds only five years ago." I paused. "In my measure of time, of course."

Leinad turned crimson. Trebor shuffled behind me. I ig-

nored him and moved closer to Leinad, who shifted back a few inches.

"Like any scientist," I continued softly, "you developed prototypes, didn't you? Where are those prototypes, Leinad?" My voice was so sweet, I was making myself sick.

His body color changed to puce. "I destroyed them, of course."

"All except one, maybe?"

Yowls filled the space between the two of us like a heat wave. Leinad swelled to twice his size, but his head moved to the middle of his chest. Trebor came around and faced me as well. I stood my ground.

"You tricked me," Leinad boomed.

I shrugged. "Whatever works. How about leveling with me this time?"

Leinad suddenly deflated and melted into the floor.

"We are pleased." It was Nasus, moving around me to stand beside Trebor. I'd totally forgotten about her, she'd kept so quiet. "We will tell you what we know."

"You were testing me."

Nasus inclined her head. "In a manner of speaking. We needed to assure ourselves of your competence. We expected it would take you longer to discern the truth."

I raised my eyebrows at Trebor. Without a word, he drew nearer to Nasus and slowly merged into her. She lost some of her magenta and became more substantial, more concrete. Leinad reappeared from the floor and merged into the other two. The resulting shade was really ugly.

I'm getting blasé, I thought, or punch drunk. Merging aliens didn't faze me one bit.

"Would you quit doing that splitting and merging? It's very annoying."

"We are stronger when we are one, Jack Meter," Nasus said, her sultry voice mixed with Trebor's high-pitched tone and Leinad's slightly nasal inflection. "What one does, the others feel. Yet, we are also separate individuals."

"Interesting, Nasus, but it doesn't impress me anymore. I'm not here to discuss our cultural differences. You've had

your little fun. Now you'd better get straight with me, or the deal is off. You can fix yourself another PI. I find I can live with myself after all."

"Are all private detectives as difficult as you?"

"You haven't seen anything yet, baby. I want to know about these prototypes and who has them. My bet is that they disappeared along with that 'Portal' of yours. Right?"

The Thrittene combination smiled and shook its head.

I sighed. If I'd been in my office, I would've leaned back in my chair, plunked my heels on my desk and looked jaded. Those were the props of my trade. I missed them.

I blinked—and I was in my office, sitting at my desk. Damn that telecarb. I'd have to be more careful what I wished for. I thought of Nasus, and her old magenta self was in front of me again, flanked by Trebor and Leinad. She looked annoyed.

"You left us again, Jack Meter. We are displeased."

I had been gone only a few seconds. With the time difference, they shouldn't have even noticed my absence. Unless...

"Ah, you do keep track of me."

"The telecarb possesses a beacon that permits us to know on which world you are," Leinad said. "We do not intend to make the same mistake twice, Jack Meter."

"Then I was right. You lost a telecarb."

Nasus nodded once. "What we told you is partly true. We did experience a storm and became aware of other worlds. Yours had the simplest dimensional structure, and our scientists began to research a way to communicate or even, if it were possible, to travel back and forth.

"As you surmised, we built several prototypes, most of them unsuccessful. The last two were most promising. Ener, our chief researcher, grew impatient with the restrictions we had imposed on him. One day he disappeared with the latest version of the telecarb. Since then we have experienced problems with cohesion."

"You mean there are no Portals?"

Nasus made an impatient gesture. "Of course, there are Portals."

"But none has been stolen."

"No."

"You think Ener stole the telecarb?"

Leinad shook his head, which had sprouted out of his chest again. "We think Ener contacted someone from your world, someone brilliant who had the intelligence to understand the links between our worlds and how to use the telecarb. That someone stole the traveling device from Ener and is now using it along with the telecarb."

"How could the telecarb be stolen?" I plucked at mine and it slipped through my fingers. "I can't even grab enough of it to take it off."

"Your telecarb is connected to your neurological system. The stolen device is a portable model. The wearer can take it off at will."

"Someone else has your telecarb. What's the connection with your cohesion problem?"

Leinad changed from blue to crimson. "It was only a prototype. Untested."

"You mean it has bugs."

"Just like yours, the stolen telecarb is part of our world," Nasus said. "Since it is made of the same matter as we, its malfunction resonates back to Thrittene. We thought that if you found the thief we might then ask you to retrieve the telecarb."

"You think Ener is dead."

Nasus nodded. "So far, none of us has survived outside our world, Jack Meter. We felt Ener's death the way you would have felt the severance of one of your limbs. We did not die of it, but we felt the pain."

"The telecarb we gave you can only follow the trace left by the prototype," Leinad interrupted. "They could not be synchronized. You can transfer anywhere but where the thief already is. This includes psychological space."

"What the hell is 'psychological space?'"

"It is the space that you regard as yours. For instance, you may consider that you inhabit your entire apartment even though you can occupy only one room at a time. Once

you are in visual range of the thief, however, the telecarb will adjust itself and will function again."

"You mean I can't use my telecarb to find the thief but once I find him I can use my telecarb?"

Leinad beamed. "Exactly."

"Well, gee, thanks for nothing."

"These sarcastic asides are very unproductive, Jack Meter."

"Anything else?"

"If the telecarbs are in direct physical contact with each other," Leinad continued, "neither can operate. Beyond that, I cannot say. You will have to experiment." He hesitated then continued. "We have another worry, Jack Meter. We suspect the defective telecarb may create havoc in all the other worlds, even yours."

"You mean all the worlds I may visit will have started to lose cohesion?"

"They may experience different problems than ours, based on the particular characteristics of each world."

I raked my fingers through my hair and scrubbed my chin. All of a sudden, it was too much. I needed to distance myself from the steady stream of information and sensations that had assaulted me for the past few hours. I needed to get my emotions and my brain churning in the right direction. My stomach growled. Low blood sugar, I thought, that's what it is.

I saluted Nasus. "I'll keep in touch," I said; and before they could protest, I thought about my kitchen and left. I landed in front of the sink. A wave of dizziness overtook me, and I clutched at the counter to stay upright. I sucked in a deep breath; the stars in front of my eyes faded slowly. My stomach growled again. I needed nourishment fast, before I fainted from hunger.

I walked to the pantry and checked its meager contents. It was nearly empty. No wonder—I hadn't prepared a meal since Annie died, unless I counted opening a pizza box or eating baked beans out of the can.

I winced at a sudden flash of memory: Annie, in her

apron and nothing else, trying to scramble some eggs for me the morning after we'd met. We never did eat that day. The next morning we ended up throwing out the congealed eggs and going out for bagels and espresso, Annie's favorite breakfast. She always said she needed her caff-carb fix to get her started in the morning.

As if to punish myself even more, I walked over to the CD player and put on Carmen. That well-stacked, sensual, clever Gypsy always reminded me of Annie.

I used a lone can of tuna, some tomato juice and pasta to make a marinara dish. The brainless ritual of stirring sauce and the familiar music had a soothing effect, and I started thinking again.

I went back to Leinad's story and tried to sort out the facts. The time factor confused me. Leinad had said they were running out of time, but was he talking about their time or mine? Did that mean that the damage would occur at a different pace in the other worlds than in theirs?

The telecarb's limitations were also worrisome. Since I couldn't land where the thief was, I'd have to follow his trail, get to know his thinking processes and try to anticipate his moves. But with his telecarb, he could duck and run as soon as he saw me. Then, I'd have to start looking for him all over again. Before I confronted him, I'd have to find a way to get the telecarb away from him. If it was a him...

I finished my food and dumped the dishes in the sink with the others. Johnson still hadn't repaired the plumbing; I could hear the damn drip over the soprano's voice.

I turned off the CD, suddenly eager to get going. The faster I found the stolen telecarb, the faster I could start looking for Annie's files.

I glanced at the telecarb and wished it to transport me to the first place the thief had gone after he'd left Thrittene.

* * *

I stood in what looked like the inside of my computer. The walls appeared to be made out of integrated circuits, the lighting came from fluorescent wires above me, and coils

and capacitors rose at waist level. The black and white floor tiles added a dizzying effect to the decor.

I turned at the sound of a machine-like hum. A white box on wheels was coming out between two cathode-ray tubes. It had two retractable arms with what looked like a mechanical hand with opposable thumb on each end. On top of the box, something like a memory chip with a lens in its center focused on me. In the middle of what I took to be its body, the box had a receptacle with a series of holes. If the computer analogy held, I'd have said this box had a female connector.

"Where the hell am I?" I muttered.

"You are on Tekhnè," the box said in a flat voice. "Do you wish to recharge?"

"No, thanks."

"If you are not here to recharge then you wish to converse." She pointed to the darkest corner of the room, where I could see a vague shape if I squinted real hard.

"Who's that?"

"Version One-point-O-one-F."

"That's its name or its prison number?"

"All come here to recharge or to converse with One-point-O-one-F. If you will not recharge then you exchange data." She leaned closer. "Although I am not certain he will make sense. His interface capability is degenerating."

The decoder in my brain seemed to work well enough for me to understand her words, but I was damned if I knew what she was talking about. She'd lost me at her first recitation of numbers.

I glanced at the glum corner into which the black and white floor tiles faded. The lines twisted and rolled, until I felt like I was falling into a picture from Escher. I shook my head and scrunched my eyes, and the room righted itself.

"What was that all about?"

"Not sufficient information to respond. The phenomenon is worse around One-point-O-one-F."

I turned to the box. "What's your name, sweets?"

She rolled backward between the tubes. "I do not know

'name.' My designation is Version Four-point-two-O-seven-M. Call if you wish to recharge," she added before she disappeared.

"Hey, I wasn't finished with you," I said to the empty space. She didn't come back, so I walked over to One-point-whatever in the corner, who seemed to be leaning on a coil.

This box was black and had pins instead of holes in its chest, so I figured that was why the female box had called it a "he." He was about half the size of the first box, and his body was scuffed and his lens scratched. He gave me the impression of being much older. I moved beside him and rested my elbows on the coil.

"Forgive me," I said, "but I didn't want to recharge." I winced. Talk about an insane icebreaker.

He lifted his head and stared at me.

"Another one of you?" he asked listlessly.

I suddenly paid close attention. Good old Scratchy here had given me my first hint of a clue. Another human had passed by here. Since I'd asked my telecarb to take me on the thief's trail, I now knew my thief was human.

"One of us?"

"From the Decimal System. Which is totally ineffective. I would have never thought..." He shook his head. "How could it have been done?"

"You've talked—conversed—with somebody like me before?"

"More than compared data. Shared. Then, he stole them."

Another piece of the puzzle. Scratchy was talking about a male thief from Earth.

"You'll have to be a bit more specific."

He gave me a blank stare. I took this for an expression of contempt.

"What is your interest in this matter?"

"Maybe we can help each other. I'm after a thief myself."

He hung his head. "It is too late now. The end of our world as we knew it. The Operating Manual foretold that when they were gone the end of Tekhnè would be near."

"When what are gone?"

"Our future generation. The Neurochips."

For some reason, I knew this downtrodden, depressed, scuffed male Tekhnè wasn't talking about snack food.

"Listen, I'm trying to catch up with this guy, so whatever you can tell me would be useful."

"If we had our Neurochips then we would perpetuate. Now, we are doomed. The Neurochips are the latest Tekhnè-eugenics advance for our race. I grew them myself. With them, our world would have attained a higher consciousness, an unimaginable analytical power. They would have become the core processing unit." He shook his memory chip from side to side. "They were in the final phases of testing."

"You mean he stole your kids?"

He looked at me without understanding. That's the problem with communicating with other races, I thought. There are no common points of reference.

"This man," I tried again, "did he abscond with your next generation?"

"They were our future." For a fleeting moment, his immobile face darkened and the iris of his lens tightened, managing to impart an emotion close to despair. "But they were not ready. If he uses them, he may not only destroy them but himself as well. I have used special capacitors...very dangerous."

I showed the guy my telecarb. "Did the person who stole the Neurochips wear a gizmo like this around his wrist?"

"Yes." Scratchy lifted his eye to stare behind me. I turned around and saw a tall white female box and a short black male box on coasters. They obviously hadn't come here to recharge, either.

"I'll leave you to your friends, then. See you."

Scratchy ignored me completely. I was about to wish myself somewhere else when Version Four-something rolled to my side.

"May I ask you something?" she said after a moment of hesitation.

"Sure, sweets. I may even answer you."

"Who is your father?"

I frowned. "I never knew my father. He didn't stick around when he found out my mother was pregnant."

"You are a man, then."

I chuckled. "How did you guess?"

"You told me you did not know your father."

"Come again?"

"A bastard is a Decimal System unit without a father. You do not have a father. You are a bastard. All men are bastards. Therefore, you are a man."

"Twisted logic, sweetheart." I shook my head. "Who told you all men were bastards?"

"She was completely outside our field of knowledge." Version Four rolled back and forth; her lens sparkled. "She was shaped without hardware, and her voice sounded like badly oiled gears. But she was young, she said. When I asked her what she was, she said she was a traveler from the Decimal System and that they were all shaped that way in her world. Except for the differences between male and female, of course. Most unusual."

"She explained all this, she said, because she wanted to warn us about men. She said we should never trust them. When I asked why, she said it was because most of them were real bastards."

If this world was spinning, it stopped right in the middle of her babbling. Only one person fit that description and that attitude—but it was impossible. She couldn't be talking about who I thought she was talking about.

"What was her name?" I asked through a constricted windpipe.

"Then, aeons after she was gone, a male from the Decimal System came to speak with Version One-point-O-one-F. I asked him the same question I asked you, but he had a father so we trusted him. Males with fathers should not be trusted, either."

I forced myself to stay calm. I didn't care about all the bastards, real or otherwise, who'd passed through this poor excuse for a world. I started panting. With a major effort, I

unclenched my jaws and kept my fists glued to my sides.

"Listen, you little twit," I said in a very low voice, so as not to scream her head off, "what...was...her...name."

Her lens refocused, and she looked at me. "Her name," she said, rolling backward. "I don't know 'name.' But she gave me her designation."

She took another look at me and backed up behind a tube. My ribs hurt from anticipation. If she didn't answer me in the next second, I'd have to wring it out of her. But before she disappeared completely, she dropped her bomb.

"She was Annie."

CHAPTER FIVE

“ANNIE,” I REPEATED, MY SENSES FLATTENED LIKE A tortilla. My ears rang with a persistent buzz. My vision blurred. My lungs struggled to draw in oxygen.

It was impossible. Impossible that Annie had come here to Tekhnè, had made contact with these aliens, had learned to communicate with them, had warned them. At the same time, in a dark and unvisited portion of my brain, way at the back, I knew I’d already accepted the notion.

How could I have been so oblivious to Annie’s activities? Okay, I hadn’t been searching for clues pointing at out-world travel, but I should have recognized Annie’s involvement in something big. I was a professional snoop, for God’s sake—I ferreted out secrets for others. Had I tuned out that much with Annie? What else had she hidden from me?

I laid my hands flat on the top of a capacitor to stay upright. I forced myself to breathe slowly in and out, in and out, concentrated on the up-and-down movement of my chest until breathing became easier and my brain could operate. I felt lightheaded.

I sifted through my memories for a telltale sign, a clue I’d missed but should have picked up on, words Annie would have let drop as a hint of what she was working on.

When we met, she already had her job at the Northern Alliance Research Center. She’d shown me her lab, at-

tempted to explain her research to me. I tried to remember what she'd told me about her project. Something related to time.

My heart beat faster. In hindsight, I could admit she had changed. In a subtle way, perhaps, but because I wasn't paying attention, I didn't see the alteration in her manner. After a while, every time I'd asked her about her project she'd clammed up, changed the subject. Did I remember seeing fear in the back of her eyes, or was I deluding myself because I wanted to believe she possessed less self-assurance than she overtly manifested? Had she discovered something dangerous?

For the past two years, the last image I'd had of Annie haunted me, chased me through my crazy days and nights. Unbidden, it flashed in front of my eyes again — Annie in my arms, her body torn and broken, a shard of glass imbedded in her left eye.

I stared at my surroundings, took in again the Early Electronics decor. The old guy I'd talked to earlier had left, and so had his buddies. I could hear clinks and thumps beyond the tubes, but the empty room diffused the sounds against the walls, which seemed to absorb then return them hushed. The place felt alien yet familiar.

Why would Annie warn a bunch of boxes about men, and in such a roundabout way? I knew she held most men in contempt. I even understood it — very few saw past her face or voluptuous body. I'd have thought the subject of men would have fallen at the bottom of her list of things to talk about with an alien race.

Unless she wanted to warn them about one man in particular and she'd gone the only way she knew — insulted the gender in general because she realized they wouldn't be able to distinguish between two people of the same gender.

If my assumption held true, I needed to know the name of that man. Next, I had to find out what she wanted to warn them against.

I shivered with the searing desire to see Annie's smiling face again. I blinked then swore. I really had to pay more attention to what I wished for.

Emptiness surrounded me. I stood on brown roiling vapor—and didn't like the look of it at all—but my telecarb had obviously brought me to this place for a reason. I squinted through the pale twilight and leaned forward, my ears straining for a sound in the oppressive silence.

A speck of darkness appeared in the near distance, then another, and another, until, seconds later, thousands hovered and danced. They quickly gathered into a human shape. Without warning, the huge form bore down on me. The body held its emaciated head in its hands, the face filled with huge, vacant eyes and a mouth rounded in a scream. Weeping and wailing followed in its wake.

It attacked me. It rammed into me again and again. Every time it touched me, it burrowed through me, whipped around and pounded into me from behind. I stood, faltering, battered by an onslaught of raw suffering. Reds and oranges swirled around me. Rage, borne by this vision of hell, impaled me. Seared blue anguish pressed on my shoulders. Scenes of horror tore at my gut: little children with gaunt eyes and bloated bellies; addicts sharing needles in stinking alleys coated with slime; pimps beating up their whores or rent-boys; bodies riddled with bullets rotting in trenches, their blood soaking, mixing with the mud; men covered in sores, dying of AIDS, alone in sordid rooms smelling of decay.

Every image felt like the slash of a knife. I struggled against the vicious attacks but came up defenseless. Overcome with a grief that for once didn't grow from my own pain, bawling like a newborn, I fell down on my knees, half mad with pain. Defeated, I surrendered to death.

At that moment of release, my thoughts went to Annie. Through the haze of pain, I shaped an image of her, her beautiful face smiling down on me.

As if I'd flipped a switch somewhere, the pain stopped and bliss replaced it. It was so intense I could hardly breathe. Exultation swirled golden; organ music filled my head. In the distance, I saw Annie. She stood on a cloud like an angel in heaven, rocking with laughter, her arms spread wide. Mil-

lions of colors, each a pinpoint of light, hovered around her, swooping down, touching her briefly then flitting away like wild birds. She laughed again then turned and looked straight at me, smiling. She motioned for me to come to her.

I crawled toward the vision. Annie. Healthy. Happy. Whole. I could almost touch her when, in the blink of an eye, she vanished. I groaned and rose painfully to my feet.

The constellation that had surrounded Annie fluttered just out of reach. It pulsed and shimmered until a whisper of breath wove through the particles of light in an ethereal dance. They sang like chimes in the wind.

The cluster of lights flattened and stretched until I couldn't see either end. I tried to fix a point and follow it but soon realized it moved too fast. The flow didn't darken but became opaque, as if I peered into deep waters. The river flowed a few feet off the ground. It had no density, but it appeared substantial.

I placed my hand against the floating mass; it had the springy consistency of marshmallow. Slowly, one side bulged out and formed an eddy. In its center, a dark stain spoiled the harmony of the current. It reminded me of a cancerous growth, and I wondered if the aliens of this world were sick and if they expected me to do something about it. At these thoughts, sorrow filled my heart then, once more, feelings of agony and pain invaded my body.

"Stop it," I yelled. "Tell me what the hell you want." The feelings changed from anguish to hatred, although this time the emotions weren't hurled at me. I felt the loathing push outward, as if my own soul hated an elusive, external physical presence. I stared at the eddy with its black stain, and an intense desire for wholeness washed over me. In my mind, I saw the river become unbroken. Whoever had fed me the visions of death now flooded my body with a yearning so strong it made me want to cry again. Without a doubt, I knew they were asking me to recover whatever would fill that dark hole.

"Okay," I said out loud, more to hear my voice than to make conversation. "If I can, I'll find your missing piece."

Anyhow, I told myself, even though they'd tried to kill me, I deemed it fair exchange for the gift they'd given me—Annie's smiling image.

Exhausted, I closed my eyes to block out the visions. When I opened them again, I could only stare.

I was back on Tekhnè.

I sat down heavily. In a very short time, I had learned, seen and felt so much that I stood on the brink of incoherence. If I didn't rest, my brain would soon disconnect. I wished myself on my favorite couch in my apartment, looked around and, reassured, promptly fell into dreamless sleep.

* * *

I woke with the sun on my face. Until then, I hadn't realized I'd missed sunlight, not for its cheering qualities but for the fact I could use it to track the passage of days. All this world-changing and time-hopping confused my biorhythms.

I took a shower, changed clothes then went down to the market to buy some groceries. After what I'd gone through, I thought I'd splurge on the best stuff I could find. I stocked up, too, since I might not get the chance to do it again. For that matter, once I went back to thief-chasing through the universe, I had no guarantee I'd see my apartment again.

Funny how a bit of sunlight, a good western omelet, muffins and Costa Rican coffee can restore a sense of perspective. Rested and more coherent, I re-engaged my brain and went back over the events of the past hours.

The telecarb had interpreted my wish to see Annie again by taking me to yet another world, this one centered on emotions instead of logic. As soon as the Emotions entities perceived me, they had attacked. They couldn't have known me, but they might have recognized me as a human and mistaken me for someone else. My emotional tie to Annie, and their willingness to acknowledge it, had probably saved my life.

The Emotions entities knew enough about Earth to use realistic visions and emotions with devastating impact. They'd certainly used my feelings about Annie to wring an

agreement of help from me. And they'd used the "river" as an analogy to help me understand the importance of their missing element, how it rendered them incomplete and terrified them. I also understood their anger.

Even with limited information and more questions than answers, I was able to deduce several important facts. First, circumstantial evidence identified the thief as a human male who, so far, had stolen an irreplaceable article from two different worlds in addition to the pilfered telecarb. Second, it seemed Annie had visited more than one world, and I could follow her trail. Maybe the thief had been following her, and I was following him. Somehow, we all seemed to be going in the same direction. Or at least my telecarb was tracking somebody.

The same sense of displacement I'd experienced when I'd moved back and forth to Thrittene struck me again. Annie had to have done her traveling more than two years ago, but the events felt immediate, as if they'd happened only a few minutes before. I wondered at what rate time flowed in the Emotions World and how long I'd spent there in Earth time.

A sense of urgency pushed at me. It felt as if an inexorable force had trapped events, past and present, into a funnel. They slid down and squeezed into the narrow end, accelerating on the way to disaster. I took a deep, calming breath. No sense in rushing about without a goal. I forced my mind back to my experience in the Emotions World.

The most important part of this turn of events struck me as the most astonishing: the Emotions entities had sent me back. After I'd agreed to help them, I hadn't had time to wish myself anywhere. Even so, I'd found myself back on Tekhnè. This meant that the Thrittene weren't the only ones aware of other worlds and with the means to establish contact. As soon as the Emotions entities had decided to return me to Tekhnè, I was there. And they'd done it without any obvious doodads. This one piece of information I decided to keep to myself for a while.

One last fact had fallen into place for me — Annie had obtained the means to travel to these worlds. Even though

what I'd discovered about her shook me, I knew she hadn't stolen the telecarb. It wasn't her style. Besides, Scratchy from Tekhnè had identified the Neurochips thief as male. Still, Annie had to have had a similar method of travel.

I decided to go back to Tekhnè to test out my theory. When Version Four saw me appear out of nowhere, she rolled to hide behind a tube.

"Hey, wait a minute." I said. "I won't hurt you. I just want more information about Annie." She peeked around the corner of the door, and I showed her my telecarb. "Did she wear one of these?"

She moved closer and squinted at it. "No."

"How did she do it, then?" I mumbled, half to myself.

"She wore something like that around the middle of her body." The lens zoomed down to my belt. "It had the same colors as that."

She focused on my telecarb.

I felt a jolt of satisfaction. Trebor picking me from among millions of people on Earth had seemed too much of a coincidence. His explanation about my mind being open I added to the list of his fabrications. There are liars everywhere. It apparently didn't matter which world I found myself on, I managed to stumble on them.

I tried to make myself as non-threatening as possible and smiled at the box. Her lens aperture narrowed, and she backed off again.

"Did she mention anyone in particular when she spoke about men?" I asked quickly.

"No. I told you everything she said."

"Do you know the designation of the man who stole the Neurochips?"

She shook her head. "He was male."

"What did he look like?"

She didn't answer, just looked blankly at me, obviously not understanding the question.

"Can you remember any special characteristics? The color of his hair? His eyes? Was he taller, shorter than me?"

Her lens opened and closed, giving her a confused look.

"If the unit is not female then it is male. If it is not white then it is black. He was male." She hesitated. "A man, I think, even if not a bastard."

I opened my mouth to comment on her keen powers of observation. Another female box rounded the cathode-ray tubes in front of me. She looked exactly like the one I was talking to. Then another one came out: same memory-chip-with-a-lens face, same body as the first two.

I suddenly clued in. This was a Digital System. That was why they had version numbers for their names, why the place looked like the inside of a computer and why everything I'd seen there contrasted like two opposites of a coin. Just as I couldn't tell the difference between the three female boxes in front of me, it was possible they weren't able to differentiate between the thief and me except to know that we were two different "units." That was the reason Annie couldn't warn them about one specific man.

All this enlightenment, however, didn't help explain Annie's motivation in coming here or in going to the Emotions World.

Without question, Trebor had to have known about Annie. Did he give her the means to travel through those worlds or did Ener contact her?

I had this nagging feeling I was missing something obvious, and it bugged me like the tick-tock of a clock in the dead of the night. I shrugged. It would come to me eventually.

This case had finally stirred my blood. It looked like someone had made me the unwilling player in a game for which I didn't know the rules. But I would change that.

First, I had to find out what Annie had been working on before she died. I knew just the person who could help me. Unfortunately, I didn't have much hope she'd help me willingly — she hated my guts.

The three female boxes had rolled in front of me and were staring. Time to get out of here. Trebor and his pals had some explaining to do, but I wanted to make sure I had a few tricks in my pocket first. The Thrittene might have cho-

sen me for reasons of their own, but they'd find out soon enough that feeding me lies really pissed me off.

I waved at the boxes and wished.

CHAPTER SIX

*I STOOD IN FRONT OF LAB 215, DEEP INSIDE THE NORTH-*ern Alliance Research Center. I quickly scanned the corridor—no one in sight. I had to be careful; security in the Center had always been tight, but ever since Annie's death it'd been tighter than a hangman's noose. I'd have a lot of explaining to do if someone found me cooling my heels in a restricted area.

I saw movement through the door's frosted glass window and knew it was Claire Foucault, Annie's colleague and closest friend. No one could mistake the copper of that hair; it blazed even through the unpolished glass.

She didn't turn around when I came in, just pointed to her right with the open book she held.

"Put the beakers on the counter, Sam. I'll unpack them later."

The lab was filled with Bunsen burners, coiled condensers, scales and other equipment I knew nothing about. On the counter in the center an electron microscope took up most of the space. A desk was squeezed into one corner; and piles of papers, stacks of file folders and a computer covered its surface. The room smelled of disinfectant, old paper and hot electrical systems.

I closed the door softly. It would be the first time Claire and I had talked since Annie's death. I could have killed for a cigarette.

"Hello, Claire."

She stiffened, slammed her book down on the work top, and whipped around.

"Jack! How did you get in here?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Through the door," I said. "How've you been?"

"Get out." She turned her back to me.

I crossed the room and leaned on the counter beside her. She moved away, picked up a slide and inserted it onto the platform of a microscope. She sat on the stool in front of it and glued her eyes to the binocular head.

"I hear you came to visit me in the loony bin," I said. "I don't remember seeing you, but I was touched all the same."

She lifted her head from the eyepiece and turned to face me.

"Don't flatter yourself," she said. "I wanted to make sure you were really there. I'd hoped you'd become a permanent resident. I'm very disappointed."

"Don't be shy, just tell me how you feel about me, won't you?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Are you sure? That's not the way it looks from here."

She ignored me, returning her eyes to the eyepiece of her microscope.

"I'm not leaving, Claire."

She kept silent.

"Face it," I continued, "one of these days you'll have to talk to me. Might as well get it over with."

She took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "Fine. You want me to say it, Jack, I'll say it. Annie's dead and you're alive. We both know it should be the other way around."

She jumped up, paced to the door and back to the counter, her features set in a rigid mask. I imagine it took a lot of effort to keep a lid on the Pandora's box of her emotions.

When she spoke again, her voice was controlled. "Annie was all I had, and you took her away from me. I was left alone, with all the gory details of the inquest and the funeral arrangements. I had to go to the morgue and identify her.

She...she barely had any face left. Then I had to bury her while you hid in that padded room in a safe world of your own making. So, yes, you bastard, I was glad to see you suffer. They ought to have kept you there forever. Now, if you don't get out of here in the next ten seconds, I'll call the guards."

She smiled viciously and pointed to my breast pocket. "You don't have a visitor's pass. I'd enjoy having the NARC security guards question you. I hear they hit first, ask questions later."

"Sure, why don't you call them? But, if you do, you'll never know why I came to visit."

"What makes you think I care?"

"Curiosity. Can't be a good scientist without it. And you're good, aren't you? You wouldn't have it any other way. Admit it, Claire, you're dying to know what I want."

"In your dreams," she said. "Look, you've disrupted my work long enough. Just get out of my lab."

Her reaction puzzled me. Before Annie died, we'd established a relationship of what Annie had laughingly called "aggressive tolerance." It was a mix of simmering contempt on her part and jeering condescension on mine. Of the two of us, Claire was definitely the smarter and had taken great joy in finding creative ways to heap abuse on me. I was always the one who gave up first. Now, she couldn't wait to get rid of me and was really forcing the issue.

"No way, Claire," I said. "I need answers and I know you've got them." I smiled at her. "I can always come visit you at your place tonight. Which would you prefer?"

If her eyes had been shotguns, I would have ended up a colander for cooked spaghetti. My smile grew bigger.

"Annie used to say she could read your face like a book. Did I make you mad, sweets?"

Claire's rage slammed into me, and I felt it burn through me like liquid ice. A sharp cracking sound made me look down. She'd crushed a microscope slide. When she opened her hand, the shards stayed embedded in her palm. She frowned at the crimson drops splattering the counter.

"Jesus, Claire. Next time try to punch me instead," I said. "It might be more satisfying and less messy."

She didn't say anything; I could tell she was still distracted.

"Yo, Claire. You should treat that cut."

She nodded absently, walked to the sink and rinsed the cut. I followed her to make sure she did a thorough job. Her hands shook as she dragged the first-aid box from a shelf in front of her.

"What do you want?" Her voice was rough, as if she hadn't spoken for a week.

"Here, let me do that." I picked up a dressing and some antibiotic ointment and grabbed her injured hand. She didn't resist. I worked in silence while she stared at a point above my right shoulder.

"There," I said, "the cuts looked worse than they are." She nodded absently. "Listen to me, Claire. I need you to tell me what Annie was working on before she died."

She turned her head and looked at me. Emotion flickered in her eyes then died. "I don't know."

"Right."

"It's the truth. We're discouraged from discussing our research, except on a need-to-know basis. Annie and I had separate projects, we worked in different divisions. There was no reason for her to discuss her work with me." She pointed to the door with her thumb. "Now that you have your answer, you can leave. Goodbye."

"Come on, Claire, you can do better than that. Even in a place like this, people talk, speculate, gossip. Tell me what you've heard."

She didn't answer, so I continued, my voice hard.

"Let me give you some facts, sister. Annie was involved in something big, maybe something dangerous. I can't go into details about it, but I came across information that confirms it. Then, one day, there's an explosion in her lab and she gets blown to pieces. What's the connection?"

"I don't know, Jack, you tell me. You're the one with all the answers. Tell me why the police were searching for

someone connected to you. Tell me what you did to make somebody mad enough that he would want to kill Annie to teach you a lesson. Tell me why he didn't kill you instead. Can you do that?"

"The police could never find proof it was a hit directed at me, and they never will. If you think seriously about it, you'll see it, too. Use your head, Claire. Better yet, put your scientific mind to it."

"I'm sure there are dozens of people who'd like nothing better than to get rid of you. You knew that, but you didn't care. You placed everybody who knew you in jeopardy. You didn't deserve Annie."

I said nothing, just stared at her. She looked away.

"If it makes you happy," I said finally, "I agree with you."

I grabbed her shoulders and shook her until she turned her head back to me. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"Listen to me, Claire. If you won't use the brain you were born with, I'll lay it out for you. I had a lot of time to think about this. If Annie was killed as a form of revenge against me, I can't make all the evidence fit."

She shrugged my hands away. I started to pace.

"In my business, you can't help making enemies. Maybe one of them was out for revenge, but it takes a brain to plan a hit like that and get away with it. Besides, I didn't receive any threats before Annie was killed, which is usually what they do. They hassle you—they like to play with your nerves."

"Sometimes revenge is enough," Claire said through clenched teeth. "It'd be for me."

I stopped in front of her. Her eyes gleamed like green crystals in her bleak features.

"Sure," I said. "But revenge is a bullet in the back of the head or broken bones. To blow someone up takes preparation, malicious intent, a desire for show. You don't just do it, you take credit for it. Recognition is part of the game."

"They put you out of commission, didn't they?"

I shook my head. "How could they have predicted I'd react that way? If putting me out of commission had been

their goal, they would have hit me, not Annie. And, believe it or not, I don't have that many enemies. The cops know the signature of most bomb experts. This bomb didn't have a signature, and the explosives couldn't be traced." I raked my hands through my hair. "More to the point, Claire, why did they choose Annie's lab to do it? The apartment or the car would have been more logical. The NARC labs aren't impenetrable, but they're not easy to get into, either.

"No, that explosion wasn't directed at me. I think someone wanted to protect something big, something Annie had discovered. The only way to do that was to destroy her research. The cops told me the damage to her lab was so extensive they couldn't even find a pen."

Claire nodded. "It was more an implosion than an explosion. The rest of the building was undamaged, but the inside of Annie's lab was...melted. They had to use cutting torches to clean it up."

I thought about Aplin's visit. "I thought they used gelignite."

"The police said the gelignite was used to start the explosion. It took very little."

"I don't know of any explosives that create an implosion. How about you?"

"No. Neither do the police. Or maybe they know and they won't tell." She looked at me curiously. "You've really been out of it, haven't you?"

"Yeah. Hey, Claire, don't hold your breath, but I think we're having our first real conversation."

"A temporary aberration, I'm sure. Are you leaving now?"

"I don't think so. You still haven't answered my question. You knew what Annie was working on, didn't you?"

"Why should I help you? It won't bring her back, and there's certainly no love lost between us."

"So, she did tell you about it."

She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows at me. I sighed.

"Aren't you interested in finding out who killed her?"

"Is that what you're trying to do? That's police business." She walked around me toward the door. I grabbed her forearm.

"After two years, Annie's file is in the unsolved murders pile. They won't reopen it unless they find new evidence or someone comes forward, which may never happen. I didn't know where to start before, but now I have a chance to make it right. That's why I need your help. This case I'm working on, by some weird coincidence, involves Annie. I don't believe in coincidences, Claire. They make my skin itch."

"That's usually lice."

I shrugged. I didn't want to get into that kind of useless argument. I pulled up my sleeve and showed her the telecarb. The multitude of colors swirled on my arm.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?"

She blanched, and I thought she was going to faint.

"Where did you get that?" Her voice was so low I could barely hear her.

"You've seen one before."

She put a hand to her throat and shook her head violently. "No."

"Sounded like a 'yes' to me. You care to tell me what has you spooked?"

She tensed. Then, as quickly as it had come, the fight left her. She bit her upper lip, closed her eyes and dropped her chin.

"I keep telling myself I should have done more to help her," she said, her voice a whisper. "I've asked myself a million times, would she still be alive if I'd insisted?" When I didn't respond she continued, her tone stronger. "Two days before she was killed, Annie came here to my lab. I was surprised, since we'd always made sure to keep our friendship separate from work. I don't think anyone was even aware we knew each other."

"How come?"

"I liked to keep it that way. When your...lifestyle...is different, people tend to paint everyone you know with the same brush."

As she talked, Claire moved away from me and stood in front of a cabinet at the back of the room. She opened the cabinet doors and started removing beakers and other chemistry equipment from the shelves.

"What did Annie want?" I said.

"She told me someone had been tinkering with her research, but she said she couldn't tell me any more at that point. I'm sure she knew who it was. I insisted she tell me, but she was adamant. She said she was asking too much of me already, but that I was the only one she could trust...apart from you."

I took her last words as a small peace offering on her part. I knew Claire had been in love with Annie. They'd spent a lot of time together, even though Annie was straight. Then I'd appeared on the scene, and she had lost her. She was grieving for Annie, and blaming me was easier than accepting the truth. I could relate to that.

She removed three of the shelves from the cabinet and laid them on the floor. She took a key from her pocket and unlocked the back panel. Behind it was a safe, from which she took a rectangular wooden box about the size used for wine bottles.

"She left me this, made me promise not to touch it, said it was dangerous. She added that if something were to happen to her you would come here. I was to show this to you."

I already knew what it was. She handed me the box, and I slid open the lid. A long cord, more like a sash than a belt, lay coiled on black velvet. It was pure white. I passed my telecarb over the sash and it stayed white. I touched it with a finger. The same infinity of shades as the ones in my telecarb swirled around. A faint tingle raced up my arm.

"The colors moved like that when Annie placed it in the box," Claire whispered. "What is it?"

"Annie didn't give you a message for me? Just gave you this box for safekeeping?"

She nodded.

My mind was going a mile a minute. This sash was different from my telecarb. Annie could remove it, which meant

it could be worn by anybody. But if she thought she was in danger, why would she leave it with Claire? If she hadn't stolen the sash, why not give it back to Trebor? At least, my suspicion there might be a link between Annie's visits to other worlds and the explosion in her lab seemed more and more grounded in facts.

I turned on Claire.

"You knew. All this time you knew there was a connection between her research and her death."

"I knew of no such thing. As far as I was concerned, she was much more likely to have been killed because of you than because someone was trying to steal her data. Industrial espionage I can accept. Murder for numbers? I don't think so."

"Is that what she told you? Her data was stolen?"

"No. I assumed that's what she meant."

"Right. I take it that tantrum earlier was designed to avoid giving me this?" She blushed. "Did you tell the cops about the sash?"

"No. Annie made me promise not to say anything unless I was asked specifically about it."

"Not even to me?"

"No."

I was suddenly very angry. What the hell had Annie been thinking?

As soon as I asked, I knew the answer. It had been her problem. She had to fix it. I could see her, a teasing smile on her lips, saying, "If our roles were reversed, what would you have done, Jack?"

I was jerked from my thoughts by Claire's voice.

"What is it all about, Jack? You owe me an explanation. I know you—now that you have what you wanted, you'll just leave me dangling." She yanked the box out of my hands and snapped the lid shut. "Annie didn't tell me to give you the box, just to show its contents to you. I don't trust you. I never have. Maybe, deep down, she didn't trust you, either."

I lunged for the box, but she was too quick for me. She stepped aside and put the lab counter between us.

"Start talking, Jack. I want to know what's in the box."

"I don't know, exactly. All I know is that if you keep it, it puts you in danger. Just give me the box, Claire. You don't want to get involved."

While I was speaking to her, I'd managed to whip around the counter and stalk her until her back was flat against the cabinet.

"Ha! That's a laugh," she said. "A few moments ago, you were asking me to help find Annie's killers. Now you tell me to play dead."

I winced. "Bad choice of words, Claire. It's not a game, and that's the way you could end up. Dead. I can only tell you that I think Annie was working on a project that related to some kind of space travel and that I think it was more dangerous than she thought."

"I don't care how dangerous it was." She clutched the box close to her body. "Annie was my friend, and I want to be involved."

"Forget it."

I straightened and moved away. The sash had stayed hidden for the past two years, which meant no one knew about Claire's connection to Annie. The sash was probably as safe here as anywhere else as long as it stayed in that cabinet. I could always come back, get the box later when I'd decided what to do with it. My priority now was to talk to Trebor. This time he would give me the real answers. I had a bargaining chip.

"Put the box back in the cabinet and forget about it. I'll come back for it eventually." I walked to the door.

"Come back here, Jack. You can't casually mention Annie and space travel in the same breath then expect me to forget the whole thing."

"Why not? You certainly did it once."

She flushed.

"Anyway, where I'm going, you can't follow."

"You said Annie was working on a space-travel project. Is that what this sash is used for? Is it the same thing as whatever you have on your wrist?"

I pulled up my sleeve again and looked at the telecarb. Although my touch had activated the sash, my telecarb had not reacted to it. Leinad had mentioned the other telecarb and mine weren't attuned to each other, and I was pretty sure the sash wasn't, either. I shuddered to think what would happen if Claire wore the sash. There was already one loose cannon out there; I didn't need a second one. I decided to give her a bit of slack.

"I think the sash is an earlier prototype of what I have."

"What does it do?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I could put it on and find out."

"Don't you dare." I bore down on her. "I knew you were stubborn, Claire, but I didn't think you were stupid." I plucked the box from her fingers. "If you won't believe me, believe Annie. She made you promise not to touch it, remember?"

"And you're naive enough to think that telling me this thing is dangerous will scare me? No way. I don't trust you." I could hear what she left unspoken. Annie had trusted me, and she was dead.

"I don't care if you trust me or not. You're not getting your hands on this box again." I walked to the door and opened it. "Nice chatting with you, Claire."

"Wait! You're just going to leave?"

"That's right, sweets," I said, and closed the door behind me. I looked down at my telecarb

...heard the door of the lab open...

...thought about Trebor's white room...

...felt a hand on my sleeve...

...and blinked.

"Holy Mother of God," Claire whispered. "What is that?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

*TREBOR'S JUMBLED FACE SHOWED AS MUCH ASTONISH-*ment as Claire's. Before I could say anything, Nasus and Leinad surged in unison from the floor behind Trebor. Claire squeaked and fell backward. Immediately, a chair rose to catch her. On contact, she yelped and jumped to her feet. I caught her sleeve to keep her from bolting.

"Easy," I said. "They're kinda ugly, but pretty harmless." I pointed to each Thrittene and introduced them. "This is Dr. Claire Foucault," I then said to the room.

"Wh-where are we?" Claire said in a gasp. Her eyes just about popped out of her head. Her head darted left and right as if she were trying to get her bearings or find a means of escape.

Trebor glided closer.

"You have arrived on Thrittene," he said to her. He turned to me with a frown below the eyes on his chin, which was really his forehead when his face was upside down. "Really, Jack Meter, we advised you to experiment with the telecarb, but we did not have this sort of thing in mind. Why have you brought Dr. Claire Foucault here?"

"Dr. Foucault and I had a slight misunderstanding." I still held Claire by the arm and could feel her trembling. Her breathing had accelerated, and if she continued that way she'd soon hyperventilate. I squeezed hard. "We hadn't exactly planned this visit."

Claire twisted her arm from my grip, grabbed my sleeve and turned me to face her. "Did he say we're on another planet?"

"I told you Annie had discovered something big." I pointed at Trebor. "He's part of it."

"Your companion appears distraught," Trebor said in an interested tone.

Claire shifted wild eyes to him. "Don't come any closer."

"Don't freak out on me, Claire," I said.

"Take me back."

"In a while. I have business with Trebor, here." I hefted the box that held the sash higher on my arm. "Take deep breaths, relax. We'll be gone in no time."

"I said take me back." Her clenched teeth made it difficult for her to speak clearly. She clutched my sleeve again.

I raised my eyebrows. "Or what, Claire?"

That stopped her. She stared at me, stunned, then took a deep breath. She exhaled very slowly. "You'll suffer for that."

I flashed her a smile. "I love it when you talk dirty."

"Is Dr. Claire Foucault recovered, Jack Meter?" Trebor asked.

I looked into her eyes and saw the suppressed panic. I also caught a glimmer of curiosity.

"She'll do for now," I said to him, my eyes still fixed on hers.

She let go of my arm and backed up a step. She crossed her arms across her chest and squinted at Trebor.

"Do you have some news for us, then?" Nasus said. Claire gave a start at the new voice.

"How can I understand what they're saying?" Claire said.

"Jack Meter's cerebral cortex decodes the transmissions of our thoughts and feelings then sends them out telepathically to you. As long as you remain with him, you will understand other life forms."

"You didn't tell me I was also a public address system," I said.

Claire stared at me. I pulled my sleeve to uncover the telecarb.

"I'm plugged into the universe, sweets. How d'ya like that?"

"Jack Meter," Nasus said, her voice impatient. "Must I repeat myself? What have you discovered?"

"About your thief? A few interesting tidbits. I found out about other things, too." I pressed the box closer to my body. I wished I hadn't brought it with me. "Does the name Annie Barnes mean anything to you, Trebor?"

Trebor cast a covetous look at my box. "You have recovered our tleb?"

"Is that what you call it?"

"I will take it now, Jack Meter."

"I don't think so, Trebor. First, you'll tell me how you came to give this...tleb...to Annie."

Trebor's face contorted and darkened. Instinctively, I knew it wasn't an effect of their loss of cohesion. This time, I'd succeeded in making him angry.

Shrill cries broke out around us, their rebound from the white walls a physical wave that pushed against us. Time for us to go. I turned to Claire, but she backed away, her hands on her ears to block the sounds, her face stark with shock.

"Wait!" I yelled over the noise. "Hold on to me."

Too late. The floor undulated and rolled. I lost my balance and dropped the box. It started to sink into the floor and move away. I flung myself on it and snatched it up, rolled away then jumped to my feet.

Trebor surged in front of me. I swung the box and hit him hard. A square hole yawned on the side where the box had passed through. He looked down in surprise.

"Jack!" Claire yelled.

I turned around. White matter engulfed her, her head the only part that stuck out. I launched myself toward her, but Trebor blocked my way. He still had the hole in his side.

"We have no wish to harm you, Jack Meter. Why do you always resort to violence? Give us the tleb."

I held on tight to the box. Trebor's eyes followed my hands with intense concentration. I peeked around him. The white matter that still enveloped Claire's body flowed seam-

lessly from the floor. Why hadn't Trebor wrapped me up in the same kind of cocoon? Once he'd immobilized me, he could easily get his hands, so to speak, on the tleb. He wanted it very badly, yes, but something prevented him from just taking it away from me. Something that had changed since the first time I'd woken up on Thrittene.

Claire squeaked my name.

"You won't get prissy on me and faint, right, Claire?" I said.

I heard her gasp.

"I have never fainted in my life."

"What, then? You're going to start bawling? I knew you couldn't take the heat." I sighed dramatically. "Women."

"Let me go!" she said to the room. Her voice sounded strained, as if she were struggling to get free. "Jack, you miserable excuse for a human being, when I get my hands on you..."

"What an incentive, honey. You really know how to sweet-talk a guy."

She let out a scream of frustration. From past experience, I knew her mind sharpened to razor edge when she got angry. I would need her to think quickly and not panic if we were to get out of here.

I threw back my head and laughed.

"Jack Meter," Trebor said. "You may continue this argument later. We will free her as soon as you relinquish the tleb. Give it to me."

His face was upside down again, and he was missing an arm. The remaining one snaked toward me.

I stuck the box inside my jacket and fastened the buttons. I was getting really pissed off, but I had to direct part of that anger at myself for being such a sap. Twice now, Trebor and his friends had stretched the truth so far it sagged like a worn elastic.

"You're not getting your sticky hands on this box until you tell me your story again," I said, "and from the beginning. This time, it'd better be the true version."

Trebor's arm stopped mid-flight. "I have no idea what

you mean, Jack Meter. I admit we may not have been totally straightforward with you at the outset—"

"Save it, pal," I said. "You did all the shuffling you could and it didn't work. Either you start singing like a canary, or I'm out of here." I tapped the box through my jacket. "And you won't ever see this baby again."

"You want me to mimic a bird?" Trebor said, looking baffled. His features slackened and lost definition. From the top down, his body split vertically in two. When the two parts took shape again, Nasus stood beside him.

"Jack wants us to confess the truth, Trebor," she said.

I automatically searched for Leinad. "Where's the other Stoooge?"

"Pardon?" Trebor wore the same confused frown.

"Where's Leinad?" I repeated.

The room turned purple, and Leinad emerged from the floor beside Nasus. I threw a quick glance at Claire. Her mouth had fallen open. She closed it with a snap and glared at me.

"I'm so glad the whole little family is back together," I said. "You should've started with the truth, Trebor. I probably would have handed over whatever's in this box. Now, I'm curious."

"The tleb is too important. We could not depend on your good will, Jack Meter. We could not take the risk."

"Why the cocoon around Claire? We're not going anywhere. You control my telecarb, so why worry?"

Trebor pressed his lips together. He looked peeved. I paused, frowned at him, flipped to Claire then stared at my telecarb. I grinned.

"I'll be damned. You can't control my telecarb, can you?"

The mouth on Trebor's forehead quivered. The eyes on his chin glowered at Leinad.

"We cannot," he said. "It appears that the telecarb is too compatible with your neurological system."

"Meaning it likes me better than it likes you," I said and started to chuckle.

"Perhaps," Trebor said. "Leinad designed the telecarb

with a self-protection feature. It seems it has decided this self-protection extends to you. We cannot harm you in any way." He paused. "But we can still track your whereabouts."

I studied his features. So far, I hadn't been too successful in reading their various body parts. They'd lied to me repeatedly, but in this case I knew they were telling the truth. For one, my skin didn't itch. Plus, they showed their desperation by keeping Claire prisoner. They'd had a bit of luck when she appeared with me, but they had taken advantage of the situation quickly enough.

Which meant they must want my telecarb back, too. Tough. I wasn't ready to hand it over. I'd made a promise to the Emotions entities, and I intended to keep it. For that, I needed the telecarb. And until I knew more about Annie's involvement with the Thrittene, the tleb would remain in my possession, too.

The tricky part would be to leave Thrittene with the information I wanted, both devices and Claire.

I checked on her. She seemed to have recovered somewhat and was following our exchange with interest. I had to get close enough to take her back to Earth with me. We'd have to make a break for it, take the Thrittene by surprise. I only hoped my rebellious telecarb would continue in its protective mode. I'd have only one chance to find out.

I smiled at Trebor.

"So, you know where I've traveled, then."

Leinad undulated closer. "What have you discovered?"

"He will not tell us yet, Leinad," Nasus said, her voice as sultry as ever. The smile she threw at me matched her voice. "Think of this, Jack Meter. We hold your companion. You have the box and the information. We appear to be at a stand-off."

"I suppose," I said.

"Humans are so fragile," Nasus said, "and so ignorant of our limitations."

Her eyes gleamed. Any trace of seduction had disappeared from her voice, her stance.

"Jack, I can't breathe," Claire said in a strangled voice. "It's squeezing my lungs."

She panted behind me, her short rasps the only sound in the sudden stark silence. I shrugged.

"Go ahead, get rid of her. It would be a relief. She's been a thorn in my side forever."

An obvious ploy even a small-time hood on Earth wouldn't fall for, but I counted on the Thrittene's scant knowledge of human negotiations. I sneered at Claire.

"I warned you, Claire. Now, you have to deal with the consequences."

"Jack!" she croaked.

I decided to give Nasus another few seconds. I held my own breath, clutched the box more firmly under my jacket and got ready to move. Nasus laughed suddenly, a torrid ripple that raised the hair on the nape of my neck.

"Very well."

From the corner of my eye, I saw the white matter dissolve and Claire crumple to the floor.

"Fortunately for you, Jack Meter," Nasus said, "I find your unpredictable nature fascinating."

I strode over to Claire and leaned down to help her. She brushed my hand aside then pushed herself up slowly.

"Get away from me, Jack. I nearly died, you jerk!"

"We can bicker another time, Claire." I grabbed her hand and whispered in her ear. "Stick close to me from now on. Don't get separated from me again. You keep in contact with me. I'll get us out of here."

She opened her mouth to say more then seemed to think better of it and pressed her lips together. She nodded once and shoved her hands in her lab coat pockets.

I walked back to Nasus, Claire in tow. Once we stopped, she clutched my sleeve.

I considered the three aliens for a moment. Entities that could pass for creation's rejects were hard to take seriously. I'd underestimated their ruthlessness and single-minded motivation, but I wouldn't make that mistake again.

"What do these...things want with Annie's box?" Claire asked into my neck.

Leinad twitched at Annie's name.

"We're going to find that out, aren't we, Leinad?" I said.

"The tleb and the telecarb do not belong to you, Jack Meter," Trebor said. "We see now that we made a mistake in soliciting your help. Return our property and forget the entire experience. Surely, it will be a relief to return to your normal life." He coughed slightly. "We will honor our side of the bargain, if you wish, Jack Meter, even though you did not fulfill its terms."

"What kind of shady deal did you strike with them?" Claire said.

I lifted my hand to stop her. She stiffened but said no more. Hell would freeze over before I told Claire about my little bargain with Trebor. Besides, this wasn't the time to die.

"Not before you tell me why you're so eager to get rid of us when I've barely started to investigate," I told Trebor.

"We have merely re-evaluated the possible dangers and decided to withdraw our request for help."

"After all the trouble you went through to get me here then repair me? Come on, Trebor, try harder."

The three merged into Trebor. "We do not have to explain our decision to you, Jack Meter."

"That's true. But you know what? I notice every time you guys melt into one, my skin starts to itch. If you're thinking of feeding me another invention, forget it. I'm not interested." I scratched my chin, the rustle of my beard loud in the silence. "Now, what could incite you to cancel our agreement? Your other telecarb is still missing, you still have cohesion problems. If what you told me is true, that you can't leave your world, you'll need someone else to help." I threw out a wild guess. "You made a deal with someone else."

The room hissed like a deflating balloon. The Thrittene's features blurred and melted. Claire gasped, and I looked down—we were slowly sinking.

"Damn!" I said. "You did make another deal."

"Jack," Claire said through clenched teeth, "do something."

"What the hell do you want me to do?" I clutched the tleb. "Trebor, stop that."

He didn't seem to hear me. We were now up to our knees in the stuff. Claire lost her balance and fell forward. Her arms sank into the floor up to her elbows. I grabbed the back of her lab coat and pulled her upright. The force I exerted pushed me down to my waist.

"Trebor," I yelled, "if you don't snap out of it, I'm getting the hell out of here! I still have the tleb, remember?"

Nasus split from Trebor first, and the white matter receded a few inches. Leinad soon followed. We were standing on a solid floor again. A multitude of sounds swirled around us. All three stared at me.

"As I said before," Nasus finally said, "you can be quite astonishing, Jack Meter."

I shook my head, disgusted. "Did you think I wouldn't figure it out?"

"We have concluded a transaction with someone else," she said. "This latest agreement better meets our requirements."

"What does this guy have that I don't?"

The Thrittene darkened, sounds deepened, but they said nothing.

"Fine. Someone steals a prototype telecarb from you. You hire me, but as soon as things heat up a bit, you want to cancel. Now, who could have a vested interest in stopping the investigation?" I stared at them. "You made a deal with the thief, didn't you?"

The Thrittene sank partway into the floor and lost definition.

"He said if we recovered the devices and terminated your employment, he would give us back our stolen telecarb," Leinad said.

"And you bought that?"

"Why, yes. He seemed in earnest."

"I bet he told you he was sorry about stealing your property, too."

All three of them nodded.

"How can you be so dumb?"

"It's dangerous to believe someone you don't under-

stand," Claire piped up. "You don't know how our minds work. How can you possibly tell a lie from the truth?"

I could have applied the same thing to my own situation. I picked up on some of her words.

"You said 'our minds,'" I said. "How did you figure out the thief comes from Earth?"

"Annie told me someone had tampered with her research, remember?" she answered. "If she used the device in that box, it must mean that she contacted those...that..."

"Thrittene."

She nodded once. "If the thief stole a telecarb, he must have found a way to contact them." She shrugged. "Annie's research."

I scratched my chin. "So, we're looking for someone working at NARC."

"Which leaves us with several thousand employees," Claire said. She clasped my arm tighter. "You know what that means, Jack? Annie was the first human to ever contact alien life forms."

"Hmm. Annie must have found a way to communicate with the Thrittene. Once the link was established, it was only a step to try a visit. The Thrittene designed the tleb—"

"In fact," Leinad interrupted, "the reverse happened. We found Annie Barnes and contacted her. The first traveling device was cruder, with larger components that did not have neurological connections to the user. It worked strictly with touch and thought."

"One of the Thrittene must have traveled to Earth," I said to no one in particular. "I bet Annie tried to detain him, and she ended up here, just like Claire did."

"You surmise correctly," Leinad said. "Annie Barnes was working on a project related to temporal fluctuations when we detected her signal. When one of our scientists tried to cross over, the effect was devastating. He began to disintegrate."

A mournful sound rose around us and the room turned pukey green. I winced and took deep breaths to keep my stomach down.

"Before he died," Leinad continued, "he used the tleb to return here. Annie Barnes was touching him at the time, and she crossed over with him. We realized that, unlike us, she seemed unaffected by the transit. We agreed to lend her the tleb for her research."

"And you continued with yours."

"Yes. Ener, the scientist about whom we told you, took over. Annie Barnes provided much information on the worlds she visited. We had fitted the tleb with a crude version of your telepathic implant. In some cases, she managed to communicate surprisingly well with the inhabitants. A most impressive specimen of your female gender."

I made an impatient gesture. "What happened?"

"I sometimes assisted Ener in his research, but I had other projects and I could not concentrate all my time on interworld travel. We believe Ener was contacted during that time and the prototype telecarb stolen."

The room turned a deeper green and the mourning sounds intensified. I blocked my ears until the noise receded to a mere trembling in the air.

"You're telling me the thief stole Ener's telecarb and left him to die in my world," I said, "but you expect him to give it back just because he promised?"

They nodded again. Something didn't add up.

"Jack," Claire said, her eyes thoughtful. "What if there's another deal going on here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think of all these worlds. Once you've gotten used to the idea they exist, it's fascinating. Irresistible. Anyone would be tempted to use a few shortcuts to facilitate his research."

Claire's words made my skin itch. They reminded me of something important, but it stayed just at the edge of my consciousness.

"If, by chance, they found someone who was prepared to collect items from other worlds for them," she continued, "the Thrittene might be tempted to overlook the means to justify their end."

Leinad and Nasus instantly melted and sprang up behind us. The look on Trebor's face told me Claire had hit the jackpot.

"You're a fool, Trebor," I said. "You'll regret it, mark my words."

"The faster we understand these worlds, the more quickly we will find the means to repair ours."

I thought about Tekhnè and the Emotions World. "But if they're all interconnected, maybe taking away from them will make yours worse."

"We doubt it very much. You see, we are almost certain it was one of our experiments in time synchronization that precipitated our loss of cohesion. We believe, however, that the answer to our problem lies in one of these other worlds. Annie Barnes refused to help us."

"You mean she refused to steal for you."

Trebor shrugged. "We lent her the tleb and facilitated her research. We expected she would reciprocate. It was unfortunate that Annie Barnes refused to assist with ours. This difficulty, however, has resolved itself."

"Why didn't you ask me to do the same for you?"

Trebor shook his head. "How can an investigator help us collect scientific samples?"

I smiled inwardly. Inadvertently, Trebor had given me another piece of the puzzle. "Has he brought you anything yet?"

"No, but he will, as soon as we have neutralized you."

Seeing that they'd spent a lot of effort in repairing me, I wasn't too worried they now wanted to off me. It was more likely they wanted to keep me on Thrittene for a while.

"What does he want in return?"

"We agreed to give him the tleb."

I didn't like the sound of that at all. "If I were you, I wouldn't be so trusting. Has this thief got a name?"

Nasus laughed nastily. "Really, Jack Meter, we are not that naive."

"I'll reserve judgement on that. Doesn't matter, I'll find out soon enough. Then I'll catch up with him. Whether you

like it or not, Trebor of Thrittene, we still have a deal."

"You might leave now, Jack Meter," Trebor said, "but if ever you come back here, it may not be so easy to leave us again."

"I guess not." I mentally crossed my fingers, looked at Claire and gave her a brief nod.

"Remember, Jack Meter," Trebor added. "We can still track the telecarb."

"Come on," I said to Claire, "we're out of here." I closed my eyes. The screeching sounds of Thrittene winked out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I THOUGHT I WAS DEAF UNTIL I REALIZED MY EARS WERE buzzing from the contrast between noise and quiet. Like a physical force, the silence wrapped around me, entered through my eardrums and exploded out of my chest. It took my lungs with it and replaced them with lead.

My wrist burned. I looked down; my sleeve was gone. The telecarb throbbed in time with my heartbeats and the skin on each side of it had taken on the same swirling hues. As I watched, the band of colors crept up my arm.

Like the increasing traffic noises just before sunrise, the sounds of Thrittene replaced the silence. The distorted sonics combined into an opera of twisted, off-key melodies. They should have made me shudder; but, instead, the sounds hovered just at the edge of my understanding. I strained to catch their meaning.

Then, along with the music, a multitude of realities swarmed through me. They read my thoughts, plunged into my emotions, called for me to merge with them. Never, I thought. My telecarb pulsed faster; my heartbeats followed. I still couldn't breathe, but it didn't seem as important as before. I felt lightheaded, without substance, as if a gust of wind would blow me apart.

Breathe, I reminded myself.

I struggled with a breath. Once it was in I felt more solid.

Again, I thought. Another breath blurred the sounds.

I felt Claire move away from my hand. I focused on her, and the noises vanished. The telecarb stopped burning. My jacket had a sleeve again.

I took a deep breath and released it slowly. From Claire's lack of reaction, I guessed my experience had lasted only a few seconds, if that. I didn't know what had really happened, but somehow it was connected to the use of the telecarb. If Claire hadn't moved and distracted me, would I have eventually freed myself from that trance? I wasn't sure, and the idea of losing myself among all those consciousnesses scared the shit out of me. Death, I could take. Assimilation was another story entirely. I shuddered.

Get a grip, I told myself. I looked around. Claire and I stood in the center of her lab, exactly where I'd wanted us to arrive. I grinned in relief. At least I'd proven the telecarb responded only to me. One thing for sure—I wouldn't return to Thrittene any time soon.

Claire had flopped on a stool. Her lab coat was wrinkled, her hair flew in all directions. The taut fatigue in her face made her look ten years older. Her chin rested on her chest as if she didn't have the strength to keep her head upright. Nothing like the shock of alien life to short-circuit a brain.

She rolled her head, raised her shoulders then stretched her neck sideways.

"Don't get too comfortable, Claire. As soon as you've put the tleb back in the cabinet, we're leaving."

"What do you mean 'we?' I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm going home and I don't ever want to see you again."

"Wouldn't that be lovely. Unfortunately, you'll have to tag along until I find a way to get you out of harm's way. Face it, you're involved now."

"I've just uninvolved myself. You want help, go to the police."

"Help? Lady, give me a break. I was doing real well until

you decided to latch on to me. Now I'm stuck with you, so you're going to do what I tell you to do. You're coming with me."

"I'll follow you in hell."

"That may happen yet, sweetheart. The thief used Annie's equipment and he's familiar with the NARC buildings. Plus, he's a scientist, so he has access to the labs. It won't take him long to figure out that if you and I know each other Annie's the connection. How many female scientists with red hair do you have here in the complex? He'll easily find out the location of your lab, if he doesn't already know. And what if the Thrittene can track the tleb? Trebor will send our thief after it. He'll end up here soon enough."

"You made the deal with those aliens—you handle him. I have nothing to do with all this. For all I care, they can have the stupid box and whatever's in it."

"You don't mean that, Claire. You're just tired, strung out."

She jumped up and jammed her fists on her hips. "Don't tell me what I mean or feel. Lord, you're arrogant. I'd rather take my chances with that thief. In case you haven't figured it out, I can take care of myself."

I mimicked her stance. "Sure. What do you think he'll do, Claire, once he finds you and gets the tleb from you? Thank you? Kiss you on both cheeks, and go on his way? You'll be expendable. Besides, who do you think blew up Annie's lab?"

When I saw the stricken look in her eyes, I felt a bit guilty. I wanted to move on, and all this arguing about the obvious made me nasty. I knew she hadn't made the connection between the thief and Annie's death, and I'd used it like a bludgeon.

She lifted her chin and pointed it at me. "I'll leave before he gets here."

I swore and shook my head quickly. "He won't risk us going after him. He wants the tleb, and Trebor more or less gave it to him. I'm willing to bet he's not the type to respect his end of the bargain, either. As long as he doesn't have ac-

cess to the tleb, you have a chance of staying alive. Once you remove it as a deterrent to killing you, he's home free." I handed her the box. "He's got the advantage at the moment; he'll know who we are. That's why you can't go home." I scratched my chin. "We can't stay at my place, either."

She looked like she wanted to rip out my insides and feed them to me slowly, but at least I had her moving. The tleb went into its niche again, and she pocketed the key. While she replaced the shelves and the beakers, I mentally reviewed what I knew.

Some tidbit of information tickled my subconscious like a sneeze at the tip of my nose. It had to do with something Claire had said on Thrittene. Then, I had it.

Short cuts.

Annie knew a man who was into short cuts. I'd met him not too long ago, in my own apartment. What would Mueller want with a tleb, Neurochips and a chunk of the Emotions World?

"Claire," I said, "have you ever heard of something called Neurochips?"

She didn't answer, just closed and locked the cabinet. I was about to repeat my question when she said, "You mean biochips?"

I held my breath for a second then exhaled. "There is such a thing?"

"Maybe." She stuffed her hands in the pockets of her lab coat and turned to me.

I could tell she was still angry, but her interest was piqued.

"Where did you hear about them?"

"Annie's supervisor experimented with them. But he doesn't work for the Center anymore, so I don't know if someone else continued his research."

Something like ants crawled under my skin. I shivered. "Annie's supervisor. You mean Dr. Mueller?"

She nodded.

"He's not with NARC anymore?"

"No." She threw me a derisive glance. "He's dead, Jack."

"Stefan Mueller." That bastard. "Mueller's the thief."

"Didn't you hear what I said? The man's dead."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know — five-eleven, six feet, maybe? Thin, blondish, gray eyes. He always dressed like he just stepped off the plane from Italy. His shoes alone must have cost a thousand dollars. I always wondered where he got that kind of money."

The description fit my visitor perfectly. "How did Mueller die?"

"I don't recall many of the details, I was...preoccupied at the time." She shook her head. "It must have been about a year and a half ago. His house burned down, I think. I remember they found his body. The RCMP took over the investigation shortly after, and the press couldn't get anything out of them. The papers made a big deal of it, but the noise died quickly."

"What if the body they found wasn't his?"

She made a face.

"Don't you see? He was familiar with the NARC buildings and Annie's research. He could easily have contacted Thrittene when Annie wasn't using her lab."

"I guess. But six months after Annie's lab was destroyed, he died himself. Don't you think you should look elsewhere?"

"What if I told you I talked to Mueller yesterday?" I paused. "At least, I think it was yesterday."

"It can't be."

"He said he wanted to continue Annie's research. It's more likely he wanted the tleb."

"Okay, let's say Mueller is still alive and has the other telecarb you're looking for. What does that have to do with biochips?"

"On one of the worlds I visited, he stole what they called 'Neurochips.'"

"Hmm." She walked over to her computer and turned it on. Every trace of fatigue had left her face. "If someone is working in that field, there should be something on the

Internet about it. I read Mueller's article on biochip theory in Science Journal. That's the piece that got him fired from NARC. If I recall correctly, he was using fractal interpolation encoded signals to train pRAM neural networks. He claimed he was close to designing the perfect neural algorithm."

"In English, please?"

"He was on the verge of designing a working biochip."

"So?"

"The biochip combines knowledge from neuroscience and robotics." As she talked, she logged onto the 'Net then scanned the titles the search engine had loaded and clicked on one. "Here we go. Wow, they're doing a lot of work on biochips these days. Too bad Mueller's not here to continue his research. It looks like they haven't caught up with him yet."

"He was unethical and ruthless, according to Annie."

"Yes, that I can believe. He diverted funds and equipment from his official research project for his biochip work. Even today that type of research would be too risky for the ultra-conservative NARC administration. Not to mention extremely expensive."

I pointed to the screen. "Other agencies don't have the same opinion."

"It depends on how promising the research, and who's backing you up. In this case, it's one of the huge communications corporations." She fell silent while she browsed through the articles on her screen. She studied one for half a minute.

"It says here they can't mimic neurons in the brain because the rate of the calculation processing speed of the chip can't be increased enough. Even if they solve that problem, the use of the chip will be limited to switching systems and communications networks. Using them for advanced intelligent systems is still a long way away."

"Advanced intelligent systems," I said. "You mean robots?"

She shook her head. "Robots already exist. Eventually, a chip like the biochip could regulate anything from highly

complex circuits similar to our nervous system to entire cities. It would learn from its mistakes, be capable of fine motor control and have much higher problem-solving capabilities than humans." She leaned back with a sardonic smile. "Don't you read science fiction?"

"Don't have much time for reading. I watch sports and the news on TV. It's enough for me." I grinned. "Sometimes, if I feel like doing something wild, I turn to the Shopping Channel."

She made a face. "Careful. That might tax your intellect."

"What about science fiction?"

"Most authors have been fascinated with machines that look so much like humans you can't tell them apart, except that they have superior strength, intelligence and skills." She sniffed and looked down her nose. "Surely, you've heard of androids."

"You mean Mueller could build an android if he had a sophisticated enough biochip?"

"I'm a biochemist, not a neuroscientist. How should I know?"

"Make a guess, Claire. It's important."

She blew an annoyed sigh. "I think the biochip wouldn't be enough. He would need to connect it to a functioning body, a body that would look enough like a human to fool us. That means finding a way to reproduce epidermis, organs, hair, not to mention a fully functioning neural system. That's why the publications on the 'Net are only vaguely optimistic about using the chip for humanoid artificial intelligence." She lifted her hand to stop my question. "And if that weren't enough, his android would need to recognize complex verbal imagery, which is almost impossible to do if it doesn't have a frame of reference."

"I don't get it."

"To understand complex ideas, his machine would need to be able to place them into context. Humans learn because, among other things, they can separate the pleasant from the unpleasant. They have—how can I say this?—an emotional framework."

Emotions. That answered the question about why Mueller had gone to the Emotions World. The "river" must have been a heady mix of emotions. A chunk of it would have been all he needed.

My skin itched. I had a feeling I knew where Mueller's jaunts were leading him. This New Age Frankenstein was building himself a monster. But what were, ultimately, Mueller's motives? Once he gave life to his monster, what did he intend to do with it? And why did he want the tleb?

The skin of my wrist tingled. When I pulled back my sleeve, the colors in my telecarb swirled madly. It was trying to tell me something. The more I stared, the more anxious I became. The only other time I'd felt this kind of tingling had been when I'd met Mueller. I felt the sudden urge to throw myself on the floor. I grabbed Claire by the arm, pulled her down.

"Duck!" I yelled.

We dove behind the lab counter. The computer screen exploded in a burst of light and smoke. A second later, the glass doors of the bookcase above us shattered. I covered Claire's head and mine as best I could and felt the sharp sting of glass shards on my hands. I swore.

"Someone is shooting at us!" Claire said, her voice low and urgent.

"Tell me something I don't know," I muttered, brushing the pieces of glass off my hands. The little suckers stung. I heard a muffled report, and a chip of marble from the counter flew over my head.

"Let's get out of here!" Claire hissed. She pointed at my telecarb.

"Not yet," I whispered back. "I want to know if it's Mueller who's shooting at us."

"Are you crazy?" She grabbed my sleeve. I untangled her fingers from my jacket and patted her shoulder.

My wrist still tingled. I took that as a sign that whoever had shot at us was still there. In the silence, I heard the shuffle of feet. He was moving.

"I know you're still here, Meter," Mueller's educated

voice said. That answered my question about the identity of the shooter. The telecarb must have been warning me he was coming.

I was puzzled. Mueller had a gun. By this time, he knew I didn't have one. Why wasn't he transporting himself in front of us, instead of waiting for us to come out?

"Keep him talking," I mouthed then turned the corner of the counter before she could grab me again.

"Please, don't shoot!" Claire cried. "I don't know what you want, but you don't have to shoot. I'm sure we can arrive at an agreement."

"Agreement? I think not. You have something I want—the tleb. Just slide it over to me and I'll be on my way."

"I don't have it with me. It's in a safe place."

I moved to the front corner of the counter and peeked. As if he had radar, Mueller followed me with his gun. I heard a plop and the wooden side of the counter splintered. I ducked back before he could shoot again. I'd seen what I needed to see, though.

Mueller stood facing the counter, with enough space for me between him and Claire's desk. I darted back to Claire, who looked mad enough to spit her own teeth at me.

"I just learned you're supposed to be dead, Mueller," I said from the safety of my hiding place.

"Let's just say I found it expedient to disappear. Unfortunately, I had to break my cover to ask for your help in tracing the tleb. You see, I suspected Annie had left it, along with her research notes, in someone's safekeeping. Find the notes, find the tleb."

"Why do you want the tleb, Mueller?"

He sighed. "You don't expect me to tell you, do you, Jack?"

"How did you find out Claire had the tleb?"

"Simple deduction. It had to be either you or Annie's good friend. You knew Annie and Dr. Foucault had a very peculiar friendship, didn't you? It goes against nature, if you ask me."

Claire opened her mouth to protest. I placed a hand on

her arm and signaled "no." Her teeth snapped together.

"Why did it take you so long to come after the tleb?"

"There was no rush, and I had, should we say, more pressing priorities. Unfortunately, the Thrittene forced me to accelerate my timetable. You will, therefore, hand the tleb over now."

"You heard Claire. She doesn't have it."

"Then you will lead me to it." His tone became more impatient. "You cannot stay behind that counter forever. Get up slowly and I will not harm you."

"I've heard that one before," I muttered. "I can just disappear," I said in a louder voice. "You won't find me again."

Mueller chuckled. "Oh, go ahead, try it. You'll find your telecarb ineffective with another one so close. Thrittene matter in close proximity blends into one consciousness, and none of the devices work. That is why I avoid that world as much as I can, although I was clever enough to convince them to send me back once I discovered my telecarb did not work there."

Claire jerked her head up, her eyes wide. I nodded. Mueller had inadvertently given me precious information.

"Tell me, Jack, however did you convince Trebor to send you back with the tleb? What did you threaten him with?"

"How far away do I have to be from you for my telecarb to work?" I said.

"Farther away than this, certainly." I could hear the amusement in his voice. "Does it matter? You cannot leave, and I have the gun."

I heard shuffling to the left. He was getting closer. It was time to find out if Leinad had been right when he said my telecarb would work at close range. I put my finger to my lips, signaling Claire to keep quiet, and blinked.

The telecarb brought me a foot behind Mueller, to his right. I lunged and gripped his right wrist with both hands. He jerked in surprise and tried to yank his wrist free. I twisted his arm outwards then yanked it toward me. The move forced him to bend backwards, but he wouldn't let go of the gun.

"Shit," he said through clenched teeth. He swiped at me with his fist. The blow grazed my temple and threw me off-balance.

I crashed down, bringing him with me. Mueller twisted and rammed his knee in my stomach. He slapped his free hand on the gun butt and tried to shove the barrel in my face. My arms started shaking from the effort of keeping him off.

Suddenly, I pulled instead of pushed. He fell on his side. I managed to keep my fingers clamped around his wrist, threw myself over him and banged his gun hand on the floor.

This time, I didn't see it coming. My head snapped back from Mueller's clip, and I lost my grip on his arm. In sheer reflex, I rolled away from him. Mueller shifted to all fours. I rolled again. He fired. The slug ricocheted off the tile where my head had been.

I hopped behind the counter. The lab door slammed open. I risked a peek over the worktop and saw a security guard burst inside.

"What the hell is going on here?" he said, moving into the room.

Mueller turned and fired. The guard gasped and fell back, folded in two by the impact. Mueller scrambled to his feet and ran through the lab door, now propped open by the guard's bleeding body. I leaped from my crouch and sprinted after Mueller.

When I reached the door, he was already halfway down the corridor. At the end of the hall, he faded then disappeared. I skidded to a halt and looked down at my telecarb; it had returned to its normal appearance and my wrist had stopped tingling. I swore. I couldn't even pursue him, since my telecarb could take me only where he'd been and not where he was.

I swiped at the blood that trickled from my lip with the back of my hand, brushed the last of the glass from my clothes and walked quickly back to the lab.

At the door, Claire was bent over the wounded guard.

She'd stanching the blood as best she could with the limited supplies in her first-aid box. She lifted her head when I stopped in front of her.

"He's still alive." She got up. "I'll call security and 911."

Before she turned to go back into the lab, I gripped her sleeve. "After you're done, we're getting out of here."

"Someone has to stay with him!"

I shifted my eyes to my hand on her arm. "Either you agree, or we leave now."

She grimaced then nodded. We stepped over the guard to get back into the lab.

CHAPTER NINE

IT TOOK CLAIRE LESS THAN A MINUTE TO PHONE SECURITY. She checked on the guard again before she pronounced us ready to leave. The delay chafed my nerves.

"You can't do any more for him," I said. "Gotta move. Someone from another lab might show up. The last thing I need is the cops after me."

"There's little chance anyone heard the commotion," Claire said. "These labs are soundproof, and everyone keeps their door closed. Even if some of the scientists are still working at this hour, their staff should be gone already." She nodded at the digital clock on the wall. It read 5:50.

Damn. I'd never get used to these time shifts. When I'd first dropped in on Claire, it had been early morning; now it was nearly supper time.

"Get a move on anyway. Mueller could come back any time. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be here if he does."

"Where are we going?"

"My place first, but we can't stay there. In and out, just long enough for me to call a friend. Based on what he tells me, I'll know what to do next."

"Let's take my Jeep." She took off her lab coat and frowned at the bright red blood streaks. She stuffed it in the garbage can and picked up a green anorak. "I know it's not

as fast as thinking your way everywhere, but..." She shrugged. "I need to know there's still a world out there."

I nodded. I understood how the basic task of driving through town could do that for her. Two days ago, when I'd come back from the Emotions World, the simple pleasures of waking up with the sun, shopping for groceries and cooking had helped me refocus.

"Let's go." I clutched her sleeve and took us to the parking lot. A wave of dizziness made me stagger and fall against her Jeep.

"What's wrong?" Claire said.

Her voice echoed as if from the other end of a tunnel. I lifted my head with effort. Under the parking lot lights, Claire moved in jerky, accelerated gestures, as if I'd pressed the fast-forward button on a video machine. I watched her frown, thread her fingers through her hair, move away, look around then back at me. It made me dizzy.

I lifted a hand to stop her, my gesture in slow motion compared to her sped-up action. Her arm darted to mine, and she clasped my forearm. The world righted itself and slowed down.

"Jack, answer me," she said, her tone annoyed. "What's wrong with you?"

I straightened and pulled in cool air. The moist breeze from the river carried the smell of fallen leaves. Huge gray clouds, illuminated by a near-full moon, swirled overhead. They mirrored the eddies in my gut. I closed my eyes and concentrated on keeping my stomach down.

"Jack?"

"I'm fine, okay? The telecarb...I think it's doing something to me. Every time I use it, I get sort of lightheaded."

She considered me for a few seconds. "Are you saying you're suffering from side effects every time you use that thing?"

"Might be. But it gets weirder every time." I took another deep breath. "I'd planned to meet you outside the gate, but I'm not sure I'm up to using the telecarb again. You drive; I'll hide in the back."

"That's why you looked so strange in the lab when we came back from Thrittene. Those side effects, they're getting worse, aren't they?"

"Hey. There's no free lunch, right?"

I turned my back on her, closing the subject. She pulled my arm, swung me around then let go and jammed her fists on her hips.

"What did you do this morning, Jack? Did you wake up and decide to mess up my life? Since you barged into my lab, I've been bullied, choked and squashed by aliens, shot at and now, thanks to you, I'm a fugitive. That poor security guard is bleeding to death on the floor of my lab. My lab, Jack, and we left the scene of the crime. Then you have the gall to order me to smuggle you out of a high-security facility."

I scanned the parking lot. They hadn't sounded the alarm yet, but it wouldn't take long. I figured we had another five minutes, tops, before all hell broke loose and they locked the gates.

"Can you get hysterical after we're out of here? We don't have much time."

"They'll search the vehicles, inside and out. They always do—"

"You'll just have to talk them out of it this time, won't you?"

She glared at me, her hands still on her hips. For a second, I thought she was going to turn me down. Then, she sniffed, pushed me aside, unlocked the driver's door, flipped the seat forward and motioned me inside.

"Get in and stay on the floor."

I jumped into the vehicle and hunkered down behind the passenger seat, my bum on the floor, my knees under my chin. The window handle dug into my skull. I twisted and shoved my feet under the seat as far as I could to give me more space. I was still trying to find a comfortable position when Claire came back with a blanket she'd taken from the cargo area.

"Use this." She threw the blanket at me. Its stench, a mix-

ture of oil and rotten fruit, made me gag.

"What do you use this for?" I said. "Picnics on a garbage dump?"

She shrugged, jumped in the driver's seat and slammed the door. I pulled the putrid blanket over me and tried to act like a heap of dirty laundry.

Claire had parked in an unpaved lot near the river. The wheels crunched on the gravel; then the sound switched to a low hum as the Jeep hit the asphalt. The parking lot lights blinked on and off inside the car at irregular intervals, like a message sent in semaphore.

"We're approaching the gate," she said, her voice low. "They don't seem to be in a panic yet. Try not to move."

The Jeep slowed down to a stop. My air reeked of oil and dirt; I was tired, hungry and still hazy from that last use of the telecarb. Blood rushed in my ears, and it was a strain to stay awake. Before I passed out, I lifted a corner of the blanket and took a deep breath.

"Hi, Rod," Claire said. I froze with my hand in the air.

"You're out early today, Dr. Foucault," Rod said.

"I have an appointment." She sighed.

"Sounds like you don't want to keep it."

"Well, no, but I have to. It's fairly serious."

Come on, Claire, no time for chit-chat. They'll ring the alarm any minute.

"Really?" Rod said. He sounded very young and very concerned. "You're not sick, are you?"

"No, no," Claire said, "it's not me. I'm meeting the exterminator. I'm plagued with a vermin infestation. It started in my lab."

"Bummer." He cleared his throat. "Okay, Dr. Foucault, why don't you step out of the car so I can search your vehicle as quickly as possible?"

"Hmm, Rod, that's fine with me, but I should tell you that they'll have to fumigate the Jeep as well. They told me I'd even have to burn these clothes. It might not be a good idea for you to come in contact with the inside of the vehicle."

Rod cleared his throat again. "Regulations. You know that."

"Fine. I warned you. Don't blame me if you start itching tomorrow." Claire opened her door. I tensed, ready to use the telecarb.

A phone rang. The alarm pealed.

"Sorry, Dr. Foucault, there's the alarm. It's probably just a drill, but I can't let you through until I'm given the go-ahead."

"Well, you'd better answer that phone then."

The car door slammed closed.

"He's going inside the guardhouse," she muttered. "Oh, no. Three security guards just came out of the building. They're running after us. Jack, they have guns." That last sentence came out strangled.

"Get out of here, Claire."

"I can't. The gate's not open."

"For crying out loud, just ram it. It's either that or explaining why a guard is bleeding to death in your lab."

She groaned. "I swear one day I'll get you for all of this. Hang on." She revved the engine. "Here goes nothing," she mumbled.

The tires screeched. My head snapped back. The impact and the noise shook the frame of the Jeep. Slats of white-painted wood flew past the side windows.

Claire turned right before I could hold on to something. I crashed head first into the other door opposite me.

"Take it easy, will you?" I lifted myself up as she ran a red light. "You didn't have to break my neck," I said.

I climbed over the passenger seat. Claire kept her eye on the rearview mirror and said nothing.

"Next time, why don't you let me make up the story for you? Did you expect the guy would buy such a lame excuse? A vermin infestation." I cracked up.

"Why not? It's exactly what I have, and it spread from my lab to my Jeep." She threw me a furious glance. "You owe me a paint job."

"Come on, what's a few scratches? Gives your Jeep character, like you're using it for real."

She didn't find it funny.

"Okay, whatever you say. A paint job. Let's go to the apartment."

"You're at the same place?"

I nodded. "Didn't see the need to move."

Claire stopped at the next red light. She glanced at the rearview mirror again and drummed her fingers on the steering wheel.

"What did you do with Annie's things?"

I stared out the window at the National Gallery. Bright lights shone through its hundreds of windows and made the metal-and-stone structure look delicate and translucent. The steady tempo of the left turn signal had a hypnotic effect.

"I put most of them in the basement. Didn't want to be reminded."

"And now?"

I shot her a glance. "Now, I don't want to talk about it. Just get us to the apartment, Claire."

The cross-street light turned yellow. She gripped the wheel, checked her mirror again. A sharp uneasiness crept up my spine, and my skin itched.

"On second thought," I said, "continue down Sussex to Colonel By. We'll stop at Pretoria Bridge. I'll use a public phone there."

She complied with a frown. "I hope you know what you're doing. By now, they must have contacted the police."

"Probably. But I have a hunch the cops won't touch that one. They'll call the Mounties."

"Whatever. I'm sure it won't take long until someone comes after us."

"Correction. They'll come after you."

She gripped the steering wheel tighter but didn't comment.

Claire parked in the shopping center on Isabella Street and waited in the car while I went to find a phone. It was completely dark now, and the chill in the air had changed to a damp cold that went through my jacket. People went about their last-minute purchases, rushed and intense. My body hummed as I walked among them. Life was full of irony. Not

three days ago, I was slumped in a drunken funk on the couch in my apartment, oblivious to anything but the empty feeling inside my chest. Now, I was chasing a crazy scientist across the universe in the company of the only person who hated my guts more than I did.

I dug out the rumpled card with my friend's cell phone number from my wallet. Terry was the best cop I knew. He'd been transferred from the RCMP mainstream to their National Security Investigations Unit just before I lost Annie. I also vaguely remembered he'd floated around the investigation of her death. At the time, I'd thought it due to our friendship. Those Grey Cup weekends had always been a wild ride, even after we'd both found us a partner and Terry'd become a dad. When he came over, Annie treated him like a big Teddy bear, and he loved it. So, when she was killed, I thought it only natural he'd be involved.

With recent events, however, I realized there might have been more to his involvement than friendship. If the Mounties had suspected Mueller of stealing other people's research, as well as NARC funds, they might also have considered the explosion in Annie's lab had something to do with him, if only because he was Annie's supervisor. NARC had a lot of contracts with the government and the Department of National Defense.

Contacting Terry was a risk. He could decide to take over the investigation and put us on ice until they caught Mueller. On the other hand, if there was anything to know about that loopy scientist, Terry would know it or could find out about it.

He picked up after the fourth ring. "Parczek here."

"Terry? Jack."

"Jack." I heard surprise and urgency in his voice. I automatically went on alert. "Where the hell are you?"

"What's up, Terry?"

"Aplin's been trying to track you down for three hours."

"I've been busy."

"I'll say. What did you do, Jack, piss off the Godfather?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Someone blew up half your building, including your apartment. You're wanted for questioning, pal."

"Any casualties?" My voice came out raw.

"One dead, six injured. Looks like Johnson, your janitor, went into your apartment to fix something. The door blew in his face. He never had a chance."

I closed my eyes and slumped against the wall. "He was going in to fix that dripping pipe under the sink."

My voice sounded hoarse to my ears. Damn. The guy's sense of timing had always been the pits. He was nosy – no, he'd been nosy – and annoying, but he'd also been the first to reach through my numbness and desolation. I took a deep breath, and with it came anger.

"I'll get the bastard for this."

"That's our job, and you know it. Just come in, and we'll talk."

I straightened and surveyed the area. People dashed by the public phone, but no one stood close enough to hear me.

"Listen to me, Terry. Right now, you have other worries than bringing me in. Remember Annie's friend, Claire Foucault?"

"Yeah."

"I have a feeling you'll find the same setup at her place. You'd better send a bomb squad there before anyone else gets hurt."

"She's with you? I just heard on the car radio the police issued a Canada-wide arrest warrant for her. What the hell is going on, Jack?"

"The bomb squad, Terry." I gave him Claire's address. "I'll call you back in an hour."

I slammed down the receiver and leaned against the wall, dizzy with rage and impotence. Who else but Mueller could have done this? He must have set up the bombs before he came to Claire's lab. He'd made sure that if we'd gone to my place or Claire's we would have stayed there. Permanently.

I dragged myself back to the Jeep.

"Something's happened," Claire said.

I barked a laugh.

"We need to get out of here." I raised a tired hand before she could protest. "First things first. I don't know about you, but I'm starved. I have to eat. I'll tell you everything once my stomach is full."

I directed her down Queen Elizabeth Drive to Baseline then on to Merivale Road and the Merivale Diner. It boasted old-fashioned high-backed booths and a jukebox blaring 50s songs that covered up conversations. Claire sat across the table from me, her back stiff. The sweet, greasy smell of fish and chips wafted to our table. Her nose wrinkled.

"I know you're a picky eater," I said, "so relax. This isn't your usual fancy little café, but it has great food."

"I'm not picky, I'm a vegetarian. Just the smell of meat makes me retch."

"You'd better stick to the salad, then."

She picked up the menu and, after a moment, lifted her head.

"There's a whole vegetarian section on this menu." Her smile had a sarcastic twitch to it. "Why, Jack, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were being thoughtful."

I cleared my throat. "We both gotta eat, okay? I don't want you to pass out on me. You're way too heavy to carry around."

She glared. I smirked. The atmosphere felt almost normal.

The waitress broke into our silence, and we both ordered. After she left, I put my brain in neutral and simply absorbed the noises around me. Ordinary noises, like the clinking of dishes, the whine of a child, the call for more coffee. I patted my pockets in search of my cigarettes and remembered I didn't smoke anymore.

I glanced at Claire who, eyes closed, rested her head on the back of the seat. If she'd looked bad after coming back from Thrittene, she looked awful now. She'd used the time I spent talking with Terry to twist her hair into a braid so tight it pulled her scalp at the temples. Her coppery hair, the grayish cast of her skin, the taut lines around her mouth and the two purple slashes under her eyes made her look bruised. I

thought maybe she'd fallen asleep, but when our food arrived she straightened.

She took a mouthful of her pasta salad, chewed carefully. She nodded once, said "Good," and dug in while I concentrated on my club sandwich. Halfway through our meal, we both came up for air.

"Will your friend be joining us?" she said.

"Not here. I have to call him back in..." I checked my watch. "Twenty minutes."

"You looked upset when you came back to the Jeep."

I snickered. "You could say that."

"What did he tell you?"

"You don't want to know."

She stopped chewing, swallowed then raised an eyebrow. I smiled.

"You know, you missed your calling. You would have made a great Mother Superior."

"Spill it, Jack."

"Terry and I go way back," I said, hearing the defensive tone in my voice.

"Meaning you can trust him."

"Meaning I think I can trust him." I scratched my chin. "I just have to find a plausible story to tell him."

"Terry...Terry..." she muttered then glared at me. "You don't mean Terry Parczek?" When I didn't say anything, she leaned forward. "You called the police?" She sat back, looking stunned. "I don't believe it. He called the police."

"We need to locate Mueller. Terry's the only one I know who can help us. I just have to find a way to get him to do that."

"If he doesn't put us in prison instead," Claire said.

"Yeah. The thought had occurred to me."

She made this little strangled sound, and I wasn't sure if she was suppressing a scream or holding tears.

"Terry's part of NSIU," I said. "If anyone knows about Mueller, it'll be him."

"Why?"

"Most of NARC's research has the potential to affect na-

tional security, right? You can bet that if one of its scientists fakes his death and it's discovered, the NSIU will be involved. In fact, you said yourself the RCMP took over the investigation of Mueller's house fire. Terry also investigated Annie's death."

"If we're dealing with national security issues, he won't want us mixed up in it. He certainly won't volunteer information."

"Maybe not," I said. "You can do what you want, but I'm involved until the end. Don't look at me like I'm an idiot. Terry and I will meet on my terms or not at all."

"What are you going to do, kidnap him?"

"That's not a half-bad idea."

She snorted and took a sip of tea. "What did Terry tell you that upset you so much?"

"My janitor was killed when he tried to get into my apartment. He got himself blown up." I kept a tight grip on my emotions. I didn't need to imagine what a bomb did to a body. I'd seen it.

"That's terrible," Claire said, shuddering.

"Yeah, well, he wasn't the target."

She went completely still. "My God. My apartment."

"Terry's sending a bomb squad to your place right now. I suspect Mueller booby-trapped it, too. He probably thought he'd be finished with you once you got back home. I'm sure he didn't count on me being there with you in the lab. If you'd been alone, he would have given you the same sob story he gave me."

"It wouldn't have worked."

"I'm not so sure."

She rubbed her upper arms slowly with her hands. "It could have been us in that explosion. Poor man."

"There's another wrinkle. Now the cops are looking for both of us."

"Oh, goodie."

"If there's any way Mueller can pay for what he's done, I'll find it."

Claire shook her head. "I can't think anymore, Jack. I'm exhausted. Is there a motel around here?"

"Do you have any cash?"

"My wallet's still in my drawer at the lab."

"I have about thirty bucks. I can't use my credit card or my bank card, the cops can trace that."

"I'm not sleeping in the car."

"That's why we need Terry. Besides, I told you I need to pick his brains about Mueller." I checked my watch again. "I have to call him now." When she didn't say anything, I continued. "Listen. Either you take your chances with me or you go with the police. I'm not sure I can keep you safe."

She clenched her fists. "I don't need a keeper, Jack."

"If you go to the police, they may be able to protect you. It may also alert Mueller, and I'm sure he can reach you anywhere. Remember, he has a telecarb, and he did bypass security and materialize in your lab. It's your choice, Claire."

She chuckled, but there was no humor in it. "Some choice. Go call Terry. I'm not going anywhere."

CHAPTER TEN

THE PAY PHONE WAS IN A NARROW HALLWAY BETWEEN the doors to the washrooms. In front of me, a woman with two young boys hesitated then resolutely marched into the women's. I watched her until the door shut on her retreating back. Before I could pick up the receiver, the door to the men's room slammed open; and a man twice my width shifted past me, his wheeze loud in my ear. An old man waited for him to pass before he shuffled inside. I'd be lucky if I got two minutes of privacy to settle matters with Terry.

I huddled close to the phone and dialed his number.

"Parczek here."

"Did they find a bomb?"

"Jesus Murphy, Jack, what the frig did you get yourself into?"

"I'll take that as a yes."

"How did you get involved with Foucault? One minute you're getting sloshed in your apartment, the next you're running around with a suspected felon."

"That's not the important issue here, Terry. I'm on a case and it's getting complicated, so don't give me your cop routine. I need to meet you — alone. Fifteen minutes, the Silver Spur."

"You're talking like a two-bit hood in a bad movie, Jack. Give me one good reason why I should meet you."

I hesitated for a moment then decided to take the chance.

"What do you know about Stefan Mueller?"

A heavy silence hung between us. I waited, listening to the white noise on the line and the ruckus around me. Terry swore. I laughed.

"I just love to rattle you. I suspected you might be the one to talk to about that guy."

"You'd better come in, Jack. You can tell me what you know about Mueller after you've talked to Aplin about those bombs."

"What I have to say, Terry, I'll say to you alone. What are friends for, after all?" I chuckled when he grunted. "Fifteen minutes," I said, serious again, then hung up. I turned around and bumped into Claire.

"They found a bomb," she said.

The door to the women's room opened, and the mother came out with the toddlers in tow. A blue-haired, polyester-clad granny threw us a disapproving glance and squeezed through the closing door.

"Let's go back to our table," I said. "We're in the way."

Claire had ordered me more coffee while I used the phone. I slurped it now, grateful for the additional shot of caffeine. My cut lip stung and my muscles screamed from my encounters with Trebor and Mueller. Even though I felt better since I'd eaten, Claire wasn't the only one who longed for a bed.

"How can you be so sure it was Mueller who planted the bombs?"

"Gee, Claire, can you think of someone else who wants to blow you to pieces?"

"Maybe you can."

"We're not back to that, are we?"

Claire bit her lip then shook her head quickly. "This whole thing's a bit hard to deal with, okay?"

"That's why I want you to stay here until I talk to Terry."

"No way. Where you go, I go."

"Listen," I said, adopting a conciliatory tone. "I know I'm not your favorite person—"

"Don't flatter yourself," Claire interrupted. "It has noth-

ing to do with whether I like you or hold you responsible for Annie's death. Aren't you forgetting something?"

I frowned, puzzled. "What?"

She pointed at my wrist. "The traveling device."

The reminder startled me. I kept forgetting the telecarb. "What about it?"

"I had time to think while I waited for you. The tleb and that telecarb were built with a technology unlike anything we know on Earth. Nevertheless, they're compatible with our physical structure." Her eyes glittered. "Throughout my entire career, I've never encountered anything so fascinating. And to experience this sort of travel...I couldn't feel a thing! One minute we were talking to Trebor, the next we stood in the middle of my lab. It happened between two heartbeats. Amazing." She took in a long, shuddering breath. "Even though it's not my field of expertise, I'm a scientist. I want to study these devices, document their use. I need to find out how they work. Who knows, one day we may be able to replicate them."

"You touch that tleb, sister, and I don't answer for my actions."

Her face hardened. "I was about to say that if studying the telecarb means sticking to you, as much as it pains me, I'll do it."

"So, I'm the guinea pig attached to the wheel."

"Something like that." She dangled the keys to her Jeep. "Besides, it's my car and I'm driving."

Ten minutes later, Claire parked behind a couple of wrecked cars in the gas station lot adjacent to the Silver Spur. Her dented fender and grill weren't out of place. She glared at me; it wasn't hard to see she was scratching mad.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

"What do you mean? It's just a safe place to meet. Neutral ground."

"A church is neutral ground. This is a striptease club."

"You've got a point, but it doesn't matter. You'll have to wait outside."

"I'm not letting that telecarb out of my sight."

"Right now, although he probably suspects it, Terry doesn't know you're with me. I'd like to keep it that way." I took out one of my cards and wrote on the back of it. "I'll follow Terry inside. If I don't come out within fifteen minutes, go there."

She took the card and read the address by the light of the street lamp.

"This is in Toronto," she said.

"My sister. You two have something in common—she doesn't like me either. We don't get along, but she'll help you, especially if you tell her you were Annie's friend."

"You're not getting rid of me that easily." Her voice had the flinty edge of raw anger. "Either you come back here or I go in with you."

"You'll stick out like a nun in a whorehouse. I picked this place 'cause I don't want to get noticed."

She pursed her lips and regarded me for a moment. She nodded.

"You're right. You'll have to go in alone. But I don't care how you do it, you will come back to the Jeep. Otherwise, I'll make my way to the lab somehow and take my chances with the tleb."

"I told you to keep your hands off that thing."

"Your choice, Jack." She crossed her arms below her breasts.

I swore under my breath. On top of being a big pain in the butt, the lady was way too sharp for her own good. I'd picked the Spur knowing full well she wouldn't want to go in. Once I'd finished with Terry, I'd have slipped out through the back and disappeared. Claire would've been afraid something had happened to me and would have gone to my sister's. After which I could have concentrated on tracking down Mueller without the Wicked Witch of the West on my back.

"What will it be?" she said in a sugary voice.

"Okay, okay. I'll come back here. You're one pushy broad, you know that?"

She didn't say anything, just leaned back in her seat with a satisfied smile.

A bitter dampness seeped into the Jeep. Several cars turned into the Silver Spur parking lot. I wiped the condensation off the side window with my sleeve to check them out. The vehicles had barely stopped before their owners were jumping out. A couple of jeans jackets and ball caps, a dark overcoat open to reveal a three-piece suit. None of these guys belonged to Terry. I could recognize an undercover cop any time of the day or night, and these didn't fit the profile.

I surveyed Merivale Road in front of us for any sign of the RCMP's white cruisers. I had to guess at the colors of the cars rushing by – under the orange halogen street lamps, the paint took on an olive green or yellow-brown shade.

It was drizzling when we came out of the diner, but now it was threatening freezing rain. Each drop fell as a bead of ice on the windshield and reflected the light like a minuscule prism. They half melted and slid down to collect above the wipers.

I thought about the apartment where I'd lived alone then with Annie then alone again. Most of the stuff I cared about I'd stashed away after I'd come back to the place, so there wasn't much in there I would miss. I shivered. Except maybe my winter coat.

A metallic-blue Trans Am bounced into the parking lot and parked close to the front door of the Spur.

"There he is," I said to Claire.

Terry got out of his car, visually swept the area then went into the club. I waited another ten minutes. When I was convinced he hadn't brought reinforcements, I got out of the Jeep.

"Jack," Claire yelled.

I turned.

"You'd better come back."

I waved my hand, annoyed at her nagging.

A blast of warm air hit me when I opened the heavy steel door that led into the bar; a fake-wood panel hid the main room from the entrance. Raunchy canned music blared from speakers above my head; and the smell of cigarette smoke, stale beer and sweat rushed over me to race out the closing

door. Whistles and hoots drowned out the music for a few seconds. I entered the bar area just as a new act started.

The Silver Spur bordered the Industrial Park and was one of the sleaziest strip joints in the city. Oil men, construction workers and truckers, together with more well-to-do johns, congregated there for cheap beer, hot wings and jiggling flesh. All three were served in a dingy, tired decor that relied on dark corners and the crowd's indifference to it. My job had brought me there countless times—most guys who cheated on their wives ended up at the Spur, alone or with their sweetheart of the hour.

I immediately spotted Terry at one of the tables farthest from the stage. He sat with his back to the wall, the table to his right, a half-full glass of beer at his elbow. Since I'd last seen him, he'd cut off the three straggly hairs he used to comb over his baldness, shaved his beard and trimmed his moustache from a thick crumb-catcher to a pencil-thin line above his lip. He was dressed in jeans and a yellow T-shirt one size too small; white socks peeked from a pair of black dress shoes. On his lap, a red-and-neon green windbreaker shimmered even in the dimness of the room.

It didn't matter how nerdy he looked—he had that cop presence that guaranteed patrons would leave him alone. I sat down opposite him, my back against the wall in mimicry of his own posture.

"Hey, Terry," I said, as I signaled the waitress for two beers.

"You're in a lot of trouble, Jack."

"Is that coming from Aplin or from you?"

"He's our bomb expert. You seem to have an affinity for them these days."

"Yeah, but it all depends on who sets them, doesn't it?"

"How did you get mixed up with Mueller?"

The waitress arrived with our beers, and I let Terry pay for the drinks. I swiveled in my chair to face him.

"Answer a question for me first," I said.

He hesitated then nodded.

"Did you investigate Annie's death because of our

friendship, or did you have a more professional interest?"

Terry's eyes narrowed. He stuck his hand in his wind-breaker pocket. I tensed, ready to split. It re-appeared with a pack of cigarettes. I refused his offer of one.

"Since when did you quit smoking?" he said.

"It's a long story. Answer the question, Terry."

"It was both."

"What do you mean?"

He took his time lighting up and inhaling. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth, examined the tip, picked a bit of tobacco from his tongue. He glanced at the stripper gyrating on the stage and made a face. He took another puff, exhaled slowly, sipped his beer. I waited in silence, my elbows on the table, hands joined in a fist.

Finally, he leaned over so I could hear over the din of the music and the antics of the patrons.

"The NSIU was already investigating Mueller when Annie's lab was destroyed," he said. "I volunteered to take the case when I learned she..." He cleared his throat. "We couldn't find any evidence linking Mueller to the explosion, but my gut tells me he had something to do with it. The investigation is still active."

"Claire told me he was dead."

Terry turned away from me and surveyed the room. I knew I had to wait him out until he made his decision on how much to tell me. We glanced at the stage, where the dancer was peeling her last piece of clothing. Terry pulled on his cigarette. I used the condensation running down my beer mug to make concentric circles on the table.

"He's not," Terry said over the applause and the wolf whistles.

I flashed a smile, pushed my beer away and leaned against the wall.

"I'm glad we've got that covered. He tried to shoot Claire and me in her lab this afternoon."

"Damn. I knew the bastard still hung around. Why is he after you?"

"It's complicated. Too long for a chat when your friends can walk in on us at any time."

"There's nobody with me," he said.

"Now there isn't. Who says it'll be the same in ten minutes?"

Terry shrugged. My skin started to itch.

"Either you trust me," I said, "or I walk and you don't hear from me again. I have information, Terry. But there's a price attached to it."

He squinted at his watch, dug in his coat pocket and took out a walkie-talkie the size of a cellular phone. He inserted a small headphone in his ear.

"Parczek here. Over," he said, his mouth close to the speaker.

I leaned closer to hear over the din of the room. Terry waited, his finger pressed hard on the button earphone.

"Suspect is a no-show. Abort."

Another few seconds.

"Negative," Terry said. "I know the man. If he's this late, he won't show. Keep me posted. If you hear from him I want to know right away."

Pause.

"Clear." Terry stowed his radio back in his pocket then glared at me. "They could take away my badge for this. Your story had better be real good."

He jumped to his feet, picked up his coat and hurried to a door at the side of the stage, where another stripper was cranking it. This one must have been popular because nobody had paid any attention to Terry's conversation with his little black box. He turned around when he saw I wasn't following and yelled, "Well, come on, we don't have all night."

The side door led to a hallway even darker than the main bar. I could make out a few doors on each wall, but Terry moved to the end. He pushed at the wall, and we were outside in the rain.

"Move over to the side of the building," I said, "then walk to the gas station. I'll follow you."

"I want to know how you got involved with Mueller, Jack," he said over his shoulder.

"You won't believe it when I tell you. I'm not even sure I believe it myself."

I steered him toward the Jeep. Claire turned on the engine.

"You take the front," I said then jumped in the back. Terry pushed the seat back into position and sat beside Claire. She turned in her seat to look at me.

"Where to?"

I pointed to Terry. "His place."

He stared at Claire for a second then looked back at me.

"Come on, man, you don't really believe she shot that guard," I said impatiently.

He nodded and gave her the directions.

* * *

Terry's house was typical suburban—an open concept that combined living and dining areas into an L-shaped room with a closed kitchen at the other tip of the L. The decor, in beiges and browns, was as inoffensive as possible, with dozens pictures of his kids at various growing-up stages hanging on the walls.

Terry's wife Betty poured each of us a cup of coffee then left us alone. I straddled a chair in the dining room. I didn't think I'd stay conscious for long if I sat on the living room couch.

"I've done my bit, Jack," Terry said. "It's time you came clean."

I turned to Claire and raised my eyebrows. She returned my gaze for a moment then looked away and shrugged.

"Sure," she said.

I gave her a quick grin, relieved she'd decided to back me up. I stacked my fists on the back of the chair and leaned my chin on them.

"What I'm going to tell you will be nearly impossible to believe. Claire can verify some of the events. I hadn't seen her for two years until today. You can check that out. I doubt we're both crazy at the same time."

"Get to the point, man," Terry said.

I started with my kidnapping by Trebor. I showed him the telecarb, explained to him what it did. In as few words as

possible, I described my visits to the alien worlds and when I'd realized Annie had used a similar device. I told him how we'd concluded that Mueller was involved, that he coveted the tleb and that he'd tried to take it by force. I looked battered enough to corroborate that part. I left out the theory that Mueller might be building an android. At this point, it was only conjecture, and I wasn't sure how much Terry would assimilate.

Claire corroborated the facts she knew about, including Annie's entrusting the tleb to her two days before she died.

When I finished, Terry shook his head.

"Even you couldn't come up with a crazy story like that on your own," he said.

"You believe us, then," Claire said.

"Hell, no. But if you can get me closer to Mueller, I'll go along for the ride."

"When did you find out he wasn't dead?"

"We've always known. That house fire was a piss-poor way to try to disappear. He rigged it because we put the heat on him after Annie's death. If we add the bombs in your apartments, I'd say they're his *modus operandi*. We also know he's not dead because, shortly after he disappeared, he stole a plutonium battery."

I straightened in my chair, and Claire jumped to her feet.

"What?" we said in unison.

"Chalk River does joint research with NARC on plutonium-powered batteries. They're used for pacemakers. Mueller stole the latest prototype, which was the size of a microchip."

"How do you know he's the one who stole it?"

"We have him on tape. It's the weirdest thing. All of a sudden he's there, steals the battery then fades away again. They had the camera checked, but it was in perfect working condition." He pointed to my wrist. "Now you're telling me you can do the same thing." He shrugged. "It's as good an explanation as any, even though I can't really buy it. The question is, why would he want a plutonium battery?"

Claire whipped around, her eyes sharp with speculation.

"He could be building a weapon."

"Then why would he steal emotions?" I said to myself.

"You didn't mention that part."

"I don't have to tell you everything, sweetheart."

"Would someone clue me in here?" Terry said. "What's this about stealing emotions?"

I ignored him. "He's got the brain, the emotions, the source of power for his —"

"Monster," Claire said, her voice hushed. "He's building a creature by combining parts of different worlds. That makes it a monster."

"I bet you my best shirt good old Mueller associates himself with God, not with Frankenstein," I said. "What is he missing?"

"He still needs to fashion a body."

"But why does he want the tleb?"

Terry moved in front of me and stared me down. "Jack, I'm quickly running out of patience with you. Stop speaking in riddles and give me some facts I can work with. Where do you think Mueller is hiding?"

I got up slowly and sidestepped him.

"I have no idea, Terry, and that's the truth." I scanned the room, feeling almost desperate. I had to get away, needed to think. "Listen, I'm exhausted. I need to crash for a few hours. Can I borrow a couch somewhere?"

He considered me for a moment. If I looked as bad as I felt, it wouldn't be hard to convince him I needed some sack time. He made a face and gave a short nod.

"Betty probably already made up a bed for you in the basement. Claire can sleep in the guestroom."

"Thanks, pal."

He grabbed my arm. "You're not off the hook, Jack. I want the rest of the story tomorrow morning."

He directed me downstairs. I sat on the made-up couch, stared at the inviting pillow. Mueller first, sleep later, I thought. I had a sinking feeling we were losing the race, that every minute wasted brought us closer to disaster. I needed to anticipate Mueller, and for that I had to find out what else

he'd stolen. I had to visit another world. If only my brain wasn't so fuzzy.

Claire called out my name from the top of the stairs. This time, she wasn't coming with me. I heard her feet pounding down the steps when I didn't answer. I turned my head, intent on sending her back, and I saw her eyes widen.

"My God, Jack," she whispered, "what's happening to you?"

I squinted and concentrated on her words. She rushed to me. I lifted a hand to stop her then stared at it, puzzled. There was something wrong with it. Just before I lost consciousness, I realized what was different.

I could see her through my hand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I WOKE UP SUBMERGED IN LIQUID. INSTINCTIVELY, I brought my feet down. They made contact with something solid. I pushed hard and floated upwards through the clinging fluid, higher and higher, my lungs about to explode, my ears filled with the clang of bells.

In the next blink, I was lying on a cold steel floor.

Intense light blinded me. I lifted my arm to protect my eyes, but it didn't help; and I switched focus to my fingers, my arm, the rest of my body. I could only perceive a vague silhouette, as if I peered at my limbs through a slightly dirty window. The telecarb made a darker slash on my arm.

A sliver of light cut through the murkiness; I swam toward it. Then, just before I thought I'd pass out from lack of oxygen, I burst through the surface. I felt a moment of disorientation, and my surroundings shimmered like rising heat on pavement.

"Swell. Now I'm a ghost," I said. I pushed myself to my feet.

The bar of light broadened, and I turned my head to avoid it.

"Hey, lay off the spotlight, will ya? I can't see a damn thing."

The beam of light dimmed then expanded and flattened into the shape of a man-sized scallop shell. I approached and

circled it, looking for an opening or a clue to its function. I placed my hand on top of it; it felt solid, even though I could see through my hand to the surface below.

I returned to the front and knocked on one of the shell's ribs. It sounded hollow. I sniffed, half expecting the smell of the ocean, but instead I got an acrid whiff of ozone.

The glow of the shell illuminated the surrounding area. I stood in a room or, at least, in an area with top, bottom and sides. I walked over to one of the walls. Tiny doors, similar to those on safe deposit boxes in a bank vault, covered it from top to bottom. Instead of numbers, each door was inscribed with a series of symbols and had, beside them, a crystal set into it. Most of the doors on the wall I faced had crystals. I lifted my hand to touch one of them.

"Do not," a voice behind me said.

I whipped around. The two halves of the shell had opened; and in its center a human shape, as translucent as I, sat on a shimmering, mother-of-pearl wing chair. The apparition reminded me of the bedtime ghost stories my sister told me as a child. They scared the beejeebies out of me.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" the shape said.

"I could ask you the same thing, pal," I said.

One arm floated up, and brilliant light blinded me. Sharp, tearing pain streaked through my body and forced me to my knees. I landed on the floor with a thud that ended in a moan.

"You will answer," the shape said.

"Meter," I croaked. "Jack Meter."

The pain eased.

"What is your purpose here?"

"I'm looking for someone. I come from —"

"I know from whence you come, Jack Meter. We had to filter out most of your corporeal mass to permit your entry."

I remembered the sensation of floating up through some kind of liquid. "Did you have to drown me to do that?"

"For whom are you searching?"

"A thief." I showed him the telecarb. "He used a device similar to this to steal from other worlds. I followed him here."

"A thief," the shape said.

He lifted his arm again. A wave of supercharged ions broke around me. The hairs over my entire body stood on end. The biting smell of ozone saturated the air. I felt like a living lightning rod—one move, and the flash would zoom in and strike.

"What guarantee do I have that you are not a thief yourself?" the shape said. His voice crackled with menace.

"None," I said, my lips barely moving. Based on his reaction at my mention of a thief, I could assume that Mueller had already been here. I hoped the shape wouldn't take it out on me.

"I'm trying to stop him," I said, "but I'm always one step behind. The thief did show up here, didn't he?"

"Yes." The air around me made little popping sounds.

"What did he steal?"

As if he'd thrown a switch, the electric charge around me dissolved. I relaxed a bit.

"We are not in the habit of providing information without payment," he said.

"Sorry, but I didn't have time to go through the exchange." I turned out my pants pockets and a bit of lint fluttered to the floor. "As you can see, I haven't much to offer."

"That is where you are mistaken, Jack Meter."

"Do I have to pay for your name as well?"

"How rude of me. I am Chrona, thirty-sixth Archon of Pleroma. I am gatherer, provider and guardian of Pleroma's main resource."

"Which is?"

"Memories."

My skin started itching. I didn't like the sound of that. I had a feeling I'd have to pay through the nose for the information I wanted. I turned back to the wall and gazed at the doors and their crystals.

"Do you mean this room is a library of memories?"

Chrona dimmed. "I do not comprehend this word...library."

"In my world, we keep collections of materials that in-

crease knowledge or intellectual pleasure in buildings—libraries—where people can use them.” A lame explanation, but one that would do for my purposes.

The light surrounding Chrona brightened, the equivalent, I surmised, of a smile.

“Ah. Yes, we collect memories in a similar fashion.”

“Why?”

“From others’ memories, we Pleromans derive the energy that sustains us. Every single entity, regardless of race or manifestation, possesses memories, but it is the way they are engraved in the consciousness that generates the energy. In the case of your race, for instance, emotions form the basis of its nature, but they are fueled by memories.”

Chrona’s words scared the hell out of me. A deep-seated conviction, based partly on insight and partly on what I’d learned so far, told me Mueller had stolen memories from this world. The question was, what kind of memories had he stolen?

I walked back to Chrona, who’d remained seated in his shell.

“The thief I’m looking for is named Mueller. Did he steal a set of memories from you?”

Chrona did not answer, just sat on his mother-of-pearl wing chair, unmoving. For some reason, my sense of impending doom pressed even heavier on my shoulders in this place. I decided to blink first.

“What do I have to do?”

“The gift of information is dependent on the price paid,” Chrona said.

“In my world, a gift is usually free.” I ambled along the walls covered with little doors then turned back to him. “But don’t let that stop you.”

Chrona lightened. “Very well. I will bestow part of the gift without charge, Jack Meter. A female of your species left a token and a message here for you.”

Annie, I thought. Annie had somehow known I’d come here.

“The remainder of the gift,” Chrona continued, “you must purchase.”

“I see.” I crossed my arms. “Sounds expensive.”

"Very." Chrona brightened then returned to his normal glow. "I will require you to relive the memory that affected you the most profoundly."

I froze. I knew exactly which memory he was asking for.

"You know," I said, "we could approach this problem from another angle. If I can bring back the stolen memories, what can you give me in exchange?"

"I did not say that memories have been stolen."

I walked up to him. "I'm not haggling for the sake of my health, Chrona. I don't need you to tell me that Mueller stole memories. I've already figured that one out all by myself. I could use a few more details, but I can live with what I have. You, on the other hand, need me to retrieve those memories. If you want them back, you'll have to hire me. Which means I'll need a retainer."

Chrona sparkled like water in brilliant sunlight. The room burst with rainbow-colored light. It passed through my body, bringing with it a feeling of euphoria. Damned if it didn't feel to me like a Pleroman laugh.

"We Pleromans admire arrogance," Chrona said. "You must know that you cannot leave this place until we release you. Therefore, might I suggest that the fee for your services consist of your freedom?"

"Yeah, but I could turn you down, and then you'd be stuck with me. Who'll catch that thief for you?"

Chrona laughed again. "We can strike the bargain, Jack Meter, but the original price stands. We will pay for your gift. Are you prepared to pay for ours?"

I weighed my dread of remembering against the possibility of avenging Annie and stopping Mueller. I gave him a short nod.

"I must ask to be allowed to pay when I'm done." I hesitated. "The memories I will give you are painful."

"Granted. Turn around and touch the glowing crystal, Jack Meter."

There, on the wall at eye level, a red crystal glowed on a door. I raised my hand, hesitated for an instant and then skimmed the crystal with the tips of my fingers.

* * *

I stared at a familiar door in front of me. I frowned, struggling to remember how I'd gotten there, but the only thought that came to mind was that I wasn't really there. The more I tried to sort out my confusion, the more my head hurt. I let go of the idea, and the pain eased.

I peered at the number on the door. Annie's lab. I turned at the sound of footsteps. Annie was coming toward me, her head bent to the clipboard in her hand. She stopped beside me, lifted her eyes to the door.

"Annie," I croaked. She ignored me and pushed the door open.

"Hey," I said. I reached for her shoulder. My hand passed right through her. I stared at my fingers. They looked normal to me. Annie closed the door in my face.

"Hey," I said again and pounced on the doorknob. My hand slipped through. Carried along by my own impetus, I fell forward. I braced myself for the impact against the door, but, instead, I stumbled into the lab.

I patted my body and it felt firm, which meant I shouldn't have been able to pass through doors, let alone through another human being. As a trial, I placed my hand on the counter and pushed. My hand disappeared into the marble without any resistance. I pulled back with a grunt of surprise.

Annie's lab consisted of two long, rectangular rooms with a sliding partition wall in between that had been pulled halfway across. On a counter against the wall closest to me hummed a computer hooked to a number of electronic devices that analyzed data provided by the nuclear labs in Chalk River. I stared at the equipment. She'd used it for what had started her on her research, which had eventually led her to Thrittene.

An annoying, high-pitched, syncopated sound reached through my wandering thoughts. Furthest from the door, on the other side of the half-open wall, I glimpsed another set of electronic equipment.

"What are you doing here, Dr. Mueller?" Annie exclaimed. The answer came back muffled. I walked around the wall and surveyed the scene.

Annie stood a few feet behind Mueller, her hands shoved into her lab coat. He had his back to her and was peering inside a box the size of a TV. It sat on a counter, and through the front opening I could see a stroboscope flashing rapidly. The high-pitched sound I'd noticed coincided with every flash. Annie rushed to Mueller's side and grabbed his arm. He turned, grasped both her forearms and shoved her against the movable wall. She stumbled but grabbed the edge before she fell.

I moved between her and Mueller. Both seemed oblivious to me.

"Stefan, turn that thing off!"

"In a minute." He dug his hand into the box and came up with a multicolored strip. "Ah, I have it." He quickly fastened the band to his wrist then turned a dial on the box. The light flashed faster; the sound became almost painful for my ears. He stepped aside with a flick of his hand. "He's all yours."

Annie passed right through me and rushed to the panel beside the box. She flipped a switch. The strobe light stopped and silence fell over the lab. Annie leaned over the box and stretched her arms inside. She shook her head.

"It's too late," she said. "He's gone."

She straightened and turned to face Mueller. "You killed that Thrittene. You tortured him."

"Only to get him to give me that telecarb. After that, I cut his sufferings short."

"Killing him makes torture more acceptable?"

Mueller raised an eyebrow. "Annie, if you must blame someone for this unfortunate incident, blame yourself."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"It was very selfish of you to keep such a discovery as the Thrittene to yourself. I am, after all, your project director. I expected you to share your results with me."

"I didn't trust you, Stefan. Now I know I was right."

"Did you think you could keep them secret forever?"

"What did you take from him?"

"You have the brains, dear Annie, but not the breadth of

imagination nor the ambition indispensable to a true scientist. While you were..." He smiled. "...out of the lab, I looked up your research project. You know, you were much too secretive about your progress. You should have known it would pique my curiosity. What an amazing discovery! Unbeknownst to anyone, you have succeeded in communicating with an alien world. Quite mind-boggling. Didn't know what to make of it at first. Then I found out these aliens had given you a device that allowed you to visit their world and others." He pulled up his sleeve and showed her his telecarb. "Did you know they've perfected the device? They're quite compact now."

"You're despicable, Stefan." Annie shook with anger. "You must have known our world would destroy him."

Mueller's mouth twitched. "I convinced them the improvements they made to the device would be enough. After all, what good is science without empirical knowledge?"

"The device doesn't belong to you. Give it back."

"Or what, Annie?" he said, his tone amused. He stepped closer to her and caressed her cheek with his knuckles. She recoiled, revulsion clear in her face. Mueller's eyes narrowed. He caught her chin between his fingers.

Oh-oh, big mistake, I thought. Annie flushed and her lips tightened. In a quick underhand movement, she knocked Mueller's arm away then backed up.

"Don't you dare touch me, you bastard," she said.

Mueller's eyes widened; then he relaxed and smirked.

"Well, well, the lady bites after all." He walked to the counter where the strobe box sat and brushed it lightly with his fingers. He turned back to Annie. "How awkward that you arrived at such an inopportune moment. I had hoped to continue using your facilities for a while yet."

"What is it you want, Stefan?"

His eyes became dreamy. "Did you know I've grown in-vitro bodies to test my biochip? Unfortunately, I haven't yet been able to match all the neural connections."

"What?" Annie looked confused. Then, comprehension dawned on her face. "Oh, my God. You replaced their brains with your biochip."

"Hmm, yes. Only fetuses at this point, but I'm very close, you know."

"You're out of your mind."

"I've always said women were too emotional to make good scientists."

"Why do you need the traveling device?"

"Isn't it obvious? I will study these new worlds, use their resources."

During Mueller's declaration, Annie had slowly backed away from him.

"You're mad," she whispered. "Stark, raving mad. I won't let you get away with it, Stefan."

He smiled. "What will you do to prevent it?"

"I'll warn them, all the worlds I can visit. They'll expect you, know you for what you are. I'll make sure of it."

"I think not, Annie." Mueller made a grab for her, but she was fast. She turned on her heels and ran to the door. Mueller started after her, but Annie disappeared before she even reached the door. Mueller stopped in his tracks and swore.

The scene shifted, and I stood in the corridor outside the lab. Mueller was beside me. He cocked his head, and I heard voices.

"Tell me again why we had to come here."

"I need to pick up something in my lab. It won't take a minute. Then we can go to dinner."

My voice, and Annie's. Hearing them, Mueller slipped into her lab. I followed him through the door.

"You've interfered enough," he muttered. "Time for fireworks."

He leaned down and attached a wire to a gray lump on the door. He followed the twisted strand to four cylinders strewn across the lab. They looked to be made out of glass or plastic and contained a transparent, viscous liquid. Once he had quickly verified his work, Mueller ran away from the door and vanished.

I watched as a dark shape appeared behind the frosted glass and the doorknob turned slowly. Panic seized me; and, suddenly, I knew what would happen.

For the millionth time, I wished I were dead.

* * *

The image blinked out, and I stared at the row of doors on the wall. I remembered that this was Pleroma and turned back to Chrona.

"It seemed so real," I said through my constricted windpipe.

"Of course."

"What I saw was a mix of Annie's and Mueller's memories, right?"

"Yes. Even he had to pay with his memories."

"That bastard. He waited for his moment then wired the door." Every nerve ending below my head seemed numb. A little corner of my mind worried because I didn't feel anything. "He must have been trying to prevent her from warning the other worlds. I wonder how many of them she visited before he killed her?"

I walked away from Chrona. "Annie always did have good instincts. You should've listened to her."

"Yes. Even though she had warned us, I admit our eagerness for fresh memories overcame prudence. Mueller made us believe in him, confide in him. Then, he stole from us. He stole memories so vile that, if absorbed into a consciousness, they will render its owner ruthless and cruel but also submissive, malleable." Chrona paused. "Are you ready to pay?"

"You said something about a message."

Chrona stayed silent for a long moment. "I will give it to you after you have paid. You will be in greater need of this message, I think, after payment."

"Fine," I said, impatient to get the ordeal over with. "What do I do?"

Something sparkled in his extended hand. "Take this crystal. Find a door with an empty socket, and place the crystal into it."

When I did so, pain speared my head.

* * *

"Tell me again why we had to come here," I grumbled to Annie.

"I need to pick up something in my lab," she said. "It won't take a minute. Then we can go to dinner."

"I'm starved, and I'm thirsty, and my skin itches."

"Boy, you are so grumpy when you're hungry." She pointed to the water fountain. "Have a drink, you'll feel better."

"You're the one who's been on edge lately. When are you going to tell me what's bugging you?" I stopped at the fountain while she continued on to her lab.

"Today's the day. I thought I could take care of it on my own, but...I've decided I need your help, Jack. We'll talk at dinner." She took out her keys and unlocked the door to her lab. I turned to tell her to hurry.

The explosion was deafening. Annie took the brunt of it on her left side. The impact propelled her backwards and flung her against the wall. I blacked out.

When I came to, my first thought was for Annie. I tried to rise, but there was something wrong with my right leg and arm. Too shocked to feel pain, I rolled onto my stomach and spotted her fifteen feet away from me.

"Annie!" I yelled. I crawled toward her.

The blast had mangled her body almost beyond recognition. One of her legs was bent at a right angle and her left arm was missing. Her blood gushed onto the floor in a crimson stream. A shard of glass in her eye pulsed with the last of her heartbeats.

I took her in my arms, rocked her back and forth. In the distance, I could hear someone screaming her name over and over again. Dimly, I realized it was me.

* * *

I felt something burn my hand, and I let go of the crystal. The room had returned to its series of doors, and the one I had chosen now had a crystal set into it. I turned back to Chrona, who now barely emitted light.

"We also grieve for Annie," Chrona said. "Her death should not go unpunished, Jack Meter."

I could barely make him out in the waning light. A small

silver box appeared in my hand. A series of symbols were engraved on its lid.

"It is time you returned to your world, Jack Meter. I have placed the message in this box. You may have access to it whenever you wish. It also contains an object of which you should take possession now."

I was still concentrating on fighting the madness that lurked just behind the horror of my memories and couldn't find any energy to protest. With automatic movements, I opened the box and peered into it. It contained a crystal – and Annie's ring.

It had been my ring once. I'd given it to her when we decided to live together. It was only a school ring with a semi-precious red stone, but I'd wanted to make the decision official somehow, as if I'd needed to bind her to me. Annie had smiled, placed it on the middle finger of her left hand and never took it off again.

Funny how I hadn't noticed she wasn't wearing it the day she died.

I slipped the ring on. The metal seared my finger. I stared at the stone and blinked rapidly to clear my vision.

"Thank God," I heard Claire say. "Jack, are you all right?"

I stared at her, disoriented. I looked down, saw the ring on my finger, the box in my hand.

"Just leave me alone, Claire," I said, each of my words enunciated with effort. "Just leave me the hell alone."

I lay down, turned my back to her and stared at the green-and-red-checkered upholstery of the couch.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TEN HOURS LATER, I SAT BROODING IN TERRY'S DINING room, Chrona's box in front of me. I didn't know how he'd managed to send it back with me, but the box felt as substantial as I did.

I traced the carved scalloped design around its edges; then, for the umpteenth time, I opened the lid and peered inside. The crystal nestled between delicate metal claws. Beside it was a concave indentation similar to the sockets I'd seen on the doors in the vault on Pleroma. If I placed the crystal in the depression, I'd hear Annie's message.

I reached inside. Just before I touched the crystal, I withdrew my hand and snapped the lid shut.

Upon my return from Pleroma, I'd had to face two incapable facts. The first was that, deep down, I'd never accepted Annie's death. I hadn't seen her coffin, wasn't there when they buried her. I hadn't said to her what I needed to say. If I listened to Annie's message, it would mean she was really gone. But, truth be told, I wasn't ready to say goodbye.

The second realization I'd made was that I wanted Mueller dead. I'd rejoined my body in Terry's basement with a burning rage in my gut for the man who'd deliberately killed Annie. Sane or mad, it didn't matter. I would make him pay.

Terry sat down across from me and slid a steaming cup

of coffee under my nose. The rich aroma made me salivate. I rolled the hot liquid around my mouth to savor its sharpness then lifted my eyes to look into his worried face.

"Okay, that's it," he said. "Enough moping for you,"

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Jesus Murphy, Jack," he exclaimed, as if he couldn't contain himself anymore, "what the hell happened last night? If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. I could see right through you, for frig's sake!"

The coffee turned to acid in my gut.

"I'm going after Mueller," I said.

"The hell you are," Terry said. "This is a police matter. If you have information we can use, fine, I'll use it. But I take care of Mueller."

"He rigged Annie's lab."

"He is a suspect."

"No, you don't understand. I saw him do it."

"What?"

I stood up so quickly the chair toppled backward.

"That bastard killed Annie deliberately. Before, I thought maybe he only wanted to destroy her lab, and she happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Now I know better. He wanted to kill her. He planned it. He'll pay for it."

"And how are you going to do that, pal? You don't even know where to find him."

"I have an idea where he might be," Claire said.

We both turned to face her. She got up from the living room couch.

"Where?" Terry and I exclaimed at the same time.

She pointed to the box on the table. "You went to another world and came back with that. What is it?"

"None of your business."

"How could you have seen Mueller plant the bomb in Annie's lab?"

"I said, forget it, Claire."

She marched to the table and pushed up my sleeve.

"Mueller is police business. This..." She pointed to the telecarb. "...is bigger than you. We have to find out how it works."

"I don't care how it works. As long as it gets me to Mueller."

"Okay, kids, simmer down," Terry said.

He picked up the toppled chair and set it straight with a bang. Claire threw him a scathing glare. He laughed.

"Don't waste that look, Claire. Doesn't work on me." He hammered his finger into my chest. "As for you, it wouldn't kill you to act a bit more polite."

"I don't have time for making nice, Terry." I turned to Claire. "What do you know?"

She crossed her arms tightly, her lips thin with frustration. I raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"Mueller has a sister." She spat the words at me.

"That's not common knowledge," Terry said. "How did you find out?"

Claire turned to Terry. "I didn't remember until a few hours ago when I was at loose ends and Jack..." She shot me a quick glance. "I was trying to put together what I knew about Mueller when I remembered something Annie said. She'd asked Mueller about the picture of a woman on his desk and he'd said it was his sister. She wouldn't have made anything much of it, except he told her he kept the picture to remind himself that some people were born losers and fulfilled their destinies. Annie thought it a very odd thing to say about a sister, so she repeated it to me."

"Her name is Helga Mueller-Schmidt." Terry said. "When we started investigating Mueller, we put her house under surveillance. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts and other cases, we had to drop it after a few weeks. He never showed up once during that time."

"Where does she live?" Claire said.

"Montreal. She married rich and lives on Sherbrooke. She doesn't go out much anymore. She has severe arthritis and spends most of her days in a wheelchair."

"He needs a place to live that's inconspicuous," I said. "He's there."

"I'll ask for the surveillance to resume," Terry said. "No one will be able to come in or out of that apartment without us knowing."

"He doesn't have to use doors." When I saw Terry's uncomprehending stare, I continued. "He has a telecarb. He can come and go without you ever knowing about it."

"How do we find out if he's there then?" Claire said.

"We don't have to," I said. I pointed my wrist at her. "I only have to want to go somewhere, and it takes me there."

"Hang on a sec," Terry said, but I was already wishing to appear in front of Mueller's sister. Nothing happened.

"What are you waiting for?" Claire said. "I expected you to disappear without consulting anyone, as usual."

"I can't get there, which confirms that Mueller is at his sister's. The telecarb can only take me where Mueller has been, not where he is."

"Whereas Mueller's can take him exactly where you are," Claire said.

"Yeah. But he can't leave when I'm within a certain distance of him."

"What's the range of your telecarb? Can you arrive in a room he's just left?"

"Obviously not, otherwise I'd already be there." When she made a face, I threw out my hands. "Your guess is as good as mine." I raked my hand through my hair. "I can't believe this. He's so close, I can feel him."

"I can't begin to understand how that doohicky works," Terry said, "but if you're certain of Mueller's position, I'll get the boys in Montreal on it." He planted himself in front of me. "I don't have to tell you again this is police business, Jack. I don't want you to race there alone to deal with Mueller. More than anyone, you know how dangerous he is. I don't want you dead. You hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said.

"I mean it, Jack. Three deaths are enough."

"Three?" I did a mental recap: Annie, Johnson, and... "The security guard in Claire's lab didn't make it?"

Terry shook his head. He picked up the briefcase that leaned against the wall in the dining room, pulled out some blank forms and thrust them at me.

"Claire already gave me her statement. You do the same.

Write down everything that happened at the lab while I make a few phone calls. It'll give you something to do, and I'll have what I need to charge Mueller with murder and assault with a deadly weapon."

I took the papers and threw him a dirty look. He knew that one of the things I hated most about my job was writing reports. He chuckled.

"Behave, children," he said as a parting shot.

I sat at the dining room table and shuffled the forms. I'd filled in some for previous cases, and I knew it would take me a while to go through the whole story. I could feel Claire's eyes on me, but I purposely ignored her. After a few minutes, I heard her sigh and move to the living room. I started writing and heard her pick up a magazine.

She didn't fool me. I knew she wanted to talk about Annie and what I'd learned on Pleroma, but I still felt bruised by what I'd gone through and didn't feel up to recounting the events. Maybe, in a few days, I'd give her a condensed version.

I tried again to get to Mueller's sister. No success. I felt restless and impatient and couldn't concentrate.

"Wait a minute," I muttered.

Claire raised her head. "What?"

I got up from the table and moved into the living room. She set her magazine aside and got up.

"If Mueller is inside the apartment, I can arrive outside and make my way from there."

"I'm going with you." She grabbed my sleeve.

"No way." I tried to pull away, but she held on tight. "Did I tell you lately you're a pain?"

"I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"You mean the telecarb, don't you?"

"Whatever. I'm still going with you."

I tamped down the urge to wring her neck.

"Regardless of what you may think, I don't want you dead," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "If you stick with me, there's a good chance you'll get hurt."

"If I stick with you, there's a good chance I can help."

"Or get me killed."

"Okay, here's the deal again. Either I follow you—fine, the telecarb—or I do my own experiments with the tleb."

Now I really wanted to strangle her. "You know Mueller wants the tleb."

"I'll take my chances. Come on, Jack, quit stalling. Decide."

"I warn you. Anything happens, you're on your own."

"I told you before, I can take care of myself. Let's go."

This time I didn't feel dizzy, but I heard the sounds of Thrittene, like the sweet song of the Sirens. I felt the pull, my wrist tingled and I gasped for air. Claire shook off my arm.

"Wow, that's quite a building," she said.

I blinked, disoriented then remembered where I'd landed. Claire had been right after all. She'd helped by anchoring me to reality.

"If this is how losers live," she continued, oblivious to my state of mind, "I want to become one."

I studied the building more closely. We'd appeared in the center of a flagstone courtyard, now used for parking. On the other side of an arched porte-cochère lay the street with its busy traffic. The four-story structure was built of stone, probably granite, now old and weathered. Age had given it a brownish patina and rivulets of acid rain had streaked the stone with black.

We walked around the gallery that ran the perimeter until we came to the entrance. I tried one of the heavily carved wooden doors. It opened onto a mirrored hall filled with plants. On one side, in between two palms, was an elevator door. Beside it, four black buttons were embedded into a brass plaque and below each, in neat script, a name and number. The plastic box of an intercom indicated how the tenants communicated with the outside world.

Claire pointed to the second button from the left.

"Helga's apartment is on the second floor."

"In fact," I said, "the apartment must occupy the entire second floor."

"What are you going to say to her?" Claire said. "If Mueller is there, he'll know us. He won't let us in."

"I thought we'd get into the hall outside her apartment first. Then I'll think of something."

"This mansion is over one hundred years old. It wasn't built to be divided like this. They must have used the staircase to install the elevator, which means it probably opens directly into the apartment. She would have to activate it from up there. Which means that, even if we succeed in getting onto the elevator, we won't be going anywhere without her agreeing to see us."

I came to the same conclusion as soon as I went back outside and checked the architecture more closely. Claire was probably right about Helga, too—she probably wouldn't let in someone she didn't know. Someone like us. And if we announced ourselves with Mueller there, he'd either vanish again or jump us.

The element of surprise would give us an edge; I didn't want to lose it.

"I can't believe we're stumped," I said. "We have to think of something." I paced to the archway and looked out into the street. Traffic was light given the time of day.

What would induce Helga Mueller-Schmidt to open the door to us? I reviewed what I knew. The woman, housebound, suffered from severe arthritis. I spotted the pharmacy across the street. What would be the odds Helga had her prescription pills delivered from there? The phone booth in front of it gave me an idea.

"Come on," I said to Claire.

I grabbed her sleeve and pulled her across the street. Once I explained my plan, she expressed her doubts but agreed to help. She picked up the phone and dialed Helga's number. I saw it as a good omen the number was listed.

"Yes, hello," she said into the receiver. "May I speak to Ms. Mueller-Schmidt, please?" She paused for the answer. "Yes, this is Sherbrooke Pharmacy. We had a call from your doctor for a new prescription for you." Paused again. "I'm sorry, ma'am, he didn't say. But this medication is quite new. He may want to start you on it before he sees you again." Pause. "You might want to call him. In the meantime, could

we send someone to bring it to you? We're not too busy now." Pause. "Very well. One of our delivery boys will be there in a few minutes. Thank you."

She hung up and turned around, frowning.

"Bingo," I said. "Well done."

"That lady is entirely too trusting. I really feel bad about this."

"Don't start now, Claire. Let's just get it over with."

Back at the door, I pressed the bell. Helga answered the intercom right away and unlocked the elevator once I'd introduced myself as the pharmacy boy. The elevator whisked us silently to the second floor, and the door swished open.

When she saw us, she gasped and reached for a button. I stepped out before the door closed, Claire hard on my heels. I lifted my hands in a pacifying gesture.

"Please, Mrs. Schmidt. We're not here to hurt you."

She backed her motorized wheelchair into a corner near the window, and I followed her. Helga Mueller-Schmidt appeared to be at least ten years older than her brother. There was little family resemblance, except for the slate-gray eyes. She sat deep in her chair, as if her body had melted and the only parts left that could move were her twisted hands and feet. Her hair, white and sparse, flew in all directions. She wore a shabby chenille housecoat over a faded night-gown.

In contrast to her dilapidated appearance, the spotless apartment overflowed with treasures: yellow silk covered the walls, moon-yellow Oriental carpets lay on the hardwood floors, paintings and knickknacks in tones of yellow decorated walls and corners. Overstuffed chairs and a sofa in matching colors made the huge room appear small, even though someone had arranged the furniture to leave space for Helga's chair. Incongruously, a massive mahogany desk dominated the middle of the room, a Tiffany pedestal lamp beside it.

"What do you want?" she whispered. She had the same cultivated accent as her brother. "I have no money here, no jewelry."

"We're not here to steal from you," I said. "We want to talk to your brother."

She paled. "Stefan isn't here. You must leave."

"I know he's in this apartment, and I intend to find him."

Her features slackened for a second then hardened with resolve. She rolled her chair forward. I crouched to place my face at her level. She glanced over at Claire before she spoke to me.

"My brother isn't well." Her voice became stronger and firmer. "If you give me your name, I'll tell him you called for him."

"I don't think so. We'll wait."

"Why can't you understand? You're not wanted here."

"On the contrary, my dear sister."

I rose slowly at Mueller's voice. He stood near the elevator door in the doorway leading to the rest of the apartment, gun in hand. His mouth curved up slightly.

"Their coming here will definitely facilitate my task."

I backed up around the desk and sidled to the right until I came up against the yellow couch at the other end of the room. Claire followed me but stopped when she encountered the armoire beside the sofa.

"How nice of you to drop by," Mueller said. He moved to a sideboard beside Helga's chair. "Sherry? Unfortunately, Helga doesn't favor scotch."

He reached for the sparkling crystal decanter.

"No, thanks," I said. Claire shook her head once.

Mueller poured the rusty-colored liquid into a small glass and took a sip. The gun never wavered. He walked to the front of the desk and leaned on it.

"I heard about the explosion in your apartment building, Jack. Frankly, I was appalled."

"Appalled that I wasn't in it when it exploded, you mean." I took a deep breath. "You love blowing people up, don't you, Mueller?"

He raised his eyebrows and took a sip of his sherry, his smile still in place.

"Are you accusing me of planting that bomb in your apartment, Jack?"

"Oh, not just this one, Mueller. That's how you got rid of Annie, too."

"How interesting. How did you come up with that conclusion?"

"That's just it, I didn't. I saw you do it."

His smile disappeared. "My, you do get around, don't you? How did you find Pleroma? What did you have to pay for this little gem of a memory?"

"I did what I had to do."

"Then we have that in common."

"Don't fool yourself. We are nothing alike."

I took a step in his direction. He pointed his gun at Claire.

"I wouldn't come any closer, if I were you; and I wouldn't use that telecarb of yours. It takes only a millisecond to pull the trigger, and I'm quite prepared to shoot her."

"You're a dead man, Mueller," I said. "You won't get away with Annie's death, I swear to you."

"Stefan?" Helga said, her voice soft and hesitant.

"This is between Meter and me, Helga. Be quiet."

"But, Stefan—"

"I said, be quiet." He spoke the words oh-so-softly, and Helga shrank in her chair. "Your coming here is quite fortuitous, you know," he continued. "I've seen what your telecarb can do. Quite a device. You will hand it to me."

"You forget the tleb," Claire said. "I still have it."

"You should stay away from our friend Jack, Dr. Foucault. I fear matters are usually..." he said, his smile broadening, "...explosive around him."

"You son of a bitch," I said.

Mueller tut-tutted then threw an amused glance at his sister.

"Did you hear that, Helga? Our guest has just insulted our parentage. Very tacky. But I fear ill-breeding is rampant these days." He returned his gaze to me. "Notwithstanding your bad manners, Jack, I must say I am impressed by your results so far. You come on the scene unexpectedly and, despite your fumbling ways, manage to accomplish more in a few days than the police in almost two years."

He pursed his mouth. "I do like to gamble, you know,

but only when I'm aware of the stakes. You, on the other hand, are an unknown quantity, a wild card."

"Don't tell me I've upset your well-laid plans?"

"Oh, I've felt only a twinge, but it's distracting. Don't think I won't succeed, though. Even you cannot hope to change that."

"Just watch me."

Mueller sighed.

"This conversation is finished. I'm afraid you have become rather a bore." He straightened and held out his hand, palm up. "You have ten seconds to give me your telecarb. Otherwise..." he pointed the gun at Claire's chest. "...she dies."

"Even if I wanted to, Mueller, I can't give it to you. It's neurologically implanted in my body."

"He's telling the truth, Mueller," Claire said.

"Five seconds."

"I'm not lying to you." The distance between us was too great for me to reach his gun arm, but maybe I could tackle him. But first, I had to distract him from pointing his gun at Claire. I tensed and shifted my weight forward. Mueller saw the movement and fired.

Claire squeaked. Her body slammed against the armoire; her head followed with a thud. She stared at Mueller in surprise then slid slowly to the floor. The blood trailing down the door of the armoire matched the widening stain on her chest.

"No!" I threw myself in front of Mueller. He shifted his gun in my direction. I knew I couldn't reach him in time.

Helga rolled her chair to the lamp behind him. I jumped sideways. She collided with the lamp then continued to push it with her chair. Mueller ignored her. His gun followed my movements. The pedestal toppled, and the leaded shade crashed into Mueller's back. He fell to his knees. The gun went off.

The hit propelled me backwards, and I collapsed beside Claire. I knew he had shot me, but my only sensation was a tingling in my wrist. I looked at the floor. The gun had skit-

tered close to me. I picked it up. Dimly, I realized Mueller wasn't moving.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Helga said. "What am I going to do?"

"Call the police," I rasped, "before he wakes up."

I rolled over to Claire and placed my finger on the pulse point at her neck. Her eyes stared ahead, a stunned look still in them. I couldn't feel her heartbeat, so I lay my head on her chest. It was sticky with blood.

Nothing.

"Hang on, Claire," I croaked, "I'll get you to emergency."

I took her in my arms and wished for a hospital. In the next blink, I looked around in consternation. This time, the telecarb hadn't done what I wanted. It had taken me to the one place I didn't want to go.

I was back on Thriftene.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHIT. CLAIRE'S LIFELESS BODY STILL TIGHT IN MY ARMS, I concentrated on the image of an emergency room. Any hospital, I thought desperately. When I opened my eyes, Trebor towered over me, his eyes and mouth for once in the right alignment.

I laughed at the irony of the situation. I'd survived Mueller's gun only to end up squashed by a Thrittene. My chuckle turned into a cough, and I tasted blood. I could feel the bullet hole in my gut spewing blood and imagined the pulp that were my organs giving up the fight one after the other. I realized that, without immediate attention, I wouldn't last long. My entire arm was tingling now, the same way the telecarb did when it warned me of danger.

I knew I had to do something, but the connection between my brain and my body seemed cut off. Without wanting to, I let go of Claire. The floor rippled, and her body moved a few inches away from me. I rolled onto my side.

"It looks like you and Mueller won after all," I said. I coughed again, and blood dribbled from my mouth onto the white surface of the floor. "You'll even get your telecarb back. The only loose end is the tleb, but, what the hell, you can't have everything."

Trebor sank into the floor to his waist. He placed a hand over my wound. "You are dying, Jack Meter," he said.

"Give that alien a cigar," I said through a wheeze.

I turned my head at a movement beside me. Claire's body was sinking into the floor. I reached for her too slowly, too late.

"Another addition to your scientific research, Trebor?"

"The pain renders you incoherent, Jack Meter," he said.

"Funny, I can't feel a thing." I spread out full length, the tips of my shoes pointing at the ceiling. The swirling colors, the way they molded themselves into Trebor's face, fascinated me.

I felt drowsy and euphoric at the same time. I tried to stay conscious a little longer. There was something I wanted to tell Trebor...I just couldn't seem to remember what it was.

An electric zap on my arm shocked me awake.

"Tell me, Trebor," I said, my voice a whisper, "why did the telecarb bring me here? Did you suddenly get efficient?"

"Do you not remember, Jack Meter?" he said. "We programmed a self-protection feature in the telecarb. It seems it considers gross danger to your life caused by another party as a threat to itself. This safety feature ensured you would continue your services to us until successful conclusion of the investigation, or until we decided to terminate our association. Your telecarb is currently attempting to maintain your life force until we tell it otherwise. Unfortunately, your injuries may be too extensive even for its capacity."

"Sorry to disappoint you, pal." I coughed again and nearly choked on my own blood. I turned back onto my side so I could breathe more easily and avoid looking up at Trebor. I'd forgotten that he was the entire room. His face jutted out of the floor in front of mine.

I closed my eyes, drowsy again. The pervasive sounds of Thriftene ebbed and flowed around me and lulled me to sleep.

"Open your eyes, Jack Meter."

"Why?" I whispered. "I'm tired, and I can't get away from your ugly mug. I'll be dead soon, don't worry. At least I'll have had the satisfaction of bleeding all over you while I do it." I coughed again. "You wouldn't have a cigarette on you, would you?"

Trebor made a disgusted sound. "These sticks of paper filled with burning tobacco will kill you."

I laughed and sputtered blood. "You've got to be kidding."

"I am not in the habit of making jokes."

"Don't I know it. How about a drink then?"

I had to force my lips to form the words. My mind was getting fuzzy, too. The sensation in my arm had dwindled to a mere tickle. I frowned. An insistent little voice kept hammering in my brain—something important I had to tell Trebor. Something very important. I mentally turned to the message, focused on it until I could grab it. Ah yes, I thought, Mueller.

In a rush, it all came back. I didn't want to go out without making sure Trebor knew what Mueller was up to. I couldn't stop him, but the Thrittene might change their minds and do something to scuttle his plans.

I thought of my encounter with him in his sister's apartment. I had no illusion that Helga had called the police, and that they had Mueller in custody. It wouldn't take him long to recover and go after the tleb. And now I couldn't prevent him from going ahead with his plans.

The first spasm of pain struck and left me breathless.

"Trebor, listen to me," I croaked. "Don't trust Mueller. He..." I panted with the effort of speaking.

Trebor looked surprised at the mention of Mueller's name. Then I remembered that the last time I'd landed here I hadn't known their thief's name. A lot had happened since then, as well as almost twenty-four hours for me; but to them, I might have been gone only a couple of hours.

"There will be time for discussion later," Trebor said. "You have lost a substantial quantity of blood, Jack Meter."

"This is...important, damn it. You have to...listen to me."

"You are dying, Jack Meter."

"What is...this, a new form of...Chinese torture? Torment...by the obvious?"

"I only meant to remind you of our contract."

I closed my eyes. Why did I bother trying to talk to him?

We might use the same words, but we sure didn't speak the same language. A second spasm of pain racked my body. One of Trebor's arms jutted out of the floor and landed on my chest. The pain eased a bit.

"What about...our contract," I said.

"You have not fulfilled your side of it."

If I hadn't been hurting so much, I would have burst out laughing. "That's...rich," I croaked. "From the...beginning, you...lied...to me, had me...chase after a...maniac then...double-crossed me. Now...you say I...haven't met the terms...of the contract? Let me...refresh your memory...Trebor. You hired me...to recover a...Portal. Since no...such thing was...stolen, I'd say our...contract was...null and...void before I...even...started this...investigation."

"But you still wish to die."

"I'd...hoped to catch...that bastard...Mueller first. He...killed...Annie. Deliberately. He's...a rabid...animal, and...he should...be taken...out. After...that, I...would...have died...happy."

"So, you do not wish to die now?"

"Is that...a trick...question?"

"You must tell me if you still wish it."

I opened my eyes. His face appeared as a brilliant patch in the surrounding darkness.

"I just said...I wasn't ready." I leaned my head back. "As if...it made...a difference," I mumbled.

Trebor smiled, his mouth back on his forehead. "But it does, Jack Meter, it does."

His head sank into the floor. I sighed, relieved I didn't have to chat him up anymore. This process of dying was hard work.

The reprieve didn't last long. In my semi-conscious state, I became aware of my body being lifted from the floor. The wave of nothing moved up and sideways, and I rolled onto my back.

I made a feeble effort to get up but couldn't muster much strength. The ceiling lowered down to my body. A white tendril snaked toward my head and pounced on my neck. I felt it pierce the skin.

"Damn it, Trebor, what the hell are you doing to me?"

Had I said that last out loud or just thought it? I tried to grab the feeler in my neck, but I couldn't move my arms. In a half-delirium, nightmarish images flashed before my eyes. After all, I knew next to nothing of the Thrittene. What if, like spiders, they kept their prey alive while they slowly chewed their insides?

My fears were confirmed when two more tendrils came out of the ceiling and entered my gut. I felt a sharp pain then nothing. I tried to move my head and couldn't. I tried to move my hands and feet. Nothing moved. Damn. I was back to square one.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a magenta shape ooze from the wall.

"Well, Jack Meter," Nasus said, her voice a soft purr, "we meet again. And this time, you definitely are not in a position to bargain."

"Have you looked in a mirror recently?" I said.

Her face, although still recognizable, looked like she'd suffered a major bout of chicken pox. As for her body, it had been rearranged in the Cubist style. She gave me a tight little smile, fiddled with the tube in my neck then yanked slightly on those in my belly.

"Will we trade insults now?" she said. "I did not think you would have the energy."

"I don't. Just tell me what you're doing with my body."

She smiled again, her eyes full of mischief.

"Why, Jack Meter, it seems we will repair you again. It was very inconsiderate of you to damage our beautiful work. The tube inserted into your carotid artery will provide your brain with all the elements it needs to stay alive while we perform repairs. Tell me, what made such damage?"

"A bullet."

"Ah. A projectile expelled from a firearm. I did not realize how harmful they could be. Why, then, do so many of your race use them?"

"We love to live on the edge, sweets."

"The edge of what?" she said, frowning. She shook her

head and continued. "Never mind. This bullet pierced your liver and your left lung then shattered the edge of your shoulder blade and exited through your back, taking bone fragments with it. You have a big hole in your back, Jack Meter."

"How can you know so much about human anatomy?"

"Annie Barnes brought us 'books.' They contain an amazing amount of information."

Annie. Of course. I closed my eyes. I saw her, laughing, surrounded by the lights of the Emotions World.

Then it hit me. In the space of a few days, I'd remembered her alive twice. On the heels of that realization came the other—that I'd carried on a conversation with Nasus even though a few minutes earlier I'd been ready to buy the farm and all the animals on it.

As if she'd read my mind, Nasus smiled and nodded. "It will take several of your hours to rebuild your organs. In the meantime, you will explain to Trebor what transpired during your adventures on the various worlds to which we tracked you."

"Will it do any good?"

"We are not above bowing to logic, Jack Meter. If you convince us, we will let you go. At the moment, our inclination is to keep you here for a while longer. As long as the life-support connections hold you, your telecarb cannot function." She sidled closer and, with a sultry laugh, caressed me from neck to crotch. "Maybe I will indulge my curiosity with you. What do you say, Jack Meter?"

I appraised the Cubist version of her body with a wary eye. "I say not before you get your body rearranged, Nasus. I bruise easily."

She laughed again and melted from my range of vision. Trebor's face emerged from the ceiling in between the tubes. The head stopped at his neck—it made me think of those foam models stores use to display wigs.

"Gotta get yourself some hair, Trebor," I said.

"The last time you found yourself in a similar situation, Jack Meter, you did not react to it as well."

"I'm not sure which sounds worse — getting killed by you or getting repaired."

"We did not relish the idea of terminating your life."

"Did you slip something into that juice you're serving my brain? I feel no pain. In fact, I can't feel anything at all."

"I assure you, Jack Meter, all matter inserted into your body is yours. We have cloned your cells and are transforming them into blood and tissue."

"Impressive. I suppose you'll remove the telecarb?"

"We may."

"Why are you doing this, Trebor? Repairing me again?"

"Tell me, Jack Meter, who shot you?"

I paused. I wanted him to know Mueller had deceived them, but how much should I tell him? On the surface, the whole situation, especially with the Thrittene around, smacked of comic opera. In reality, though, it had all the makings of a tragedy.

I'd pieced together bits and fragments and come up with a theory. Unfortunately, it sounded crazier than Lucia di Lammermoor's mad scene. I just hoped that when he heard the bad news Trebor wouldn't follow the opera character's example and kill me.

What the hell.

"This investigation I started for you has grown into something broader than what you originally thought, Trebor," I said. "We're not dealing with the simple theft of a telecarb here. Mueller has his own agenda. He'll use you the way he's used others. He's killed several people before, even one of your own. He'll kill again if necessary."

"Hmmm. He has not brought us any elements from other worlds, as agreed. We were beginning to suspect that either he was singularly ineffective or he misled us about his goal."

"Which is?"

"He insisted he wanted to help us solve our problem with cohesion, volunteered his services. He said he would gain knowledge in return and that it sufficed him."

"I think he's the one affecting cohesion."

"Actually, the problem has stabilized."

I stared at him. "Don't tell me that."

Trebor looked insulted. "You would rather that we scatter slowly?"

"That's not what I meant. As long as you're getting worse, it means he hasn't finished gathering the material he needs."

Trebor gawked at me, incomprehension plastered on his face. I tried to remember what he'd said about how their loss of cohesion had started. I had to find a way to explain how Mueller, by stealing from other worlds, had worsened their situation.

"You said that one of your experiments caused your loss of cohesion, not the theft of the telecarb."

"Yes."

"This experiment. Did you by any chance remove something from a world? Besides me, I mean."

Trebor turned a rosy hue. "I must admit we have not always followed rigorous scientific methods when it came to contacting other worlds."

"Did you know that Mueller tortured Ener to death so he could get his hands on the telecarb?"

The room turned that pukey green I hated, and the sounds rose a few decibels.

"How do you come to know this, Jack Meter?" Trebor's voice boomed, and his words bounced off the walls in a continuous echo.

I waited until the noise subsided.

"I saw it." At his unbelieving stare, I sighed. "Look, I think it's time I told you what I've discovered so far. This may take a while, though."

"You are not going anywhere, Jack Meter," Trebor said.

"Cute, Trebor. Listen closely, because I'm not repeating any of this."

I told him of my discoveries in the various worlds I'd visited, including Mueller's having stolen an element of each world for his own designs.

"If your analogy of Thrittene as the hub of a giant wheel stands true then your loss of cohesion makes sense. Let's say

that each world you're connected with has, as its main environment, one crucial element of the Thrittene composition. Let's assume again that the connection has more importance to the stability of the entire structure than you originally thought. Then, a weakening of a world could have a ripple effect through the hub to the entire wheel. If enough spokes are weakened in that way, the wheel will eventually collapse.

"Mueller has systematically removed elements from various worlds. The wounds from these other worlds resonate through yours. You lose cohesion."

"But what would Mueller want with all those elements?"

"Mueller has been obsessed for years with artificial intelligence. I'm convinced he's attempting to build an invincible machine that will have the ability to travel through all those worlds because it's made from them. I presume that's also why he wants the tleb."

The room fell silent. That same sensation of lead in my lungs I'd felt when I'd earlier escaped from Thrittene returned. It felt like my heart skipped several beats. Trebor's eyes stared in horror at a point just above my head.

"Trebor, I'm dying here," I croaked.

He seemed to mentally shake himself, and the sounds resumed. I breathed deeply and felt my heart bounce in my chest.

"Mueller doesn't have the tleb yet," I continued, "and it's only an earlier prototype, right? It must have a bunch of limitations and bugs."

"No. No, if you are correct in your assumptions, Stefan Mueller will not use the tleb to have his machine travel through the worlds."

His head disappeared from the ceiling and his whole body surged beside me. He looked extremely agitated; he'd turned a greenish-gray, and the sounds around me reminded me of a dirge.

"Do you not understand, Jack Meter? You said it yourself—Thrittene is the hub, where all matter is integrated. He will use the matter from the tleb as the glue that will hold his machine together."

The sense of urgency I'd felt before hit me again. Even

though I knew I couldn't feel a thing, I wanted to scratch all over. How long would it be until Mueller got his hands on the tleb? He knew Claire had it, and it wouldn't take him too long to conclude she had hidden it somewhere in her lab. I just hoped the bump on the head Helga had given him had slowed him down.

Trebor glided back and forth beside me, muttering to himself. He stopped beside my head.

"Jack Meter, this is terrible. Based on everything you have told me, if Stefan Mueller succeeds in melding the tleb with other matter it may very well accelerate the collapse of our worlds! The amalgamation of these elements will amplify their resonance and will completely destabilize the harmonic balance of the universe."

"Damn, I hate it when I'm right. It's never good news. Let me up, Trebor, I've got to go. I've wasted enough time here."

"Your recovery is not complete, Jack Meter. You will remain weakened from the operation. You need to regenerate your strength."

"I need to stop Mueller. If I don't, there won't be any point in me recuperating, will there?"

"We also need to counter the effects the telecarb has on your nervous system."

"You know about those? Good, you can tell me what I can do to deal with them. But I still gotta go, Trebor."

The tubes from my neck and belly withdrew and my restraints disappeared. I sat up slowly, fighting dizziness and nausea.

"The only thing that worries me is," I continued, so I could focus on something else than my stomach, "once I catch up with him, how do I dismantle his machine?"

"Claire Foucault and Leinad will study the problem."

"Claire!" I said. At once I felt guilty about forgetting her. "You mean she's alive?"

"The bullet pierced her heart. We repaired the hole easily enough. We also fitted her brain with a decoder."

Two shapes emerged from the wall in unison. I turned to Trebor and narrowed my eyes when I saw that one of them

was Claire. She looked very healthy, despite the large bloodstain on her shirt. Trebor smiled and shrugged.

"Your story was doubly convincing, Jack Meter, since Claire Foucault corroborated it independently."

"Jack," Claire said. She stopped in front of me, a broad smile on her face. "This world is fantastic. You wouldn't believe what I've learned already. Of course, it's a bit overwhelming, but what an opportunity! Did Trebor tell you I'm staying here and working with Leinad?"

"Thank you, sweetheart, I feel fine, too," I said, peeved that she could muster so much enthusiasm for aliens who had almost crushed her to death a day earlier. "At least you'll be out of my hair."

She stopped smiling. "That's right, Jack, you got what you wanted."

"It looks like you did, too."

"Just make sure you remember not to destroy the android. Otherwise, we won't be able to return its components to the various worlds."

"Do you have any other totally obvious instructions for me?"

"Yes. Don't get yourself killed. We wouldn't want to lose the telecarb. Come on, Leinad, we have work to do."

She turned on her heels and melted back into the wall.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LEINAD WATCHED CLAIRE DISAPPEAR THROUGH THE wall, bewilderment written on his face. I laughed.

"You have no idea what you got yourself into, Leinad. That's one pushy broad you're working with. Don't worry, though, she'll mold you into shape."

"Annie Barnes did not act in this sharp manner. She was most cooperative."

"Yeah. If you say so."

I clenched my teeth. Damn Annie for leading this entirely separate life from me. Damn her for thinking she could solve her own problems. Damn her for dying and leaving me to pick up the pieces.

I cleared my throat. "I have to go."

"Jack Meter, wait," Leinad said.

He placed his hand on my arm. I stopped, surprised at the human-like gesture. I looked down at his hand—it had three fingers, each one a different hue.

"You must use the telecarb as little as possible," he said. "You are weak. The side effects of its use will be amplified."

I backed away from him. The little hairs on my arms lifted.

"Come on, Leinad. Spill it. What's happening with the telecarb?"

"I fear that, with each use, it increasingly melds with your own cells. It is...amalgamating."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Leinad's color paled. "You are becoming Thrittene matter."

"Say what?"

I raised my hand to stop him from repeating the words. I walked to the end of the room and back, hands on hips. When I stopped in front of him again, sounds whirled around me, high-pitched and intense.

"Explain," I said, my voice deliberately calm.

"The more you use the telecarb, the less you will be able to function on Earth. We have told you before that our matter is incompatible with your environment. Our composition is too complex."

"Your composition will be simplified real fast if you don't fix that telecarb."

"I think I can repair it, but it will take time. I am only beginning to understand why we disintegrate on your world. We sent some of our matter to other worlds and we get similar results. We have, however, stabilized matter conformation in small bodies such as the tleb or the telecarbs. Soon we will have the capability to expand our technique to larger masses."

"Time I don't have. Think of something else, Leinad."

"I am sorry, Jack Meter. At this point, the only solution is to refrain from using the telecarb."

"I can't do that. I have to stop Mueller."

"I cannot predict how fast the degeneration will occur."

"Then I'll just have to risk it, won't I?"

Leinad detained me again.

"What now?"

"Mueller's telecarb."

"I hope it's good news 'cause I've sure had enough of the bad."

"The prototype he stole, and the tleb, will eventually decay. They were not designed, like yours, to last indefinitely."

"And...?"

"With repeated use, the telecarb matter will lose coherence and break down."

"What happens when it stops working?"

"Either he will be stranded or, if he is in transit, his atoms will scatter."

"When is this going to happen?"

"Without examining the device, I cannot tell. We did not anticipate its theft."

"That makes my life a lot easier, doesn't it? I just have to find a way to get Mueller to use his telecarb until it falls apart. Great strategy."

He frowned and I chuckled.

"Forget it. Gotta go find me a madman."

Leinad's face changed into Trebor's.

"Take care, Jack Meter. Our very existence is in your hands. Where will you search next?"

I thought about that. I was out of leads and didn't know how much time had passed since I'd arrived on Thrittene. First, I had to find out if the Mounties had caught Mueller—Terry would have known enough to remove the telecarb. If Mueller had gotten away, I'd have to figure out what to do next.

I wanted to talk to Terry, but I also wanted to visit Helga again. I banked on Terry's making his way to Helga's apartment as soon as he knew Claire and I were gone.

I decided to start with Mueller's sister. If Terry wasn't there, or if too much time had passed, I'd give him a call afterwards.

After a brief explanation to Trebor, I appeared in a corner of the courtyard. I grabbed at my chest, unable to breathe.

The force of gravity was bearing down on me. It would flatten me.

I leaned against the stone wall, clutched at the grooves to help me keep upright. Thrittene called, but because I now knew why, it was easier to resist its appeal. I concentrated on breathing in and out. The pain ebbed, but I felt weak all over.

I surveyed the area. Three RCMP cruisers filled the parking area, and a dozen officers milled around. I hesitated, unsure of my next move. I couldn't just accost one of the cops—they'd pack me in so fast, I wouldn't have time to say Terry's name.

As if thinking his name had brought him to me, I saw him come out of the elevator. I pushed away from the wall.

"Don't move," a voice said. The barrel of a gun dug into the soft tissue at the base of my skull. The man pushed my shoulder to get me to face the brick. "Hands against the wall, spread your legs...holy shit!"

His reaction puzzled me until I remembered the bloody hole in my jacket. Good thing he hadn't seen the front of my shirt.

"I need backup here!" he yelled.

He started patting me down and stopped at the pocket of my coat. He extracted the gun I'd taken from Mueller before I'd transported to Thriftene.

I heard feet scrambling closer.

"I don't believe it."

I recognized Terry's voice.

"That's okay, he's with me."

I relaxed and turned around. "Hi, Terry."

He closed in on me with the intensity of a bull eyeing a red flag. I saw his hand come up. He didn't stop, just grabbed me by the throat and slammed me against the wall.

"You friggin' SOB," he spat out. His voice blared under the eaves of the gallery. "You had to interfere, didn't you? You went up there. It has your signature all over. I told you to stay put. I should have known better than to trust you."

I grasped his wrist and pushed. He backed up a step and stuck his fists on his hips.

"Where the hell were you, anyway?"

I pointed behind him. "Do I have to tell in front of them?"

Terry turned to face the officers, who'd all stopped to watch the exchange. "Get back to work. Nothing here to gawk at."

The cop who'd frisked me still held the gun by two fingers. I pointed to it.

"This is the gun that killed the security guard at NARC. I lifted it from Mueller."

"Did he use it recently?" Terry said. "There's a lot of blood up there."

I unbuttoned my jacket, and he took in my torn shirt soaked with blood. His eyes widened.

"Don't tell me," he said. "It's a long story." He waved at the cop, who was still staring at me. "What are you waiting for? Get this to Forensics."

The young cop produced a plastic bag and dropped the weapon into it.

"I take it you didn't get Mueller," I said.

"No. When we arrived, the sister was dead, her neck broken."

"Damn." I saw Helga's deformed body in my mind. Must have been as easy as breaking a bird's neck. He'll pay for your life also, Helga, I vowed silently. "I was hoping to talk to her again," I said aloud to Terry. "She might have known another of Mueller's hideouts."

"If you hadn't dropped in on him in the first place, the sister might still be alive."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"I ought to throw you in the clink for obstruction of justice. I told you to friggin' stay where you were. Going after Mueller is my job."

"So you would be dead now, too?" I pulled at the front of my shirt. "What do you think this is, Terry, catsup?"

He whipped me around to look at my back. "You have more guts than brains, you know that? Where's Claire?"

I abruptly felt bone-weary and famished. "Claire's fine."

Terry pursed his mouth for a moment then shook his head.

"Come on, I'm finished here. Time to go home. Unless you want to wink your way there?"

I shook my head. "I have nowhere to go, remember? My apartment is confetti."

We picked up some takeout; then Terry drove the two hours from Montreal to Ottawa. I told him what happened at Mueller's sister's while I chomped on french fries and a two-inch smoked meat sandwich. My hunger satisfied, I fell asleep during his speech about the differences between cops and private dicks.

I woke up with a start when the car stopped. I looked around, groggy. We were in the RCMP headquarters parking lot.

"I thought you were going home," I said.

"Got a phone call while you snoozed. We have new developments you might be interested in. Come on."

We entered the yellow stone building in silence. Terry signed in for both of us then tore down the hallway and up the stairs to his office on the third floor. I struggled up after him.

Two cops in civilian clothes were waiting inside. They took in my appearance then frowned. One of them gestured toward me.

"What's he doing here?"

"This is Jack Meter," Terry said. "Would you guys give us a minute?"

He kept his hand on the doorknob and motioned the two outside. They left with reluctance, their silent glare a clear message that I didn't belong. Terry closed the door and moved to a metal cabinet behind his desk. He yanked the handle, and the door opened with a vibrating clang. He fished something from the top shelf.

"Here," he said, tossing me a bundle of clothes. "Put these on. I don't want that bloody hole in your shirt staring at me."

"Where are we going?"

"Before I tell you, I want you to give me your word you won't try anything by yourself."

I lifted my head from contemplation of the blue shirt and green-and-brown checkered jacket. "You found Mueller."

"What, you think I'm crazy, Jack? Last time I gave you information, you jumped into it with both feet, a woman got killed and I lost my chance to get my hands on Mueller. I'm not telling you anything until you give me your word." He plopped into his desk chair. "I know I can't detain you, because of that thingamajig on your wrist. But I swear to you, Jack, I'll shoot you myself if you interfere."

"You finished with the speech?"

"Your word, Jack."

Terry didn't realize he had already given me enough information. I only had to wish to be where Mueller's investigators were, and I'd be there.

"Oh, before you think yourself too clever, I'm sending four teams to different places, and I'm staying here if I need to. You could waste a lot of time and energy on red herrings."

"For someone who claims he doesn't understand a thing about my telecarb, you're pretty sharp."

"Your word, Jack."

The door opened after a perfunctory knock. One of the cops leaned on the doorknob. "Gotta hustle, Sergeant."

Terry lifted his hand to signal him to wait, his eyes still fixed on mine. I nodded, and he relaxed.

"Let's go."

I dumped the jacket on the desk and walked out into the hall with the shirt. Terry took the lead; the two cops fell in behind me. He pointed to the impatient one.

"This is Corporal Baxter. He's been investigating Mueller with me."

"He's a civilian, Sarge," Baxter said.

I turned my head in time to see him glance at his partner in a message of mixed anxiety and frustration.

"He comes with us." Terry halted abruptly and turned to Baxter. "You got a problem with that?"

Baxter shook his head, saying nothing.

Terry looked at the other guy. "Tomkins?"

"It's against procedure, Sergeant. If he gets hurt..."

Terry cracked up then pointed at my shirt. "See that? He's already dead."

He continued down the hall and hopped down the stairs. Baxter and Tomkins gaped at each other then at me.

"Nothing like a dose of lead in the morning to wake you up," I said.

I hurried after Terry. A few seconds later, the two flatfoots scrambled after me.

"What did he mean, you're already dead?" Baxter said.

"Work on it," I threw over my shoulder.

I caught up with Terry in the parking lot. He pointed at the two cops.

"You follow us in your vehicle. Is backup in place? The bomb squad?"

At Baxter's nod, Terry slid into his car. I barely had time to get in before he squealed out onto the Vanier Parkway.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" I removed my jacket and placed it on my knees.

"You should have brought the jacket, too. It's too cold for air conditioning."

"One guy looking like you is enough, pal."

I took off my shirt and shoved my arms into Terry's blue shirt. He took the westbound ramp to the Queensway.

"Do you remember how we found a body in Mueller's house after he torched it?" he said. "Height and size matched his, and we found a ring on the corpse's finger that matched the description of the one Mueller wore. We thought it was his attempt, a poor one at that, to make us believe he'd died in that fire. The explanation just happens to be a bit more convoluted than that."

"Mueller is too brilliant to leave anything to chance."

Terry nodded. "We weren't able to identify the body. No match on dental records, no fingerprints. But we got a break a month ago. After we ran out of ideas here, Forensics sent the description of the ring to Interpol, just in case. Turns out it's a school ring from a small college in Holland. We tracked down every graduate from Mueller's class, except for one. A Dr. Gerrit Verbeeck. Seems he disappeared without a trace."

"That's hardly evidence that Mueller killed him."

"You're right, except for two things. Verbeeck's last known address was a house in Ottawa. He sold it and all his possessions just before he disappeared."

"So, he left the country. Big deal."

"Maybe."

While we were talking, Terry had turned onto Hunt Club Road then Uplands Drive. Just before the entrance to the airport, he slowed and turned onto the grounds of the old military base.

“What’s the second thing?”

Terry gave me a Cheshire Cat smile. “With the money from the sale of his house and stuff, Verbeeck purchased one of the military research laboratories on this disaffected base. After we found his body in Mueller’s house.”

He stopped the car about five hundred feet from a white-with-green-trim rectangular building. The structure blended with the others around it; its only distinguishing marks were the number S-32 in black beside the door and the yellow signs posted on the wall indicating danger from electrocution and radiation poisoning. Four bomb squad officers, duly padded, were approaching the door. I saw Aplin waiting a few feet away.

It all seemed too easy. From my encounters with Mueller, I knew he liked to gloat, to show his genius, to bask in his superiority. It wasn’t like him to leave so many loose ends, unless...

“Damn it, Terry,” I said. I pushed the car door open. “Wait!” I yelled to the men at the building.

The explosion covered my warning and blasted the wooden door away from the building. I ducked back into the car and covered my head with my arms. Debris spattered the windshield.

I lifted my head when the hail of bits and pieces stopped pelting the car. Terry rushed to the four men on the ground. Baxter slowed beside me.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Is someone calling an ambulance?”

He nodded and jerked his thumb behind him but didn’t stop until he reached the fallen men. I followed more slowly to stop beside Terry. Aplin was crouched beside one of the bodies. He lifted his head briefly.

“They hadn’t even touched the damn building,” he said to Terry. “Whoever did this installed either an infrared detector or a weight-triggering mechanism some distance from the barracks. They’re in bad shape, but they’re all alive.” He jumped up when he saw me. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

"He's with me," Terry said. Before Aplin could say more, Terry stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "I need him for the investigation."

Aplin stared at him then at me. He gave a short nod.

"Fine," he finally said to Terry. "But if I find he's involved in this, I swear, your head will roll." He turned to me. "I'm on to you, y'hear me?"

I shrugged then walked to the gaping entrance and peered inside. The blast had destroyed half of the external wall and part of another a few feet inside. Further on, I glimpsed another door. I stepped over debris up to the door and knocked. Reinforced steel.

"Jack," Terry yelled, "what the frig are you doing? Get back here."

"If Mueller had wanted to destroy the entire building, he would've done so." I pointed to the men laid out in a row on the ground. "This is his idea of a joke, you know. He wants us to look inside. There's a message in there for us."

"How can you be so sure?"

"At his sister's, he talked about the fact he loved to gamble, especially when he knew the stakes. He wants us to know what he's doing."

"Sergeant," Tomkins called from behind us. He held a chest protector and a helmet in each hand. "At least wear these."

We donned the protective gear and cleared the area of debris. I was about to open the door when Terry pulled me aside.

"Just stay back, okay?"

I took a deep breath and held it. Terry placed his hand on the handle and pushed down very slowly. He waited for a few heartbeats then pulled toward him. The door opened with the swooshing noise of equalizing pressure. He pulled it open wider and stepped inside.

Silence.

I released my breath and followed, Baxter and Tomkins close on my heels. A strong odor of formaldehyde and carboic acid assaulted my nostrils.

"What the...?" Terry muttered.

"Look at all that stuff," Baxter said. He continued to the end of the room.

A stainless steel worktable, large as two pool tables abreast, dominated the center. A groove ran along its sides and in one corner a hose stretched from a hole in the surface to a drain in the ground. Above the work area hung operating room lights; at one end stood what looked like an anesthesia machine. To the side, above pristine counters, an assortment of metal implements—tools, saws, electric drills—dangled from hooks in the wall. Against it and below, the lighter imprint of several rectangular shapes showed where equipment had been removed.

Five metal boxes about two feet deep had been wired into the opposite wall. I stared at the contents of the one at my eye level for a full minute before what they were registered in my brain.

Bones. Bones wired together into an arm and a hand. Four or five of them covered the bottom, as if they'd just been dumped there. I peered into the next box. That one contained thin, curved bones. Ribs.

I was about to call Terry when I saw Baxter rush from a door at the far end of the room. He'd turned a bilious green. He stared at me for a second then seemed to shake himself.

"I...we need a camera." He rushed out.

The door had stayed open. It was a refrigerated room; cold mist rushed out and ran over my feet. I walked over and stood in the entrance. On each side hung a row of semi-transparent plastic bags. The shapes, long and thin, looked like bodies.

Terry, whiter than death, stood at the other end of the room in front of an open bag. Tomkins, his back to Terry, peered at another. He was breathing in quick, shallow breaths. He was the same greenish color as Baxter.

I approached the first bag. My hand trembled as I gripped the tag of the zipper. I pulled it down fast, the sharp sound shrill in the silence. The bag parted and revealed its contents.

What used to be a human being stared at me with fixed eyes, its mouth cramped into a gaping grimace, its teeth stark white against the dark cavity of the mouth. The entire body was brown and shriveled. I staggered backward until I hit another body bag then jerked away. I closed my eyes and swallowed the bile rising in my throat.

"He stripped the skin off," I croaked.

"This one has no arms," Tomkins said between efforts not to retch.

"Sweet Jesus and Mary," Terry whispered. "Where's the head?"

I looked down the room and counted the bodies. Twenty. Twenty victims of a madman's obsession.

All of a sudden, my skin started to itch and the hair on the back of my neck shivered. I jerked to attention.

"Terry, Tomkins, we have to get out of here."

They looked at me in surprise.

"Now."

"We're not finished here, Jack," Terry said. "I want to check all the body bags before we call Forensics."

We don't have time for that, a voice whispered in my brain. I strained to make out the outside doorway. Too far, my instincts told me. I ran to the back of the room, grabbed Terry's sleeve and Tomkins's collar and made a wish.

We landed in a heap near Terry's car. Still holding on to them, I shook off the dizziness and tried to breathe. I lifted my head to stare at the building. Nothing had happened. Maybe I'd overreacted, I thought.

"Jesus Murphy, Jack, what the frig got into you?"

Terry jumped to his feet. He grabbed my shirt and pulled me upright. I lifted my hand, unable to catch my breath.

"I thought..." I said between gasps, "I felt—"

The rumble sounded like an earthquake, and it came from the spot we'd just vacated. Almost casually, the building crumpled in on itself. Billows of dust slowly furled over us.

"Danger," I finished, once the noise had subsided.

We watched the dust settle. The sirens of firefighting equipment blared in sync with the rasp of my throat.

I slid to the ground, nerveless, and gazed at the heavens.
The setting sun had dyed the angel-hair clouds stygian red
and transformed them into rivers of blood.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“A SHOUT THAT TORE HELL’S CONCAVE, AND BEYOND frightened the reign of Chaos and old Night,” I muttered. Someone snickered over my head. I looked up. Aplin loomed over me.

“Didn’t know they taught poetry in PI school,” he said. “No wonder you guys are all screwups.” He took a drag of his cigarette.

“Must be hard to put two clues together, hey, Aplin, when you’re so clueless.”

Someone yelled for more light. The sudden illumination carved Aplin’s features into a distorted mask.

“What do you want?”

“Goddamn answers, that’s what I want. The explosion threw clear one of the bodies. A young woman, not even twenty.” He made a disgusted face. “She’s been eviscerated and some sort of implant inserted in place of the gut. Doc says she must have suffered for days before she died.”

The red tip of his cigarette glowed brighter. White smoke surrounded his head. The acrid smell of burnt tobacco wafted down to me.

“That bastard is a fucking kook,” he continued, his eyes fixed on the destroyed lab. “You’re gonna give me everything you know about him, Meter. You’re gonna talk until I’m satisfied I got all of it. Then I might let you go.”

I didn't answer. I sat on the ground, my head between my knees, and concentrated on regaining my strength. It had taken me at least five minutes to breathe properly again after I'd brought Terry and Tomkins out, even though the telecarb's side effects were milder, thanks to my very active imagination. This time, the disembodied screams of the corpses we'd found echoed in my head and drowned out the sounds of Thrittene.

Fifteen minutes after our timely exit from the lab, a mob of officials had swarmed into the area and taken over. Terry joined Aplin to brief the new guys while I stayed by his car and gathered my scattered wits. I'd started thinking about getting up when Aplin showed up and dropped his pearls of wisdom.

"Did you hear me, Meter?" he said.

"You're going to keep me all to yourself, Aplin? What about the city cops? The coroner? The bomb squad?" I pushed myself up. "Very selfish."

Terry interrupted Aplin's retort. "What the frig are you harassing Meter for, Aplin? As far as I can tell, you're not finished with the bomb site."

"I just wanted to have a little chat with him. Right, Meter?"

"Jack is off limits, okay? Concentrate on confirming that the explosives have Mueller's signature. I want a report on every bit of evidence you dig up."

"Get off my back, Parczek. You're not my boss."

"No, but I'm in charge of this investigation until Bozo there changes his mind." He pointed to a spot near the blasted site where Inspector Morin, Terry's boss twice-removed, held the lapels of his expensive jacket and bounced on the balls of his feet while the media set up their TV cameras. "So, unless you hear otherwise, I'm telling you to lay off. If you want to so much as breathe in Meter's direction, you go through me. Clear?"

Aplin clamped his jaws together and straightened his back. Terry glared. Aplin turned on his heel and strode back to the destroyed building.

"Thanks," I said to Terry.

"Don't mention it. I don't want anyone to put you away again until I'm finished with you. In Aplin's defense, though, he's as pissed as the rest of us. We have different methods, that's all." He scrutinized my face. "Are you okay?"

"I'll live." I pointed to the building. "What's the verdict?"

"Everything's fused together just like in Annie's lab," he said.

I clenched my teeth to contain the rage. With every step closer to Mueller, the body count rose. This time, Terry said, four injured, one dead—Baxter had come back inside with his camera ten seconds too early. The forensics experts were still searching for traces of his remains in the melted blob that used to be a building.

Terry leaned against the fender and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Outwardly, he appeared relaxed, even bored. I knew him, though, and I could read the minute, telltale signs of anger—the muscle spasm close to his ear; the throb of a vein in his temple; the hard glitter, even in the semi-darkness, in his eyes. He breathed in slowly, twice, as if to imprint in his mind the smell of metal and charred bodies that floated to us on the breeze.

"Why didn't he blow up the entire base, Jack? Why only the lab?"

I'd been asking myself the same question.

Mueller had obviously foreseen the discovery of his lab. No, not foreseen. Engineered. His badly torched house, Verbeeck's body with the ring, the purchase of the lab under a dead man's name—all led to this moment.

Mueller wasn't the kind of amateur who made stupid mistakes or left a trail unintentionally. On the contrary. He acted with cold, calculated deliberation. He'd calmly shot Claire; he'd bided his time to make sure Annie would die in the lab explosion. No, he'd wired the building with a goal in mind. He'd planned this destruction, in this manner, a year and a half ago, starting with setting fire to his house with Verbeeck's body in it. He'd arranged it so the Mounties would trace him here. But why?

Maybe he wanted to wipe out the evidence and at the same time eliminate a chunk of the police force. Some facts didn't mesh, though. Mueller waited until the investigators were inside before the bomb was detonated. Obviously, he wanted the cops to know what was in that lab. In addition, the lab had imploded, not exploded, which spared most of the cops gathered around outside. He had to have known they'd come en masse. So, if he'd wanted to kill cops, why hadn't he set his charges to blow up a chunk of the surrounding area?

Because he wanted us to keep chasing him.

With the conceit of a madman, he knew he'd reach his goal. But that wasn't enough. He wanted the thrill of the chase. He needed to gloat, to rub our noses in it, to say "How pathetic and feeble your attempts." That's why he'd spared our lives.

"That's all fine and good," Terry said, "but where do we look next?"

I started in surprise then realized I'd spoken my thoughts aloud.

"I haven't the foggiest idea," I said. "Mueller would have assumed that the detective in charge was inside when the bomb blew. He couldn't have predicted I'd be there to get you out. If I'm right and he wants us to go after him, he'll have left a clue so others could pick up the trail."

"Where's that clue then?"

I clutched the blanket one of the firefighters had placed on my shoulders and forced myself to look at the dark hump that hid twenty mutilated bodies. No, I remembered. Nineteen.

"Anything special about that woman's body?" I said. "It's kind of strange it was thrown clear. Doesn't match the type of explosion."

"Not that I know of," Terry said. "But they're not finished examining it."

"If the body bag doesn't contain the clue, it's somewhere close to there," I said, pointing to the rubble.

The area was swarming with police, forensics experts and

journalists. Inspector Morin stood on one side of the building and briefed the press, his bald spot shining from the perimeter floodlights. Terry watched him, fatigue and misery etched in the furrows of his glare.

"He's having a grand time," I said.

"Doesn't he always? Give him gore and sensation, and he's a happy camper." Terry's lips rose into a curt smile. "He'll make promises to the public we can't keep, and we'll have to scramble to accomplish the impossible. That guy is a menace all by himself."

The crunch of footsteps on gravel interrupted us. Tomkins appeared, half-shadow, half-light. He held a plastic bag with something black in it.

"Sergeant," he said, "the doc found this in the metal box inside the body that didn't get burnt." Tomkins's voice rasped as if he smoked too much. Or maybe he'd been crying. He handed the bag to Terry, who opened his car door to examine it more closely under the overhead light.

"A Walther P-38," he said in a wondering tone. He slammed the door shut, and the shadows surrounded us again.

"It's our clue," I said.

"A gun?"

"That's not the type he used to shoot at me," I said. "What about the gun, Tomkins? Anything special about it?"

"No prints, no shells. I'd say it hasn't been fired in a while. In fact, it looks fairly old. You can't see it in this light, but it has rust spots on the barrel and the hammer."

"This gun was the German army sidearm during World War II," Terry said. "It replaced the Luger."

"Maybe Forensics will pick up something," I said hesitantly. My skin itched. The gun was the answer. But where did it point to?

A hand fell on my shoulder. "How in hell did you get us out of there?" Tomkins said. "I seem to have lost it for a while. The whole thing's kind of fuzzy. I'd swear one moment I was staring at a corpse and the next I was lying on the ground beside the car. All I remember clearly is that you

grabbed me. How did you manage to beat that bomb, Meter?"

"Need-to-know basis, Tomkins," Terry said before I could open my mouth. "Just count yourself lucky you're not the one who went to get that camera."

Tomkins's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He cleared his throat. "What do we do next, Sergeant?"

"Next? Aplin sifts through that rubble. We gather even the smallest evidence so we can put that friggin' lunatic away forever. Jesus Murphy, how did he manage to carve up twenty people without anyone noticing?"

Tomkins cleared his throat again. For the first time I noticed he was very young, maybe only twenty-two or twenty-three. Terry seemed to realize the same thing. Compassion flickered in his eyes; then it was gone. He yanked on the car door handle.

"If you don't have the stomach for crime scene work, Tomkins, you should have become an accountant." He handed him the gun. "Give that back to Forensics. I'm going home. Call me if anything comes up. You know where to reach me." Terry climbed into his car and started the engine. He switched his gaze to me. "Are you coming or are you sleeping here?"

I leaned in between him and the steering wheel and grabbed my jacket from the passenger seat. I handed the blanket to Tomkins and stuffed my fists through the sleeves.

"You go on home," I said. "Say hi to Betty for me."

Terry raised his eyebrows then made a face. "I can drop you off somewhere," he said, his voice gruff. "I owe you that much, at least."

I leaned on the open door and smiled. "You go check on Betty. I'll walk to the airport and take a taxi from there. I need to clear my head."

"And then?"

I shrugged. "I'll grab a hotel room downtown. Don't worry, I'll let you know where I am as soon as I get there."

Terry fished in his pocket and came up with a twenty. "That should cover cab fare." He hesitated then leaned out

the window. "If you get any leads, you call me, Jack. It's personal now."

I snapped up the bill. "You were that close to Baxter?"

He shook his head. "I've realized tonight that Mueller has a long reach. Those bodies? There could have been someone I knew in there. And do you know what's really scary, Jack? That bomb was meant for me...just like you said. When Mueller realizes I'm still alive and still after him, what's to prevent him from putting his filthy paws on my family?"

Terry slammed the car door shut. I watched him pull away then waited until I couldn't see his taillights anymore. My breath came out in a little puff of silvery vapor. The temperature must have fallen below zero. A shiver started from my gut and spread outward.

"I could get one of the squad cars to drive you," Tomkins said. "As the sergeant said, it's the least we could do."

I slapped his shoulder and left in the direction of the airport.

"Don't worry about it, Tomkins," I said over my shoulder. "One day I'll need a real favor."

The police had blocked the road to and from the airport. The asphalt stretched in front of me, dark and silent. Ahead, the illuminated airport grounds beckoned. I understood Terry's need to check on his family. I doubted the cops would find more than they already had in that wreckage. Mueller had left his message; there would be no loose ends to unravel.

I decided to forget about the problem for a while, to let my instincts do the work. I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with raw air. It carried scents of humus mixed with jet fuel. I concentrated on these smells, let them envelop my brain, let them chase away the nightmare visions of that lab. I rubbed at the spot where Mueller's bullet had gone in. It was sore.

I forced myself to empty my mind of everything except the rhythm of the walk. Slowly, mundane concerns crept into my consciousness. I was freezing, hungry, and tired; I had no

clothes, no money, no place to go...I suddenly burst out laughing. There was somewhere I could go! As long as Mueller hadn't decided to booby-trap the premises, I knew of a place where I kept clothes, money, and a nice comfortable couch — my office.

Of course, I hadn't set foot in the place for two years, except for the few moments when the telecarb had brought me there. I doubted Mueller had bothered with the office; he might not even know I had one. He'd seen the computer and the file cabinet in my apartment and might have assumed I used the spare room as my office. I almost ran the rest of the way to the airport.

Thirty minutes later, a cab dropped me off in front of the old heritage building that housed my office. I raised my eyes to the second floor. The bare trees across the street traced spidery shadows on the facade. The carved white trim seemed to float like a flag when the branches stirred in the wind. The gabled dormer windows reflected the light from the street lamp. The entire house stood in darkness.

I walked up the steps to the porch and peered through the latticed window of the front door. On the left, the stairwell to the second floor climbed into darkness. On the right, the faint red exit light at the end of the corridor glimmered above the back door. I raised the key to the lock and waited. No itchy skin. No tingling of the wrist. I inserted the key, turned the knob and pulled. The door opened with a creak. I stepped inside and stopped. The clang of the door slamming shut behind me resonated in my ears.

The furnace coughed once then rumbled awake. Warm air pushed through the floor vent. The second hand of the clock beside me skipped like a heartbeat. Apart from the musty smell raised by the furnace, I detected the faint aroma of cigars. I smiled. Winston loved his coronas. The brass plaque with his name and title glistened beside the door to his offices.

I climbed the stairs and placed my hand on the doorknob of my office. Still no warning or premonition. I unlocked the door and turned on the light.

The office looked exactly like it had when I'd left it two years ago. I'd expected more dust, even a few spider webs. Then I remembered the weekly cleaning service I hadn't discontinued. I was glad now that I'd found paying bills an unbearable chore and had arranged direct payment of most of them.

Under the gabled windows, my leather couch beckoned, while across the room the fridge and hot plate promised soup and hot coffee. I hesitated, undecided between sleep and food. A wave of dizziness made me stagger. I swayed to the side and connected with the doorjamb. I realized I still stood in the entrance. I walked in and stopped in the center of the room.

Someone had put the plastic cover over my computer and straightened my files. I glanced at the glass pane beyond the desk and caught sight of my image. Even the blurry reflection couldn't hide my disheveled state.

"My, you look like death warmed over," my mother would have said.

It was exactly how I felt. And if Trebor hadn't stopped gabbing when I'd gone back to Thrittene with a hole in my gut, that's what I would have been: a warmed-over dead man.

My appearance jolted me to a decision. The first thing I had to do, before food or sleep, was take a bath. I went into the bathroom, and while water gushed into the deep claw-footed bathtub I took some clean clothes from the built-in armoire.

The first blissful sensation of sinking into luxurious warmth didn't last. After a sigh of satisfaction, I opened my eyes to see my knees sticking out of the water. It struck me then. How many other bodies had already been dissected and discarded before, in other labs similar to that one?

Mueller had admitted to Annie he'd tried to grow his own bodies and replace their brains with his biochip. When did he decide that procedure took too long? What did all these body parts mean? Was he trying to construct a body out of them? An endless row of faceless corpses marched be-

fore me. Were there mothers, husbands, wives who grieved, agonized over their disappearances?

I surged out of the tub with a splash and stood shivering in the cool air. My chest hurt with anxiety and rage.

As I dressed, combed my hair, heated a can of soup and made coffee out of the stale grounds I found in the freezer, I concentrated on my movements as if each one demanded my full attention. I didn't have time to go crazy. The little time I had I would use productively.

I brought my bowl and cup to the desk and sat in my chair. My eyes fell on the framed picture on my desk, and the spoon stopped midway between the bowl and my mouth.

Annie. There she was, smiling at me, dressed in the same outfit she'd worn when I'd first met her. I picked up the picture. I'd taken it the night she'd won her first Masters Regional Tennis Championship. She'd been ecstatic, drunk with the sheer fun of it; and it showed in her eyes and her broad smile. I put the frame face down on the desk and methodically ate my soup.

Once finished, I sipped my coffee, intent on putting order in my thoughts. So far, Mueller had had the upper hand at every turn. I was getting real tired of reacting to his little surprises. It was time I turned the tables.

I needed a plan.

A couple of years ago, Mueller had discovered Annie could travel to other worlds. He'd used her equipment to steal a telecarb from Thrittene and travel to at least some of the same worlds as she had. He had gone with one reason in mind: to find, then steal, the elements that would help him build an android or, as Claire and I called it, a monster.

Mueller now had Neurochips, emotions, memories and a nuclear battery. I had to assume he knew how to fashion a body. God knew he'd practiced enough.

According to Trebor, Mueller needed the tleb to bind all the pieces together. Since Mueller had admitted he didn't have the tleb yet, that meant he had to store his unfinished creation somewhere until he could activate it. He'd also need

equipment and a power source. Therefore, it had to be a place with facilities for a laboratory. It didn't matter where it was; Mueller could use his telecarb to go in and out without anyone noticing. Still, I needed to find a lab where he could leave his work in progress without fear of discovery.

I pulled up my sleeve and stared at my telecarb. The Thrittene couldn't control it against my will, but they could track my movements. They couldn't track Mueller's because the one he was using wasn't a neurological implant. His telecarb would degenerate with time, while mine wouldn't.

On the other hand, he didn't run the risk of changing into white matter every time he used his telecarb, an occurrence which, according to previous experiences, threatened to be painful and unpleasant. I had to limit its use. I definitely wasn't interested in changing into Trebor.

I remembered one other important thing—if the telecarbs came in contact with each other, actually touched, they canceled each other out. If I could get close enough to Mueller, maybe I could use that to my advantage.

I wouldn't turn Mueller over to the cops once I found him. Who would believe a story of androids and alien worlds? A good lawyer would make mincemeat out of that. Mueller would be back on the street in no time. On the other hand, killing him outright seemed too mild a punishment for the pain he'd inflicted.

I needed to lose him in space somewhere. But how was I going to keep him there? I thought about the entities of the Emotions World and Pleroma. They'd both been stiffed by Mueller and might be angry enough to want to help. They'd also demonstrated they could control traffic in and out of their worlds.

Slowly, a plan started to take shape in my mind.

I picked up Annie's picture and set it upright. I took her ring from my finger and placed it in front of her smiling face.

"Don't worry, babe," I said. "I'll finish what you started."

I took a deep breath and wished my way back to Thrittene.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN I CAME BACK TO THE OFFICE, GRAY LATE-AFTERNOON light was creeping through the windows. I collapsed in my chair, exhausted but elated.

When I'd started on my mission to hammer out a plan, I hadn't been certain any of the aliens would listen to me, much less agree to help. But they were a bloodthirsty bunch, each one of them wanting a role in Mueller's destruction. The tricky part was getting them to work together, but I'd done some fast talking and it had paid off.

Of course, it didn't hurt that they'd all been, in their own particular way, fond of Annie. As a bonus, I traveled courtesy of the aliens. That way I was tired but still in one piece.

Only one element in the puzzle was missing—Mueller. The sense of doom that urged me to action had now settled over me permanently. For some reason, I knew we were running out of time.

I still had no idea where to look for him. I could have used the telecarb until I eventually ended up in his lab when he left it for a while. Unfortunately, Leinad had repeated his dire warnings—I had maybe two or three uses of the telecarb left before my body gave up.

That meant I didn't have the luxury of following Mueller around. I'd have to find him the old-fashioned way, which, at this point, appeared to be a nearly impossible task.

My stomach growled. Maybe I felt dejected because of low blood sugar. I picked up the phone and ordered a jumbo pizza from Calabrese's. As soon as I hung up, I heard a booming voice from the first floor.

"Hey, Meter, get your ass down here!"

I smiled and went out on the landing to look down at Peter Winston, the lawyer who occupied the offices on the first floor.

"Long time, no see," I said. "You haven't changed a bit." I came down the stairs to face him.

Winston patted the bulging stomach that threatened to burst out of the vest of his London suit and used his lips to maneuver his corona from one side of his mouth to the other.

"If you mean by that I'm fat as ever and still like my stogies, you're right on both counts. As for you, Jack, my friend, no offense, but you look like shit."

"Everybody's a critic these days."

Winston plucked his cigar from his mouth. "I didn't get a chance to tell you before, but I was sorry to hear about your lady friend."

"Yeah. Thanks. Forget it, okay?"

"Sure." He clamped the cigar between his teeth. "You know, life always gets interesting when you appear on the scene."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, see, I didn't know you'd taken on a new case until Parczek comes looking for you three days ago. Boy, is he pissed! Says you left without a trace and you a material witness or some such."

So, it had taken three days to work out a deal with my aliens. Time flies when you're planning revenge.

"You know Terry," I said aloud. "He gets emotional."

"Yeah. Right now, I'm supposed to jump on the phone and tell him you're here. Said to call him day or night. Didn't matter that I told him I'm the lawyer, not the receptionist."

"I'll give him a call. That should get him off your back."

Winston shrugged. "Funny how things work out. When it rains, it pours, they say. As soon as Parczek leaves, this

other guy comes in and asks for you. The place felt like a goddamn train station. I liked it better when you didn't show up for work."

"What other guy?"

"Wouldn't give me his name." He paused, hooked his thumbs in his armholes. "Always puts me on the alert, you know, when they don't want you to know who they are. Especially when they wear nifty duds."

My gut contracted. "Tall, blond hair, glasses? British accent?"

"Bingo. Didn't like the look of him, kind of slippery, you know. I can spot slime when I see it, even when it's wrapped fancy. Asked me if I'd seen you. Since I hadn't at the time, I told him no."

"Thanks, pal. He's one joker I want to meet on my own terms. Do me a favor, okay? If he comes back, tell him the same story."

Winston pulled on his cigar then stared through the blue smoke coming out of his mouth. "Sure."

I clapped him on the shoulder and walked back up the stairs. By asking Winston about me, Mueller had sent me a message: I found your office and I know you're alive. Obviously, he must have kept track of Terry's movements in some way, which meant I had to stay away from my friend, for his sake and mine.

I looked out the window. It had started to rain again. The wind whipped the bare branches of the elm huddled against the neighbor's house and whistled through the cracks of the old window. Despite the haunting sound, the office felt cozy and warm. I walked to the couch and sprawled on it. My first haven in days, I thought, now vulnerable. I had to find another place right away.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. In an effort to think, I closed my eyes. Suddenly, I sensed someone in the room with me. My eyes flew open; I gaped at the apparition in front of me.

"My telecarb!"

"Claire!"

"That lying, sniveling, two-faced hypocrite! I can't believe he did this to me."

"How did you get in here?"

"I had a telecarb," she said through clenched teeth. She stared at her bare wrist.

"Trebor let you have a telecarb?"

She made a sound deep in her throat. "Don't even mention that name. I gave up one year of my life. One whole year! I worked like a slave, crammed on whatever passes for physics in that world, lived with a bunch of weirdo aliens that looked like bugs—one of them even hit on me, would you believe? The nerve! So, here I am, mission accomplished, and what do you know—they wouldn't let me keep it!"

"Claire, what the hell are you ranting about?"

"The telecarb! Trebor said I could keep it, and then he changed his mind." She presented me with a delicate wrist. "Do you see anything? As soon as I got here, they must have recalled their stupid device."

"I doubt Trebor said you could keep a telecarb after all that's happened."

She glared at me. "He intimated that he would. And after all, it would have been acceptable payment for all that hard work, wouldn't you agree?"

She paced in front of the couch.

"Sit down, Claire. You're making me dizzy."

She threw me a dirty look and continued to pace. I got up and planted myself in front of her. She stopped a hairsbreadth before she collided with me. I placed my hands on her shoulders and pushed. She backed up until her legs hit the couch and then plunked down on the leather cushion.

"There," I said. I pushed her back when she tried to get up. I sat beside her. "Why don't you start at the beginning? As far as I'm concerned, I left you on Thrittene four or five days ago."

That got her attention.

"Four days? I must figure out the time differences. On Thrittene, I was gone only a few hours..." She took a calculator out of her pocket and punched in some numbers.

"Claire, there's no time for that. Why did you come back? Can you do something about Mueller's monster?"

"Yes, yes, I have the conjugator," she said in a distracted tone. "I'll have to make more precise measurements, go back to Thrittene then to Entomon." Her face tightened. "Of course, if I had the telecarb Trebor, that messed-up blob, promised me it wouldn't be a problem," she muttered. "Wait till I get my hands on him, I'll —"

I wrenched the calculator from her hands. She looked up in surprise.

"What's a conjugator?" I said.

She blew an exasperated sigh.

"You know," she said very slowly. "The device that will stop Mueller's android. The conjugator." She swiped the calculator from my hand. "I'm pretty sure it'll work."

"Pretty sure. Gee, sweetheart, that's a guarantee I can live with."

"What do you want me to say, Jack? We didn't have a similar creature to test it on. It's as foolproof as we could make it."

"How does it work, then?"

"The same way as a bacteriostatic agent does. It inhibits the functions of the whole but doesn't destroy its components. The device contains an active substance that can transfer its genome to the cells of the android. Bacteria do it all the time. One joins together with the other. That's why I called it a conjugator.

"However, this substance has an added feature. The transposon that will invade the android's cells will deliver the message to break down the links with the other components of its body. Theoretically, all the elements from one world should stay together but reject the elements from another. Not that you'll see much of anything — our brain won't have the ability to process the breakdown.

"That was my part of the project. Leinad took care of the technology to transfer the elements to each world."

"Sounds complicated enough. A conjugator, huh? As long as it doesn't spew verbs at us."

"Very funny." She looked around. "I'd forgotten about this place. Didn't think you'd kept it since you haven't worked for two years."

I shrugged. "I'd forgotten about it, too, until a few days

ago. Since I didn't give my bank instructions to do otherwise, it continued to pay the bills for me."

"I bet it didn't even make a dent in your cash flow."

"What can I say? It helps to have had a stinking rich father who felt guilty just before he died that he'd abandoned his flesh and blood."

"Sure."

I rubbed the sore spot on my stomach. "Enough about my financial status. Where's this conjugator?"

She patted the bulge in her pocket. "Forget about getting your hands on it. I've spent a year of my life on this thing. I'll be the one to use it." Her eyes narrowed. "Especially since I didn't get any reward for my efforts."

"Stopping Mueller and destroying his monster sounds like reward enough for me."

Claire jumped from the couch and jammed her fists on her hips. "So far, Mister Second-rate Private Detective, the only thing you've succeeded in doing is to get us both shot. Since I'm the one who developed the conjugator, I decide who gets to use it—me."

"Boy, what the hell did you put on your cereal this morning? Chopped nails and ground glass?"

"I've had a hard year, okay?"

"So nice to have you back, sweets."

She walked to the window behind my desk and stared at the rain. "What happened while I was gone?"

"We found Mueller's lab. One of them, at least." I sank deeper into the couch. "It looks like he tried to use human parts to construct his android. We found twenty dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine a butcher shop then replace the carcasses with bodies."

She turned around slowly. Her face was deathly pale, and she visibly swallowed. "No trace of Mueller?"

"No. That's just it. I think he hadn't used that lab for a long time. You know what else? I'm convinced he wanted the cops to find it. He left a series of clues that ended up there."

"Why?" She raised an eyebrow then answered her own question. "A taunt."

"Bull's-eye. The 'I'm-more-clever-than-you' kind. I can't

deny the guy is brilliant. He's also playing with a stacked deck. I don't even know where to look for him."

"So, either you get smarter very fast, or we wait for his next move. The first option doesn't sound possible and the second is not very desirable."

The pounding of feet up the stairs interrupted my smart-assed comeback. A fist rattled the door in its casing. Claire jumped. I stood on one side of the door and tried to make out the silhouette on the other side of the frosted glass.

"Yeah, who is it?" I said.

"You called for a pizza?"

I sighed in relief and opened the door. The smells of tomato and cheese mixed with heated cardboard drifted past my nose. My stomach growled. I paid the guy and gave him a hefty tip.

"We have to get the tleb and take it back to Trebor," I said. I sat down at my desk and plucked a slice from the box.

"Out of the question. I want to study it first. How can you eat that stuff? It's gross."

"Didn't Trebor explain to you why Mueller wants it? Without it, he can't put his monster together. He may find another way to do it, but in the meantime, if we take the tleb away we'll have slowed him down."

"It stays where it is."

I stopped chewing for a moment and stared at her. This wasn't the Claire I'd left on Thrittene a few days ago. She had a sharper edge and a sort of nervous compulsion about her.

"You're becoming too ruthless for me, sweets. What happened out there? Sounds like you had a rough time."

She laughed, but her laughter had no humor in it.

"It was a nightmare." She paced up and down again. "In order to develop the device as fast as we could, I had to go to a world where time ran faster than it does on Earth.

"Even before the Thrittene kidnapped you, they were working on designing time bubbles that would allow them to contact other worlds in their own time threads. Don't ask me how they work, but I used one when Trebor negotiated a

deal with the one world that had faster time. Once the world had given its permission, I used a telecarb to get there. That world is called Entomon."

She stopped, raked her hands through her hair and scratched nervously at her scalp. She threaded her fingers through the thick strands and peered at the ends as she let them fall.

"It's a world of insects," she continued. She gave me a feeble sarcastic smile. "There's only one thing I hate more than you, Jack, and that's bugs." She pinched her lips as if to contain her nausea.

I took another bite of pizza and forced myself not to burst out laughing.

"So, Trebor owes you," I said. "Are you going to play into Mueller's hands because of that?"

She made a sound like a deflating balloon and flopped onto the couch. "Of course not."

I licked my fingers one-by-one with a smack of satisfaction. "Let's go then." I said. "I can borrow Winston's car."

"To my lab?" She stood uncertainly. "I don't think security will let me in. I'm probably still a suspect in the shooting of that guard. You said only a few days have passed here for you."

"Damn. You're right. The cops have the gun Mueller used, but I doubt they've had time to analyze ballistics."

"Couldn't we call Terry?"

"I don't want to involve Terry in this. Besides, even if he clears you, NARC might not automatically reinstate you. I don't want to waste that much time." I took a deep breath. "I'll have to use the telecarb."

* * *

We appeared in front of the cabinet in Claire's lab. I fell to the floor.

Agony.

That's all I could think of. Sharp pain stabbed at my temples. I could barely move. My arms felt numb, as if they'd been cut off. My legs ran with a million pinpricks. My stomach heaved. The silence hurt my ears.

In a rush, the harmonic resonance of Thrittene invaded my brain. I tried to focus on Claire's moving lips, but my eyes rolled in their orbits and the whole room spun out of control.

"Get tleb...quickly..." I croaked.

I saw Claire move to the cabinet before I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing. I fought my desire to let go, to just sink into the pain. As before, Claire's presence served to anchor me to my own flesh.

The sounds receded enough that I could tell she was working fast without bothering with the contents of the shelves. The clink and jangle of glass and metal helped me focus, and my breathing eased.

"I've got it."

Claire turned, box in hand. In the same moment, Mueller appeared right behind her. Before I could shout to her, he grabbed the box and shoved her into the cabinet. The metal rattled with her impact. She cried out then fell silent.

Mueller stared at his telecarb in surprise, looked around then down. He must have wanted to transfer out and couldn't because I was too close. It didn't take him long to understand it and look for me. I tried to scramble up, but I couldn't find the strength.

He spotted me. His face clenched with anger then relaxed when he realized what bad shape I was in. He bore down on me, lashed out with his foot. His kick landed in my back. Again. The second hit flipped me onto my stomach.

The wood of the box clattered on the marble counter. I rolled onto my back, groaning. Mueller pulled me up by my shirtfront. Repeatedly, with great precision, he hammered his fist into my gut. I felt my gun wound tear open. He noticed the blood and grinned.

Then, something shifted in his eyes, and I knew he was going to kill me. Too weak to react, panting, I stared him in the face. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his gun.

"You lose, Jack," he said. He stuck the gun under my chin.

A crunch of glass made him turn his head a fraction.

Claire, with a piercing scream, slammed his back with a metal shelf. I wrenched my head to the side. The shot shattered the counter. Marble chips peppered my neck.

Mueller dropped me and spun toward Claire. With another shriek, she swung the shelf again. It knocked the gun out of his hand. He swore, picked up the box and ran to the door. He was gone before I could take another breath.

"Are you okay?" Claire said. She propped me up. "You're bleeding."

"I'll be fine." Strangely, I couldn't feel a thing. I swore long and hard, going through all the words I knew in three languages. Claire got up and came back with a wad of paper towels. She pressed one to my neck and gave me the others. I wiped the blood from the front of my shirt. I undid the buttons and checked the damage. It looked like only the surface skin had broken.

"By the time this is over," Claire said, "you're going to look like that pizza you just ate."

I stared at her in surprise. "Did you just make a joke?"

She raised her eyebrows.

I pushed her away and walked a short distance, still shaky from the transport and the blows. "Thanks, Claire."

"Forget it. You'd have probably just ended back on Thriftene, anyway."

I smiled. "That's true. Although I'm not sure how they could fix splattered brains."

"Mueller didn't put up much of a fight, did he?"

"Why should he? He didn't like the odds. Besides, he had what he wanted." I swore again. The situation felt more hopeless by the minute. I leaned on the counter. "Where the hell is this lab of his?"

Claire lifted her shoulders in a slow shrug, shook her head and walked to the sink to wash her hands. I laid my forehead on the cool marble counter. The telecarb hadn't warned me of Mueller's presence this time. Or maybe it had; but since I was otherwise occupied, I hadn't paid attention.

The tips of my fingers tingled. I lifted my head and stared at my hands. They were slate gray, and each had only

three fingers. I snatched them off the counter and stuffed them in my trouser pockets. Bile rose in my throat; my legs felt like cotton. I pushed the panic back and concentrated on Mueller.

"Don't you find it a bit too much of a coincidence that Mueller appeared in the lab only a few seconds after we did?" Claire said.

"His telecarb can take him where I am, remember?"

"Yes, but he didn't use it until you had set foot in here."

"Hmm." I glanced around the room. I noticed a red flashing light on the side of the electron microscope on the counter. "Look there." I pointed with my chin, my hands still stuffed in my pockets. "Is it supposed to do that?"

"Certainly not." Claire extended her hand to touch the light.

"Don't."

Too late. She put a finger on it, and I heard the distinct buzz of an electrical shock. Claire squeaked. "That thing zapped me!" The tip of her finger was already blistering.

"I think we can safely assume this gadget belongs to Mueller. It certainly has its own defense system. It must be what warned him of our presence."

"How did he know the tleb was here?"

"That's easy, Claire. You spend most of your time here." I leaned on the counter. "Damn. I wish I knew what that gun meant," I mumbled through stiff lips.

"What are you talking about? What gun?" Claire said.

"They found a P-38, a German Army sidearm from World War II, at the site of Mueller's old lab," I said. "I know it's a clue, but I'm damned if I know what it means."

Claire didn't answer. When her silence stretched on, I turned to her. She was contemplating a small box similar to the one Chrona had given me.

"If that's the conjugator in your hand, you might as well put it back in your pocket. Looks like you won't be using it just now."

"No, but soon." She smiled. "I have a hunch where Mueller might be."

“Really. Where?”

“Here, Jack. Right here.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I STARED AT CLAIRE, TRYING TO FOLLOW HER TRAIN OF thought. "You mean here, in this building?"

"Maybe not this particular building, but somewhere in this complex."

I thought about Mueller's vindictive genius then caught on. "Of course. Mueller was fired by NARC. It would appeal to his lunatic sense of humor to use their facilities to continue his work."

"And then there's the gun."

"What about it?"

"You said it was a German weapon. Jack, what do you know about the NARC complex?"

"Not much, although maybe a bit more than most because Annie worked here. NARC was established—what, ten years ago? The organization took over from the government and built this complex."

"Yes, but it also kept some of the older buildings."

I scratched my chin then remembered my hands. They'd changed back to five fingers. They still retained a tinge of gray, but I chose to believe it was due to fatigue. I refocused on the facts.

"Before the government sold these facilities, it also used them for research."

"Yes. That's why they didn't tear down the old buildings."

They were already set up as sophisticated laboratories. NARC renovated most of the premises, kept the labs, used the rest for administrative offices then built around them. The gun gave me the idea."

I snapped my fingers. "Of course. That gun was used during the second World War by the Germans. So, the location of his lab is tied to either the war or Germany."

"Or both. The old labs predate the war. The Allies sent scientists from all over the world to do research here. It had to do with nuclear weapons. Not many people know about it, but it's not exactly a secret.

"Here's something else. Mueller is one of the last scientists who worked for the Government Research Center before it was disbanded."

Claire threw a last look at her conjugator then put it back in her pocket. She grabbed a stool and sat down, fished an elastic from her other pocket and gathered her hair into a ponytail at the base of her neck. A worried look appeared on her face.

"Do you think Mueller will come back?"

"We're the least of his worries right now. He'll want to work with the tleb." I slapped the counter. "Damn. Now he knows you're alive, too. It won't take him long to deduce you haven't stayed idle all that time."

"He may suspect we have a plan, but he can't know we have the means to destroy his monster."

I thought about my plan and smiled. "You don't know the half of it, sweetheart. I have a few more surprises in store for him. But, first, I have to get my hands on him. Go on, tell me what else you know."

"During the second World War, the government allegedly constructed a series of laboratories in a bunker near the original buildings."

A surge of certainty coursed through me. My skin crawled. "Where's the bunker?"

She shifted on her stool. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know, all right? I'm not even sure that bunker

exists. I was about to say that it was only a rumor, an interesting bit of lore scientists use to intrigue the summer students who come to work here. That's how I learned about it."

"Myths are usually based on facts."

"I suppose. Although I don't know anybody who's actually seen the bunker, let alone stepped inside."

"What are you saying, then?"

"I'm saying that it is possible the government conducted secret experiments in an underground bunker during the war; and, if it exists, they'd probably make sure this bunker is still kept in good repair, just in case. I'm saying that Mueller may have known about the bunker's existence, and that it would be the ideal place for him. I'm saying it's the only lead you have."

I raised my hands in a placating gesture. "Okay, don't get your knickers in a twist about it. It is a good lead. It might be a better one if we knew for certain there is a bunker. Any ideas?"

She thought for a moment, her lips pursed. "The central building in the complex is over one hundred years old. It could be under there."

"They'd have had to dig under the structure after the fact in order to build the bunker. Too difficult. No, they'd have built it in an inconspicuous place."

I mulled this over for a moment. Short of ideas, I surveyed Claire's lab. Despite the mess of fallen shelves and broken glass, the rest of the room was pristine. Someone had even patched the marble counter and the chipped woodwork from our previous encounter with Mueller. Someone who had the responsibility for the upkeep of the complex.

That gave me an idea.

"NARC must have its own maintenance staff, right?" At her nod, I continued. "If they have to do all the repairs to the buildings, that might include the bunker. To do repairs, they have to have grounds plans or blueprints."

Claire got up from her stool. "It's a start. At least I know where Maintenance is."

I checked the clock on the wall. It was close to seven o'clock. "No one should be in the office at this time of night. We'll have to walk there, though. I don't want to use the telecarb again for a while."

Claire nodded and strode to the door. She opened it a crack and peeked out.

"Let's go." She hurried to the security door at the end of the hall and slid a card through the magnetic reader. She waited a few seconds then, when the door didn't open, swiped the card again. After another few seconds of nothing, she growled, "My card's not working. They must have deactivated my code after Mueller shot the guard."

I looked at the clear glass window in the door. "Can we break it?"

"Lead glass. Unbreakable. Bulletproof. Explosion-proof. The door also has a hydraulic vacuum seal to prevent leakage."

"What about these?" I pointed to the ventilation grates close to the ceiling.

"Heavy filters at regular intervals. Impassable. This is the biochemistry building, after all."

I turned my back to the door and moved a few feet away. I took a deep breath to gather the remnants of my energy. "I'll use the telecarb. Unless you have another idea?"

I heard the swooshing sound of the door opening and turned on my heels. Two security guards stood, their guns drawn—one pointed at me, the other at Claire. The men looked nervous. I hoped it didn't make them trigger-happy.

"Now I don't," Claire said.

I raised my hands above my head and relaxed my stance. "Hey, guys," I said, "it's cool. Don't do anything rash."

"How did you get in here?" the guard closer to Claire said.

He was at least five inches taller than her and three times bigger. His muscles bulged out of his clothes in a poor imitation of the Incredible Hulk, and he looked just about as flexible.

The other guard was a runt with a rat face. Even from where I stood, ten steps away, he stank of cigarettes and old sweat.

"How did you know we were here?" I countered. I sidled one step closer to the rat.

His nose twitched. "Miracles of technology, man. As soon as Dr. Foucault used her card the alert sounded."

"Shut up, Vic," the Hulk said. He jerked his chin at me. "I asked you a question. How did you get in here?"

I shuffled my feet again on the pretext of turning my body in the direction of the lab. Two more steps closer to Vic. I pointed without lowering my hands. "We arrived from there. Through a space rift."

Claire turned her head slowly and stared at me. I raised my eyebrows. Vic shifted from one foot to the other. It brought him one step closer. Hulk snorted.

"Yeah, right," he said.

"I don't know, Karl," Vic the rat said, "they do some weird research around here. We should check it out. If the thing's still open anybody could come in here. Then we'd be in real trouble."

"No!" Claire said.

We all turned to her. I moved another step.

"I mean, come on," she said, "you're not going to believe that, are you?"

That did it for the Hulk. "I'll go," he said to Vic. "You stay here with them."

While Vic watched Karl make his way down the hall, I slid closer to him. Two steps. He pointed his gun in my direction.

"Don't move."

"I won't. I'll just lower my hands, okay? My arms are getting tired."

He nodded, distracted. Karl had stepped inside the lab. Claire coughed and leaned on the wall. Vic jerked around to face her.

I rushed the three remaining steps, hooked my arm around his throat and squeezed. I wrenched his gun from him. He croaked Karl's name.

"Sorry, buddy." I squeezed tighter until he fell limp into my arms. I dumped him on the floor then checked for a pulse. It was strong and steady.

"Keep an eye on him," I said to Claire then sprinted

down the hall. The frosted window was just transparent enough for me to see Karl's shape coming back toward the door. I moved against the wall and waited.

The doorknob turned. He pulled. At the same time, I shoved as hard as I could. The edge of the door smacked him in the face. His head snapped backward and he staggered. Before he could recover, I burst into the lab and jabbed three fingers in his solar plexus. He folded in two, hovered in that position for a couple of seconds then fell on his side. So much for brawn, I thought.

I snapped off the keycard attached to the Hulk's neck and ran back to the door. Claire had used Vic's belt to tie his hands behind his back. I picked up his key as well—hopefully, that would delay them when they came to and give us a few more seconds.

Claire pushed away from the wall and followed me through the door. I made sure it was closed properly.

"A space rift?" she said.

I grinned at her. "It worked, didn't it? We'd better hurry. We have maybe five minutes before all hell breaks loose. Which way is Maintenance?"

"Building 3, Basement. We can take the tunnels."

I motioned her ahead of me, since she knew where she was going. We turned the corner at a run. Halfway to another security door, she stopped short then backtracked a few feet.

She frowned at a fake wood panel six feet wide covering the wall. She skimmed her fingers along its edge, found a crack and inserted her fingers into it.

"Help me with this," she said.

"Why?"

"When I worked here as a student, this wall was a staircase. They put up these panels to restrict and control traffic."

I found purchase in the crack above her fingers and pulled. The wall, which turned out to be only a thin cover of particle board, came away with a scrape and a screech and revealed the door to a stairwell.

"Come on," Claire said. She held the door open while I replaced the panel behind us as best I could.

I scrambled down the stairs after her for two floors. We were running so fast we nearly rammed into a brick wall.

"This is the basement exit," Claire said. "It leads to the tunnels." She slapped the wall in frustration. "It would have been too easy."

"Let's go back up one," I said. The next floor had a wall panel like the other above. I put my ear to the wall and listened for the echo of steps on the tiled floor. When I heard only the hum of the air flow in the vents, I pushed against the panel. It gave way, and I stepped into the hall.

Right in front of an astonished man in a lab coat.

"Hi," I said. Damn. The man had rubber soles. I grabbed Claire's hand and pulled her into a run.

"Dr. Foucault," the man said.

"Sorry, Dr. Durand," Claire said. "Have to go." She sprinted down the hall.

"But security's looking for you. Wait!" the man yelled.

We didn't. We'd barely made it through the security door before the alarm flooded the corridor.

"Our time is up," I said. We ran faster.

We were on the second floor of Building 7 and had to get to the basement of Building 3. Every time I swiped the card to open another security door, I expected the code to have been deactivated. To make matters difficult, the tunnels didn't connect directly. Twice we had to duck into janitors' closets to dodge security guards.

To make sure security didn't track our path by following the use of our card key, I waylaid another guard, stuffed him in a closet and exchanged the Hulk's pass for his. Ten minutes later we stood in front of the Maintenance offices.

They were tucked into a short hallway kitty-corner with the main corridor that ran the length of the building.

Claire jerked on the doorknob. "It's locked."

I checked the door. It was an old-fashioned one with an old-fashioned lock.

"Do you have a hairpin?" I said. She shook her head. "Anything pointed and sharp?" Another shake. "Shit." I stared at the door. The frosted glass gave me an idea. "Go check if anyone's coming."

She threw me an inquisitive look then walked to the corner. She sneaked a glance then a long stare.

"No one," she said.

"Get behind me and hold my shoulders." I leaned into her and kicked the window in. It shattered instantly, the sound like an explosion in the silence.

"Great," Claire said. "Why don't you call the police and tell them where we are while you're at it?"

"You said no one was coming." I turned the lock from inside and walked into the dark office. My feet crunched on the glass strewn on the floor. Behind me, Claire turned on the lights.

The office contained a couple of desks with telephones and green blotters. One wall was lined with standard filing cabinets. In a corner, the cursor of a computer screen blinked green. At the end of the room, on opposite walls, were two closed doors.

"Look for a cabinet with wide, thin drawers. The plans should be in there." I opened the door on the right and turned the light on. It was full of electrical and plumbing parts set on metal shelves. "Not here," I said.

Claire had already walked through the other door. I followed her. It was another office, a little more posh than the front one. No cabinet.

"Maybe we'll find the blueprints in that row of file cabinets outside," Claire said.

An inverted U-shaped stand with a roll of paper five feet wide took up most of one corner of the office. I followed one of its cables to the back of the computer tower.

"Or maybe it's all online now," I said. "That looks like a mighty big printer. One for blueprints, maybe?"

I sat at the desk. As soon as I brushed my fingers on the touchpad, the computer asked me for a username and a password.

"I hate that," I said.

"Try DuncanB," Claire said, "then 'password.'"

I turned to her in a disbelief. She pointed to the door of the office where the name "Bernard Duncan, Chief Engi-

neer" was painted. "A lot of people don't bother changing the default password. The system manager uses 'password' to log in first-time users. Try it."

It worked. Once I'd entered the system, I opened the software that would permit us to read the blueprint files. The directory contained hundreds of files, their names a combination of letters and numbers.

"I can't figure out those filenames," I said. "We don't have time to look at each of these. Someone could be along any minute."

"No, no, they make sense," Claire said in an eager tone. "Look at the first one: el4_3se96.prt. I think it means it's a blueprint for the electrical wiring of Building 4, Third floor, updated in September 96."

"Not bad. What filename would he use for the bunker?"

"The files are sorted by date saved, not in alphabetical order. Scroll to the bottom." After I did, she pointed to one near the bottom titled "gcbk.prt." "Try this one," she said in an excited voice.

I clicked on the file. The title at the top said "Government of Canada Bunker, Research Laboratories." My skin itched. Mueller was there, waiting for us.

"You're not half-bad at this stuff," I said to her.

She pushed my hand off the glide pad and moved the image to the edge of the drawing.

"Clever, really clever. Brilliant, in fact," she muttered. She straightened and stuffed her hands in her pockets. "I know where the bunker is. It's under the Rideau Falls. It has its own hydroelectric power plant. Mueller can use all the electricity he wants, and nobody would ever know about it."

"Can we get to it?"

"Not from here. We have to get to the basement of the main building. There's no tunnel connecting that one to the rest of the complex."

"We'll go from outside."

"We can't. The card key we have won't open the external doors. Once the alarm has sounded, all doors automatically lock and everyone is stuck inside until the CEO orders the

doors unlocked. It's a procedure that was developed after Annie died."

"Lot of good it did." I scratched my chin. "Are you sure there's no way out?"

She didn't answer, just walked into the outer office.

Elbows on the desk, I leaned my head on my hands. Faint, whispery voices danced in my head. I was exhausted. The use of the telecarb and the mad rush through half the NARC complex had done me in. If I transported again, I didn't know in what shape I'd end up.

There has to be another way, I thought. My spirits were starting to droop, along with my energy.

Claire rushed back into the office. "Someone's coming."

Ah, well. Fate had a way of forcing decisions. I grabbed Claire's sleeve and wished myself in the basement of the Main Building.

I died.

I lost the body I knew. I had no lungs, no heart, no eyes. I was sound and music. I was slate gray and white. I was Jack and Trebor and Leinad and Nasus and a myriad of others.

A brilliant light blinded me. Gee, and I didn't even believe in that tunnel stuff, I thought. I was readjusting my entire belief system when I heard my name, faint at first then louder. I smiled. I hadn't believed in angels, either.

Then I heard the rest.

"Jack, you miserable jerk, wake up right away or I'll slap you silly. Then I'll kill you. Do you hear me?"

Like a drowning man, I swallowed a mouthful of air then coughed. My lungs wheezed in air several times.

Claire, a light silhouette against a dark background, flashed a penlight in my eyes. I pushed feebly at her hand. She yelped in surprise. I followed the direction of her gaze. My arm had stretched itself out into a glowing tendril that wrapped around her wrist. She yanked hard, and fingers took shape.

"Wait," I wanted to say, but a sound halfway between a honk and a bellow came out of my mouth. Claire yanked harder, her movements a blur. When I didn't let go, she hit my arm with the light. The hit reverberated through my

body. I felt the pain, the capillaries breaking under my skin, the blood seeping out, the bruise developing. She hit me again on the same spot. The blow seemed to come slower this time. I took a deep breath, and the world righted itself.

Claire struck again.

"Cut that out, you witch," I said between gulps of air.

"Let go of me!"

I looked at my arm. It had reverted to its normal shape and ended with five fingers that were still wrapped around her wrist. Tentatively, I ordered my hand to open. It obeyed.

My breath came in short gulps again, but this time I recognized the reaction as panic. I fixed a point in front of me and concentrated on it, emptied my mind. Gradually, the muscles of my chest relaxed. Claire sat on her haunches, observing, silent. I gave her a brief nod then pushed into a sitting position.

"Where are we?" My voice still sounded odd to my ears.

"At the beginning of the tunnel that leads to the bunker. Are you okay?"

"Just peachy." I shook my head. "I need to rest a while."

Claire got up and pointed her light into the tunnel, where a thick coat of dust lay undisturbed. "Mueller hasn't used this tunnel at all. If he's in the bunker, he's been coming and going from there."

"He's there."

"How do you know?"

"My skin itches."

She snorted then pointed at my telecarb. "Are you sure it's not because of that thing?"

The telecarb's colors swirled madly. Now that she had pointed it out, I could feel the skin around it tingling.

"That damn thing nearly killed me. I think it's gloating. Help me get up."

She grabbed one of my arms and pulled. I wobbled to my feet then leaned on the wall. I took a deep breath.

"Let's go."

Each step was painful, as if I'd regrown my legs and needed to learn how to walk all over again. I couldn't count

on my telecarb when I faced Mueller. If I used it again, I probably wouldn't make it back into my body. That meant I was back to using my usual tools—wit and grit.

Claire moved ahead of me with her penlight, but I detained her.

"If Mueller is there, I want to be the first to face him."

Without a word, she gave me her light.

"Suits me fine." She shuddered. "I don't like the look of those cobwebs."

I flashed ahead. Thick cobwebs, heavy with dust and debris, blocked the passageway ahead. "Man, maintenance on this bunker is obviously at the bottom of the priority list."

"Wait," Claire said. She backtracked and returned with what looked like a broom handle. "Use this. I'll hold the light."

I started down the corridor, poking at the cobwebs then rolling them around the stick. Soon we were coughing from the dust cloud spiraling around us.

"Welcome to my world of wonders!" Mueller's voice crashed over our heads. "So nice of you to drop by, Jack."

Claire pointed the light above and in front of us. A state-of-the-art camera and speaker hung above a reinforced steel door.

"I didn't come here for a polite chat, Mueller."

His chuckle reverberated through the passageway. "How crass of you not to die when I put so much energy into arranging it. I do like determination in a man, however. And Dr. Foucault. So nice to see you again. I never apologized to you for having killed you. Allow me to do so face-to-face. I have a surprise for you both. Please, come in."

"Said the spider to the fly," I muttered.

The door opened silently. I squinted as brilliant light flooded the corridor. With it came a gust of warm, stale air, and, behind that, the smells of ozone and chemicals.

I couldn't have imagined a better entrance into Hell.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I TURNED TO CLAIRE. "GIVE ME THE CONJUGATOR," I whispered. "I'll deal with Mueller."

"I'm coming with you," she whispered back.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Her face was deathly pale, and something reckless floated in her eyes. She yanked at the hair tickling her cheeks.

"I'll be fine." She opened her hand and let the wisps she'd torn out fall on the floor. She gave me a feeble smile. "I thought it was a spider."

"Stand ready with the conjugator, then," I said, as softly as I could.

She nodded, took out the box and fiddled with a knob on its side. She bit her lower lip, gazed at me for a few seconds then placed her hand on my arm to detain me.

"I..." She shook her head. "Everything happened so fast," she whispered. "I didn't have time to explain. Mueller has to use the tleb on the android before the conjugator can work."

"What if the universe falls to pieces as soon as he turns on his creation?"

"Trebor thinks we'll have a little time because of the differences in temporal velocities among the worlds."

"I hate working with tight deadlines. Anything else you want to tell me?"

"The conjugator works like an atomizer. For the agent to become active, it has to come into contact with the skin or be inhaled. That means I have to be no more than three feet from the monster."

"I'll try to get you close. Just start spraying as soon as you think you're close enough."

"I can't. It only has enough charge for one shot." At my incredulous stare, she continued, her tone defensive. "I had to be able to carry it with me."

"Swell." I gritted my teeth. "How long before it takes effect?"

She shrugged.

"Okay." I took a deep breath and turned back to the entrance. "Here goes nothing."

We crossed the threshold into the bunker. I had expected to enter the lab itself; but instead, we stood in an antechamber of smooth stone blocks. A wall of riveted metal, in which an immense bay window had been installed, separated us from a large room that looked like an operating theater.

I focused on a coffin-like box, made of some tinted, semi-transparent material that only hinted at its contents, set on a pedestal table in the middle of the room. The box sat perpendicular to the window, so I could only make out the vague shape of feet. A domed lid of the same material further shrouded the occupant. Tubes and wires ran from the top of the assembly to a series of machines. One of them resembled an EKG machine. The front of another, lined with glass, displayed two bellows moving up and down in opposite directions, while a third propelled thick gray liquid into the head of the box. On a stool, still in its original box, the tleb gleamed its myriad of colors.

I heard a whispering sound behind me and turned in time to see the door to the bunker close with a clink. Claire shuddered.

"Nice gothic touch, Mueller," I said to the empty air.

His chuckle echoed from speakers flanking the window. A movement in the corner of the lab on the other side of the glass caught my attention. He stepped into the center of the room.

"I saw on the news that Sergeant Parczek survived the

explosion I'd prepared for him. How clever of him to have brought you along."

"Leave Terry out of this."

"Poor Jack, you are not photogenic at all. What's more, you appeared quite crestfallen, sitting on the ground like that. And that blue shirt. Simply not your color."

"I didn't come here to discuss fashion with you, Mueller."

He expelled a theatrical sigh. "Jack, Jack. Haven't you understood yet? I led you here. You had no choice in the matter. You proved me right, though. I was confident you had the brains to read the clues I left lying around." He placed a hand on the coffin. "Aren't you a little bit curious to see what is under this lid? I have accomplished what no one else in the universe has. I have fashioned a being from nothing."

"You're a butcher, Mueller, not a scientist."

I'd wanted to provoke him, but I didn't get any reaction. He just stood there, a smirk on his lips.

"What, nothing to say for yourself? Maybe it's because you know very well you couldn't have built your...monster on your own. You're a scavenger, Mueller."

Claire gasped then moaned.

"It's not wise to provoke me."

Mueller's voice rang from beside me. He held Claire, one hand tight on her ponytail, the other holding a gun to her throat. Her head was pulled back, her eyes filled with fear.

He chuckled. "How do you like my hologram, Jack?"

"Fooled me."

"Good. Another little technical gadget I perfected. You know the old adage about necessity and invention."

"Let her go, Mueller."

"I think not." His eyes took on a fierce gleam, and he pushed the gun barrel deeper into Claire's throat. She gurgled. She was still holding the conjugator, but I didn't dare look down in case Mueller followed the direction of my gaze.

"I must say, it would be fun to kill you again, Dr. Foucault." He pulled Claire toward a side door I hadn't noticed. "However, your appearance here may yet turn to an

advantage. Persistence should be rewarded, don't you think?"

Claire dug in her heels. With a vicious yank, he made her move again.

"Ouch! Let me go!" she yelled. Her protest covered the clatter of the conjugator on the stone floor. Mueller backed into the lab, dragging her with him. The door crashed shut.

I picked up the conjugator. The door had no handle and fit invisibly into the stone wall, which explained why I hadn't seen it when I'd come in. I hit the metal with my fist. It answered with a mild thud.

I went back to the window. The hologram had disappeared, and the real Mueller propelled Claire into the lab. She stumbled, caught herself from falling by catching a steel post. He spun her around, twisted her hands behind her and used a rope from his pocket to tie them around the column. With a last jerk at her bonds, he turned to me with a cocky smile.

Things were not looking up. Once he was done gloating, Mueller would use the tleb. Even if I knew how to operate the conjugator, plate glass separated me from my quarry. He could kill Claire any time the whim took him.

I wasn't sure if my telecarb would get me on the other side of the wall; and even if it did, I probably wouldn't survive the transfer. My only hope was to keep him talking until I thought of a brilliant solution.

"What's in the coffin, Mueller?"

"Haven't you guessed?" His smile uncovered a row of shark-white teeth. He stroked the cover with the tips of his fingers in the same way he would a lover. "Herein lies the means to conquer the universe."

I played dumb. "Let's see. So far, you've stolen Neurochips, emotions and memories, and you've experimented with human body parts. You wouldn't be trying to replicate a high-tech version of Frankenstein's monster, would you?"

"Very good, Jack. But I'd already told you that. You can look further."

"I hope you're aware that you're going to blow up the

universe if you finish that thing. If it were just me, I'd let you do it. But there are more than a few trillion beings to consider."

He merely looked amused. "Who fed you such tommyrot? Trebor and his preposterous cohorts? They've been trying to cover up their own scientific fumbling by blaming me. Their experiments destabilized their world. They are so inept they are unable to fix it."

I felt a quiver of uncertainty. I had based all my assumptions on Trebor's assertions that Thrittene was placed at the center of the universe. Once upon a time, men thought the sun revolved around the Earth. They'd been proven wrong.

Besides, Trebor wasn't lily-white, either. He'd been devious in his dealings with me and fully capable of twisting facts when they suited him. He'd also made a deal with Mueller for the expedience of gathering information more quickly. These actions didn't put him much higher on the scale of humanity than Mueller. On the other hand, the Thrittene weren't human, while Mueller pretended to be.

"Trebor doesn't kill people," Claire said.

Mueller spun around and smacked her across the face. Her head slammed against the post. He leaned over with deliberate slowness.

"You will keep silent." He glared at her. A muscle twitched on the side of his clenched jaw. Claire blanched and cringed as far as her bonds let her. Mueller withdrew, a slight smile on his lips.

"Regardless of Trebor's intentions," I said in an attempt to deflect his attention from Claire, "you're still a thief and a murderer."

A look of annoyance flitted across his features. "I despise clichés."

He stepped closer to the box containing the tleb and caressed it. The telecarb on his wrist brightened. My own wrist tingled.

"I did what needed to be done," he said. "If you insist on speaking in clichés, here is one for you—you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. Every time I used a live

human subject, my knowledge advanced by leaps and bounds. It should reassure your sensibilities that I didn't waste those precious resources. I tested only crucial developments on them."

He stroked the tleb again. "And it has paid off. I learned so much about molecular composition that I was able to create an entire body out of a few cells. Soon, I will insert the tleb into my creation, and it will live."

He took the box with the tleb and placed it on the counter behind him then sat on a stool beside the receptacle that contained his creation. His eyes glittered.

"You must see now why I needed to build my creature."

"Explain it to me, Mueller."

"I knew I could do it. It's as simple as that. Without the elements from the other worlds, it would have taken me longer, but I would have done it." He placed his hand on the sealed coffin. "I took a few short cuts, perhaps, but what is in there comes from my brain alone. You have to understand this to know I don't intend to be stopped."

"Your intentions, in this case, are immaterial. I will stop you."

"You'll have to find a way to get to me first. You must admit that so far my plan has worked out very smoothly."

"So far."

"When I first dropped in to see you—when was it, a week ago?—I did not intend for you to play a part in this. All I wanted was the tleb, and you seemed the most expedient route. I now see I made a slight miscalculation."

"I would have found you anyway, Mueller. You didn't exactly keep a low profile."

He chuckled. "True. Nevertheless, your plodding progress astonished me. It made me rethink our relationship."

"I'd rather you hadn't. We're on different sides, you and I. No pun intended."

"Any situation, however bad it looks, can change for the better." He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows, a slight smile on his lips. "Soon, I will need a second-in-command."

"Are you offering me a job?"

"Think of the possibilities, Jack. I built the perfect machine, the ultimate slave, the first soldier in my army. An army of creatures stronger, faster, more limber than any being in the universe. Devoted but intelligent. Beings that can travel through dozens of worlds and conquer them for me. You could be part of it."

"They should have put you in the loony bin instead of me."

"I am not crazy, but you are a fool. I am offering you an opportunity for greatness, Jack. I suggest you take it."

I scratched my chin and tried to look thoughtful. "Maybe." I shrugged. "There's nothing holding me here since Annie died."

"Indeed. All of us, at one point in our lives, have wished to turn back the wheel of time." He chuckled. "Who knows? Time travel may be next on my agenda. Your telecarb may provide some useful information."

"I knew there was a catch."

Mueller chuckled. "Isn't there always? In the meantime, wouldn't the next best thing to traveling back in time be to attempt, as best as one can, to recreate what one has lost?"

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. No. He wouldn't. It couldn't be.

He stepped to the side of the coffin and pressed a button. The lid retracted into the side of the box.

"I know how affected you were by Annie's death. I have suffered remorse about the measures I took—yes, I admit I took them—to prevent her from thwarting my plans."

Suddenly, Claire groaned, a sort of desperate mewling that chilled me. Her face was a mix of desperation, horror and, most of all, longing. She must have been able to see what was in the coffin; and she strained against her bonds, as if she could wrench the post from its setting.

Mueller pressed another button, and the sides fell away. He pushed the table, and it swiveled ninety degrees to reveal a naked body.

It was Annie.

I slapped both hands flat on the glass, hard enough to make it vibrate. "You son of a bitch."

He looked smug. "Isn't she perfect, Jack? Look at her."

"If you dug up her body, so help me God, Mueller, I'll rip you apart."

"Really, Jack. Annie's original body was too mangled to be of any use. I'm afraid when I was in your apartment I absconded with her hairbrush. It still had a few hairs of hers on it. You see, I've discovered this charming little world I call Cybernetica where you can clone anything, as long as you have the genetic key."

Loathing welled like bile in my gut. Mueller couldn't have done anything more obscene than using Annie's image.

"Right now, all the elements of this masterpiece are floating unconnected under the skin. The tleb will unify them, breathe life into my creation. You can have Annie back," Mueller said, his tone sweetly persuasive. "She'll be yours if you join me."

I heard frantic laughter and realized it came from me. "Do you think it'll make a difference that your monster looks like Annie? It's still a monster." I pointed to the body on the table. My hand shook uncontrollably. I closed it into a fist. "That's not Annie. Annie's dead. I won't let you use her like this."

"No!" Claire's cry contained all the anguish I felt. With a twist, she wrenched her hands from the rope. Before Mueller could react, she threw herself in front of the table, arms wide, a human barrier against a stampede.

"No, Jack," she said, her voice crazy with hope. "Don't do anything you'll regret. You see her. It's Annie."

"Claire, it can't be. Annie's dead, you know that. You arranged her funeral, you were there."

"I know. But, it's so obvious—why can't you see it? Dr. Mueller cloned her. Look, she's so perfect, exactly like I remember her."

I shook my head.

Her face folded with rage. "Oh, I see. You don't want to share her, is that it? You're afraid this time I'll have a chance. Is that why you don't want her alive again, Jack?"

I stared at her, appalled. In a rush, I remembered that I

hadn't shared Chrona's revelations with Claire. I knew Mueller had stolen the darkest memories he could find, but I hadn't bothered to tell her.

"Claire, listen to me. This...thing may have Annie's body, but it won't have her personality or her emotions. Otherwise, when she woke up she'd fight Mueller."

"No. She'll be grateful that she's alive again. She'll thank him."

"Claire, she tried to stop him. He killed her. Do you think he'd take the chance she would rise against him again? He wants slaves, he said it himself. Annie would never obey him."

"You're right, Jack," Mueller interrupted. He stood beside Claire. "I have programmed her to be somewhat more...malleable than her original self. But what of it? You rugged types like your women compliant, don't you? Work for me and you can have her."

"No!" Claire cried. Her breath came out raw. "He doesn't want her, don't you see? He had his chance with her and he threw it away. She's mine this time."

She was ranting like a madwoman, and it was like gazing at myself two years ago. She bent over the body as if to protect it, and I heard her sob. Where was the angry, cynical scientist I knew? Even though I wanted to hope she was acting crazy just to confuse Mueller, a part of me understood she had reached the limits of her rational self. The strain of the past few days—more than a year for her—added to the hope of seeing Annie alive again had made her snap.

Mueller pushed her aside. His lips curled in disgust when she broke into sobs again. He moved to the counter.

The tleb! I pushed against the window, powerless. Swiftly, he placed the tleb along the middle of Annie's body. I watched it melt into her skin until it was completely absorbed.

"Now, Jack, behold my genius." He fiddled with the machines on the side of the table, unplugged the tubes from the Annie clone's head and neck. He placed his hand on its forehead, and it opened its eyes. It lifted a hand in front of its

face, wiggled its fingers then turned to the side and sat up. The clone took a deep breath, stretched languorously, gazed at the surroundings. Saw me through the window.

"Oh," Mueller said, his voice dripping with satisfaction, "I forgot to tell you I programmed her neurochip with a selection of Annie's memories that I copied from Chrona." He chuckled. "He was so disturbed by the theft of the other memories, he never thought to check if he was missing an empty crystal."

A little smile lifted the corner of the clone's mouth, the same smile Annie always used to greet me.

"Hi, Jack."

The rusty voice, the one I knew so well, scraped all my nerve endings. I stared in fascinated horror as the clone pushed back its long black hair with one hand, the strong fingers scraping the scalp, a gesture I'd watched Annie use hundreds of times.

It...She motioned to me. "Hey, what are you doing on the other side of the glass? Come and join me, lover."

My heart pumped spastically in my chest. Annie wasn't dead. Mueller must have stolen her body, kept her brain alive, saved her...my mind was reeling.

I watched as Claire took off her lab coat and put it on Annie. Annie shouldered her aside.

"Get away from me, bitch," she growled.

All at once, I felt grounded again. This was not Annie.

I snickered. "You almost made me believe you could do it, Mueller. Almost."

"Mueller!" Claire said in a rushed voice. "He has a weapon that could harm Annie. Don't let him close to her."

Shit. I was on my own, then. I cocked an ear. There was this rumble just at the edge of my hearing. Like a tidal wave, it seemed to oscillate through the rock. The ground under my feet hummed as if it were crossed by thousands of volts of electricity. The hum became a tremor. The room lurched and tossed. My telecarb swirled with its colors. My arm tingled in response.

"Mueller," I yelled over the noise, "it's starting already. If you don't remove the tleb, we'll all die."

The floor heaved in one corner. I nearly fell down. The bay window exploded with a thunderclap. I hurled myself to the floor. Pebbles of glass pelted my back. I lurched back to my feet and peered into the lab.

Mueller, Claire, and Annie's clone were concentrating on staying upright. I staggered to the gaping window and dove in. I landed in a heap ten feet from the clone. The conjugator was in my pocket. All I had to do was get close to it and spray.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CLONE SOLVED THE DISTANCE PROBLEM—IT MOVED so fast it looked like it was gliding. I saw ten perfect toes; then it circled my neck with two fingers and lifted me above its head. It let out a hoarse chuckle.

“So glad you could join us, Jack,” it said in Annie’s rusty voice. I tried to break the hold. It squeezed harder. I kicked. It twisted out of the way.

“Check his pockets, Claire,” Mueller said.

She patted my jacket and took the conjugator from me.

“Claire,” I croaked, “use it.” I scratched at the clone’s hand. “She’s...killing...me.”

“Poor Jack,” the clone said. “Am I hurting you? So sorry.”

It tossed me across the room like a bag of airline peanuts. My back hit the wall, and I slid to the floor. It advanced on me, picked me up by the lapels, pivoted, threw me back into the middle of the room.

My back hit the table right at kidney level. Pain shot up and down. I shuffled away across a heaving floor, intent on evading it. The clone zapped forward, grabbed my jacket again.

Desperate, I punched it in the stomach, hard. It laughed. My hand hurt, my knuckles were bleeding.

Its face—Annie’s face—glowed with excitement, and I could see bloodlust in the eyes. The clone walked back to the

center of the room and swung around, holding me high in the air. I twisted my head to look behind. If it pitched me, I'd fly through the window opening to crash on the stone beyond. My head would hit that wall and explode like a ripe melon.

I heard Claire sniffle beside me.

"Claire, use the conjugator," I shouted. "Can't you see this isn't Annie?"

"Claire doesn't have your device anymore, Jack," Mueller said. "I do."

My heart skittered in all directions, my breathing became labored. I looked down. The clone's breath rasped in its throat—the disintegration had started, and it seemed to affect both of us equally.

"This is getting tiresome," Mueller said. "Kill him, Annie, and be quick about it. I want to get out of here."

"No!" Claire threw herself forward and pushed the table. It swiveled and slammed into the clone's back. It lurched, rasped an oath and let go of me. I staggered backward, away from its grasp.

What the hell, I thought. If I'm going to croak, I might as well go out in style.

I used the telecarb to appear in front of Mueller. My lungs felt like they'd turned to lead. I worked hard for oxygen. I had maybe three seconds before I lost consciousness. My hands had three gray fingers again.

Before I could pass out, I punched him in the face. He staggered and dropped the conjugator then slumped to the floor. The impact of my fist on his jaw jerked me from blacking out.

The clone followed me, its movements slower than before. There was something wrong with my eyes. The walls seem to ripple away from me. I looked down. The floor was a mass of swirling colors, and I couldn't find the conjugator. I checked on the clone—it was closer.

I tried to think. When I'd punched Mueller, he was holding the device in his right hand. He'd dropped it, so it would have fallen in front of him, but not far. I focused on his

crumpled form then followed the whirling colors away from him. One spot seemed darker than the others. The floor heaved. I threw myself on the dark patch; my hand closed on the box. I grabbed the device and rolled down the slanting floor then jumped up to face the clone.

Its olive complexion had deepened to almost brown. It had difficulty breathing, but Mueller had built it strong. It staggered in my direction.

The conjugator supposedly worked like an atomizer, but I couldn't find a spray nozzle. I frowned at the box, turned it around and saw a small circle with swirling colors. The clone went for my neck.

"Point the dot at her," Claire blurted out.

I aimed again. A gentle mist floated into the clone's face. It laughed, grabbed my neck and squeezed. I blanked out.

When my vision returned, I was lying on the floor. I looked down along the length of my body. It had become a misshapen gray mass. I had no legs.

I lifted my head. The clone had fallen on its knees beside me; its face had the purple hue of an amethyst. It raised an arm, the movement jerky and uncoordinated. Dragged-out sounds, like a record at the wrong speed, came out of its mouth. It stared at me, and I saw in its eyes the stunned realization that everything was over.

Slowly, from the center of the body where Mueller had placed the tleb, cracks appeared, like fine lines in old glass. Colors swirled on the surface of the skin. Screeches and sighs filled the room. The cracks deepened, joined, separated. Brilliant light seeped out of the crevices. It seemed the only thing holding the clone together.

"Damn you," it hissed.

The light inside winked out. The sounds died. The cracks widened, and the body shattered into small pieces. In the dead of silence, one-by-one, each of the fragments floated away, like dandelion seeds on a windy summer day.

I followed one with my eyes. It hovered at the edge of my vision for a moment then vanished.

The side effects from the telecarb still created havoc with

my body. I was dizzy; the thickness of the air drowned my lungs. Mueller picked himself up. He seemed to move faster than normal, as if he'd been speeded up in fast-forward.

"You fool," he said as he reached me. His voice came out distorted and high. "You could have had everything." He pointed his gun at me. "You're finished this time. I won't have you interfering again."

The cold steel of the floor under my palms chilled the tingling of my arm. I shaped legs for myself in my mind and pushed to my feet. Mueller's image stabilized. I grasped his forearm. Our telecarbs touched. He pulled the trigger.

The world stopped spinning, and I felt weightless, even though I still held on to him. Pinpoints of light surrounded us like a whirlwind, and a sensation like drowning washed over me. I was expecting it. I hung on until my field of vision righted itself again.

Mueller pushed me away. I let go and knocked the gun out of his hand. It clattered to the floor and disappeared under a desk.

He stared at my body then down at his empty hand.

"I shot you," he said, his voice hoarse. "You should be dead."

The bullet had gone through me, but it hadn't done any damage. I gave him a crooked smile.

"You know what they say, Mueller—it ain't over till the fat lady sings. I'm not finished with you." I swept the room with my arm. I was relieved to see it was my own, with a hand that had five fingers. I also had two legs. "Look around you, Mueller. Do you know where we are?"

He focused on his surrounding. "This is Annie's lab. Impossible."

"Sure, it's possible. If you're on Pleroma, that is. Enjoy the trip?"

His eyes widened then narrowed. "You shortsighted, interfering bastard. I should have applied more effort to eliminating you."

"Oh, I didn't bring you here. In fact, when our telecarbs came in contact, they became ineffective. Overload of information or some such."

"Is that right?" His eyes scoured the floor around him.

"Looking for your gun? Forget it. You won't be fast enough to reach it." I smiled. "On the other hand, why don't you go ahead and try it. It'll give me an excuse to beat the shit out of you."

He backed up a step, shoved his hands in his lab coat and studied me. "You've lost your rosy complexion, Jack. I'd say you're far from fighting trim."

"Really? Maybe you're underestimating me again."

"I think not. Your naive, oversimplified sense of justice will bring you down, not me. You think you have stopped me? No, Jack. I've suffered only a minor setback. I can replicate my results any time, and with what I've learned I won't need to borrow from other worlds. So, you see, I will build my soldiers after all."

"You were always too cocky for your own good."

Mueller whipped a small cylinder out of his pocket. His thumb sat on a red button on the side. He chuckled. "It always pays to be prepared. This dart gun contains a lethal dose of poison. I shall enjoy watching you suffer before you die. It's too bad you won't be around to see me clone Annie again and again. I will definitely enjoy that. Sort of poetic justice, don't you think?"

I pointed to his telecarb. "You'd better not try to use it to get away from here. Your telecarb is running out of juice. You could find your atoms scattered all over the universe with no way of putting yourself back together."

He squinted. "You're bluffing."

"I'm not. But go ahead and try it." I walked to the side and crossed my arms. What Mueller didn't know or had forgotten was that on Pleroma only our essences had crossed over. His dart gun would have the same effect on me as the bullet. I hoped.

He kept me in sight with the dart gun.

"Before you kill me and go back to Earth," I continued, "don't you want to know how I got you here?"

I saw hesitation in his eyes. I decided to press my advantage, slim as it was.

"Our telecarbs cancel each other out. In spite of that, we went from Earth to Pleroma."

He backed away. "So?"

"Your biggest mistake, Mueller, was to think you're smarter than me. I got tired of following you around, so I devised a plan of my own. Since you managed to piss off a whole bunch of aliens, I didn't have any problem getting help."

He frowned.

"See, it's like this—the Thrittene tracked me until my telecarb conked out because it touched yours. They communicated my position to the Emotions entities, who transported us to Pleroma. You didn't know they could do the same thing without a telecarb?" I tut-tutted. "You disappoint me."

"Why this whole production? What do you want?"

"It's not what I want, it's what I want to prevent you from doing in the future. So, I decided to get reinforcements."

The walls around the lab fell away, and we were in the archives room. Chrona's shape shimmered beside me.

Mueller lowered his weapon and addressed Chrona. "I knew you must be close by. We can deal."

"We will not bargain." The light dimmed almost to darkness. "Not with you."

"Surely, I can better whatever you've agreed upon with Meter here. Isn't that the way it works?"

"Our contract with Jack Meter does not concern you. Besides, his bringing you here was not part of a contract or a gift. Stealing memories is a felony on Pleroma. The guilty must pay."

"A fine? Sure, I'll pay, if that's what it takes to go back to my world."

I felt a weight in my hand. It was a red crystal, larger than the one I'd used to remember Annie's death. I smiled with grim determination. No, sir, I thought. The fat lady hasn't sung her last aria. Right now, she's making her entrance on stage and taking a deep breath. I hefted the crystal then threw it.

"Catch, Mueller!" Reflexively, he extended his arm and caught it.

Immediately, the room changed. We were back inside the bunker. I heard Mueller scream but couldn't take my eyes

away from the scene playing in front of me. Everything I'd experienced in the past hours—the sights and the sounds—streamed backward. I saw him fall, hand over the conjugator to Claire, plug Annie back in, remove the tleb. The memories speeded up; and in a blink he was reviving Helga, unshooting us, putting back the skin on his victim, sawing back on arms and legs, unhooking the bomb in Annie's lab. Faster and faster it went, the years of violence and cruelty so nauseating I finally had to turn around and block my ears.

Another heart-wrenching scream made me look back. Mueller, his eyes full of horror, stared at a vision in front of him. I remembered the images of hell I'd lived through in the Emotions World—the despair, the agony that had made me give up. The same reds and oranges, borne on a wave of black, rammed through him. With a last wail, he crumpled to the floor. The air was thick with whispering voices.

"Well done, Jack Meter," Chrona said.

We were back in the archives room with its hundreds of little doors. The red crystal floated into his hand. He opened a box and inserted the crystal into the cavity. His iridescent form drifted to the wall. He opened one of the doors and placed the box into it. He passed his hand over the closed door.

"These memories are now sealed forever. No one will ever have access to them."

I moved to Mueller's prostrate form and felt for a pulse. "He's still alive."

"His body is an empty shell. When you remove memories and emotions from full-grown organisms, it creates an irremediable void." His color dimmed. "I must admit that this type of punishment is quite painful. Quite a fitting retribution for such a vile creature."

Extracting Mueller's emotions was a twist the aliens had worked out all by themselves. I shrugged, hardened by the stream of memories from his brain.

"He got what he deserved. What about the body?"

"We have planned for it. We will meet again, Jack Meter."

My stomach lurched from the sinking sensation I'd had before when I'd entered and left Pleroma. I stared at my sur-

roundings. They'd sent me to Tekhnè with Mueller's body still at my feet. Good old Scratchy stood before me, his countenance stiff.

"You will leave this living matter here. We will study it, attempt to understand the neural connections that make its body function without sentience. It will assist our research into the next generation of Neurochips."

This was another twist the aliens had worked out without me.

"The stolen components have all returned to their proper place," Scratchy continued. "You have completed your task. In addition, you have provided the worlds within the wheel with a means of extending the realm of research. All, therefore, have an outstanding debt to you."

Scratchy droned on, but I didn't hear any of it. The realization of what I'd done hit me with full force. The conjugator had worked. For a second time I, in essence, had watched Annie die a violent death. Scratchy stopped speaking and regarded me with a drooping lens.

"Good-bye, Jack Meter," he whispered. "We will meet again."

Without warning, I was back in the bunker. A weight had lifted from my lungs and I could breathe more easily again. Like a drowning man, I took in great gulps of air. More slowly, my skin color returned to normal, and I felt whole and completely human. By filtering my essence, Chrona must have eliminated the side effects of the telecarb.

I stared at the spot where Annie's clone had died. Nothing remained except for the lab coat. It lay on the floor in a crumpled heap.

For one moment, for the briefest minute when she'd awakened, looked at me and smiled, time had run backwards. In that single instant, I believed that Mueller had foiled death and brought Annie back to me.

But it had never been Annie. She was truly gone. This time, however, I had no madness to sink into. Just the dull emptiness of being alone.

The rustle of clothes distracted me from my brooding,

and I turned. Claire sat on the floor, legs extended in front of her, hands on each side of her body. She raised her head to me, her eyes dull. They flickered in recognition when she saw me.

"Are you okay?" I said.

She shook her head. I wanted to go to her, but I wasn't sure what to say or what to do. I surveyed the damage around me.

"What are you going to do?" she said, her voice flat.

I turned back to her. "What do you mean?"

"Are you going to tell the police about..." She gulped. "About Annie?"

"They probably wouldn't believe me, anyway. I destroyed that..." I swallowed compulsively. "That monster. It's enough."

She gathered her limbs and pushed herself up. "I'm sorry."

"You need help, Claire."

The fire in her eyes came back.

"I've been there, remember? It's a long road to walk alone."

A clatter of feet made us turn toward the door. Terry rushed in with a dozen men in combat gear. They stopped and stared.

"Jack! Claire!" Terry said. "Where's Mueller?"

"Gone." I shook my head, my eyes warning him not to ask more details in front of his team. "How did you find us?"

"NARC security called us when you knocked out those two guards. Then you were kind enough to leave the Maintenance offices without switching the computer off. It just took us longer to get here. I don't have your resources."

"Can we get out of here?" Claire asked in a small voice.

"Sure," Terry said. "I'll need your statements, of course, but we can do that at headquarters." He turned to the man beside him and swept the room with his arm. "Go through this room and the others with a fine-tooth comb. I want everything catalogued and logged in. Send whatever you find to Forensics. I'll take these two back."

The man nodded and gestured to the others, who threaded carefully into the room.

Terry took the lead through now fully lit corridors. They appeared dingier under the naked light bulbs. The once-pristine dust was smeared by footprints, and the thick cobwebs lay in tatters on the floor.

Terry half-turned to me. "What about Mueller?"

"He's as good as dead."

Claire gasped. Terry stopped and turned around. "How?"

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you want to know."

He crossed his arms on his chest and didn't budge. I threw my head back and sighed.

"Let's say the guy just fell apart."

"With a little help from your alien friends."

"Something like that."

His eyes shifted from me to Claire. His gaze changed from suspicious to concerned. "Claire, are you all right?"

She leaned on the wall, tears streaming down her face. She was so disturbed she hadn't noticed she'd stuck her head into a cobweb. She lifted her eyes to me, and a look of pure hatred twisted her features.

It left her face so quickly I was sure Terry hadn't seen it. I knew what it meant, because it echoed feelings I'd had earlier. Even though her rational mind told her it was impossible, Claire had entertained the faint hope that Mueller had escaped and would try to build another Annie. Now that hope was truly gone, and she needed someone to hate. It wouldn't take much to push her over the edge. She needed help, all right, but I wasn't the right person to give it.

"I have to get out of here," I said. "I'll be in my office when you want to talk to me."

Terry nodded absently while he supported Claire through the tunnel. I quickened my pace, suddenly unable to bear another human being.

"Wait up, Jack," Terry called. "Betty gave me this for you."

I waited for him to catch up. He fished Chrona's box from inside his jacket pocket.

"Don't ask me why," he said, "but she told me you might need this when I next saw you."

I took the box with trembling hands.

"Thanks," I said, my voice gruff even to my own ears. Now I was the one who felt like crying. "Tell Betty..." I swallowed convulsively a few times. "Oh, hell," I croaked. I left without another word.

It was still night outside. I figured it must be close to dawn, but I had no way of knowing. I didn't even know which day of the week it was. The grounds of the complex were completely deserted. Not one car in the parking lot. The guard booth empty. The lights off. Terry must have evacuated everyone in case of another bomb.

Incongruously, as if waiting for me, a lone taxicab idled at the curb. I looked around, searching for police vehicles, and saw them further down the road. I knocked on the cabby's window. The driver started from sleep, nodded and turned on his meter.

Back in my office, I sat on the couch, Chrona's box in my hand. I stared at Annie's ring, which I'd put back on my finger as soon as I'd returned.

During the taxi ride the face of Annie's clone kept jumping at me, viciousness like a scar etched on its features. I'd hesitated to hear Annie's message before, but the events of the past hours made it necessary. I needed to see and hear the real Annie. Otherwise, it was Annie's clone I would always remember, even though, rationally, I knew it hadn't been my Annie.

Just like Claire, however, it was hard to tell my heart that Annie hadn't been alive again.

I opened the lid, picked up the crystal and deposited it in its setting. I waited. Nothing happened. Disgusted, I slammed the lid shut and threw the box at the other end of the couch. I leaned back, closed my eyes and tried to crush my disappointment.

"Hi, Jack," Annie's raspy voice said.

I jumped. She sat beside me, her legs under her, her muscular hands around her knees, her little smile on her face.

She was dressed in her usual black. The faint, familiar scent of musk floated toward me when she leaned forward.

"Annie."

"Well, lover, if you're watching me right now, it means Mueller got to me. I hope you already know it's Mueller you're chasing. The man is sick, Jack. If I haven't stopped him, you have to take over."

"I have, Annie," I whispered. "That, I've done for you."

"You found Trebor and Pleroma." She grinned. "Isn't Chrona cool? I wouldn't trust Trebor and his pals, though. They're as shift-y as the matter they're made of."

She got up from the couch, paced a few steps then turned. She looked so real, so there, that I wanted to shake her and scream at her for putting me through hell.

"Do you remember the first day we met, Jack?" Her rusty voice slithered along my spine. "I was about to beat you to a pulp when I saw your eyes change. They got all mellow and soft. I fell in love with you right then."

She raked her dark, flowing hair with her hand. It fell back in the same position, as it always did.

"We had a lot in common, you and I. I never thought I'd find someone who loved opera, junk food and randy, noisy sex as much as I did. Remember," she continued, her eyes dancing, "when we had to buy a new bed because our neighbors complained the old one squeaked too much? That was quite an expedition, what with you wanting us to try out every mattress in the store. Then we bought two days' worth of bagels and espresso and spent the weekend consecrating the new bed."

I laughed and started on my own memories, until I remembered she was not really there. My chest ached. I rubbed a sore spot near my heart.

Annie sobered and sat beside me. "We had good times together, Jack. The best. I wish..."

Her look became dreamy for a moment then focused on me again. She chewed on her lower lip. "I'm dead, you know. Dead. I'm sorry I did this to you, lover. I know you. When you fall, you fall so hard you can't pick yourself up. If

you received this message, you know what's at stake. You're the only one who can fight and win, because you're too ornery to do otherwise."

She extended her arm, and I leaned over. She cupped my cheek in her hand; and I imagined the caress of her palm, the slight calluses of her fingertips.

"Remember me. I love you."

I closed my eyes tight against the pain. When I reopened them, Annie was gone. So was the box.

I got up and opened the window. The light of dawn flared a brilliant gold against the clouds. It would be a perfect autumn day, bright with sunshine. In the distance, the trees of the Gatineau Hills, already tinged crimson, shone like damask. I imagined myself standing outside, breathing in the fragrance of the newly fallen leaves mingled with the crisp air of fall.

My wrist tingled. The telecarb was signaling, I knew, that I should return to Thrittene. I would. Soon.

My stomach growled. I strode to the door and ran down the stairs to the outside. I had a sudden hankering for bagels and espresso.

TO BE CONTINUED...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. D. BENOIT learned to tell stories at her father's knee. His bedtime stories were always full of gadgets, dark doorways and disappearing people. She is continuing the tradition.

She lives in Ottawa, Canada, with her husband and her cat (who is really an alien in disguise). Metered Space is her first novel.

M. D. Benoit can be reached by email by writing to jack@mdbenoit.com, or visit her website at <http://mdbenoit.com>.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

My name is GWYN WILLIAMS. I was born in 1959 in a small coastal town called Colwyn Bay in the north of Wales, a very beautiful country. I am married to Claire and have two sons, Gareth and Craig. I work as an electronic engineer with my artwork being a job on the side, although I don't see it as a job but rather a joy that also relaxes me.

I began my interest in 3D art in 2003, and it's gone on from there, I use many tools to create my images, from Photoshop CS3 to Vue6Infinite and Poser.

I have many interests that I like to do when time permits, which include scuba diving, walking in the Welsh mountains, Formula 1 racing and the history of Vietnam.

I have only one ambition left in life and that is to see my country become an independent nation. That is something I hope I live to see."

ANGELA WATERS' eclectic tastes in music and books have converged with her fascination

with technology. Sleepless nights are filled with listening to hardcore rockers and playing out the tunes in colors that describe her vision of an author's words. Her muse is thrilled it finally has a place to cut loose.