

Down the Rabbit Hole

A Red McKenna Novel

C.G. Masi

WARNING:

This novel contains explicit descriptions of sexual encounters.

Certain moral authorities have determined that reading such material may prompt some susceptible individuals to behaviors that are entirely too much fun for their own good. If reading such material disturbs you, the author recommends you look for alternative reading material in the Children's Books section of this store. He suggests particularly the Winnie the Pooh stories by A. A. Milne. After all, Dr. Seuss can get a little rough!

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For Merrie

“It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious.”
– *Oscar Wilde, Lady Windermere's Fan, 1892, Act I*

1

“Doc! You inconsiderate, unfeeling, self-centered son of a bitch, get your ass in here right now,” Pat Dacy yelled into the telephone, “and explain to this poor girl what’s going on! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. What were you thinking – keeping her in the dark like that?”

Pat was Chief Operations Officer for Scottsdale Systems Technology. Red (aka Judith McKenna) didn’t know what a Chief Operations Officer was supposed to look like, but Dr. Patricia Dacy was not what she would have expected. Rather, she looked like someone’s grandmother.

Pleasant and kindly, with wise eyes, Pat had long, straight, grey hair, which she wore pulled back from her thin face, which must have been beautiful forty years ago, before ravages of time had turned it to soft, seamed leather. She looked like she’d be at home sitting in a rocking chair with an old, lazy gray cat sleeping on a braided rug at her feet, while she knitted and waited for the tea to cool. Instead, she was scolding her boss.

Sunlight streaming through the glass wall in Doc’s bedroom had wakened Red Saturday morning, cuddled with Doc like spoons in his oversize bed. While the glass-walled office building Doc had bought and condo-converted a few years earlier – keeping the top two floors for his own use – certainly wasn’t the highest in the area, it was far enough from other high rises and high enough on its own that sheer distance from prying eyes was enough to create privacy. Doc habitually left the curtains open to enjoy the view.

“It’s beautiful,” she had exclaimed when she first saw that view across what Phoenixians like to call “The Valley of the Sun,” which is an immense basin containing Phoenix and its many suburbs.

That had been Friday night, and she and Doc had been standing in the middle of the room stark naked, getting ready for bed. He had just shut the lights off so she could see the view.

Western citiscapes at night generally resemble the classic view of Los Angeles from the Hollywood Hills,

which nearly everyone in the industrialized world is familiar with from motion pictures. They all look like semi-regular arrangements of lights carpeting a more-or-less flat expanse reaching to the horizon. They nearly all look like that from any elevation high enough to provide a view.

While movies have prepared people to recognize this cityscape, even the big screen cannot convey the yawning cavernousness of the space overlying that flat expanse of flickering and moving lights. With no reflections of the darkened room, nothing appeared between Red and that immensity.

When they'd first arrived at the desert in West Texas, Doc had told her: "Easterners meeting the desert for the first time either love it, or hate it. If they love it, they never want to be anywhere else. But, for some people the immensity is too much. It makes them feel small and unimportant, and they go scurrying back to someplace where they feel less exposed."

She'd hired Doc to transport her on his motorcycle to Nevada when her car broke down in Florida. She'd run away from home – the yacht her mother lived on with her step father when they weren't at one of his other residences – to search for her long-lost natural father, a geologist who'd disappeared on a field trip to Nevada ten years before.

Doc had stopped to help her get her car settled in a repair shop that he, at least, trusted. She'd quickly come to trust him enough to hire him to provide alternate transport on his motorcycle for the rest of her trip West.

In West Texas, she'd found that she was one of the people who loved the western deserts. Now, it suddenly became clear to her why. The thrill she got from looking out at this cityscape was similar to the thrill she always got standing next to the big, athletic men, like Doc, she was so physically attracted to.

Being six feet, three inches tall, and a crack athlete herself, there weren't too many men around whom she would describe as "big." Unfortunately, the ones she'd known previously had all come up short in some other way. Either they weren't smart enough to keep her brain entertained (she was earning top grades in what Doc described as "one of the most intellectually demanding universities in the most smarty-pants part of the country, with a

degree in a subject that gives most people phobias”), or they were too egocentric to give her the space she needed to be herself, or what ego they had was too fragile to take competition from a girlfriend who was bigger, tougher, and smarter than they were.

While spending nearly all her waking hours – and most of her sleeping hours – with Doc for nearly a week, she hadn’t yet found anything not to like about the guy. That fact had made her decide that, come Hell or high water, she wasn’t going to let *this* one get away. It was that, plus the fact that, when she’d finally decided to make love to him, he’d introduced her to the best sex she’d ever experienced.

Not that she was all *that* experienced – most of her beaus had failed to measure up before she’d gotten to the “is he any good in bed?” test. Doc was definitely the most experienced of the two or three who’d made it that far in the “husband for Judith” try-out program. The ones who’d spent their high-school years banging cheerleaders had washed out very, very early. In fact, none of them had made it past the “polite conversation” test. Red (Red was the “biker” nickname Doc had coined for her due to her flowing flame-colored hair and densely freckled complexion) felt very sorry for the poor cheerleaders!

“Doesn’t it bother you how many people can look directly into your bedroom windows?” she had asked, staring at the immensity past the glass wall.

Living alone in a big apartment for years, she’d kept up the nudity-at-home habit she’d picked up from her freshman roommate – the last person she’d shared accommodations with before getting her own apartment across the river from the Harvard campus. Like most nudists, however, she was acutely aware that people in general are embarrassed by seeing strangers unclothed. Not only is public nudity illegal in most places, it is impolite everywhere. To her, that last was even more important.

On the other hand, another thing she’d noticed while hanging around with Doc was that she had a taste for exhibitionism. Dressing provocatively to elicit furtive stares from strangers turned out to be good clean fun. Doc had encouraged her with a quote from an old movie. Quoting Jason Robard's character in *1000 Clowns*, he'd told

her: “Don’t be afraid to give the world a little goosing once in a while.” Then, he’d added: “Most of them need it most of the time.”

She found that she liked the attention she got by showing off that magnificent body. But, she’d also picked up enough of his Zen practice to be sensitive to the feelings of the people around her. She had fun startling them, but didn’t like making them uncomfortable. Thus, she went in for lots of jewelry, tops that showed off her rather nice breasts, and anything that featured her long, shapely legs, but drew a line at anything that might make others really uncomfortable.

She’d found that line their first night in Austin, Texas. They’d walked a few blocks to find a restaurant for dinner. Red had hiked her jeans up high – to the point where the seam at her crotch rose up between her labia, making it obvious that she had no underwear on. Everyone from the hotel housekeeper to people passing on the street noticed it. The stimulation and the stares had combined to give her more than one orgasm before reaching the restaurant.

By that time, however, she’d realized she’d crossed the line. *She’d* had fun, but most of the people seeing her had looked uncomfortable, even as they involuntarily stared. Under the table, she’d loosened her belt to push the jeans back down.

She didn’t want to make the same mistake by running around nude – and doing other things she intended to do – in a bedroom with glass walls.

“The only people who could possibly see us are people in high rises all the way over there,” he pointed out, “and they couldn’t make anything out without a pretty serious telescope. If they want to spend thousands of dollars on optical equipment to spy on their neighbors, I figure they deserve a show. If the lights are bright enough to make it hard for you to sleep, we can draw the draperies.”

“No, it’s spectacular – worth being kept awake, actually.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

Despite the fact that the glass wall in the bedroom faced West, away from the rising sun, morning in the clear desert air was bright enough to waken them. As Doc had predicted days ago, they no longer felt the compulsion to make love every time they found themselves alone.

When, as they passed through Austin the previous Wednesday, Red had first maneuvered him into sharing a bed at the Driskill Hotel by telling the check-in clerk they’d recently been married, they found themselves keeping up the fantasy by enthusiastically copulating every time they got the chance.

Noting that they’d made love half a dozen times in the first thirty hours, and that she was looking forward to more, Red had speculated that they’d crossed into nymphomania territory. Doc, who’d had experience with *real* nymphomaniacs, said that, no, it was what he called the “Honeymoon Effect.” They’d both just taken on new lovers (each other), and had little else to do right then. So, they were naturally making best use of their time and energy by exploring each other. He predicted that their libidos would calm down over the next few days.

That’s exactly what happened. With other things to think about while riding cross country on Doc’s big touring motorcycle, their sneaking-off-for-a-quickie rate had plummeted. They still did a lot of groping between the sheets when they stopped for the night, but when they were done, they were done, not just taking a break to recharge their batteries for the next tryst.

That Saturday morning, they were content to just sit up in bed holding each other and enjoying the view while their sleepiness wore off. Wednesday evening, they hadn’t been able to do that for any length of time without coming up with a new position that they just *had* to try out *right now*.

Desertscapes with the sunrise at your back – whether you’re looking out over vast stretches of open desert, vast mountain ranges glowing in the Sun, or the facades of countless buildings burning red-gold in reflected light against the azure sky – always seem alive, and inviting. “Look at me,” they seem to say. “I’m full of the promise of adventure. There’ll be all sorts of things going on out here all day. Get out of bed, sleepyhead, and come out to

play.”

One can’t resist the siren song for long. Just a few minutes is all it takes for sleepy desert rats to begin to stir.

The first order of business is always to pee. Doc got there first, so Red wrapped herself up in the enormous bedspread folded at the foot of the bed, and curled up in one of the luxurious red-leather club chairs Doc had arranged around a black marble coffee table next to the glass wall. Still not 100% awake (accounting for her losing the race to the bathroom), she smilingly resisted the desert’s pull a little longer.

After taking her turn in the bathroom, she found Doc already dressed in jeans, a pair of black cowboy boots, and a light blue western-style shirt, topped off by a tan cowboy hat. He had stretched out his muscular six-foot, six-inch frame in the same chair she’d just vacated, with his feet, as usual, propped up on the coffee table.

Red walked over, and plopped onto his lap, still nude, for a kiss and a cuddle before getting dressed, herself. She would have been too big a load for an average man to hold in his lap, but was just right for Doc to cuddle up with.

One of the many traits that had caused her to decide she wanted him for exclusive property was that he was the first man who could make her forget the huge empty space in her life that had yawned like a chasm at the edge of her consciousness since her natural father disappeared.

In less than a week since he’d found her crying her eyes out in frustration when her pink 1965 Mustang convertible had given up its mechanical ghost by the side of the highway in Florida, he’d become the central figure in her life. Doc had immediately chased away all the failure and panic, making her feel like an adventurer who could conquer any obstacle.

Thinking he was just some random motorcycle bum, she’d offered to pay him \$100 a day to carry her on his big touring bike to Nevada, where the trail to her father’s whereabouts had gone cold all those years ago. It wasn’t until she’d fallen madly in love with him that she discovered:

1. He was a certified genius in two fields of physics – both of which were fascinating to her as well;
2. He had combined this scientific ability along with business acumen to make himself filthy rich;
3. The company he'd built had just the right technical capabilities she needed to complete her quest.

The last item meant that she'd be joined to him at the hip at least until her quest was over. The first item meant that they were destined to be best friends (there just weren't that many math and physics fans around to play with).

The second item was something she'd never thought of as terribly important, but it sure felt nice!

All her life, what she'd wanted most was a home and a family with a husband she loved and respected. She'd always imagined that husband to be just like her father. Now, she imagined him to be just like Doc.

She felt things had started working out spectacularly well for her the minute he'd walked into her life. She never wanted him to walk out again.

That would be awful!

5

Bright and early Monday morning, Red and Doc stuffed the lunch bags Sam had put up for them into their briefcases, and headed down to the garage. Red had thought Doc's admitting that he owned the company settled the issues between them, but it didn't.

Doc was much happier now that they had settled the conflict of interest posed by his offering her a job while simultaneously taking her as a lover. At least they'd settled it between themselves. Red had a plan for silencing critics, and Doc knew she could make it work. In his mind, as long as the two of them were satisfied, he didn't really care what anyone else thought.

Nonetheless, over the weekend Red sensed that something was still bothering Doc. He wouldn't discuss their

quest to find her father. Every time she brought it up, he defensively put the discussion off “until next week.” She couldn’t understand why, and it bothered her more than she let on.

Doc suggested that they take the Jag to work, and that Red drive it to give the security guard a heads up that Red and the Jag belonged together. She’d have to sign in as a visitor today, and get a badge at the reception desk, but she’d get a permanent badge later.

Scottsdale Systems Technology was located right on the Scottsdale Airport flight line because most of its business involved flight-control-system development, and they had test aircraft flying in and out constantly. The data acquisition part of the business was relatively new, and, although it was the fastest growing part, it was still small compared to the government-sponsored aerospace-research segment.

While Doc’s apartment was also purposely close to the airport – from his terrace they could watch planes touching down on the runway – the actual route to the main office was long, and torturous. To keep as low a profile as possible, SST leased a building on the far side of the flight line, and getting there meant entering the airport property, driving past the commercial terminal, through the industrial park, then all the way around the north end of the runway, and back along the flight line to a spot as far from the commercial terminal as physically possible. It was much easier for Doc to call out directions from the passenger seat than to write them down for Red to follow.

At the front desk, the receptionist already had a visitor’s badge ready for Red. She just had to sign in, and loop the lanyard over her neck.

Doc led her through a maze of corridors – SST eschewed cubicles in favor of separate offices with doors that could be locked for security – to a large office past a large conference room near the end of a corridor.

“Pat,” Doc said to the little old lady sitting at a round table surrounded by eight chairs, “this is Red McKenna. Please take care of her paperwork. She’ll be coming on board as a research analyst grade four. She’ll be reporting directly to you, but dotted to me for technical supervision. She’ll be the principal on the McKenna project. Also, please have Josh bring her up to speed on Wavelet, because she’ll be in charge of application

development for it, as well.”

“And, good morning to you, too, Doc,” the little old lady said, pointedly.

“Sorry, I’m a little excited about having Red come on board. Good morning, Pat.”

The office looked like an explosion in a warehouse specializing in 1960s memorabilia. The little old lady wore a pair of dark blue slacks and a tie-dyed tee shirt under a floral print shirt that she wore untucked and unbuttoned. A mass of what looked like love beads hung around her neck. Clearly, she was not only somebody’s grandmother, but a grandmother who was an unreconstructed hippie.

After Doc abruptly stepped out of the door and went to the very last door on the corridor, the little old lady stood up, coming to a few inches below Red’s shoulder level, and took Red’s two hands in her two hands to hold Red’s arms out for inspection. She turned Red around, eyeing her appraisingly. Then, she took Red gently by the chin, and turned her face to inspect each side. Finally, she looked deeply into Red’s eyes.

“I can see why Doc’s got such a case on you. We’ll get to what’s bothering you in a little while,” she said.

“I’m Pat,” the lady explained, redundantly. “Supposedly, I’m in charge of making everything work around here. Actually, I do practically nothing, except make sure everyone else knows what they’re supposed to do, and has what they need to do it. We have to start you off with some forms.”

She sat Red down at the round table in front of a stack of papers, handed her a pen, and sat in the chair opposite her.

Red was initially dismayed by the size of the stack, then surprised to find that most of the spaces had already been filled in. Looking up, she saw Pat’s kindly eyes smiling pleasantly as she said: “We took the liberty of filling in what information we had. Please check it over for accuracy, and sign each page at the bottom.”

“How...?” Red started to say.

“We don’t let our most important asset go traipsing around the country with some girl, without knowing everything there is to know about her. While you guys were on a shopping spree in Daytona Beach, we did a complete background check on you.”

The first form was an NDA similar to the one she’d had to sign for Robotics Concepts when they’d met with them about their technology back in Austin. Pat made sure she read the whole thing carefully, and asked questions to make sure she understood what she was signing.

The second form was a pretty standard job application. It was filled out neatly, and exactly as she would have filled it out. Even that unfortunate cashier’s job was there, with “left for college” listed as her reason for leaving. There was no mention of the argument with a customer that had caused her to be fired in disgrace.

When Red pointed to it with a quizzical look on her face, Pat said: “I know, but it’s water over the dam that we don’t want following you later.”

Apparently, at SST, they followed the “end justifies the means” credo. Red wasn’t surprised. It seemed fit in with Doc’s general intolerance for rules. In every situation, he seemed to carefully analyze the ramifications of every choice, and did what he believed would produce the result he wanted, no matter what conventional rules of behavior dictated.

The longest and most detailed form was an application for Top Secret security clearance. “I believe you know that most of our work is confidential,” Pat explained. “What you may not know is that the client for most of that work is the U.S. Department of Defense. In most of this building, you have to have Top Secret clearance to walk down the hall. Even the janitors have security clearance.”

“By the way,” Pat said, “pardon my indelicacy, but you see where we checked ‘heterosexual’ where it asks about sexual orientation. There is the matter of your relationship with your roommate in the Harvard freshman girls’ dorm....”

“I’m not a closet lesbian, if that’s what you’re asking. Not that I think it’s any of your business.”

“Officially,” Pat said in measured tones, “it is not my business. The Feds, however, make it *their* business when you ask for a security clearance. Personally, I’m making it *my* business because of your relationship with Doc. I’ve known Doc for ten years, since he was a pimply faced teenager in my ‘exceptional student’ program at M.I.T. He’s like a son to me. If you break his heart, I’ll tear your eyes out!”

Red did a double take at the sudden change of tone. Searching Pat’s face, she realized that Pat allowed no nonsense about certain topics, and Doc was one of those topics. This woman not only had an iron will beneath the nice-little-old-lady exterior, but she had the wherewithal to impose that iron will on those around her.

“Aha. You’re the advisor who made Doc stand in front of a classroom to get over shyness, aren’t you.”

“Yes, I see he mentioned me.”

“He did. Fair enough. Pat, I love Doc like crazy. I’m not going to break his heart if I can help it.”

So, it looked like Red was going to have an ersatz-mother-in-law relationship with Pat, as well as an employee-to-boss relationship. That could be good, or bad, depending on how they got along. Red vowed to make it a good thing, if she possibly could.

After Red finished signing the forms, Pat called someone in to take them off for processing. Then, she and Red sat for a heart-to-heart talk about Red’s life, what she’d done in the past, and what she hoped to do in the future. Red knew it was part of the job-interview process, but Pat made it feel like just-girl talk.

Red didn’t know, although she suspected it, but Pat’s doctorate was not in science or technology. It was in clinical psychology.

During her years as an academic, she’d set up a program to “mother” the underage geniuses that had gained places in the M.I.T. student body through superior academic ability, but were often still emotionally immature.

Growing up, they'd generally had difficulty relating to their elders, and their peers, so they needed special nurturing to grow into well adjusted, emotionally mature adults.

Doc had been arguably the most successful of her "kids." When government funding for her program dried up, she'd turned to Doc for help. He threw his company's resources behind the program, so that Pat had been able to keep it going, and growing, until she reached the age for early retirement. He'd then asked her to bring her leadership skills to SST.

Because Doc had wanted to make SST a place where exceptional people could work independently, the way she ran the operation fit perfectly. If the staff weren't so heavy in self-starter personalities, it might not have worked.

Most of what Pat and Red talked about was just what Doc had quizzed her about on the road. Realizing that she was dealing with an expert psychologist, Red hoped that she wasn't just being manipulated, but she had a lot more to gain than to lose.

Pat purposely steered the conversation away from Red's relationship with Doc, and on to the more relevant topic of the job Red was actually applying for.

"What does a research analyst do, exactly?" Red asked.

"That's hard to pin down because it depends on the project, and what its goals are. Any project starts out with some goal, or goals. Maybe it's building a better mousetrap, or finding an answer to some question. The Research Analyst starts with those goals, gathers all the information available and identifies the resources needed to achieve those goals, and comes up with a plan for actually achieving them. It calls for self-starters who take responsibility, can think independently, and aren't afraid to go outside the box, and it pays commensurately."

"Can you quantify that for me?"

"Grade four starts at \$100,000 per year, and that's where you'll start. Doc's made you a very well heeled

young woman.”

“What is Wavelet?” Red asked, changing the subject because she didn’t want to let Pat see how flustered the pay offer made her. She’d had practice spending her step father’s money, but had been uncomfortable with it. She’d never had any of her own. If she hadn’t gotten the scholarship, she probably couldn’t have afforded college at all. “Doc said he wanted me to learn about it.”

“It’s a computational fluid dynamics software system that we’re developing under a Department of Defense contract. Most CFD systems are based on solving the Navier-Stokes differential equation that uses basic physics to model fluids in motion. Wavelet takes another approach. It assumes a wave solution, and works out the amplitude and phase parameters as a function of frequency for each position in the solution field. The key is to break the solution into acoustic and shear waves. That separates viscous effects, which only affect the shear wave, from pressure effects, which only affect the acoustic waves.”

“Doc and I talked about that on the road. He neglected to tell me that his company was doing the development work. I’ve always wanted to meet the guy who figured out the physics for it. I heard he was some M.I.T. whiz kid with a brain as big as a house.”

“You’ve been sleeping with him all week.”

“That He’s done it to me, again! I was spouting off about how I’d go about improving the user interface, and how I’d make it more user friendly, and get people outside the CFD community to use it, while all the time I was talking to the guy who’d invented it. He just sat there letting me rattle on.”

“Yes,” Pat smiled, “and now he wants you to actually do what you talked about. But, that will have to wait until tomorrow. In less than an hour, you’ve got to put your research-analyst hat on. You have to prepare for the McKenna Project kickoff meeting.”

“What, exactly, is the McKenna Project?”

“My dear, it’s *your* project. You want to find your father, right? And, in the process, you want to validate his theory about mineral deposits near Carson City, Nevada. Finally, you want to secure any rights for his heirs, meaning you and your mother. Any of this sound familiar?” she asked sarcastically.

“That’s a problem I’ve got with Doc. I no longer know what’s going on with it. Since we talked to the Robotics Concepts guys in Austin, he won’t say ‘boo’ about it. I can’t afford to pay for it – unless that’s what the salary is all about – but Doc just said not to worry. It was covered. I want to know how it’s covered, and by whom. What’s my part in it? Who’s the team? But, Doc won’t answer my questions.”

That is the point at which Pat picked up the telephone to damn Doc as an “inconsiderate, unfeeling, self-centered son of a bitch,” and told him to get his ass into her office “right now.”

6

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to break it to her for days,” Doc said, “but there’s a problem. She really has issues with her step father. I’m afraid she’ll blow up when she finds out.”

“Quit stammering, you big lummoX,” Pat replied. “She’s standing right there. Just blurt it out. She’s a big girl, she can take it.”

Despite the fact that Red knew the issue revolved around her, she couldn’t resist surreptitiously smiling at the comical picture of this little old woman wagging her finger at her own boss, the company’s CEO, and a man of tremendous physical, intellectual, and financial power, as if he were a stupid, clumsy boy, while he stood there, head hanging, and tongue tied.

With a look of fear, and anguish, Doc lifted his head to look Red square in the eyes, and said: “Your step father set this whole thing up. That day you left Miami, thinking he was trying to set you up on a date with some, and I quote, pencil neck from work, unquote, what he was trying to do is get you to meet with *me*, so that I could help you track down your father. He knew what you wanted to do, and he wanted to help. He knew your obsession

with your father was wrecking your life, and he didn't want that to happen. We were supposed to talk about starting a search as soon as you graduated. But, you wouldn't listen. You blew your top, jumped the gun, and ran away. I found you beside the side of the road that day because I was looking for you."

"So, it really was just a setup all along!" Red turned red-faced, and angry. "You don't care about me. Getting me in the sack was just to keep me happy, so you'd have your research project. You really are a son of a bitch!"

"Hey!" Pat yelled, stepping in front of her, and reaching up to poke Red's chest with her index finger for emphasis. "You just get down off your high horse, young lady. A lot of people have gone very far out of their way to help you, when they had very little reason to do so. They did it because they care about you. Doc cares about you. I care about you. Your mother cares about you. And, whether you want to hear it or not, your step father cares about you. Now, you go in that office over there with this man, and you work with him to finish what *you* started. I don't care if you two are cooey and dovey on your own time, but you turn yourself around right now, and act like the professional we're paying you to be."

"And you," she said, turning back to Doc. "Get in there, and give this woman the information she needs to do her job. You've got about forty-five minutes before *she* has to turn a bunch of research assistants into a functioning team. She needs your guidance and support, so give it to her."

"Remember, you two," she said addressing them both, "I'll be in there watching, too. You make me proud!"

Forty five minutes later, Red and Doc sat next to each other in the middle of a horseshoe-shaped conference table in a large meeting room. A large video screen hung from the wall at the horseshoe's open end. Pat and a handful of technical specialists flanked them, all with prepared presentations ready to go.

Doc started things off.

"Folks, I'd like to introduce you to a new member of our staff, Judith McKenna. You will notice that the project we're kicking off this morning bears her name. There's a reason for that. The project is being funded by her

family.”

“At the same time,” he continued, “she is joining our staff at Scottsdale Systems Technology permanently as a research analyst. She will also be heading a unit to develop new applications for our Wavelet software system. All of that information will be announced throughout the company via email before this meeting concludes. We feel fortunate to have secured her services, and hope you will join me in welcoming her. And now, I’ll turn the meeting over to Ms. McKenna.”

“Gentlemen, and ladies,” Red began, “I’ll start by passing out copies of today’s agenda, which also appears on the video screen. I apologize for not distributing it prior to the meeting, but both Doc and I were out of state last week. We only finalized it a few minutes ago.”

She waited a few minutes while copies of the agenda were passed hand-to-hand around the table.

“I’ll lead off by explaining the project’s goals and history. We’ll then break for a half hour for lunch. After lunch, Dr. Manchek will describe details of new technology that we think may prove useful in this project, as well as other projects SST may take on in the future. We learned about this technology last Wednesday at a meeting in Austin, Texas with its developers.”

“After Dr. Manchek finishes his report, we’ll have individual reports of the information you all have gathered in your specialties.”

“Finally, we’ll have a Blue Sky session to generate ideas about how we might meet this project’s goals, and set up action items for subsequent meetings.”

“As I’m new to the company, I’m not sure how you normally conduct these meetings. I think it makes sense to allow each of our speakers the opportunity to make their presentations uninterrupted, then we can open the floor for questions. Is that agreeable to everyone?”

Nods, and murmured assent all around.

“Okay, this project is being funded by Gulf States Petroleum, which is wholly owned by my family. It has three goals: the first goal is to seek the whereabouts of my father, James McKenna, who has been missing for ten years; the second goal is to validate – or invalidate – an hypothesis he put forward before his disappearance, that mineral deposits of substantial value lie buried deeply in the central Rocky mountains; the third, and final, goal is to secure any rights to those mineral deposits for my family.”

When Red had run away from home just over a week ago, her goals were nowhere near this refined. It was, in fact, her stepfather who’d enumerated them as part of his instructions for Doc. Doc had translated those goals into action items for a team of specialists, which included a mining engineer, a mechanical systems engineer, a lawyer, and a private investigator. Pat had provided someone from her staff to take care of logistics, and Judith would do what she did best – setting up a database, and analyzing the data.

Unknown to Judith, last week Pat had put together the team, and started them gathering background information. One of the reasons Doc had wanted to take a day off in Austin was to give the team a little more time to complete their preparations for this kickoff meeting.

Red had learned all this during the forty five minutes she and Doc had spent working together to prepare for the meeting. Pat had been cross with Doc because she felt they should have spent a lot more time in preparation, and could have if he’d handled things better. Yet, she understood Doc’s reluctance to explain the situation to Red when they were alone. Without Pat’s intervention, which wouldn’t have been possible before Monday morning, things might have gone much more badly. Red had already stormed off in a huff once. If she did it again, it would be disastrous.

Pat felt like spanking them both, which goes to show that she, too, had taken to Red instantly. Pat had mentally “adopted” her. She was now one of Pat’s “kids.”

“Approximately, twenty years ago,” Red launched into her project-history lesson, “James McKenna, my natural father, developed a theory that before the episode of hydrothermal activity that created the Comstock Lode

in central Nevada roughly 14 million years ago, a prior episode some 36 million years ago had created a very similar deposit in an adjacent area by a nearly identical process. Subsequent geologic processes buried this earlier deposit under 2,500 to 4,500 feet of sediment, hiding it from prospectors.”

This was all information Red’s father had drilled into her head before leaving on his disastrous final expedition. Pat and Doc figured she would know it well enough to speak extemporaneously about it. They were leading with it to give Red the confidence to come forward as the team leader. It also gave her standing as *the* overall expert on the project.

“Had the two deposits been located more closely, there is a good chance that miners in the mid-nineteenth century would have stumbled on the second lode, while exploring underground to extend the Comstock Lode. As it was, there was too much barren rock between the deposits. Underground explorers gave up before reaching the second deposit that was coincidentally located at nearly the same level.”

“My father believed that erosion had brought some of the uppermost deposits within five hundred feet of the surface, still hidden from detection, but within reach of determined searchers who knew where to look. He set out to locate these relatively shallow structures, which would, if located, provide access to the deposit as a whole. He began sinking deep test shafts in a number of possible locations using his own money. Ten years ago, he failed to return from one of those prospecting expeditions.”

“After some time with no word, my mother asked local authorities to look for him. At first, she expected him to be found camping at one of his test-shaft locations. He had left a map of possible sites among his papers at home. When authorities could find no trace remaining of camps at those locations, they started a wider search, thinking that he may have tried additional locations, and began checking in the actual shafts, in the event that he had met with an accident in one of his existing shafts. Because the shafts were deep for prospect holes, and many had been abandoned for some time, it was not feasible to thoroughly search a number of the shafts. They called off the search when they had exhausted the locations that could be searched safely.”

“My mother did not have the resources to continue the search on her own, and was forced to let the matter lie. After seven years, she had my father declared legally dead in order to settle his estate.”

“Soon after that, she remarried. Her second husband is Mark Shipton, owner of Gulf States Petroleum. Our family now has the resources, and the will, to resume the search. We have contracted with SST to organize the search effort, hoping that the company’s expertise and technical resources will make possible a more exhaustive search.”

“That pretty much brings us up to date. Are there any questions?”

A middle-aged man on the far left stood up, and introduced himself: “My name is David Goldstein, and I’m a lawyer specializing in mining law. Dr. Dacy has retained me to guide this project team on legal matters. My question is actually directed to Dr. Manchek.”

He paused to take a breath before continuing: “Pardon me, but it is highly unusual for a young woman with no experience to be hired as a system analyst, and simultaneously be put in charge of an investigation of this type. While I don’t mean to doubt Ms. McKenna’s qualifications, I think an explanation is in order.”

“That’s a fair question,” Doc responded. “Obviously, Ms. McKenna is deeply involved in the effort. It is, after all, her family’s effort to find her father. She is interrupting her final semester at Harvard University to make time for it. In addition, she is not without expertise and experience valuable to the investigation. She is an applied mathematician specializing in database analysis. She has worked on a number of interdisciplinary teams, and we feel she is ready for a leadership role. Since she is probably the person most familiar with this situation, and is highly motivated, she is the most qualified project leader.”

“During the course of setting up this project,” he continued, “we learned of her qualifications, and decided she would be a valuable addition to the permanent SST staff. So, we made a successful effort to recruit her as a research analyst. At SST, recruiting young, exceptional people, and challenging them with tasks that stretch their capabilities, is an important part of our corporate culture.”

“I hate to be indelicate,” Goldstein continued, “but lawyers often must be indelicate. There is a rumor that you and Ms. McKenna have become intimate. Does this have any bearing on this project.”

“Yes, lawyers often must be indelicate,” Doc said with a slight smile. “Ms. McKenna, and I have been intimate, but that has absolutely no bearing on any of the decisions made. Those decisions were made before Ms. McKenna and I met, and I was not the only person involved in making them.”

“Perhaps it’s my turn to be indelicate,” he continued. “When Ms. McKenna, and I finally met, I found her personally extremely attractive.” The words “Fuck of the century!” ran through his mind, but he didn’t say them aloud. “Apparently, she doesn’t find me too repulsive, either. Under those conditions, I’m not about to let observance of puritan conventions stand in the way.”

Doc’s expression became serious, and he looked each of the attendees in the eye when he said: “I trust this issue will not come up again.”

7

When they broke for lunch, Doc said to Red: “I usually have lunch in my office. There’s also a company cafeteria.”

“I think I’m just going to stay here in the conference room,” Red responded. “I want to read these reports that the technical specialists emailed. Also, I need to think about how I’m going to integrate them into a GIS database. If you don’t mind, I need to be alone.”

Disappointed, but not terribly surprised, he went back to his office. She might be slipping away, but he’d expected that. He was serious about treating her according to the Jonathan Livingston Seagull approach:

If you love something, set it free.

If it’s yours, it will come back to you.

If it doesn't, it never was.

Red did have to do the things she said, but she had other reasons for not wanting to join Doc for lunch.

Most importantly, she felt vaguely betrayed by the way things transpired. She recognized that she'd caused the problem, herself, by running off like a spoiled child, but that didn't make her feel any better. She had the irrational feeling that Doc, if he'd really cared, could have found some way to make it alright anyway, but he hadn't.

Then, there was the fact that she felt like a newbie at work (because she was). She didn't want to get the reputation of boss's pet by being seen eating lunch with him. Being seen by herself in the conference room working through lunch was a much better career move.

Also, she'd been embarrassed by having her relationship with Doc mentioned in the meeting, as well as being asked indirectly to defend her qualifications for the position she now held. While she'd consciously expected it, she hadn't been prepared for it emotionally. It hurt more than she liked.

"Very unprofessional, Judith," she said to herself. "No wonder Doc has been preoccupied. It just doesn't look good. In fact, the whole situation doesn't look good."

She decided that she would have to keep things on a professional basis. No fraternizing in the office. She thought she'd better move out of Doc's bed, and into the bed in "her" room, as well. Maybe she should even find a hotel.

Besides, now that she thought about it, she was royally pissed off at him! Anybody who'd been through what she had would need the release of working up a really good Mad. Any really good Mad needs someone to be mad at, and Doc *deserved* to be the object of hers. At least, that's what she told herself. She had decided to be mad at him, and wasn't letting anything get in the way of it.

"That son of a bitch!" she said aloud to convince herself.

Anybody who expects a woman in love to behave rationally is ignoring some four million years of human experience.

The afternoon meetings started with Doc's report of the Robotics Concepts technology. Doc described the Worm product concept, using information that Mandy had emailed, supplemented with clippings from media coverage, and his own interpretation of the technology and its possibilities. There was much excitement because the technology had been kept relatively quiet, and it promised to be widely applicable. Mandy was right: it was exactly the kind of thing that SST could make repeated use of. The questions Doc fielded dealt with potential applications outside the McKenna project, and the cost.

The latter, Doc said, would have to wait until they had a better idea what features would have to be built into their Worm, especially its size, and configuration. All he could give them was a list of prices Robotics Concepts had set for standard modules. How they were used, and how they were combined would determine, in a large part, the overall cost. Doc opined that they would likely need to develop non-standard modules as well. "Finally," Doc said, "there is the issue of who will program the Worm. Do we get someone from Robotics Concepts, or do we train members of our staff?"

Next, Judith called on Peter Smith, the mining engineer, to explain her father's theory from a geologist's point of view, and to outline its status. He started off talking geologist-speak, until Doc interrupted him by holding his hand up, and saying: "Please, some of us are not geologists. Could you keep it simple for those of us who have forgotten most of what we learned about geology in high-school general science class."

For some reason, Red got it into her head that Doc was referring to her. "Hey, I'm the daughter of a geologist. I know what he's talking about."

Doc simply said, "I was referring to me. I'm not, and I don't. The last time I learned anything about rocks and minerals was in back in high school, and I've forgotten most of it."

In typical Doc fashion, he'd cast himself in the role of the stupid one who needed to be spoon fed

information, even though there were others at the table, such as the detective, who needed it more. Frankly, his self image was strong enough that he didn't mind looking dumb if he thought it would spare someone else's feelings.

Smith started again, adding more explanation for Doc, the mechanical engineer, and the detective. His explanation of Jim McKenna's theory pretty much followed Red's. He added his own estimate, based on McKenna's work, of how big and how rich the lode might be – huge and fabulous, respectively. His own opinion was that McKenna could very well have been right, but it could only be confirmed by field exploration.

He also voiced the opinion that McKenna's methods could revolutionize mineral exploration. Sonar methods had been used for decades to search for promising liquid and gaseous deposits hidden underground. McKenna's work strove to extend those and similar remote-sensing methods to uncovering deposits of solid material.

Smith moved on to detail conditions in the shafts that had been explored. McKenna had only identified half a dozen possible locations for prospect shafts, largely because he had limited funds and the technology at the time was limited. Smith identified several additional locations that could be looked at with more advanced technology and better funding. He felt these had no bearing on the effort to find Jim McKenna, but would be important for establishing the family's claim to developing any mines based on McKenna's theory.

"I believe our mandate for the second and third goals can be interpreted to include developing prospecting tools based on McKenna's work," he suggested, "but that's not my call."

Getting back to the search, he pointed out: "Conditions in three shafts bear special consideration. Those are McKenna's existing shafts that local authorities felt were too dangerous to explore during the first search. All of them are choked with rubble of collapsed bracing and/or equipment, such as broken winches or elevators."

"I particularly think we should look into shaft number 6," he added. "It drops vertically for 100 feet, then jogs to the northeast for about three meters, then appears to turn again to descend vertically to an unknown depth. Bureau of Land Management people found a derrick McKenna used to descend into the mine had fallen into the shaft and become lodged in the jog. There is also reason to believe it was the last shaft McKenna visited, so it is the

most likely place to look for the remains of a fatal accident. The scenario would be that the derrick collapsed when McKenna was in the shaft, trapping him.”

Glancing at Red, who was sitting stiffly, holding in emotion, he said: “I’m sorry Ms. McKenna.”

“Quite alright. We expected this,” she replied mechanically.

Thinking of nothing to say, he went back to his presentation: “Robotics Concepts’ Worm could be used to thoroughly explore these three holes. My guess is that we’ll find his body in one of them.”

Here he again glanced at Judith sympathetically. She was barely hanging on emotionally, but didn’t seem quite ready to break down.

“Are there any questions?”

Nobody said anything. After about thirty seconds, Doc stood up, and said: “I, for one, could use a bathroom break. Shall we reconvene in about ten minutes?”

Everyone except Red stood up silently, and filed out of the room. When the door closed, Red buried her face in her hands to weep for her father. She’d never had the chance to mourn him before.

8

Ten minutes later, Red returned from the ladies room with a freshly washed face, and freshly applied makeup. She called on Goldstein, the lawyer, for his presentation.

He had stopped her earlier in the corridor to apologize for his personal questions at the morning meeting.

“That’s quite alright,” she’d responded. “They were issues that needed to be addressed, and couldn’t be addressed unless someone brought them out in the open. Actually, I want to thank you for bringing them up. I hope you’re now satisfied.”

“I think you responded well,” he said carefully. “Others will, however, bring them up again in the future. How they take your response will depend on how you perform in your job. Time is your best ally.”

In other words: “People will be watching.”

Goldstein’s presentation before the group was short: “The major legal issue is the family’s right to claim ownership of any minerals in the area McKenna explored. Declaration of his death ended any legal issues surrounding the search for his remains. The family, of course, still has a right to search all they want. They have a right to enter anyplace such a search might lead, subject to others’ property and privacy rights. That right automatically inures to SST, as their agent.”

“McKenna wisely filed claims on the locations his research indicated were good prospects. He did enough exploratory work to establish his claims at some of the locations. We have not verified the existence of physical stakes, but the paperwork is in order, and no competing claims have been filed. That is hardly surprising because for someone to file a competing claim – basically to jump McKenna’s claim – they would need to believe that the minerals were there, and recoverable. They would have only limited time to establish their claims through exploratory work, as well.”

“At issue is the status of McKenna’s claims after ten years. The facts that the family mounted a search, retained documentation of the claims and of McKenna’s research pending resumption of the search, and is now resuming the search, indicate the claims were not abandoned. The fact that McKenna was declared legally dead three years ago may, or may not, be interpreted as abandoning the claims. That will be for a court to decide, but I doubt it.”

“I believe our first step should be to send out a field team to verify the claim stakes at all the locations McKenna filed on. Next, we should seek a judge’s opinion about the family’s continuing claims. Do we need to re-file? It would be wise to expect to file new claims. That would be the third step. At that point, we should also file on the additional locations Mr. Smith identified for prospecting.”

“Our fourth step should be to have field teams begin exploration of the existing shafts. That will reestablish the family’s claims to mineral rights, whether the claims are reactivated, or refiled.”

“The fifth step is to begin exploratory work on new claims. This can, of course, be done simultaneously with exploring the existing shafts, if the resources are available.”

“I believe that would complete SST’s contract. The family should immediately decide in whose interest to file the mining claims. Ms. McKenna, you could assign rights to yourself, to a trust set up to benefit family members, or to Gulf States Petroleum. I think it is important to settle this matter now, before any work begins. It will be much more difficult for all parties to agree later on.”

“Are there any questions?”

Judith asked: “Do you have any recommendation for which alternative to choose?”

“My recommendation would be for your mother to set up a living trust, and put everything she owns into it. She might be the trustee, and you and any siblings would be contingent beneficiaries. Your mining claims would then go into the trust as well.”

“From what I hear, it wouldn’t hurt you to set up such a trust for yourself, as well. You strike me as a young lady who will amass a goodly estate quickly. You want to protect it for your heirs.”

Blushing at being singled out, Red said: “Thank you. Sounds like good advice. Would you be the person to contact about setting up these trusts?”

“No,” Goldstein replied, “but I can help you locate an appropriate lawyer here, or in Massachusetts, which I believe is where you reside.”

“I’m beginning to wonder where I reside!” she quipped, suddenly realizing that she really didn’t know. “I’ll have finished up at Harvard in a few months, and I don’t know what’s next on that front. My job’s now here, so it

makes sense to move here.”

She glanced briefly over at Doc, then dropped her eyes and said: “It’s not settled.”

“Well, let me know when you make up your mind, and I’ll help you find a lawyer.”

“As for setting up a family trust,” Red said, returning to actual team business, “that sounds very good. I’d like to take a recommendation to my mother, who has the final decision. Can you recommend a good lawyer in Maryland, which is where she resides now?”

“I should be able to give you a contact in a couple of days,” Goldstein said.

“Are there any more questions?” Red asked. Seeing none, she said: “Thank you Mr. Goldstein.”

Looking around the table, and especially at Doc, she said: “Again, this is my first day, formally, with the company, even though I’ve been working with Doc on this project for a week. Do you normally conduct meetings like this, calling each other mister, miz, and doctor? I’d be a lot more comfortable being on a first name basis with my team. My given name is Judith, but I’d prefer to be ‘Red’ to my friends, and I hope you’re all going to be my friends.”

Everyone smiled, and nodded, then visibly relaxed. Pat chalked another one up for Red in the “win” column. Always the teacher, Pat kept a mental grade book on all her kids. Instead of a GPA, or grade point average, they had a running total PGA, or Pat Grade Average. Pat thought Red’s was going to be unusually high.

“Okay,” and here Red consulted her notes, “Steve, you’re next with the mechanical engineering status.”

Steve Michels said: “Originally, we’d imagined that we’d be climbing down into one or more partially blocked mine shafts. We figured that we’d be dealing with a lot of block and tackle stuff, and machines to clear junk out of the shafts to make them as safe to go into as possible.”

“What Doc said seems to have changed all that. We probably will want to clear at least some of the shafts,

but we may be able to do most of the reconnoitering using Worms. I believe we should have at least two Worms, and many spare modules. We will need something to use in conjunction with the Worm technology to move heavy objects.”

“I suggest getting together with the Robotics Concepts engineers to develop a general purpose manipulator Worm module. It would probably need a reach of at least two to three Worm-module widths, and should be able to lift at least 25 pounds. More would be better.”

“Most of the other equipment we’ll need should be standard mining stuff. There must be contractors around who sink mine shafts for a living. Or does each individual mine have its own crew? Pete, can you help us here?”

“In general, mines are stand-alone operations. In underground mines, which is what we have to deal with, tunnels follow ore deposits. Miners drill into the deposits with pneumatic drills – basically jackhammers – to make many small holes into which they pack explosives, then light them off to fracture the rock. Then, it’s just a matter of mucking – digging – out the broken fragments with shovels. When the muck is cleaned out, they use timbers to shore up the tunnel, and start again. Each shot extends the tunnel a few feet along the ore seam.

The difference between a prospect hole and a working mine is that the timbering in a prospect hole is intended to be temporary, whereas in a working mine it has to last the life of the mine. What was once at the working face becomes a tunnel through which everything travels after the working face moves on.

Traditionally, it’s mostly hand labor. Over the last one hundred years, more and more pneumatic power has been brought in. Pneumatic power has the advantage of helping ventilate the mine, as the compressed air pumped in to run the tools brings in outside oxygen, and pushes stale air out after being exhausted from the tool. More recently, robotics has become important as well. The more robots you use, the safer it is for the miners.”

“I suggest that we need to simply start a mining company. Staff it with experienced hard-rock miners, and develop the mine.”

Here Doc interrupted to ask: “Would it make sense to look for a small existing mining operation that we could simply buy lock, stock, and barrel? The worst that could happen is we end up owning a struggling mine operation. At best, their dreams come true along with ours. We’ve done this sort of thing before. Sometimes it works out. Often we end up liquidating the operation at the end, but when it works out, it works out well for everyone.”

“It’s possible,” Pete allowed. “Especially if we find a small operation with proved reserves that needs a cash infusion. Would it have to be U.S. based?”

“No,” Doc responded. “As long as they know how to work in the same type of rock formation with the best equipment money can buy. What we’re looking for is expertise. A good overseas place to look would be South America.”

“Alternatively,” Pete suggested, “we could look for an experienced prospector who’s just sold out to a developer, or just gone bust. Offer him, or her, a consulting job with enough money so they come out with their next grubstake.”

“That’s probably the best plan,” Doc said. Then, thinking a few seconds more, he said: “Oooh! I like that idea a lot!”

“A third alternative,” Doc suggested, “might be to find a good recent mining-school graduate. Naw, we need somebody experienced. And, my experiences working with academics on projects like this has not been good. Too much red tape. They’re usually too focused on grades, and not enough on getting results. A recent graduate would likely have the same hangups.”

“Okay,” Pete said, “I’ll start hunting for some old codger with a burro. I’m only partially kidding. We need the modern equivalent. I don’t know how to find him, but I will in a few days.”

“So,” Steve took back the floor, “I’ll concentrate on working with the Robotics Concepts guys. Pete will

ping me if he needs any specialty equipment down the line.”

“It sounds like we have a plan,” Red put in. “Pete, is there anything else to say about mechanicals at this time?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Does anyone have any questions for Steve, or Pete? Any additional suggestions?”

Seeing nobody jumping up to talk, she called for another ten minute break.

9

When the group reconvened, Red began by saying: “We still have a lot to cover, and only a limited time. According to the agenda, we’re to move next to the operations aspect with Ezekiel Brown, then Thomas Devore who has been conducting a private investigation. Finally, I’m to wrap up with a discussion of how we’re going to organize information flow, so that this project doesn’t turn into – pardon my French – a cluster fuck. Finally, I was to lead a blue sky session, and develop action items.”

“I’d like to make a few changes here,” she continued. “It makes sense to me to get the results of the private investigation first. That will pretty much complete the information gathering. Then we can start looking toward the future with Zeke’s – do you mind being called ‘Zeke,’ or would you prefer something else?”

The only black man at the table responded with “Zeke is fine, thank you.”

Pat mentally chalked up two more leadership points for Red. One for thinking to ask what Zeke wanted to be called, and the other for taking the initiative to modify the agenda on the fly. So many newbies would be too shy to make a change. In fact, Pat had a sneaking suspicion Red had modified the agenda mainly to demonstrate her authority as team leader. It would have been a good gambit.

“Zeke’s discussion of logistics. I’ll go next, then I’d like to have Doc take the wrap up, since he is more familiar with the resources we have around here than I am. So, Tom,” here she stopped to look up to make sure Devore was happy with the diminutive, “please describe your activities so far.”

“Yes. Okay. And, Tom is fine,” he said.

Devore had the fattish physique of a man in his late fifties who had once kept in good physical shape, but was now losing the fight with too many doughnuts, and too much time sitting at a desk or in a car.

He had the jovial attitude of someone who’d retired from one successful career, and found a way to make himself useful by applying his skills and experience part time. In his case, he was a retired police detective who filled his days helping folks uncover information they didn’t know how to uncover for themselves.

This was his first job consulting for SST, and he was impressed with how organized they were, how intelligently they approached what they did, and, especially, with how fast they came to the point and made decisions.

Most of his clients were confused people finding themselves out of their depth. He typically spent half his time leading them by the hand.

Not these folks! They seemed to have the world by the tail, and knew how they wanted to shake it. They also knew exactly what they wanted him to accomplish, and then had the guts to let him loose to accomplish it in his own way. It was refreshing. He wanted to make sure they liked his work enough to call on him again. He especially wanted them to call back because they seemed to have more money than God!

“Basically, my assignment was simple: use all means available to discover the whereabouts of James McKenna. I have little to add to the history that Ms. McKenna – Red – outlined, except to say that I’ve verified all the information she had, and details her mother and stepfather supplied. I spoke with local authorities in Nevada, and people involved in the original search. I also worked with Dave Goldstein to consult the public records, as well

as studying the news reports of the time. You've already heard a summary of the results."

"I approached the assignment by listing all the possible ways a man in James McKenna's position could disappear. Here's the list."

As prearranged, Doc started the PowerPoint presentation the nice lady at the secretarial service had helped Devore put together. They'd loaded the slide images onto Doc's laptop, and Doc cued them while Devore talked.

Devore was not hugely computer savvy. He generally used the computer in his office only to do Internet searches. He didn't own a laptop, but after watching these folks use them to juggle information like circus acrobats, he decided he had to get himself one, and learn to use it. Information, after all, was his life, and to make it dance like that would be great fun, as well as good for business.

"There are four possibilities:

- The obvious simple fatal mining accident, which is what you folks are wisely concentrating on;
- An accident, or illness not related to his mining activities;
- Foul play;
- and the possibility that he simply wanted to disappear, and did so."

"I've arranged them in descending order of likelihood. Willful disappearance is something we must consider, even though there is no indication that he would want to do it. He had a wife and a daughter to whom he appeared to be devoted. We must remember, however, that McKenna had a history of spending weeks and even months at a time away from home. That is one of the criteria we use to spot an individual capable of willfully disappearing. Such individuals always have the ability to chuck their lives away, and start over. Most don't, of course, simply because they don't want to."

“Foul play is also a low-probability scenario. To our knowledge, McKenna had no serious enemies, but our knowledge is incomplete. In addition, McKenna was in possession of knowledge that could be worth several fortunes. He could have been put out of the way by someone who wanted to use that knowledge for their own gain.”

“Another scenario involving foul play is that he could have been attacked by a random felon who didn’t know, or care, whom he was attacking. For example, it has happened that people camping in the wilderness have been killed for their equipment. It’s rare, but there are examples on record.”

As Tom spoke, Doc paced through the slides. Each bullet point was illustrated with statistics, news clippings, and even police photos to drive home the message that these were things that happened all the time.

“Far more likely, however, is the possibility that he fell victim to some accident – and I put attack by a wild animal in this category – that prevented him from returning from the wilderness. Statistics show that it happens surprisingly often, even to experienced people. Previous searchers made this a priority, reducing the probability of this having happened in this case, but still a significant number of people go missing each year, only to be located by accident years later. Somewhere searchers either missed them, or they ended up beyond the search boundaries.”

“Finally, we have the possibility of a mining accident. Clearly, this team is mounting an effort that will definitively settle this most likely category. If James McKenna was killed in one of his prospect holes, this team will find him – no doubt quickly.”

“If your result is negative, the search will become much more difficult. At this point, he could be almost anywhere in the world. You will need help, and a lot of it.”

“I suggest a two-part strategy based on gaining public support. Start by publicizing your present activities. If you do not find him, post a reward for information leading to his whereabouts. Publicizing your search from the start will gain exposure, interest, and sympathy. A subsequent reward offer would send every Tom, Dick, and Harry out to search for him. If anyone knows anything, they’ll come to us.”

“There is a serious downside, however. Publicity will make McKenna’s heirs public figures. Ms. McKenna – Red – you and your mother will receive six marriage proposals a day. For a while, at least, the press will hound you. And, to be successful you’ll have to court them. You’ll have to go out of your way to get as much attention as you can. Appear on Oprah. Write a book. Whatever it takes. Not everyone would be willing to live like that.”

“In addition, if you don’t find McKenna’s body in the mines, you’ll have to check out hundreds of bogus leads per day. That can get expensive in both time and money. You have to be ready for that, too.”

“The way I see it, the choices are to limit yourselves to a low-key private search limited to testing the mining-accident hypothesis, or to go whole hog with a public splash. I see no other alternatives. Any questions?”

“Just a comment,” Red said. “My family and I have already thrown all the resources we have behind this search. Finding my father has been a personal goal for me since he disappeared. I still miss him. Anything I can do to find him, I’ll do. If it means writing a book, fending off a gang of clowns sniffing at my tail, or making a fool of myself on national TV, I will.”

“This is a little self serving,” Doc admitted when Red was done talking, “but I want to point out that we, as a company, have a perfect opportunity to showcase the technology we’re applying here. Something like a television program telling McKenna’s story and following our progress looking for him would serve the publicity effort you suggest. It would also be good for SST, as the suppliers of the equipment we use, and for Robotics Concepts. I’m aware that it sounds a little mercenary, but it is an aspect we should be aware of.”

Red, who was still nursing her mad at Doc, thought that sounded very self serving. She knew Doc never had any compunction about making a buck while helping his friends. He used Ben Franklin’s strategy of “doing well by doing good” as an excuse, but she’d never expected it to apply to her, or her mother, or her father. She wondered how much emphasis he put on the “doing well” and how much on the “doing good.” Long ago (at least it seemed long ago) she’d decided Doc was not someone she wanted to play chess against. Now, she wondered if she hadn’t been locked in a chess game with him all along.

She definitely was moving out of his apartment – tonight.

There were no more questions for Devore, so Red called on Zeke Brown.

“The way I see it,” Zeke said, “we need a field crew, and a support team. The field crew needs to head out to Jim McKenna’s prospect sites right away to verify his claim stakes. The skills we need are mainly wilderness skills, and the ability to find, and recognize, claim stakes. We can probably find local talent in Reno or Carson City. Probably Carson City. Depending on how quickly you want to move, we could send one, or three crews to either look at sites six, four, and one in that order, or all at once. Pete, do you agree that’s descending order of likelihood?”

“Yup, that’s it.”

Brown was nearly as big as Doc. At first glance, one might mistake him for a stevedore, with his tightly stuffed denim shirt, jeans, and work boots. A closer look into the steady, thoughtful eyes, however, would show him up for what he was: a busy executive who found time to work out with heavy weights several times a week.

“The support team,” Zeke continued, “pretty much consists of the folks here, plus any additional help you tell me you need. I’ll get started on organizing the field teams as soon as you decide how many to send out.” He looked around the room to see if anyone had any suggestions, or wanted to discuss it.

Doc looked at Red expectantly. He clearly had something he wanted to say, but for some reason didn’t want to say it without being invited. She noticed it, and decided any input Doc had, she wanted to hear. She wasn’t mad enough at him to forget how fast he could analyze a situation, and identify a solution.

“Doc,” she said, “do you have something you want to say about this?”

“Well, from the information we have, location 6 appears much more likely than anywhere else. I suggest we start by organizing one team, and getting them up there as fast as possible. If we don’t find him there, we can organize more teams to look farther afield.”

“That sounds good to me,” Red said. “Does anybody have other ideas?”

Seeing nobody ready to speak up, she turned to Zeke, and asked: “Will you handle this yourself, or will you need to delegate it?”

“I’ll handle it myself. Pat said to put everything else on the back burner until this was settled. I’ll make some inquiries after this meeting, and probably go up to Carson City by the end of the week to personally set up the team.”

“Pete, do we know anything about that shaft?” Red asked. “I mean, do we know enough to put together specifications for Robotics Concepts to work with, or do we need to look in the shaft, first?”

“I, for one, don’t know what information Robotics Concepts needs,” Pete replied, “so I can’t answer the question.”

“Hmm,” Red said, looking down with knitted brows at the papers in front of her. No answers were there, but her eyes were focused inward as she tried to figure out what to do. Then, she remembered Doc’s description of the future as a probability field. She imagined all the options she could think of, and what likely results each path might bring. Quickly, she made her choice.

“Steve,” Red said to the mechanical engineer, “I think this should be your baby. Please contact Robotics Concepts – I’ll email you the contact information after the meeting – and start working with them on developing a Worm to explore the mine. I don’t want to put a person down there until we’ve seen what we’re dealing with. I think we want you, Pete, and someone from the field team monitoring the Worm in real time to explore the shaft. I’d like to go as soon as you can get the equipment ready. I think you’re on the critical path for the project.”

Red had enough informal training in project management to know about Gantt charts, and critical path management. A Gantt chart lays out all the tasks needed to complete a project, along with their estimated time to complete, and their dependencies – which tasks can’t be started until others are completed. The critical path is the

one that finishes last. A project manager then focuses on keeping the critical path on track. Slips elsewhere are tolerated unless they start to impact the critical path, then *they* become part of the critical path. Red was already pulling together the Gantt chart for this project in her mind.

“Is there anything else we need to cover on your part, Zeke?” Red asked.

“That’s it for now, except to point out that if anybody needs anything else from operations as we go along, please contact my assistant Cy Tannenbaum. By anything else, I mean airline tickets, rental cars, dune buggies – you name it, he’ll get it.”

“One thing I can think of right now,” put in Doc, “is an assistant for Red. I’m serious about doing something to publicize this project. I’d like to attach that effort directly to Red’s office, and we need a flapper for her, or she’ll get buried.”

“Flapper?” Red asked.

“You know, like in *Gulliver’s Travels*. The king, or emperor, or whatever, of the Lilliputians always had a functionary around with a little puffball thing he used to control access to the king. If the flapper wanted the king to listen to what someone was saying, he’d flap the king’s ears with the puffball. If he wanted the king to respond, he’d flap the king’s mouth. If the flapper didn’t flap, you might as well go home and suck eggs, ‘cause you weren’t getting anything from the king.”

“And, you think I’m a Lilliputian king? That’s not very flattering.”

“Didn’t mean to offend. I think you need somebody to help you juggle your balls (no pun intended) while you’re helping everyone else juggle theirs. I don’t want to see you photocopying hotel receipts, or fielding every phone call. You need an assistant. Pat, can we free up Bonnie Wells to backstop Red?”

“Yeah,” Pat said, “she’d be a good choice. She’s worked on a couple of information-heavy projects and has good database skills, so she can help Red organize that area, too.”

“Does she know anything about public relations?” Doc asked.

“I don’t think so,” Pat responded, “but we’ll hire an agency for that, and Bonnie can liaise with the agency.”

“Red,” Doc said, “please have Bonnie set up a planning meeting in the next day or so, to strategize about PR. We’ll need you, me, Bonnie. ... Tom, I’d like you to be there, too. It was your idea, and we need to make sure what we do fits with your needs.”

“I can be there,” Devore said.

“Since it’s so important to you, Doc,” Red put in, “maybe you should manage it.”

Red wasn’t so sure how much she liked the whole idea. It looked like something that could get out of hand, and divert attention from the project’s main goals.

“Two reasons for me not to,” Doc responded. “One, it’s actually a side show off the main project. I want you and Bonnie to prioritize it with the rest of the project in mind. If I run it, the people I delegate it to won’t have the proper perspective. Two, I’ve the rest of the company to run as well. This is *your* show. Anybody working on it should report to you, not me.”

So, Doc had the same concerns about this PR project getting out of hand that she had. He was giving her control so she could decide how much effort to put into it. At the same time, he’d reminded her that this was just one project out of many for the company, and he was head honcho over them all.

We now know who works for whom.

“Judith, you’ve just been put in your place,” she thought to herself.

She wanted to say something like: “Sorry about that,” but realized it was not the thing to do in front of her team. Instead, she said: “Okay. Is there anything else about operations we need to discuss right now?”

Zeke made a palms up gesture with his hands to indicate he thought they'd covered it.

"That makes it my turn," she said. "I've two areas to deal with: overall project management, and information analysis. You all know your parts of the project better than I do, so please feel free to do what you feel needs to be done. I'd like to have us all meet here at eleven o'clock each Monday morning to compare notes, and coordinate our activities. Does that work for everyone?"

Nobody objected.

"If there's a problem, please let me know. Uh, I guess you should let Bonnie know, now. I plan to send around a memo recapping the meeting's highlights. My goal would be to have it done by the end of the day, today."

"I hope we can keep the Monday meeting down to one hour. We'll go around the table, and each take, say, five minutes to recap what we did during the previous week, and our plans for the following week. Then, we'll have a general discussion about where we are, and where we're going. We should each end up with a list of action items."

"I plan to set up a website for the project on our intranet. I have in mind to build the website as a front end for a GIS database that will carry everything we know regarding this project. Please post all relevant information there, so we can keep it all together in one place. I'll be able to say more at the next meeting. Hopefully, I'll have it done by then."

GIS stands for "geographical information system." GIS databases were developed for remote sensing applications to carry different kinds of data linked to location, such as satellite photos along with resource statistics. They've proved useful for any project that generates large amounts of data from diverse sources.

"The third piece is the PR effort. This is a new idea for me, so I don't yet know what to say about it. Again, I'll be able to report more next week."

"Does anybody have any questions or comments?"

Seeing none, she asked Doc to take the floor for the wrapup.

“At this point,” he said, “I think we’ve beaten to death everything we know so far. I’d just like to go over the major action items to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Pete, you’re to work with Zeke on setting up the field team. Start by trying to find a supervisor with local knowledge. Especially, try to find McKenna’s claim stakes. Also, start thinking about preparing academic papers on McKenna’s work as well. What research needs to be done? That sort of thing. See if there’s anybody at Gulf States Petroleum we can partner with on scientific research. Also, think about academic partners as well. We’ll make company funds available to help support research on McKenna’s methods.”

“David, your focus will be on securing the legal rights to the claims for McKenna’s heirs.”

“Steve, you need to get with the Robotics Concepts folks right away to get them started on building us a Worm. Consult with Pete to draw up a set of specifications. You probably should fly out to tour their operation as soon as possible.”

“Zeke, you and Pete are to set up a field team. The two of you might head right up to Shaft Six to take a first-hand look, and maybe look for McKenna’s claim stakes. Leave sign of renewed activity on the claim. Maybe you should set up some kind of headquarters building. That sort of thing. Certainly, scout access routes.”

“Tom, we’ll work with Red on starting the publicity campaign.”

“Red, you and Bonnie get your project management ducks in order. Your second task is to set up that intranet website with the GIS database. Your third task is to start organizing the PR campaign. The first two are critical. The third is important, but mustn’t interfere with the first two.”

“Are there any questions, corrections, or concerns? If not ... Red?”

“We’ll meet back here at eleven o’clock next Monday,” Red said, picking up the ball. “It’s pretty obvious

that some of us won't be able to physically attend the meeting. We've already got folks headed for airports. I'll see what we can do for remote attendees, and let you know before Monday. See you here then, and thank you."

"Pat," she called to her over the noise of people leaving the room, "where's my office, and where do I find Bonnie?"

"Come with me. I'll get you oriented. It looks like your introduction to Wavelet will have to wait a while."

10

Pat led Red back to her office, had her sit down at the round table again, and closed the door.

“Talk to me,” she said.

“How did I do in there?” Red asked.

“You know perfectly well that you did well,” Pat said. “Exceptionally well for someone your age, and brand spanking new to the company. You got things started promptly. You didn’t allow the group to get off track. You allowed them freedom to wander from the agenda when they were making progress, and pulled them back when it was time. You didn’t take shit from anybody, even Doc, which can be hard. When your business was done, you got them out of there with a list of what to do next. Yes, you did exceptionally well. Another year or so, and you could be running this place – if you want to. Doc was proud of you. I was proud of you. But, you knew that. Now, talk to me.”

“I’ve got to get out of Doc’s apartment,” Red whined timidly, afraid that Pat might take Doc’s side against her. “But, I’ve no place to go.”

“What does Doc say?” Pat probed.

“I haven’t talked to him about this. Frankly, I’m mad at him. I can’t get over feeling betrayed.”

“You’ll get over it, but it will take time. Doc expected you’d feel that way. I’ll say this once, then let it go: you’re being unfair to him – and yourself.”

“That said,” Pat continued, “you can’t help it. You aren’t quite rational about all this father, and step father thing. You’ve got a raging Electra complex going here, except that you’ve transferred the ‘hate your mother’ part to your step father. Anyway, now Doc appears on your step-father’s side, so you’re transferring it to *him*.”

“It sounds like I can’t make up my mind,” Red said with embarrassment.

“No, circumstances have pushed you. Actually, you’ve handled things pretty well. You still have poise, confidence, and a positive attitude. You are kind, and thoughtful, even to people your inner child perceives as enemies. That’s difficult. You don’t let your feelings control you, but you control them. Actually, you need to express them more. You could use a good cathartic tantrum, which brings us to the present issue.”

“You’re right that you can’t stay at Doc’s. You’ve no space to scream, for one thing. And, under the circumstances, I can’t see you being civil to him 24/7. Furthermore, it doesn’t look good, as our snippy lawyer pointed out. There’s no reason to keep up a charade that you’ve got a Platonic relationship with someone whom you have come to despise. It’s demented!”

“So,” Pat continued, “the first thing we need to do is get you someplace to hang your hat when you’re here at work. It’ll have to be someplace within shouting distance of Bonnie. No reason to uproot her.”

Pat consulted an inch-thick three ring binder, using an index tab to find several pages covered with a modified version of a grammar-school-teacher’s seating chart.

“There,” she said, “is an empty office three doors down from Bonnie. I see you’ve got the laptop we put in Doc’s guest bedroom. Did you bring the charger?”

“Yes, it’s all here in the laptop carrying case, which I’ve adopted as a briefcase.”

“That’s the idea,” Pat replied. “It’s yours as long as you work for the company. We’ll get you set up with a smart phone. Bonnie can handle that.”

“A word about working with Bonnie, and delegation in general,” Pat turned professorial. “Never do anything you can get someone else to do. We’re paying you a lot more than we’re paying her. We pay you to do the things she can’t do. Every time you do something she could do, you’re wasting company money amounting to about half your salary.”

“Another thing,” Pat continued, “Bonnie knows her job is to keep you as productive as possible. She will have no other duties, so keep her busy. You can be friends. In fact, things will work out better if you are friends, but remember who’s boss. She’ll be miserable if you don’t rely on her – a lot. I can’t think of anything else to say about that.”

“Now, your first instructions for Bonnie should be to set you up with a suite at the Sheraton Crescent. They’ve suites set up for visiting executives, and that is what you are.”

“I’m an executive?” Red said in disbelief. “I haven’t even finished college!”

“The same goes for half the CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies. You’re a visiting executive because I’m assigning you to run our satellite operation in Boston.”

“Where’s that located?”

“Your apartment. I’m having business cards made up as we speak. Don’t look at me like that. We decided all this stuff last week, but couldn’t do anything about it until you accepted the job this morning. I don’t want to give you a swelled head, but you’re a valuable asset being groomed for a career in private research. Get used to it.”

“I thought when I decided to break it off with Doc, that would change.”

“Screw Doc,” Pat said forcefully. “He lost his vote when he put his dick where it didn’t belong. Those are his rules, by the way. He may own the company, but he’s not the only one with a stake in it.”

“Hey,” Red said, irrationally standing up to defend Doc when she saw him attacked, “I climbed into his bed, not the other way around. He’s not the bad guy. He was there for me when I needed someone.”

“So, you do still care about him. Good. Remember that when this is all over.”

Red shut her mouth with a snap when that sank in.

Pat sighed: “No. I was wrong to say he stuck his dick in where it didn’t belong. As his friend, and as your friend, I have to say, even though you won’t like it, and I promised I wouldn’t say it, that Doc stuck his dick *exactly* where it belongs, and the sooner you realize it, the better.”

“Now. You’re to have Bonnie reserve a suite on the Club level at the Sheraton Crescent over on Dunlap. She’s also to get you a rental car. Have them deliver it here. I don’t want you driving home with Doc tonight. Get yourself something you’ll want to drive. I don’t want your team to see you driving home in an econobox. You like Mustangs, right? Have Bonnie put all this stuff on your credit card. We’ll reimburse you. Just get receipts, and give them to Bonnie. She’ll take care of your paperwork when she pays the bills.”

“Wait a minute. I can pay my own bills.”

“Weren’t you listening when I told you how to delegate? She can do it, so she’s to do it. I want your head on business 24/7.”

“Don’t I get any down time?”

“Of course you do. If you didn’t, you’d burn out. Then, where would we be? When you want to get drunk; when you need to get laid; do it. Then, come to work refreshed, and ready to go. We’re grownups here, and grownups have needs. You’re not a nun. Your job is more demanding than meditating in a cloister. We need you sharp, agile, and decisive, not a mental basket case. Recreation is part of what you need to do to do your job.”

Pat stopped, and looked Red right in the eye. “Stay away from drugs,” she said. “A lot of young execs fall for the whole pharmaceutically enhanced lifestyle nonsense. You’re an athlete. You know that steroids give you a boost for a while, then wreck your health. Drugs like coke and speed are the same way, except that they wreck your mental health. That reminds me, you’re a tennis player. Have Bonnie find a good tennis club with pros that can challenge you, and a social scene that’ll help you decompress. For regular workouts, the Sheraton Crescent has a decent fitness club.”

“Let’s see. Office, assistant, hotel, car, mental, and physical fitness, what am I missing?” Pat stood, perplexed for a few seconds, then said: “Education! How could I forget that?”

“We talked to the folks at Harvard. You’re on leave to take care of family business. All your courses are W’d out. No grades. I expect this project to take two to three months. I’ll have Tom find someone to keep an eye on your apartment. Are there plants, and such that need watering?”

“Yeah, I like plants.”

“Give me your key, and we’ll make sure they’re taken care of. We’ll get your mail forwarded here.”

“What about my degree,” Red asked while pulling her keys out, and handing them to Pat.

“We’ll give these back after we’ve copied the ones we need,” Pat promised. “I got sidetracked. You should be back in time for the first summer session. You’ll finish your degree, then.”

“Then, you need to decide where you want to go for your PhD Your main choices are staying at Harvard, switching to M.I.T., or coming here to ASU. All of them like us because Doc is a generous alumnus.”

“Doc went to Harvard?”

“For his MBA.”

“And, ASU?”

“We sponsor some research there, and do some recruiting. Where do you think all these people come from?”

“I imagined want ads.”

“Yeah,” Pat laughed, “for janitors, and secretaries. Our main product is knowledge. We hand pick our production workers from university honor rolls, like we’re doing with you.”

“Anyway,” Pat said, getting back to the subject, “your career path includes getting a PhD. The sooner the better. We’ll probably saddle you with an MBA, too. It makes you think more practically.”

“How can I work here, and go to school up in Massachusetts?”

“Ever hear of telecommuting? That’s why your apartment is now a satellite operation of Scottsdale Systems Technology. You’re a research analyst chained to your computer until you get your PhD. Who cares where your computer is? Then, we’ll go to work on your business and management skills. This’ll probably be your last team-leader assignment until then.”

“I’m scared,” Red said, looking scared.

“Don’t be,” Pat said soothingly. “I’ll be at your back the whole way. That’s why you report directly to me.”

“That’s another thing that confuses me. Who am I supposed to be working for?”

“Okay,” Pat said, changing her tone back to professorial. “Management 101: SST has a matrix organization. People are permanently assigned to one department along with others having similar skill sets. That department is responsible for keeping them paid, giving them a place to hang their hats, and so forth. That maintains a pool of talent whose services we assign to different projects. When you’re assigned to a project, you join a team for the life of the project. What you do all day is to work on that project, and you coordinate with the project team. I know you understand that part because you slipped into a project leadership role without feeling a bump. We’re now working on integrating you with your ‘home’ department – me.”

“Does everyone get a ‘Bonnie?’”

“No, she’s part of the McKenna Project team. She works for Operations, providing support for execs who have tough assignments. When McKenna’s over, we’ll assign her to another project. You’ll go back to Boston, and work from there.”

“Doing what?”

“Doc has you assigned to Wavelet. You’ll work on Wavelet when not busy with your homework.”

“But, summer classes are intense. I won’t have any time to work on Wavelet.”

“Make time, even if it’s just a little. The job Doc wants you to do on Wavelet is a solo. You won’t have to coordinate with anyone else. You’ll work at your own pace, and plan your own time. Use Wavelet as a change of pace to keep you productive when you get tired of reading textbooks. It’ll only be for six weeks, anyway. Then, you go onto Wavelet full time, while thinking about your PhD. From time to time, we’ll need you for another project, like McKenna, that has a time horizon. You make that your top priority, going back to Wavelet when your work for the other project is finished.”

“One last thing,” Pat interjected. “Sometime soon, you need to have a heart-to-heart with Doc to explain why you’re moving out, and what your relationship is to be. You owe him that, personally, and you’ll have to work with him in the future. I don’t care when, where, or how you do it. It doesn’t have to be today, but do it soon. Tomorrow, if you can’t do it today. Don’t let it drag out, or it’ll become a bigger problem than it needs to be.”

“Now,” Pat changed the subject, “let’s get Bonnie in here for introductions. You remember what you need her to do?”

“Yes, hotel, car, tennis club. Then I have to get started on my meeting summary.”

“Have Bonnie scout up a tape recorder. Dictate it into the recorder, then have Bonnie transcribe it. Have Bonnie arrange for moving your stuff from Doc’s to the hotel, too. Remind her to talk to Sam, or he’ll shoot whoever touches your stuff. He’s that loyal. In fact, you’d better talk to Sam yourself. I don’t think he’ll want to see you go.”

11

Pat was right. Sam did not want Red to leave. He'd been fantasizing about having her to take care of, as well as Doc. Like a real family! He'd envisioned Doc and Red getting married, and having a bunch of babies, and moving to one of those mountainside estates he saw in *Phoenix Home & Garden*. They'd need a gardener to take care of all that land. The gardener would take care of the outside, and Sam would take care of the inside. Maybe he and the gardener would spend evenings in the yard playing cards. A smart lady like Red would be a professional woman, so they'd need someone to take care of the kids. Maybe they'd hire a pretty governess just the right age for Sam.

Red dashed that dream by explaining that she and Doc were breaking up. Sam begged and pleaded, as if *he* were the lover she was jilting. She said that, yes, maybe one day she and Doc might get back together, but don't count on it. They needed to separate, at least for a while. Besides, it didn't look good at work for them to be living together, not being married, and she being a new employee while he was the head of the company.

That was enough to calm Sam down a little. He promised he'd pack her things so "those men" could take them to her hotel. No, he'd have her things packed and ready to go. He wasn't going to let some strangers paw through her drawers. He'd just finished putting away the laundry, so her clothes would all be clean and fresh when she unpacked them.

He was glad to hear she was just moving across town – a mere ten minutes' drive away. If she wanted to, she could bring her laundry over once a week for him to do. Laundry in hotels is very expensive, and he was sure Doc wouldn't mind. No? Well, if she changed her mind.

Bonnie turned out to be a year older than Red. She was of medium height, medium build, had dark brown (almost black) hair cut above shoulder length – just long enough to show tight waves. She had large, intelligent brown eyes, and a perky, good natured face. Doc had once described her as what Shirley Temple must have looked

like while growing up to be a U.S. senator.

Red decided to be a tough, sexy, professional woman, who knew what she wanted, how to get it, and had no patience with incompetence. She'd be milk and honey to whoever worked along with her, and Hell on wheels to whoever got in her way. She hoped it was the right strategy, and that she could pull it off. So far, it was a strategy that had worked for her with desk clerks, bell hops, and even Mandy, the marketing lady in Austin.

It also worked with Bonnie, who was bowled over by this impossibly tall redhead who still had the guts to wear cowboy boots with three-inch heels. Red was wearing a sky blue blouse made of real silk with no bra, unbuttoned half way down to show a drapery of silver, and turquoise jewelry hanging between her full breasts. Multiple piercings in her ears now gave places to hang a pair of huge gold hoops, with smaller silver hoops dangling inside, and turquoise studs large enough to cover and hide the hooks. A pair of skin-tight black leather pants tucked into the boots emphasized the length of her legs, as if any emphasis was needed. The pants were held by a wide black leather belt decorated with silver conchos, and an oversize silver buckle with the biggest scorpion Bonnie had ever seen encapsulated in clear acrylic in the center. Being a native Arizonan, Bonnie had seen some very large scorpions, indeed. This one was bigger.

Red had been shopping.

Bonnie thought she could never wear an outfit like that. She wasn't tall enough, or thin enough, or, for that matter tough enough, to make it work. Her new boss, however, not only made it work, but made it work impressively. If Bonnie hadn't seen her with her own eyes, she wouldn't have believed it.

But, there she was, sitting back in a brand-new desk chair, in an office with bare walls, and empty bookshelves, with her long legs stretched out straight to prop her feet on the desk. She looked like she owned the world. "If she were a man," Bonnie thought to herself, "I'd offer to have her baby."

"Bonnie," Red said, "please reserve me a suite on the club level at the Sheraton Crescent on Dunlap. I'll need it for at least a week, until I have time to find something longer term. Then have somebody pick up my

luggage from Doc Manchek's apartment. Sam, the houseman, will let them in, and have the bags ready for them to take away. Have them delivered to the hotel."

"I'm going to need a car, too. Something fast, but not too large. If possible, see if you can get a muscle car, like a Mustang. I'd prefer a convertible, but a hardtop will do, and might be easier to find. I don't care what agency you use. Any solid color will do – except that pukey lime green. It's hideous. Have them drop it off here. They can ask for me at the reception desk, and I'll come out to sign the paperwork."

"Let's see," Red continued. "Do you know a good tennis club around here? If I don't get some practice in soon, I'll bust. My game will fall apart. I'm looking for a pro with a strong swing. Somebody who can give me a challenge."

"Ms. McKenna ... Ma'am ..."

"Oh, please. Call me 'Red.' If we're going to work together we ought to be friends."

"Well – Red – How much of a challenge do you want? I've played a little. Enough to know that people who are serious about the game look for people at or slightly above their own level."

"I was an alternate on the U.S. Olympic Team last summer. I need someone to give me a workout at least twice a week."

"Oh, I know who to check with."

"I like to play for fun, too. Maybe sometime we can get away for a pickup game."

"That might be fun. Anyway, the place I'm thinking of has a nice lounge, and restaurant. A lot of people go there just to hang out."

"That sounds good. I don't know anyone around here, except Doc."

Bonnie thought that getting to hang out with Doc Manchek – at his house, even – would fill up her entire social calendar very nicely, thank you. But she didn't say anything.

"After you've saved me from being homeless, please set up a meeting with you, me, Doc Manchek, and that detective – Tom Devore. Tomorrow, or Wednesday would be fine. Oh, and please find me a cassette recorder. I need to dictate my report on today's meeting. That ought to keep us busy for the rest of the afternoon. Is there any coffee around here?"

"I'll get you a cup. How do you take it?"

"No, I'll get it this time. I need a break, and there's not much I can do until I at least get that recorder."

"Okay, there's coffee machines two doors down on the left. I'll have the recorder on your desk when you get back."

"Thanks. Back in a minute," Red called back as she sashayed down the corridor, hoping she was going in the right direction.

"Ugh," she grunted when she tasted the coffee, making a face. "Blech!" she added for emphasis. She resolved to invest a few sheckles in a new coffeemaker for her office as soon as possible – even before reaching her hotel. She'd invest in the maker, and makings. Bonnie would be in charge of its operation, and they could both at least enjoy decent coffee while she was working in Scottsdale.

"Bonnie," Red poked her nose in Bonnie's office on her way past. "Please organize some plants for my office, too. Enough to add some life to the place. And, do we have a decent technical library here?"

"Yes, Red," Bonnie replied, practicing the name to make it a habit, "we've a pretty good one."

"Good, as soon as I have a few minutes, I'll make up a list of reference books I should have on hand in my office. They'll also help fill up those empty shelves. And, I'm going to pick up a coffee maker tonight. I'd like you

to be in charge of using it to make coffee for both of us. This stuff is horrid. We'll put it on the bookcase just inside my door, and you can grab a cup whenever you want."

A minicassette recorder was, as promised, on her desk when Red got to her office. She closed her door, and sat down with the agenda and her meeting notes to dictate her report. Before starting to dictate, however, she downloaded all the presentations to her hard drive. All the presenters had emailed files to her, as well as all the other attendees at the meeting.

The phone rang just before four o'clock. It was the receptionist calling to say that her rental car had arrived. It turned out to be a new, black Mustang convertible with a 5.0 liter engine, and all of fourteen miles on the odometer. Being a rental car, it had an automatic transmission, but Red thought that was a small flaw in an otherwise fantastic car.

Red insisted on driving it around the parking lot before signing the paperwork. She came back with a new mechanical love in her life.

"Can I leave it right where it is for now?" she asked the receptionist. I'll be leaving within an hour, anyway. Red planned to keep to a strict nine-to-five work day – or, at least, day at the office – to keep from becoming a workaholic. There'd be plenty of times on this job, when she worked 24/7 in the field. Maintaining a disciplined schedule when in the office seemed to be in the spirit of Pat's warning to play as hard as she worked.

"Sure," the receptionist answered, "it's out of the way. But, tomorrow put it in the visitor's lot. You'll have to register it as an employee vehicle, and put it in the employee lot as soon as you can."

"Okay, thanks. See you later," Red said, scooping up the rental paperwork. She'd get Bonnie to take care of the registration stuff today, if possible.

On her way back to her office, Red met Doc walking in the same direction.

"Hey, Red," he said, "I was just on my way to see you. Could I have a few minutes with you in private?"

“Sure,” she said with a sinking feeling. She didn’t know what he wanted, but guessed that it would be awkward at best. “I just have to drop this paperwork off with Bonnie on the way by.”

As they walked side by side in silence, Red tried to think of a way to break it to Doc that she was moving out. Perhaps he already knew, and that was what he wanted to talk about. In fact, that was probably it. She had to come up with a way to express her feelings. Wanting him had become so much of a habit that she found herself wanting to hug his arm as they walked, like she did that day walking into the Driskill lobby in Austin. It had felt so good to trust him. How could she say she no longer did?

When they reached Bonnie’s office, the door was open, and Red stuck her head inside. Trying to keep her feelings from showing, she said: “Bonnie, here’s the rental agreement on the Mustang. It’s beautiful by the way. I can’t wait for you to see it. Thank you very much.”

Thinking about the car, and how thrilled she was with the result of the first little job she and Bonnie had done together – she felt it was a collaboration, with Red outlining the task, and Bonnie making it happen – that she temporarily forgot her anxiety about her coming talk with Doc. What Bonnie saw was Red’s genuine enthusiasm about the job Bonnie’d done.

Seeing Doc standing in the corridor waiting for Red, Bonnie felt a little awestruck. Doc Manchek was a legend around SST. Everyone knew that he’d built the company in just a few years based on innovations he’d practically pulled out of his head, like a rabbit out of a hat. They also felt that he expected each and every one of them to contribute their own ideas and innovations to move the company’s technology forward. Not one of them wanted to let him down, Bonnie included.

Here she was, working for Red, whom everyone knew Doc had hand picked to lead an important project, and Red was thanking her gratefully for doing what Bonnie considered a simple part of her job. Red actually made her feel that she couldn’t get along without Bonnie (which was how Red felt). And, Doc Manchek was standing in the hall with a serious look on his face, waiting for Red to finish talking to her.

Bonnie decided that she'd be damned if she ever let Red down. If Red asked her to wrestle a live crocodile into her office, and make it sit quietly under the table, she'd find a way to do it.

"Please take care of registering it with security so I can park it in the employee parking lot."

"Sure, Red," Bonnie responded, suddenly feeling proud to be on a first-name basis with her. "Did they give you a key card for the gate? You'll need that."

"No, I drove Doc's car in this morning, and used his key card."

"I'll take care of that, too. It's getting late, but maybe I can get Security to issue one before the end of the day. What time did you plan to leave?"

"I'm going to try to keep nine-to-five hours. I don't know if that's going to work, but we've got to have some kind of schedule, at least when I'm here in the office. It won't be long before I'm going 24/7 out in the field."

"I'll try to get the key card before you leave. I'd better call them right away."

Red took that as a signal that she'd better get out of Bonnie's way. Giving her a thumbs-up sign, she stepped out of Bonnie's office, and showed Doc into hers.

Closing the door, she waved Doc to a chair at her little conference table. Sitting opposite him, and thinking of nothing to say to open the conversation, she just looked at him expectantly.

Doc came straight to the point: "Pat tells me you're moving out of my place tonight."

"That's right," she replied. "In fact, my bags are probably already on their way to my hotel, if they haven't gotten there already."

"Sam will be devastated."

"He was. I talked to him an hour or so ago. I felt the news should come from me."

“Quite right.”

He paused, not quite sure what to say next, then bit the bullet and asked: “What’s happening between us – you and me?”

This was what Red was dreading, but she knew it had to be said: “We’re breaking up.”

“May I ask why?”

“I’m upset about you stringing me along all that time about my stepfather’s role in all this. You knew how I feel about him, and you just pretended he wasn’t involved. In fact, you pretended you were on my side, helping me avoid him.”

“The fact that I didn’t have a choice makes no nevermind?”

“Everyone has a choice. You told me that.”

“True, but the alternative was to spring it on you when you didn’t know me, didn’t know anything about how we planned to help you, and weren’t ready to do the job on your own. If I’d told you right away, you’d still be sitting in Daytona Beach with a broken-down car, and no way to do anything.”

“As it is, because I ‘strung you along,’ you have the resources of two corporations, and a team of experts backing you up. On top of that, you’ve got a pretty good career laid out for you, and a lot of friends to back you up.”

“Yeah,” she said, surprised by what she was saying, “but I wouldn’t have a broken heart.”

She felt tears welling up in her eyes. Doc waited patiently while they overflowed, then took the box of tissues from atop the bookcase, and put it on the table between them.

When Red quit dabbing her eyes, and blew her nose, signaling that the flow was back under control, Doc

said: “I know, and I’m sorry about that. Maybe some day you’ll let me help heal that. I very much would like to. I’m missing you already.”

Her cold stare told him that his helping her with a broken heart had no part in her plans. “Okay,” he said, capitulating, and taking a professional employer-to-employee tone. “In the meantime, know that you are this company’s star employee, hand picked for a leadership position. We expect great things from you. I’ve already done as much as I can to push you along. It’s up to you, now. Work with Pat. Do what she says. She’s made a lot of careers around here. Now, wipe your nose, and fix your makeup so we can show you off to the rest of the world. If you ever need anything from me, just ask.”

12

Two weeks later, at the team’s Monday meeting, Red sat staring at what looked like a creature from the Paleozoic Era. Looking like a cross between a giant centipede and a lobster, it was six feet long, had twelve pairs of legs, and a foot-long head sporting a pair of pincers that looked like they came from a mid-twentieth-century prosthetic arm. Each pincer had three claws, two that were set together, while the third moved between them. In action, they looked like two metal fingers opposed by a metal thumb. At the other end was a short, stiff wire communication antenna that looked for all the world like a stinger.

The thing was Robotic Concepts’ Worm. It was one they’d built specially for her project to specifications provided by the team’s mechanical engineer, Steve Michels, who had spent most of the past two weeks at Robotics Concepts’ facility in Santa Clara, California. The man standing over the nasty looking thing was Greg Michels (no relation to Steve), who was chief technology officer at Robotics Concepts, and whom Red had previously met as a disembodied voice on a speakerphone in Austin.

Michels was tall – even by Red’s standards – blonde, thin in an aristocratic way, and wore round wire-rimmed spectacles that enhanced, rather than masked, his intelligent face. His long, thin fingers adroitly pointed out the various features and aspects of his creation as he described them. Greg was about the same height as Doc,

but in contrast to Doc's muscular physique, and almost piratical good looks, Greg had a much more patrician air about him that Red found refreshing.

On first seeing him, Bonnie had quietly mouthed the word "yummy." Red had smiled, keeping her leadership dignity while agreeing wholeheartedly. Red had sneaked a look at Michels' left hand, and noted the lack of a wedding ring. That helped her plan her wardrobe for the evening's celebratory dinner, which would include – beside Michels – Doc, Steve Michels, Pete Smith (the team's geologist), and the producer of what Red thought of as "Doc's annoying documentary."

By now, she was getting used to the two-man film crew that was always buzzing around. To be fair, they did their best to stay out of the way, and Red understood why they were important both to the company, and potentially to her project. She, however, considered them another symbol of Doc's mercenary streak, and wished that the whole documentary could be dispensed with. Especially, she didn't look forward to their crowding into the private dining room Bonnie had reserved for the occasion. Without the film crew, they would have just taken a table for six in a quiet corner of the restaurant. Red, however, didn't want to endure the horror of being the center of a media circus in a crowded restaurant. The producer, Tamara Jones, had agreed wholeheartedly, although for film technical reasons.

In any case, Red wanted to be the center of attention tonight for two reasons. Her public reason was to maintain her leadership position as project principal as well as team leader. Her only concern there was having Doc at the table. He had such a commanding presence, quick wit, and quick understanding of technical matters that it was easy for him to dominate any discussion. The fact that she had the same talents, and that Doc had never upstaged her once in all the time she'd known him, didn't outweigh the fact that she was still mad at him, and so had no motivation to be fair.

Red's second reason to be the center of attention was that she found Greg attractive, and was on the rebound from breaking up with Doc. To further that end, she'd sent a private email to Bonnie early in Greg's presentation asking her to dig up everything she could on Greg Michels. Hopefully, Bonnie would include enough personal

details to answer the most pressing question: “Was he attached?”

She was pleased that Doc had asked Bill, the mechanic back in Daytona Beach, to forward her luggage to her in Phoenix. It included the one evening gown she owned. Her mother had insisted that she bring it with her to Florida “in case we have a chance to go someplace nice.” She’d bought it months ago, when a young suitor tried to impress her by taking her to the opera. She’d liked the opera, but she hadn’t liked the suitor, so, to paraphrase: “All I got out of it was this lousy dress.”

In fact, it was anything, but “a lousy dress.” She’d tapped her step father’s American Express card (serves him right for being a creep) for a stunning black velvet job that had been tailored to fit her shape, and to make maximum use of her long legs, ample bust, and coke-bottle waist. The back was completely open, arcing gracefully up from a point as low as practical below the base of her spine, up along her sides to a halter top. The neckline formed a vee that reached to the bottom of her ribcage. The rest of the dress was basically a form-fitting shift, leaving the observer with the delectable task of figuring out where her waist was by observing her body shape as revealed (never concealed!) by the dress. Below the thighs, it abandoned any further attempt to hug her body, and simply dropped in cascading folds to the floor. That made minor activities, like walking and dancing, possible, but made any attempt to, say, run up stairs fraught with peril.

When insisting that Red bring it along, her mother had no idea what it actually looked like.

Loaded with the right amount of the right kind of jewelry – not forgetting what had by now become her signature hoop earrings – it could knock the socks off anyone in the room.

When she’d first worn the dress, she’d been too insecure to wear heels. That night, she’d worn flats to minimize her height, which hobbled the dress’s effect. She was older, and wiser, now. If a man couldn’t deal with Red on four-inch heels, then he wasn’t the man for her. It had taken her hours practicing walking around her suite in them to feel safe. The muscles in her feet weren’t up to walking any distance in them, but she hoped she wouldn’t have to, tonight.

Back in the conference room, Greg went into technical detail about the Worm's features and specifications, how it was supposed to work, and what it was supposed to accomplish for them. That was: to crawl down a rope suspended from a support (basically a log laid across the shaft opening), which they would set up atop Shaft 6. The rope would extend to the wreckage of the derrick jammed below. The worm was to descend the rope, then crawl through the wreckage, collecting enough information to allow the team to build a three-dimensional computer model. They would use the model to devise a strategy for getting the Worm down to the bottom, or to the next obstruction if there was one.

A major upgrade since Red and Doc had discussed Worm technology with Greg over the phone in Austin was voice programming. Greg had hinted that they were working on it. Now, they had it installed, and were using it as the main control interface. Rather than have to type commands into a terminal, then download them to the robot, they were able to speak directly to it. It could listen via a microphone, and respond via a loudspeaker. When out of earshot, they could communicate the same way by radio.

"Greg," Red said at the end of his presentation, "it's a marvelous piece of engineering, even if it does look like a monster from a sci-fi movie. I think it'll do just what we need it to do. But, is there any reason to make the poor thing climb down a rope? Couldn't we just rig a new derrick, and lower it to the wreckage? We could feed out some slack, and use the drop line as a safety line while we check the wreckage. If that wreckage breaks loose, and drops down the shaft, I'd hate to see our little monster take the fall with it."

She knew she was taking a chance of offending Greg by calling his creation a "little monster," but she figured "What the heck"

She was pleased that Michels chuckled at the characterization. Apparently, he had a sense of humor, as well as an effective brain. "A safety line would be sure to get snagged. Then we'd lose the Worm for sure."

"Could we rig some kind of trapeze line that the Worm could grab, and hold onto," Doc suggested, "then come back to when it's work is done. If so, we could rig a separate safety line with some kind of quick release so

that we could jettison it if it becomes fouled. I should say *when* it becomes fouled, as I agree with you. I'd bet a night on the town that it'll get snagged somewhere in there at least once before we're through."

"That would work," Greg said. "It'll take a few days to design and fabricate, but that would increase our chance of success by a lot."

Once again, Doc had stuck his nose in, Red thought. Even worse, once again he'd provided a simple fix that made everything work. She was beginning to find that annoying. If he was gonna keep butting in like that, the least he could do was to be wrong once in a while!

So, it was decided that Greg would work with Steve, the team's mechanical engineer, to design the lift and safety-line systems using SST's computer aided design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM) system, then have SST's machine shop build it. They set a tentative date for the following Monday to have the team fly up to the camp at Shaft 6 after the team meeting. If the equipment wasn't ready by then, they'd have to postpone the trip, but Greg and Steve both thought they could make it. "We may have to work through the weekend, but we can do it."

Red insisted that they plan to bring the equipment to rig Greg's original rope-climb solution, in case the trapeze idea failed. She also wanted to have at least one spare safety line on hand as well, just in case. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Doc's head nodding up, and down in agreement. She had to admit that knowing the boss approved of her strategy pleased her. Even if she was still mad at him, she reminded herself.

In the early afternoon, Bonnie emailed her report on Greg Michels. Beside the usual biographical information about his degree (masters in electrical engineering), and so forth, Bonnie included more personal info. He had been married, but that ended in divorce about a year ago. He lived alone with no pets, apparently because he spent so much time at the office. He tended to come in early, and stay late, which might account for the divorce. On the other hand, it might be the other way around: the divorce might account for the workaholic routine. As far as Bonnie could determine, he was not seeing anyone on a regular basis, although he had been on a couple of blind dates set up by coworkers. "In other words, he's available," Bonnie concluded. She had guessed the motivation

behind Red's query, and was happy to be part of a romantic conspiracy.

That was just the news Red was hoping for. She and Bonnie both left the office early. Red to get ready to wow Greg Michels with her sparkling wit, and luscious cleavage. Bonnie to make sure the restaurant didn't screw up the plans. She had no reason to doubt them, but a good manager always makes sure. Of course, she wanted to be on hand to take credit. There's no profit in doing a good job if the boss doesn't notice.

When she arrived at the restaurant, Red found herself pleased that Doc nodded appreciatively at her outfit. She knew he was a connoisseur of ladies' fashions, so his approval carried weight, even if she was still mad at him. He even seemed to approve of her heels, despite the fact that with them she looked eye-to-eye with him, even in his cowboy boots.

He, of course, wasn't wearing "those awful boots" he'd worn in Austin. Those were a past-worn-out pair of suede boots he kept packed in his touring-bike saddlebags.

He had several pairs of presentable everyday boots that he alternated wearing to the office, and which Sam kept looking like new. Tonight, however, he was sporting a pair of light-colored python-skin boots.

No black tee shirt, either. He wore a dark gray western-style suit with a white shirt, and a black bolo with a silver slide carrying a large white stone. She recognized it as a stone that, during her own shopping excursions, she'd learned was a type of white quartz called "Moon stone" that was found only in Death Valley. Once again, Doc showed his taste for the obscure, and unusual.

Greg Michels, however, was startled to find Red's eyes looking down at him from almost two inches aloft. He'd elected to wear his usual running shoes, which were part of the California high-tech-geek uniform. Bonnie had warned him to bring a jacket and tie, but Silicon Valley geeks looked down on the western styles many of these countrified desert rats in other western states affected. Now, he wasn't so sure. Standing between Doc and Red, sipping champagne to celebrate his creation, he felt decidedly underdressed, as well as vertically challenged. It was a new experience for him.

The others, of course, politely refused to notice.

Greg had not been warned that Red was really an eastern city girl whose family had more money than he could dream of. Bonnie made sure Red and Greg sat next to each other. She'd tried to maneuver Doc to the chair next to Red on the other side, but he'd simply brushed her off, and chosen a chair at the opposite side of the round table. While Bonnie thought Greg was "yummy," she considered Doc "totally awesome," and kept trying to push him onto Red. This amused Doc, and annoyed Red.

Bonnie, of course, knew that Red and Doc had been together. Everyone knew. But, she felt that breaking up with Doc was the stupidest thing Red had ever done, and would have liked to see the mistake reversed.

Doc realized that Red was wearing that dress not for him, but for Greg. Far from being jealous, however (or at least not *too* jealous – that would be very un-Zen), he cared most about seeing her happy. If Greg Michels was what she wanted, then Doc, for one, wanted her to have him. So, he positioned himself out of the way.

There were other fish in the sea. He'd just never found one he liked half as much as Red. But, that's what tomorrow is for.

The dinner, of course, went off splendidly. Everyone at the table was a professional who had attended such occasions many times in the past, and knew how to do their parts to ensure that the dinner went off splendidly. Red and Greg discussed the technical merits of different options for the mechanisms to lower the Worm into the shaft and rig a safety line to it, while Red watched Greg's eyes lose their battle to avoid staring at her chest. Doc led the others in teasing Greg by asking him questions to force him to take his eyes off Red's chest, which only renewed the conflict.

Despite the sophomoric games, the group did some important business. They agreed that Doc's trapeze should be replaced by a hard rubber ball affixed to the end of the lowering rope. That would give the Worm's pincers a good grip on the line that wasn't dependent on friction. The line would be small enough in diameter that even the hooks at the end of the Worm's legs could hang on to it, if necessary.

The safety line would attach to the Worm's sensor segment by a spring clamp affair latched by an electromagnet under the Worm's control. The Worm could reattach itself to the safety line by positioning itself to engage the safety line, then activating the electromagnet to pull the clamp mechanism in. The force would close the clamp's jaws on a knob attached to the Worm. The jaws would then carry the Worm's weight, with the electromagnet supplying only enough force to keep the jaws closed.

Theoretically, the Worm could do the maneuver on its own, but they felt there was no way to write and debug the software in time. A human operator would have to guide the Worm and its manipulators through the operation remotely. The Worm's visual sensors, two of which would be able to see the electromagnet, would give the operators the visual feedback to guide the Worm through the task.

"Red," Greg said to her as everyone left after dinner, "why don't we share a cab back to the hotel? I understand you're staying at the Sheraton Crescent, too. Maybe we could stop for a drink."

"Sounds like a plan, except we'll take my car," Red said. It was just what she was planning, herself. She did not, however, say: "And maybe later I'll wrestle you for the last drink in the mini-bar in your room." But, she thought it.

She still had half a dozen condoms taking up space in her handbag, and no intention of letting them go to waste. After all, her immediate supervisor, Pat, had given her explicit orders: "When you need to get laid, do it!"

13

"I'm staying on the club level," Red said as she and Greg stepped into the Sheraton Crescent lobby, "there's a nice lounge there that's a little more intimate than the bar down here. I've had enough of being on display for one night. Would that be okay?"

"Suits me," Greg said. Being a techno-nerd, and having only recently been introduced to money, he had only a vague idea of what was available when money was no object. He thought the regular suite Bonnie had arranged

for him was opulence.

Red, on the other hand, had been subjected to her step father's lifestyle for three years, now. It was one of the things that she disliked about him. Every time she visited her mother, there were the marble staircases, the servants bustling about the mansion, and the crew running the yacht. She thought he was trying to impress her and her mother with extravagance. One thing it did for her, however, was to get her acclimatized to expensive surroundings. It took something spectacular to impress her. The Driskill was spectacular. The Sheraton Crescent was just "very nice."

Subsequently, hanging around with Doc for a week had taught her that money didn't have to spoil one. Doc seemed equally at home in a one-room cabin behind a roadhouse, or in the best suite at the Driskill. He appreciated the finer things in life, but didn't mind if they weren't there. When in opulent settings, like the Driskill, he drank heated cognac. When leaning on the outdoor bar at the Iron Horse Saloon, he drank boilermakers. All were just part of the rich fabric of life.

In a real sense, he had the money, the money didn't have him. More importantly, he didn't feel that having money made him a better person. Most importantly, he didn't feel that having it made him superior to people who didn't have it. It was simply there, like the street sign on the corner, or the wastebasket next to the desk.

He'd taught Red to use money as a tool. Of course, Pat had reinforced that lesson by ordering her to rent an upscale car, and move into what most people would think was an obscenely expensive hotel suite. Money was a tool to project an image, and the image was a tool to accomplish what she had to do. If others wanted to attach emotions and values to it, that was their mistake. Red knew she could be herself with, or without money.

In the final analysis, Red had learned that what was important was not how much money you had, or even how you used it to achieve your ends. What made a difference was what those ends were.

Right now, however, Red's immediate goal was to maneuver Greg Michels into her bed. Chatting him up in the Club Level Lounge was the first step. Assuming they liked what they learned about each other, she could invite

him to her suite when the lounge closed, which it did relatively early. If it all worked out, they could have their way with each other. That, to Red, sounded like a *plan!*

Greg followed her to the elevators, where Red used her key card to select the Club Level floor. Seeing that Greg was still a little intimidated by having to look up at her, she made an excuse to take off her heels. Ignoring the other two couples in the elevator, she kicked them off, saying: “Oh, these shoes are killing me!” She leaned over to pick them up from the floor. When she straightened up, the effect was immediate. No longer towering more than an inch over Greg, she sank to almost three inches shorter. Instead of an intimidating goddess condescending to let him be her pet, she became a really cute coed just right for a snuggle. She smiled up at him, inspiring him to tentatively move his arm around her waist. She responded by moving a little closer so that her arm brushed against his side.

And so it began.

“I’d like to pay for the drinks,” Greg said, when Red put his scotch and her cognac on an open tab assigned to her room.

“Nonsense,” Red scoffed. “You’re a guest of Scottsdale Systems Technology. You’re bringing us unique technology that’s going to help us with many projects in the future, as well as this one. We hope this is going to be a long, and fruitful partnership. Besides, its simpler this way.”

She did not mention that by “simpler” she meant that the lounge was for Club Level guests only. They would not have allowed Greg to pick up the tab. If Red had not put the bill on her room tab, they would have been kicked out of the bar.

“Let’s sit over here, and get acquainted,” she said, leading him over to the corner with the most comfortable chairs. Another thing Doc had taught her was to always commandeer the best seats in the house. If you don’t, somebody else will who has no more right to them than you have.

“Rumor has it that you and Doc Manchek have a little thing going,” Greg opened with the question uppermost in his mind at the moment.

“ ‘Had’ is a better way of putting it,” she corrected. “We’re friends. We tried taking it to another level, but I couldn’t tell whether he was more interested in what I could do for him personally, or what I could do for the company professionally. A man’s having a good income is important to a woman, but no woman wants to play second fiddle, even to a successful company. So, I simplified the situation. Frankly, this is a dream job for me. I’m not going to jeopardize it by playing footsie with the boss.”

“But, the rumors?”

“Everyone at the company knows about it. A lot of busybodies – my friends, and his – would like to see us together again. They mean well, and its harmless. Don’t be confused.”

Relieved, Greg smiled into the glass in his hands while thinking about what to say next.

“How did Robotics Concepts get started?” she asked, relieving him of the burden.

“Dave and I knew each other in college,” Greg explained. “He was a business major, but knew technology was where the big opportunities were, so he minored in electrical engineering.”

“Some minor!” Red interrupted.

“I got to know him when we were in the same electronics lab course. I was getting the highest grade in the class, so he made sure we were lab partners. We got along, and kept in touch. After graduation, he went for his MBA and I went for my masters in engineering. We both liked RPI because of its business incubator program, so we went there. Even then, we knew we wanted to set up our own company.”

“Cybernetics – what people persist in calling robotics these days – looked like kinda ‘the wave after next,’” he elaborated, “so we decided to aim in that direction. It turned out we were right. By the time we graduated, the

technology was ready for breakthroughs in mobile autonomous systems. Dave got us an incubator grant, and we started developing the Worm. We supplemented the grant with income from developing control systems using products from Mandy's company. Then, we became one of their Alliance partners."

"What's that," Red interrupted.

"It's an organization of individuals and companies who have expertise using that company's products," Greg explained. "There are different levels you can reach by taking courses, and demonstrating your abilities. A lot of companies want to take advantage of their technology, but you have to know what to do with it. So, customers look for third-party developers who can produce custom systems. That's where the Alliance comes in. Alliance Partners have already demonstrated competence, making the outsourcing decision easier. You can't join the Alliance without passing a bunch of tests."

"When we went looking for a high-profile project to demonstrate the technology, Mandy introduced us to you folks," Greg concluded.

"Yeah," Red laughed. "She caught Doc and me partying hearty in a bar. God knows what she must have thought!"

"She said you two were the smartest people she'd ever met. She said you'd been drinking, and partying, but still picked up the technology right away, and set up the meeting for the next morning. Then, you just went back to partying. I guess you had her join in."

"Well," Red said to set the record straight, "we didn't invite her into *everything*. I'm not that open minded, and I wouldn't be willing to share."

Greg laughed, seeing what Red was driving at. "I can't see Mandy getting into something like that, either. Although, I don't know her very well on a personal level. Is that the kind of scene you, and Doc were getting into?"

"I told you, I'm not willing to share. I'd have been more likely to claw her eyes out if she'd so much as

wiggled her fanny at him. Doc, however, tends to make up his own rules, then toss them aside. I never know what he'll do." The last part sounded almost wistful.

"You still like him," Greg said flatly, disappointed.

"Greg," she said putting her hand tenderly on his, and looking him in the eye, "I'm sitting here with you, not him. And, it's by choice, okay?"

Greg brightened: "Okay."

After a pause, he asked: "What's the story about this project? You guys very pointedly wouldn't tell us anything on the phone."

"I thought that would bother you. Doc said that if you weren't used to getting only part of the story, in this business you'd have to learn fast. He's right. Everything's on a 'need to know' basis. You wouldn't believe the secrecy around here. Even I don't know anything about what anyone else is doing, just what I need to know to do my job."

"But," she continued, "since you and I talked in Austin, we've decided to put this whole project in the public domain, so now I can tell you everything. You saw the film crew hovering around, and met the producer at dinner."

"Yeah, that surprised me, when I thought it was all so hush-hush."

"The decision to go public was made two weeks ago. I should have told you about it, but, frankly, I didn't think of it. For that, I have to apologize. I'm new at this, you know."

"You could have fooled me! You look like the ringmaster at a three-ring circus coordinating all the different sub-projects you've got going on: the Worm, the documentary, I guess you have a field crew running around somewhere, too."

"That's only the half of it. We've got legal issues, geologic research, and more. If I thought about it, I'd be

scared that it would all come crashing down, and everyone would find out what an incompetent I am. So, I don't think about it."

"Anyway," she said, shutting off that train of thought, "I'm sorry I didn't give you the full briefing sooner, so let's fix that now. What this is all about is finding my father. He disappeared almost exactly ten years ago while prospecting in Nevada. You see, he was a geologist who specialized in locating hidden mineral deposits. He had a theory that there was a big deposit buried under the mountains out there. Nobody could locate it because the processes that created it had stopped – a very long time ago – and subsequent mountain building had erased all surface traces. He'd worked out the geologic history far enough back to figure out that the deposit should be there. He even had maps of the its most likely size, and shape."

"The analysis," she continued, "was so difficult, however, that he couldn't get anyone to believe it enough to back him financially. So, he was out there on his own, digging prospect holes with his own two hands in the places he thought the deposit would be closest to the surface. One day, he just didn't come back."

"I was still a little girl. At first, my mother was no more concerned than usual. He often didn't send word for weeks at a time. When weeks stretched into months, though, she got really worried. She asked the Sheriff's department to check on him. They couldn't find any trace. My mother had maps of where his prospect holes were supposed to be, so they located them, and had somebody climb down into them looking to see if he was there. They still found no trace. There were three holes that they said they couldn't get into because it was too dangerous. They guessed that he'd been killed by a collapse in the last hole, which we've dubbed Shaft 6, but they couldn't get down there to verify it."

"You have to remember that, at the time, my mother didn't have any money. There was little savings left, and no insurance because there was no body. It was just her and me for years, until I went to college."

"You went to Harvard, I hear," Greg interrupted, "not bad for a poor girl from the sticks."

"Well, I knew that if I was going to go to college I'd need a scholarship. The only things I could really excel

at were tennis and studying, so I worked to get the best grades I could, and practiced tennis every day. I was lucky enough to attract an offer from Harvard.”

“You don’t get scholarships to Harvard based on luck,” Greg intoned.

“Anyway,” Red brushed it off, “part way through my Freshman year, my mother showed up with a rich boyfriend. He’s the CEO at Gulf States Petroleum. Her marrying him put things on a different footing. Now that I’m old enough, I’m using my step father’s money to find out what really happened.”

“So all this is about your search for your long lost father?” Greg asked, surprised. “I understand your interest, but you’ve managed to get a lot of other people fired up as well.”

“There’s also proving my father’s methods, which could provide a tool to uncover mineral deposits previously undiscoverable all over the world. And then, the deposit he was chasing could be the biggest find since the Kimberly Mine in South Africa.”

“Now I get the picture. That might account for the secrecy,” Greg speculated.

“Actually, no. We kept it secret while we tried to figure out whether we wanted secrecy or not. Once a secret’s out, you can’t put the toothpaste back into the tube. Better to keep the secret until you know for sure you want to let it out. Two weeks ago, we put together enough pieces of the puzzle to determine that publicity would help us, not hurt us. I just hope we were right. I hate having that film crew buzzing around, and if it was the wrong thing to do, Doc Manchek’s going to get an earful from a very angry redhead!”

“I sense that’s another thing standing between you and Doc,” Greg surmised.

“Not really. The documentary annoys me, but I’d stake my life on Doc’s being right about it. He has an uncanny ability to see these things. Did you know he’s a Zen master? Sometimes, it’s like he figures these things out using The Force, or something.”

“You sure you’re not in love with him?” Greg asked.

“No, I’m in awe of the boss, like everyone else around here. You’ll probably catch it, too.”

“Besides,” Red reminded him, “as I said, no woman wants to play second fiddle to a company.”

She knew that without the spin, the story would make her sound like a jerk. There was no way she was going to tell him that she threw a tantrum when she found out Doc had been in cahoots with her evil step dad – whose money she was using to pay for the drinks she was plying him with, and the bed she was trying to get him into. She tried not to think of it, herself.

“Doc seems so laid back. I have trouble seeing him as that kind of workaholic.”

“Yeah, but the wheels are always turning. It’s subtle. He looks outwardly relaxed, while inside his mind is focused like a laser. When I first met him, I mistook him for a motorcycle bum. Sometimes late at night, you can almost hear those wheels grinding away. Try living with that!”

Red was exaggerating, of course. She wanted to convince Greg that she was through with Doc, and wasn’t above stretching a point to convince him.

Robert Heinlein once wrote: “My brother, one should never tempt one of the dear ones to lie.”

“Could we stop talking about Doc?” she whined. “I didn’t invite you here to talk about *him*. I want to know about *you*!”

“Okay, what do you want to know about me?” Greg asked. He hadn’t come here to talk about someone he still considered a rival, either.

“I don’t know. Do you like puppies?”

“Yes, I like puppies. I don’t have a dog, though, because I’m at the lab too much. I guess I shouldn’t say that.

Bad salesmanship after what you said about second fiddles.”

“Is that why you broke up with your wife?”

“How’d you know about that?”

“The same way I keep from being blindsided by everything else: advance research.”

“So, you already know everything about me.”

“Only about Greg Michels the Robotics Systems CTO. I don’t know enough about Greg Michels the man. So give.”

She realized that her tone was getting a little bit harsh, but all this talk about Doc had annoyed her. She wanted him out of her life for tonight.

Greg mentally noted for future reference that Judith McKenna’s patience was not infinite. On the plus side, he noted that she gave fair warning when it approached exhaustion. That had not been true of his ex-wife. She was all sweetness, and light until the moment she blew up – like an atom bomb!

“I’m not quite sure why my wife left me,” he admitted.

Red said nothing, just waited to see whether Greg would decide to say more.

After a long pause, he continued: “I’d taken the day off to spend extra time with her. We’d just gotten funds to start the company, and I was actually thinking that maybe we should have a kid. After breakfast, however, she said she had some things to do, and took off. I hung around, playing with her dog for a couple of hours. Then, she came back, and told me she had outgrown our relationship – whatever that means – and was leaving. She packed an overnight bag, picked up the dog, and left in her car. A few days later, she came back in a big SUV, and packed everything she could fit into it.”

“It turns out she’d moved in with her therapist, and her therapist’s husband,” Greg continued, “but she still wanted to be friends. I said that, in that case, I didn’t want to be friends with *her*. She got mad and left. I filed for divorce, and offered her a check for one-hundred-thousand dollars on condition that I never hear from her again. Apparently, she blew it all in Las Vegas, because my lawyer heard from a judge that she’d filed some sort of action to get more money. My lawyer said the judge told her to get out of his courtroom, or he’d have her committed. That was the last I’ve heard of her.”

Red’s expression, which had started out as a look of compassionate concern, slowly changed to mild surprise, then amusement, and finally outright laughter. She clapped Greg on the shoulder, and burst out: “That’s the best divorce story I’ve heard yet! Didn’t you know she was a moron when you married her?”

“Actually, no,” Greg said, starting to laugh himself. “She was a natural blonde, though.”

“Oh, no!” Red gasped, trying to breathe while laughing even harder, “Blonde jokes!”

Catching her breath, she said: “But, being a blonde really doesn’t mean you’re a congenital idiot. You’re a blonde. You show signs of intelligence. My best friend from years ago is a blonde, and she’s finishing up her degree in archeology at Harvard.”

“Well,” Greg continued, “Kim’s from the San Fernando Valley, with that airhead ‘Valley Girl’ accent. I thought it was all an act. You know, to be cute. It took me two years to find out that she really did have an IQ smaller than her bust size!”

By this time, Red was in tears from laughing. They clinked their glasses in a toast to blonde Valley Girls with IQs smaller than their bust sizes, and Red went to the bar to get another napkin to dry her eyes.

“Oh, Lord!” she exclaimed, returning to the table and handing Greg another napkin to dry his mirth-watering eyes, too.

“This is the first time I’ve been able to laugh about it,” he said, gratefully. “Although Dave had a good laugh

when he gave me the hundred grand. It took him five minutes to write out the check. He kept stopping, looking at me, and breaking into belly laughs. I couldn't understand it at the time."

"Where'd Dave get the money?" Red asked. "That's a lot of cash for a couple of recent college grads trying to start up a business."

"He got it from the money guys. We'd just cut a deal with a private venture capitalist for ten million to develop the Worm. Apparently, the VC had a good laugh, too. They said they'd get it back when the firm goes public. Everyone thought it was funny, but me."

"And now you see why," Red blurted out as she started laughing again. "Did your wife know about it?"

"I was planning to tell her that night. I was going to take her out to dinner to celebrate. That's why I thought we could afford to have a baby. All I'd told her was that we'd cut a deal to fund the company's research. I hadn't told her how much."

"That's probably why she tried to come back to the well," Red surmised. "She found out how much you'd got, and wanted more."

"You're probably right," Greg agreed, but it didn't do me any good. I had to sign over twenty percent of my share in the company.

"Let's see," Red started calculating in her head, "there was ten million in the company at that point. If you're dealing with the usual barracudas, they hooked into you for ninety percent of the company. That means your cut was half of ten percent, which is half a million. Twenty percent of that is exactly one hundred grand. So, they gave you fair value for your shares. They must have liked you!"

"Why do you say that?"

"They had you over a barrel. They could have gone for your jugular. In fact, I'm surprised that they didn't.

They must have wanted to keep you happy.”

“Maybe they’re good Christians,” Greg suggested.

“Most of those guys never had a Christian impulse in their lives. Remember, I go to Harvard. I’ve dated some of those weasels. Besides, if you’re not a member of their church, a lot of so-called ‘Good Christians’ will chop you up, and feed you to the missionaries.”

“You’re not a Christian, are you?” she said, realizing that she was treading on dangerous ground. Not politically correct!

“Well, not really. My parents went to church all the time, but I stopped when I went away to college.”

“You got your master’s at RPI, didn’t you?” Red asked, deflecting the subject.

“Yeah, in upstate New York,” Greg replied. “I grew up in Los Angeles though, which is where I met Kim.”

“You were a UCLA undergrad, right?” Red kept pumping. This was a lot easier than extracting information out of Doc had been. Stop thinking about Doc!

“Yeah,” Greg said, “it’s great having a state college that’s also one of the top engineering schools in the U.S. Kim and I married when I graduated.”

“I assume Kim is the ditz.”

“Uh, huh.”

“So Kim, the moron, marries you, follows you all the way to upstate New York, endures two of the awful winters they have up there. Then follows you back across the country to the Bay Area, and finally dumps you for a *menage a trois* just before the big payoff comes. Unbelievable! No wonder the judge threatened to have her committed.”

“Well, she did wait until the first installment came through. And, there’s no assurance that we’ll ultimately get rich from Worm technology.”

“I wouldn’t have jumped ship.”

“You’re not a moron.”

“There are a lot of people who might disagree about that.”

He knew she meant the people who said she was crazy to leave Doc.

“Well, for that matter, aren’t you leaving a shitload of money on the table?”

“Not the same. Remember, my momma made me Miss Rich Bitch by marrying my step daddy. I don’t have to care about money because I’ve already got more than I need. I can marry whomever I want.”

“Don’t you have to find a guy with enough money so he won’t feel like your house pet?”

“If he let that bother him, I wouldn’t want him.”

“Ahhh! Clever girl!”

Red liked having Greg call her “clever girl.”

“Besides,” Greg continued. “Kim couldn’t be sure we’d get any more than we had already. We still don’t know, in fact.”

“Doc thinks you guys have engineered a gravy train,” she said, violating her oath not to mention Doc – for the *n*th time. “And, he’s usually right about that sort of thing. He’s probably planning to hook onto your caboose right now.”

“Should I worry about that?” Greg asked, showing that he, and probably his partners, were concerned.

“Most of the folks I’ve seen hooked up with Doc have made out very well, in their own way. A mechanic I know in Florida let Doc put up money to start his repair shop, and now has more business than he can shake a stick at. His wife has her own restaurant next door. Doc helped a barkeep buy out a roadhouse in Missouri, and now it’s packed full on a Monday night. There are a couple of others I could mention. None of them seem unhappy. Of course, there’s me. I’ve landed a dream job, in fact, a dream career. I get to stay in places like this, and hobnob with guys like you, while doing fascinating things I’ve always wanted to do. I’d say you’re in good company right now.”

“So, we’ve lucked out.”

“It isn’t luck. Louis Pasteur once said: ‘Chance favors the prepared mind.’ SST found you because of what you did. If you hadn’t done what you’ve done, we wouldn’t have noticed you passing on the street. Well, *I* might have noticed *you*, but not your business.”

“Thank you, I think,” Greg said. Then, he noticed the compliment/pass, and smiled brightly, realizing it meant he’d hit a line drive in the boy-meets-girl game.

Red suddenly realized that she’d solved the last puzzle Doc gave her in Austin a week and a half before the deadline he’d set. She ought to tell him. No, he wouldn’t care about being told. The important thing would be that she’d solved it. The supercilious bastard probably already knew, anyway! She could imagine a smug little smile creeping across his face as the knowledge floated down to him from the Great Void. STOP THINKING ABOUT DOC, DAMMIT!

“It looks like they’re getting ready to close this place,” Greg observed.

“So, let’s adjourn to my place with one of those nice little bottles over there. I’m suddenly in a blackcherry brandy mood,” Red said.

“No!” she amended. “I’m in a ‘drinking tequila, and leaving the salt’ mood!”

“We can explore the subject of Worms,” she added, making a triple entendre.

14

Red had already completed the transition from Lady Executive Goddess to cute and cuddly coed by the simple expedients of: removing her high heels (which on any other woman would have been characterized as “come-fuck-me heels,” but on her were a pedestal raising her above everyone else); and being cute and cuddly for Greg. Grabbing the strap of her handbag, and picking up her shoes, and the nearly full tequila bottle she had wheedled out of the barkeep (with a suitably generous tip as she signed off on the bill), she added “slightly drunk,” and “horny” to the above description by humming, and sashaying her way down the hall, leaving Greg following behind, and wondering how this could be happening to a clumsy geek like himself.

For readers who find Red being tipsy a bit out of character, we have to point out that, since having nearly been seduced into doing something she didn’t want to do by bisexual nymphomaniac Annie’s bar tab at the Iron Horse Saloon in Florida, Red had been careful to always post a sharp-eyed lookout in the crow’s nest of her brain, even while the rest of the crew might get totally swacked down below. Furthermore, in this case, the crew hadn’t reached their capacity limit by a long shot. They were largely playing a mean game of ‘possum.

Thus, most of the “slightly tipsy” part of her sashaying was laid on for Greg’s benefit, while the rest of the crew (obviously an all-female crew) plotted nefarious stratagems for separating Greg from as much of his semen as possible. The fact that they would carefully package most of the purloined goods in neat (well, actually rather sloppy) plastic bags, which they would then flush down the commode, saving only those few drops Red might, in the course of the theft, choose to swallow instead, was beside the point. The action of theft was the goal that mattered.

As the Zen master says: “It is not the destination that matters, but the journey.”

STOP THINKING ABOUT DOC!

Pushing the light switch to its “on” position after entering the room, she tossed her shoes, which had long since completed their tasks for the day, across the room toward the bedroom door. She then very carefully, and very precisely placed her shoulder bag on the TV table, and just as carefully, and precisely set the tequila bottle on the coffee table. She straightened up, and turned around.

With a quick glance at the door to make sure it had closed properly, she wrapped one arm around Greg’s waist, the other around his neck, and pulled him close to her, involving him in the longest, deepest, and most thorough kiss he’d ever gotten involved in. That includes all the kisses Kim, the moron, had involved him in during three years of marriage.

Not that Kim hadn’t gone in for kissing. She liked it, and did it at every opportunity. It’s just that, being somewhat intellectually challenged, she’d failed to get the main point. Red, with her vastly superior cognitive capabilities, realized that kissing was a cooperative activity. A team sport, as it were. To do it well, one must endeavor to maximize the fun for the *other* person. When both (we’re limiting the discussion to pairs kissing, here) partners do their jobs with skill and enthusiasm, the result is, well, you try it, and see.

Kim’s more selfish kissing, where she sought to maximize her own pleasure instead of concentrating on her partner’s, produced rather mediocre results.

Greg only *thought* he’d been kissed right before. His body proposed the idea that, if Red’s kissing was that advanced compared to Kim’s technique, then maybe there were other things Red could do with more skill, as well. It suggested exploring that possibility by launching the biggest erection Greg’s penis was capable of.

Red’s belly, which was by now in close contact with Greg’s penis – being separated by only a millimeter or two of compressed cloth – sent a signal to Red’s brain (through the intermediary of her vagina) that caused her to emit a warm chuckle. The chuckle found its path blocked by Greg’s tongue, which was just then busy sparring with Red’s tongue for hegemony over the combined space in their mouths, so it came out as a muffled “Hnnngh!”

On entering Greg’s ears, that sound, now converted to electrochemical signals, excited a feedback loop

involving coordinated actions in both their limbic systems. His amygdala upped its staccato bursts of neuronal activity, pushing his hypothalamus to crackle away with its own frenzied tempo. That sent a cascade of signals throughout Greg's endocrine system, putting everything on high alert, culminating in an astounding 25% increase in his erection.

Completing the feedback loop, the sudden expansion of Greg's erection tapped "Hello in there!" to Red's belly, which quickly relayed this new message to her vagina, which sent an urgent communique to her limbic system, which elicited another groan, and caused her to start ripping his clothes off from his necktie to his shoes, without interfering in the least with the struggle for lingual supremacy going on in their combined mouth space.

Somewhere along the way, as an afterthought, Greg's thalamus carbon copied a message to his cerebral cortex, reporting that all this was going on. As everyone knows, at least every right thinking adult knows, cerebral cortexes are of absolutely no use at such times, and are better left shut off.

In fact, as experienced female black widow spiders can attest, ripping off (and eating) the heads of their mates makes what's left copulate more enthusiastically. Apparently, knowing that you're being slowly dismembered and eaten by your wife somewhat dampens one's sexual enthusiasm. Ripping the head off simply removes the inhibition.

Experienced male black widows have been strangely silent on the subject.

Red, although figuratively trying to eat Greg alive, had no intention of dismembering him. That would have interfered with what her body thought up to do next, which was to try to swallow him whole, from the penis up. She kept having trouble, however, getting it between her tonsils and past her uvula. She kept gagging, but, being stubborn, she kept trying.

Eventually, through a supreme effort of willful self control, she got it past her uvula, only to find that it wouldn't make the turn down past her soft palate to her epiglottis. She tried stretching her neck to straighten the path, but with her throat blocked she could no longer breathe through her nose, her mouth having already been well

and truly blocked.

As stars started to appear in a black void, she gave up, and pulled back off. While reconstituting the oxygen level in her blood, she contented herself with using her tongue to clean up the rivulet of her saliva running down his shaft.

Meanwhile, Greg's confused cerebrum was wrestling with the problem of getting Red's dress off. He felt around for zippers, catches, buttons, or hooks, but could find none. Realizing his distress, she pulled the halter over her head, then let it drop. Of course, it dropped onto her face as she was working her way down Greg's shaft for another sword-swallowing attempt.

Pulling back again, she let the halter fall down in front of her, exposing her to the waist. She stood up to let the garment slide over her hips, and drop into a donut-shaped pile on the floor surrounding her feet. This completed her undressing because the garment's cut, relying on her shape to create its shape, had never allowed use of underwear.

By this time, Greg had his face nestled between her breasts. Finding her necklaces scratching his face, he moved back a little, taking a breast in each hand, and started suckling at her nipples, alternating first one, then the other.

This, of course, precluded further attempts by Red to swallow his penis, but that was okay. Red being Red, her inner thighs were already soaked to the knees, and she had no further need of oral stimulation. It did, however, strategically position Greg's erection at just about level with Red's navel. So, she used her right hand to position it more precisely, and pushed the tip into her belly button.

Only the tip could go in. Red's athletic build, with six-pack abs, left no room for anything else. She was forced to stimulate Greg by stroking his shaft. Her left hand, with nothing to do, made itself useful by ensuring that her clitoris didn't feel left out.

Very quickly, Red found Greg's penis leaking warm slime into her navel. While that felt good, she thought of what might feel even better, and started dragging him down to the floor on top of her.

She wrapped her long legs around his waist, and inserted his penis in her vagina. Then, she slid her legs higher up on his back – nearly to his shoulder blades – to run it in all the way.

All this time, Red's cerebrum, which knew from her Zen training (DO NOT THINK ABOUT DOC!) that the best thing it could do at a time like this was to switch off thinking and just enjoy the show, had been working hard practicing satori. When Greg's penis rammed home, however, attempting to elbow its way through her cervix into her uterus, a sudden cacophony of alarm bells exploded in her brain. She didn't know Greg well enough to trust him to pull out before ejaculating. Yelling "Hold that thought," she kicked him off her, and dove for her pocket book, with its remaining cache of condoms.

Greg's cerebrum, on the other hand, without the benefit of Red's Zen training, had been spinning wildly. Dizzy, it was further confused by this sudden change in the program. It managed to make him grunt, "Huh?" as he rolled into the coffee table, knocking over the tequila bottle. Luckily, they'd never gotten as far as unscrewing the cap before Red's libido took charge of the situation, so no tequila was harmed in the making of this episode.

Red's trained mind forced her to work calmly, and deliberately on the condom. That meant she got it over Greg's penis even before his erection started to fade. Quickly, she had him pulled back into position with his weight on his knees, so he could work his erection in and out of her vagina, which his body did automatically.

Greg took longer than some others Red could mention, but refused to think about, to achieve orgasm. Not realizing that, although long, drawn out stroking sessions might be excellent exercise, they could get boring after a while, Greg tried to hold back, and prolong the activity. Red was starting to wonder if something was wrong, when Greg finally exploded inside her, wrapping his arms around her neck, pulling her close, and grunting heavily into her ear. She didn't mind that at all.

A few minutes later, Red's hips began to cramp. Greg hadn't moved at all, except, perhaps, to sag a little

more like a pile of jelly over her, and go silent. She didn't mind that at all, either.

The cramps, however, forced her to get out of that position. She fantasized about rolling over with Greg's penis still inside her, and perhaps stroking some life back into it with her vaginal muscles. As she rolled over, however, his penis slipped out, the condom barely holding on by the little rubber ring at the top.

Red crawled over to an end table to retrieve the box of facial tissues housekeeping had thoughtfully placed there. Wiping her thighs and labia, she brought the box over, and laid it beside Greg on the floor.

He was not moving. All of his muscles were relaxed – flaccid. His eyes stared fixedly at the ceiling. He could have been dead, but for the warm glow on his skin, and his heavy, sighing breathing.

Red pulled a couple of tissues out of the box, wrapped them around the condom, and pulled it off. She used a couple more tissues to wrap that package again, ensuring that nothing would leak out onto the floor. Seeing globs of semen spilled over his penis, thighs, and belly, she decided not to let them go to waste, and lapped them up gently with her tongue, slurping the bigger globs down. At first she found it awfully salty, but, knowing it could do her no harm, she gobbled it all up. By the time she was done, she'd concluded that the salty, savory taste was not at all bad.

"Mmm. Good choice, Red," she told herself.

Greg was still comatose. A profound change had come over his entire outlook on life. Whereas previously his mind had been filled with thoughts about his Worm technology, his company's future, and annoyance with Kim, it was now immersed in a virtual reality consisting of how Red felt in his arms, wanting to feel safe and warm by holding her safe and warm, making her happy, and, most of all, fucking her brains out as often as possible. The fact that right now he couldn't grow an erection to save his life meant nothing to him. He'd just hold her, and cuddle her, until he could.

This, of course, is Mommy Nature's way of enlisting men as slaves to women, willing to throw their lives

away to fight off any enemies that might drop around the cave to harm them, or the babies they now carried. It made sure that no matter how far the man wandered off in search of bison or ibexes to eat, as soon as such a carcass was secured, he'd hoist the thing onto his back with one hand, leaving the other free to discourage the wolves, hyenas, and buzzards who thoughtfully offered to relieve him of the burden, and run as fast as his little legs could carry him back to her.

It's a system that everyone seems to enjoy. Nobody has complained about it in the last four million years, except for a few spoilsports who seem to want the men to bear the babies, and the women to chase the ibexes, no doubt keeping the spoils for themselves, and letting everyone else go hang.

Happily, in the present case, everyone involved was smart enough to see the system's merits, and enthusiastically wanted to be involved. Thus, Greg found himself volunteering as Red's sex slave for the rest of his life, or as long as she wanted him, whichever was shorter.

As the system makes no such demands on the women, whom Mommy Nature makes devoted more to the babies than to the fathers, Red was not so brainwashed. She certainly had fun fucking Greg, and found him nice to be around, generally. He could make her laugh, which counts for a lot more than most people are willing to admit. She was not, however, quite ready to shave her head and join a cult. She needed a little more information before she'd do that.

Again, all perfectly natural, and in accord with Mommy Nature's plan.

Mommy knows best.

Red decided that the best way to get the additional information she needed was to hoist Greg to his feet, and guide him to her bed, where a good night of quiet cuddling, and hopefully some additional groping, and maybe even some sleep, would restore his brain to its normal clear, rational functioning. Greg, the moon-eyed sex slave was all right, but she needed Greg, the ambitious electromechanical genius to fix her Worm up. She had a hole in the ground to explore.

15

The next morning Greg woke up with his face full of nice-smelling hair, a warm, soft feeling all down the front of his body, and his hand cupping a breast, the nipple of which was sending little jolts of electricity to his limbic system just by touching his palm.

Kim had never quite felt like this. Too short. This one fit his body better.

Far from releasing him from his bondage to Red, Mommy Nature had made sure his sleep locked him in tighter. The thought that this might have been Kim had been a disappointment. What he wanted was red hair, a long thin body, and lots of brains. There was that girl from Scottsdale Systems. It was too much to hope that this could be *her*.

A strident buzzing split the air, and evaporated his reverie. All his muscles gave an involuntary twitch, which momentarily levitated him a few inches above the mattress.

It had a similar effect on Red, who exploded from his arms in the direction of the alarm clock.

Greg felt devastated by the turn of events. In an instant, he found that the girl in his arms was exactly the one he wished to be there, only to have her torn away from him.

After shutting off the alarm, Red saved the day by crawling right back into the same position she'd been in when Greg awoke, pulling his hand over to cup the exact same breast in the exact same place, with the exact same little electric sparks shooting up his right arm from his palm.

"Mmmm, that feels good," she cooed.

Greg was too speechless to reply. He had, of course, known whom he'd gone to bed with the night before, but in his sleep he'd never really believed she'd be there when he woke up.

She turned over to face him, still wrapped in his arms. Their faces were so close, she couldn't speak without her lips brushing his. They both thought that was a good arrangement.

"It was nice last night," she said, "we should do it some more." Greg agreed, thinking that now was as good a time as any to start.

It's not clear whether it was Red's motherhood instincts, or her project manager instincts (it's entirely possible that they are one and the same) that opened a door in her mind, and said, "Wake up sleepy heads." Something certainly did it, because she was suddenly full of energy.

Without unwrapping his arms, she sat up, forcing him to do the same. "We've gotta go. You have equipment to build, and I've got people I have to push around."

Greg, for one, didn't mind a little pushing around today. He was more comfortable dealing with robots than women. He'd been trained to deal with robots, and had actually spent more time with them than women. He knew how robots thought, but had no clue about women. He was grateful that this one could take charge, and show him what to do. He didn't feel awkward around her. Who could say no to that voice? Who could object to being pushed around by those hands, and arms, and

Red grabbed a pile of his clothes, and shoved them into his hands: "Now, you put on your clothes, go down to your room, take a shower, and get dressed. I'll meet you downstairs in the lobby for breakfast at," she looked at the alarm clock, "seven thirty. That'll give us an hour and a half to get breakfast, and drive over to the office by nine."

Mechanically, Greg started to stand up, and go. Suddenly, Red stopped him, and turned him to face her. Taking the clothes out of his hands, she wrapped her arms around him, and said: "I need a kiss first," which she extracted for herself. Greg felt that was exactly what he needed, too.

"Thank you, Greg, for a wonderful evening – night," she continued. Then, noticing that he hadn't uttered a

word, she asked: “Are you alright? You haven’t said a word. Are you mute in the morning?”

Greg smiled happily, then said: “I love you.”

It wasn’t what he thought he wanted to say. It just came out. Of course, it was exactly what any woman wants to hear from a good looking, intelligent man who smells nice, and has recently pleased her thoroughly. She gave him a big hug, and said: “I love you, too.”

“Now,” she said, switching back to Ms. Project Manager, “get moving. I’ll see you in an hour downstairs.”

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Greg stepped out of an elevator into the lobby. Judith was starting to feel panicky. She had the new manager’s fear of letting things get out of control. She brightened considerably when she saw Greg.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “It took a long time for the elevator to come.”

“That’s okay,” Red replied as sweetly as she could. “We still have plenty of time,” she lied. The “float” she’d built into her mental Gantt chart for the morning had all but evaporated. It was time to abandon Plan A, which called for a leisurely cooked-to-order breakfast in the cafe.

Plan B was to scarf down the continental breakfast set up in the lobby. Red had brought her copy of *The Wall Street Journal* in hopes that she’d get a chance to at least scan the left column on the front page for the featured stories, but she didn’t.

She found herself feeling tense.

She told herself there was no rush, and no need to feel tense. Who gave a shit if they arrived at nine o’clock on the dot, or fifteen minutes later? It’s not like they had a bus to catch. Yet, she couldn’t shake the tense feeling.

They actually arrived early. They breezed through the front door, and up to the reception desk at twenty to nine. Greg signed in again as a visitor with Red as host. It was the simplest thing to do, since she was right there to

escort him in. He was actually going to be working with Steve Michels, but if Greg signed in with Steve as host, the receptionist would make Greg stand there until Steve came out to escort him into the building. As host, Red could simply escort Greg to Steve's office before going to hers.

Red's appearance that day surprised everyone except Bonnie. Instead of the usual jeans and boots, she wore sandals with flat heels, and a summery print skirt. Her solid yellow blouse was buttoned two buttons farther up than usual, and a bra controlled the jiggling of her breasts.

Bonnie took one look, and smiled, knowingly. "So, you scored, didn't you," she said as she came in for their usual informal morning day-planning session. "I can tell by the skirt."

"What?" Red said, in mock surprise. "Nothing's different. Can't a lady put on a skirt? The weather's getting pretty warm for jeans and boots all the time, you know."

"Yeah, right," Bonnie intoned sarcastically. "Flats so you don't tower over him. Print skirt so you don't look tough. A bra to tone down the jiggling. You've got him hooked, and you're ready to reel him in. When's the wedding?"

"Enough of that. We must maintain office decorum, and I haven't decided when the wedding will be, yet."

"But you scored," Bonnie said, trying to confirm her hunch, so she could wheedle for details.

"Oh, yeah," Red said, rolling her eyes. "Big time!"

"So give with the details."

"No details. Let's just leave it that we never got to opening the bottle of tequila. It's still on my coffee table."

"No tequila? Don't tell me he shook your hand, said good night, and left. I won't believe it."

"I said we never got to opening the bottle," Red reminded her. "Things moved too fast."

“Okay,” Red relented. “After dinner I drove us to the hotel, and invited him up to the Club Level lounge. We sat and talked for about two hours. He’s really a very interesting man.”

“And, a dreamboat.”

“Okay, and a dreamboat. Anyway, they started to close up the lounge, so we grabbed a bottle of tequila, and went down the hall to my room. We thought we’d have a few more drinks, and continue our conversation. We never got to it. No drinks. No conversation. I don’t think we said three coherent words the rest of the night. I just grabbed him, and that was it.”

“You mean you never got to the bed?”

“Well, yeah. Later. We woke up this morning all cuddled up.”

“So, should I cancel his hotel reservation? You gonna move him into your suite?”

Red clouded over slightly. “I haven’t had very good luck with men so far,” she said seriously. “This might be just a one-night stand.”

“It doesn’t look like a one-night stand to me,” Bonnie said, indicating Red’s skirt.

“Well, it could be. He’s going back to Santa Clara in a few weeks. That may be the end of it. I’m not in the market for a husband, anyway. I’ve an education to finish, and a career to build.”

Bonnie looked at her steadily, and said: “Red. This is me. You said we should be friends, and I think we’ve done that. I know you pretty well, now. You can’t fool me. You want a husband so bad you could scream.”

“Maybe, but maybe not this one. I’m going to take it slow.”

“That makes sense. What am I saying? You usually make sense. More sense than most people, anyway. Just don’t let him get away ‘cause you’re scared of commitment. Remember, they have good schools in San Francisco,

and you can telecommute from the Bay Area, as well as from Boston.”

“Please. I’m tired of people pushing me about my love life. First it was Doc, now it’s Greg.”

“We just want to see you happy. Besides, we have to get you out of circulation so the rest of us have a chance.”

Maybe that was what was making her tense.

An hour later, Doc showed up at her door. “Just a social call,” he said. “I’m curious how you made out with Greg last night.”

“Why, are you jealous,” Red responded, unkindly.

“I hope not. Bad karma. Would show an unhealthy attachment. I just want to know how my new star employee is managing her relationship with our new star equipment supplier.”

“I fucked his brains out.”

Amused by her bluntness, Doc said: “Good for you. Did you have a good time?”

“Yes, very.”

“Double good.”

“Look. Could you get to the point? I don’t have much patience today. In fact, I’m feeling kind of tense.”

“Of course, you’ve taken off your armor.”

“Huh?” She didn’t think she could take Doc’s Taoist leaps of intuition today.

“The cowboy boots. The jeans. The jewelry. The Lauren Hutton neckline. Those are your armor. You’ve been pushed to take on responsibilities you never really believed you’d have to shoulder, certainly not this soon,

and you're not sure you're up to it. Putting on a bold front helps you keep your courage up. Because you like Greg, or, should I say because you want Greg to like you, you've chosen to be more vulnerable. You took off that armor. But, now you're exposed, and it scares you. That's why you're tense."

She thought about what he said for a minute, then said: "I hate you. You're always right, dammit."

"I'll have to remember to be wrong more often for you. I thought I already did it often enough, but apparently not."

She could never tell when he was joking, and when he was dead serious. She wasn't even sure there was a difference.

"Anyway, you wanted me to come to the point: What am I doing here, interrupting your day for no apparent reason?"

He took a breath.

"The point is: I'm checking up on you for good business reasons. If you decide to run off and marry Greg, then spend ten years playing Mommy, it affects our investment in you. We need to know, so we can plan."

"That didn't seem to bother you when *you* were making moon-eyes at me. All of a sudden it's a problem when I'm interested in Greg? That's pretty transparent, fella."

"You misunderstand me. We know that over the next ten, fifteen, or twenty years, you'll be juggling home life, and work. You're a normal, healthy woman. You're likely to want a home, kids, and so forth. We've made the commitment to try to help you – to be flexible to make it as easy as possible for you. When it was you and me, we had a clear picture. We had a plan. We knew, or at least thought we knew, more or less what to expect and how to react."

"You've changed all that, which is okay," he continued. "We aren't idiots, we know things change. We just

need to know what's going on, so we can change, too. We don't want to be, for example, smoothing your way into a graduate program in Boston, if you want to head off to Santa Clara. We'd start checking our Roll-O-Dexes for contacts up at Berkeley, instead. Another unknown is Greg. What does he want in a wife? Some guys want a stay-at-home wife. Others don't mind living with a career gal."

"How come men don't have such problems?"

"Who says they don't? They do. When we hire a young man just out of college, we plan ways to make it possible for him to, for example, get an advanced degree. We site plants so they can have a reasonable commute to areas that are good for growing families. We set up health care plans, and so forth. We do all that stuff because we know that people are our most valuable asset. We wouldn't screw up an employee's life any more than we'd leave a computer out in the rain."

"You don't poke your noses into their love lives," Red complained. "They don't get a visit from the CEO every time they go out on a date."

"Yes, they do. They often get visits from managers two levels up, which for you means me. It's just that most employees give us a chance to do it more subtly. They don't wonder why we're checking up on them, and challenge us to come to the point. You, however, look behind the curtain, then want an accounting for what you see there. Of course, that's why you're more valuable to us than most employees."

"You, in particular, are an *extremely* valuable asset. You're smarter, tougher, and more independent than the average schmo. We need those qualities, so we're willing to invest more in you than in the average schmo. But, we need to make the *right* investments, so we need to check more closely. The upside of being a genius is that society values you highly. The downside of being a genius is that society values you highly."

"I'm not a genius," she challenged. "That's a title others give to you for accomplishments already done."

"Yes, which gives me the right to bestow the title on you. Nyeah!" He stuck out his tongue.

“Damn, you’re difficult!” Red complained, bitterly.

“Damn, you’re difficult!” Doc echoed.

“Okay, look,” she said, capitulating by tacitly agreeing to take what he said at face value. “I like Greg. We had a great time last night, both in, and out of the sack. I might decide to marry him – assuming he’d have me – and move to California, but I don’t know. I’m taking it slow. I’ve a lot on my plate right now, and don’t need the clanking of wedding bells to add to the confusion. If anything changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Better make me third, or fourth, to know. Tell yourself first, then Greg, then Pat before me. I probably shouldn’t have pestered you, but I was curious to find out what happened last night. I knew Greg was a gonner when you showed up in that dress. I was curious about how he responded. It tells me a little about him, too.”

“Satisfied?”

“Never, but it’s a good start. By the way, don’t be too fast to change yourself around for Greg. Be yourself. If he’s the right guy for you, he’ll want you the way you are.”

“So, you don’t think I should have changed?”

“No, no. Change is good. If you wake up in the morning feeling like Suzy Homemaker, dress like Suzy Homemaker. If you feel like being a fashion model, or a biker chick, that’s what you should do. But, do it for *you*. Don’t do it because you think it’s what he’ll want. You don’t know what he’ll want, anyway, and acting on a guess is a recipe for disaster. It sounds corny, but you have to be true to yourself. If some guy doesn’t like it, then he’s not the right guy for you. You’d be doing both of you a disservice.”

“Now,” he concluded, “I’ve got other people to annoy.”

On impulse, she ran up to him, and gave him a hug.

“Thanks, Daddy,” she said.

After he left, she thought about what she'd done. She'd consciously meant the "Daddy" bit as a joke, because of the way he'd talked to her, but she might be starting to think of Doc as the father figure she'd been missing all these years. "You're going to need psychoanalysis before this is all done, girl," she told herself.

Well, at least, she wouldn't have to be quite so mad at him, anymore.

16

During the latter half of the afternoon, Red was surprised to hear a scream coming from the direction of the hangar where all the workshops were. "Aaah!" came another scream, followed a few seconds later by a third. Some of the screams came from high-pitched female voices, some from deeper male voices. All were genuine, "Oh, what a horrible thing!" screams.

Normally, human beings, when presented with evidence of danger, such as frightened screams, run *away* from the source. It's called self preservation, and accounts for such a large portion of the our ancestors having survived to populate the world.

There is, however, a sub-species that carries a mutant gene that has "hero" written on the side. These people are driven to run *toward* danger, instead of away. Mother Nature must feel these individuals fill a very important role in society, because the subspecies is represented by a significant number of individuals, despite the obvious evolutionary disadvantage the mutant gene confers on its victims.

When interviewed after such incidents, the victims often say such absurd things as: "I just wanted to help," leading researchers to hypothesize that the damaged gene acts by causing victims to hallucinate, whereupon they become disoriented, and run in the wrong direction.

Red, unfortunately, was afflicted with this genetic disorder. Instead of running away from the hangar area from which the screaming clearly was emanating, she ran toward it. In fact, she correctly solved the traveling salesman problem with lightning speed to determine the shortest, most direct path *toward* the hangar entrance, and

used it. Running down the corridor outside of her office to a cross linking corridor, she took it, then turned to run back parallel to the direction from which she had come.

When she emerged from the cross linking corridor, however, she stopped dead in her tracks. About half way between her and the door leading into the hangar, the Worm crouched in the middle of the floor, swinging its head back, and forth as if looking for something.

Satisfied that there was nothing of interest in the corridor, it rattled its way to one of the closed office doors, reared up with its front two thirds vertical, while supporting itself by the rearmost six segments, and banged on the door with one of its pincers. The door opened slightly, and an engineer poked her head out, hoping it was someone giving her the all clear.

As soon as her head appeared, the Worm lifted up its pincers threateningly, shook them, and emitted a series of loud noises that sounded like a turkey gobbling. The poor engineer screamed, and ducked her head back, slamming the door.

The Worm then dropped down to the floor, and crawled to the next door, reared up, and banged on it, then ran through the same performance when it opened. The third office was empty, so nobody answered. After knocking three times, the Worm used one pincer to turn the knob. Opening the door, the worm, still reared up on its hind segments, entered the room, and fired off a strobe flash as it recorded a still photo.

As it exited the office, the Worm spotted Red standing in the corridor watching it. It executed a fast turn in her direction, and, still reared up on its hind segments, charged directly at her, waving its pincers, and emitting its gobbling sound.

Red was not intimidated. Unlike most of the people in this part of the building, she knew exactly what it was, and had a pretty good idea what was going on. Most importantly, she knew where the emergency-stop button was, and used it as soon as the Worm got close enough.

“Greg! Steve!” she yelled. Four grinning heads poked out from around the corner at the corridor’s far end. The third, and fourth heads belonged to technicians assigned to help set up and program the Worm.

“You assholes!” she yelled, trying to suppress her own grin. The Worm had looked so comical. It was frightening to an unsuspecting civilian who’d never encountered anything like it outside of a science fiction film, but to one who knew what it was, and what little it was capable of, it was about as frightening as an eight-year-old wearing a sheet.

Greg had obviously been teaching the technicians how to program the Worm. On a lark, they’d decided to practice by programming it to seek out, and terrorize unsuspecting humans. Then, they’d let it loose in the office area.

Unable to think of anything worthwhile to say, Red stomped down to the end of the corridor toward the four miscreants. Had she worn her usual jeans and heavy-heeled boots that day, the stomping might have been more psychologically effective. As it was, instead of being accompanied by a loud banging from each footfall on the linoleum-covered concrete floor, the sound was a slap-slap from Red’s flat sandals. Still, Red towered over three of the four men she approached, and projected a convincing image of a red-haired avenging angel. The fact that she outranked three of them, and was paying the fourth as an outside agent, did nothing to lessen the intimidation she was capable of.

“What the Hell did you think you were doing?” she started to say, trying to find words with which to continue the tirade, when, just as she reached the corridor’s end, she spied Doc sitting on the floor doubled over with silent laughter.

Red wanted to chew Greg, Steve, and the technicians out, but every time she thought of the Worm standing four feet tall, and waving its arms in the air saying “gobble, gobble, gobble,” she burst into laughter. She’d managed to keep an angry look on her face while stomping the length of the corridor by suppressing the image in her mind.

Turning her attention to Doc, she scolded: “I should have known you’d be in on this. You’re probably the ringleader!”

Doc looked up, trying to control his mirth. “*Mais non, ma cherie. Je suis innocent!*”

“Stop speaking French. It makes me think you’re lying.”

“*Non, non, je suis ...* I can’t remember how to say ‘completely honest.’”

“That’s because you don’t know the meaning of the word,” she said, misusing “word” instead of “phrase.” In her frustration, she didn’t bother to correct herself. Instead, she kicked Doc’s shin gently with her sandaled foot. Then she, too burst out laughing, and lost the ability to communicate.

Greg, who was unsure of the footing he stood on, being an outsider, was the first to say something useful. “No, Doc’s right. He didn’t know anything about it. In fact, he was the first one to encounter the Worm. It banged on his door, and then went through it’s routine. He started laughing. Then, it started going down the corridor. Banging on doors like a trick-or-treater.”

Red and Doc had simultaneously started thinking about the ramifications of letting a scary mechanical monster loose in the corridor, and sobered up fast.

“Red,” Doc said to her sternly, but quietly, “these clowns are your responsibility. Put a cork on this mess, and I’ll get Pat started on damage control.”

Red nodded, and turned on the miscreants. “You two,” indicating the technicians, “throw a tarp over that thing, and put it in ...,” she turned to Doc for advice. He said: “My office.” Turning back, she said: “Doc’s office. Then sit your asses down at the conference table, and think about how you’re going to explain this to the people you’ve scared the pants off. Now, move!”

The two techs took off to do as told, now worried about their jobs and careers.

“You two,” Red yelled at Greg and Steve, “get in there, now!”

Red sat at one end of Doc’s rectangular conference table. Steve and Greg took up positions on either side of her. All sat silently thinking their own thoughts.

Red had managed to suppress the image of the Worm waving its arms and gobbling, and was now seething about her team members – people she trusted to get her through all this – pulling an irresponsible stunt that she feared might backfire badly. She felt betrayed.

We all know that a betrayed Red is a vengeful Red. A lot of things she was quick to forgive, or at least put aside and ignore. Betrayal, real or imagined, was not among them.

This was the first time anybody’s screwed up on her watch since she’d chosen her management style that first day. So far, it had all been “milk and honey.” Now, she decided that, unfortunately, it was time for “Hell on wheels.”

Greg was in emotional agony. He saw the look on the face of the woman he’d just fallen in love with, and wanted to crawl into a hole. He also knew that he was here representing the company on which he’d hung all his hopes and dreams. He’d let his company down, too. Finally, he knew that, while he’d had no hand in letting the Worm loose (which Red did not know), he had helped devise the program the Worm was following (which Red correctly surmised). He’d invented the technology they’d misused, as well.

Steve was embarrassed by the incident. Like most of the men at SST (and some of the women), he had a crush on Red, and was horrified by the thought that he’d let her down. Finally, he didn’t know what kind of disciplinary action would come next.

The two technicians came in, carrying the worm wrapped in a drop cloth they’d found in the assembly shop. It was still standing upright, so they followed Red’s non-verbal cues to stand it in a corner. Then, they sat at the far end of the table away from Red, and thought glum thoughts.

“Anybody want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

Steve felt that, as the senior SST employee there, he should tackle the explanations: “We’d configured the Worm’s software, and spent a few hours learning to program it. That program you saw running was one of the exercises we did. Then, we started working on ideas for the launch and retrieval system. Greg, and I went to my office to sketch it up on the CAD/CAM system. Alan and Ted practiced some more programming. Greg, and I saw the Worm going past the door, and went out to see what was going on. It went right up to Doc’s door, and knocked on it. Doc opened, and the Worm went through it’s routine. Doc stood there for a minute, then started laughing.”

“Then Sheila came out see what was going on. The worm heard her door open, so it started for her to do its routine. That scared heck out of her. She started screaming, then ran back into her office. Then, the Worm started going door-to-door down the corridor. Then you showed up, and stopped it.”

“Is that right, Greg?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I should have paid more attention to what was happening in the lab. I know better, and ... ”

“Shut it!” Red snapped. Then, more softly: “You don’t need to apologize. You’re a guest here. It’s my team that screwed up.” Steve knew that she meant him, and the technicians assumed she meant them.

“What have you two to say for yourselves?” she asked the technicians.

“We knew the Worm wouldn’t hurt anybody, and when we had it go through its routine in the shop, it looked so funny. We thought Doc would appreciate seeing it in action. We didn’t know it would go on a rampage!”

“Now you know why we test software, and test it, and test it, before putting it out in the field. It’s the things you didn’t think of that come back to bite you in the ass. Never, ever, let an automated system loose until you’ve done a complete set of tests, and had them signed off by the responsible test engineer – that, in this case, is Steve – and the project manager, which is me. If you’d done that, none of this would have happened.” She knew they never would have been given permission to take the Worm into that corridor, anyway.

Now, Red decided, would be a good time to pour out some milk and honey to salve bruised egos. She needed these guys back firing on all cylinders as soon as possible.

“When Doc gets back with Pat, I’ll explain what happened. Nobody’s really at fault here, except me. We just had a miscommunication that resulted in an accident. We’re going to have to apologize to the people we frightened, and promise not to let it happen again. I should have been paying more attention to what was going on here.”

Just then, Pat and Doc came in. Doc sat down at the other end of the table, making the two techs’ strategy of getting as far as possible from the big brass (as such they considered Red, so well had she established her leadership role) backfire. Now, they found themselves sitting next to the biggest brass around. Pat sat half way between with a blank expression.

“So, what’s the story,” Doc asked Red.

“In a nutshell, it turns out to be my fault. The techs wanted to show you their progress with the Worm, so they sent it to your office to show you. If I’d been paying better attention to what was going on, I’d have headed them off. We should have brought you to the lab, instead of the Worm to you. Then, we could have done the demo in a more controlled environment, where it couldn’t go on a rampage. I have to apologize to you, and I hope I can apologize to the people we frightened.”

“So, the problem was a software bug,” Doc summarized. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” Red said, sticking to her conclusion. “The Worm was running software from a teaching exercise. It was never intended for deployment, so hadn’t been fully tested. It shouldn’t have been out of the lab.”

“How do you plan to prevent a repeat?”

“I need to spend more time monitoring progress on the different parts of this project. In this case, I should have known there wasn’t a well established test procedure. Just a few words would have been enough to alert our people. I just wasn’t there to say the words.”

Pat, unaccountably, looked pleased.

“Luckily,” Doc gave his verdict, “only a few people outside of your team were affected, and they were all SST employees. I agree you need to apologize to them, but it would be embarrassing to single them out. Since we want to go public with this technology, anyway, let’s, with Greg’s permission, call a general meeting in Hangar B tomorrow morning to introduce Robotics Concepts’ Worm to our whole staff.” Pat nodded agreement.

“Greg, would that be okay?” Doc asked him.

“I don’t see why not?” Greg replied. “The more people who know our capabilities, the better.”

“So, it would be okay to tell our people that the Worm exists, and that we’re using it on one of our projects, and that they can tell people outside the company about it?”

“Sure.”

“Can we organize a little show-and-tell demonstrating its main capabilities? Basically, I’m thinking about demonstrating autonomous action guided by programmed cues.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I haven’t got that far, yet. Actually, I’m thinking of leaving that up to the folks in this room. We could think of it as a dry run for a public demonstration later this week. I know that’s fast, but I don’t want to mess up Red’s schedule, and that has the thing going to Nevada Monday.”

“Would it make sense to do the demo in Nevada?” Red suggested.

“Perhaps, but I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves. I don’t want to schedule the public demo, yet. I’m hoping to do a private demo here mostly to give you a chance to apologize to the employees for letting a monster loose on them, and promise not to let it happen again. If we can leverage it to further our publicity campaign, so much the better.”

“But, it’ll take hours to set up such a demo. These people would have to work half the night.”

“They caused the problem by pulling a bone-headed stunt. I don’t have any sympathy.”

So, it was all clear. Their punishment for screwing up was to work late turning lemons into lemonade.

“I assume you’ll all have to contact your wives, sweethearts, mothers, or whatever, to tell them you have to work late,” Doc concluded. “Let’s reconvene in about a half hour in Steve’s shop to get started. Red, could you stay behind for a few minutes?” She nodded affirmatively.

Doc didn’t bother telling them that he was going to stay late with them. He’d just do it. He felt at least as responsible as anyone else for the incident. Besides, he hoped that his participation would help them achieve a better result in less time.

“That was a good save,” Pat told Red after everyone else had left. “I assume you chewed them out thoroughly before we came in.”

“Yes. I told Greg that he was in the clear because he was a guest, and it was my team at SST that screwed up. I think Steve knew that he should have supervised the techs better, so I didn’t say much about that. I told the techs that what they did wrong was let an untested robot loose on an unsuspecting world. It could have been a lot worse. I read them the riot act about not doing a demo without permission from the test engineer, which would be Steve, and project manager, which would be me. Then, I took blame for the whole thing for sloppy supervision.”

“Good. I thought you’d be a natural for this, which is why I gave you enough rope to get in trouble.”

“You *let* this happen? That was a bit dangerous, wasn’t it!”

“I was watching. The reason the techs thought of showing their handiwork to me first is that I’d poked my nose into the lab, and showed interest. I didn’t know exactly how the situation would blow up, but tried to make sure I was on hand when it did. I saw you were concentrating too much on your own work with the GIS database,

and not on supervising the team. You passed the test with flying colors. Thanks.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing *to* say,” Pat advised. “Now you know that your abilities are limited. It’s almost impossible to be a manager and a worker at the same time. You end up concentrating on one or the other, and at least one of them falls apart. On this project, you need to be the manager. It’s too big. How do you want to handle the GIS work?”

“I guess I have to delegate it. I want to control the design, but the grunt programming somebody else could do. Doc, is there a programmer available who knows more about what software we have here than I do?”

“Probably, but I’m not the one to ask.”

“Ahh, but Pat is.”

“Very good, grasshopper.”

“By the way, Doc, I think I found the answer to that koan you proposed in Austin. The one with the Louis Pasteur quote.”

“I know you did. And, you solved several more since. Good work.”

“Do I get another?”

“Life is a koan.”

So this was going to be her new relationship with Doc. Maybe that’s why he showed no jealousy about her going on a rut over Greg. The old fraud was setting up as her teacher, and being a lover interfered with it. Well, a teacher was psychologically equivalent to a father figure, and it felt nice to have a father figure again.

“Thanks, Daddy,” she said, and kissed him on the cheek. It was the second time she’d done it, but this time

she knew why.

Pat looked amused. She knew perfectly well that the roles of teacher and lover were not incompatible. Human psyches are sophisticated enough to keep the roles straight without any difficulty. She was pleased that Red seemed to have forgiven him enough to accept him as a teacher. It was what she needed most from him. She could find lovers anywhere, and some day one of them would be right for her.

Doc did, however, miss having her in his bed. He should stop procrastinating, he thought, and start looking for someone else for himself. He'd never taken a vow of chastity, and wasn't about to start now. Maybe he'd start looking tomorrow, or soon.

But, tonight, he had to help Red's team plan a demonstration.

17

"So, what are we trying to accomplish with this demonstration?" Doc asked the team when they'd all reassembled in Steve's shop. He knew he was upstaging Red as leader, but felt this was the time to do it. He didn't think she'd had experience with this kind of situation, and thought she'd had enough for one day, anyway. By taking charge of the group, which he had himself brought together, he was relieving her of the burden of leadership for one night.

Red and Greg were sitting together at the small conference table near the whiteboard in Steve's office. Everyone else was there, too, but their attention was wholly focused on Doc, standing at the whiteboard with a dry-erase marker in his hand. Greg and Red sat closer to each other than to the others, and Greg's hand rested on the back of her chair.

Red had restored order in her love life by seeking out Greg during the break. She found him wandering in the corridor where the Worm had staged its rampage, looking like he didn't quite know what to do with himself. She'd pulled him into the unused office.

She started by apologizing for getting him mixed up in the afternoon's fiasco, which she pointed out was an SST internal affair. She stopped his repeated apology for having been a part of it by kissing him thoroughly on the lips. When he'd properly responded by pulling her closer, she hugged him back, and said to his neck, "Forget it. It doesn't affect us. We'll get together later."

The damage mended, she hoped, she led him to Steve's lab, where she found the door to Steve's office open, and Doc sitting in one of the folding metal chairs at the conference table. He was sitting, meditating while waiting for others to arrive.

He noted that Red and Greg arrived together, grabbed chairs next to each other on the far side of the table, and moved their chairs that much closer together. Red looked happy, and Greg looked relieved. It was transparent to Doc what had transpired, so his expression grew a pleased smile as he nodded acknowledgment to them. Then he went back to meditating.

Now that the others had arrived, too, it was important to get their brains all focused clearly on the task at hand.

"The way I see it," Red spoke up in answer to Doc's question, "we have two things to accomplish. First, we need to explain what happened this afternoon. The rumor mill will have provided everyone with a sensational account. We need to set that straight by showing exactly what was wandering the halls, and explain why we have it."

"Our second goal," she continued, "is to fire them up about this new technology. We want them to see it in action, so they can appreciate its potential. We also want to get them used to seeing it move. Its shape and movement evoke negative primal images, which we have to counteract. People have a natural revulsion to giant insects, and that's exactly what the Worm looks like. We have to work on that perception."

Doc listed these goals on the whiteboard as one-line summaries:

1. Explain test SNAFU;
2. Demonstrate Worm.

“Let’s give this thing a name,” Doc suggested. “It should be something simple, memorable, and whimsical, since we’re trying to defuse the Worm’s sci-fi monster look.”

Everyone looked at each other for a few minutes, unable to come up with anything that fit the bill. Soon, everyone began looking at Red, expectantly. For some reason, they all assumed she’d come up with the answer. She was looking at the floor.

“This is ghoulish,” she said, not lifting her eyes from the floor. “The main purpose for building this Worm is to find my father. I can’t help thinking it should be named for him: ‘James.’ The diminutive fits all Doc’s criteria: ‘Jimmy the Worm.’ The only alternative I can think of is something totally off-the-wall, like ‘Buttercup.’”

“You mean,” Doc said, “like after ‘Princess Buttercup’ in *The Princess Bride*?”

“Exactly.”

“I like that better than ‘Jimmy the Worm,’” Doc responded. “I agree ‘Jimmy’ sounds ghoulish. Greg, could we paint it yellow?”

“If you can find something that will stick to ABS plastic. The segment shells are all made of vacuum-formed ABS. It’s a bitch to paint.”

“Check the Internet,” Red said.

“Ted,” Steve said, “you’re nearest my computer, please Google ‘how to paint ABS plastic.’ Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Ted stepped to Steve’s computer, and tapped at the keyboard for a few seconds, then said: “Son of a ...

Bingo! Here's a recipe. I'll print out six copies, so we can all read it. It looks like there's also a product made especially for painting ABS molded parts. Another product to pretreat ABS for regular primer. It all looks like a trip to the hardware store, though. I don't think we have this stuff laying around, although maybe we should."

"Okay," Doc said. "If we can make painting work, I vote for naming the Worm 'Buttercup.' Frankly, I find 'Jimmy the Worm' a little too disrespectful to Red's father."

"I think Bonnie's still here," Red said. "I'll have her go with Ted on a hardware-store run. Ted can pick out what we need, and Bonnie can pay for it with her company credit card. Let's figure they'll be gone at least a half hour to an hour."

"In the meantime," Doc interjected, "we can start developing the demo program for the Worm."

"Wait a minute!" Red said. "Before we blow a lot of precious time on Worm paint, let's see if we can come up with a better name that works with the Worm's current look."

They all thought about what the Worm looked like, and tried to think of names. Everything that came to mind sounded like it came from a horror movie, or didn't fit.

The only one that said anything was Alan, who said, brightly, "What about 'Walter?' You know 'Walter Worm.' It's so out of character, that it fits."

They all looked at each other in agreement.

"Walter it is," said Doc. "Cancel the hardware-store run."

He wrote "Walter Worm" at the whiteboard's top-center in large letters.

Then he asked: "What are Walter's most important features that we want to demonstrate? What differentiates Worm technology from other robots?"

“Well, it’s modular,” Greg said, “but there’s no way to demonstrate that. We just have to say it, and point out the segmented body.”

“I plan to do the presentation,” Doc said, “to emphasize that this is a technology that SST committed to making a part of our expertise. I know enough to hand wave at the various kinds of segments.”

“You don’t want me to demonstrate it?” Greg asked, thinking it would be most appropriate.

“If you do the demo, it looks like you’re trying to sell it to us,” Doc pointed out. “If I do it, it tells everyone that we’re already sold, which is the message I want to convey. I do want to get you involved, so people see that you guys are the developers, but I want to establish SST as a third-party application developer for your technology.”

Greg shrugged his shoulders non-committally. It wasn’t his call.

“What other features or characteristics set the Worm apart?” Doc asked.

“It’s easy to program,” Greg pointed out. “You really train it like a dog.”

“Or a child?” Doc asked.

“Yeah. A very stupid child,” Greg agreed.

“How long does it take?”

“Only one repetition, you just have to remember that you *are* programming. Use structured programming methods. Build your subroutine modules first, then link them together.”

“How do you communicate with it?” Red hadn’t been in on the programming tutorial sessions. Had she not remembered Greg pointing out the E-stop button at the Monday meeting, she wouldn’t have known how to stop the rampaging Worm without a shotgun. Even then, she wouldn’t have been sure exactly where to shoot it.

“You speak a set of commands in plain English,” Greg responded. “Think of programming in C++. A command word calls up a program module, which executes. For example, if you want it to recognize your voice, you say to it: ‘Learn my voice;’ it responds with ‘Please read the script;’ then you read a certain script aloud. It knows what the script is supposed to say, so it associates the sounds you make with phonemes used in the script. If there’s any doubt, it’ll ask you to repeat the script until it’s satisfied that it can recognize your voice reliably.”

“What about movements,” Doc, who also had no Worm training, asked.

“You say, ‘learn movement such, and such.’ It responds, ‘Okay’ to tell you it’s in movement-learning mode. At that point, you can gently push it through the motion. It has a lot of motions already programmed in, which you can invoke. For example, you could say: “Step left three times,” and it will move one, and one-half meters to the left. One step is a half meter. There’s a whole manual full of pre-programmed commands, and movements.”

“What if you wanted to load a file, such as a recording, and have the Worm play it back.”

“You’d probably do that through a wireless link from a PC, then teach it to associate the file name with a verbal command, and it will play the file.”

“How do you interrupt a program during execution?”

“Say: ‘Worm stop.’ It’ll halt, dead, and wait for another command.”

“Red,” Doc said, turning to her, “would you be willing to teach it to dance – during the demo?”

As she realized what Doc had in mind, a wicked smile grew on Red’s face. “You mean, you would lead the Worm up to me, and say something like: ‘Walter, this is Ms. McKenna. She’s going to teach you to dance.’ I would then take its pincers, and say something like ‘Learn the box step,’ and move it through a box step. Then, I could say something like: ‘Repeat the box step,’ and it would run through the movements with me until I told it to stop.” Turning to Greg, she asked: “Would that work?”

“That’s exactly how it would work,” Greg responded, smiling excitedly about how quickly she’d learned the basics of Worm programming. Mandy had told him she and Doc were quick on the uptake. He’d thought it was hyperbole until he saw it for himself. With just a minute’s explanation, she’d gotten the syntax exactly right, and guessed some of the commands correctly.

“That’d be fun! But, I think Greg should run that part of the demo. He’s more experienced. It would make sense for him to demonstrate Worm programming. Besides, I don’t want to find myself chasing Walter down the street because you bungled a command.”

Smiling at the image, Doc nodded agreement.

It took another two hours to work out a skit that demonstrated teaching Walter to dance, and download an audio clip of Strauss’ *Blue Danube* for Walter to “sing” while they danced. Another twenty minutes gave Doc a list of topics to cover in his introductory remarks, and wrapup. They were done by six thirty.

Doc invited the group to his place for dinner, but got no takers. Steve and the two technicians had families waiting for them. Red and Greg just wanted to get to their hotel, and crash. The prospect of a meal home cooked by Sam nearly had Red sold. Greg, not knowing what he was missing, wasn’t really interested. Red could have dragged him along to Doc’s, but she wasn’t up to being social, anyway. It had been a long day after a late night.

On the way out to the parking lot, Doc asked Red: “What do you plan on wearing tomorrow to our little demo?”

“I have a nice party dress with a floral pattern that I picked up on a whim last weekend. I figured that would fit my role as dance instructor.”

“Perfect!” Doc grinned. “Tamara will be back, and I figure on having the film crew record the whole thing.”

“I was surprised you didn’t have the film crew in there tonight.”

“I want to downplay the whole rampaging worm incident. It could backfire. I think our demo will be the best introduction.”

“Why not just have Tamara film the public demo?”

“I will, but that’s not even set up, yet. This’ll be my Plan B pack.”

Red nodded tiredly.

“You’re not wearing a helmet tonight?” she noted, seeing his chopper parked in his reserved parking space, feeling a chill in the evening air, and no “brain bucket” dangling from his hand.

“I didn’t figure on being this late,” Doc explained. “I expected to leave when it was warmer, and helmets are such a pain in the *tuchus*.”

Making an exasperated face, Red asked: “Is that another language you say you don’t know, or did you just make it up?”

“It’s Yiddish for your backside. I learned a lot of Yiddish words from Jewish friends in high school and college. Fascinating language. It’s full of such expressive words. But, ... ”

“I know,” Red interrupted, “you couldn’t put them together in a sentence to save your life. You said that about French, too. Then started Frenching up a blue streak.”

“I don’t think I ever said that I couldn’t put together a sentence in French. I can, so that would have been dishonest.”

“No, but you said a lot of words that gave the *impression* that you couldn’t do it. You’ve got to get over this shyness about letting people know you’re smart. You are, you know.”

“Yeah, but if I go around telling people that I’ve got a brain, everybody will want one.”

Once again, Red didn't know what to say to one of Doc's strange pronouncements. She just punched him in the arm.

"You let one of your employees do that to you?" Greg asked Doc, truly puzzled.

"She's not just any old employee," Doc explained.

"Didn't you know?" Red said in a mock little-girl lisp, while hugging Doc's arm, "He's my new Daddy."

This really confused the heck out of Greg, who had been trying to work out the relationship between them since he got here. He knew they had been lovers, had been told repeatedly that they were no longer lovers, but he kept seeing signs of intimacy.

Seeing his distress, Red transferred her grip on Doc's arm to Greg's, and said: "Hey, don't be jealous, lover. Doc, and I are good friends. Frankly, there's nobody else around here I can play with. I was mad at him, but I couldn't get by without him. I barely know what I'm doing, and Doc's helping me a lot. 'Doesn't mean I don't love you, though."

Greg had his doubts about what Red was saying, but decided to play along, since he had little choice. Doc knew darn well that Red was headed for serious emotional trouble, but had faith that she'd come out of it okay in the end, and he was curious about what strategies she would come up with to cope. So far, it had at least been amusing to watch.

Also, he had few people he could play with, too. He was surrounded by people who were in awe of him, were intimidated by him, or simply couldn't keep up with his brain at play. Red could keep up with him, although she usually couldn't top him, and she wasn't afraid of him. Doc couldn't imagine her being afraid of anyone.

Lest our readers be as confused as Greg, I should point out that "kindly big brother" was the relationship model that Doc had tried to develop with Red right from the first, before she'd suddenly come after him like a cat in heat. Her whipsawing him from brother to lover to "Daddy" relationships had been tough on him, too. He was

wise enough to understand what was going on, but it was confusing not knowing what role he had to play in her life from one minute to the next.

He knew, however, that she couldn't sort her emotional relationships out until she settled her father's fate. Then, she could start to put it all together. He dared not try to predict what attachments she'd eventually settle down with, though. They'd find that out when it happened.

In the meantime, all he and her other friends could do was keep a close watch, and lend support when needed.

18

"I'm up for some room-service pepperoni pizza," Red said to Greg as she drove out of the parking lot. "Then I'd like to curl up in bed, and read myself to sleep. Care to join me?"

She really did want him in her bed tonight. Not for sex, but for warmth and companionship. She found that she slept better with a cuddle buddy, and she needed to sleep. She hoped he felt the same. Greg had turned out to be a great cuddle buddy.

"I was hoping you'd ask," he said. "Although, I'm too tired to fool around. It's been that kind of day. But, I'd like to be with you."

"Okay, why don't you call the hotel, and have them send up a medium pizza. We should be there before it shows up. I'd like root beer to drink, and whatever you'd like. I'll probably eat only one slice. You can have the rest. Will that be enough for you?" Red knew that Greg didn't watch his weight as closely as she did, so he tended to gorge more.

With Doc, she'd enjoyed helping him avoid the curse of too much restaurant food while on the road. While he didn't train as hard as she did – she still entertained hopes of someday making the Olympic team, instead of just

being an alternate – she knew he put a lot of effort into staying in shape. He’d even joined an amateur power lifting team, just for the additional motivation and discipline of working out with a team.

Greg had no such pretensions. Having “thin genes,” he’d never had the blubbery figure so common among techno-geeks, who gravitated toward couch-potato lifestyles. But, he owed none of his narrowness to conscious effort. If he didn’t care about his figure, she wasn’t going to, either.

He made the call, reaching the front desk, identifying himself, and asking to be put through to room service. “Hello, this is Greg Michels in room four-oh-six. I’d like to order a medium pepperoni pizza, and two root beers sent to Judith McKenna’s suite. That’s ten thirty two. Bill it to my room.” Red started to object, but realized that would make arrangements more difficult. “Yes, we’re on our way now, and should arrive in fifteen minutes. Okay, we’ll see you in forty minutes.” He snapped his phone shut.

“He didn’t like taking an order from somebody that wasn’t in their room, but he did it.”

“I’ll call down to confirm it when we get there. That should make them happy.”

They were both tired enough to ride in silence the rest of the way.

In the suite, Red stripped down to skin. While she didn’t run around nude in front of strangers, or people she thought might be offended, she never had suffered body shyness. In fact, she found nudity more comfortable – provided the air temperature was right. Since Greg had already seen her naked, she saw no reason to cover up.

Greg just pulled off his shoes, and propped his feet on the coffee table in front of the TV. After calling down to room service to confirm their order, Red curled up on the couch in a fetal position with her head in Greg’s lap. Greg’s taste in entertainment ran to old *Star Trek* episodes, and similar fare. Red had seen them all so many times she no longer cared about them, and went to sleep.

The knock on the door startled Red awake. She jumped up, and ran to the bathroom for a robe. Greg let the room service waiter in.

“I think we’ll just sit on the couch and nibble, if that’s okay,” Greg said to the waiter, who didn’t care at all. He just cleared off the coffee table, covered it with a table cloth, and laid out plates, glasses, and so forth. Red came out of the bathroom, decent for company, still wiping sleep from her eyes.

Seeing her, whom he’d served a number of times before, the waiter mumbled something about leaving the plates outside the door. Red used room service for half of her meals, so the waiter knew that she knew the drill. Red signed off on the check, adding her usual tip, and put it on her own room bill.

Her one slice of pizza was enough to send Red right back to sleep. A couple of hours later, she woke up to find that Greg had finished the rest of the pizza, and fallen asleep in front of the TV. Red cleared the dishes, placing them outside in the hallway. Finally, she bullied Greg into getting up, and going to bed. She told him that he could watch TV in there as long as he wanted, but he never even turned it on. The bed felt so good that he just curled up with Red, and went to sleep.

Since they’d gone to sleep so early, they woke up long before the sky became light. That was lucky because they’d both forgotten about setting the alarm clock.

Red woke up feeling the warm lump of Greg’s erection pressed against the small of her back. Greg woke up to the feel of Red’s erect nipple against the palm of his hand. He gently squeezed her breast, and started sliding his palm back and forth across the nipple, which caused it to grow even larger. That caused his erection to grow in response.

Instead of responding, however, Red slid out from under the covers saying: “I have to use the bathroom.”

When Red returned, she saw Greg absentmindedly stroking his erection under the covers. She smiled, and crawled back under the covers into the position she’d been in, but a little higher up so that his shoulders were below her armpits. He reached his left hand under her to cup the her left breast, and his right over her body to cup the right one. He stroked both breasts simultaneously, then started rolling the nipples between his thumbs and index fingers, which was exactly what she’d had in mind.

Getting damp between her legs, she reached back for his penis. As she was lying on her side with her knees drawn up she could easily lay his penis against her anal crease, with the tip touching her perineum. He started stroking his hips back and forth, which meant that his penis slipped into her anal crease, and the tip pressed against the back of her perineum on the forward stroke. She began moving her hips to increase the effect.

Soon she felt a greasy feeling as his penis leaked fluid onto her anus. He felt it, too, and began pressing his erection directly into her anus. Her natural reaction was to clench, but the stimulation caused her to have an orgasm.

“What the heck,” she thought, “if that’s the way he wants to do it, I’ll try it again,” and she relaxed her sphincter muscles.

Greg’s erection slid about half way into her rectum. He slid it back out all the way, so that it got recoated with the juice still covering her anus. Reaching down under her bottom, he pushed two fingers into her vagina, which was filled with her orgasm, he brought them out coated with fluid, which he then smeared around the rim of her anus, which was now completely open. He also coated the shaft of his erection with the fluid. Then, he plunged it in even farther than before. After several strokes, his shaft reached completely into her rectum. They maneuvered their bodies around until Greg’s mound was splitting her anal crease, and his scrotum rubbed her labia.

Red could see why Cheryl had come to like anal sex. She found it even more exciting than the last time, when she’d felt ambivalent about what she was doing. She planned on making him pull out before having an orgasm, and thus avoiding the mess that had grossed her out the first time. So, she relaxed, pushed her fingers past his scrotum into her vagina, and enjoyed the double stimulation – and its accompanying orgasms.

She was enjoying orgasm after orgasm, when she felt his penis pump warm semen deep in her rectum. Ooops! Since there was nothing she could do about it now, she relaxed to enjoy the sensations. She’d deal with the mess later.

When Greg finally stopped pumping and relaxed his body, Red found that she’d not only reached all four

fingers of her left hand into her vagina, but had push her thumb in as well. The heel of her thumb stretched her labia all the way out.

Greg's erection shrank, and he pulled his penis out. This gave Red's left hand a little more room, and her hand slipped into her vagina up to the wrist.

"What a good idea! I should do this more often," was what she thought.

"Ohhh!" was what she said.

After bringing herself to another orgasm, which didn't take long, she headed directly to the bathroom to clean herself out, and up.

She was surprised to find that, since she was still excited, and had emptied her bowels earlier, feeling Greg's load slide down inside her rectum and out actually felt kind of erotic instead of disgusting. Such are the vagueries of human psychology. One's sensations can vary widely depending on one's emotional state.

"Naughty, naughty, Judith," she said to herself, realizing that she felt ready for a rematch. "You're getting to be a baaad girl!"

Finding herself still very excited, she sat on the toilet, and tried fisting herself again until she had another orgasm. The day seemed to be working out very well for her, so far.

Sponging herself off with a washcloth, she went back to the bedroom and dragged Greg out of bed and upright. Kissing him, and rubbing her breasts against his chest, she sent him off to his own room, which he'd so far slept in only once, to get showered and dressed.

She did the same, putting on the party dress she'd described to Doc, along with a pair of medium heels appropriate for dancing, and a minimum of jewelry. The weather had turned cold, so she pulled out her winter coat, which had made the journey from Massachusetts, to Miami, to Daytona, to Scottsdale, and finally to Phoenix along

with the rest of her luggage. It was a little too warm for the weather, but between her starting to get used to the southern climate and wearing it unbuttoned, she thought it would be okay. It would be a lot better than arriving at work blue and goose bumped.

When she met Greg in the lobby, she saw that the native Phoenicians were all wearing winter coats like hers. Only the new arrivals from up north were braving the cool morning with just summer-weight suits and dresses, and no coats. She'd done the same weeks ago when she'd first arrived in Florida. Not so, anymore. After being in the southland for nearly a month, it was too cold!

Bonnie had arranged for a long-term visitors pass for Greg, so he wouldn't have to sign in at the receptionist's desk every day. So, Red drove them right to the employee parking lot, where they could enter the building through the north entrance, which let into one end of the corridor running along the office spaces behind the hangars. Greg was camped in Steve's lab, where he spent most of his time, anyway.

This morning's demonstration was an intrusive delay to the Worm team. They could have used the time trying to figure out what the Worm, now christened "Walter," needed to know to find its way through the wreckage in Shaft 6.

Red went with Greg to the lab, figuring that would be the physical location from which she could do the most good. She called Bonnie on her cellphone to let her know she was in the building, and was available if something came up. They decided that Steve and the two technicians would skip the demo in favor of setting up a mock wreckage site for the Worm to crawl through to test the software. Greg, and Red would have to go to the demo, since they were part of the program.

The first thing the Worm team had to do was move Walter to Hangar B, and get him ready for the demonstration. As it weighed nearly a hundred pounds, this was no easy task for the average geek, which the men on the team were: long on brains, but short on athletics.

To make worms easier to move, Robotics Concepts had written a number of self-movement commands.

Three of the most useful were “Follow me,” “Go to ...,” and “Come here.” Each command needed to be preceded by the Worm’s name to avoid confusion.

“Follow me,” as the wording implies, caused the Worm to trace the movements of a human handler. If Greg, for example, were to say to Walter: “Walter, follow me,” and then walk twenty feet across the hangar floor, then execute a right turn, walk thirty feet, and stop, Walter would memorize Greg’s track, then follow it, moving twenty feet, executing a right turn through the same angle, then move thirty feet to where Greg stood. Walter would halt a foot from Greg’s position to avoid bumping into him.

“Go to ...” allowed a handler to send a Worm to a position occupied by something, or someone that Walter recognized. So, Greg might say “Walter, go to Ms. McKenna.” Providing Walter had previously learned to recognize Red, and was able to identify her current location, it would move right up to her, again stopping short to avoid a collision.

“Come here,” followed the same pattern. If Red walked out to the middle of Hangar B, then say “Walter, come here,” Walter would take the shortest route available to reach her, avoiding any pitfalls or obstacles in the way.

Of course, movement commands needed to be canceled by saying “Stop,” or “Stay,” otherwise the Worm would continue executing the command *ad nauseum*. If Red said, “Walter, follow me,” without ever saying “Stop,” Walter would follow her to the ends of the Earth.

In fact, Greg’s description that training a Worm was like training a dog was literally true. He’d based the basic command set on standard commands used to train dogs.

So, when Red wanted to bring Walter into Hangar B, she simply opened the door from Steve’s lab to Hangar B, said “Walter, follow me,” and walked out toward the middle of the hangar floor.

Red noticed too late that there was a small group of people standing in the middle of Hangar B. As soon as

Walter came skittering through the door, pincers held high, and thirty six legs tapping at the epoxy-coated concrete floor, a startled screech came from the group, followed by laughter. Surprised by their existence, but not by their reaction, Red stopped, turned, and said: “Walter stop. Walter stay.”

The unexpected group turned out to be Doc (who was responsible for the laughter because he still couldn’t help laughing every time he saw Walter move), video producer Tamara Jones, and the two-man film crew. Tamara had let out the startled screech. The videographer had, true to his training, grabbed his camera to record whatever had caused the fuss. The sound man stood, white as a sheet, holding his breath, and pointing a microphone at Walter.

Red clip clopped up to Doc, and asked, defiantly: “What are you doing here?”

“We were planning how to shoot your little extravaganza,” Doc said, ready to use his authority to trump the “it’s my project” argument Red’s tone presaged. “I told you we would.”

Abashed, Red said: “I didn’t know you’d be in here, yet. Sorry. I was startled. If I’d known, I would have warned you before bringing Walter out.”

On hearing its name, Walter turned to face the group with another skittering sound. Tamara jumped again. The cameraman, who was still holding Walter in his view finder, felt his heart jump, although he managed to keep the camera steady. The sound man recorded the sound of his own startled intake of breath.

Red turned and said: “Walter, off.” The Worm froze in position.”

Doc still couldn’t help snickering every time Walter moved. He shook his head, grinning. By this time, Greg, Steve, and the two techs had followed Red out of Steve’s office, and joined the group.

Seeing Doc’s reaction to the Worm, Tamara blushed, and relaxed. Apparently, the thing, which she’d heard about but never seen, was harmless, despite its looks. She was, actually, a brave lady who had proven her courage many times during her career as a documentary film maker. The startled scream was due more to surprise than

outright fear.

Turning to Tamara, Doc said: “You can see the problem we have. Worms look like alien monsters. They have to. Their form is dictated by their function. What we’re trying to do is make Walter seem less menacing.”

“Red,” he said turning to her, “Let’s go through the routine, so Tamara can figure out where to put her camera.”

“Sure, we’re standing at ground zero, so if you folks could all spread out. In fact, let’s get some tape, and outline the area we’ll need for the demo. I should have thought of that last night.”

Turning to Walter, she said: “Walter, on. Walter come here.”

At the first command, Walter turned to face Red directly, since she’d moved slightly since turning it off. At the second command, it resumed its skittering advance.

This time, Tamara appreciated why Doc kept laughing at the Worm. She snickered at it, too, now that she’d started getting used to it. The fact that Red talked to it in a “here, doggy” tone made it seem even less threatening.

“Walter off,” Greg said as preamble. “Doc’s going to start by describing the McKenna project, and why SST decided to use Worm technology. Then, he’ll introduce me. I’ll go over the Worm’s basic features and specifications, then segue into how we control it through verbal commands. All this time, we’ll be basically standing here.”

Tamara interrupted him: “Could you move about ten feet to that spot over there? It’s in a better position under the lights.”

“Walter on,” Greg said. “Walter this is Ms. Jones, remember her.” Walter turned his head directly toward Tamara, and moved a little side-to-side to get different views of her face and body. “Okay,” Walter said.

Tamara jumped, and asked: “How does it talk?”

Greg explained that Walter had an annunciator – basically a small weatherproof loudspeaker – to help it confirm commands, as well as make other sounds as needed.

“Now, where do you want it to stand?”

Tamara pointed to a spot on the floor. Greg stepped over to it. “Okay?” he asked. “No, two steps to your right.” she responded. “There, good,” she said when Greg had moved.

“Walter, come here.” Greg said. Walter skittered right up to him, then stopped. “Walter off,” Greg said to close Walter’s command mode.

Looking to see that Red was ready, Greg said “Walter on. This morning Ms. McKenna is going to teach you to dance, Walter. Say good morning to Ms. McKenna.”

Because of the clever way Greg planned this speech, Walter only recognized the words “Walter say good morning to Ms. McKenna” as a command. In response, it moved up to Red and said: “Good morning, Ms. McKenna. You look very nice today.”

Surprised because she’d never seen Walter respond to this command before, Red looked at Greg, and asked: “When did you teach him that?”

“Monday morning. It was one of our programming exercises. I’ve been waiting for a chance to use it on you.”

“Walter, stand up,” she said, going into her planned routine.

The last thing they’d done at the previous evening’s meeting was to erase the commands they planned to teach him during the demo. They’d have to do it again after this dry run.

Walter raised himself up on his hindmost segments, as it had done yesterday in the corridor.

“Walter, hold out your hands.”

Walter held his pincers out horizontally.

Taking a pincer in each hand, Red said: “Walter, sing *The Blue Danube*.”

The pre-recorded sound of a full orchestra playing the waltz emanated from Walter’s annunciator.

“Walter, learn motion the box step,” Red said, then led Walter through the motions once in time to the music, then stopped, and said “Walter stop.”

The music stopped, and Walter froze in place. “Walter off.”

Then Red said to anyone listening. “Walter now knows how to do a box step. The waltz is a series of box steps combined with slow turns. He already knows how to do slow turns, so I can teach Walter to waltz by combining the box step with a series of slow turns.”

She again took Walter by the pincers, and said: “Walter on. Walter learn waltz is simultaneous box step, and rotate one-point-five. Walter sing *The Blue Danube*. Walter waltz.”

Red’s timing was a touch off, but not noticeably. Walter moved through the box step while rotating in place. The result was a credible-looking waltz.

After a few turns, Red said: “Walter stop. Walter off.”

Tamara was fascinated. “Can I try it?” she asked.

“Sure,” Red responded. “Just remember to let it lead. It won’t follow you a bit, so you’ll get tangled up.”

Red stepped away from Walter, and Tamara took her place, nervously.

“I have to command it, because it hasn’t been trained to respond to your voice. Walter on. Walter sing *The*

Blue Danube.” As the music filled the air, she asked Tamara: “Are you ready?” Tamara even more nervously nodded. When the music reached the right moment, Red said, “Walter waltz.”

Walter swept Tamara into its waltz step, which Red allowed to continue for about thirty seconds, then said: “Walter stop. Walter off.”

“Wow!” Tamara exclaimed. “I wish my boyfriend could dance that well. Why do you keep saying its name?”

“So it will know that what comes next is a command. It is, after all, just run by computers. They aren’t very smart. This guy’s got the intelligence of a dog, so you have to talk to it like a dog.”

“I thought computers were smart.”

“No, compared to life forms, they’re extraordinarily stupid. Most of them have intelligence somewhere between an amoeba and a flea. When people talk about not having the brains God gave a potato bug, it’s literally true for nearly all computers. This little guy is a genius for a machine, but it’s still too stupid to live.”

“Wow. I didn’t know that. You know, maybe we should start doing some interviews. I think people would love to hear this kind of thing from someone who really knows. Doc said we’d get better interviews as the project advanced, but maybe we could start soon.”

“He might be trying to run interference for the team. Most of us are awfully busy right now, but I think you’re right.” She waved to get Doc’s attention, then beckoned him over.

“Whachuwantgirl?” he asked.

“Tamara suggested we start scheduling some interviews for your film project. I agree. I’d rather space them out throughout the project, than try to bunch them all up at the end.

“I’ve been trying to keep them out of your hair,” Doc replied, “but if you’re ready to start doing them, I’m all for it. I’d like to start getting you ready to face mass media, too, and interviews with Tamara would be good

practice.”

So, it was settled. They’d start off with Tamara interviewing Red that afternoon. Then, the two women would plan a series of interviews with other team members. Red planned on limiting it to herself, representing the project team; Doc to represent SST; and Greg, representing Robotics Concepts.

Steve got the two techs busy laying masking tape down on the hangar floor to mark a space around where Red had danced with Walter that was large enough for the presenters to stand and do the demo.

“Should we cover Walter, then unveil him during the demo?” Steve asked Red.

“No,” she responded, “have him lying on the floor uncovered, but don’t have him stretched out straight. Put a little curve in his spine.”

“He doesn’t have a spine,” Steve pointed out with technogeek literalness.

“Well,” Red responded, “back, body, whatever you want to call it. Just don’t make it look stiff.”

She wanted people coming in, and gathering around to have time to look at it. She felt that curvature would look more natural – less like a dead thing. That would make its coming to life less startling.

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Folks started filtering in about ten forty five. The demonstration was scheduled for eleven. One of the first to arrive was a short, buxom woman wearing a woman’s gray suit with a knee-length skirt, and a white blouse with a Peter Pan collar. She had black hair cut short in a mannish fashion. Doc introduced her to Red and Tamara: “Ladies, this is Gwen Talbot with the Barnes, Knowles and Talbot Agency. Pat hired her to organize public relations for this project.”

“Gwen, this is Judith McKenna, whom we like to call ‘Red.’ Her family’s funding this whole project, and

she's running it as project manager. She's also coming on board the SST staff as a research analyst."

"She looks young," Gwen said to Doc, reaching up to shake Red's hand.

"She is young," Doc explained. "She's also extremely smart. I think we want to feature her as much as possible. Kind of an Amelia Earhart figure, but not dead. Pay particular attention to her resume. There's too much to explain right now."

"Hmm. Young, beautiful, smart. Any love interest?"

"We probably want to keep that in the background. You should discuss that with her. See how she wants to play it."

Doc paused for a few seconds, then said: "I don't know how to play this, but she's also wealthy. She's heir to an oil company worth billions."

Red's head snapped around at that to look directly into Doc's eyes. She'd never bothered to find out just how much her step father's company was worth. Certainly, she'd never imagined it was that much. She wasn't sure she believed it now, but Doc's face looked like he was dead serious.

"Yet, she's taken a job working for you?" Gwen asked, incredulous.

"Ever seen a smart person with nothing to do? They go stir crazy in no time. She's a Harvard scholar, and a top amateur athlete. You do the math. She wants a career. We're grooming her for the executive suite."

Impressed, Gwen asked Red: "What's your major, hon?"

"Mathematics," she responded. "I'm interrupting my senior year to find my natural father, who disappeared ten years ago. Then, I'm planning to go back for my PhD." Doc hadn't coached her on what to say, what not to, and what to emphasize, but this seemed the kind of thing he'd want her to lead with. A look at his face told her she was right.

“At Harvard?” Gwen asked.

“That’s still up in the air.”

“She’ll have a number of choices when the time comes,” Doc put in. “We should probably de-emphasize that, too. We want to concentrate on what she’s doing now.”

“Understood,” Gwen said. “But, one last question about it, so I understand: you don’t need a PhD to be a corporate executive, so why?”

“You need it in this company,” Red put in.

“All that’s in the backgrounder I gave you. Right now, I see that Red needs to take her place. The room’s filling up.”

After Red left, Gwen turned to him and said: “You’re in love with her!”

“Uh, huh, but so aren’t half the people in this room.”

“But, she’s in love with you, too.”

“She doesn’t know it, or won’t admit it. To her, I’m her mentor and friend. Right now, she’s playing patty-cake with that tall drink of water over there. That’s Greg Michels, chief technology officer at Robotics Concepts. He’s pretty much single-handedly responsible for inventing the robot you’re about to see.”

“Oh, boy. I can see why you don’t want to emphasize her love life. Sounds like a soap opera.”

“What twenty-two-year-old coed’s love life *doesn’t* sound like a soap opera? But, you’re right, it would be hard to explain to the public.”

“Yeah, but the tabloids would go ape-shit over it!”

“I’m ambivalent about that. They can make one’s life miserable. Red’s smart enough, and independent enough to be able to handle it, but I’m not sure she’d like it – a bunch of paparazzi poking cameras in her windows. Although, she might just think it’s fun! She might also decide that being famous won’t hurt her career, and might help it. That’s why I want you to discuss it with her. Make sure she knows what she’d be getting into, then let her decide. You’ll find she’s a really good decider.”

“Does she really know what she’s doing? At her age? She seems to have a lot of responsibility supervising all these people.”

“It scares the shit out of her,” Doc replied, “which is why I think she knows *exactly* what she’s doing. She also knows I’ve got her back. Although, I haven’t had to do much. You know she’s an Olympic-caliber athlete, don’t you? Tennis. Out on the court, she’s got to do it alone. If she fumbles, she’s got to pick it up herself. She’s applied that to her work here. She’s fumbled a few times, but she’s picked it up without missing a beat. We’re all very impressed. *That’s* something to emphasize.

“I’d better get over there, myself,” Doc said. “I’m supposed to lead this dog and pony show off. See you afterwards. By the way, this afternoon Red’s planning to do an interview for the documentary we’re producing. It would be good if you could sit in. I’m going to make myself scarce to make it as much the Judith McKenna show as possible. Take notes, and let me know how it works out.”

With that, Doc trotted over to where Red and Greg waited for him to start the show.

As Red had planned, a lot of the assembled crowd managed to catch a glimpse of the Worm lying on the concrete inside the taped area. Four security guards were on hand to ask people to stay back from the taped area. The fact that they’d brought in four stanchions and added a yellow tape barrier strung between the stanchions made crowd control easier. The crowd was large because everyone in the company had been asked to attend.

Doc started off by mentioning the incident yesterday, where the robot got loose because of a breakdown in the test protocol. He used it as an object lesson, as Red had done when talking to the Worm team after the incident,

to remind everyone how important it was to follow procedures. The rest of the presentation went off exactly as planned.

“I think that went well,” Doc said to Greg and Red as the audience began filing out. “Hopefully, we did what we set out to do.”

Seeing Gwen and Tamara approaching from different directions, he introduced them to each other. “Red,” he said, turning to her, “we should have Gwen present at any interviews, partly because it’s the best way for her to learn about what we’re doing, partly to keep track of what documentary information we generate, and partly to make sure we capture whatever she needs for PR.”

“Okay, Gwen ... it’s Gwen, right?” Red asked. Gwen nodded. “I want you to meet my assistant, Bonnie. Basically, I’ll make it part of her job to keep you informed about whatever is going on that you might care about.”

Red spied Bonnie among the attendees, and waved her over. She introduced her to Gwen.

“Tamara and I want to set up a series of interviews with Doc, Greg, Steve, and me to explain what we’re doing and events as they unfold. We want to have Gwen present as well. In fact, I’d like to have you keep her apprised of any upcoming interviews, events, or anything else that might be useful for publicity. Obviously, she’ll need to know whatever the film crew is doing for the documentary. We’d like to start the interviews this afternoon with me. Is there anything you know of that would interfere with our doing it in my office?”

“No,” Bonnie said, “except your working on the GIS database and website.”

“That’s another thing I haven’t had a chance to talk with you about. I need to delegate that work. It’s interfering with my keeping tabs on the team’s progress. Please ask Pat to find us a programmer to do it under my supervision. We’ll probably need someone full time until the project is finished. We’d need them on board asap, so I could bring them up to speed by the end of this week.”

“Okay,” Bonnie responded. “That would free you up this afternoon, so you could do the interview at

practically any time.”

“Tamara, Gwen, when would be convenient for you?”

Both women said the sooner the better, so they decided to meet in Red’s office at one o’clock. Red left to find Greg, Steve, and the techs to congratulate them on a job well done with the demo, and see how they’ve made out with building their Worm obstacle course.

At one o’clock, Red was in her office on the telephone with David Goldstein, the team’s legal counsel. Yes, her father’s mining claims were intact, and valid, and she could claim them for the estate, since he was now legally dead. They should, however, verify his physical stakes as soon as possible. There were no records of claims on the new prospect sites Peter Smith had identified. Goldstein was in the process of drawing up the paperwork to create a trust for her father’s and mother’s assets. He’d decided that, since the trust form was pretty simple, and all the complications came with the mining claims, it was, after all, best for him to do.

“I’m flying up to Carson City on Monday,” she told him, “and I expect to be there indefinitely. We have a local office set up in the Plaza Hotel. You can contact me through them.”

By this time, Tamara, Gwen, and the film crew were in the office. Gwen was admiring a framed poster-size photo of a woman tennis player stretched out to return a ball that was almost out of reach to her forehand side.

“Okay, David,” Red continued to the telephone, “I have people in my office waiting to start a meeting. Let’s plan to get together on Monday. Hopefully, we’ll be getting there in late afternoon, but it’ll take a while to get organized and over to the hotel. Let’s try to get together for dinner. Are you available? Say around eight? We can meet in the hotel lobby. We’ll be at the Plaza. You pick the restaurant. Okay, see you then.”

She pulled up her schedule on her computer, and typed in the appointment. “There,” she said to her guests. “Sorry to leave you sitting, but next week is going to be a biggie. We start exploring Shaft Six with the Worm, but everything else has to keep going, too.”

“Is that you?” Gwen asked, pointing at the photo.

“Yes. I put it up to remind me that there’s life outside of this office.”

“Is that an Olympic-team uniform?”

“Yes, that picture was taken during practice. I was an alternate for last year’s summer games, so I practiced with the team. My form looks good, there, but that volley ended when I fell on my face reaching too far for my next shot. Skinned my arm and my hip, and bruised my kneecap. My opponent had been setting me up, placing her shots just within my reach. When she saw I was both tiring and getting complacent, she hit it a foot farther out. I don’t feel too bad, though. She came home with the gold. Maybe I’ll get her next time.”

“Next time? You’re going to try out again?”

“Of course,” Red seemed surprised by the question. “The games are an amateur event, and I’m in an ideal situation. This year is toast, though, I’m out of shape. Too many restaurant meals, and too little work. If I started training now, the season would be over by the time I was ready. But, that’s why God invented next year! I’ll have two years to get ready.”

“Okay,” Tamara interrupted, “what I’d like to do is take advantage of the light from that window, and have you sit here with the picture in the background. Today, I’d like to get some background on you, and on the project.”

Red sat where directed, and faced the camera.

“No, no. Don’t face the camera,” Tamara said. “I’m going to sit opposite you, and ask questions. Face me, and wait a couple of beats before answering each question. Later, we’ll edit out the questions, and leave your answers. So, remember that the audience won’t hear the questions. Make your answers complete, so they can stand on their own. Can you do that?”

“I think so,” Red said with a sarcastic smile, thinking that would be the easy part. It wasn’t. It’s one thing to

hold a conversation, but quite another to try to signal the questions without actually repeating them. A few minutes in, and Red was getting frustrated with herself.

“Just relax,” Tamara said, interrupting the interview. “This isn’t live. If you flub a line, we just won’t use it. We’ll also edit out the ‘ums’ and ‘ahhs.’ Take your time, and don’t be afraid to pause while you gather your thoughts. We can edit out the pauses, too. Also, I’m repeating the questions in different ways to elicit different responses. We’ll combine all the best parts.”

Red called on her Zen practice to help focus on Tamara’s questions, and the answers she would make, pausing until she’d decided what information to put in her answer, and trusting her verbal centers to make the words come out right without conscious effort. After that, the interview went faster and better. She stopped being frustrated by her performance because she stopped trying to monitor her performance. She just let it flow naturally.

“Is there anything you’d like to say that I haven’t asked you about?” Tamara asked when she’d run out of questions.

Red thought about it for a minute, then said: “This is a team effort. We have a lot of very talented people working together toward a common goal. We have engineers, technicians, researchers, lawyers, programmers, cave explorers, and many others. When I first started out, I thought I could do it on my own, but I couldn’t. I’ve learned a lot, mostly from Doc – Dr. Manchek. One of his sayings is: ‘Everything looks easy to the person who doesn’t know what she’s doing.’ It’s true. This is my first big project, and I didn’t realize how big it was until I started working on the details. Doc’s been there every step of the way, guiding and encouraging me. One of the first things he taught me was to use Caesar’s ‘divide, and conquer’ strategy. Break the job into bite-size pieces. Then work on them individually. Without that trick, I’d have been overwhelmed a long time ago.”

“Anything else?” Tamara asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Red replied. “Besides, I’m assuming we’ll have follow up interviews like this throughout the project. Is that your plan?”

“Yes, exactly. So, if you think of anything else, we can tape it another time. I guess that’s a wrap,” Tamara concluded.

“Before we break up,” Gwen said, “I’ve got a few things to go over with Red that Tamara maybe should know about, too.”

“About what?” Red asked.

“Mostly about how to handle certain personal aspects. What to make public, and what not to, and how to spin whatever you want spun.”

“Ahhh, the sex angle,” Red surmised, “for the tabloids.”

“How did you know?”

“It’s obvious isn’t it? I saw you talking to Doc. He probably told you to ask me what I wanted to make public.”

“Yes, but that’s only part of what I want to talk to you about,” Gwen said, surprised at how accurately Red divined the content of her conversation with Doc.

“You probably also want to know what I want to say about my future plans, as well as about my family.”

“Um, yes,” Gwen replied, even more impressed. “Is there anything else that I want to discuss with you that I haven’t thought of, yet?”

Red laughed at the way Gwen put it: “Not that I can think of right away. I’m sure we’ll come up with some as we go along.”

“Okay, let’s start with the sex angle, as you put it.”

“Let’s start by kicking out those guys with the recording equipment. Then, we can have some girl talk – as

long as we agree that it doesn't leave these walls. Okay?"

The two men left looking like they'd really like to stay.

"And, no peeking through keyholes, you two," Red laughingly called to them as they closed the door.

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"I'm going to make the mistake of trusting you guys with some things I wouldn't tell my mother. That way, we can decide together what to let out, and what to bury."

"You think it's a mistake to trust us?" Gwen asked, wondering whether to be offended, and if so, why Red would take the chance.

"It's a mistake to trust anyone with anything that can possibly hurt you, but it can't be helped. Beyond that, she's a journalist, and you're a publicist. Both professions aim to make information public."

"Actually, no," Gwen interrupted her. "At least half of public relations consists of figuring out how to keep information private that you don't want to admit to."

"I'm glad to hear that," Red said.

Not to be outdone, Tamara said: "It might surprise you to know that journalists go out of their way to protect their sources, too. Remember, I'm working for you, and you're my source. If I let something out that you've told me to suppress, you can cut me off from the information I need. We call it 'burning your source,' and it's probably the biggest no-no professional journalists have."

"I thought it was done all the time," Red said.

"Not by professionals, at least not to important sources. Professionals want to keep their jobs, and if they burn their sources, they'll be out of a job in no time."

“That makes sense. Thanks for telling me, and thanks for being professional.” Red then surprised Tamara by adding: “Doc chose well.”

“So, we’re all sworn to secrecy except about what we agree to make public?” Red asked to confirm the pact.

She got nods from both Tamara and Gwen.

“Feels like back in the dorm room!” Red said, laughing.

“I’ll start by saying that I’m a twenty-two year old coed who’s very pleased to have lost the curse of virginity a long time ago,” she began. “I like men. I like men *a lot*! I don’t like to sleep alone if I can help it. At the moment, I’m sorta playing the field, but that doesn’t mean I’m not selective. I’m looking for someone to settle down with, grow old with, raise kids and puppies with, and cuddle up with every night. For a while there, I thought Doc Manchek was the one. That hasn’t worked out.”

“Why not?” Gwen asked, interrupting Red’s train of thought.

“My stock answer is, and will continue to be, that he’s very involved with this company – which is true – and I don’t want to play second fiddle to my husband’s career – which is also true. But the real answer is that I don’t know. He’s probably the best guy I could ever hope to find, but he hurt me badly. And, he knew he was doing it, but did it, anyway. Maybe he had no choice. He says he had no choice, but it still hurt. I know that he meant well, and means well, but I can’t get over it.”

“Let me back up – a long way. You know that my father disappeared when I was twelve. Finding out what happened to him is what this project is all about.”

“What you may not know is that before that he was the best father a girl could ask for. He traveled a lot, but when he was home, we were inseparable. When he worked in his office at home, I studied, or at least read, in his office at home. When he went on a local field trip, I went on the field trip. Probably, most of those field trips were for my benefit, anyway. We went hiking, camping, visited museums, attended concerts, and many other things

together. My mother, knowing that he was away a lot, mostly stayed home, and let us have father-daughter time. Perhaps she figured that her time with him would come when I grew up, but she was cheated out of that, too.”

Red paused in her story, thinking about what she’d been saying.

“If I find out that somebody deliberately hurt my father, I’m gonna make them *pay*!”

She’d never said that aloud before. She’d never even consciously admitted the possibility that it could have happened. The thought had crossed her mind, but whenever it did, she caught it and shoved it into the deepest, darkest dungeon that she could find in the back of her mind, and hoped that it would stay there.

This information was getting a little more personal that Gwen, and Tamara wanted to get. They realized, however, that an important part of their jobs to help Red keep it covered up, so they needed to know what it was. They also realized how much courage it took for Red to take them into her confidence this way.

“If you ever let slip anything about what I’m going to tell you next, I’ll make sure you never work again,” Red warned them. They believed her.

“I resented my step father since the first time my mother told me about him. ‘Hate’ is not too strong a word for it. I can admit it, now, but it turns out that I was grossly unfair to him. I resented his wanting to take my father’s place. I resented his replacing him in my mother’s affection. I accused him of using his money to worm his way into our family. I went looking for reasons to hate him.”

“Now, I’ve realized, to my chagrin, all he’s done for me, and that I really owe him an apology. But, I didn’t know about that when I met Doc. When I first met Doc, he let me think he was just some random motorcycle bum who’d stopped to help when my car broke down. I even offered to pay him a hundred dollars a day to give me a ride to the mine site! Later, when we became lovers, he still didn’t tell me anything. It wasn’t until we got here, and Pat – our VP of operations and everyone’s mother figure – *made* him tell me. He’d been working for my stepfather all the time. He let me go through all that and fall in love with him without telling me he was working for my

supposed enemy. That's what I can't forgive him for."

"Anyway," Red concluded, "I've gotten to the point that I can work with him. I even like him as a friend, like a big brother. In fact, he's become like the father I've missed all these years. But, not a lover. As I said, if you ever let anybody find out what I've told you – even Doc, I'll never forgive you."

"That explains a lot," Gwen said.

"He already knows it," Tamara said, flatly.

"Who knows what," Red asked.

"Doc knows all about what you've just told us."

"How would you know," Gwen scoffed.

"I've known him longer than you have, Gwen. I've known him longer than Red has, too. I worked with him on another documentary I was doing about one of his clients a few years ago. I got to know him pretty well, although not in the way Red got to know him – dammit! – and we've kept in touch, since. I still call him whenever I need to understand some technology that I'm working on, or anything else for that matter. That's probably why he called me about doing this documentary. He knows I take the time to understand what I'm covering. In fact, he probably did the most to teach me the importance of understanding it."

"Doc pretty much knows about everything that goes on around him, but he watches Red like a hawk. There's nothing, and I mean *nothing*, that she does, or thinks, or that happens to her, that he doesn't somehow know about. He's got some kind of ESP about anything that's important to him, anyway. You've seen it in action, Red. I know you have. But, Red, you're wrong. There's only one thing in the world more important to him than this company – you! That means his ESP follows you like radar. If there's anything he doesn't know about you, I won't believe it. He probably knows your future."

“The future’s uncertain, and the end is always near,” Red intoned, absently.

“What?” Tamara asked.

“It’s a line from an old Door’s song,” Red explained. “I always think of it whenever anyone talks about predicting the future. Doc taught me to see the future the way he sees it. I don’t look any more than I have to, though. Scares Hell out of me! The future’s a horrible place, full of all the horrible things that could happen, as well as the good ones. People who consult psychics because they want to know their futures are fools. The future’s easy to see, but it’s not like any of them want it to be.”

“You mean that actually *works*?” Tamara asked in amazement. “You can *see* it? I thought it was just Doc playing at being mystical. Like, to keep from having to answer too many questions.”

“He doesn’t play at being mystical,” Red answered. “That’s what goes on in his mind. It’s how he really sees the world. It’s only a mystery if you haven’t seen behind the veil. When you do, it’s just how things are.”

“Oh, shit,” Tamara said to herself in disgust. “She’s one of Doc groupies.”

“Groupies?” Gwen asked. This was an aspect of this job she’d never expected.

“Doc’s a Zen sage,” Tamara explained. “Even most of the people I know who have practiced Zen for years say they can’t follow his thinking. There are a few people who say they do. They’re all advanced masters, themselves. When they hear about the things he comes up with, they just say, ‘Yeah, of course!’ I thought of trying to do a documentary on him. He wouldn’t cooperate. Said it wasn’t for just anyone to know about. He won’t teach anyone. Except for a few little hints, like that ‘future as probability field’ thing, he won’t even discuss it with anyone except the few people who already seem to know about it. I call them Doc’s groupies, although maybe he’s the groupie. I don’t know. Hey, wait a minute, Red! You say he *taught* you to see the future? He didn’t just say something vague about how *he* could see it?”

“Well,” Red explained, none too confidently, “we spent a week together, and he taught me to meditate, and

achieve *satori*. Once he described his vision of the future, it was easy to see. It's so obvious."

"Oh, Jesus!" Tamara said. "Gwen, you're looking at an honest-to-God prodigy. Apparently, she went from nada to adept at techniques most people have to spend decades to learn – if they make it at all – in a week. Not only that, she apparently mastered one of the most esoteric techniques of the lot. She learned it from a master who steadfastly refuses to teach anyone anything. I mean, he literally sends them away. People who've spent twenty, or thirty years practicing, he politely brushes them off. If they don't already know it, he won't even talk to them about it."

"You know, Red," Tamara launched into her subject, now getting excited, "the Dalai Lama, himself, has written a number of books encouraging Buddhist philosophers to do research aimed at developing this knowledge. You're telling me Doc's already done it, and taught it to *you*!"

Gwen interrupted her, saying: "Wait a minute. I'm missing something. What are you talking about?"

"For years, and years," Tamara explained, "the Dalai Lama's been on this kick about some kind of fusion between advanced physics, and Buddhism. A lot of others have worked on it too. In 1976, a young physicist named Fritjof Capra wrote a bestseller called *The Tao of Physics* in which he tried to pull it off. People who have read it – those that have the background to understand it – seem to think it's like twenty-thousand lawyers chained to the bottom of the sea: a good start. But they somehow aren't satisfied. It's still a big issue among Buddhists."

"The story goes that our Doc, who is a *bona fide* Zen sage with a mastery of all the traditional stuff, has put it all together. Everyone knows that he's got two PhDs in subfields of physics – one in astrophysics, and the other in fluid dynamics – and is a certified genius in both fields. What most people don't know, and I only know because I was digging for my documentary before Doc put the kibosh on it, is that Doc's supposedly been studying Zen since he was a baby."

"It's like, nobody taught him to meditate, it was just something he did, even as an infant. Drove his parents bonkers! Whenever somebody tried to teach him something about religion, he'd listen politely until he understood

what they were trying to teach him, then say something like: ‘No, that’s not how it works,’ and explain it from a Zen viewpoint.”

“He got so fed up with their trying to push their views on him, that he stopped answering them. He’d listen politely for as long as they wanted to talk, then change the subject. He’d ask them about the weather, or something completely *non sequitur*. Drove *them* bonkers.”

“He heard about the Vedic literature, and read that. He heard about the Upanishads, and read them. He heard about the Buddhist sutras, and read them. When somebody finally explained formal Zen to him, he just said: ‘Oh, that’s what I do.’ Not ‘what I believe,’ or anything you’d expect. He said: ‘it’s what I *do*.’”

“Next thing you know, he’s got the main texts of Taoism and Buddhism memorized. No, not memorized, *absorbed*. He’d spout some quote, then have to run to the nearest copy of the original text to find it just to make sure he had the wording right. He *knew* he had the *sense* right!”

“So,” asked Gwen, “if he’s got the answer to this big question that is so important to his religion, ... ”

“It’s not a religion,” Red pointed out.

“Pardon?” Gwen asked.

“Not important, sorry,” Red apologized for interrupting. “Go ahead with your question.”

“So, if he’s got the answer to this big important question, why won’t he tell anyone? I should think he’d shout it from the rooftops.”

“I don’t know,” Tamara said. “Apparently, every time someone figures it out, they clam up. None of them, and I’ve talked to three or four so far beside Doc, will explain it to anyone.”

“At least, not until Doc spent some time with one Judith McKenna,” she said, pointing sideways at Red. “Apparently, he spilled the beans to *her*.”

“So,” Gwen asked Red, “why don’t you tell us the secret?”

“If you’re very, very smart, and work very, very hard to understand, it would take, let’s see, twelve plus – I dunno, thirty? – which makes forty-two years, to explain. I’m not sure I could do it. I do know that I wouldn’t have the patience. That’s why nobody who understands it will explain it to anyone who doesn’t already know.”

“But, you learned it in a week!”

“No,” Red explained, “after working with Doc, I got curious, and figured out the timing. Accounting for the telescoping effect of multiplexing study of different things with different teachers at the same time, it took me approximately forty four years. And, it took Doc to show me how to put it together in the end. You see, I read the Dalai Lama’s book, too.”

“See Gwen,” Tamara said, “she’s just like the others. As soon as one of Doc’s groupies figures it out, they clam up. Won’t explain it to a soul!”

“Look,” Red said, showing frustration, “could we talk about something else? We’ve got some decisions to make, and I’m running out of time.”

“See, Gwen, now *she’s* changing the subject! We’d better let her have her way, or she’ll just throw us out of her office. Then, we might as well go find other clients because she’ll never talk to us again.”

“It seems you’ve learned something!” Red said, darkly.

“Uh, oh,” Tamara said, “where were we?”

Gwen, who took Tamara’s warning to heart – especially after seeing the stony look in Red’s eyes – said: “We’d just found out why Red refuses to admit she’s still in love with Doc.”

Looking into Red’s eyes, Gwen realized she’d made the mistake, after all. She had the distinct feeling that she’d just heard a door slam shut. Maybe there was something to this mystical hocus pocus, after all.

Then, Red opened the door again by correcting her: “You know why I will no longer consider marrying Doc. You also know why he’s probably my closest, and dearest friend. Let’s put it this way: he’s the closest anyone alive has come to being my father, and who wants to marry their father?”

Tamara, and Gwen looked at each other, shrugged, and both raised their hands.

“Traitors,” Red said, without explanation.

Everyone, of course, with the least understanding of human psychology knows that every girl from a well adjusted home wants to marry a boy who’s just like her father, and every boy from a well adjusted home wants to marry a girl who’s just like his mother. It’s why Doc knew that she was headed for an emotional crisis. Red knew it, too, but was trying to avoid its implications.

That was the future that Doc could see for Red, just as Tamara had suggested.

21

They decided to follow Red’s suggestion that their public story was to be that she was playing the field, looking for Mr. Right. They were not to officially name Greg as the current candidate. Leave it for the tabloid reporters to discover, if they wanted to.

“Let ‘em do their jobs, themselves,” Gwen said. “We don’t have to do it for them. In the meantime, we’ll stick to talking about Red’s search for her father.”

“We’ll also not say, ‘boo,’ about any friction between me, and my step father,” Red commanded. “I feel like a jerk about it, and I’m going to try to mend it, anyway. If anyone else brings it up, our official position was that it was a stupid misunderstanding that I feel badly about, but it’s in the past. Nothing more, okay?”

“I like that,” Gwen said, because she did. “If you’re going to patch things up, though, do it soon. No sense making them hear it from strangers.”

“I’m meeting with our lawyer Monday about setting up a trust for all my father’s assets,” Red said, thinking out loud. “I’ll have to go back east to explain it to my mother, and get her signature on the papers. I’ll talk to Mark then.”

“What should we say about that trust?” Gwen asked.

“Nothing. It should have been done long ago, and probably would have been if I wasn’t being such a shithead.”

“What about your relationship with your biological father, and your mother?”

“They stand as in the backgrounder. I was devoted to my father, but he’s dead. I want to know why, and I’m prepared to spend ridiculous amounts of money to find out. Through my step father, I have ridiculous amounts of money to spend, and Doc and Greg have the technology to finally make it happen. As far as my mother is concerned, she’s my *mother* for crissakes! On top of that, she’s also my oldest friend.”

“Do you have a prediction about when you might discover what happened to your father?”

“The only one I know with clairvoyance enough to make that prediction is Doc. He thinks it’ll be a matter of weeks, or maybe a few months at most. I’m going on the assumption that he’s right.”

“Do you really want us to tell the world that this company is being run based on mystical knowledge divined by it’s Zen-master CEO?”

Red laughed. “Of course not. Zen practitioners and Taoists would think it perfectly natural, but everyone else would think we were total whackos. Thanks, Gwen, for reminding me that, while I understand what’s really going on and find it perfectly natural, there’s no way to say it to the general public that doesn’t sound completely loopy.”

“So, what *do* we say?”

Still smiling, Red replied: “Instead of saying ‘based on the nutso ravings of our psychotic CEO,’ we’ll say,

‘based on experience with similar projects.’ Put in lots of waffle words about ‘barring unanticipated difficulties,’ and ‘unknown factors,’ and we’ll be golden.”

Gwen noted with satisfaction that Red displayed a clear understanding of the difference between reality and perception, and knew how to use words to manipulate them. She was also impressed by Red’s knowledge of the technical term “waffle words.” She not only knew of the term’s existence, but knew how to use it correctly in a sentence, what it actually meant, and how to apply waffle words to a PR problem. Undergraduate math majors aren’t supposed to know that.

“When the tabloids do manage to unearth the romantic link between you and Greg, how should we respond?”

“That I really, really like Greg Michels. The words ‘yummy,’ and ‘dreamboat’ have been applied to him in this office. He and I actually met face-to-face for the first time at a dinner in Phoenix hosted by SST. You can get details from Doc, if and when needed. Doc picked up the tab.”

“Greg, and I hit it off, and stopped for drinks at a bar in our hotel afterwards. We happen to be staying in the same hotel – on different floors. I’ve taken a suite there until this project is finished. Then, I go back to my own apartment in Boston, Massachusetts. Greg’s at the hotel while he’s in town working with our engineers. If they want more details than that, let ‘em make ‘em up themselves.”

“You said earlier that you are not a virgin, and that you don’t like to sleep alone. Is that how you want us to play it?”

“Well, let’s not feature it in any press releases, but if anybody asks, that’s the simple truth. But, don’t forget to include that I’m looking for a stable relationship with one man. In other words, I’m playing the field in search of a husband. Between us, so there’s no confusion, having sex is part of the search. I’m not marrying any guy who’s a bust in the sack.”

“Do you have any idea how many marriage proposals that will generate?”

“I can afford to buy a really big wastebasket, and hire a couple of really big men to dump junk mail into it. I’m picky, and don’t care who knows it. I’ve already run through a string of boyfriends who didn’t measure up.”

“You’ve established that you like men,” Gwen said. “What about women?”

“I’m not a lesbian, if that’s what you mean. Between us girls, I’ve had a couple of experiences that skirted the edge, and Doc says that how I’d react to an actual female lover has not been established. I don’t think I’d go for it, but even Doc says he doesn’t know. I think we can go with what I said before, and keep silent on the L-word. That makes me happy, and leaves room for Doc’s test to come out terribly wrong.”

“You know, you could want a man and a family, and still find sex with a woman enjoyable,” Gwen cautioned.

“Are you volunteering?” Red jested, then realized that she might actually be volunteering.

“No,” Gwen blushed, “just pointing out that the question will come up, if only from a few militant feminists. I can name a number of prominent women, especially tall ones, for whom silence on the subject has not been enough.”

“Which brings us to another subject,” Gwen said, “that I’ve skirted a couple of times. How do you feel you’d react to being under a microscope? Doc said he didn’t know how you’d react to a bunch of paparazzi buzzing around. Once it starts, it can be an annoyance for life, although some people seem to thrive on it.”

“I don’t think I’d thrive on it, but I’m too smart, too old, and, it turns out, too rich to give a shit. By the way, I still have no idea how much my stepfather is worth. He’s certainly not poor, but I’m not sure I believe Doc’s mention of ‘billions.’ I expect that’s an exaggeration.”

“Let’s just do what we need to do to find my father,” Red summarized. “If buzzing paparazzi are the result,

so be it. I don't know whether it would be a good career move. I can't see that it would cause problems for anything I might want to do."

"It could cause problems for a marriage," Gwen warned. "It is not unthinkable that some tabloid might misreport, or even make up, an indiscretion that could hurt the trust between a husband and wife. Certainly, any real affairs that you or your husband might have would be uncovered and splashed all over the place."

"If the marriage couldn't take it, it wouldn't be strong enough, anyway. There are worse pressures that marriages have to deal with every day, like fifteen-year-old daughters. Besides, I'm probably not going to be interesting enough to hold their attention for very long, even if I attract it in the first place. We're not going to seek it, but if they come after me, I'll deal with it then. To Hell with it."

"Well, I think the sex angle's well and truly disposed of," Gwen concluded. "All that's left is your future plans. Aside from a wistful longing for a home, and a family, and a husband to keep you warm at night, what are your plans?"

"Actually, I've a wonderful career here all mapped out. I'm not the least convinced that it isn't compatible with a home and a husband to keep me warm at night, either. Millions of men juggle work and family successfully, why can't I? The plan is that, after we settle my father and his estate, and the geologic techniques he pioneered, I'm to go back to school, finish my PhD, then get an M.B.A., then become a top corporate executive. Doc has made noises like he wants me to run SST when I grow up. You might note that there's also an oil company run by a step father who might someday want to retire, or at least share some responsibility with his contrite step daughter."

"As I said before," Red reminded her, "'The future's uncertain, and the end is always near.' I'm not looking beyond finishing my PhD."

"Have you decided whether you want to stay at Harvard?"

"You mean since we talked about it this morning? No, I haven't decided. It will depend on a number of

factors. Obviously, if I happen to find Mr. Right, he'll have input into where we want to live, which limits where I go to grad school. What I decide to do for my thesis is also important. I have to find an advisor who's also working in whatever field it involves. There are a lot of imponderables. Right now, however, Harvard is the front runner, if we want to handicap a race. Is that enough? It's all I've got."

They all agreed it was more than enough, so, with another plea for secrecy, Red shooed them out of her office.

22

She didn't go back to work, though. She sat thinking about making up with her step father. As her comments to Gwen and Tamara indicated, she'd been thinking about Mark, and re-evaluating everything that had been said and done between them. Not only did she feel like a fool, but thought that she might have missed out on a good friend.

She decided to do something about it now, rather than later.

She called Doc's extension on her desk phone.

Seeing by caller ID that it was Red, Doc interrupted his meeting with Pat. "Whachuwantgirl?" had become his pet greeting for Red.

"Can I get together with you for a few minutes? I need your advice."

"Of course, will you give me" he looked up to Pat, who silently mouthed: "Five minutes."

"Give me five minutes to finish up here," he re-said his sentence, "and come on in. We'll have about a half hour. Will that do you?"

"Should be more than enough time," came Red's reply.

“What do you think that’s about?” Pat asked, after Doc hung up the phone.

“From the tone of her voice, it’s important, and personal. I don’t think she’d need advice about Greg. My guess would be that she’s finally got up the gumption to apologize to Mark Shipton, and needs moral support. Maybe you should stick around. It’s your area of expertise, and she’ll probably want your blessing, as well.”

Five minutes later – on the dot – Red opened Doc’s office door. Seeing Doc and Pat still sitting on the tree-sided sofa in front of his wall-size TV/computer monitor, she said: “Oh, sorry. Do you want me to come back?”

“No, we’ve just finished,” Doc said.

“In that case,” Red said somewhat shyly, “could you stay, Pat? I’d like your advice, too.”

“Sure, come on in, dear,” Pat said, patting the seat next to her as an invitation to sit down.

Red sat down, then looked at her folded hands while trying to figure out how to start. She’d thought about it all the time since calling, but now that she came to the point, she couldn’t think of what to say.

Doc and Pat sat, waiting patiently. Pat had been through this a million times professionally. Doc was prepared to wait until the end of time. He could outwait anyone, if he wanted to.

Red cleared her throat, then said: “I need to go back east to talk to my mother about setting up a trust for my father’s assets. The claims, and so forth.”

Doc looked at her as if she’d said something stultifyingly stupid. “That can wait,” he replied. “It’s all *pro forma*, anyway. David can draw up the paperwork in his sleep, and won’t have it done until ... when?”

“Monday,” Red said with the sinking feeling that things were going very badly for her plan. Doc was going to block her trip on grounds that she was needed here. “But, I can’t wait until then. I’ll be up to my eyeballs in Nevada until who knows when. It’s better that I do it this week.”

“You can do it from Carson City with a phone call and overnight mail. You don’t need to go to Miami for that. C’mon, Red, this is us. What do you really want?”

Red opened her mouth, then closed it, then decided to just blurt it out: “I want to go back, and apologize to Mark.”

“About fucking time!” Doc exclaimed.

“Good girl,” Pat said.

“Now *that*,” Doc said, “is important. Let’s see. This is Tuesday. I need you back here to meet with the TV folks Friday morning. You don’t know it, yet, but we finally got Eve Salazar at Channel Five interested in covering your little quest as a human interest story. She’s coming here Friday morning to interview you. You have to be there because you’re the star of the show.”

“Does Gwen know? I was just meeting with her, and she didn’t say anything about it.”

“Eve called with the go-ahead while you guys were doing your interview. Gwen won’t know ‘til she gets back to her office. She’ll be furious that she missed getting the call herself. Lucky that Eve knows me. She called here when she couldn’t connect with Gwen.”

“Anyway, let’s try to get you, and Mark, and your mother together tomorrow. You do want your mother there, or do you want to talk to Mark alone? They’re still on the boat for another month. I’m sure Mark will want to make time for you. I think he’d leave the Saudi Sheik cooling his heels on the dock in order to see you!”

Red had gotten used to seeing a whirlwind come up every time Doc decided he wanted something to happen. She sensed the wind picking up, and knew it was best just to hang on while it blew through.

He reached for his cellphone, looked up a number, and punched it. “Jack, this is Doc Manchek over at Scottsdale Systems Technology. We have an exec who needs to get to Miami on the QT for a meeting tomorrow

afternoon. I think we can have her fly out first thing in the morning. ... By about eleven o'clock, if the jet stream cooperates. She'll need to fly back Thursday morning. ... I don't know, say nine o'clock? All we need is to have her here, bright eyed and bushy tailed, for a TV interview on Friday morning. Is that doable? ... Okay, great. We still need to confirm the meeting. I'll call you back in an hour or so to confirm. ... Yeah, breakfast on the way out. Lunch on the way back. I'll give you the menu when we confirm. ... Talk to you later, thanks."

"Call your step father at the boat. Tell him you want to come for a quick visit with your mother and him before we go into the mine next week. Tell him I said we could spare you tomorrow, but you have to be back here Thursday night. If it's okay – give him the option to nix the trip – you should be landing at Miami International General Aviation Center about eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. I'm sure he'll want to have Darrell pick you up, but if not, we'll arrange transportation."

"The trip back will take a lot longer because you'll be fighting the jet stream, so it'll take most of the day, Thursday. Luckily, there's a big southern meander in the stream that's parked between here and there, which accounts for the cool weather today. It'll help you on the way out, but not on the way back. You should still be back by dinner time on Thursday."

"Don't bother to come in Thursday, unless you get in early and want to get an update. You shouldn't need to. There'll be a phone on the plane, so you can keep in touch with your team just as if you were here. I'll check in on Greg and Steve from time to time, in case they run into something that requires somebody on site. Got that?"

"Have Bonnie arrange for a limo to take you to the plane here," he added. "They're two doors down to the south. Bonnie will know which limo service to use, and they'll know which charter service we prefer. Give me a call as soon as you talk to Mark."

Red asked him to repeat the flight information to write down, as well as the name of the charter service they'd be using. She sprinted back to her office. Mentally doing the time zone correction, she realized that Mark and her mother would be finishing dinner, so she called her mother's cellphone.

“Hi, Mom? It’s Judy.” Her mother was almost the only person on Earth whom she allowed to call her “Judy.”

“Hello, baby. Is anything wrong? Are you alright?” her mother gave her the standard greeting that all parents give their children when the children call.

“Yes, I’m great. Doc’s letting me loose to come visit you and Mark. Will you be around tomorrow?”

“Why, yes. We thought we’d take the boat out for a moonlight cruise tomorrow night. Can you come along?”

Mary McKenna knew all about the friction between her husband and her daughter. The fact that Red mentioned him as someone she wanted to visit gave her hope that the trouble might finally get resolved.

“I have to fly back here Thursday morning. As long as we can get back in time for me to make my flight, I’d love to. I miss you, Mom.”

“I miss you, too, baby.”

“Can I talk to Mark?”

Dumbfounded, Mary handed her cellphone to Mark, saying: “It’s Judy. And she wants to talk to *you*!”

Equally surprised, Mark accepted the phone, and said: “Judith. This is a wonderful surprise. How are you, and how’s that old pirate treating you?” Without knowing why, Red knew he was referring to Doc.

“I’m fine, and Doc’s letting me off the reservation to visit you and Mom. The only time I can do it is tomorrow. Will you be around? There are some things I want to talk with you about. I have to come tomorrow because I’m going onsite to my father’s mine on Monday, and Doc got the local TV station interested in doing a human-interest story on what we’re doing. The TV people will be here to interview us Friday morning.”

Red was having trouble shutting her mouth. She found herself that excited.

“That means you’ll have to be back in Scottsdale Thursday night,” Mark calculated. “I assume Doc isn’t

putting you on a commercial flight.”

“No, he’s chartered a jet to take just *me* over, and back!”

“I’m surprised he isn’t flying you over himself. Is everything okay?”

“He’s got stuff to do here, getting ready for the move up to Nevada. And, he’s going to cover for me here, while I’m with you. I was amazed that he was willing to let me go at all.”

“That boy’s got a good head on his shoulders. If he said ‘okay,’ then it’s the best thing to do.”

“Mom said you guys were taking the boat out tomorrow night. What time do you expect to be back?”

“What time do you need to be back? You’re coming with us, period.”

“Doc arranged for the flight to leave at nine o’clock, but it’s a charter, so we can change that, can’t we?”

Red knew that Mark invariably flew by corporate jet, never commercial airlines. She’d thought it was an affectation. When she found out that Doc always chartered a plane for his corporate execs, she thought there might be more to it. She was beginning to find out what.

“They don’t like last minute changes because they have to file a flight plan and get takeoff clearance. I try not to screw up their schedules, once they’re set. It’s impolite. But, nine o’clock should be easy to make. If something evil comes up, they aren’t going to leave without you.”

“Great. So, I’ll see you tomorrow around noonish? Uh, will Darrell pick me up, or should I take a cab?”

“If you ever take a cab without a damn good reason, Doc will yell at you. Get used to being too valuable a commodity to take chances with. Doc’s put a lot on the line – over and above what I’ve committed to the project – and it will all go up in smoke if anything happens to you. No corporation in its right mind would let its key people wander around a commercial airline terminal, or grab a random taxicab. You’ll understand by the time you get

here. We'll all meet you. See you soon. Do you want to say goodbye to your mother?"

"Yes, please."

"Hi! So you're really coming tomorrow? I can't wait to see you," Mary said.

"Mom, I'm going to put the phone down, now, because I don't want to say goodbye. I just want to say hello again as soon as I can. See you tomorrow. Love."

Immediately, Red called Doc, and Doc picked up on the first ring. "I just talked to Mark and Mom," she told him. "Everything's all set. They'll meet me at the plane tomorrow."

"Okay," Doc replied. "I'll confirm the plane. Have Bonnie arrange for the limo. They'll tell her what time they need to pick you up to have you at the ramp on time. They want to take off by seven o'clock to get you there by eleven, so plan to be at their office by six thirty. You'll have to go through a security checkpoint before they'll let you out on the ramp, but there won't be a line. I'll see you when you get back. Have fun! Oh! Meals. Are you still trying to maintain training? How about eggs Benedict for breakfast tomorrow, and, maybe a bit of quiche Lorraine for lunch coming back? Lots of protein to offset the load of carbs they'll try to dump on you while you're there."

"Sounds perfect. Thanks Doc, for everything."

"Sure. That's what friends are for."

23

At first, Red agonized over what to wear, and what to bring. She knew her mother had never seen her in anything like what she usually wore to work – what Doc called her "armor." On the other hand, she'd become so comfortable in more flamboyant fashions than she'd worn before, that she felt uncomfortable going back to the old styles.

“What the Hell,” she finally decided, “I’m just going to be me. If anyone doesn’t like it, let ‘em pound sand.”

She wore her red leather jumpsuit for travel, decorated with a colorful scarf around the waist. She wrapped a second multicolored scarf snug around her neck, and knotted it on the side. She added a large squash-blossom necklace that Doc had found for her in New Mexico. It was made of nickel silver, which has a duller, but deeper sheen than the bright surface shine of sterling. The squash blossom petals were made of hundreds of individually set turquoise stones. She included a very large pair of silver hoop earrings, but just put small diamond studs in her extra ear piercing holes. They’d now expanded to three on each side. She wore her red leather jacket for warmth, and her gray cowboy hat to keep off the sun when on deck.

For casual, she’d brought a pair of jeans, her cowboy boots, and a light blue blouse. She threw in a pair of sneakers to wear on deck. Mark had a rule about rubber-soled shoes on deck. She also brought her heels, and that black velvet evening gown, just in case. Finally, she brought a string bikini with a matching floor-length wrap to cover her legs, in case the weather got warm. It didn’t take much space, and when wandering around the marina, you never knew what rich hunks you might meet.

The flight out taught her why both Doc and Mark kept key executives off commercial flights. Aside from the security concerns, there was a huge time element. The plane she took provided high-speed Wi-Fi Internet access, a mobile telephone, fax machine, copier, scanner, and every other kind of office machine she could think of. She found that she could, as Doc told her, keep tabs on her entire team as easily from the jet’s cabin as she could from her office in Scottsdale. Had she gone by commercial airliner, she would be at the mercy of their schedule, and would have basically been out of touch the whole time.

Eggs Benedict on the flight weren’t up to Sam’s standards, or even that of room service at her hotel, but, they were still quite good for all that, and the high-protein meal would help her body maintain muscle without putting on fat – the bane of the traveling athlete.

As Red grabbed for her bag at the bottom of the stairway exiting the plane, one of the flight crew waved her off.

“I’ll carry that in for you, ma’am,” he said.

The crewman wasn’t very big, and looked pretty scrawny. Red figured she could probably deadlift twice what he could, but smiled and thanked him for his gallantry, anyway. It was probably part of his job, but she hoped he’d been hired for his aviation skills, rather than his baggage handling.

Inside the terminal building, she spied her mother first, then Mark. The two women ran to each others’ arms while Mark hung back, smiling.

Mary McKenna Shipton was an older, slightly shorter version of Red. Although, at nearly six feet herself, she was taller than most of the people in the lobby, including her husband, who didn’t seem to mind a bit.

“Let me look at you,” she said, pushing Red back to arms length. It had been less than a month since she’d last seen her daughter, but Red had been through so many changes in that time that she almost looked like a different woman.

“What a beautiful necklace,” she said, pulling the zipper on Red’s jumpsuit down four inches, and spreading the collar wider to show off Red’s squash blossom. Red had pulled the zipper up higher than usual because she figured her mother would want her to dress more modestly. “There, now people can see it. You look wonderful! Arizona agrees with you.”

Mary, contrary to Red’s idea that her mother would want her to dress more modestly, had actually been pushing her to show off a little more. “Mousey” was the way Mary thought of her daughter’s wardrobe. “You need to show off more of what you’ve got,” she’d often said.

This time, however, she just said, cryptically: “I see Doc’s taught you to dress a little better.”

“Mom!” Red whined. She was about to protest that Doc had nothing to do with it, when she realized that he’d helped pick out the jumpsuit, the necklace, and the boots. She’d added accessories, such as the scarf around her waist, but only after he’d encouraged her to add more flash to her look. She closed her mouth on the protest, and looked, for the first time in years, critically at what her mother was wearing.

She’d known that after retiring from school teaching, her mother had joined a health club, but she’d always assumed it was mostly for something to do. Now, she realized that her mother was keeping herself in nearly as good physical shape as Red, herself.

She didn’t show the sagging, jiggling triceps muscles that most women her age – even the thin ones – had. Her muscles were all lean and toned. Looking at her sides, Red could see the well-defined ribs characteristic of top female bodybuilders. Red suddenly realized that the perky little yellow party dress her mother was wearing was really something! It’s pleated skirt came to mid-knee, and the halter top’s neckline was open to the waistband. The bare-backed design accounted for the fur jacket Mark was carrying for her.

She wore no jewelry beyond her wedding ring, and plain silver studs in her ears, but she didn’t need any. The dress, which Red realized had been custom made, showed off her athletic – there was no other description – body beautifully. Jewelry would have been a distraction.

Red noticed that Mom had no compunction about wearing heels, either.

“Mom, you really look good, too,” Red said as they turned toward the exit to the sidewalk. “I knew you were working out, but, wow!”

“Baby, I see all these women out here sagging in their deck chairs, giving in to being frigid, fat, and fifty, and say: ‘Not for me!’ Of course, I don’t blame them for being frigid, considering the beach balls they’re married to. I’ve pushed your step father into shaping up, too. I love him, and want to keep him around as long as I can. He’s a lot more fun in bed, too. I can’t do anything about coming up on fifty, but there’s something I can do about the frigid, and fat.”

“Mom, you don’t look anywhere near fifty. Excuse me, I want to say hi to Mark.”

Since having her daughter behave hatefully to her husband had been one of the biggest disappointments – possibly the only current disappointment – in her life, she welcomed this simple announcement.

Stepping over to the surprised Mark, Red wrapped her arms around his neck, and hugged him. “I’m sorry for being such a shit all these years. You didn’t deserve it. I’m going to try to be a better daughter for you.”

Mark Shipton was too cagey a businessman to take a pronouncement like that at face value. While it was one of the things he most wanted, he always gave a gift horse a thorough dental examination, and always, always kept his camel tied. When considering any business deal, he drew up contingency plans B, C, and often D in case what was offered was not what was delivered. This woman had treated him like an enemy for three years, and was suddenly falling all over him. He understood that she’d been through a lot of changes, and had been with people who wouldn’t put up with her Gothic fantasies, but the change may, or may not, be real.

On the other hand, a family was what he’d always wanted, and circumstances had denied. His first wife had turned out to be a vicious, selfish, greedy, conniver, who had married him solely for his money. She hadn’t even pretended to be interested in him sexually. In fact, her neglect had been so obvious that he’d finally gotten rid of her by maneuvering her into an apparent indiscretion with a colleague’s wife. Her coldness to him was so notorious that it was easy for people to believe she was secretly a dyke. The fact that the colleague and the wife had been, and still were, his true friends, and had enthusiastically conspired with him to pull off the deception, was still a private joke. Whether the harpy really was a dyke, or not, Mark never knew, nor cared. The caper had allowed Mark to get rid of her at very little cost. The unfortunate marriage had, however, cost him the opportunity to have a real wife and family.

He’d known Mary since the time he’d collaborated with her husband – Red’s natural father – on several projects. He’d liked James, and envied him his loving wife and family. He’d kept up his friendship with Mary after James’ disappearance, helping her with encouragement and enough financial assistance to keep her from becoming

destitute. His marriage to the harpy had made anything more impossible.

Red's moving away to college had freed Mary from responsibility for a teenage daughter. That, combined with the ultimate success of Mark's effort to scrape off the harpy, had provided the opportunity for a second chance.

While she'd always been aloof from him, he'd watched Red grow up, and knew what extraordinary qualities she had. She was everything he would have wanted in a daughter. He'd done everything he could think of to win her over, but she continued to treat him with disdain.

Here she was, now even more the daughter he'd always wanted, suddenly hanging around his neck and apologizing. It was a lot for a tough veteran of business wars to accept, even if he'd had a hand in setting up the circumstances that had brought about the change.

"Thank you, Judith," he said, "All I've ever wanted was what's best for you. I know I could never be as good a father as Jim was, but ..." He ran out of words.

"Let's just start over," Red said, and held his arm as they walked toward the limo.

"Where's Darrell?" she asked, suddenly.

Darrell was the only one in the Shipton household whom she really called a friend. He'd understood her problems, and liked her company. When she wanted somebody she could just talk to, it was off to the garage. She knew about cars from Darrell. She was his favorite, and he was her friend.

"Right behind you, miss," a big black man shaped like an industrial-size refrigerator called out. She turned around to see him carrying her suitcase like it was a briefcase.

Being a chauffeur was only part of Darrell's job. He was also bodyguard for whoever was riding with him. Just about nose-to-nose with Red, his uniform hid the body of a Special Forces veteran, which he was; who had

free access to all the training and fitness equipment one could want, which he had; and was encouraged to make use of it, which he did. He was just one of a cadre of overpaid functionaries who carried the additional duty of being there to step in should trouble come knocking. Mark was much too shrewd to think that his money made him anything, but a target.

Mark was even more concerned about protecting those he cared about. Darrell's job was to unobtrusively reduce the odds that anyone could lay a finger on any "civilian" under his care. For example, there was that poor unfortunate who tried to steal Mary's purse when she was out shopping. The thief landed in the hospital, and Darrell almost landed in jail. A quick flurry of phone calls, beginning with Mary calling Mark, and ending with a patrolman being asked "What the Hell were you thinking?" by his sergeant, got Darrell off.

Red did not know it, but she was hardly ever out of screaming distance of very big, very competent people paid by Mark to make sure that anything she couldn't handle, would be handled for her. When Doc had disabled the biker back at Pinky's Roadhouse, the men who took him outside and waited until he drove away were not Pinky's employees. They were Mark's.

Those two polite guys who shared the apartment downstairs in Red's building, whom Red unjustly suspected of being gay, didn't pay rent for the apartment. Mark owned the building.

Even that friendly grad student who had encouraged her to start studying martial arts in her freshman year, and had given her the name of a really good instructor, bought his groceries with Mark's money.

In fact, Doc was the only one of her bodyguards who was strictly a volunteer. When he was around, Mark's forces relaxed a little. None of them would want to go up against Doc, but they were very happy to watch him work, and just mop up after he was done. Not that there was much work to do. True to his anti-violence philosophy, Doc was always on the lookout for potential trouble, and generally able to defuse it before anyone knew there was something to be defused.

Guarding Red was not considered a hardship, even when Doc wasn't around. The fact that Red was easy on

the eyes wasn't the reason, or not the only reason. It was the fact that she'd learned to take care of trouble, herself. The guards figured that encouraging her to take up martial arts as a sport was the best investment of a few minutes' time they'd ever made.

Although not as adept as Doc, Red was also pretty good at spotting potential trouble. Certainly, she was better than the rest of the "civilians" someone in their profession had to deal with. With Red spotting trouble, and knowing what to do about it, their job was again reduced to mopping up discretely.

For Darrell, guarding Red was almost like a day off. When neither Mark nor Mary was in the car, Red sat up front with him so they could talk about cars, or gossip about their lives. Red probably knew more about Darrell's family than her mother and step father combined. And, Darrell could have told Mark a thing or two about dealing with his wayward step daughter, had he been allowed.

At the same time, he'd seen her demeanor suddenly shift from giggling schoolgirl to deadly assassin, as she stopped a potential miscreant dead in his tracks with a look. The fool had been stalking a young woman across a crowded plaza in New York City. She was probably a hooker in trouble with her pimp, but that made no difference to Red. She'd spotted the frightened look on the girl's face, and the angry, determined look on her pursuer's, and simply stepped between them, facing the man. His look of anger changed first to surprise, then to dismay as he stopped in his tracks. When Red started walking toward him as if she had dinner plans for his liver, he turned, and sprinted out of the plaza.

Darrell and Red had shared a good laugh over the look on his face.

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"What do you guys really know about Doc Manchek?" Red asked as they rode to the boat in the back of the limo. "I know that you put him up to helping me find my father, but I don't know how you know him, or really much about his background. I got the impression you were trying to push me at him, but that could be my

imagination.”

“Which question do you want us to answer first, dear?” Mary asked.

“I dunno. Let’s start with the first: how did you hook up with him to begin with? I don’t think he’s part of your set. I can’t see you hobnobbing with bikers.”

“Well, you should know that he’s not just a biker. We met him at the marina. He has a boat just a few slips down on the same dock as our boat. We’ve known him since he joined the yacht club two years ago.”

“I didn’t even know he had a boat. Of course, I’m not surprised. Nothing about Doc surprises me, anymore. Like, I just found out yesterday that the Zen practice he taught me has only a handful of adherents worldwide.”

“He *taught* you that?” Mark asked in surprise.

“You know about that?” Red asked.

“I know *about* it. When we thought of working with him, we did a thorough background check on him, which turned it up. Its adherents are supposed to have uncanny powers of perception, which we’ve seen from Doc, but nobody’s sure whether it’s the training, or natural to the practitioners. I asked Doc, and he just mumbled something about there not being any training, and changed the subject.”

Red laughed delightedly. “Oh, that’s Doc. It’s the sort of thing he does all the time. What kind of boat does he have?”

A funny look came over Mary’s, and Mark’s faces. It was a combination of surprise mixed with a twinge of panic, as if they weren’t sure they knew her, anymore.

“What?” Red asked.

Mary and Mark turned to look at each other, and Mark said in a slightly frightened tone: “She’s doing it,

too!”

“Mom,” Red pleaded, “what’s the matter?”

“It’s just that you’re talking exactly like Doc. It’s so weird! Is it some kind of cult? Should we be worried?”

Red realized that they were afraid they’d been misinformed, and that they’d put their only daughter in the hands of some religious cult. She could see their point.

“No, you should not be worried. I haven’t changed. I’m still the same Judith McKenna I’ve always been. I’ve learned to not be as afraid to express myself, to go out on a limb, to take chances, as I used to be. I’ve a lot more confidence than before, but that’s because I’ve learned to trust my instincts more, and not stand in my own way.”

“Is that because of this training? What is it? Why won’t anybody tell us about it?” Mary asked, concerned.

“That’s two separate questions,” Red explained. “No, three, but I can answer two of them together.” She was trying to formulate an answer that was both truthful, and that they could understand without knowing anything about either modern physics, or Zen.

“I’ll start with the last,” she said, finally. “The reason nobody will tell you about it is that it’s so darn complicated that there’s no way to explain it simply. What Doc practices, I guess I should say it’s what we practice – Doc *and* me, and I guess a few other people that I don’t know – is a fusion of traditional Zen Buddhism and modern physics. There’s no secret. The information is freely available to anyone. All you have to do is get a degree in physics, or applied math. You also have to practice Zen meditation, which isn’t exactly what most people think of as meditation. Basically, it’s a technique for quieting your mind, so you can experience the world without trying to fit your experience into any pre-conceived notions of what you think the world *should* be. Then, there’s the whole Taoist philosophy that’s part of Zen. The math and physics give you practice in critical thinking and a frame of reference that doesn’t depend on opinion. ”

She paused for a few seconds.

“I’m only telling you this because you’re my family, and I want you to understand that it’s all okay. If anybody else asks, they’re going to get squat from me.”

“Once you put those two pieces together,” Red continued, “you suddenly see things you never noticed before. That’s why Doc seems to have uncanny perception. It’s like, you’ve spent your whole life peering through a swirling milky fog, and suddenly it disappears, so you can see clearly. Meanwhile, everyone else is still trying to look through the fog.”

“Why won’t they – you – teach it to anyone else?” Mark asked.

“How many people are trained in physics, or applied math? That training changes the way you see the world, anyway. It gets you used to the idea that what goes on in your head isn’t the real world, but a representation of the real world, filtered, and edited by your senses, and your preconceived notions. Zen training teaches you how to take off the filter, and skip the editing. You’re left with the real world. Does any of this make sense?”

“Sort of,” Mark said with a mildly confused expression. Red noticed that Mary just sat back with a beaming look of pride. She no longer cared whether she understood it, or not. She was proud of her daughter, who obviously did understand it.

“Why the emphasis on physics and applied math?” Mark asked, still trying to understand what Red was trying to explain.

“Training in those two scientific disciplines affects the way you look at things. A physicist looking at, say, an alpine skier bouncing over moguls sees the skier, and the moguls, just like everyone else, but he also sees the physical variables, like friction force, momentum, air resistance, reaction forces in the snow holding the skier up against gravity, and so forth. He also sees how they interplay with each other as time evolves and the situation changes. That’s where all the ‘predicting the future’ stuff comes from. Scientists and engineers predict the future

very accurately all the time using mathematical models. What we're doing is applying that same method to everything that goes on in life. For example, Doc and I used to have fun every morning reading the newspaper, and predicting how things would turn out."

Mark interrupted: "Everybody does that, politicians and business people, especially."

"Yeah, but we got it right. The next day, or the next week, we'd find events played out exactly as we said they would."

"You could make a million in the stock market that way!"

"Ever look at Doc's bank statement?"

Mark stared at Red's face for a few seconds, then a slow smile crept across his face. "You're right! A bunch of our friends would get together, and somebody'd say something like: 'The European countries are doing such-and-such to solve their economic problems. We should be doing the same.' Then Doc would get this really disgusted look on his face and say something like: 'They've got it ass-backwards. They're going to trash their economies in two weeks.' Sure enough, two weeks later we'd be reading that the European economy suddenly fell off a cliff."

"Yes," Mary chimed in. "Remember last summer, when Cliff was whining about Apple stock suddenly going down for no apparent reason, and Doc told him it was nothing? Then he started spouting some stuff about waveforms interfering. Then he announced that next week it would go back up, then continue rising. Cliff didn't believe him, and sold out in a panic. Then, the stock went up, and Cliff tried to buy back in, but he lost a ton of money. He wouldn't talk to Doc for the rest of the season."

"Yeah, chaos theory," Red blurted out. "Complex systems are typically chaotic, which means they follow their own rules. And, as soon as you think you've figured out the rules, they change."

"Wait a minute, Judy," Mary said, interrupting the conversation. "Did you say, you, and Doc *used* to read the

paper together? That means you don't now?"

"Well, we were together twenty-four-seven for a week, there. We had breakfast together every morning. I moved into a hotel when we got to Scottsdale." She wasn't sure what to say about the time they were sleeping together.

"Baby, were you sleeping together?" her mother asked.

Knowing enough to answer a direct question directly, Red said: "Yes. I thought I wanted to marry him."

"He didn't tell us," Mary said.

"He was having trouble dealing with it, himself, so I'm not surprised. He probably didn't know what to say."

"He was having trouble dealing with it?"

"Yeah, I didn't know why at the time, but I understand it, now. I think he felt he was violating a trust."

"I should say so," Mary said.

"Mary," Mark put in, "remember that he does what he thinks is best, no matter what the rules say. Actually, it sounds like he found himself in a tough spot."

"Hey, don't blame him. I pushed him into it."

"He could have said, 'no,'" Mary stated, unconvinced.

"Mom, he never said no to me about anything. I'm convinced that if I told him I wanted to jump off the Empire State building, he'd say 'okay, but please wait a minute while I invent this doohickey to keep you safe.' Anything I wanted, he made sure I got. Even when he thought what I wanted was bad for me, he wouldn't say no. He'd figure out a way for me to find out it was bad, and back out myself before I got hurt. I always felt safe when he was around."

“That sounds more like our Doc,” Mark said.

“But, why did he have to sleep with her?” Mary pleaded.

“Did you ever think that maybe our boy is in love?” Mark suggested. “Who’d you rather have Judith marry?”

“I’m not marrying him!” Red almost shouted.

“Why not?” Mary asked, concerned, but no longer sure what to be concerned about.

“I’m just not!”

Mark looked searchingly into Red’s eyes, then took Mary’s hand in his, and said: “Okay, Judith. Enough said.”

They’d already entered the yacht club grounds, and were headed toward the marina. Judith had always loved looking at the boats, hearing the sounds of flapping flags and clanging sailboat rigging, and smelling the salt air, which she now opened the window to enjoy. She spied Mark’s hundred-three footer docked against the end of one of the floating docks. Then, she spotted another one near it that stood out, although it was half the size.

“Hey, look at that beautifully restored wooden job,” Red said, excitedly. Now that she wasn’t constantly pouting about her step father, she found the marina an even more exciting place.

“It’s not a restoration. It’s a new wooden boat,” Mark explained.

“You mean a replica,” Red showed disappointment. As classic car enthusiast (thanks to Darrell), she considered replicas to be second tier, no matter how well done.

“No,” Mark countered. “It’s Doc’s. He designed it, and his father built it.”

“Doc’s father builds boats?”

“Yes, he has a yard up in Massachusetts on the Merrimack River. He builds custom boats using cold-molded process.”

“What’s that?” Red was unused to finding a bit of technology she’d never at least heard about before.

“They build the hull on a frame, like any wooden boat, then lay it up like a fiberglass hull, but using wood veneers instead of fiberglass cloth. All the wood is hermetically sealed in epoxy, so it never leaks, or swells, or rots, or anything.”

“Is that another one of Doc’s inventions?”

“No, it’s been around for years. I understand that the Navy’s PT boats were made that way as far back as World War Two. It’s expensive, so only amateur boat builders, or professionals building really high-end boats use it. The owner has to really love wooden boats, and have a lot of time, or money, to get one. Everyone else can get more boat for the same, or less, money with fiberglass or metal.”

“But, Doc designed the boat?”

“You know he has a degree in fluid dynamics, don’t you? Add Doc’s engineering expertise, and his practical knowledge from growing up around a boat yard, and it’s not a very big step to naval architect. The only reason he doesn’t do it professionally is that he makes so much money doing other things, it would be a poor use of his time. So, he designs for his own amusement, and his father builds ‘em at cost. I guess Doc’s done a number of designs of different sizes. This one’s a forty-five footer, which he says is the biggest he can handle by himself. I think he could handle bigger, but he always likes a safety margin.”

“Can we go aboard?” Red asked. No matter what she said, she felt a proprietary interest in anything having to do with Doc. She told herself it was because she thought about emulating his lifestyle. Mary was pleased to think that she knew better. Mary considered Doc excellent son-in-law material, despite her disappointment at his taking her daughter to bed without her (Mary’s) permission.

Mark said: “I suppose so. I can’t see Doc objecting, as long as we don’t set her on fire, or sink her. She’s locked up, but I know where to find the key.”

So, they spent the next hour poking around in Doc’s boat, the *Strange Brew*, while Darrell carried Red’s luggage to her stateroom, and the housekeeper (boatkeeper?) unpacked for her.

Red was surprised that Doc’s boat didn’t have a flying bridge, like nearly all the boats in the harbor. Mark, who’d noticed the same thing and asked Doc about it, had an answer: “Remember that Doc learned boat handling on antique wooden boats up in New England. Before about the nineteen-sixties or -seventies, flying bridges were rare. Pilots stood at the helm, steering with wheels having handles on the outside of the rim. If you were alone in the boat, you’d have to bring it in next to the dock, stop it, then jump off to handle the lines. That’s difficult and dangerous from a flying bridge. If you look, there’s a swing-out pad mounted behind the helm position that he can sit on when loafing along, then swing it back out of his way to stand up when maneuvering.”

“I can’t see Doc ‘loafing along,’ as you say it,” Red stated.

“Well, he considers twenty five knots in this baby loafing along,” Mark laughed. “He patterned the hull after the World War Two PT boats – that’s how I know they were made with the cold-molded process – and it’ll do fifty without breaking a sweat. Going that fast on anything but flat water can get uncomfortable, though, and it burns diesel fuel like a ... It burns a lot of fuel. Unless you’ve got a long way to go, and a short time to get there, it’s pointless. You spend more money to have less fun.”

“So, he’s powered it with diesels,” Red surmised.

“No,” Mark corrected her, “leave it to Doc to upgrade to technology nobody else would think of. *She* burns diesel fuel in two gas turbines. If you’re going to hang around Doc, get used to boats being female. He grew up on nautical tradition, and it’s one area where he’s very conservative. Anyway, turbines provide more power in less space. Something like two thousand horsepower! Makes a gawdawful noise when he opens her up, though, which he doesn’t do anywhere around other boats. This thing on plane at fifty knots leaves quite a wake. You should see

the heads pop up when he starts her up!”

Just then, Mark’s captain appeared on the dock. “We’re ready to shove off whenever you are, sir,” he said, which is polite yacht-captain-to-owner code for, “Get your ass in gear. Time’s a-wastin’, and we’re gonna lose the tide.”

Mark, who understood the code perfectly well, shooed Red and her mother off the boat to follow the captain to the *Mary McKenna*. (Mark had sentimentally given his new boat Mary’s previous name when he christened her just after marrying Red’s mom.)

“I’ll be along as soon as I close up Doc’s boat,” Mark told the captain. Unlike many owners of large yachts, Mark had experience with small boats. In fact, he had his own forty-five-foot sport fisherman docked in Annapolis, a short drive from his estate in Maryland. He liked the freedom and independence of running a small boat that needed no crew.

The *Mary McKenna* required a crew of four to handle safely. That’s not counting domestics. Taking her out was a major logistical operation.

Not that Mark’s boat was big enough to call a megayacht by a long shot. It was big enough to support the amenities land-lubber guests would expect, but short enough to fall under the demarcation between “boat,” and “ship.” Mark wanted to go boating, not shipping.

Red found, as she’d come to suspect, that by pouting whenever he was around, she’d missed a good friend in Mark. After spending even a couple of hours with him, when not acting like, as she put it, “an asshole,” she’d come to like him. He was smart, funny, friendly, and knowledgeable. And he seemed genuinely fond of her.

Anyone who could tell her things she didn’t already know was always okay in her book, anyway, and she found he knew boats, knew business, and knew a thing, or two about applied math, as well. He’d at least heard of, and had a basic understanding of, chaos, fuzzy logic, and control theory, which were her particular areas of interest.

Of course, as the CEO of a large corporation, he thoroughly understood finance, statistics, macro- and microeconomics, and logic.

Of most significance for Red, Mark was a top-level manager who every day faced the kinds of issues she was just now starting to wrestle with. She found herself asking advice about her particular problems managing her complex project involving many independent sub-projects.

Mark explained about “managing by walking around,” which Doc had hinted at, but never explained in such detail.

“Managing by walking around,” Mark explained, “is more of a management philosophy than a set of techniques. It starts from the observation that, while holed up in your office, what you are doing is writing memo after memo, and creating report after report. The people who work for you then have to stop whatever useful thing they’re doing to read your memos and reports. While they’re doing that, they can’t be doing any useful work.”

“Managing by walking around gets you up out of your office, so you can’t be writing endless memos that interfere with your employees working. Instead, you go around making brief visits here and there, just to see how things are going. If you find a problem, fix it as quickly as you can, then get your ass out of there. If you find things going along swimmingly, give some encouragement, and get your ass out even faster. You minimize your interference, apply your efforts only where they’re needed, and keep your crew heads-down working, doing what you really want them to do.”

That snippet of conversation happened after dinner when Mark and Red lingered long over coffee at the table set out on the after deck near the taffrail. It was a beautiful cloudless night with a sky full of stars. They were far enough out to sea that the lights of Miami were just a smudgy glow on the horizon. Mark had asked for the afterdeck lights to be turned off, so they could watch the stars as they talked.

Red had changed from her leathers to jeans, sneakers, and blouse as soon as she got on board. The ankles on her jumpsuit had been cut a tad high, which was okay when wearing boots, but made her look like Huck Finn when

wearing sneakers. Mark insisted that sneakers were *de rigueur* on deck. He relaxed the rule when landlubber guests were aboard, but not for Mary or Red.

“We can’t enforce it for those people,” he’d told Red the first time she’d been aboard, “but no real boater would wear heels or leather-soled anything on deck. Decks are wet, and slippery, and there’s a cold splash at the end of a fall.”

The one time she’d rebelled against the rule, Mark had banished her to her cabin with a large crewman stationed outside her door. His orders were to not let her out without proper footgear. The particular crewman was ex-military, to whom an order was an order. After two boring, unpleasant hours listening to everyone else having a good time on deck – the boat was hosting a party for folks from the yacht club, who had no more tolerance for snippety teenagers who wanted to wear leather soled shoes on deck than Mark did – Red came out wearing tennis shoes. The crewman, after checking to make sure she wasn’t hiding the leather soled shoes to put on later, smiled, and escorted her on deck, where he sneaked her a gin-and-tonic disguised as pure soda water.

Tonight, that same crewman dug up a pea coat for her to wear when her leather jacket proved too thin for the night wind.

You see, while being as nasty as possible to her stepfather, she was always nice to the help. Her feud with Mark had nothing to do with them. Consequently, she was their pet. That crewman who guarded her door was as anxious to keep Red safe as Mark was. If Mark hadn’t been there to issue orders, the crewman would have cajoled her into putting on rubber-soles, anyway.

Actually, if Mark hadn’t been there, there wouldn’t have been a problem. She knew perfectly well what the rule was for. She saw everyone else, including the captain, obeying it. She only wanted to flout it to annoy Mark.

That was then, and this was now, and annoying her new-found friend Mark was the farthest thing from her mind. She’d already become fond of him. That was something she’d have to tell her Mom about.

Amazingly, she was starting to transfer her well-traveled father-figure attachment from Doc to Mark. It fit Mark much better, he being older and more experienced. Red found herself happier than she'd been since her natural father disappeared.

25

"I saw your boat," Red told Doc when she got back to Scottsdale. "It's a beauty."

Red's flight had made good time, landing in the early afternoon. Since SST was right nearby, and Red wanted somebody to tell about her trip, she made a beeline for Doc's office. In her excitement, she walked right past his "guest" chairs, and sat on the desk corner next to his right hand, her long legs interfering with his desk chair. He didn't object because this is the kind of privilege afforded to little sisters, which was how he was trying to think of her.

"Someday, I'll let you take her out," he replied.

"You mean, you'll take me out on it," she tried to correct him.

"No, I mean I'll let you take *her* out. Boats are female. I know you've never given Mark a chance to teach you boat handling, but we'll correct that. Then, I'll let you take her out."

"How come you always know what I'd really want without my asking? Someday you're going to get it wrong, and I'll have an excuse to be annoyed with you."

"Sorry, I keep trying to be more stupid for you, but I forget. You didn't, however, go all the way to Miami just to look at my boat," Doc reminded her. "How did it go with your folks?"

"I can't forgive myself for being so stupid. Mark turns out to be a great guy. We talked for hours. He's helping me work on my management techniques."

“Of course he’s a great guy. Did you think your mother would marry a bozo?”

Red laughed sheepishly at that, knowing how stupid she’d been. Then she said, shyly: “I don’t think I’ll be calling you ‘Daddy’ anymore.”

“Good. Mark’s your daddy. From the look on your face, I don’t even expect to have to take you over my knee to remind you.”

“You try it, buster!”

“Not without your permission,” Doc replied, completing his end of the volley. “How’s Mary?”

“She looks great! I never expected to see my mother looking sexy. For a woman her age, she’s a knockout!”

“She’s a knockout for a woman any age.”

“I was so surprised,” Red admitted. “I haven’t really looked at her for years. She’s just been ‘Mom.’”

“Every child forgets that their parents are whole complete persons. Mary knows what she has in Mark. Remember, she’s already lost one husband. She doesn’t want to lose another.”

“Why should she lose him?”

“Mark’s a fantastic catch for any gold digger. Mary knows that her competition isn’t a bunch of old flab farms swilling piña coladas on yacht afterdecks, it’s a flock of supermodels just waiting for a chance to move in on her.”

“But, Mark obviously loves her. Look what he’s put up with from me, just to be with her.”

“Mark loves her now, but things change. Chaotic Universe, remember? It would be stupid for her to take chances, and Mary is not stupid. You didn’t think you got all of your brains from your father, did you?”

“Of course not, I lived with her almost twice as long as I lived with my father. I know she’s smart. She taught me an awful lot.”

“By the way,” Red changed the subject, “you’ve always called her ‘your mother,’ but now you’re calling her ‘Mary.’ Why?”

“Last week, if I’d called her ‘Mary,’ you wouldn’t have known who I was talking about, because you didn’t know I knew her on a first-name basis. We’ve been friends for a couple of years. Mark was practically the first one to welcome me when I pulled in at the marina with my new plywood dinghy. I didn’t know anybody. He showed me around, and introduced me to the yacht club. He’s probably the reason I joined.”

“Some dinghy!” Red scoffed.

“Is there anything you want to know about your project, or aren’t you interested anymore?”

“Of course I’m interested. I’m so interested that I touched base with every member of the team this morning. I had a talk with Mark about managing-by-walking-around, and have an even better idea of what you’ve been trying to tell me to do. Unless something evil has exploded in the last hour, everything’s on track. Have you anything to report that Greg might not have told me? Any dirty little secret, like that the worm melted into flaming goo, which you boys decided to keep from the girl?”

“Unless he failed to tell you that he’s missed you, no.”

“How would you know if he’s missed me? Has he been complaining behind my back?”

“How do I know anything about what goes on here? Your sordid little affair affects two of the most important members of *my* team. I keep tabs.”

“Yeah. You keep tabs on all of us. Who keeps tabs on you?”

“Pat. She’s been keeping tabs on me since I was a teenager covered with zits.”

“And, who keeps tabs on her?”

“Probably God, mostly. But, I look in on her once in a while, just in case. And, last time I checked, she had a husband lurking around someplace. I figure it’s his job, too.”

“I never knew.”

“You never asked.”

“Are you suggesting that I ought to ask such things more often?”

“Perhaps, but Pat isn’t your responsibility. You’re hers, as well as mine. Your team is both new and temporary, so you shouldn’t be too cozy with them, yet, either. But, while you’re managing-by-walking-around, take a look in their eyes to see if someone’s having a problem.”

“That’s what’s so important about face-to-face visits. Just phone calls isn’t good enough. Once in a while you have to check to see what’s going on behind the eyes. If you suspect a problem, talk with Pat or me about how to get to the bottom of it. If some guy’s got a colicky kid, it’ll affect his performance, but be a temporary problem. If he’s heading for divorce, it can mess with his mind, big time. Nothing’s too big, or too small, to know about.”

“Of course, most of the time the best thing you can do is leave them alone to sort it out. People know their own business best.”

“On that note,” Red said, “I’ve some visits to make. I haven’t seen Greg’s eyes in a couple of days.”

“Good, now get your bony ass off my desk, and go make eyes at him, so I can get my work done.”

“My ass is not bony!” Red said, mock offended. She knew perfectly well what Doc thought of her ass.

“Whatever it is, get it off my desk, but have it back here by eight o’clock tomorrow morning. Eve, and her camera person will be here by ten, and I want to go over what we want to say, and what we don’t. I’ve given her a

list of questions we'll be prepared to answer, but she'll ask what she wants. I've talked to Gwen about what you guys decided at your meeting Monday after the interview with Tamara, so I know what to expect you to say. It sounds good, and I'll follow the lead."

Just after nine thirty the next morning, Red, Gwen, and Doc were finishing up their mental preparations for the interview. Gwen had brought a disk with an edited version of the Monday presentations. They'd decided to suggest that Eve broadcast Red teaching Walter to waltz, and use the rest as background.

A telephone call from the front-desk receptionist interrupted their discussion. "Hopefully, that's Eve arriving early, not Eve canceling out," Doc said. When he saw the caller ID read "Reception," he was relieved. "It's the front desk. Probably Eve trying to catch us off guard. Well, two can play at that game."

"Mike Manchek," he answered with his usual telephone greeting. "Yes, I'll have someone come right down to collect her."

He hung up the phone.

"Red," Doc asked, "would you call Bonnie, and ask her to wander *slowly* down to the front desk – have her take about five minutes – and escort Eve Salazar and company into here?"

Smiling, Red made the call on her cellphone. Then she said to Doc and Gwen: "I think we're ready, but I could use a bathroom break. Do we have time?"

"I think we should make time. Serve her right for being early," Doc said.

"I'm okay, and I'm just a fly on the wall, anyway," Gwen said. "Why don't you two go do your business, and I'll hold down the fort in case Bonnie gets here faster than we planned."

Gwen was getting used to watching these two operate. When they got together, it was like kids playing in a sandbox. What they were doing was sometimes deadly serious, there was certainly a lot of money involved, but

they couldn't see a reason to be serious about it. They took time to joke around with each other, while keeping right on top of things.

26

It was a long five minutes before Bonnie knocked on the open door and escorted Eve into the office along with a pretty, though robust and roughly dressed, young woman carrying two large video cameras. Doc had returned, and was sitting at his desk with Gwen in one of his guest chairs, as if they'd been killing time waiting for Eve to show up.

"Hello Eve. Our star will be here momentarily," Doc said, standing up and extending his right hand. "Things are rather hectic around here, since we're getting ready for a new phase of the operation. As you know, we're moving equipment up to the mine site on Monday. We're planning to start exploring the mine next week."

"Hello, Doc. That must be exciting," Eve said, extending a hand with long, manicured fingernails to clasp his outstretched hand.

"Well, it happens on nearly every project," Doc responded, "but it doesn't seem to get old. It's like going outside to play when you've been cooped up in the house. Eve, this is Gwen Talbot, who's handling publicity for the project."

"We've met. Hi, Gwen." Eve extended the taloned hand again.

"Hello, everybody. Sorry to be late," Red said, as she breezed in.

Eve stepped back in surprise. Nobody'd prepared her for a woman so tall that her chest was at Eve's eye level. As a medium-tall woman herself, and relatively tall within the Hispanic community, she wasn't used to feeling Lilliputian. In addition, Red had laid on the light blue blouse open wide to display a full-court press of jewelry between her round breasts. She'd also added teardrop earrings to the hoop-within-a-hoop display she often

wore. Eve found herself eye-to-eye with a cascade of silver, turquoise, and diamonds that was worth half of her year's salary – and her salary was not exactly small – nestled between the sides of two well-freckled breasts.

Instead of jeans and boots, Red had worn a floor-length wine-colored skirt that was split up the side. It provided just enough view of her long leg to show that the freckles went all the way up to there. As an athlete, she spent so much time outdoors that attempting to suppress the freckles was hopeless. So, she nurtured them. Thinking that tan lines looked silly, she filled them in via tanning booth.

These impressions caught Eve full force, and she was intimidated.

It was the effect Red meant to have. It was also the effect Doc had meant her to have, which is why he'd failed to mention that Eve's subject was a modern-day amazon.

"Eve, this is our heroine, Judith McKenna. This is her story. How do you want to do it?"

Turning to the cameragirl, Eve asked, with some annoyance: "Bitsy, where's Hank?"

"He's coming along," Bitsy reported. "We decided at the last minute to use tripods, and he went back to get them."

"While we're waiting," Doc said, "I'd like to show you some video of a presentation we made to our staff here, to introduce the technology we're using to explore the mine. We think you can use part of it in your feature, and the rest as background information."

Gwen had already put the CD into Doc's tablet computer, which was sitting on the large, square coffee table in the middle of the U-shaped sofa in front of the large wall monitor. The computer was already wirelessly connected to the monitor and accompanying sound system.

Tamara had added title slides identifying the content to follow, the date it was recorded, and so forth. Then the video launched into Doc's introduction of the Worm technology. Tamara had removed the preamble discussing

the Worm's escape into the corridor, as it was nobody's business outside SST. She'd added a banner strip across the bottom identifying Doc as "Dr. Michael Manchek, CEO, Scottsdale Systems Technology, Scottsdale, Arizona."

She'd shortened Greg's overview of the Worm, removing the parts that were too technical for a general audience – which was most of what he'd said. She'd interleaved close ups of Greg with shots that included Greg pointing out Worm segments as he described them. The first close up also carried a banner identifying him as "Dr. Gregory Michels, Chief Technology Officer, Robotics Concepts, Santa Clara, California."

The first shot of the dance-class sequence was a closeup of Red's reaction to Walter's greeting, with an added banner identifying her as "Judith McKenna, Project Director, Gulf States Petroleum, New Orleans, Louisiana." Somehow, Tamara's crew had captured a shot of Greg answering Red's question about when he'd programmed Walter to compliment her as part of his greeting. All in all, Red thought Tamara had done an excellent job of making the presentation look very professional, instead of the amateur skit she'd expected.

"Tamara did a really good job on this," Red said to Doc. Then to Eve she said: "This is the first time I've seen the finished file. I've been back east visiting my family, but cut it short to meet with you."

Red didn't know what telling this to Eve would accomplish, but she figured that it was more likely to do good than harm.

While the video was running, a wide-shouldered man in his late twenties came in carrying two heavy metal tripods. He had curly red hair, and almost as many freckles as Red. He'd gained a robust build by schlepping around heavy video recording equipment, and dressed even more roughly than Bitsy. He had trouble keeping his eyes off Red.

Not that he had any desire to keep his eyes off Red. Rather, he was torn between professional interest in the video being displayed, and prurient interest in Red. In fact, he was wondering how he could get her to star in one of the pornographic videos he made as a hobby. Maybe her, and Bitsy? *That* would be something to watch! He'd already seen Bitsy in action in one of his previous productions.

When the video ended, Doc went over what he thought Eve could do with the various scenes as part of her feature. Of course, what Doc suggested plus a simple explanation of the material in the background he'd prepared would make an hour-long show, whereas Eve would be lucky to get five minutes' airtime. But, Doc was working on the theory that you don't get what you don't ask for. Ask for the stars, and hope you can get the Moon.

Watching the interplay between Doc and Eve, Red was struck by something going on behind their obvious attempts to manipulate each other. She was amused to realize that Eve had the hots for Doc.

With a twinge of jealousy, she also realized that Doc was aware of Eve's interest, and was encouraging it. While Red had been busy convincing herself that she no longer had a romantic interest in Doc, she hadn't considered the possibility that he might develop an interest in someone else. Red wasn't quite sure what to do with this new idea.

Anyway, Eve was now rearranging seats. She put herself on one side of the vee created by one of the couch's corners, with Red opposite her, almost touching knees. That set the interview up like a *tete a' tete*. She put Doc on the other side of Red, allowing her to bring him into the conversation as needed. She set the cameras up with one facing her, and the other facing Red, to allow for individual shots of herself, Red, or Doc, or wider shots of any two, or all three.

While Hank set the cameras up, Bitsy wired the three on-camera personalities with wireless microphones. Red was surprised to find Bitsy smiling at her while taking an extraordinarily long time to find a good place to clip Red's microphone onto her blouse. Bitsy was fantasizing about the same extracurricular activity as Hank.

When everything was set, Eve launched right into the interview, figuring that she could add an intro and outro back in the studio.

"Judith, or Judy – which would you prefer?" Eve asked.

"Actually, I prefer 'Red.' It started out as Doc's – Dr. Manchek's – pet name for me, and it's what everyone

around here calls me, now.”

“Have you two known each other long?”

Sidestepping the question, Red said: “Doc’s been a friend of the family for a couple of years, now. He’s a member of the same yacht club in Miami as my step father.”

“Your step father is Mark Shipton, CEO of Gulf States Petroleum, headquartered in New Orleans. Pardon me, but you don’t sound like you’re from Louisiana.”

“I’m not. The company’s operations are headquartered in New Orleans, but we have operations all over the Americas. Mark runs the company from wherever he is at the time. He travels a lot. I was brought up in Maryland, and live in Massachusetts.”

“But, you’re here in Scottsdale, now.”

“I’ve been here three weeks starting up this project to find out what happened to my father. Before that, I was on vacation with my folks in Miami. Two days ago, I was in Miami again, visiting my folks. Next week we’re going to the field site in Nevada. When this is all over, I’ll be going home to Boston. I’ve never been to Louisiana except when Doc and I rode through on his motorcycle. What was it? Four weeks ago?”

“What were you and Dr. Manchek doing riding a motorcycle through Louisiana?”

“Well, Doc was on vacation, and I was waiting for other people to do their preliminary investigations about my father’s disappearance. We had to get up to speed on what was done to find him years ago. Doc, and I were both in Florida, and Doc had his motorcycle, so we rode back here together. Fair enough?”

“You sure get around!” Eve said, ignoring Red’s somewhat rude question. It would disappear in editing, anyway.

“Not usually. I’ve typically got my head shoved into a school book up in Boston. Mostly, I’m just your

average coed.”

“Tell me about your step father, and Gulf States Petroleum. Where do they fit in?”

“Mark Shipton *is* Gulf States Petroleum. He owns the lot of it. Mark was friends with my father – my natural father – before he disappeared. Mark and my mother married after my father was declared dead three years ago. I’ve always wanted to find out for sure what happened to my father, and now the technology is available to make it possible. Mark is helping by funding it.”

“Why wasn’t it done before?”

“Ten years ago, when my father disappeared, they made as thorough a search as they could. They checked the entire area, then checked all his prospect holes, but could find nothing. There were, however, three holes that were considered too dangerous to enter at the time. Recently, Greg Michels of Robotics Concepts introduced a new kind of autonomous robot that is ideal for exploring dangerous sites like these mines.”

“Let’s back up a bit.” Eve paused a few seconds to allow for an editing cut. “Tell me about your natural father, and what led up to his disappearance.”

“My father was a geologist who specialized in using meta-analysis, that is combining information from many sources, to discover difficult-to-find mineral deposits. That’s how he and Mark got to know each other. Dad found a number of oil fields for Gulf States Petroleum.”

Red paused, thinking about what to say next. Eve gave her time to compose her thoughts.

“Dad had developed a theory about a very large mineral deposit near to, and partially underlying, the Comstock Lode in western Nevada. The Comstock is the deposit that gave Nevada the nickname ‘The Silver State.’ Wealth from those mines in the middle of the nineteenth century pretty much built the city of San Francisco, as all the silver was shipped out through that port. Mining in the Comstock Lode also drove technical innovations that we still use today. Dad’s deposit should be bigger than the Lode, but much harder to get at, and nearly impossible to

locate because all surface traces were buried as the Rocky Mountains grew.”

“So, if you find your father, you’ll find this fabulous treasure?”

“Not really, we have Dad’s notes. We could go find it ourselves without him, and we probably will, later. I’m more interested in finding out what happened to him. That’s more important to me than another pile of silver. My family’s not hurting for money, but I really miss my Dad. I want to know what happened to him.”

“I understand that you’re a senior in college, now, studying mathematics.”

“That’s correct. I’ve taken this semester off to use Robotics Concepts’ Worm technology to explore the last three shafts that couldn’t be explored before. They’re our last leads to my father, and we think he was killed in an accident in one of those holes.”

“I understand you’ve accepted a job with Scottsdale Systems Technology as well. Isn’t that unusual for an heiress?”

“Why should I care what’s usual, or unusual, for an heiress?” Red asked with her usual independent air. “I like using applied mathematics to solve real-world puzzles. Working with SST will give me a chance to do just that. It’s that, or spend all my time playing tennis.”

“I understand that you’re quite good at tennis.”

“Well, yes. I was an alternate for the U.S. team at last year’s Summer Olympics. I hope to try again, but I’ve a lot on my plate right now.”

“What about marriage?”

Red laughed. “There’s a line from an old John Wayne movie in which one of the female characters asks: ‘What young woman of my age doesn’t contemplate marriage?’ Oh, who was it? Doc, help me out.”

Doc replied: “Dorothy Lamour in *Donovan’s Reef*. Dorothy was middle aged at the time, making the line comedic. It’s a great Christmas film shot in Hawaii, but supposedly set in Tahiti. I believe it was the last film John Ford directed with The Duke. Elizabeth Allen in the female lead reminds me of my sister: pretends to be a Boston prude, but underneath cares no more for convention than you do, Red.”

“You’re from Massachusetts, too?” Eve asked.

“Amesbury. My father builds custom boats up there.”

“You two sound like an old married couple! Pooling memorized facts.” Eve observed.

“Well, we’re not. We’re good friends,” Red insisted.

“Kind of like big brother, and little sister?”

“Sort of. Doc’s taught me a lot about a lot of things. And, I annoy him as much as possible.”

Red suddenly turned around to face Doc, ignoring Eve. “Mark calls you an old pirate. Why is that?” she asked.

Surprised at the question, Doc answered: “It’s because I’m an evil, unscrupulous character.”

“You are not!” Red countered, laughing playfully.

“I am. You’ve complained about it, yourself. We’re in the middle of an interview, you know,” Doc reminded her, nodding toward Eve.

“Ooops! Sorry Eve,” she apologized.

“I heard your name linked to that of Greg Michels, CEO at Robotic Systems,” Eve asked, to restart the interview.

“Greg, and I met when he brought the robot to Scottsdale. He’s seriously cute, and seriously smart. We hit it off, and spend a lot of time together both on, and off work. But, when this project is over, he’ll probably go back to Santa Clara, and I’ll go home to Boston. Beyond that, who knows?”

“You’ve supplied a video. What’s that about?”

“Last week,” Red explained, “we decided to put together a presentation to introduce Robotics Concepts’ Worm technology to all the people at SST. We hope they’ll come up with other applications for it on other projects we do. We videotaped it for posterity. We brought a piece of it. The robot looks kinda spooky at first, but working with it is just like training a puppy. You’ll see.”

“Thanks, that’s a great lead in to the video,” Eve said.

“We aim to please,” Red said, flippantly. Then she said, “It just came out.”

“I’ve a few more quick questions. I don’t know how much of this we’ll be able to use.”

“I’m sure Gwen and Doc will offer to help you pick and choose,” Red replied.

“Yes, I’m sure they will,” Eve said sarcastically. After another pause to make editing easier, she asked: “How tall are you?”

“Six feet three inches.”

“Doesn’t that make it hard to find boyfriends?”

“You’d be surprised how many men like tall women. What’s worse is trying to find guys that can put up with my personality. I’m a bit independent. They also have to be smart enough to interest me. And, then there’s the karate.”

“Karate?”

“I started studying martial arts in my freshman year at college. I’ve gotten good enough to intimidate a lot of guys who think they want to protect me. Then, of course, there’s that stupid money. Boys like to be the breadwinners. Put it all together, and it’s a tough package for most guys to deal with.”

“You don’t sound bitter, though.”

“I used to be, but I’ve found there are guys out there that measure up.”

“For example?”

“Greg Michels, for example.” She looked at Doc in dismay: “I feel like I’m talking behind his back.”

“Eve,” Doc said, “could we get rid of all the stuff about Red and Greg together. What’s important is Greg’s role in developing the Worm technology. The rest of it could only embarrass him. I’d take it as a personal favor if you could edit it out.”

From the way he said it, Eve realized that he meant that if she *didn’t* suppress it, Doc would take it as a personal affront. That would close doors for her both personally, and professionally. “Of course, Doc,” she said, “I’ll make sure.”

Red realized she’d just seen the power of the “not burning one’s sources” creed in action.

“Okay, I guess that’s a wrap,” Eve said, before she could get in any more trouble. “We should have the show edited by this afternoon. I’ll try to get it on air in this evening’s news.”

Hank and Bitsy started breaking down the equipment, disappointed that they’d found no opening to invite Red to join in their hobby. As Bitsy unclipped Red’s microphone, she said, meaningfully: “I hope we’ll get a chance to work together some time.”

“Who knows?” Red said, not knowing what Bitsy had in mind, but not wanting to be drawn in, whatever it was. It seemed Bitsy wanted to go off the reservation in some way, and Red wanted no part of it. “Unless your boss

follows up this story, it's doubtful."

That created an opening for Doc to ask Eve, "How about it? We're funding a documentary on the project, but you could cover progress in real time from the news angle. I could fly you up to the field site in Nevada, and you could work with our film crew there."

"Let's wait until we see how this feature flies. Why don't you call me tomorrow night, and we can discuss it."

"Why don't we meet for dinner tomorrow night to discuss it?"

Leave it to Doc to combine pursuit of potential SST business with pursuit of potential personal business. Maybe that was what Mark meant when he called Doc a pirate? That was one dinner Red didn't expect to be invited to.

27

"So, how'd you make out with Eve Saturday night?" Red asked Doc in his office after her Monday staff meeting. She'd stopped in to say goodbye in case she didn't see him before the team's flight to Carson City.

Instead of answering her, he handed her a neat pile of yellow nylon fabric, and said: "Put these on. Your shoes gloves, and helmet are in there." He pointed to a large, yellow nylon bag on his conference table, with "Judith McKenna" stenciled on it in letters about one inch high, and "Red" neatly hand lettered in letters about three inches high.

"What's this?" Red asked, indicating the pile of cloth in her hands.

"Your high-altitude flight suit, and flight coveralls. You're flying with me to Carson City."

"I'm flying up with my team!"

“Not no more! New plan. You and I are going in my plane, and we’re flying up where there’s no speed limit.”

“Your plane?”

“Well, it belongs to SST, but it’s one of my pet designs. It’s been through it’s initial ‘Is it safe?’ tests, and now we have to do some cruise tests, and fly off some hours to complete its experimental certification. I’m the test pilot. You’re the observer taking notes so I don’t have to. See the kneeboard with the log forms in your flight bag? That’s your office. You turn ‘em in to ‘Frog’ through that door when you get back.

“Frog?” Red said, laughing.

“Emil Deschanel, call sign ‘Frog.’ He’s chief flight engineer on this project, which, by the way is coded ‘Vector.’ We’ve a hundred hours to fly off, and at five hundred knots, that’s a lot of distance to cover. We’ll use it for every trip we can think of until it’s certified. Don’t expect to take any train trips for a while. Be back here at oh-one-hundred for a briefing with that suit on, and a full belly. It should take about fifteen minutes, then you can run off, and see to your team’s packing. We lift thirty minutes after they lift. We’ll have time to chat on the plane. Follow me. I’ll show you where your locker is in Hangar A.”

“That’s restricted, isn’t it?”

“Your clearance came through this morning. Top Secret. We couldn’t have done this without having it, and I didn’t think it would come through in time. We got lucky, but now we’ve gotta scramble to make the plan work. So, please don’t be mad at me, and save your questions for the briefing. All will be revealed.”

Dazed, but no longer surprised at anything that happened in this place, Red followed Doc down the corridor to a solid red metal door marked: “Hangar A. Restricted Area. Keep Out.” Doc pointed out a biometric pad on the wall next to the door, and told her to press her right thumb against it. The door clicked and buzzed. Doc pulled it open, and held it for Red to walk through.

On the other side was a long corridor with only two doors on the right, and three on the left. They were met by a short, pretty woman with hair as red as Red's, and the long, thin lines of a female bodybuilder who'd never taken steroids: wiry, but not bulky.

"Tilly, this is Red. She needs to learn how to put on her flight suit right side out."

The woman extended her hand, and introduced herself: "I'm Matilda Holloway, call sign 'Tilly.' I'm another test pilot. Let's get you settled. The ladies locker room is through here." She pointed Red through one of the doors on the right, which Red now saw bore a plaque reading: "Female Pilot Lockers."

"I'm not really a pilot."

"I know, not yet. Doc's given us twelve months to get you licensed with instrument rating, and high-performance, complex, and turbine endorsements. Don't worry. Doc said to go easy on you until your 'McKenna' project is finished. Your instructional materials will be waiting when you get back to your apartment in Boston. We'll arrange for a flight instructor there."

"What if I don't want to be a pilot?"

Tilly looked at her as if she'd never heard such a silly idea. "Doc warned me that you might say something strange like that. I'm to tell you that it's required as part of your job. He doesn't, and I quote, want you pestering other pilots every time you need a ride, unquote."

Tilly showed her a cabinet-sized locker with another biometric lock, and "RED" stenciled on the door.

"What if I lose my thumb?" Red quipped facetiously.

"Use the other one," Tilly quipped right back. Then, she deadpanned: "But, don't forget to tell us, so we can cancel the print on the lost one, so nobody can use it to break in and steal secrets. Try not to, though. You can fly without thumbs, but filling in the forms is a bitch."

“Hey,” Red said defensively, “I was kidding.”

“So was I,” Tilly said, smiling, and revealing dimples deep enough for Captain Kidd to hide his treasure in.

Red laughed in return, suddenly feeling pretty good about this woman, who could equal or best her in the game of one-liner tit-for-tat, without losing her air of competence.

Tilly explained how to use Red’s new pressure suit. “This was custom made after the design of the David Clarke MC-3 partial pressure suit from the 1950s. It’s called a capstan partial pressure suit. Those tubes running down your arms and legs are called capstans. At altitude, they’re pressurized with air to expand, and pull on those cords, which stretch the fabric over your skin. The mechanical force makes up for the lack of air pressure. It does two things. First, it helps your lungs expel air. Otherwise the air pressure inside your lungs from the oxygen mask would be higher than that outside, and your lungs fill up like balloons. It becomes hard to breath out. Second, it helps keep your body fluids under pressure, so nitrogen doesn’t bubble out of solution, and give you the bends.”

“I wouldn’t like that,” Red commented.

“At the altitudes you’ll reach today, you could probably get away without it,” Tilly continued, ignoring Red’s aside, “but at the speed you’ll reach altitude, and the value we place on your carcass, nobody wants to take the chance.”

“Why, thank you,” Red said with a note of irony. “I place a high value on it, myself,” she said, still trying to get Tilly to lighten up, again. Tilly wasn’t having any of it. Safety, and flight performance were too important for her to joke about. Besides, she didn’t have time to play right now.

“You can wear it by itself, or under coveralls. It’s electrically heated, so you won’t freeze your tush. Most folks wear coveralls over it because the pressure suit has no pockets, and pilots always need some place to put pencils, maps, and so forth. Coveralls also make you look like a frump instead of a cyborg. The extra insulation makes the heating a little more even, too. Otherwise, you’ll know exactly where the heating tapes are, because

everywhere else will be cold. It's colder than a witch's left one up where you're going!"

"What should I wear underneath it?"

"I wear skin. This one's made specifically for a woman – you – and has this interesting fly that zips all the way 'round, and up past your tush in the back. It's not there to get you invited to kinky parties. It saves loads of time when you want to use the bathroom right before a flight. Wearing panties would wreck the whole plan. You'd have to take the suit off to get 'em down, so what's the point. Wipe yourself thoroughly, though. Also, be careful. Getting caught in a zipper can hurt! It also motivates me to shave down there. I can find you a disposable razor, if you need one."

"Ahh, I'm all set, thanks."

"You sure? Fur and zippers don't mix."

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh. Had a good weekend, did we?"

"Very good. I guess I'll take your advice about the coveralls. How warm is this thing walking around? I've got a couple of hours work outside before flight time, but not, I suspect, time to run back and forth changing outfits."

"Wear the coveralls. Put your street clothes in the bag, and carry it with you, so you'll have something to wear when you get there."

"What's with this little bottle with the interesting looking plastic doohickey," Red asked, fishing it out from her flight bag.

"You shouldn't need that today. You'll only be in the air about an hour and a half. That's for when you need to pee at twenty thousand feet. Keep it in your bag. I'll explain it another time, but I'm sure you can figure it out

for yourself.”

“I’ll read the directions.”

Rummaging around in the bag some more, she asked: “What’s this book?”

“That’s your student pilot’s log. Fill out the information in the front as soon as you get a chance. Just leave the pilot certificate space blank until you pass your written. Your medical certificate is in there, already.”

“Medical? I don’t remember that.”

“You had a medical exam when went through company orientation, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah. But, I thought that was just a new employee thing.”

“The doctor’s an FAA medical examiner. He did your flight physical at the same time.”

“I thought it was awfully thorough, but you never know in this place.”

After getting dolled up in her pressure suit, coveralls, and boots, Red put her street clothes, helmet, oxygen mask, gloves, and other items in her new flight bag, then put it on the floor in her new locker. Thanking Tilly for the help, she went off in search of food.

Since they were staging in Hangar B for the move to the field site, there were several people and a good deal of equipment to bring along, and a flurry of activity as the people loaded the equipment into the cargo plane they’d chartered. The the team – in other words, Bonnie – had laid on a buffet at the back of the hangar so that people wouldn’t have to go wandering off for lunch, or for breaks. Feeling decidedly mis-dressed, Red went through the line, making herself a ham and cheese sandwich, and carrying it over to a table where she saw Greg and Steve wolfing down their lunches.

“Is this a new fashion statement?” Greg asked. “Rumpled, bulky yellow coveralls, and combat boots, along

with hoop earrings, and mascara.? I don't know how it'll sell in Omaha, but it might fly in San Francisco."

"Very funny. Wait 'til you get a load of the fly! It'd probably get me gang-banged in San Francisco. No, you're looking at SST's newest test-pilot-in-training. Doc found something else to shanghai me into. Now I know how the Congolese tribesmen used to feel after being 'pushed from behind' into the hold of a slave ship."

"Speaking of Doc, where is he?" Steve asked. "I expected to see him in here pestering everyone about progress."

"He's probably next door playing with his new plane. That's why he stuck me in this outfit. I'm to ride with him as observer as he flies the thing up to Carson City."

"Oh, ho! Wait 'til you see that plane," Steve said. "Very *Star Wars*! It's not classified, which is why he can fly it out of here. It incorporates a few aerodynamic tricks that are already public knowledge, but put together in a civilian-jet package. We'll use it as a test platform when he's done playing with it."

"What do you mean 'civilian-jet package?'" Red asked.

"Most one- or two-person jets are military aircraft," Steve explained. "They have to carry a lot more avionics – aviation electronics – as well as fire-control systems, weapons systems, and ammunition stores. That stuff's all very heavy, especially the ammunition. On top of that, they're specially hardened to be able to make it home after being shot up. To haul all that mass up into the sky at top-gun speeds takes a big airframe, and ridiculous amounts of engine. Aircraft for civilian use can be much smaller and lighter for similar performance."

"So, Doc's made himself his own supersonic private plane," Red surmised.

"You're almost right," Steve corrected her. "It's not supersonic because supersonic flight is illegal over most of the U.S.. Even the military and NASA go supersonic only in special military operations areas set aside for it. Too many people complained about rattling windows in the nineteen-fifties and -sixties."

“Well, supersonic or not,” Red reported, “Doc’s using the trip to Carson City as an excuse to take it for a joy ride, and he’s dragging me along.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Steve concluded. “It’ll take us hours to fly up there in that bird,” indicating the cargo plane, “while you can leave after we take off, and still get there long before we show up. That gives you the chance to supervise loading here, then get to Carson City, and make sure arrangements are okay for when we arrive.”

“So that’s what this is all about,” said Red. “I was fretting about not being able to eyeball their arrangements until we all arrived there. This solves that problem, but I’m now commanded to attend a briefing. Somebody has to supervise packing. Can you cover for me for about fifteen minutes?”

“Sure, I can cover for you,” Steve said. “I jumped in when you didn’t show up after the meeting. I’ll keep holding down the fort until you get back.”

Finishing lunch just in time to make Doc’s briefing in Hangar A, Red found Doc standing with another man near a strange looking aircraft answering Steve’s description of Doc’s new plane. Apparently, the briefing was in Red’s honor. The additional man turned out to be Frog, who introduced himself without waiting for Doc to do it. He handed her a thin booklet of forms, and explained how to fill them out while enroute. Then Doc gave her a run down on the mission, which matched Steve’s speculations about the reasons for taking the plane.

The aircraft was roughly triangular in shape, with no visible seams for control surfaces. Doc explained that it incorporated the wing-warping technology he had developed as a teenager, which had led to his early admission to M.I.T., and the grants and patents upon which he’d built SST.

The plane was about twenty feet long, and thirty feet wide. There was no actual fuselage because its design used the “blended wing-body” concept. That is, the craft was mostly one big triangular wing, with a stalk sticking forward from the nose to carry a small horizontal fore-wing called a canard. The pilot, passenger, engines, and other items needed to make the airplane go were installed in hollow spaces along the center line within the thickest

part of the wing. Each wing tip was surmounted by a tall sail-like winglet. There was no tail section.

Instead of a propeller, the plane was powered by two jet engines. These were not big units designed to push military and commercial craft. They were, Doc explained, six-hundred-horsepower gas turbine engines made for marine applications, which had been modified into jets. The modifications mainly consisted of removing their aft turbine sections, and replacing them with jet nozzles. These nozzles incorporated thrust-vectoring technology, which had been around for decades, but seldom applied to civilian aircraft.

“We’ll be flying at twenty thousand feet, which is why I wanted you to wear the pressure suit,” Doc explained. “The reason, in case you were wondering, is that, within limits imposed by the engines’ performance characteristics, the higher you fly, the faster a given aircraft will go. We want to get you to Carson City well ahead of your crew, so speed is good. Since we have this baby, and it needs exercise, anyway, it’s a good way to get the speed we want.”

“You said something about a speed limit?” Red queried.

“Federal Aviation Regulations section 91.117 paragraph ‘a’ limits airspeed at altitudes below ten thousand feet to 250 knots. We’ll be flying at double that. At ten thousand feet, supplemental oxygen is a good idea, although it’s not legally needed until twelve thousand feet. So, we might as well put on pressure suits, and go to twenty thousand feet to gain even more speed – and push the altitude envelope a little higher. It’ll be a balls-to-the-wall speed run, not a cruise, so we have to watch the gauges like a hawk. If anything goes wrong, we’ll have to abort fast. Las Vegas is our alternate on the flight plan, but we’ll be passing Kingman and Tonopah, and could put down there as well. Actually, there’s a slew of airfields between here and Las Vegas that we could use, but it gets sparse on the other side of ‘Vegas. We expect this aircraft to do five hundred knots at our plan altitude. It’s the main thing we’ll be verifying today. The flight will take about an hour and a half – fifteen minutes each, roughly, for climb out and descent, and an hour to cover the five hundred nautical miles to Carson City. Any questions?”

“None that I can think of, except, when do we take off?”

“I estimate one half hour after your team’s plane takes off, whenever that happens. Meanwhile, I’ve got some things to finish up here, such as loading the plane. Where’s your flight bag?”

“In my locker.”

“Please get it before you leave, so I can load it. I still need to top off the fuel tanks. Then I’ll do a weight and balance to make sure it will trim properly, and we’ll be ready to go. Stop by when you’re team takes off. Then, we’ll do a final pre-flight, and head out ourselves.”

After the briefing, Red went back to Hangar B to check over the lists of materials to be taken, and verify that everything was accounted for and had been loaded. She fretted that there might not be enough room, that there weren’t enough seats for the team members going up to the site, that something critical might be damaged, or that something might be left behind. Fretting, at times like this, was her primary job. Finally, all was loaded, flight plans checked, and the cargo plane taxied toward the runway. When it was finally airborne, Red headed next door to Hangar A to rendezvous with Doc.

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Doc was more businesslike than usual. There was no brother/sister-like banter. He had his game face on as he handed her a sheaf of plastic-enclosed printed sheets clipped together by a ring. “This is the preflight checklist,” he said. “I’ve done this a thousand times, but we still need to follow it so nothing gets missed. I know it by heart, so I usually do a few items, then refer to the list to make sure I didn’t forget something. Since you’re here, we’ll go line-item by line-item. You call it out, then I’ll do it, then tell you it’s done. Okay?”

“Got it.”

“The list starts in the cockpit. All preflight checklists start in the cockpit. Shoot!”

“Remove control lock.”

Doc removed a pin that had immobilized a joystick located between seats that were mounted side by side in the cockpit. The pin was attached to a red-painted aluminum plate that identified it as the control lock. Then, he said: “Control lock removed.”

“Check ignition switch OFF.”

“Ignition switch OFF.”

“Turn master switch ON.”

Doc pressed a large, red, double-sided switch, which clicked loudly.

“Master switch on,” he said.

“Check fuel quantity.”

“Both tanks full.”

“Set trim to neutral.”

Doc pressed a button, which started a whirring sound, then let it go.

“Trim neutral.”

“Set fuel shutoff to BOTH.”

“Fuel shutoff set BOTH.”

This went on for about twenty minutes as they checked off items first in the cockpit, then on the starboard wing, then around the engine exhausts, then on the port wing, then around the canard on the nose, over the plane’s top, and finally under the plane’s belly.

“What if we didn’t do this?” Red asked, thinking it was a lot to go through every time you take off.

“Pilots who do sloppy preflights die young,” Doc said simply. “Next time you fly with the charter service, get there a half hour early, and you’ll see the pilot and copilot doing just what we’ve been doing. Every time an aircraft flies, or sits, or gets worked on, things change. Screws disappear, cracks develop, things shift. If you don’t do a thorough preflight, these little changes add up until the airplane becomes unsafe, and you know nothing about it. The idea is to catch little things early, so we can fix them before they get dangerous. It’s especially important for experimental aircraft, which we *expect* to have issues.”

“If you look at the last page of your test log,” he continued, “you’ll see a blank page marked ‘Squawk List.’ Anything you see that you’d like the mechanics to check over, put it on the squawk list. Frog will make sure it gets attention before the next flight. The pilot doesn’t have to *do* anything, but it’s his, or her, responsibility to *see* everything, and abort the flight if the aircraft isn’t safe. I’m pleasantly surprised that we didn’t see anything to squawk about today.”

After pre-flighting, they climbed into the cockpit, with Doc taking the left seat, and Red taking the right. As they cinched up their seat belts, which were five-point safety harnesses like race car drivers use, a mechanic came out with a tow bar, which he attached to the plane’s nose wheel. Then he used it to pull the plane out of the hangar and onto the tarmac, turning it so that its jet exhaust pointed parallel to the building’s front, rather than into the hangar.

“Now, pull the ‘Before Taxi’ checklist from that pocket,” Doc instructed.

They went through the “Before Taxi” checklist, then the “Starting Engines” checklist, then Doc called ground control to obtain clearance to taxi to Runway Three.

“Doc, is that you?” the radio crackled.

“Yes, I’ve a new recruit in the cockpit, whom I’m familiarizing with procedures. I’ll need to take a little longer to do a runup this morning.”

“Okay. Traffic’s pretty light, now, so take your time. Switch to the tower frequency on one-nine-nine-point-nine when you’re ready.”

“Will switch to tower frequency on one-nine-nine-point-nine when I’m ready to depart,” Doc repeated back the instruction. “Talk to you on the flip side.”

Just before reaching the runway, Doc pulled the plane off onto a wide apron, and turned it so he could see the entire sky to the right of the runway, which stretched off to the left.

“Scan that whole patch of sky,” he told Red. “See that plane on final approach? It will be here before we finish our runup. There’s another one farther out, which is going crosswind. See it?”

“Yes,” Red said.

“He’s on base, meaning the base leg of the traffic pattern. In a minute or so, he’ll be turning onto final. After that, it’ll take him a few minutes to get here. That’s the one we have to watch out for. The tower is watching, too. We’ll take off when the tower tells us to, but we want to be aware of the traffic in case the tower screws up. The pilot has final responsibility. Now, put that check list back, and pull out the ‘Before Take Off’ check list.”

“There are a lot of check lists!”

“There’s one for every phase of flight, including emergencies. That’s so when the going gets rough, we don’t have to guess.”

They went through the Before Take Off checklist, then Doc switched to the tower frequency, and called: “Scottsdale Tower, this is experimental aircraft november six three five one x-ray ready to depart on runway three, climbing to three thousand five hundred feet, and departing to the east. Request you activate my flight plan.”

“Experimental november six three five one x-ray, be advised that a commercial jet is turning final. Are you ready for immediate departure?”

“This is november six three five one x-ray, I can get out before he reaches the runway.”

“November six three five one x-ray, cleared for immediate takeoff.”

Doc ran the power levers half way forward, and let off the brakes. With a lurch, the plane accelerated forward while Doc steered to the middle of the runway, then turned sharp left to aim her down the centerline. Red felt a surge of excitement that bordered on panic. She clutched her knees, and braced herself.

As the plane straightened out on the centerline, Doc pushed the power levers all the way forward, and the plane surged forward. It rocketed down the centerline for what seemed like only a fraction of a second before Doc pulled back on the joystick, yanking the craft off the pavement. Then, he leveled off about twenty feet above the ground, and waited another few heartbeats as the plane gathered speed. Then, he pulled the stick back again, sending it rocketing nearly straight up, as if boring a hole in the sky.

A few seconds later, he lowered the nose to quickly scan for traffic, then pulled the joystick back again. After doing this several times within about a minute, he brought the power levers back, leveled off at three thousand five hundred feet, and looked over to see how Red was doing.

She was white as a sheet, except for her freckles, which stood out like angry red smallpox, but she was smiling excitedly.

“Wow!” was all she said.

“Wow,” she repeated, and then, “Wow!” again.

“How fast are we going?” she asked.

“Two hundred twenty five knots. I have to call in to departure control.”

“Departure control,” he said while squeezing a button on the joystick, “this is experimental aircraft november six three five one x-ray, heading 090 degrees at three thousand five hundred feet, at two hundred twenty

five knots, about to turn to heading three zero two, climb to four thousand five hundred, and depart the area. I'll be climbing to flight level two zero when I reach the reservoir."

"Experimental aircraft november six three five one x-ray, this is Phoenix departure control, please squawk one six five niner."

"Departure control, this is november six three five one x-ray, squawking one six five niner."

He reached over to a small patch on the instrument panel with four windows showing numbers, and a dial under each one. Starting from the left, he dialed the four digits the tower had given him into the four windows.

"November six three five one x-ray, this is departure control. I have you. Be advised that there is sky diving activity over Pleasant Valley. It should not be a factor. Have a good flight."

Doc said to Red, "I'm about to do a wing-over turn because we're headed away from where we want to go. It's sudden, but not particularly violent. Just sit tight. Ready?"

By the time Red said, "Yes," Doc had pulled back hard on the stick, and jammed the left rudder pedal hard. The plane lurched up, and to the left. The world spun briefly, and they leveled out pointed the other way. Then, the port wing lifted slightly for a few seconds, and the plane turned a few degrees to the right.

"You still with me?" Doc asked.

"Uh huh," Red replied. "Is this aerobatics?"

"Not really. It's an advanced private pilot maneuver, but not very difficult. It's pretty easy on the airframe, too. A vertical turn would have had you standing on your ear for several minutes as we swung around more slowly to change heading. When turning more than ninety degrees, I like to do a wingover, then correct the heading. Here, take this." He handed her a folded map that he pulled out of a pocket on his pants leg.

"I want you to start learning to follow our progress on a chart. You see, we have GPS to navigate by, but, as

the poet Robert Burns said:

*The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!*

GPS dost *gang aft aglay*. It's best to have a plan B for navigation, and to know where th' heck you are at all times. So, please open yon parchment."

"I guess you're reciting poetry means we can relax, now."

"Getting there. We need to look quick to find the reservoir, so we know when to climb out. At this speed, we eat up ground in a hurry. Then we have to contact the flight service station, close the VFR part of our flight plan, and open the IFR part. Then, we should contact flight following so Big Brother will keep a watchful eye out for us."

As Red unfolded the map, she asked: "Why not climb up right away to our – cruise altitude? – Is that the right term?"

"Yes, it's the right term. We're still in Class E airspace under a shelf of Class B controlled airspace around Phoenix Sky Harbor. If we want to penetrate the Class B space up there," he pointed straight up for emphasis, "we'd have to call their tower, and so forth. It's easier to just hang low under their airspace, then shoot straight up when we get out from under it. Lake Pleasant is a convenient landmark that everyone knows, so it's a good place to do the deed. There, you see it right ahead? Better get your oxygen mask on, and plugged in."

It took them a couple of minutes to get plugged in, and oxygen flowing. "From now on, we'll be on oxygen. Just breathe normally. The apparatus takes care of everything. Just don't hold your breath while we climb or

descend. Breathe naturally, and give the equipment a chance to do its job. Now, see we're almost at Lake Pleasant. You might want to check it out. It's an artificial lake created by the Cave Creek Dam. You can see the dam just on the southern lake shore. I'll be passing it to port, so you can see it."

Red found herself fascinated by watching the boats move slowly across the lake surface, and looking at the dam that held back a river to form the lake.

Suddenly, Doc pulled back on the joystick, and shoved the power levers all the way forward. The plane began climbing as the lake dropped away below. It looked like old films she'd seen that were taken in the early days of NASA, showing the view downward as the rockets left the launch pad.

"Ahhh!" Red yelled.

When she calmed down, Doc pointed to a dial on the dash panel directly in front of Red marked "Vertical Speed." It had a black face, and a white needle, which pointed to three thousand five hundred. Then Doc pointed to the forms attached to her kneeboard. Doc was pointing out that she had a job to do. She wasn't there as a tourist.

It took her a while to find all the gauges whose readings she needed to complete the form. "I don't know what time we started climbing!" She yelled, tension showing in her voice. "I didn't take notice of it. You had me looking at a lake!"

"No problem," Doc said, calmly. "I noted it for you. It was fifteen-oh-three. Calm down. You're okay. I've got your back."

"Why'd you have me look at that lake, when you knew I needed to take notes?"

"Mostly to distract you from the maneuver. A little to give you a rather neat experience. Finally, to give you another couple of minutes off before you had to go to work. I hope I did right, but we'll never know."

"I'll warn you for the next maneuver," he promised. "That'll be when we level off. We'll do it abruptly,

which is a little uncomfortable, but not dangerous. I try to do maneuvers abruptly when testing because it makes it easier to be precise about time and distance.

29

As the aircraft approached twelve thousand feet, Doc called the nearest Flight Service Station (FSS) to close his VFR flight plan, open the IFR portion, and request Flight Following.

“Okay,” Red asked, still uncomfortably feeling like she was lying on her back with her feet in the air, which she was, “what are VFR, IFR and ‘flight following?’”

“VFR,” Doc explained, “means ‘visual flight rules.’ Quite simply, its the rules you follow when the weather is nice enough so you can see where you’re going. You must follow ‘instrument flight rules’ when you can’t. You can’t follow VFR when you can’t see well enough – when conditions are below VFR minimums. You can, however, follow IFR rules under VFR conditions. The difference is that flying under IFR requires more navigational equipment and pilot training to know how to use it. For example, you have to have what’s called a Mode C transponder, which allows radar stations to locate you vertically as well as laterally. They need to do that so they can keep planes from colliding at six hundred miles per hour. If your aircraft has the equipment, meaning that it’s IFR equipped, and your pilot has IFR certification, then you can fly IFR any time you choose. The advantage is that you have more interaction with air traffic control – ATC – and the disadvantage is that you *have* to have more interaction with ATC. Above eighteen thousand feet, IFR is mandatory.”

“Flight following,” on the other hand, is a service that air traffic control provides to private aircraft – us – when requested, and when they’re not too busy sorting out the big iron that commercial airlines throw up here. What flight following does is keep track of what we’re doing, so that if we deviate from our flight plan, by crashing for example, they know about it right away, and have a good idea where we are. That makes getting saved

a lot less difficult.”

“Why would we need to get saved?”

“This is a prototype aircraft on a test flight over very difficult terrain. Being a prototype, we’re more likely to have an equipment failure than a production plane. If we went down, we’d have less chance of getting found than your father had ten years ago in a Nevada mine. You know how that turned out! Without flight following, our heirs would find themselves looking for us.”

“Okay, we like flight following!” Red stated, then asked: “Is that what happened to Amelia Earhart?”

“Actually, no,” Doc explained. “They didn’t have it then, at least not out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The aviation community were following her as best they could, given the technology of the time. It just wasn’t good enough.”

“I believe, however,” Doc continued, “that lack of flight following might have contributed to the Steve Fossett tragedy. You probably know he was a famous aviator who disappeared in 2007 over some of the same country we’ll be over today. He made a mistake, and smacked into the side of a mountain. It took over a year, and nearly three quarters of a million dollars to find his body. Knowing the nature of his flight, I doubt if he was using flight following. Flight following probably wouldn’t have saved his life, but it might have shortened the search considerably. Of course, if he’d survived the crash, it might have ultimately saved his life. People would have known hours earlier that something was wrong, and would have had a leg up in finding him.”

“What’s different about what we’re doing than what he was doing?”

“We’re doing a simple cross country – following a predetermined track to a known destination at a certain speed. It’s easy for air traffic control to follow us. Steve, however, was wandering around looking for something. He couldn’t have told them where he was going, because he didn’t know. It’s a whole different kettle of fish.”

“We’re at fifteen thousand feet, now,” he interrupted himself. “We’ll reach nineteen thousand feet in about a

minute. When we get there, note the airspeed, and get ready for the nose to go down. It'll be a negative-gee maneuver, so hang onto your pen. You need to take down the time it happens. Also, take down the airspeed when we complete the maneuver. Here goes."

Red quickly looked at the airspeed indicator, and wrote down the number on the form. Then her heart levitated into her mouth as Doc nosed the plane over. She quickly checked the time, then the airspeed when the plane settled down. Then, she wrote the numbers down.

"Gee, we lost almost fifty knots making that maneuver!" she pointed out.

"It takes energy to change momentum quickly," Doc replied. "But, look how fast we're accelerating, now. That's why I wanted the airspeed as we leveled off. We'll take it down every 30 seconds until it stops climbing quickly. Then shift – take a reading *now* – shift to one minute intervals, and so forth."

Red concentrated on getting the readings every thirty seconds, until they stopped changing quickly. Then, she switched to taking them every minute. After six minutes, the readings hardly changed from minute to minute.

"Now, switch to taking readings every five minutes," Doc suggested. "Do that until they stop trending up from reading to reading. Then, you can switch to taking a complete scan of the whole panel every fifteen minutes."

Red thought she was beginning to get the hang of this. "What if I miss a reading, which I've almost done twice?"

Doc smiled: "There's a little black box behind the panel that logs all instrument readings, plus readings from a raft of sensors scattered over the plane. It does a complete scan every ten seconds."

"So, what am I doing?" Red complained looking at her beautiful form she'd been trying to fill in,"

"You're plan B," Doc assured her. "You're trying to grab the most important data as a backup in case the data logger fails. It's done that in the past. If it happens now, the flight won't be a total loss, whereas it would be

without your notes. Now, we'll have your data. If, for example, the data logger fails today, we won't have to repeat the test. We'll be able to put a check mark on the 'maximum speed at flight level two zero' test, anyway, and move on. Okay?"

"Okay," Red agreed, feeling better that she wasn't totally wasting her time.

"Can I ask you the question you put off this morning, now?" Red asked, feeling that the activity level had settled down."

"What's that?"

"How'd you make out Saturday night with Eve?"

"Nearly as well as I made out with her Sunday morning. She's a good kisser, as well as having other talents. Hot blooded latina, you know."

"I'm not going to ask for details."

"Good, because I wouldn't give them, any more than I'd give out details on your efforts."

"Thank you for being so gallant. In between smooching, did you happen to get a chance to do any business? Or, was your evening devoted totally into sordid, lascivious, licentiousness?"

"You forgot lewd, and libidinous, but we did talk briefly about your project for a few minutes before I got my toes worked into her crotch under the table."

"You did not! I can't see her letting you, which means you wouldn't try it. You're a fraud."

"Yes," he replied contritely. "I'm a fraud. She's a nice lady, and wouldn't let me do it. Besides, I couldn't figure out how to get my foot in the right position. The joints don't flex that way. We just contented ourselves with making goo-goo eyes at each other, until the waiter brought the check."

“You’re incorrigible.”

Imagining what Doc was describing was getting her excited, and she was conscious of the fact that there was nothing between her crotch and her pressure suit. She wanted *off* that subject. For all she knew, Doc was deliberately trying to put her in this position just to tease her.

“So, what about my project?” she asked grumpily.

“Well, the upshot is that I’m going to drop you off, then skedaddle back to Scottsdale, so that I can fly her up when you’re ready for Walter to go in the hole. I figure it’ll take you one day to get all your stuff up to the mine site, and another to get Walter ready to crawl into the hole. That puts penetration sometime Thursday morning. I’ll fly her up Wednesday afternoon, or evening, so she can report – using our film crew – Walter’s effort live. She probably won’t broadcast live. I know I wouldn’t. But, she can record the action, and narrate it later. Depending on what we find, we may have the main results in by the weekend. There’ll be more detailed exploration on-going, but if your father’s there, we should know by the end of the day Friday.”

“That matches my schedule, too. Although, we may have trouble getting Walter past the wreckage that we know about, and there may be more wreckage down below. That’ll push things into next week. If that happens, I’ll work the crew a short day Saturday, and give them Sunday off. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good to me. Once I’m up there, however, I want to stick around and see it through. I can’t let you have all the fun.”

“With Eve there, I bet you’ll be having all the fun.”

“Greg will be there, too. So, unless you’ve suddenly taken a vow of chastity, you’ll be having fun, too.”

“No vows, I have plans for Greg, and I hope he has plans for me. This is, however, his big chance to show off before a statewide, and maybe national, audience. He might be preoccupied.”

“I trust you to get his attention,” Doc suggested.

“It’s my big chance to find my father. I’ll be preoccupied, too.”

“Darn,” Doc quipped, “and I was looking forward to a summer-camp soap opera.”

“Doc,” Red said, changing the subject, “as soon as we get this wrapped up, I want to go back east to set up the trust with my mother. We may also have some arrangements to make for my father.”

“I thought we covered that. There’s nothing about the trust you can’t do via overnight mail. I don’t think Mary needs you to hold her hand while she signs a bunch of documents. As for what you put into the trust, David will take care of that with your signature here and there. He’s local in Carson City, so as long as you’re there, there’s no problem. There’ll be ongoing development work on the prospect holes, but you can, and should, put that in Peter’s hands. He’s the expert. You can supervise it from afar. Once you’ve found your father, or exhausted your leads, I vote for dumping you off in Boston to continue your career, starting with finishing your degree.”

Red could see the logic, and it fit with what she needed to do. She, however, felt a sadness that her adventure might be over so soon. She’ll miss all her new friends, and she’d miss her new career.

“I’ll miss you guys,” she said aloud.

“We’ll try to make your life miserable remotely,” Doc said, seeing what was bothering her. “You’ve still got a lot of work to do with us. I’m not paying an exorbitant salary for you to sit up in Boston, and mope. You have a lot on your plate. We need you to get cracking on the Wavelet Web interface. We aren’t kidding about your getting a pilot’s license. And, we expect you to apply for a PhD program very soon. There’s no reason for you not to start in the fall. You are in for an exciting time for the next few years, and won’t have time to miss us. Besides, we’ll be there at the other end of the phone line. And, we’ll likely find excuses for you to show your face in Scottsdale from time to time.”

As an afterthought, Doc said: “If you find you really miss us. You can always transfer back to Scottsdale. I,

for one, would really, really like that. I'm going to miss you, too. So, don't think you have to stay in Boston. Any time you want to come back, the door will be open."

Feeling a little better about the future, Red settled down to multiplexing between taking data at fifteen minute intervals, and tracking their flight progress by comparing the GPS display, the chart Doc had handed her, and the scenery passing slowly by outside.

Forty five minutes later, they were already getting close to Carson City. "Doc," she asked, "it seems that once we leave altitude, my work logging data will be done. Is that correct?"

"Umm, yeah," he replied from satori. He'd been meditating while letting Red handle data logging chores. Flying the plane as precisely as possible was the action part of his action-meditation program. "In fact, it's just about time to throttle back, and start our descent. This thing isn't in any hurry to lose kinetic energy. You don't have to take any more data. The test's done."

So saying, he brought the power levers back half way. The engine noise nearly died out, and the plane, which had felt like it was pushing hard through the air, seemed to relax, and coast. Red, going over her notations to make sure they were both accurate, and understandable, prepared to put work aside, and enjoy the rest of the ride.

"Can I try it?" she asked, suddenly, indicating the joystick.

"I don't see why not. Let me point out the controls. First, there's this little joystick. Pushing it to the right makes the plane bank to the right. Pushing it left makes it bank to the left. Forward pitches the nose down, and back pitches it up. At your feet are two pedals for the rudders. The way this particular design works, pushing the right pedal causes the starboard rudder to move out into the windstream. That causes a drag on the starboard wing tip, which yaws the nose to starboard. The more you push the pedal, the more drag you make, and the more the plane yaws. Similarly, pushing the left pedal yaws the nose to port. Pushing both makes the rudders act like a speed brake. They cancel each others' yawing moment, but the braking action sums. Try it."

Red tried moving the stick backward. The plane zoomed upward, and she let go in surprise.

“That’s your first lesson. When in doubt, let go. The plane will, unless it’s badly out of trim, return to straight and level flight. When you handle the controls, don’t think about *moving* them. Just apply a gentle pressure. If you want more result, press a little harder. Now, watch this. I’m going to apply backward pressure on the stick while you watch the airspeed indicator.”

Doc took the stick, and pressed backward gently. The nose came up.

“It slowed down!”

“Pitch controls speed. Throttle controls altitude. If you think about it, altitude represents gravitational energy – mgh , where h is altitude. If you ease off the power levers, the engines don’t produce enough power to maintain airspeed against drag. To make up the difference, the plane taps into the stored gravitational energy by reducing h . That causes the plane to descend. Conversely, if you advance the power levers, the engine produces more power than needed to overcome drag, and the additional power goes into increasing gravitational energy – increasing h . So, power controls altitude.”

“Similarly,” he continued, “pitch controls speed. If you pull back, the nose pitches up. The airframe wants to climb, but that would take additional power to put into increasing the gravitational energy. Since there’s no source for that power, the plane steals it from kinetic energy, slowing the plane down. So, pitch controls speed. Pointing the nose down lets the plane gain speed.”

He let her play around with the controls a while. After they broke through eighteen thousand feet, he called the FSS, canceled the IFR part of their flight plan, and opened the last VFR portion. Then, he took the controls back.

“Now, we’re approaching our destination, but we’re still thousands of feet above it. From what you know about the plane’s energy balance, what would happen if we just aimed the plane’s nose down to reach the ground as

fast as possible?”

“Gravitational energy would be converted into kinetic energy, and the plane would go faster, and faster as we approached the ground. We’d never get it to stop.”

“That’s right. We’ve got to find some way to convert the kinetic energy into turbulence in the air. Now, watch.”

He pitched the nose up, and pushed the joystick toward the left. The plane thus took on a nose-high attitude, banked to port. At the same time, he pressed the right hand rudder pedal hard. This kept the plane from actually turning to port. It took on the strange attitude, while plowing straight ahead.

“This is called cross controlling,” he told her. “It presents maximum surface area to the wind, creating a tremendous amount of drag by stirring up a lot of turbulence. That’s the best way to slow this puppy down. the wing is so out of shape that it’s almost stalled. That is, instead of providing lift, It’s mainly providing drag. You just have to make sure you don’t overdo it, and get into an actual stall. That could easily develop into a spin. That’s a bad thing! You drop out of the sky like a rock without any control.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “it’s almost impossible to stall this airframe, so we don’t have to worry about a spin. We’re just dropping like a stone, but under control, and without picking up speed. We’ll get the thing slowed down to pattern speed, which is a little below a hundred knots, and at traffic pattern altitude, which is about five thousand five hundred feet, or about twelve hundred feet above the ground. Then, we’ll take her in.”

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Back on the ground, Red found herself with a tremendous desire to visit the ladies room. She had her teeth clenched all the time they were taxiing, from touchdown to full stop in front of the hangar they’d rented as staging area for the team.

Project operations manager Zeke Brown was on hand to greet them at the hangar, along with another man in a National Park Ranger uniform. Red practically jumped out of the cockpit, so she was first to reach them. Unfortunately, that meant she was pulled into introductions before she could go on a hunt for the ladies room.

“Hello, Red,” Zeke said. “This is Tony Edmunds. He’s on loan to us from the National Park Service. He’s familiar with the local area, and has experience exploring caves and old mines.”

The ranger was about medium height, with an athletic build under his uniform, and shaggy brown hair above it. He also wore dark aviator-style sunglasses, and a sunny smile.

Turning to the Ranger, Zeke said, “Tony, this is our project principal, Judith McKenna.”

“Just call me ‘Red.’ Everyone else does,” Red told him.

“Happy to meet you, Ms. McKenna – Red,” he said. “I’m familiar with your father’s story, and the prospect holes he dug. I look forward to working with you on solving the mystery.”

“We’ll be glad of the help. I want to talk to you about what you know about the situation, kind of get a local perspective, but first I have to find a ladies’ room. Can’t concentrate on anything else. Could either of you point me in the right direction?”

Zeke spoke up. Pointing to a small building inside the hangar, set like a blockhouse against the side wall, he said: “You’ll find a full bathroom behind that second door on the left. It’s unisex, so lock the door. We’ll just go, and see if Doc needs any help unloading.”

Doc had already removed Red’s flight bag from the plane’s luggage compartment, and had started carrying it toward the hangar. Zeke, and Tony met him part way.

“Hello, Doc. Do you need any help unpacking?”

“Hi, Zeke. No, I’m heading right back. This is the only thing we’re dropping off. I expect there’s a young

lady over there who's anxious to have it," Doc said, continuing on toward the bathroom door. I could use a bottle of water, if you have any handy."

"There's some cold in the office. First door on the left. We might as well go in there, and sit down."

"Okay. I'll just give this to Red."

Doc walked to the bathroom door, and knocked. "It's Doc," he called through the door. "I have one flight bag full of ladies garments for you. Do you want 'em now?"

"No, thanks. I'll be right out. I want to talk to that Ranger as soon as possible. I think you should be there, too. I'll change into street clothes afterwards."

He picked the flight bag up again, and walked into the office. It was a walled-off room roughly fifteen feet wide, and thirty feet long. The walls were drywall construction to three feet above the floor. From there up, they consisted of double-pane glass set in wooden frames up to the ceiling, which was ten feet above the floor. This little building within the cavernous hangar had its own heating and air conditioning units, and was the only climate controlled part of the hangar. The bathroom was a fifteen-foot-long extension onto this box. It was all drywall construction from floor to ceiling, and had its own air conditioning unit.

Entering the door, Doc saw a desk with a telephone and a laptop computer against the short wall to the left. Closer, there was a folding work table set up with six plastic chairs around it. To the right was a lounge area, with a couple of the benches typically found in airport terminal waiting areas set up on opposite sides of a long, low wooden coffee table covered with aviation-related magazines, a few soda cans, and a ceramic coffee mug emblazoned with the logo of the airfield's fixed-base operator, or FBO, which provided services for light aircraft, such as refueling planes, and selling pilot supplies. Just beyond was a large flat-panel TV screen. Beyond that, along the wall that backed up against the bathroom, was a refrigerator, and an office-style credenza supporting a coffee maker and a display of packaged snack items. Another door led directly from this lounge to the bathroom.

Doc dropped Red's flight bag on the work table, then walked over to the refrigerator to grab a bottle of water. He took it with him, and went to sit with Zeke and Tony at the coffee table.

"Red wants me to sit in while she talks to you guys about something. In the meantime, introductions. I'm Mike Manchek, but everybody calls me 'Doc.' You are ... ?"

"I'm Tony Edmunds with the National Park Service. They sent me over to help you guys avoid getting lost in the woods. I've lived in this area most of my life, and have experience exploring the caves and mines around here."

"While we're waiting for Red, are there any questions you have about who we are, what we're doing here, or that sort of thing?"

"Doc is CEO at SST," Zeke put in, "so if you have any questions I haven't answered for you, yet, he's the one to ask."

"I understand that SST is helping Ms. McKenna find out what happened to her father," Tony began. "The story's well known around here. But, I don't know much about SST's business. You must have some pull with the National Park Service. My instructions were to give you any help you needed for as long as needed. But, I've never heard of you before."

"I'm not surprised," Doc replied. "Most of our work involves development and testing of aerospace systems for the military. We also develop custom data acquisition and test systems for private-sector clients. This project is a little atypical for us, but we have the right expertise to pull it off. Red's family – actually, her stepfather – owns a little oil company called Gulf States Petroleum. They have oil production assets throughout the Americas. It's privately held, so when the owner's only daughter wants to find out what happened to her natural father, things happen. Her step father and I are friends, so when he needed the kind of help SST could provide, he came to me."

"This is just an outing for an oil millionaire's daughter?" Tony said in surprise. "How's that interest the

National Park Service?”

“There’s more to it than that,” Doc explained. “There’s also the work James McKenna was doing out here. It has the potential to advance underground mineral exploration in a major way. That interests Gulf States Petroleum, as well as the Department of Energy, and your boss, the Department of the Interior. Also, if McKenna was right, you’re sitting on, or at least near, an enormous mineral deposit bigger than the Comstock Lode. *That* interests the Department of the Interior as well. Also, that young lady isn’t some spoiled heiress. She’s a budding mathematician with just the right talent and ambitions for SST. That makes it our business. On top of it all, this will be the first major demonstration of the technology Robotics Concepts is bringing up here to explore the mine shaft. That technology has all kinds of search and rescue applications, which interests the Department of Homeland Security. Are you starting to get the picture?”

“All this swirling around one college girl? How does she cope?”

“She’s a very exceptional college girl,” Doc deadpanned. “Also, she’s got me, and quite a few others, running interference for her. To some of us, she’s more important than all the rest.”

Just then, they heard the bathroom door to the hangar open and close. Zeke could see Red walking to the office door. “Here she comes, now,” he said.

Doc was sitting with his back to the glass wall, so he couldn’t fully turn around to face Red until she entered the room. When she did, he turned, and said: “Well, speak of the Devil, and she appears! Were your ears burning?”

“I was getting hot flashes. Now I know why,” she said, picking up the thread of Doc’s ribbing. “What lies have you been telling them about me?”

“I’ve been filling their innocent heads with fantastical stories about what a superwoman you are. They believed every word.”

Seeing that Red was carrying the pressure suit in her hand, Doc said: “I was wondering what was taking you

so long. Now I see why. I thought you were going to wear that thing to our little interview.”

“Figuring you could spin enough yarns to keep our friends entertained, I took the opportunity to peel it off. It’s not all that comfortable, you know. You should. You’re still wearing yours under those coveralls.”

“I’m heading right back as soon as you let me go. So, let’s talk.”

“What’s with the nicknames?” Tony asked. “ ‘Doc,’ ‘Red?’ ”

“I used to think it had to do with Doc’s being an outlaw biker,” Red smiled. “They use a lot of nicknames based on a person’s most obvious characteristics. I once met a man called ‘Peg Leg’ because an injury left his leg stiff as a rod. I ended up being called ‘Red’ for obvious reasons. Now, it turns out that SST has a bunch of ex-military test pilots, who run around using radio call signs as nicknames, too.”

“That’s actually where the bikers got the idea,” Doc put in. “A bunch of ex-army-aircorps adrenaline junkies back from World War Two, zooming around on war-surplus motorcycles.”

“And ‘Doc?’ ” Tony asked.

“Despite appearances to the contrary,” Red explained, “he happens to be a world-famous smarty pants. He’s insufferable.” She looked at him with a mixture of pride and affection.

“Enough chit-chat!” Doc exclaimed. “I still have an hour and a half ride ahead of me. And, I still haven’t filed a flight plan.”

“Doc,” Red said seriously, “why don’t you stay over here tonight. That hotel is full of rooms. Take it easy tonight. Work out your flight plan, and file it. Get a good night’s sleep, and go back in the morning. There’s nothing there that can’t wait a couple of hours, and you’ll be better off for being fresh. I’d love to have you join my dinner with the lawyer, too.” Turning to the others, she asked: “Dinner with your family lawyer to discuss estate planning. Now doesn’t that sound like a fun time?”

They all laughed at that.

Turning to Doc, she put on her best look of mock sternness, and commanded: “Mistress Judith commands that you stay here tonight! Don’t disappoint Mistress Judith!” She wagged her finger at him for emphasis.

Red hadn’t used her “Mistress Judith” character since her fight with Doc, so neither Zeke, nor anyone else at SST had seen it. Tony certainly had never seen it. He knew perfectly well what their roles were at SST, and he’d never expected to see a junior executive lay down the law for the company’s CEO. But, to have her do it with such playful familiarity floored him. Still, Doc had said he was a friend of her family, which might account for the familiarity.

“Yes, Mistress Judith,” Doc said smiling contritely. “Your whim is my command.”

“It’s settled, then?” Red asked, excitedly. “You’ll stay?”

“Beyond the fact that I’ve never been able to say ‘no’ to you, and don’t expect I ever will, your suggestion makes the most sense of anything I’ve heard today.”

“Oh good! Now, where did you get that water. I’m parched.”

“Right over there,” Doc said, pointing to the refrigerator.

Red got a bottle, opened it, and gulped down about half standing before the refrigerator. Then, she walked back to the seats.

“Now, Tony,” she said. “What do people around here think happened to my father?”

“The intelligent ones think, just as you do, that he was killed in that prospect shaft you’re planning to go into. They think that something happened to the derrick, and he was either killed outright, or trapped down below and died of exposure. In any case, he died, and his body is still there.”

“You say ‘the intelligent ones.’ What about the not-so-intelligent ones?”

“There are all kinds of ghost stories, which is not unusual in areas like this. Out in the woods at night, people hear all kinds of noises. A gust of wind makes one branch rub against another, making an unearthly sound. Campers sitting around a campfire tell ghost stories. Then, suddenly a branch breaks with a loud crack. You get the picture.”

“So, what ghost stories surround my father’s disappearance?”

“It’s not just your father. Several others have disappeared as well. I say ‘several,’ but there have been only, maybe, five incidents in ten years, which is a lot, but not ridiculously so. Lots of people, especially tourists, come to grief over that period of time. I doubt that it’s statistically significant, but people like to talk. What makes these incidents unusual is that nothing was ever found. No bodies. No campsites. No equipment. They just vanished.”

“Did it start with my father, or were there incidents before?”

“It started with your father. Then a family about a year later. Two college kids disappeared six months after that. Then about a year, and a half passed before a minister and his wife on a retreat disappeared. The last incident involved a couple of college girls three years ago. They went out camping. About a week later, one of them came back starved, beaten up, and half crazy. She had some story about being captured by a hermit, and kept prisoner. Before anyone could follow up on her story, she disappeared in the middle of the night. She checked herself out of the hospital, and ran off into the woods. Nobody found a trace of her after that.”

“Is there anyone around here that would fit the description of a sociopathic hermit?”

“No. That’s the thing. Sure, there are people who go off to live by themselves in the woods all over the country, but we know about them. We keep tabs on them because once in a while one turns out to be dangerous, like the Unabomber. They typically stay in a fairly small territory where they’re comfortable, and there’s nobody like that around here for hundreds of miles. We figure the girls were probably using drugs, became disoriented, and

got trapped in an abandoned mine for some time. The hermit might have been a hallucination. I think the one who came back had gotten out, went looking for help, then went back to find her friend. I talked to her. She was pretty incoherent.”

“I smell a rat,” Doc said.

“An unmistakable odor,” Red agreed.

“Had the girl who came back been sexually molested?” Doc asked.

“It was hard to tell. She could have been wandering for days, so there’d be little or no evidence. The doctor who examined her said she hadn’t been a virgin for years. There were signs of partially healed trauma in her vagina, but that could have been the result of the girls playing rough with each other, or even self inflicted. There was no way to tell. Do you guys have some kind of theory about this?”

“Not really,” Doc said. “We’re just free associating off of new information. Or, at least new to us. It’s the kind of wild speculation scientists do when faced with inadequate information. It’s helpful as long as you recognize that it really is wild speculation. Management consultants call it ‘thinking outside the box.’ It leads to testable hypotheses, which eventually lead to new ideas that nobody would have thought of, otherwise.”

“If you find any such new ideas, please let me know. One of the most important parts of a Park Ranger’s job is keeping tourists safe – often despite themselves.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Red said. “Have you told Tom Devore any of this?”

“Who?”

“I guess not,” Doc concluded. “Tom’s a private detective we’ve hired to look into different possible scenarios for Jim McKenna’s disappearance. Foul play was one of them, but it was low on his list. This new information moves it up higher, I think. I wonder what he’d think.”

“I hope he already has this information,” Red commented. “Otherwise, maybe we chose the wrong detective.”

“You should check in with him tomorrow,” Doc suggested. “I’m sure he’ll be interested, if he hasn’t already learned of it.”

“He didn’t say anything about it the last time I talked to him,” Red pointed out.

“There are any number of reasons he might have not said anything about it, if he knew,” Doc said. “When was the last time you talked to him?”

“Last Tuesday,” she responded.

“That’s too long ago,” Doc said. “Better get on it first thing tomorrow. If there was foul play, somebody’s going to resent our poking into it. Tony, did the news story about Red’s search get picked up around here? I wouldn’t be surprised, since it has a local hook.”

“Yeah, it was all over the news. Started people telling ghost stories all over again.”

“That makes us a target,” Doc concluded. “Zeke, make sure everyone on our team keeps their heads down. Better get reinforcements, too. Call Mark Shipton. Tell him what we’ve learned here, and tell him we need some of his pajama-clad buddies up here on the QT. Low profile. Invisible, in fact. We don’t want to create problems if there aren’t any. If there are, we don’t want to alert the baddies that we’re onto them. That’d make them harder to find. If they’re out there, let ‘em come to us.”

“You really think we’re in danger, don’t you!” Red observed.

“I don’t know, which means ‘yes.’ I don’t want to learn we have a problem by finding you in an alley with a bullet in your head. Don’t like that idea – at all! Grrrr!” he growled at the thought.

“Why call Mark?” she asked.

“Your step daddy does business in lots of countries, like Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil, that are unfortunately infested with unsavory characters who’d like nothing more than to grab what he’s got. He’s survived by being better prepared than the baddies. Frankly, some of it’s rubbed off on me, but he’s the master. He’s also got more resources. With a phone call he can raise a professional army big enough to take over a small country. Don’t sell Mark short. He has depths you don’t know about.”

Doc hung his head silently for a short time, thinking. Then, he said: “I think I’m going to stay here longer than overnight. Red, you’re going to have to put up with my company until I’m convinced there’s no danger. SST can survive without my gentle ministrations.”

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Since he wasn’t making his return flight tonight, Doc had arrangements to make. First, he called Sam, to let him know that dinner would be delayed indefinitely.

Then, he left a message for Pat, explaining that the situation in Nevada demanded that he stay indefinitely. He’d send her a report by email later that night.

Finally, he called Eve to say that he was going to have to stay at the field site, but things could get more interesting from her point of view than they’d originally thought. He wasn’t sure about anything, yet, but she should definitely fly up by commercial airline on Wednesday.

While Doc was making his calls, Tony expressed reservations to Red and Zeke.

“I don’t like the idea of your bringing private security guards up here,” he complained. “If you have anything about a serial killer, it’s a job for local law enforcement, not a private army.”

“That’s just the point,” Red explained. “We don’t have anything. If you think about it, nothing has changed in the last fifteen minutes. All we have is that what you already knew set alarm bells off in Doc’s head and mine.

Doc's scared – I've never seen him so scared – and that scares me, but we're scared of what we *don't* know, not anything we *do* know. If you went to the Sheriff's department, and told them about this, they'd say: 'Yeah, so? We know all that.' If you said anything about our security arrangements, they'd think we were paranoiacs, and start watching *us*."

"Maybe that's what I should be doing: watching you," Tony said.

"You're welcome to. We asked you in on this project, but you're the Park Service's window on us, just as you're our liaison with the Park Service. We'll make sure you know what we're doing every step of the way, just as we've been doing already. Deal?"

"What about your step father's security guards?"

"They're very discrete." She was thinking about the fact that she'd been surrounded by them for years, and only last week found out that they were there. "Mark watches me like a hawk. There may be big, hulking ex-commandos watching us right now, but you'll never see them. For all I know, he's taken over the next building, and what look like workmen pulling overtime are there watching out for me. One reason Doc's suddenly staying on is that he pulls security duty, too. The difference is that he's a volunteer."

"Doc's ex-military?"

"I doubt it. He hasn't had enough time to do that, too, but he's probably had some training. I know he has spooky martial-arts skills. I'm a black belt, myself, but he knows moves that have no names."

"The point is, Tony," she continued. "That you won't even know Mark's pajama-clad buddies are here. You'll just see local hotels having a surge in the number of moose hunters with custom high-powered rifles. If nothing goes wrong, they'll just boost the local economy. If something does go wrong, nobody'll ever know about it. If it comes to a need for law enforcement, remember we've got an ex-cop on staff to work with them. I'll have him here PDQ."

“It isn’t moose season,” Tony objected, weakly.

“Something’s always in season,” Red responded. “If not, you’ll find a sudden announcement of a special season for giant woolly tufted marmots, or something else that requires high-powered rifles to bring down. I’m amazed at what these guys do, but it’s always perfectly legal. The bad guys always end up in jail, and the tourists never notice a thing. It’s spooky.”

“What do you think, Zeke,” Tony asked, looking for an ally in the only place left.

“I’ve watched Doc in action for two years,” Zeke said. “She’s right. It’s spooky, but everything seems to turn out right in the end. You’re wrong about one thing, though, Red. He’s not scared of the unknown. He’s sending up rockets on high alert because he sees a possible threat to *you*. We keep a lot of secrets, but we usually let the military take care of their own security, if they feel like it. This is different, and I think the difference is you.”

“You’re probably usually not dealing with a possible psychotic serial killer, though,” Tony put in.

“Yes,” Red said, “but the operant word here is ‘possible.’ Mark’s guys are always watching for ‘possibles.’ Their job is to keep ‘em from becoming ‘actuals.’ That’s why we need them here.”

“I give up,” Tony capitulated, “but I’m keeping my eye on you. Anything not strictly kosher, and I’ll blow the whistle.”

“Suits us,” Red pronounced. “Deal?”

Tony reluctantly nodded.

When Doc finished his phone calls, he returned to the group. Looking from face to face, he asked: “What’s going on? Have I missed something?”

“Tony thinks we should be calling the cops,” Red explained.

“He’s right. This opens several of their cold-case files. They’re gonna want to know, and we’re gonna need their help. But, we have nothing to tell them, yet. What we have so far is a big yawn. We need something concrete to tell them. Something to add to what they already know. Zeke, has anything unusual happened at the field camp?”

“Nothing unexplainable,” Zeke replied. “We had some boxes of rations go missing, but we figured we’d had a visit from some furry woodland creatures.”

“Woodland creatures don’t carry off boxes of rations,” Tony said. “They rip them open, and eat what they can right there. They carry the stuff off in their bellies. When did it happen?”

“Last night. Sunday night.”

“When was the news broadcast?” Doc asked.

“Saturday night.”

“What about noises?” Tony asked. “Either in the woods, or in camp.”

“The woods were a little noisier last night,” Zeke said, “but we figured the moon was getting fuller.”

“Why would that make a difference?” Red asked.

“More light,” Zeke explained. “More light makes for more critters wandering around, which would make for more noise.”

“That would be true,” Tony said.

“Then,” Zeke added, “we had a stack of equipment fall over about four o’clock in the morning. That woke us up, but we figured that whatever took the rations knocked the equipment over.”

“Any real damage?” Doc asked.

“I broke a camera lens, that’s all.”

“Hmm,” Doc said, “might be nothing. Might be testing our defenses. We’ll see what tonight brings.”

“There won’t be anything really critical at the camp until tomorrow,” Zeke pointed out.

“Right. It’ll all be here. We’ll pull the plane into the hangar when it gets here, then lock this place tight as a drum. Keep the plane locked, and surround it with motion detectors. Put a couple of people in here to answer the alarm if it comes. That should do it. It wouldn’t stop a determined gang, but we’re hypothetically dealing with just one or two people working alone, and scared that their past crimes will be found out. The only danger is that our criminal, if there is one, is a serial killer with a taste for robbery, and, perhaps, rape and torture. He, she, or they wouldn’t stick at additional murders to cover things up. Tony, did you say that girl who’d come back was beaten up?”

“Could have been accidental,” Tony replied, “like in a fall. No torture, unless you want to count starvation as torture. That could just be callousness. No sense feeding someone you’re just going to snuff, anyway. This all assumes our hypothesis of foul play. There still could be no perp at all.”

“Yes,” Doc said. “We have to keep reminding ourselves that this is total speculation at this point.”

“When’s the plane due in?” Doc asked Zeke.

“In about a half hour,” came the reply.

“Okay,” Doc said. “When they get here, I’ll address the troops. Then, we’ll send ‘em off for dinner and to get their rooms.”

“How many are coming?” Zeke asked.

Doc looked at Red, who answered: “Six, no, five. I’m already here. Greg, Steve, the two techs, and Bonnie. Doc, do you want to stick with the plan of having the hotel provide shuttle service?”

“Don’t forget the two pilots,” Doc reminded her. “Pilots get grumpy when told they have to sleep out in the cold. I can’t see one skulking serial killer, or even two, taking on seven reasonably robust adults, plus Red, and me. Let’s stick with hotel transportation. Zeke and Tony, I assume you have your own transportation already. Is that correct?”

Both men nodded in the affirmative.

“Red, I’m sure this will break your heart, but I want you and Greg bunking together. I’ll take the room he would have had.”

“I was planning to sneak in between his sheets, anyway. This’ll just make it official.”

“So, if nobody has any questions?” Doc looked around to see if anyone had any. “Then, I’ve a very expensive toy to put to bed. Zeke, I already called Mark to get the cavalry started, so you won’t have to. Red, you should help me go through the shutdown check list.”

“Speaking of the cavalry,” Red recalled. “Another concern Tony had was about bringing a private security detail in here. I told him Mark’s security guards were very discrete.”

“Actually, I specifically requested Mark’s pajama-clad buddies. They’re the guys Mark has guarding his oil wells from restless natives. They’re not the bodyguards you know, Red. These guys did anti-insurgency duty in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. They’re trained for separating a few bad guys from a mass of non-combatants – tourists, in our case. We’re up against one, or at most two, bad guys, who are stealthy, but probably not too sophisticated. We won’t need an army. At most eight, or ten, tops. We’ll have a couple or three showing themselves in camp all the time to keep down the nuisance visits. We’ll scatter a half dozen in a wide perimeter around the camp. Red’s normal contingent of bodyguards – who are already in place – can take care of protecting the team here, and in town.”

“What about *en route*?” Red asked.

“Hey, we’re talking about a serial killer here, not the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. Whoever it is, if they even exist, they’re amateurs, not ninjas. And, their intention is to stay under cover, not to attract attention by blowing up a hotel’s airport shuttle.”

“Sorry,” Red said, sheepishly. “I got carried away.”

“Now, miss test-pilot-in-training, please accompany me to yon aircraft to complete its proper shutdown, which was interrupted by your impromptu war conference.”

“Yessir!” Red saluted, and followed him out to the small plane, still parked in front of the hangar.

After they’d completed the shut-down checklist, Doc got a towbar out of the plane’s luggage compartment. He showed Red how to attach it to the plane’s nose wheel, then demonstrated how to use it to pull the plane into the hangar, and steer it into the deepest, darkest, furthest corner. Finally, he took his own flight bag out of the luggage compartment, and covered the plane with a nondescript tarpaulin. In the end, it looked like just a forgotten old plane stuck in a corner out of the way.

Doc carried his flight bag to the bathroom to change into street clothes, and Red walked out through the wide hangar door to watch the sun set. A few minutes later, Doc came out to join her wearing an old pair of boots, threadbare jeans, and a yellow polo shirt with Scottsdale Systems Technology embroidered in red over the chest pocket. Over all, he had on his black leather jacket, and black leather cap. He was carrying her red leather jacket.

“I thought you might need this,” he said, handing the jacket to her.

“Thanks,” she said, “it’s starting to get cold.

They kept watching the sky as the last red faded behind the mountains in the west. Seeing a bright orange star high in the east, Red asked if he knew what star it was.

“It’s a planet, not a star. If you look carefully, it doesn’t flicker like a star. If you’ve really good eyes, you can

almost see it as a disk. Stars are mere points of light. From the color, I'd say it looks like Jupiter."

"That's right, I hadn't thought about it, but you're an astronomer."

"I'm an astrophysicist, not an astronomer. I build CFD models of stellar atmospheres. Astronomers make measurements to find out if my models bear any resemblance to the real world."

"But, you know the stars."

"Well, the average kid in a junior-high astronomy club knows the sky better than I do. I've forgotten most of what I ever knew about star names, and constellations. I can still remember some of the constellations, though."

They went on talking about stars and constellations for awhile, when they heard the garage door in the small building next to the hangar open. Then, they heard a small gasoline engine start up, and a yard-size tractor pulled out, driven by a young man, who was bulky, but not fat.

Laughing, Red asked: "Another of Mark's bodyguards?"

"Yeah, that's Ted," Doc said, returning the man's wave. "Why did you laugh?"

"I kiddingly told Tony that Mark had probably taken over the building next to the hangar, and installed bodyguards in it. Turns out I was right."

"Ted's pulling the tractor out means your cargo plane is coming." Turning to the left, he saw a small cargo plane just coming over the airport fence line to touch down on the runway. "Yep, there it is." He pointed in case Red hadn't spotted it. She had.

A young woman, who looked like a female wrestler, stepped out of the small building's front door carrying two lighted batons. As the cargo plane turned off the runway, and lumbered up the taxiway, she took up station in the middle of the taxiway directly in front of the hangar door, holding the batons vertically over her head. As the plane pulled up within a few feet of her, she signaled for it to come closer by tipping the batons backward. When

the plane reached the point she wanted, she stopped it by making an X with the batons.

Ted drove the tractor to within a few feet of the plane's nose wheel, then got off, and attached one end of a long bar, which looked like the drive shaft from a rear-wheel-drive car, to the plane's nose wheel, and the other end to a hitch on the tractor's nose. Then, he used the tractor to turn the plane, and push it tail-first into the hangar.

"I guess we'd better go in, and greet your team," Doc said.

On the way into the hangar, Doc spoke briefly to Ted and his female companion. They nodded assent, and headed back to their small building.

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As the team members reached the bottom of the plane's stairs, Red waved and called "Hello," then ran up and greeted Bonnie with a hug. Then, she gave Greg a hug, and a long kiss. Rather than let go, she stood next to him with her arm around his waist.

Doc waved hello to everyone.

"Please follow me into the office here," he said, indicating the door, "I've something important to tell you before we go anywhere."

He wanted to say what he had to say someplace where nobody watching from the brush could hear him.

Once everyone was in the office, he said: "We've had a development that everyone on the team needs to know about, but it can't leave this room. We've found that there is a possibility – and a possibility only – that Jim McKenna was killed by a serial killer. There have been four unsolved disappearances since his, most of them including more than one person. All the victims were camping out in the woods. If this is true, and we bring in technology that will show that at least one crime has been committed, the killer, or killers, will want to stop us."

“I need to stress that this is only speculation,” he continued. “We have no proof that any crime has been committed, but as a precaution, we’re beefing up security for our party. We already have undercover security guards in place in town and here at the staging area. We’ll have additional security coming in, probably tomorrow, to protect the camp at Shaft Six. In any case, please do not go out alone. The nature of our tasks pretty much guarantees that we’ll have someone nearby at all times when working. So, it’s mostly a matter of not taking walks alone. I’m not asking anyone to restrict their movements, or feel threatened. Just please take a friend along when you go sightseeing. Any questions?”

“Who might the killer be?” one of the techs asked.

“We’ve no idea, and we’re probably being overly paranoid, anyway. All the victims disappeared in remote camps with nobody around to help. The exception is one young woman who disappeared immediately after checking herself out of the hospital at night. However, she had already been through an ordeal in the woods, and was mentally disturbed. She’d been with a friend who also disappeared. That was the last incident, and it was a few years ago. The local police and the National Park Service are aware of these disappearances, and see no reason to link them together. We’re just being cautious. Any other questions? No? Okay, the bathroom’s through that door. It’s unisex, so you’ll have to take turns. We’ll have a shuttle here to take you to the hotel in a few minutes. You might as well wait here in the office where it’s warm, but if you want to go out, please take a buddy with you. The area outside this hangar is *not* secure at this time.”

After his speech, he walked over to where Greg and Red were standing together.

“Greg,” he said, “I trust it will not break your heart to bunk in with Red.”

Looking embarrassed, but pleased, Greg said: “If it’s all right with Red. I promise to be a perfect gentleman.”

“You’d better not be!” Red said, slapping him on the chest. “I’ll want lots of cuddling to keep the bogeyman away.”

“I’ll try to get the nearest room, adjoining if possible, to be on hand if anything happens. At least anything that’s not *supposed* to happen,” Doc said. “Feel free to make as much noise as you want.”

Excusing himself from Red, Greg led Doc out into the hangar out of earshot.

“Doc, do you really think there’s danger?” he asked.

“I’ve no idea, but if there is, Red’s in the bullseye because she’s the focus of this whole operation. That’s why I want either you, or me with her at all times. You can let her go to the bathroom by herself, but stand outside the door.”

“What if something happens? I don’t know anything about fighting. What good could I do?”

“You can scream as well as I can. There are bodyguards all over the place, and they’ll come a-runnin’. What we need you for is an extra set of eyes. Red *has* been trained, and knows what to do. All you need to do is keep your eyes peeled. If you see anything suspicious, let her know, then get out of the way. Watch for errant leg kicks, though. She’d hate to flatten you by accident. If you wanted a wallflower, you came to the wrong party.”

Still concerned, Greg asked: “What about when I’m working? I have a lot of work to do?”

“That’s my get,” Doc replied. “I’ve nothing to do up here beside protect her. Basically, I’ve been promoted to head of security. That’s the only reason I didn’t turn my plane around two hours ago, and fly straight back to Scottsdale. I’m going to be doing exactly what I told you to do. I promised her some time ago that if she ever got into a fight, I’d stand back, and watch, unless she actually needed my help. There’s actually little chance of any trouble, and lots of help around if any comes up. What she needs is a second pair of eyes because she can’t look everywhere at once.”

“Why are you pushing me into her bed?”

“I don’t think I am. I figure that’s where you’ll want to be, anyway. I know that’s the way she wants it. She

told me so. I just don't want any unnecessary adolescent skulking around to interfere with her protection. Just make sure you two don't get into a lovers' quarrel."

"I mean," Greg explained, "you obviously care about her. Why aren't you trying to elbow me out?"

"Get this through your head. Yes, I care about her. I want you in her bed because that's what she wants. If she changes her mind, I'll bar your way with a scimitar. To be crude, if she were to say she wanted to fuck a snake, I'd go look up herpetologists in the yellow pages. She wants you for a lover. She also wants a big brother surrogate, and she's picked me. What kind of big brother would molest his little sister? What's so hard to understand about that?"

"It's just so unusual."

"We're an unusual family."

"Okay. I'll watch her back. And, if I see something I don't like, I'll tell her about it, and stand back. If she needs help, I'll scream for it."

"Good man. Now, go make her glad you're here. She's had a long, grueling day. I'll handle the rest of it. Go make my little sister happy."

When they got back to Red, she was looking concerned. "What were you two talking about?" she asked.

"Nothing earthshaking. I was giving Greg advice on how to play bodyguard to an amazon. I told him to keep his eyes peeled, and if anything happens, to stay out of your way. It's really rather easy duty."

"You sure that's all?"

"Scout's honor," he said, giving the correct three-fingered pledge sign.

"I don't trust you," she replied. "Greg, is he telling the truth?"

“Absolutely.”

“See? Him, I believe.”

“I’m taking you off the clock,” Doc told her. “You’ve been through enough, today. I’ll get together with Bonnie to take care of your flock. Oh, yeah! I almost forgot. You have a dinner engagement. What time?”

“Eight o’clock in the hotel lobby. It’s almost seven thirty, now.”

“Plenty of time. I’ve a Plan A, and a Plan B to get you there. Take Greg along instead of me. I’ll catch up with you later. Where’s Bonnie?”

Spotting her, Doc went to her.

“Jeesh, I can’t go to dinner dressed in nothing but a coverall,” Red said to Greg. “I’ve got to change.” She grabbed her flight bag from the work table, and headed for the restroom.

“What are you doing still here?” Bonnie asked when Doc reached her. “I thought you were flying back to Scottsdale this afternoon.”

“Change of plans due to paranoia. I’m staying here for the duration. Mostly, I’ll be handling the beefed up security, but I’ll be following Red around while Greg’s busy doing useful things. Right now, I’ve taken her off the clock. She’s all in. You can see it in her eyes. I need to verify that the hotel shuttle is on its way.” He looked out the glass windows, hoping to see it pulling into the hangar door. For once, he was rewarded.

“Oh, look! It just showed up. Bonnie, please get everybody in the van. Red has to meet our lawyer in the lobby at eight. Zeke and the Ranger have their own transportation.”

“They’ve already left.”

“Good. I have to have a word with our friends in the guard shack. They’re going to lock up afterward, and

stay in here to guard the plane. Save me the gunfighter's seat in the van, please."

Doc trotted out to the hangar, where Ted and his companion had showed the shuttle driver where to park. The team members had gone out to the van as soon as they saw it arrive, and the pilots had started loading the luggage into the back. Luckily, the van was big enough to carry nine passengers, plus the driver. Everyone had found a seat by the time Doc returned, even Red, who'd hurriedly jumped into the jeans and blouse she'd been wearing when she came to work ten hours ago.

Doc jumped into the front passenger's seat, pulled the door closed, and they were off.

"Will there be any problem getting to the lobby by eight?" Doc asked the driver.

"We should be there with ten minutes to spare," came the reply.

"Great. Thanks."

Doc was starting to feel the effects of being on the go for hours, but he wasn't as tired as Red, because he'd spent most of the early afternoon waiting for her to finish loading the cargo plane. Poor Red had been scrambling since she'd gotten up nearly fourteen hours ago. She fell asleep in Greg's arms before the van exited the airfield.

Red woke up with a start when the van bumped over the drainage channel between the street pavement and the hotel's front driveway. She'd missed Doc's instructions enroute.

"When we get to the hotel," he'd said, "Bonnie, and I will take care of room assignments, and distribute keys. Greg, you and Red should just go to the lobby, and meet David Goldstein for dinner. I'll get your keys to you later. Everyone else, when you get your keys, you're free to do whatever you want. Get dinner, go to your rooms, whatever. Just please remember not to go outside without someone else with you. We believe there's no danger within the hotel, or in public buildings. If there is any danger, it will be outdoors. Have a good evening. We'll run shuttles between the hotel and the hangar from eight o'clock to nine o'clock tomorrow morning. If you oversleep past nine o'clock, shame on you. You'll have to cab it to work."

“One more thing,” he added, “Nevada’s on Pacific *Daylight* Time, while we’re still on Mountain Standard Time. That means you do not have to change your clocks and watches. Keep them as they are. Any questions?”

“When’s dinner? I’m starved,” came a voice from the back, followed by general laughter.

“Dinner’s when you get it,” Doc replied. “The hotel has a cafe, and a respectable restaurant. Carson City is the capitol of Nevada, and boasts a number of really fine restaurants, as well as diners, cafe’s, and bars. If your stomach is willing to wait, I suggest that you check out the downtown area. I can’t give you suggestions because I’ve been here only briefly, and that was years ago. If you want nightlife, though, Reno is a half hour away by taxi. Any other questions?”

“Are we coming back here tomorrow night, or should we take our bags with us in the morning?”

“Our plan is to head up to camp tomorrow, so bring your luggage with you. We’ll keep the rooms available, though, in case we get delayed. So, expect to move to camp tomorrow, but hang onto your room keys just in case. Some of you will be working out of Carson City, anyway, and you’ll stay at the hotel. Any more questions?”

Nobody spoke up, so the group wended their way through the streets in silence.

Red was still groggy when she unfolded herself from the van’s exit door, and stepped to the pavement. Greg led her directly to the middle of the hotel lobby, where she spotted David, and waved.

“You look all in, Judith,” David said when he saw her. He steadfastly refused to use her nickname. “Do you want to make this another time?”

“No, I’m okay,” she replied. “I fell asleep in the van on the way from the airport, and I’m still waking up. I hope you don’t mind if Greg joins us. I don’t think we’ll be discussing anything confidential, will we?”

“Well, it will be private family business,” David said with a look of disapproval.

Red stepped close to David, and said in a confidential tone: “Doc thinks there’s an outside chance someone

may be out to harm me. Greg's supposed to keep an eye out while we do our business. I think Doc would go ballistic if Greg didn't come along."

Surprised, David said: "In that case, of course. Do you really think there's any danger?" He meant to himself.

"Not really," Red assured him, knowing whom he was concerned about. "Not if we stick together. Doc just doesn't want me wandering outside alone."

"In that case, should we go to the restaurant here? I have reservations at Garibaldi's, but if you don't want to go out, we can stay here."

"Hotel food versus a nice Italian restaurant?" Red asked as if it was a difficult decision. "Let me think." She pretended to consider for all of a tenth of a second. "We'll go out!"

"Can we walk there?" asked Greg, who'd been cooped up for hours, first in the cargo plane, then in the van.

"It's about ten blocks," David answered. "Almost half a mile."

Looking at David's paunch and Red's exhausted eyes, Greg said: "Let's find a cab."

"No," David said, "my car's right outside."

At the restaurant, Red gave in to her exhausted body's desire to carbo-load, and ordered penne pasta in alfredo sauce. The penne would be easier to wolf down than the more usual fettuccine, and the thought of alfredo sauce made all the cells in her body cheer. David ordered the more complex flavors of steak Diane. Greg went for a pedestrian meal of spaghetti and meatballs.

Munching on bread sticks and rolls, Red explained the security situation to David: "We had a long talk with the local Park Service Ranger this afternoon, and found out that my father's disappearance was just the first in a series of disappearances over the past ten years. That set off alarm bells in both Doc's and my heads. Remember

that Tom Devore included foul play in his list of possible reasons for my father's disappearance? He put it low on the list, and we all agreed. But, seeing my father's as the first of a series of unexplained disappearances pushes it way up on the list. I'd put it at neck-and-neck with mining accident for the lead. Maybe I'm being over dramatic, but Doc agrees. In any case, we decided to beef up security. My step father, who has good reason to be paranoid about security, has me watched discretely all the time, anyway. Don't look, but a couple of them just came in for dinner."

"Anyway," she continued, "Doc's concerned enough that he's decided to stay up here with us, and he's asking Mark, my step father, to send up some fellows to protect the mine site. Our theory is that my father was killed while camping at the mine, and the killer liked it so much that he, or they, came back for more. So far, there have been something like ten victims, counting my father, who disappeared in five separate incidents. That's quite a score! Now, we're coming up here, nosing around, and threatening to blow the whole thing wide open, assuming there actually is something to blow wide open. Right now, it's all speculation."

"But, there's enough for you to spend thousands of dollars on beefed up security," David commented.

"My step father spends thousands of dollars a day on security for our family, anyway, and a lot more on security for his business assets. This'll just be a drop in the bucket. It's cheap insurance considering what's at stake, and what we're sinking into this project, anyway."

"And what do you think is at stake?" David asked her.

"Well, I'm kinda interested in the integrity of my hide, for one thing," she replied, candidly. "Then, there're the hides of about a dozen people we have up here, not counting the security people, themselves. Then, the value of the project, which could be shut down or delayed indefinitely if somebody got hurt and the cops took over. That's one reason I don't want to get them involved unless we have to."

"What I'm hoping for is that our Worm will go down in the hole, and send back pictures that show that my father was crushed by a derrick that fell when a rotten piece of wire rope went 'spang!' As much as I don't want it

to have happened, something did, and that's the least bad for everyone concerned. In that case, we could have this thing wrapped up by Friday, and the cops would never need to be told anything. We'd get folks in here to clean up the mess, then Gulf States could go to work validating and expanding my father's research. We would have a memorial service for my father, and everybody else would live happily ever after."

"And if that's not what happens?"

"All Hell breaks loose. There's a big investigation for a serial killer, which drags on until he's caught. Everybody loses.

"But, you wouldn't be involved in any of that," David suggested.

"The Hell I wouldn't! Some bozo serial killer gets his start by knocking off my father, and I sit on my hands up in Boston? Not on your life! If I find out somebody hurt him deliberately, I'll hunt the sonofabitch down 'til he's dead." At the thought, Red's face showed a look of intense anger and hate that neither Greg or David had ever thought to see.

"Anyway," Red said, pushing the thought aside, and brightening. "let's hope that never happens. Hopefully, there's no serial killer, and we have a good laugh about being paranoid."

Changing the subject, she asked: "David, what do you have for me on the family-trust front?"

David explained what he had in mind for a trust in detail. He listed the documents that needed to be drawn up, and signed, and estimated the time required for each step. Then, their meals showed up, and they shelved business for the duration.

By the time they left the restaurant, Red knew that the process would take at least a month, and maintaining the trust would be something they'd have to work on *ad infinitum*, but wouldn't involve much work at any time. Somebody would have to be named executor. It should be either Red or her mother, but it made little difference which. Red was inclined to volunteer her mother's services to save herself work, but it was a decision they'd have

to make jointly, perhaps with some input from Mark.

Red felt refreshed, so she, and Greg decided to work off the meal by walking back to their hotel. They said good-bye to David at his car. It was a half-mile hike back to their hotel, but their path was straight down Carson City's main drag. It was an ideal way to get acquainted with the city's downtown area.

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By the time they reached the hotel, Red had seen the error of her ways. Walking the half mile back had not been the right thing for her to do. Between being exhausted from work and tension through an extraordinarily long day, and feeling bloated from an unusually large meal (for her), walking a half mile had been too much. All she wanted was to get to her room, clear out the bloat, and crawl into bed. When they got to the lobby, she had all she could do to just stand there, while Greg asked the clerk at the registration desk what might have become of their keys.

Not knowing when they might return, Doc had left the keys in an envelope at the registration desk, to be given to either Mr. Michels, or Ms. McKenna. It took what seemed like hours to Red for the clerk to get around to asking Greg what his name was. Greg had made the mistake of starting by asking for Dr. Manchek.

"He said he was picking our keys up for us," Greg explained.

"He doesn't answer the phone. Perhaps he went out. Is he a very large gentleman?" asked the desk clerk, who was not the one who had checked the SST group in.

"Yes. Tall as me. Built like a cement truck. Dark hair. Full beard."

"I think he stepped out. He asked about clothing stores, or department stores. It seems he hadn't planned to be here, or something. I'm not quite sure."

"Oh, no! What are we going to do?" Greg moaned.

“You don’t happen to be Mr. Michels, by any chance?”

“Yes, I am.”

“He left an envelope for you,” the clerk said looking around the desk for it. “Here it is.”

He handed Greg a large white envelope with the hotel’s logo and return address printed on it, and Greg’s and Red’s names hand lettered on the outside. Inside was a three-inch by four-inch folder, also carrying the hotel’s logo. Inside that were two hotel key cards, and “315” was hand written on the inside flap. Another hand had written: “I’m in 317. I’ve had the bellman unlock the connecting door in case something goes bump in the night. Hope you don’t mind, Doc.”

Not knowing when Greg and Red would return from dinner, and needing to buy some spare clothing before the stores closed, he’d left their keys in an envelope at the front desk. If Greg had led with his name, instead of just asking for Doc, there wouldn’t have been any trouble.

With Doc’s usual desire to pamper Red as much as possible, he’d made sure that she had gotten a suite with a separate bedroom off the living area. It wasn’t as nice as the suite she’d shared with Doc in Austin, or even her place in Phoenix, but it was still well above the average hotel room.

As soon as she reached the bed, Red crashed. She fell into a deep slumber, lying face down, with her head turned to one side. It was a pose she’d adopted a few seconds after plopping down with her face buried in the pillow. After a few wriggles, she’d found it was easier to breathe with her face to the side, and that’s as far as she got before sleep paralysis immobilized her for the night.

Greg, who’d spent much of the afternoon sleeping in an airline seat in the cargo plane, had the opposite problem. He was about as sleepy as speed freak on a methamphetamine high. After throwing a blanket over Red and turning out the light, he adjourned to the living area to find something exciting to watch on television. After flipping through channels for fifteen minutes, he rented the most violent action film he could find in the hotel’s on-

demand library.

So, when Doc stopped by to see how they were doing after putting away the clothes he'd purchased, he found Greg camped on the sofa in front of the television, knees up with his feet planted on the edge of the coffee table, drinking soda, and munching peanuts he'd acquired from the minibar.

"Shhh," Greg signaled with his index finger to his lips, and pointed to the closed bedroom door, despite the loud sounds of machine gun fire and explosions blaring from the television. Amused by the incongruity, Doc stepped over to the bedroom door, and opened it quietly. Red had found enough mobility to curl into a more natural slumber position, where she snored softly.

Closing the door, Doc went back to sit in an easy chair next to the sofa where Greg was having his picnic. Together, they watched the rest of the film, which somehow involved interstellar commandos fighting dragon-like aliens while on a spy mission. The plot was infantile, but the action was practically non-stop, and the special effects were spectacular. At the end, Doc still wasn't entirely sure who were the good guys, and who were the bad guys, but he didn't care. He'd been rooting for the dragon-like space aliens, anyway.

"Hey," he had said, "if I were a dragon-like space alien, I wouldn't care which monkey-like bipeds were the good guys, and who were the bad guys. I'd just want 'em all off my planet!"

"What time did she get to sleep?" Doc asked after the last bomb exploded, and the last machine gun filled the room with a staccato burst. Technically, Red couldn't really be said to have gotten to bed, since she'd simply collapsed on the bed without even taking her boots off.

"About ten," Greg reported. "D'ya think we should take her clothes off?"

"It'll be more comfortable for you in the bed if you do, and tuck her between the sheets. I don't think she'll notice until morning. D'you need help?"

"She's a big girl," Greg said, doubtfully. He knew nothing about Doc's having put her to bed by himself in

Daytona, when she was passed out from getting drunk with Annie. All Greg knew was that picking up Red as dead weight was beyond his strength. As a trained power lifter, on the other hand, Doc could dead lift almost four times her weight. Greg wouldn't have believed that if someone tried to tell him, and wouldn't have known what a dead lift was, anyway.

"Okay," Doc said, "I'll hold her up while you pull down her pants."

They went into the bedroom and, without turning on the light, Doc pulled off Red's boots while Greg unbuckled her belt and undid her fly. Then Doc lifted her up by the armpits to a standing position, while Greg really did pull down her pants. While this was going on, Red, in her sleep, put her arms around Doc's neck, and hugged him. Not wanting her to wake up at this particular moment, Doc tried to soothe her back to sleep.

It worked, and Red sat motionless after Doc lowered her to a sitting position at the edge of the bed, while Greg pulled her jeans off over her feet. Her socks came off with the jeans. Finally Doc steadied her with his hand on the nape of her neck, while Greg removed her blouse. Figuring that the hoop earrings were the only part of her jewelry that might cause problems, he unhooked them from her ear holes. If the rest of the display bothered her, she could damn well wake up and take them off, herself.

Neither of the men could see any point in trying to get her panties off without waking her, so they left them on. Doc, with one arm under her shoulder blades, and the other under her knees, picked her up, while Greg pulled down the bedclothes. Doc lowered her gently onto the bed. Smiling, she murmured "G'nite, lover," curled up in a fetal position, and went emphatically back to sleep.

They never found out whom she thought she was talking to.

Greg pulled the bedclothes up over her, kissed her hair, and closed the door.

"I'll get out of your way, now," Doc said. "By six o'clock, she's going to be zooming around here on roller skates, so you'd better get some sleep, too. If you want to sleep in, have her bang on this door, and I'll take her

downstairs to feed her.”

“Won’t you be asleep?”

“I don’t sleep that much. Never have.”

“Is that one of your Zen things?”

“I don’t know,” Doc said truthfully. “All I know is that if I get more than six hours sleep, I’m antsy all the next day.”

At six thirty the next morning, a gentle knock on the door disturbed Doc’s meditation. “Come in,” he said.

A sunny smile entered the room pasted on Red’s face, which was already scrubbed, with fresh make up, and a flaming halo of freshly brushed hair. “Good morning,” the smile said.

“My, aren’t we bright eyed and bushy tailed this morning,” Doc said, as if he hadn’t expected it. “All ready to slay dragons?”

“I’m ready to eat them, anyway, dead, or alive,” Red rejoined.

“Mind if I take a quick shower first? Newspaper’s on the coffee table, TV’s on the – whatever they call that thing – and coffee’s next to it. Help yourself.”

He trotted off to the bathroom for morning ablutions.

When Red heard the shower shut off, she called out: “Did you tell Eve about our hypothetical serial killer?”

A muffled “What?” was the response. Seconds later, Doc came out of the bathroom, still toweling himself off, to see what she was talking about.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“Nice outfit,” she said, pointing out his total lack of one.

“I’ve got nothing you haven’t seen,” he responded.

It was true. She didn’t care, and she liked the fact that he didn’t care, either. It, in fact, made her regret having put on the hot, stuffy bathrobe.

“Did you feed Eve all this information about our hypothetical serial killer?” she asked.

“No, I just said something had come up, so I had to stay here. I did tell her that it made things more interesting from her point of view, and I’d explain later.”

“That explains it. Looks like she didn’t wait for you to tell her, but started digging on her own. I think I like that girl. Reminds me of me.”

“Well, she is a professional journalist. I should have known. What does she have?”

“Just about everything. Looks like she caught the first plane up here, and started interviewing natives. She has more on the disappearances than we do. Probably hooked up with a local newsman. Interviews with a couple of locals that I think she picked out because they’re stupid looking. Nothing about the Park Service. Nothing from the cops. Do you have her cell number?”

Doc picked up his PDA, autodialed Eve’s cell number, and handed it to Red.

“Eve! This is Red. I just saw your report on TV. Damn, you’re good! ... Yeah, we’re at the Plaza on Carson Street. Where are you? ... Why don’t you drop over so we can compare notes. ... Yeah, eight oh one. Turn east on eighth, then right on Plaza. You can’t miss it. I’m in Doc’s room right now. It’s three one” she hesitated, looking up at Doc to complete the number. “Three one seven,” he said. “Three one seven. ... Great. See you when you get here.”

“She’s coming right over,” Red told Doc.

“Have you called Tom Devore, yet? We need someone to soothe ruffled cop feathers.”

“No, I haven’t. Give me my phone. It’s, oh shit, it’s next door. How do you navigate in this thing?” she asked, fumbling with his PDA.

“It’s the same as yours. Tom’s number is in the contacts list.”

“I guess I need more coffee. Of course it’s the same as mine. It *is* the same as mine!”

Fumbling some more, she found Tom’s mobile number, and autodialed it.

“Tom! It’s Red. We need you here in Carson City PDQ. ... Oh, you saw it. ... Doc dropped a pebble, and that’s the tsunami that resulted. ... Well, we’re new at working journalists, what can I say? We figure the local cops will have their noses out of joint that we didn’t tell them first. Can you come up here, and help us smooth their feathers? ... Yeah, I know we’re gonna need them, but we didn’t have anything to tell them. We just found out about all this stuff from the local park ranger late yesterday afternoon, just before our Worm team arrived. ... Yeah, the park ranger told us to call the cops right away, but we were too pig headed to listen. Chalk it up to a learning experience. We’re trying to do better, now. ... Okay. We’re meeting with the newswoman who broke the story in a few minutes. We’ll come up with something to feed the cops, so they won’t feel left out, and call you back. ... How long will it take? ... Oh, you’ll contact them. Thanks. Let us know what we should do, and we’ll do it. ... Sorry about being stupid. ... See you then.”

“It’s going to take him four or five hours to get here,” Red reported to Doc. “Meantime, if the cops contact us, we’re to answer anything they ask, and apologize for not contacting them first. If they don’t contact us, we’re not to contact them. He’ll take care of that when he gets here.”

“We screwed up,” she concluded.

“You handled it as well as you could,” Doc told her. “No sense beating ourselves up.”

“Put your pants on. Eve’ll be here any minute.”

“She’s seen it all, too.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want her staring at your dick while I’m trying to do business.”

“That didn’t stop you from sitting on it while doing business with Mandy in Austin,” he reminded her.

“That was *me* sitting on your dick, and it was covered up. This is different.”

“Oh, I see,” Doc said smiling.

“Well, it is!” Red insisted, defensively.

“What about you?”

“I’m wearing a bathrobe, and I’m not going to give her either a nipple flash, or a beaver shot. Get going!” she exclaimed, pushing him off the arm of the couch, where he’d parked himself.

“What’s going on?” Greg said from the door. When he saw Doc, he stopped, shocked.

“Eve broke a news story about our bogeyman,” Red explained. “She’s in Carson City, digging out what she can. She’s coming up here any minute, probably hoping to get us to say something stupid. I’m going to try to pump her for anything she has that we don’t know. But, now I can’t get this craphead to put on his pants!”

“Doc! Put on your pants!” Greg said, bewildered, but willing to play along with Red until he caught up.

“You,” Red exclaimed, turning to Greg, who was wearing a bathrobe, “put your pants on, too. Eve’s going to think she walked into a threesome. She may have been fondling Doc’s private parts this weekend, but I don’t think she’s seen yours. So, go get decent for company. In fact, make yourself scarce while we meet with her.”

“Hey,” Greg said in a hurt tone. “I’ve no idea what’s going on. I want to stay and find out.”

“Okay, but come in decent, and keep your trap shut.”

Turning toward Doc, she exclaimed: “Where’d you get *that* shirt?” Doc was tucking a western-style shirt with blue and white vertical stripes into his jeans.

“Local store last night. I couldn’t go very long with just the spare clothes from my flight bag. I even bought some boots I can wear for company.” He picked up a foot to show her a brand new pair of alligator hide boots that must have set him back at least four hundred dollars. “Don’t you like it?” he asked, meaning the shirt.

“You’ll need a black hat to go with it,” she answered.

“Like this one?” he asked, putting on a black, flat-crowned hat pinched at the front.

“Won’t go with a motorcycle jacket, though,” she opined.

“Then, it’s lucky I found this,” he said, putting on a buckskin jacket with a mass of beadwork on the shoulders, and fringes nearly a foot long across the chest, shoulder blades, and hanging from each arm. The jacket must have cost more than the boots.

“You’re incorrigible!” Red told him.

“Thank you,” he replied, “I do try.”

She gave an exasperated growl, but smiled while doing it.

Doc took off the hat and jacket, and put them in the closet, then flopped on the couch next to Red. It took him thirty seconds to decide that there was nothing more on the local news that he cared about, so he stuck his nose into the newspaper.

He’d skimmed half way through the “What’s News” column when a knock came at the door.

Doc opened it to admit Eve, with a cameraman toting a video camera in tow.

“Hi, gorgeous,” Doc said.

Eve returned Doc’s hug and kiss perfunctorily. Her mind was on her breaking news story, and her eye was on Red, who was the story’s principal. She approvingly assessed the state of Red’s makeup and jewelry, which was minimal at that point. She thought about the impression made by her being dressed in a bathrobe, and decided it made the scene look impromptu and exclusive, so she just opened the robe a bit to show more of Red’s bosom. Happily, from Eve’s point of view, Red still had on her squash blossom necklace.

“What is your reaction to the rumors that your father’s disappearance is linked to several other strange disappearances that have occurred in the Comstock Lode area over the past ten years?” Eve asked, swinging into a full-blown interview. The cameraman had been recording practically since he’d entered the room.

“Our project team only received this information from a representative of the National Park Service late yesterday, and we’re still assessing it. We have not had time to even discuss it with local law enforcement, yet, so we cannot form any conclusions. So far, we’ve been concerned specifically with my father’s disappearance. This information indicates that there may be a larger picture, but we consider any link between these incidents to be speculative at this time.”

Doc thought her explanation for their not calling the cops right away was a great idea. It indicated that they weren’t going off half cocked, and bought time for Tom Devore to get there to liaise with local authorities. It put the blame for bringing up a serial killer on Eve, and made them look careful and conservative.

“What about rumors of supernatural causes?” Eve asked.

“Doc, the supernatural is more your area than mine,” she said, playfully. “Why don’t you answer that?”

Doc almost laughed at the thought that his area included the supernatural. Then, he put on a serious look as he turned to face the camera, which quickly swung toward him.

“Legends and superstitions,” he explained, “generally arise over time when there is not enough information

to form more scientific explanations of events. This is one such situation. We do have scattered facts about a number of incidents involving mysterious disappearances. We do not, however, have enough to determine if they are linked other than by coincidence. In cooperation with local authorities and the National Park Service, we intend to gather enough information to assemble a true picture.”

“So, you believe there is nothing to speculation of supernatural occurrences here?”

“Scottsdale Systems Technology conducts scientific research and development. We see no evidence here that would admit of a supernatural explanation. We are still gathering information.”

That ought to satisfy the science fans, while not offending the spooky nuts. After all, he didn’t actually come out and call them psychoceramics – crackpots in plain English. He just said more information was needed.

“You must have a hypothesis about what has been going on.”

“We have not yet formed *an* hypothesis,” he replied. Eve’s misusing the article “a” jangled his nerves too much to let it slide. She should know better! He did, however, take a breath before continuing, so she could edit out the jab.

“The few facts we have so far admit of several possible explanations. It would be premature to speculate on what we may find in the future.”

“Do you have any idea how long it might take to find the answers you seek?”

“Again, we don’t have enough information, yet. Red, why don’t you explain what we’re doing, and what our time line is?”

For the *n*th time, Red explained, in detail, their plan for exploring Shaft Six. She refused to speculate on what they might find, except that they hoped to find her father’s remains.

“What if you find evidence of foul play when you explore the mine?” Eve asked.

“Then we will work with local, state, and federal authorities to see the perpetrator, or perpetrators, brought to justice. I certainly would not allow anyone who willfully did my father harm to escape the full wrath of the law.”

Doc couldn't imagine Red sweetly handing anyone who'd killed her father over to the cops. More likely, he'd have to wrestle them away from her to keep her from performing sex-change operations with a bent fork.

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“Alright, Eve,” Doc interjected. “You got your exclusive interview. Now, it's our turn. Shut off the camera, and tell us what you've got. We know you've used contacts in local media to dig up information that helped you connect the dots. What do you have?”

Looking innocent, Eve asked: “What makes you think I've gotten anything out of the local media? You told me about this development, yourself.”

“Eve, this is me. I didn't give you jack on this development. I just told you that there was one. You dug the rest of this morning's story up yourself. You didn't get it from the cops because, number one, they don't think there's anything to give you, and, number two, they're not swarming all over us. The only place you could have gotten the information you had was from old news reports and interviews with locals. The only way you could have managed to get it in the time you had was through cooperation with local media. *Ergo*, you had cooperation from local media. We don't actually care about your source, but we do care about what you found out, because we see evidence that you have information we don't have. We've cooperated with you without batting an eye. We expect something in return: information.”

Again, the implication was clear. Either Eve cooperated by sharing information with Red and Doc, or Eve would be cut off from the team's activities.

“Okay, after getting your call, we contacted our local affiliate station here. They got with the local newspapers. A reporter named Wallace Kemp had made the mysterious disappearances a pet project. Knowing that

you'd twist my arm, I made copies of all his stories for you. Here they are."

Eve handed Red a manila envelope stuffed with hard copies of microfilm pages.

"The local explanation is that an old miner named Wilbur Phipps was killed in 1851 by claim jumpers. It's said that your father, Red, was searching for the same vein of gold that Phipps was killed for. The superstition is that his ghost is still seeking revenge on the claim jumpers. It imagines that anyone camping in the area is a claim jumper, and attacks them."

"But these people weren't attacked. They were carried off."

"The legend says that the claim jumpers didn't really know where the claim was, just that the miner was finding gold. Supposedly, the claim jumpers tortured the miner by imprisoning him without food or water to get him to lead them to the claim. The miner didn't talk, but died instead. The miner's ghost is exacting revenge by imprisoning his victims, and making them die of starvation and dehydration just the way he did. That accounts for the college girl's story. The girls were, by the way, lesbians out for an *al fresco* orgy. We got that from classmates at Northern Arizona University.

"Why didn't they do their camping around Flagstaff?" Doc asked. "There's plenty of woods there. Why come all the way up here? I don't know that it makes any difference, but it might be interesting."

"Apparently, they did. It was a regular thing for them to camp all over the Coconino, and Kaibab National Forests. They came up here for a change of scenery."

"The park ranger told us that nobody ever found any of the victims' gear. Is that correct according to your sources?"

"Yes. All of them had valuables that disappeared along with them, except the college girls. There were vehicles, camping gear, and money. Some victims even had valuable weapons for hunting that vanished. A canny robber could have fenced the stuff for hundreds to thousands of dollars. That's one reason the cops haven't

connected the dots. Unconnected robberies is too tempting an explanation. As separate incidents, there isn't enough information to form a pattern. Without bodies, there's no way to establish a method of operation. It's too sketchy, and the incidents were separated by too much time."

"Have any locals been attacked? I assume they go camping all the time."

"That's another piece to the puzzle. Only tourists were attacked. And, it wasn't just any old tourists, either. Until the last ones – the college girls – all of them had money or something valuable to steal."

"The college girls might have had something to steal – their bodies," Doc surmised. "The killer might have been observing them, either to see if they had valuables, or to plan an attack, and got excited enough to want in on the fun. Maybe he thought he could starve them into submission."

"That's twisted," Red said in disgust.

"It's all pretty twisted," Eve pointed out.

"What do you think, Eve?" Doc asked. "Besides that it would make a sensational story."

"You think I'd do this just for a story?" Eve asked.

"Yes," Doc, and Red said in unison.

"Well, I would," Eve admitted.

"So, what do you think?" Red insisted.

"I think you're dealing with a serial killer who's in it for the money," Eve said. "I think your father's prospect holes somehow fit into the killer's M.O. I think the ghost story is just a smoke screen to scare people away from those holes. I doubt there ever was a miner named Wilbur Phipps who was killed by claim jumpers. Kemp is digging into that, now, but none of the locals I've talked to ever heard of the story until after your father

disappeared. I think that if you find out who started that story, you'll have your killer, but you'll never be able to dig that out. Who ever locates the real source for a rumor?"

"I also think the killer's thinking very hard right now," Eve continued, "trying to figure out how to keep you from uncovering the truth. You should watch your back."

"Does the local TV station have a chopper around here?" Doc asked, ignoring the warning because he'd already taken it, and didn't want Eve knowing.

"I don't think so," Eve answered. "What are you thinking?"

"He's thinking you need mobility," Red jumped in. "This story centers on two locations: here in town, and at our field camp. Covering it will take either two reporters, of which you have one, or one reporter able to move quickly between locations."

"It probably wouldn't hurt us to be able to have that mobility, too," Doc said to Red. "Let's get a chopper up here right away. I saw a couple of helicopters on the tarmac at the airport. Maybe one is for rent with a pilot. Let's have Bonnie check into it. I'll bet she wouldn't have to go past Reno to find one, anyway."

"In any case, *you*, Miss Muffet, must get off your tuffet and go to work," Doc ordered Red. "You've got an entire crew to supervise. Eve, we're staging out of hangar twelve at the airport. You're welcome to come out, and look around. When we get the chopper arranged, you can come up to the field camp."

"Why are you guys being so cooperative?" Eve asked. "Extracting information from SST is usually harder than pulling an impacted wisdom tooth."

"We're beating the grass to startle the snakes," Doc said, cryptically. "We agree with your assessment of the situation. Our hypothetical killer has had years to dig in and cover his tracks. We need to stir him up a bit. Hopefully, your reports will stir him into action. When in action, people make fresh tracks. If we, or the cops, can pick up the new trail, we'll have our bad guy."

“Isn’t that a bit risky,” asked Greg, who’d come in quietly just after the interview ended, and had sat down on the arm of the couch next to Red. “Hi, I’m Greg Michels, CTO of Robotics Concepts,” he smiled and introduced himself to Eve. “I believe you’re Eve Salazar at Channel 5 in Phoenix. I’ve seen you on TV.”

Immediately, the camera light came on, and the lens swung up from the floor to point at Greg. His expression changed from friendly to shock tinged with fear, as if he’d opened his front door to get the morning paper, and found a machine gun pointed at his face.

“Off the record, Eve!” Doc warned. “Greg will go on record with you after we finish our *off the record* discussion. I promise.” He looked at Greg, and nodded his head up and down in an effort to tell Greg that the team needed his assent to the interview.

“Yeah, okay,” Greg stammered. “I promise, too. Interview, later.”

Frustrated, Eve signaled for the cameraman to stop recording.

“To answer your question, Greg,” Doc explained. “Yes, we’re playing a risky game, but our only other option is to pick up our marbles, and go home. You’re sitting next to someone who just won’t do that, and I’m in it as long as she’s in it. You’ve already trained our technicians to work with the Worm, so they can theoretically handle the rest of the job without you. That means you have a choice. We certainly appreciate the technical support you’re providing on an ongoing basis, but you don’t have to put yourself in personal danger. If you’ve any reservations, we can talk about it later, after we’re done here.”

“So, how about it,” Doc asked Eve, “are you up for some on-site video? We need to get going, but you’re welcome to ride over with us, or take your own transportation.”

“I’m going,” she said definitely. “We’ll drive ourselves to your hangar, then decide what’s next.”

“Okay,” Doc concluded, “let me set you up with our operations guy, so you don’t need us to introduce you when you get there. Red, you probably ought to get ready to go. I don’t think we have time to stop for breakfast,

anymore.”

“There’re munchies at the hangar,” Red replied. “Bonnie’s putting on a lunch spread for anyone at the hangar, too. If anyone starves to death, it’ll be their own fault.”

She headed through the adjoining door to her suite, followed by Greg.

Doc picked up his cellphone from the coffee table, where Red had left it, looked up Zeke’s number, and autodialed it. “Hi, this is Doc,” he said into the unit. “We’ve given permission for a local news crew to visit Hangar Twelve and the field site. The reporter is Eve Salazar from Phoenix Channel 5. ... Yes, did you meet her then? ... Good. ... She’s got a cameraman with her, and they’ll be driving the local station’s news van. ... Probably start by giving her a brief on the operation, then a tour of what’s going on there. You can talk with her, and it makes sense for her to interview Tony if he’s there and willing to talk. You can discuss anything except security arrangements. We want them kept secret. Tell everyone there, so they’ll know what the ground rules are. ... We’re going to check into renting a helicopter to get people quickly back and forth to the field camp. I don’t yet know what’s available. Red and I will organize that, and let you know. You just take care of getting equipment to the site. ... No, let’s reserve the helicopter for ferrying people. ... See you soon.”

“Eve,” he said, “you’re all set to go over to the hangar whenever you want. We’re giving you pretty much *carte blanche* as long as you don’t get in the way. Feel free to talk to our operations manager, Zeke Brown – big black guy who looks like an ex-footballer – or Tony Edmunds. Edmunds is a ranger with the National Park Service. His main function is keeping us from doing stupid things around mines. There is one thing, though. We need to keep our security arrangements secret, for obvious reasons. Please don’t embarrass our people by asking them about them. They don’t know any more than you do. I’ve got to go down to the lobby, now, and catch the shuttle to the hangar. You’re welcome to come along, but I expect you’ll want your own transport.”

“We might follow you. When do we get to talk to Greg?”

“Aha! I forgot! You know, the best time to catch up with him will be at the hangar. That’s where all his stuff

is.”

Just at that moment, Greg came back into the room. “Doc, I’d like to talk to you about whether I should stay around here, or not.” Eyeing Eve, and her cameraman, he added: “Alone.”

“We still want to interview him,” Eve said. “You promised,” she reminded both of them.

“Why don’t you wait down in the lobby, which is my next stop. We’ll be there in a few minutes. We’ll organize Greg’s interview then.”

After Eve and the cameraman left, Greg said to Doc: “I’m not sure how much more good I can do here. I’ve got work to do in Santa Clara.”

“The way I see it, there are two legitimate things you can be doing here. You can represent your company to the media, and you can be on hand in case something evil befalls Walter Worm. True, you’ve trained Steve and the techs, but I should think you’d want to be here in case something slips. That’s between you, and Robotics Concepts, though. So, perhaps you should talk to your partner before making a decision. As for the security situation, don’t let my paranoia get to you. I’m being paranoid so you don’t have to be. My suggestion is to stay. Do at least one interview with Eve at the hangar – it’s your big chance to plug your technology to a big audience. Then, stay close to Walter in case something goes wrong. You know Murphy’s Law: If anything can go wrong, it will.”

“What about helping you protect Red?”

“She’s watched twenty-four-seven by Mark’s spooks, anyway, and has been for the past three years, at least. Nobody ever knows because Mark keeps his security stealthy. If you leave, that’s just one layer gone out of several. We’ll protect her. As far as your relationship with her, that’s between you two. You should discuss it with her.”

Greg thought for a few seconds, then appeared to come to a decision. “I’ll stay, at least until the Worm is finished in Shaft Six. Tell Eve I’ll do her interview when we get to the hangar. I’ll meet you downstairs in a few

minutes.”

“Decided whether or not to bail?” Red asked when Greg reappeared in their suite. She was standing in the bathroom door, just pulling a black tee shirt on. She was dressing for rougher conditions at the hangar, and eventually at the field site, and had dropped the flashy dress. She’d put gold studs in her ears to keep the holes open, but no earrings, necklaces, or bracelets. The only thing on her hands or arms was a plain wristwatch she wore while training.

Concerned that she might think he was frightened by the talk about danger and security (because he was), Greg said: “No, I’m staying. There was never any doubt. I just wanted to go over who was going to babysit you. I have to go to the hangar, and play ‘Worm doctor.’”

“Is there something wrong with Walter?” Red asked, suddenly concerned. Failure of the untested Worm technology was her greatest fear as a manager.

“No, No! That’s just what the guys at the shop call me. All through our development, when anything would go wrong that the techs couldn’t handle, they’d call in the Worm Doctor: me.”

“Oh,” Red said, relieved. “In that case, I’m going to stay here for a while. I have to get together with Bonnie about arrangements. I’ll take a taxi to the hangar when I’m done. I should see you there by noon. Save me a seat for lunch,” she said, pulling him close for a long kiss.

She hadn’t tucked the tee shirt in, yet, and Greg’s hands found their way under it, caressing the bare skin of her lower back. The feel of her breasts under the tee shirt against his chest inspired him to bring his hands to the front, where he found her nipples erect and hard.

“Doc’s waiting for me,” he said suddenly, trying to break free.

“Let him wait,” Red said, locking him in a bear hug. “I’ve something to do, first.”

She felt the front of Greg's pants, found his erection starting, and stroked it through the cloth to pump it up more. Then she smiled at him, and started unbuckling his belt. Greg's efforts to get away were getting much more feeble, consisting now of making her hold tight to his waistband as she unzipped his fly. She reached into his shorts to hold him by the penis. Perceiving that he'd practically given up trying to get away, she kneeled down, and renewed her efforts to swallow him whole, penis first.

She'd been working on this particular trick, and had mastered it well enough to be able to get the tip past her uvula and tonsils, and stroke it in, and out of her pharynx, while rubbing its underside with the top of her tongue. She'd even figured out how to time her breathing so she only had to pull it part way out of her throat to take a breath through her nose.

She undid her own belt, and slipped off her jeans because she intended to get very wet. Her right hand squeezing his left buttock helped her coordinate her head movements with those of his hips. Meanwhile, she reached deep into her vagina with the fingers of her left hand.

Climaxing, she reached for a better grip on Greg's buttock, and found her middle finger touching his anus. Just to see what would happen, she inserted the tip. He seemed to like it, despite her long fingernail, so she pushed it in further. He seemed to like it more.

Finally, she changed her arm angle, so her hand came down along his anal crease, allowing her to push her finger into his anus past the second joint.

By this time, he'd taken her head in his two hands, and was holding it as he stroked his erection in and out of her throat. Suddenly, he shot orgasm deep into her pharynx, nearly choking her. She held her breath tight, until his paroxysms subsided. Then, she pulled back, pulling her head away from his hands, and her mouth off his penis, which was still shooting semen intermittently.

Falling back against the wall, she sat there staring at the drops of semen dripping over her tee shirt and belly. It felt as if her entire mouth was filled with semen. Not knowing what else to do, she swallowed it all in one gulp.

“That was interesting!” she exclaimed in delight. She laughed when she realized that she was sitting on the tile bathroom floor in a puddle of her own ejaculate, with semen dripping off her chin.

Greg was standing in front of her, jeans down around his knees, watching helplessly as semen dripped out of his penis onto the floor. Red pushed herself back up into a squatting position, and sucked the last of his semen out of the tip.

Grabbing a damp face cloth, Greg wiped his semen off his genitals with it. Red pulled a hand towel off the rack, and wiped her crotch dry, then mopped up the floor. Spreading the towel on the floor, she stood up on it to reach for Greg’s neck. She pulled him forward for a long, wet kiss to thank him for the wet sex.

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Meanwhile, Doc, Eve, and the cameraman stood in the lobby, waiting. After a few minutes, Doc said: “I have to get myself a cup of coffee. Red downed my second cup for me, and I haven’t been near food since last night. The hotel puts on a decent continental breakfast, anyone care to join me?”

Eve, who had already eaten her usual breakfast of fruit and toast, plus half a gallon of coffee, wasn’t up for anything but fidgeting around in the lobby. The cameraman left his equipment in Eve’s care, and joined Doc at the buffet in one corner of the lobby. Doc carried his coffee, plus a couple of danish pastry, to a table near where Eve was pacing. The cameraman followed suit.

“You might as well settle down,” Doc said to Eve. “Knowing Red, she’s probably got Greg literally by the genitalia, and won’t let go until she’s through with them. Your choices are to take a load off, and wait ten or fifteen minutes, or rush madly off to the hangar. You *might* miss some development here if you rush off. The folks at the hangar will still be there for a few hours. How-some-ever, if you go there now, you can get some film in the can. It all depends on how much importance you place on sitting back to enjoy the moment, versus rushing around frantically.”

He demonstrated his preference by quietly going into a meditative trance. Eve grunted, and went back to her pacing, and the cameraman went back for another lemon danish. He liked lemon danish.

After seven minutes and forty three seconds, Eve could stand no more. Practically pulling the cameraman by the ear, she headed off toward the parking lot with a “See you there” to Doc on her way out. Two minutes twenty five seconds later, the shuttle pulled up, and the driver came into the lobby. Seeing nobody there but Doc, he asked; “Are you the only one this trip?”

“If you wait five minutes, a couple more will be down,” Doc replied.

Four minutes, and thirty seven seconds later, Greg walked into the lobby looking like the proverbial cat who got the canary. “Red says she’s got things to do here, and I have to go to the hangar. Red said to tell you she’d be in the office, wherever that is.”

“Red rented another suite right near the elevator to use as home-away-from-home office. They’ve got multiple phone lines, a virtual-private-network – VPN – connection into SST’s computer system, and other goodies, including a private conference room. I guess I’d better go hang out there. Eve’s already headed for the hangar.” Then, to the shuttle driver he said: “Looks like it’s only one after all.”

The shuttle driver just shrugged, and got slowly to his feet.

Doc found Red in the office suite next to the elevators on the third floor. The living room furniture had mostly been removed, and a second desk put in. There were still a couple of easy chairs, but the couch had been removed. The table was taken over by a multifunction fax/scanner/printer. One desk had a desktop computer, monitor, keyboard, and mouse setup at which Bonnie sat, staring at a web page showing pictures of helicopters.

The other desk carried Red’s laptop, which was closed. Red sat with her feet up, reading hard copies of old newspaper stories. She wore her black jeans from Daytona, and a dark blue tee shirt.

Doc chose to look over Bonnie’s shoulder, as what she seemed to be doing was of his most immediate

concern. “What’cha got?” he asked.

“These guys have two helicopters right on the same airfield as our hangar,” she said. “One’s a six place, and the other’s a four. It looks like the next closest is in Minden, about fifteen miles away.”

“Looks like the first one’s Plan A. See what they’ve got available. Find out their policies regarding pilots. We’ll definitely need one. I can fly a chopper, but have other things to do. If it makes sense, arrange for me to do a check ride this afternoon in both of them. We’ll need the six place for a few hours this afternoon, anyway. I’m going to use the phone in the conference room for a while. Let me know what you’ve got when you get it.”

“Before you go,” Bonnie said, “Mark Shipton called to say that he’s sending a team that should be here by ten o’clock, and a second that will arrive this afternoon, probably late.”

“Great. Will they be coming here, or up to the hangar?”

“Mark said he needed you to call them, and tell them. Here’s a cell number for their leader.”

“Okay. Be prepared for six big guys to knock on the door. I’ll make the call now. Have them go to the conference room when they show up.”

Doc headed for the suite’s bedroom, which he knew had been converted to a conference room by removing the bed and installing a big table and chairs, to make his phone calls.

At nine fifty nine, a knock came at the door. Bonnie opened it to find two burly men in jeans and light windbreakers standing in the hall. She caught a hint of firearms concealed under the windbreakers. “We’re here to see Doc Manchek,” one of them announced, while the other casually took in the décor in the hallway without missing a detail.

“Come in. He’s right through there,” Bonnie said, indicating the conference room door.

In the room, they found a conference table surrounded by twelve chairs. At the far end sat a large, bearded

man with long hair wearing western dress, but the clothes were new, and the hair and beard were neatly trimmed. The large man was talking on a telephone, and signalled for them to come in. When they did, closing the door quietly behind them, they saw a TV screen hanging on the wall next to the door, and opposite the large man. The TV was tuned to a business news channel with a stock ticker display streaming across the bottom. The sound had been muted.

“Will you be able to have it ready for them to use at the next race? ...” the bearded man asked into the telephone. “Good. Please fax me the revised schematic here. I’ll transfer you to Bonnie. She has the fax number. ... I’ll talk to you later, and thanks for keeping on top of this for me.”

The man punched a button to transfer the call, stood up, and stepped forward to shake their hands. “I’m Doc Manchek. It’s good to see you. Thanks for getting here so quickly.”

“I’m sergeant Davis, and this is corporal Wills. Mr. Shipton asked us to come up, and help out with your security.”

“Mark said he was sending a team, which I understood to mean half a dozen Gulf States Petroleum security people. Was I wrong?”

“You were correct,” Davis explained. “The rest are nearby. There’ll be a second team arriving soon.”

“Our situation is,” Doc said, sitting back down at the head of the table, while Davis, and Wills sat to his left, “that we have three locations to secure against a possible intruder, about whom we know next to nothing. We’re not even sure they really exist. Consider the opposition to be one or two amateur assassins, who have already killed almost a dozen people in the area.”

“Their MO is to find people camped in remote areas, and basically make them disappear. And, by disappear, I mean exactly that. No traces. Camps completely cleared out. No bodies, no equipment, no nothing. There was one incident where a victim escaped, only to be retaken near the local hospital. That means urbanized areas are not

completely safe, either.”

“The killer, or killers, have been operating in the area of our field camp for ten years, so they’re local. The apparent motivation is robbery. We surmise that the equipment that disappeared was sold off piecemeal. We expect amateurs, but they’ve managed to stay hidden and off police radar all that time, so they’re not incompetent. I’m saying ‘they,’ but it may be one person working alone.”

“The reason we’re concerned is that our activities will likely uncover evidence that will lead to the opposition’s capture. That rather tall lady in the outer office, who is the daughter of the first victim, has sworn vengeance. She’s Mark Shipton’s step daughter, so you, basically, work for her. I’m here to coordinate, so she can get on with doing what she has to do, without constantly looking over her shoulder.”

“Mark has an undercover security detail watching her all the time, and they’ll take care of security here in town. The issue for your team is to extend that security to our second, and third locations. The second location is hangar number twelve at the Carson City airport. There are two of her bodyguards in place there, covering the hangar building itself. We need part of your team to secure the perimeter against a possible sniper attack.”

“The third location is our field camp. I haven’t been there, yet, but its location, satellite photos, and so forth are in these packets.” Doc stopped to hand Davis six nine-inch-by-twelve-inch envelopes, each containing a stack of papers about a quarter inch thick. “In each packet, you’ll find information about the locations, as well as dossiers on our people. We’ve got about a dozen people to protect, altogether. There are also topo maps of the areas around the airfield and field site in there. Of course, if there’s anything else you need, please ask Bonnie, who’s the pleasant, dark haired lady manning this office. Her job is to make sure everybody gets whatever they need to do their jobs.”

“There are two people not included in those packets because we didn’t know they’d be here this soon. They are reporters for news outlets. They’ve been given free access to everything except our security arrangements. They know we have security, but that’s all. Obviously, we need to protect them, but avoid interaction with them. They’ve

been instructed to show no curiosity about you guys under pain of losing their exclusive access, but they're journalists, which makes them incorrigible snoops. Bonnie's preparing dossiers on them that you'll have as soon as possible. She also has additional packets for the second team."

"I'm planning to rent a six-person helicopter that we can use to carry our people up to the field camp. You can use it, too, if you need it. Beyond that, I look to you to tell me what you need, if anything."

"How credible is the threat?" Davis asked.

"At this point, we know nothing for sure," Doc replied. "Until yesterday, we knew only about the first victim: James McKenna, who disappeared ten years ago while conducting geologic research at the field camp, and at several nearby locations. At that time, we considered foul play a remote possibility. Upon arriving here yesterday afternoon, the Park Service Ranger for this area told us about the additional disappearances. Both he, and local law enforcement, have dismissed the possibility of a serial killer operating in the area, so we may be indulging a paranoid fantasy. Mark hasn't been successful by taking chances, though. He apparently agrees that erring on the side of safety is warranted. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

"What's your timetable of activities?" Davis asked.

"We're staging at the hangar today, and planning to transport equipment by ground up to the field camp this afternoon. Tentatively, we intend to bring our team to the field camp tonight, so they can get an early start on setting up the equipment tomorrow. Assuming the helicopter is available ... In fact, let me check on that right now. We should have arrangements made by now."

Doc picked up the desk-phone handset, again, and punched the intercom button for Bonnie's desk.

"Bonnie, what's the status of the helicopter? ... Thanks."

"The helicopter will be available whenever we need it," Doc reported. "The pilot's one of the instructors at the local flight school, and he's on site now. We can ferry the exploration crew up in the morning, so they'll stay in

the hotel tonight. If necessary, we can ferry them back and forth every day until we've finished, if you think that's best. There's been a support crew up there since last week. I think that's the bulk of the information I have for you. How would you like to proceed?"

"First, I need to study these topo maps and satellite pictures of the field site," Davis replied. "When do you anticipate Ms. McKenna going to the hangar, and then on to the field site?"

"She plans to be here most of the morning, and go to the hangar around noon. I'd thought to take her up to visit the field camp this afternoon for an hour or so, then bring her back here."

"I'm guessing that the killer won't bother trying to do anything at the hangar," Davis said. "His first choice would be the field camp, where he can move around in relative safety. So, I'd like to concentrate there. We can secure the hangar perimeter when our second squad gets here. I think we can station two men – myself and corporal Wills – to make a show of guarding the field camp. The others can patrol the woods surrounding it under cover. Four men at the perimeter is a little sparse, but we can augment them from the second squad. I'll take over security operations starting now. Except for corporal Wills and myself, you won't see anybody. We'll be going now. I'll see you at the hangar around noontime? Then you can take us to the field camp. By then, we'll have a plan to deploy the rest of the team."

"Okay, see you then."

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"Eve, there's something I'd like you to do for me," Red said when they met at the hangar. "When people made the first search for my father, the guy who checked the shafts was named Luthor Todd. He works as a hunting guide. What I'd like is for you to interview him on camera, and let me look at the raw video. There are some questions I'd like to ask, and I want to see his eyes when he answers. But, I don't want him to know I'm interested. You can use the interview any way you'd like, as long as I get to look at it right away."

“Sure,” Eve replied, “it’ll make a great update for the story. What do you want to ask?”

“Try to get him to talk about what he found in the shafts he explored. Especially, what made the three holes he didn’t fully explore so dangerous. How were they different from the others? Then, try to get him to talk about the story of the old miner’s ghost. Get him to put in all the details he can. You’ve heard all the old stuff. See if it grows when he retells it. I’m especially interested in where the story started, and when.”

“Do you have a contact? Or, should I start digging?”

“I have a contact. Here it is,” Red handed Eve a folded piece of SST note paper on which Bonnie had written everything she could gather about Luthor Todd.

“Josh!” Eve called to her cameraman. “New lead! Let’s go!”

Pleased with her scheme, Red sat down with Zeke Brown to go over plans to move equipment to the field camp.

“The generator’s already up there and running,” Zeke told her. “It’s pumping out up to ten kilowatts of power at one-twenty and two-forty volts AC. That’s more than enough for anything we’ll want. We have a single-wide mobile home set up there to serve as a headquarters building, and ladies’ dorm. A second trailer serves as a dormitory for the men. A third houses the kitchen, dining hall, and a couple of spare bedrooms. There’s even a supply tent set up.”

“Doc wants us to take most of the crew back to Carson City each night,” Red informed Zeke. “We’ll just keep the security guys here. It’s less than a half hour helicopter flight – you’re sure there’s plenty of room to land there?”

“The shaft runs down from a shelf under a large mesa,” Zeke explained. “The mesa’s at eight thousand five hundred feet elevation. The shaft opening is on a wide shelf two hundred feet down from the rim on the south side. There’s a road that winds up the north side, which we’re using to truck equipment to the mesa top. We’ve set a

crane to act as an elevator between the mesa top, and the shelf where the shaft is. It's a hell of a ride, and we can't use it if there's much wind, but it serves the purpose. We set up a large tent over the shaft opening. There's room for the Worm console as well as the hoist we'll use to lower Walter into the hole. The hoist is big enough to lift pieces of wreckage weighing up to five tons, and standing eight feet high."

"It must be a Hell of a tent!" Red exclaimed.

"It is. The hoist serves as its center post, and it reaches thirty feet to either side, and it's twenty feet the short way. You could serve a hundred people breakfast in there comfortably."

"How wide is the shelf?"

"About a hundred feet at its widest."

"Is that where my father's camp was?"

"Up on the mesa. There are marks where he'd set up his own hoist to bring gear down to the shelf. He used iron rungs fastened to the rock wall to climb down himself. Must have been an awful trip, but it would have kept him in good shape. He would have parked his truck up on the mesa."

"What's the shaft like?"

"It looks like a big, square hole in the ground ten feet on a side, with a steel grate over it to keep tourists out. The grate's anchored directly to the bedrock. There are also warning signs that say, in effect: 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!' There's a trap door in the grate with a padlock on it. We've removed the grate, and used the anchors for our hoist frame. We ran wire ropes around all four sides to keep people from accidentally falling in. The ropes just unhook when we need to swing something over the hole, such as Walter."

"What's off the edge of the shelf?"

"A three hundred foot drop to the bottom of a gorge. Your father figured it was another two hundred feet

down through solid rock to the top of the lode.”

“Why didn’t he start at the bottom of the gorge, and save himself three hundred feet of digging.”

“It was blasting through rock all the way, not digging. He couldn’t start at the bottom because there’s a stream that runs through there much of the year. His work would be drowned before he finished. The whole thing’s actually a fault line. Erosion has broken off shelves like the one the shaft is on on either side all along the fault. The detritus filled in the fault with loose rubble, then the stream drowned it all. There’s thin soil on the shelves and in a lot of the cracks, which has allowed fir trees to take hold. It’s quite a dramatic landscape.”

“So, what are we transporting up there, today?”

“We’ve all the support equipment set up, so it’s mainly bringing in the Worm control console, and setting it up. The console breaks down into three units: a monitoring station, a communications package, and a programming station. Each weighs about a hundred-fifty pounds. It runs off an uninterruptible power source – UPS – that weighs about two hundred pounds. It’s a battery storage system that can charge overnight from a variety of sources, and can run the system for a couple of days if necessary. We’re using two-hundred-forty-volt AC dropped down from the generators on the mesa top for recharging. The generators charge the UPS, and the UPS makes power for the console and the Worm-charging station.”

“How long does it take to get there from here? It’s thirty five miles!”

“We usually make it in five or six hours. We’ve used the road a lot over the past week, so it’s in pretty good shape. We’ve also kept our speeds low to avoid making washboards. We go ten to fifteen miles an hour most of the way, with a few slow spots.”

“So, when can you be ready to go?”

“We’re all loaded. We leave right after lunch – in about fifteen minutes. Will you be coming with us?”

“No, I’m going up in Doc’s chopper. I think he’s planning to start a regular commuter airline. He’ll be making several trips a day. The chopper can only carry six, including the pilot, so it’ll take two or three trips just to get everyone up there. Then, they’ll be coming back in the evening. I’m going to try to talk him into letting us stay up there, but he’s nervous. I think he’s being afraid of the bogeyman, personally.”

“Well, if the bogeyman has a rifle, he’s right to be afraid. It would be easy for a sniper to sit up there across the gorge, and pick off anyone he wants to. It wouldn’t be hard to make things very difficult for us. Just lob a few shots across once in a while to make us keep our heads down. It would take forever to get anything done.”

“Yeah, forever, or until I got annoyed enough to bring in some half-inch armor plates to put in the tent!” Red said with conviction.

“That would work! We could prop them up at an angle inside the tent in front of all the places people would be. Fire a shot, and spang! It’d deflect up the mountainside.”

“I’ll have Bonnie start looking for a source. At the first shot, we’ll start hauling them up the mountain. Can that road take a flat bed trailer?”

“No, but we have ways. We got the single-wides up, and the generator isn’t exactly small. You find the steel, I’ll get it up.”

“I’ll mention it to Doc, when he gets back,” Red said. “See what he says.”

“Where is he?” Zeke asked. “He came here with you, met those two military types, then disappeared.”

“Those two military types are here to make the bogeyman go away. Be nice to them,” Red cautioned.

“Doc went off to arrange the helicopter,” she continued, answering Zeke’s question. “I think he’s planning to do a check ride in it, in case he needs to fly one. Again, I think he just likes to fly helicopters, and is looking for an excuse. He seems to like to fly anything that’ll go up in the air.”

“Funny behavior for somebody who’s afraid of heights,” Zeke opined.

“What?”

“You didn’t know that Doc’s afraid of heights? It seems to be the only thing he *is* afraid of.”

“He mumbled something about it once, but I find it hard to believe.”

“It’s weird, but heights scare hell out of him. Has an awful time with ladders, especially the aluminum ones. They start rattling, and he starts shaking, that makes ‘em rattle more, and it all goes out of control. It’s the same with scaffolding, or anything else involving heights. He fights it, and usually wins. Take airplanes. He admitted to me that every time he takes off, there’s a period of a few seconds about the time he gets over the airfield fence, when he gets a mini panic attack. He forces himself through it, then he’s okay, but it happens every time.”

“Hmm,” Red said. “Maybe it makes sense after all. He’s the type who’d push himself to overcome a fear. I can’t see him giving in to something like that. It’s easier to see him fighting back, challenging himself.”

“Well, I’m off,” Zeke said. “I’ll do one more final check of everything, then head ‘em up, and move ‘em out.”

Red finally had a few minutes to grab herself some brunch. She’d never gotten to breakfast. In the morning, she’d been too excited and had too much on her mind to eat. Now would be her last time to get anything but junk food until the end of the day.

Greg, Steve, and the technicians had done everything they possibly could do. All their toys were packed in the trucks for their long trip up the mountain, and their helicopter flight to the field camp wouldn’t leave until Doc got back with the chopper. So, they were in the hangar’s lounge playing video games. They’d found a flight simulator game, and were flying simulated F-16s through simulated canyons. Red wondered if they knew that it wasn’t a game. It was there for pilot training, and actually counted as part of the pilots’ experience in their log books.

Doc's armed guards had wandered off outside, looking around the hangar for possible hiding places, either for the bogeyman, or themselves. Tamara, and her film crew were following Zeke around as he checked his caravan.

Red was basically on her own with her lunch. She was enjoying it.

She was just finishing a peanut butter sandwich when she heard Doc's helicopter arrive. She wanted to catch him to discuss the idea for armor plates before he started ferrying people up to the field camp.

"You're coming with me," he said, when she said she wanted to talk to him before he left. "You, Mark's security guards, and I are going up on the first trip. The chopper will come back for the Worm team afterward. Poor Cy has to stay here, and clean up."

"The caterers will clean up. Even the tables are theirs. Cy won't have to do any of it."

"Won't that be exciting for him! I hope he likes crossword puzzles."

"Actually, I'm giving him the afternoon off. When this lot gets gone, he'll go play for the rest of the day. I'll go break the bad news to the Worm team that they'll have to play video games a bit longer. How long do you anticipate?"

"An hour to fly up, turn around, and fly back. Maybe less. Then, it'll be their turn."

Red strode off to tell the boys the bad news, and to remind Cy he could leave as soon as the caterers got their stuff out of the hangar. Doc pulled out his cellphone in an effort to contact his wandering guards. They'd seen the chopper land, and had come at double quick time. They were practically standing behind him when he called. They were close enough that he heard Davis' cellphone buzz.

Once in the air, Red outlined what she'd learned from Zeke about the physical arrangements. Doc was riding shotgun, as usual, next to the pilot. Red sat behind him in the middle row, next to Davis. Wills had the back row to

himself. They were able to talk among themselves over the intercom because all seats were equipped with noise-canceling headsets. Had they taken off the headsets, they wouldn't have been able to hear themselves think because of the rotor noise.

"Zeke says it would be easy for a sniper to sit in the woods across the stream from our tent, and pick off anyone who tried to work around the hole. I thought that if that happened, we could get some armor plate, and set it up at an angle inside the tent walls to protect any people in there."

Doc looked doubtful. Then, he asked the two guards: "What do you think?"

"Actually, we'd *like* him to try it," Davis said. "Our squad will be patrolling that side of the river. We'd have him before he got off the first shot. In fact, I'd like it if you rolled up the tent side facing the river to give him a more tempting shot. We'll spot him on the way in, and nab him while he sets up his stand."

"I don't know how Greg will react to being set up as a target," Red said. "He's nervous as it is. This isn't what he signed on for."

"Do we have to tell him?" Davis asked.

"I'm afraid we do," Doc replied. "If we didn't, and something went wrong, we'd go to jail. In fact, we probably have a legal obligation to put up Red's armor plate. If we have enough concern to bring you guys in, a court might say we have enough concern to put up a barrier to protect our people. In fact, we probably can't do any more work at the shaft site until we get it installed. Let me think about it 'til we get to the camp."

He turned the volume on his headphones down all the way so that others could talk among themselves, and sat facing forward for the rest of the trip. The others had nothing to say, either. They sat looking around to take in the scenery. Red had never seen mountains from the vantage point of a few tens of feet above them. It was spectacular.

Ten minutes later, Doc turned his volume back up, and asked the pilot: "Is that the mesa up ahead?" He

knew from the GPS display that it was, but wanted confirmation, as well as some audio to reset the level in his headset.

“Yes, that’s it,” came the reply. “We’ll be on the ground in five minutes.”

When they were on the ground, and the helicopter was away to pick up the Worm team, Red wanted to know Doc’s decision about the armor. “If it’s important to get it, we need to get started on it,” she insisted.

“I want to see the situation first,” Doc insisted. Since Doc’s insistence outranked Red’s insistence, Red let it go. She realized this was an important corporate decision with legal ramifications, and it was Doc’s job to make it, not hers.

The four of them walked over to the mesa’s rim, and looked off toward the cap rock on the other side. “What have we got, about five hundred yards to the other side?” Doc asked Davis. Davis looked at Wills, who pulled out what looked like a modified telescope, and used it to look at the opposite rim. “Not really,” he announced. “Three hundred seventy three.”

“It’d still be a hell of a shot for someone over there to pick off someone over here,” Doc said, hoping for confirmation.

“Not really,” Wills said, “an ordinary rifleman could do it with a good scope. However, it’s fifty feet lower, making a bad angle. The target would have to be standing near the rim. If we kept everyone back even fifty feet from the rim, there would be no target. The shooter would have to stand so far back from the rim to get a full torso, that he’d be off the other side.”

“So, if we establish a perimeter, say seventy five feet this side of the rim, we’d be safe up here,” Doc said.

“Right.”

“What about below?”

“It would be a difficult shot from the rim because of the angle,” Davis said. “They would shoot high. The bullet just wouldn’t drop, so the sights would over correct. It’s possible, but the shooter would have to be very good at that particular shot. He’d be correcting his corrections.”

“That shelf on the other side looks narrow,” Doc suggested.

“Yes,” Wills said. “It’s twenty five feet wide at the maximum. Not much more than a ledge. It’ll be easy to watch. It’s about the right height, though.”

“Our boy could rappel down the cliff,” Davis suggested, “but would be seen. There’s enough cover to free climb it without being seen, though, if they know the way, and have enough time. They’d have to be pretty spry, too.”

“I think we need a spotter on this side, watching the rim and cliff face,” Davis concluded. “Then multiple men hidden back from the rim or just below it, ready to rappel down and nab the sucker. The spotter can cover their descent. A warning shot, and breaking cover would be enough to pin him down. If he tries for a shot, drop him.” Turning to his second in command, he added: “I say you, me, and one other on this side, and everyone else on the other. Doc’s seventy five foot safety zone to protect our civilians. There isn’t much more we can do.”

“What if he tries something from this side?” Doc asked.

“God help him,” Davis said, “because I won’t. Our people on the other side will be watching this side in their spare time, of which they’ll have plenty. They’d spot him on the approach, and warn us. If he tried a shot, he’d be riddled with automatic fire before the bullet got out of the barrel. No, his easiest, and safest approach is from the other side.”

“What if he just tries to grab Red?” This was Doc’s second greatest concern, the first being a sniper shot at her.

“That’s your problem, but with the number of people we have here, I’d say we’d be having bogeyman for

breakfast. Yes, I heard you talking with Zeke, Ms. McKenna.”

“Doc,” Davis said, changing the subject, “do your people really have to go down to the ledge?”

“Well, they have to rig equipment,” Doc said, “but once the Worm’s in the hole, it’s all remote, anyway. We could run a gigabit-Ethernet cable from the wireless link at the hoist head to the console up here. There’s no reason to put the console down there. In fact, we could set it up in one of the trailers up here where it’s safe.”

“So, no armor?” Red asked to confirm her conclusion.

“No armor,” Davis confirmed. Turning to Doc, he asked: “Can you call your pilot, and have him approach low, and from the North? That’ll keep the chopper behind cover when approaching and leaving.”

“Sure, if we catch him when he gets in range, but before he gets here. He’ll probably call in about five miles out. That’s standard practice.”

Satisfied, Davis turned to the next thing he wanted to check. “Let’s look at your rope trick,” he said.

Doc went into the headquarters building to find the hoist operator. Two men came out with him.

“I’ll go down with you,” said one of them, putting on a headset plugged into a walky-talky attached to his belt. “Sam’ll run the hoist.”

“You aren’t going,” Doc said to Red, who clearly intended to get onto the platform.

“The Hell I’m not. If your bogeyman’s over there now, waiting for a shot. He’s already got me in his sights. I’ll be safer on that platform moving up and down, than I am right now. If you don’t like it, Doctor Bossy Manchek, you can collect your pay, and go home. Remember who’s paying for this little circus.”

Abashed, Doc looked around for support, and got none. “She’s right,” Davis commented.

“At least stand behind me,” he begged her.

“Who says I want to see *you* shot? Hide behind your own damn self!”

“Damn!” Doc said to nobody in particular. When she got like this, he knew it was time to give in, especially since he could see her point. Whatever their screwy relationship was this week, she cared as much about him as he did her. But, she was the target.

He tried one more ploy: “I’m taller, and wider than you are. You can hide behind me, but I can’t hide behind you.”

“Horse shit! I spit on the difference!”

It was time for Doc to shut up.

Stepping onto the platform, Doc worked his way to the very center, and grabbed one of the supporting cables in a death grip. Seeing his white knuckles, and remembering what Zeke said about his acrophobia, Red stepped close beside him, and hugged his free arm. She could feel his body vibrating slightly. When the platform started to move, the vibration intensified into an actual tremble. She held tighter, trying to steady him. He looked over at her, managing a grim smile. He steeled himself some more, and the trembling subsided.

As they descended, the platform’s swaying, and rotating increased. By the time they reached the bottom, Doc was white as a sheet. Red led him off the platform, and found him a place to sit down.

“You stay off that thing,” she ordered.

He just nodded heavily. Pulling himself together, he stood up, and walked over to the shaft head to inspect the hoist. As it met his approval, being exactly what the engineers had designed, right down to the mounting holes for the Worm’s communication box, he walked out of the tent to inspect the grate, which was leaning against the cliff face. Curious, Red followed him.

“Looking for something?” she asked.

“Nothing in particular, just looking.”

“Meaning you’re looking to see what’s there, not what you think you want to see,” Red concluded. “Does anything jump out at you?”

“Lock’s been replaced recently, but that could just be the Park Service keeping the thing in good repair. It doesn’t look like the trapdoor’s been opened in a while. The hinges are all rusted. I see nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Me neither,” she agreed.

37

Walking over to the iron-rung ladder, Doc noted some electrical cables attached to it by cable ties. “Is this ladder safe?” he called to the hoist operator.

Coming over, the operator said: “Yeah, we used it to anchor our power and communications cables. We had to climb it to attach them, and found that all the rungs are sound, and attached solidly. Why do you ask?”

“I think I’ll take the stairs going back up. I don’t like that spider thread.”

“Mind if I join you?” Red asked. She didn’t want him on the ladder all alone. If he got an attack of vertigo on it, there was probably nothing she could do, but she damn well wanted to be there to try.

“You in shape for it?” he asked.

“I spend more time working out than you do, flabster,” she replied, knowing that her reproductive system would shut down if she let her body fat get as low as his.

“Okay, we’ll make it a race. First one up wins?”

“Just remember that you’ve got to make it to the top to win. First one to the bottom’s a grease spot!”

Red agreed to go up first. She realized that Doc was concerned that he was the most likely to fall, and he didn’t want to take her down with him. She didn’t want him taking her down, either.

Actually, Doc’s problem was mostly with the elevator’s motion. It simply felt unsafe. As long as he could hang onto something solid, he was okay. And, there’s little that feels as solid as a one-inch iron bar cemented into a wall of rock. As this had been McKenna’s only way up or down, he’d made it very, very solid. Solid enough to still be in good condition ten years later.

Since both Red and Doc found excuses to keep in good physical condition, they had relatively little difficulty hauling their bodies up two hundred feet. “It’s actually only one hundred eighty five,” Pete had told them soon after surveying the site. Red was barely winded when she reached the top. Doc, having to carry roughly a hundred pounds more than she did, was glad for the fifteen feet he didn’t have to climb.

Those riding the elevator were surprised that Red made it up in less time than they did, with Doc not far behind.

“They’ve already strung a Cat 5 Ethernet cable from the bottom to the top to link the Worm console to the computers up here,” he pointed out to Red when they reached the headquarters building. “I assume we have a broadband satellite link?”

“We’re supposed to have. You can test it yourself,” she said, indicating a desktop computer on a folding table next to a wall.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said, sitting down to access his email. With practically no delay, his Web-enabled email application popped up. “Looks good to me,” he said.

“So, we can throw the Worm console over in that corner,” Red said.

“One of my physics professors once warned me never to build a quantum-mechanics experiment into a corner,” Doc said. “I’ve found that it works the same for any equipment, including Worm consoles.”

“Okay,” Red corrected herself, “what I meant to say is that we’ll throw the console in the middle of that large space *near* the corner.” She looked to Doc to make sure he was satisfied with the change. He flashed her a pantomime satisfied smile.

“Cables overhead, or under the floor?” she asked him.

“Hmm. Good question. It’s easier overhead, but we don’t want to put up too much weight, and pull down the suspended ceiling. That *is* a suspended ceiling, isn’t it?”

“Looks like it, that’s why I suggested it.”

“Let’s wait ‘til Greg gets here. We’ll ask him how big a power cable we’ll need. Other than power, I don’t think we’ll need anything but the Ethernet link. Telephone?”

A pixieish smile came over Red’s face. “Try your cellphone,” she said, with a twinkle in her eye.

Surprised, Doc pulled out his cellphone, and dialed Greg’s number. To his amazement, instead of a no-service announcement, he got connected to Greg. “Where are you?” he asked.

“In the air about five miles from you. How’s this thing working?” came the reply.

“Mistress Judith commanded it. Apparently, even the physics gods obey her. Before we delve into that mystery, tell the pilot we have a new traffic pattern. He’s to swing around the mesa to approach from the north, and come in as low as he dares.”

Greg repeated the instruction into the intercom microphone, still holding the cellphone so Doc could hear.

“That’s right,” Doc confirmed. “It’s a security thing.”

Greg repeated Doc's comment as explanation to the pilot.

"Now, as to why these cellphones work," Doc said into his cellphone, "I must consult with my lovely, mysterious counterpart here."

In response to Doc's inquiring look, Red pointed up, and said: "Private cell tower linked through a geostationary satellite."

Into the phone, Doc said: "Mistress Judith has started her own cellphone company with a satellite link to the grid. What can I say?"

"You can probably say nothing," Greg replied. "Just wonder at our lady's mastery of modern technology. It's unusual for a math major."

"I agree: best to say nothing," Doc said. "See you when you land. Oh, wait! What size power cable does the Worm console need?"

"Why? The cable's supposed to already be installed."

"We've decided to set the console up in the trailer atop the mesa. You'll see why when you get here."

"Then you'll only need a number fourteen extension cord. The console only draws ten amps at most on one-twenty volts. The UPS will automatically switch to one-twenty input if that's what you supply."

"Just a number fourteen will do it," Doc repeated. "Still use the UPS?" he asked into the cellphone.

"Yeah, it provides the correct outputs for the different subsystems."

"Okay. See you in a bit."

"Run a number fourteen extension cord over the top," he explained to Red. "The big two-forty-volt cable outside is to reduce the voltage drop along the two-hundred foot run. Just plug the extension cord in at the same

point. The UPS will sense the input voltage, and adjust automatically.”

Just then, they heard the sound of helicopter rotor blades thumping in from the north. The Worm team had arrived.

“That’s one helluva drop!” Greg exclaimed when he looked over the cliff from the elevator platform.

“I don’t want any more people going down there than we have to have,” Doc said. “In fact, except for bringing Walter down, and setting up the equipment at the winch head, I’d like to keep everyone up on top of the mesa.”

“Except for finishing the setup, we don’t need anyone down there at all,” Steve said. “We’ll go down, attach the hoist, and the wireless router for Walter, and that’s it. Walter can go down on the elevator from the mesa top by himself. He’s programmed to attach, and detach his own safety line, and grab the hoist line.”

“What you persist in calling a winch,” Steve told Doc, “is actually a bridge crane. It has three degrees of freedom: it’s motorized to go back and forth along a steel bridge spanning the entire hole, which is motorized to traverse across the hole the other way. The third degree is an actual winch to wind the hoist cable up and down. We control all three movements through servomotors operated by a three-axis controller that gets its instructions over the same Ethernet as everything else.”

“Walter’s communications box,” he explained, “has an Ethernet router that feeds signals to the different communications channels, such as WiFi, acoustic, or infrared, depending on which has the best signal at the time. We just tapped off a spare channel to carry hoist control signals. Since we already have the Cat-5 cable up to the mesa top, we’ll connect that to the communications box. We’ll just plug it in, and it’ll work. There’s even a remote-controlled camera on the same subnet to monitor what happens around the shaft opening. What it can’t see, we’ll monitor through Walter’s eyes.”

So, it was settled. Steve, and the two techs would go down the ladder to set up the equipment, which would

be lowered on the elevator. They'd wear a safety harness and rope to protect against a fall. They'd test all the Worm equipment on top before lowering it down so that, hopefully, they'd only have to make one trip.

"Doc," Red said, "I want to keep the crew up here overnight. sergeant Davis' security plan looks good. We're well back from the mesa lip, and we've plenty of room. I can't see making everyone go all the way back to Carson City, then come all the way back here tomorrow."

Doc looked doubtful. He understood Red's argument exactly, and generally agreed with it. Still, he was unsure of the security arrangements. He turned to Davis, who'd accompanied the group to keep tabs on their plans, so he could adjust security measures if needed. "sergeant, what do you think? Can you protect all these folks up here at night?"

"Night, or day, we can protect them," Davis said confidently. "In fact, they're probably safer here than in a helicopter."

"I guess that settles it," Doc said. "Is there anyone who *doesn't* want to stay here overnight?"

There were no takers, so Red excused herself to go organize eating and sleeping arrangements. Doc led the others to the dining-room trailer to wait for the equipment trucks to arrive. He found the cook, and organized an afternoon tea party to keep people busy. A few minutes later, the man who'd accompanied Doc, Red, and sergeant Davis down in the elevator came into the tent.

"Hi," he greeted Doc, whom he'd surmised was now second in command in the camp, "Ms. McKenna asked me to take you fellows on a tour of the camp." Doc looked over to see how the cook was coming with coffee and munchies. Seeing that he was still filling the big coffee percolator, Doc figured they had time to walk around the camp, which really wasn't very big, and get back before food was ready.

"That's a good idea. Why don't you go ahead, and I'll catch up. While you're at it, please ask them to keep back seventy five feet from the cliff edge unless they need to be there. It's a security measure. By the way, people

call me 'Doc,'” he said, extending his hand.

Smiling, the man shook his hand, and said: “Pleased to meet you. I’m Mike Curry.”

Turning to the people sitting around, he said: “Hi, I’m Mike Curry. Ms. McKenna asked me to show you around the camp. There are four buildings: we’re in the dining hall, there’s also a dormitory, headquarters, and a supply tent. Each building has its own bathroom. The one for this building is right over there, so if anyone needs it now, go for it.” As they’d been filing in and out since they arrived, nobody took him up on the suggestion.

“Okay, let’s go take a quick look at the other buildings. Please follow me.”

While they filed out, Doc stepped over to the cook, who was looking as if he thought his feverish preparations were being abandoned, and said: “They’re just going to see the rest of the camp. They’ll be back in a few minutes. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, we’ll have a nice buffet set up when they get back.” By “we” he’d meant him, and his assistant.

“Great,” said Doc, “we’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Red showed up soon after the group returned from their tour. Calling for everyone’s attention, she said: “I’ve double checked the sleeping arrangements, and it looks like we’re in good shape. The six people here to keep the camp running already have bunks in this trailer. There are twelve bunks set up in the men’s dorm trailer, and ten men. Tamara and I will bunk in the headquarters trailer, and there are still two empty bunks there. Those who’ve been here awhile already have their bunks picked out. People just getting here, please respect those choices. Your luggage will arrive shortly, then you can go fight over the remaining bunks.”

“The only problem I see is meals. We can’t all fit in here at once, so I’ve arranged with the cook to set up a breakfast buffet from six to nine; a lunch buffet from eleven to one; and a dinner from five to seven. Please don’t all try to pile in here at once. If you have any questions, I’ll be around. Now, it’s my turn for tea and crumpets.”

“Very good speech, little lady,” Doc said to her, as she headed for the buffet. “Might I ask how you plan to get a few hundred pounds of luggage up here that we left in the middle of the hangar floor? It’ll be dark in a couple of hours, and we shouldn’t be driving at night over that thing that masquerades as a road.”

“That charter service has more than one helicopter, and more than one pilot,” she said. “Why did you think it took me so long to compare head count to bed count? Zeke and I had that worked out last week. I had to put my Luggage Plan B in operation.”

Doc’s cellphone rang, and he stepped outside to answer it. When he returned, he sat down next to Red, who was sitting with Greg. “That was Eve,” Doc told her. “She’s got the video you wanted, and she’s emailing it to you. She wanted to know if she should come up here this afternoon. I told her nothing of interest to her viewers was going on. She should come up tomorrow afternoon to see our preparations, and maybe see what Tamara’s crew has shot that she might use.”

“And you’re going to make extra room up here for the rest of us by riding back on the chopper that brings our luggage up,” Red surmised with a sly smile.

“Well, there’s nothing I’m needed here for. My best executive has the project well in hand. And, my favorite little sister is surrounded by lots of men, several of whom are sworn to protect her with their lives, and have the armaments to do it. Have fun, but don’t start any gang bangs you can’t finish.”

“You, too. Give Eve a poke with my compliments.”

Seeing the look on Greg’s face, who wasn’t sure whether to be excited or shocked by the implications of their farewells, she tried to assure him by saying: “He was kidding. I wasn’t.”

38

The sky was still light, but the sun was down behind the mountains to the west when the helicopter landed at

the charter service helipad. As Doc walked to the gate penetrating the fence that the Department of Homeland Security mandated to separate the rest of the world from all things airport, he saw Eve on the other side waiting for him. He'd called her (taking advantage of Red's magical mystery island of cellphone coverage in the middle of nowhere) when the chopper lifted off, given her an estimated time of arrival, and asking her to meet him there. They'd made plans to take off for the bright lights of Reno to sample dinner, and whatever else might seem like a good idea at the time.

As Doc tossed his yellow SST flight bag, which was the closest thing he had to luggage at the moment, into Eve's rental-car trunk, and slammed the lid, his cellphone rang. Caller ID told him it was Red, and he answered it while folding himself into the passenger's seat. "This had better be good, girl. I'm following your strict instructions with respect to Eve's ... ah ... your strict instructions." Eve gave him a you'd-better-explain-that-remark-buster look, and kept driving, ears tuned for the slightest hint of what was going on.

"I'm sitting here," came Red's voice over the phone, "reviewing Eve's interview with Luthor Todd, and being overwhelmed by the pungent odor of rat droppings."

"Who?" Doc asked.

"The lying motherfucker who did the first exploration of my father's prospect holes."

"Ahh," Doc said. Then to Eve: "Red's reviewing your interview with Luthor Todd this afternoon. She is uncomplimentary of his veracity."

"He's a lying motherfucker," Eve said, still waiting for an explanation of Doc's first remarks.

"Those were Red's exact words."

"Do you wish to elaborate," he asked Red, "or is this just a ploy to disturb my evening's enjoyment with the lovely Ms. Salazar?"

“I just wanted to get it off my chest,” Red said.

“And what a lovely chest it is,” Doc said, enjoying teasing Eve, who was only hearing half the conversation, so she couldn’t tell whose chest he was referring to.

“Hold on,” Doc told Red, seeing that Eve was running low on patience, “I’m about to get my teeth smashed by a lovely latina with a temper.”

“Hey, I’m just teasing, Eve,” he said in a conciliatory tone.

“You’ve got some explaining to do, fella!” Eve warned: “What were her instructions regarding what part of me?”

“Uh, oh. Let’s finish with Luthor Todd before you hurt me, okay?”

“Do it fast!”

“Red, what are you trying to tell me about Luthor Todd?”

“He was lying throughout the interview.”

“We’ve established that.”

“Specifically, if he didn’t cause my father’s disappearance, he knows entirely too much about it for the good of his hide. Also, either he started the ghost stories, or he’s doing all he can to pump them up. You can see it in his eyes when he talks about both subjects. I want his ass for breakfast!” Doc could hear her starting to hyperventilate.

“The Lord Buddha prohibits cannibalism on Wednesdays. Calm down. Deep, regular breaths, now. That’s it. Say a few Aums. You can’t get him tonight, but now you know one person to mark for further attention. Tomorrow, we prepare. Thursday we get our answers. Friday we’ll go get him. Okay? Tonight, I want you to drag Greg into the cab of one of those trucks, and have him make you forget about Luthor Todd. Remember: ‘*La vengeance se*

mange très-bien froide,’ or ‘Revenge is a dish best served cold.’ Go cool off. I’ll see you in the morning.” He disconnected.

“I thought that was an old Klingon proverb,” Eve said, recognizing the English, and surmising it was a translation from the French.

“Marie Joseph Eugène Sue in 1841. Borrowed by every Tom, Dick, and Harry for every scrap of literature involving revenge, since. I believe the translation I used was from Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*, Vol. 1.”

“You guys really do that!” Eve exclaimed.

“Do what?”

“Somebody at SST told me that when you and Red get together, literary references start flying around the room like moths around a lightbulb. It’s true.”

“I read a lot. Apparently, she does, too. And, we remember what we read. Maybe its why we can’t stop being friends.”

“Okay,” Eve said cautiously, “what’s this about her giving strict instructions about my something-or-other.”

“I’d have preferred Red’s explaining it, but she’s preoccupied.”

“You’re starting to become preoccupied. Is it going to ruin *my* evening?”

“No, I have better self control than she does, and can put it on a shelf until it’s time to take it down again. In fact, her instructions bear upon your evening.”

“I’m still waiting.”

“Before I left the camp site, she told me to, and I quote: ‘give Eve a poke, with my complements.’ Meaning, of course, that she was encouraging me to make love to you. With your permission, of course. I must admit, it

seems like a very good idea to me – with your permission.”

“At the risk of seeming easy, which no self-respecting Hispanic woman ever wants to do, I’ll see what can be arranged.”

“In the meantime, let’s forget about smelly rats, motherfuckers, and Red’s cannibalistic tendencies when it comes to her enemies’ livers, and have a good time. Do you have a plan, or shall we wing it?”

“Oh, I have a plan. For now, it involves winging it.”

Winging it started with their cruising the length of Reno’s main drag looking for just the right Italian restaurant. What Eve had in mind was someplace you’d see a head waiter built like a refrigerator, and wearing a double-breasted suit. He’d have a gravelly voice that sounded a lot like Marlon Brando with his cheeks full of cotton. Or, maybe there’d be a tall, slinky, dark-haired beauty with a look like she’d reach behind the slit in her floor-length skirt to produce a stiletto if you weren’t polite. The walls would be lined with wine bottles, colorful baskets, and vines. You know, a “family” restaurant.

What they found was not on the main drag, but on a side street that Doc suggested for no apparent reason. It was small, and cozy. (God help the patrons if there was a fire, because they’d have to climb over tables to get out.)

Nino, a short, well muscled man in his middle thirties with curly black hair, wearing a white apron, and a black tee shirt, took reservations, waited tables, and visited with customers. Estelle, his wife, ran the kitchen with a threateningly upraised wooden spoon. She, too, was short, but thin, and tough, with black eyes, and a large, finely chiseled nose. Nino was smiling and friendly until she yelled: “Nino!” followed by a staccato burst of Italian delivered in a voice Italian boys learn early to both fear, and love.

The food was stupendous. Doc’s fettuccine alfredo was creamy, and delicious. Eve’s veal parmigiana melted in her mouth. Eve started to order a glass of the house red wine, but Doc stopped her, and got Nino to open a new pony of cabernet sauvignon for her. He ordered a small glass of grappa for himself. They topped it off with

tiramisu that was, well, it was tiramisu. With a warm glow, they finished with double espresso, and sugar cookies.

“Oh, God! I feel like I’m pregnant,” Eve complained happily, as they walked out to the car. Doc just belched, and excused himself. “I feel like finding someplace to sleep,” he added.

“Better idea,” Eve said. “Let’s find someplace to ditch this car, then walk the strip. The night air will wake us up.”

Eve’s plan now involved looking for a bit of adventure in Sin City’s little sister. The idea of cruising dives under the protection of a six-foot, six-inch *bona fide* power lifter, who was said to know martial arts moves so advanced they didn’t have names, excited her. Usually, she was hanging out with newsroom geeks who still wore corduroy jackets with leather patches on the elbows. They handled dives via the simple expedient of not going there.

She was disappointed, however, when the first thing Doc did was steer her into a big-name casino with bright lights, and a sterile, crowd-controlled atmosphere. She could have more fun in one of the native-American casinos back in Arizona. At least they felt friendly, and welcoming, instead of making it obvious that all the management wanted was to separate you from your money as quickly as possible, and with the minimum of fuss.

Doc walked her right into the casino, passed all the slot machines, and proceeded directly to an ATM. There, he inserted his credit card, and extracted five hundred dollars worth of twenties. He took ten of them, and slipped them into his checkbook, which he kept in his right back pocket. He folded a second pile of ten in half, and pushed them down in an inside pocket of his jacket. The last five, he put in the biker’s wallet he kept in his left back pocket, fixed to his belt by a chain.

“Okay,” he said, “now let’s go buy some fun.”

Putting his arm lightly around her waist, he guided her by the shortest route he could find directly out of the casino, and down the hall to the hotel lobby, and then to the nearest bathroom. “You won’t see anything this clean

for a while. Meet me right back here.

Relieved of her pregnant feeling, Eve found Doc propped against a wall, looking like an ad for over-priced jeans. He smiled broadly when she appeared. Leading her to the sidewalk in front of the hotel, he stopped her, and said: “Anything you want. I’ll follow you.”

“Let’s go look at naked ladies,” she said.

Only mildly surprised, he pointed back into the casino, and said: “There’s a floor show in there.”

“No, I want to find a strip club,” she said emphatically. “A place with seedy drunks watching women do unspeakable things.”

Doc laughed broadly, and said: “When you get down, you get down all the way, don’t you.”

“Half measures are for pansies!” she announced.

“You won’t find what you want around here,” he suggested, “nor too far off the strip. I suggest we walk down this main drag, but keep our eyes peeled for activity a block over.”

A few blocks south of casino row, they started coming to smaller casinos, bars, and arcades. At the likeliest seeming places, they stopped in. Doc bought a couple of beers, and just sipped his. After a few minutes, they went out to find the next likely spot.

At first, Eve felt an obligation to finish her beer, but seeing Doc walk out after little more than touching it to his lips, she started leaving more, and more of hers on the bar. Doc had burned through a couple of twenties this way before they found what Eve was looking for.

It was still early, so they had their choice of seats. Eve, true to her desire to get down all the way, wanted to sit right in the front, next to the stage. Doc had managed to change a bunch of twenties into ones as they’d cruised bars, and showed Eve how to get the dancers to give them special attention by offering the bills. At first, Doc gave

a couple of ones at a time, which didn't elicit much response. As the stacks got bigger, he got a better response, and was allowed to put the money in more intimate places.

Then, he had Eve do it. One girl seemed amused by the beautiful lady with the huge cowboy, who was interested in girls. She stuck around more, and gave Eve more of a show than she did the men. She was an attractive natural blonde with long hair, and creamy skin shaved completely bare. She was nude except for brief panties and high heeled shoes.

As time wore on, Eve's special friend realized that Doc was slowly feeding her practically limitless funds. Doc periodically went up to the bar to cash twenty after twenty, all of which Eve would feed to the girl's panties.

After a while, the girl pushed the front of her panties down so Eve could see her clitoris. She took the stack of ones Eve offered, and put it into her panties in contact with her clit, then danced enticingly in front of Eve.

Eve was having fun. Flirting with this girl made her feel naughty. She didn't care how it looked. There were no newsies hanging around taking notes. With the current liberal climate, she could get away with just about anything, anyway. Hell, being accused of lesbianism would probably be good for her career.

She looked over at Doc to see what his reaction was. He didn't seem put off, or shocked. In fact, he looked thoroughly amused. His eyes were even sparkling. She knew enough about Doc to know that he *could* get away with just about anything he wanted to. He certainly wasn't objecting to his date flirting with a pretty blonde stripper.

So, the next time the blonde came back looking for a little more cash, Eve reached over with her left index finger, and pulled the front of blonde's panties down as she'd seen the girl do, then Eve inserted some bills deep into the panties, so that they reached the bottom. The blonde smiled lasciviously for Eve, and pushed the bills down a little further, then danced with her crotch practically in Eve's face. Since Eve was leaning on the stage edge, it was not difficult for the girl to wave her crotch quite close over Eve's face.

Eve started giggling uncontrollably, and wriggled a bit in her chair. Looking over at Doc, she saw he was pleased. She reached down below the stage to feel his crotch, where she found a big erection. The girl saw this, and redoubled her efforts.

The next time, Eve pushed the bills down even farther, so that they curved up past the girl's perineum. Eve repeated that a couple of times, then the girl, instead of simply letting the bills sit in her panties, began sliding them up, and down against her clitoris. So, Eve started sliding the bills against the girls clitoris while inserting them.

Then, the girl slipped the bills out after Eve inserted them, and folded them the long way, so they formed a V-shaped ridge. She slipped the bills back into her panties so the ridge rode in between her labia. So, Eve started doing that, stroking the ridge along the girl's labia a couple of times while inserting it.

Eve was wearing a long blue robe-like skirt, closed at the waist by a brooch. She reached in through the opening to feel that her panties had gotten very wet. Again, the girl saw this, smiled, and increased her efforts to excite Eve.

The next time, the girl came by, and Eve folded the bills, and slipped them into the girl's panties, the girl reached down and rubbed them hard enough to crumple them into her vagina. Eve wondered how she was expected to imitate that the next time the girl came around, but that was the end of the set. Eve was disappointed when the blond blew her a kiss, and strode off stage.

"I'll be right back," Eve told Doc, as she stood up. "I need to find the ladies room."

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Eve left her coat, which was a rather nice, and very un-politically-correct, faux fur job that came to her mid-thigh. Doc put his arm over the back of Eve's chair, trapping the coat's collar so nobody could quietly slip off with it.

A few minutes after the blonde left the stage, she showed up on the floor looking for Eve. “Where’s your friend?” she asked Doc.

“She went to the ladies room right after you left the stage. You got her very excited. I suspect she’s in there masturbating right now.”

The blonde had changed from the silk panties she’d worn on stage into a sheer see-through pair. “Do you mind if I sit down?” the blonde asked. Not waiting for permission, she sat down on Eve’s chair. “Would you like a lap dance?” she asked Doc.

“I think you should ask *her*,” he said, indicating Eve, who he’d spied working her way through the crowd back to their table. Doc was waiting to see what she’d do if some drunk tried to pat her ass on her way by. None of them were drunk enough to try it, although several clearly had it in mind.

“Your friend thought you might like a lap dance,” the blonde told Eve, who looked at Doc in amazement. He just shrugged to show it wasn’t his idea.

Eve thought about it for a minute, then decided what the heck. Seeing this, Doc asked the blonde how much. She asked for twenty dollars.

“Here’s thirty,” he said, “give her a good one, but be gentle. I think it’s her first time.”

The blonde led Eve off to a less crowded area while Doc went back to watching Eve’s coat. While Eve was away with the blonde, a young man, apparently hoping the club’s atmosphere would cure his acne problem, wanted Eve’s seat. Doc just shook his head slowly from side to side with a warning expression. The young man went looking for another seat.

“Her name’s Blythe,” Eve said when she got back, flushed, and excited. “She says she’s free at ten.”

“Blythe! I wonder where she got that name?” Doc was thinking of a beautiful blonde actress of a generation

ago. He wouldn't be surprised if this one had seen a couple of films, and substituted the actress's name for Grizelda, or whatever name her parents had given her.

"What are you talking about?" Eve asked.

"What are you roping me into, here?" Doc asked, rather than get into a trivia explanation.

Eve leaned over to whisper in his ear: "I want her!"

Surprised, Doc looked her straight in the eye. "I didn't know you went that way," he stated flatly.

"I don't. I didn't. I don't know. She's so sexy! Maybe I'm drunk."

"You're not that drunk," Doc informed her.

"Do you mind?" Eve asked him.

"I don't know. Do I get to come along?"

"Of course, silly. I need moral support."

"You mean immoral support."

"Whatever. You'll do it for me, won't you?"

Laughing, Doc said: "I'll do it for me, too."

"So, you wouldn't mind doing it with – two women?"

"It depends on the women, but I've always enjoyed it in the past."

"You mean ... you, and Red, and ..."

"No, Red doesn't want to go that route. She's looking for a husband. She's very selective about who she

sleeps with. He's got to be someone she'd like to settle down with, and raise rug rats. Obviously, women don't fit the profile."

"And, you don't fit the profile because you like to play around," Eve surmised.

"Not quite true, either. I'd be happy to settle down with Red, or somebody like her. Until I find her, I'm not opposed to playing around a little. Sex is fun. I'm not a Boy Scout. At least, not anymore, but I do still come prepared."

Doc knew from experience that Eve was not like Red. She was not looking for a husband. She was married to her career. So, her interest in sex was entirely recreational. She liked to fuck, and did so whenever the opportunity arose. It arose often enough that she didn't want to bother fumbling around in the dark with little latex balloons. She took birth control pills, and liked to do it barebacked. "Half measures are for pansies," wasn't just a saying she blurted out on the sidewalk in Reno. She believed it, and practiced it. She'd never gotten anything she wanted by reaching half way.

So, letting a guy she liked shoot hot juice into her vagina, then feeling it, and even playing around with it, as it oozed out was her idea of a good time. Trapping the stuff in little plastic bags for safe disposal was for pansies.

While they were having this discussion, Blythe came back out on stage, this time wearing the see-through panties.

"I have to use the Men's room," Doc said to Eve, shoving a thick wad of bills into her hands. He put his black cowboy hat down on his seat to help Eve save it for him.

"Bring more cash!" Eve called to him, excitedly.

The bouncer near the bar took note that Doc had left his seat. Blythe had told him that she had a couple of real live ones, and asked him to make sure nobody took their seats. He would. It was part of his job.

When Blythe came over to her, Eve folded a few bills the long way, and picked up where she'd left off: slipping them in between Blythe's labia. But, Blythe pulled them out and handed all but one back. Eve saw that they were fives. Doc had upped the ante by slipping fives to Eve instead of ones.

"Save it for later," Blythe whispered to Eve. She slipped the one five back into her panties, and used her fingers to crumple it into her vagina. This time, there was no "almost." It went in. Just the corners pushed out against Blythe's see-through panties as she practically rubbed them on Eve's nose. Eve surreptitiously slipped her hand into the slit of her skirt again.

When Doc stopped by the bar to change some more twenties – this time into tens – the bouncer came over to say, "Hi."

"Your lady's really taking care of Blythe," the bouncer said.

"She likes her. We both like her."

"I could arrange something," the bartender offered.

"Actually," Doc said, "I think the ladies have worked something out, already."

He added, meaningfully: "When they do that, I find it best to step aside, and let them have their way. It doesn't pay to interfere."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" the bouncer growled.

"Only that the ladies are making the arrangements. Anything between you and Blythe, I don't know about. You should take it up with Blythe, and it's best done when we're not around."

"I could take you apart," the bouncer threatened, "then go to work on your ol' lady."

"Now, c'mon," Doc teased, "do I look like the kind of person who would allow that."

Something made the bouncer look into Doc's eyes. He seemed to see an array of Death's heads in there, and they were all grinning at *him*.

"I guess not. I was just kiddin', anyway."

"Of course, I knew that. There's no reason two big guys like us shouldn't be pals. Can I buy you a drink?"

"I notice you're not really drinkin'."

"Designated driver, but I will if you will. Let me show you what I usually drink."

Figuring that, the way things were shaping up, he and Eve were not going to be driving back to Carson City tonight, Doc planned to leave the rental car where it was, and take a cab to wherever they were going to end up. It was turning into an interesting night.

Turning to the bartender, Doc ordered two of his Bass-Ale-and-Jack-Daniels boilermakers. He pushed across his platinum gold card to start a tab. Both the bouncer, and the bartender took notice.

When the drinks came, Doc showed the bouncer to pour the double shot into the beer. Then, he grabbed a couple of straws, and used one to stir the liquor around in his mug. The bartender did the same with the other straw in his drink. Then, Doc took a big pull at his mug. Once again, the bartender followed suit. A broad smile came over his face. Then, at Doc's instigation, they clashed the two mugs together, happily spilling some of the brew.

Seeing that Eve was turning around to show him her empty hands, Doc said: "The girls are out of cash! Gotta go. See ya later."

Saluting with his mug, Doc hurried over to Eve.

"Took you long enough. What was that all about?" Eve asked.

"Bouncer wanted a piece of Blythe's action. I told him to take it up with her. The drinks were to kiss and

make up. Here,” he said pushing a stack of tens into her hands, “have fun.”

By this time, Blythe had ceremoniously stripped off her panties, and shot them into the air so that they just happened to land in Eve’s lap. She didn’t ask for them back. Eve quietly secreted them away under her skirt. As Blythe danced around the stage to show off her naked crotch, Eve tucked the panties down into the front of her own. They’d be safe there until Blythe wanted to take them back.

Eve took one of the tens, and folded it in half, but had nowhere to tuck it into. Blythe took it from her, and slid the crease back and forth between her labia. Then, she rolled it up the short way into a tube, like a cigarette. Pretending to smoke it a few puffs, she then slipped the end into her vagina, and paraded it around the stage.

When Blythe came back, Eve had already rolled another ten, and was ready to slip it into Blythe’s vagina, which Blythe allowed her to do.

After parading that one around a while, Blythe pursed her lips to mime that she was doing something extremely naughty, and pushed the bill all the way into her vagina so that it disappeared.

Strutting back to Eve, who was ready with another bill, she allowed Eve to again push the bill into her vagina, but then grabbed Eve’s hand, and pushed Eve’s fingers in, too. Eve could feel the hot wetness of Blythe’s vagina enveloping her fingers. Then, without letting go, Blythe stroked her hips back, and forth over Eve’s fingers, masturbating on Eve’s hand.

Eve felt wetness seeping out of her own vagina.

Doc, along with every other male in the room, was in a sweet agony of frustration watching the performance. Pulling Eve’s hand out of her vagina, Blythe took the now soggy bill from her fingers, and shoved it way up into her vagina, then strutted off the stage.

“So, waddayathink?” Doc asked. “Need to go to the ladies’ room again?”

“No, I came right here in my chair,” she admitted.

“I hope you enjoyed it. Everyone else did.”

Eve leaned her elbows on the edge of the stage, and rested her forehead on her open fingers, eyes lowered to look at the grain of the wood. “Oh, I enjoyed it thoroughly.”

Noticing the odor of Blythe’s vaginal juice on her hand, she sat up and stared at it blankly.

“You have a souvenir,” Doc said.

Perplexed, she stared at her fingers as if not knowing what to do next.

“Should I wash it off? Wear it around a while?”

“I’d suggest wiping it off on your clit, but everybody’s watching.”

She stared at him blankly, so he smiled wickedly, then took her hand, and slowly and deliberately sucked Blythe’s juices off her fingers.

The whole bar exploded into applause.

Doc laughed from his belly until his face was red. Then, wiping a tear from his eye, he said: “I just couldn’t resist.”

Eve was still sitting staring as if she couldn’t believe what he’d just done. Then she started laughing.

The bouncer came over, still laughing himself. “I never seen anything like that!” he said.

Turning to Eve, he said: “I seen you someplace, ain’t I?”

“I’ve been someplace,” Eve returned, cautiously.

“No, I seen you on TV.”

Doc looked at Eve, concerned that she might not want her identity known at this particular place and time.

Eve, on the other hand, had already gotten past that. The whole story wouldn't be coming out. What would get out would be garbled, and she could spin it any way she wanted. And, the way she'd spin it would be the way that was best for her career.

She looked at Doc the same way, with the same concern. Would he want what had just transpired known publicly? What she saw in his face was a question for her, with not a hint of embarrassment for himself. However this played out, it would have no affect on him. He didn't give a tinker's damn. Never had. Never will. She envied him.

“I know,” the bouncer finally recalled her face, “you're that city reporter who's down in Carson City huntin' that ghost.”

The cat was very definitely now out of the bag. Eve realized that she didn't give a tinker's damn, either. It was liberating. “It's okay,” she whispered to Doc.

Blythe came out of her dressing room into the bar in her street clothes ready to seal her deal with Eve and Doc. She found no music, but an uproar of laughing, and joking centered around her would-be girlfriend, and her big hunk of a man. Seeing the bouncer, of whom she was very definitely afraid, at the epicenter, she rushed over, wrapped her arms around Eve's neck and said: “Mine!”

That, of course, started the laughing all over again. Eve twisted around in Blythe's arms, and asked: “Are you ready to go, now?”

“Yes!” She wanted to get Eve and Doc away from the bouncer's evil clutches. She wanted them in *her* evil clutches. Standing up, Doc put his hat on, and helped Eve on with her coat, which hardly anyone in the bar had yet seen.

It caused a sensation as well. Most of the patrons couldn't tell faux fur from the real stuff, anyway. It *looked* expensive, so they assumed it *was* expensive.

Delighted that things seemed to be going in her favor, Blythe hung onto Eve for dear life. Then, her worst nightmare happened. The bouncer said: "Hey, don't you have another show to do?"

Thinking fast, Blythe said: "There's no way I can top that tonight, anyway. I gotta go."

"It'll be alright," Doc told the bouncer, slipping him five twenties. "See you next time."

He quickly shepherded the two women out of the bar before the bouncer could make up his mind whether to let Blythe go, and aimed them up the street toward the big hotels. Doc had decided that was enough of adventure and excitement in seedy strip clubs. He was ready to settle down between some really clean, really fresh sheets in a big bed in a nice room. He knew Eve was pleased with the way he normally lived, and figured Blythe wouldn't object, either, as long as she got paid.

First, he was going to get their car out of the public parking lot, and drive it to the hotel front entrance. He didn't want any questions when bringing a prostitute into their hotel. They expect people to drive in, so he'd drive in.

Before driving out of the parking lot, Doc explained what they were going to do. "First, Blythe, how much do you want?"

"For how long?"

"All night. We'll have breakfast together in the morning, and we'll drive you home, or wherever you want to go.

"Two hundred bucks."

"How much will you have to give the bouncer?"

“Who says I have to give him anything?”

“The fear in your eyes when you look at him.”

“He wants half.”

“Okay. I’ll give you three. You give him what you think you can get away with. Don’t get greedy because I don’t want to come back, and find you broken.”

“Have you ever been arrested around here?” was Doc’s next question.

“What kinda question is that?”

“The kind that will help me keep you out of jail.”

“No. I’ve never been arrested, anywhere.”

“If you keep on hooking, that will change.”

“What’re you, my father?”

“No, I’m your older half brother, and she’s your older half sister. I’m in Carson City on business. We came here for dinner, then decided to stay. Does anyone at the Sands know you by sight?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We’ll have to chance it.”

“You’re sure about the arrest record?” Doc said, suspiciously. He didn’t know how far he could trust this girl. He suspected not very.

“Yeah!” The girl was starting to panic, not knowing what she’d gotten herself into. She looked to Eve for support.

“Just answer him truthfully,” Eve said, soothingly. “He doesn’t want to put you in a bad spot. If he knows about something, he can take care of it. If he doesn’t, he can’t.”

“Okay. No, I’ve never been arrested.”

“Good. If they ask you to sign the register, just do it, and sign your right name. Do you have a driver’s license?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the age on it?”

“Twenty one. In Nevada legal age is eighteen.”

“S’okay. I’m just covering the bases. So, if they ask you to register, which they probably won’t, you’re going to sign your right name because that’s what you have ID for. You can prove you’re you. What’s your real first name? So we know what to call you.”

“Gwen. Short for Gwendolyn.”

“That’s a nice name,” Doc said. “Much nicer than Blythe. Blythe always sounds like an airhead to me,” he added untruthfully. Although he liked nicknames, he didn’t approve of aliases. If you didn’t want people to know your right name when you did something, maybe you shouldn’t do it.

Doc drove the car out of the public parking lot, and used his credit card to pay the fee. Then, he drove the block to the hotel, and parked at the front door.

A bellman walked up, and opened the door. “Are we checking in tonight, sir?”

“We certainly are. Only one bag, though. We didn’t expect to stay over.”

Doc dropped his flight bag on the cart, and tipped the bellman three dollars to make up for the lack of

luggage. With three people, he could expect at least three bags, which called for three dollars. Doc handed the car key to the bellman as well, who pulled out a claim ticket, and tore it in half, handing one half to Doc, who tipped him a five to take care of the car.

“Have a nice stay, sir.”

“Thank you. And have a nice night yourself.”

Doc breezed up to the front desk, as if he’d done it a million times, which, of course, he had. He passed across his credit card, and asked, “Do you have a large suite? Preferably with three bedrooms? Or, at least two.”

“There’s the Presidential Suite, but it’s very expensive.”

“How expensive?”

“Very.”

“Very is not a number. Give me a number.”

The desk clerk gave him a number that was about what he paid at the Driskill.

“That’s about what I expected,” he said.

“Will there be any animals?”

“Do little sisters count?” Doc asked, flippantly indicating the women behind him, both of whom looked like they’d been partying hard, which they had.

The desk clerk gave a polite laugh.

“No, no pets. Just two ladies who’ve already had more fun than they should have. Time to tuck them in for the night. We’ll head home in the morning.”

“Where is home, sir?”

“Arizona. Scottsdale. I’m in Carson City on business. We came up here for dinner, then decided to do some gambling, and partying, and now sleeping. Speaking of gambling, I need to get two hundred dollars in cash. Is there an ATM near?”

“There’s an ATM just down that hall, but I can take care of it for you here.” He’d already run Doc’s card, and seen his available credit – infinite.

“That’d be great. I have to admit, I had too much to drink. I was supposed to be the designated driver, but ... You know how it goes.”

“Yes. It’s best to park the car at that point. We’re pleased that you chose to park it at the Sands. Thank you. Tony will show you to your room.”

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“I’m up for a nice hot bath,” Eve said. “Anyone care to join me?”

“Oops! Money first,” Doc said, pulling out three hundred dollars cash, and putting it on the dresser. Gwen snagged it, and made it disappear quickly into her pocketbook.

She was suitably impressed. She’d come to suites before, when clients wanted to show off how rich they were, but with Doc it was different. He just walked in as if he were entering his own living room after a hard day at the office.

Satisfied with the money, Gwen kissed Eve on the lips, and headed for the master bathroom. Opening the taps for the bath, Gwen took off her clothes, and started looking around for bubble bath. Watching her, Eve was thinking about what she was about to do, and wondering if she was really about to do it. She absently started to undress, when she was startled by a little tinkle of laughter from Gwen.

Gwen had spotted her own see-through panties tucked into the front of Eve's panties. "So that's where those got to," she said.

Eve reddened all over in embarrassment. "I thought ..." she stammered.

"Let me just take those back," Gwen said, coming up to Eve, and taking her by the shoulders. She turned Eve around, and pressed her body against Eve's back. Reaching into the front of Eve's panties, Gwen grasped the panties tucked in there with two fingers.

Instead of pulling them out, Gwen started rubbing them over Eve's mound in a circular motion. Then, slowly, Gwen brought the circles lower, and lower, until the panties brushed across Eve's clitoris at the bottom part of their arc. Then, lower still, until they brushed her labia at the bottom of the circle, and her clit at the top. Then the circles became up, and down strokes, bringing the panties to Eve's clit at the top, and down to the opening of her vagina at the bottom. At each stroke, Gwen pushed the panties farther into her vagina, until she was just rubbing them around inside. Gwen started pushing more, and more of the cloth in, until they'd disappeared completely inside.

Then, she lay Eve down on the floor, and slipped Eve's panties and bra off. Eve was then completely naked on the cold marble floor, with Gwen laying on top of her. Gwen turned herself to a sixty-nine position over Eve. She pushed the panties even farther into Eve's vagina. Then, she began licking Eve's clit with her tongue. Then sucking on it, and then stretching it out with her lips. Then, she lapped Eve's clit, and labia in long strokes from the top of her clit to her perineum. When Gwen pushed her tongue into Eve's vagina, and stroked it in and out, Eve broke into shuddering orgasms.

Finding her face close to Gwen's crotch, Eve began doing the same thing to Gwen that Gwen was doing to her. Both women brought their knees up, and spread their thighs to open their crotches as far as possible.

When both women had had enough of that, they stood up. Gwen remembered that Eve still had the sheer panties stuffed into her vagina. She kneeled in front of Eve, and began trying to hook the panties out with her

tongue. This necessitated pushing her entire face into Eve's vagina, with her nose pressed into Eve's clit, while her chin pushed into Eve's vagina.

Gwen couldn't reach, but Eve started pushing out with her vaginal muscles, and the panties started coming out. At first, Gwen could only find them with the tip of her tongue. Then she could feel the folds of cloth against her lips. Then, she was able to grasp them with her lips, and suck them into her mouth. Eventually, she clenched a bit of cloth tightly in her teeth, and pulled the panties out. But, she did it slowly to make the feeling last for Eve.

The panties were completely soaked, like an overloaded sponge. Eve had climaxed all over Gwen's face. Gwen stood up, and kissed Eve full on the lips, then tilted her head so that their tongues could plunge deeply into each others mouths. Eve could feel the wetness of her vaginal juice on Gwen's face, and smell her own orgasm. It was intoxicating.

Breaking the kiss, they felt their bodies pressed together, and hummed pleasure to each other. Eve felt the curve of Gwen's narrow waist, swelling out to wide hips and thighs. Gwen stroked Eve's sides in the same way.

Stepping back, Gwen asked: "Isn't Doc coming?"

"I don't know. He's under a lot of strain, and might pass. He's worried about his sister. Not his real sister, but they act like brother and sister. Anyway, there may be a guy trying to kill her. Now she thinks she's figured out who it is, and has threatened to kill him. I think Doc's trying to figure out whether she'll really do it."

"Wait a minute. Some guy's trying to kill Doc's sister? For real?"

"For real, we think."

"Why?"

"Well, ten years ago his sister's father disappeared. Now, she's trying to find out what happened. All of a sudden, we find out that her father was probably killed by this serial killer who's been making people disappear for

years. We count almost a dozen victims.”

“That’s you guys on the news!” Gwen gasped.

“Yeah, that’s us on the news. Doc’s probably in there right now, trying to find out what I’ve been saying about his sister today.”

Fascinated, and only half believing, Gwen forgot about sex, and started creeping slowly into the living room to see what Doc was doing. Sure enough, he had the TV on to a news channel, and was watching the edited-for-TV version of Eve’s interview with Luthor Todd.

“Eve, that’s you!” Gwen exclaimed, standing naked and sticky on the hotel’s expensive carpet. She walked over to where Doc was sitting in the middle of the sofa in front of the screen. She sat down beside him, and cuddled up against his chest.

Eve was not so interested in the interview. She’d already seen it many times during recording and editing. She wanted to drag Gwen back into the bathroom, and jump in the tub.

“That the guy who’s trying to kill your sister?” Gwen asked Doc.

“We think maybe,” was the only answer.

Doc started absently stroking Gwen’s back and sides with his fingers, while concentrating on the TV.

“All over,” Doc said to Gwen when the station began reporting a freak snowstorm in New York. Gwen was curled up against his side. He kissed her, and lapped her face. “You’re all slimy,” he said. “Eve, take this person into the bathtub, and wash her all over.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do. She’s not cooperating. She’d rather come out here, and rub her face in your crotch.”

“That’s not what she’s been doing. Here, let me help.”

Sliding his right arm behind Gwen’s back, and under her armpits, Doc slipped the other arm under her thighs, and picked her up. Changing his grip, he clamped a powerful right hand over Gwen’s shoulder, and pushed his left thumb deep into her vagina, and wrapped his fingers over her anal crease to grip her coccyx and pelvic muscles. In this way, he picked her up lightly as if she were a rag doll.

Even when the bouncer had pushed her around, he hadn’t been as powerful as Doc. Doc held her strongly and powerfully, but gently, too. She’d never been picked up this way, and she’d never enjoyed being picked up so much.

Doc lifted her over his head, carried her into the bathroom, and gently deposited her in the tub full of soapy bubbles. Then, he went back, and did the same thing with Eve, who came all over his hand while he carried her.

“D’you do that with Red?” Eve asked.

Gwen looked up, startled because she’d pigeonholed Red and Doc as brother and sister. Then, she remembered that Eve had said they weren’t *actually* brother and sister. Still, the idea stirred prurient thoughts in Gwen’s head, which she enjoyed.

“Red’s a lot bigger lady than either of you,” Doc said flatly, as if it explained everything.

“Not that much, and she’s so thin!”

“Scaling laws, baby. Scaling laws. A person with exactly the same build, but twenty five percent taller will weigh almost double. Strength goes as the square. Weight goes as the cube.”

Gwen had no idea what Doc was talking about, and it made her feel stupid to think that Eve did. She wanted to get back to her area of expertise, so she said, crossly: “Are we going to fuck, or not?”

Had Gwen a little more experience, she would not have been as intimidated. Eve, like most non-technical

people who live in a world dominated by technology, was used to feeling clueless around certain people. Another advantage she had was knowing that Doc was one of those people. Poor Gwen didn't have the dubious advantage of running into superbrained technogeeks on a daily basis, and hadn't yet worked out that, wealthy as he was, Doc had more brains than money. The upshot was that Eve only *looked* like she knew what Doc was saying.

In reality, Eve agreed wholeheartedly with Gwen, so she responded by reaching out to Gwen and saying: "Come here, you."

The positions in which Doc had placed the two women was not lost on Gwen. She knew exactly what he was suggesting by putting them at opposite ends of the tub facing each other, with their legs in a tangle in the middle. He'd set Eve down with her legs on top of Gwen's. Gwen had immediately pulled her right leg back, and then extended it to lay on top of Eve's left.

When Eve reached for her, Gwen pulled Eve into a passionate embrace. The position immediately brought their clits together, which sent a massive electric jolt directly to Eve's pleasure center. Eve found herself screaming with pleasure while rubbing most of her erogenous zones against their counterparts on Gwen's body. She stifled the scream by thrusting her tongue into Gwen's mouth.

Seeing that the women were fully occupied, Doc began stripping down for a shower. He usually showered in the morning to be fresh for the day, but he'd had a long, active day, and didn't want to be the grimy, sweaty one in the big bed with two freshly laundered ladies.

His thoughts were still on Red. The hatred he'd heard in her voice worried him. She was carrying around a lot of anger, built up over ten years of being denied the most important person in her life, her natural father. She'd fixed that anger on Mark Shipton for three years, but now that had changed. It was healthy that she'd found Mark to be a friend, not an enemy, but her anger hadn't gone. It just needed a new object. Her father's killer, assuming that was what happened, was an appropriate target, but Doc was now concerned what she might do about it. What he most wanted was to be with her, and know that she was alright.

While Doc was thinking those thoughts in the shower, he suddenly found himself no longer alone. The oversized shower stall (Doc had facetiously said it was big enough to hold a cocktail party in.) had suddenly become very crowded. Eve and Gwen had, after enjoying each other for a while, decided that they wanted something from him, too.

Eve stood in front of him, rubbing her breasts into his chest. Well, not quite, as her nipples barely came up to his solar plexus, but close enough to do the job for both of them.

Meanwhile, Gwen, slightly shorter, stood behind him rubbing her breasts into the small of his back. This, too, was a highly satisfactory arrangement for both of them.

Gwen reached around with her right hand to find the small of Eve's back, and pulled her close, sandwiching Doc tightly between them. She reached around for Doc's penis, which was, not surprisingly, erect, and squeezed between his belly, and Eve's. Gwen pulled it out from between her two partners, and lowered it to press against Eve's clitoris. Stroking it made it even harder, so it pressed more firmly against Eve's clit. Eve began moving her hips back, and forth while Gwen held Doc's erection between Eve's labia. On each stroke, the tip of Doc's penis entered Eve's wide-open vagina. Pumping with repeated climaxes, Eve felt Gwen extend her finger, so that it went into Eve's vagina at each stroke as well.

In the interest of fairness, Doc squeezed out from between the two women, so that they came together in an embrace that expanded into a drawn out kiss. Doc then stepped around behind Gwen, and pushed his penis into her vagina. Gwen arched her back to receive it, which broke her kiss with Eve, but led to her leaning over to suckle Eve's left nipple.

Eve reached over to fondle Gwen's breasts. Then, she took a nipple in each hand, and began rolling them, then pulling them, stretching their erect shapes to over an inch long. Gwen pushed her left hand four fingers deep into Eve's vagina. Gwen stroked her hand in, and out, as Eve resumed her repetitive climaxing. Then, Gwen brought her thumb into Eve's vagina as well, and pushed in, curling her fingers to get her hand further in, until she

had it in up over her wrist.

Eve climaxed repeatedly over Gwen's hand, while Gwen climaxed repeatedly over Doc's erection, which was now pressing her cervix at every stroke.

Feeling the onset of an orgasm, Doc pulled suddenly out of Gwen. He pressed his penis into her anal crease with his belly, squeezing the tip against the bone in her coccyx in an effort to stop the orgasm.

His impending orgasm calmed, he sat down on one of the seats built into the shower stall's corners. His penis still fully erect, he invited Eve over to sit on it.

Facing him, she was able to lower herself onto his erection, but her knees against the seat edge interfered with her getting all the way down onto his penis. With Doc's help to support her weight, and balance her with his hands, she put her feet up on the seat, and got a little closer. Doc had slid forward along the seat as far as he could, which helped a little.

It wasn't until Gwen came up behind her, and pressed her body against Eve's back, and held the reaction force by intertwining her fingers behind Doc's neck, that they could get Doc's penis all the way into Eve's vagina. Eve worked her feet up the sides of the shower stall until her legs were essentially vertical outside Doc's outstretched arms, by which he held Eve's sides with his hands just above her pelvic crests.

At this point, Eve was essentially helpless. She had no purchase to make any movement. It was only by coordinated movements of Doc's and Gwen's pelvises that they were able to move Eve's crotch back, and forth over Doc's erection. That was enough, however, especially with Eve rhythmically flexing her vaginal muscles.

Gwen's clitoris was erect enough to rub Eve's back on every thrust, and she began to have orgasms. Eve, relaxed, and letting the others control her body, was having rapidly repeated orgasms, rivaling Red for sheer vaginal-juice volume. Finally, Doc exploded inside her, with the tip of his penis pressed against her cervix. With nowhere for the semen to go, the spurts forced themselves into her uterus and filled her vagina.

With Doc's orgasm spent, and his muscles involuntarily relaxing, and Eve still totally helpless, it was up to Gwen to disentangle their bodies. She started by leaning forward to support Eve's back and shoulders, while taking her hands out from behind Doc's neck. Supporting Eve's weight with her arms under Eve's armpits, Gwen brought her hands down to cup Eve's breasts. That gave her enough purchase to lower Eve's body down until her buttocks rested on the floor between Doc's feet. Finally, she let Eve's head and shoulders down to rest on the shower-stall floor.

Finding herself head-to-tail over Eve's body, Gwen lowered her crotch down onto Eve's face, and felt Eve respond by thrusting her tongue into her vagina, then move it around inside. She then lowered her face to Eve's labia, and began lapping spilled semen from Eve's crotch. Eve used her vaginal muscles to squeeze Doc's load out of her vagina.

As the fluid began oozing out, Gwen began sucking it into her mouth. Quickly, her mouth became full of the mixture of Doc's semen, and Eve's ejaculation. Gwen then got up on her knees, turned herself around to face Eve's face. Lowering her mouth to give Eve a kiss, she transferred her mouthful into Eve's mouth.

Smiling, Eve decided to give it back, so she pulled Gwen's mouth back over hers, and pushed it out with her tongue. Gwen accepted it, and lapped some that had spilled over Eve's face. Both women then sat up, and passed the liquid back, and forth a few times, until each had about half of it coating her tongue, and soft palate. At that point, eyes locked, they both swallowed simultaneously. Then, they laughed to each other.

Looking up, the women saw Doc's penis half erect, and covered in semen. Looking at each other, they saw that they both had the same idea in mind. They got to their knees, and began lapping the semen off Doc's penis. Seeing that it was still oozing semen, Gwen began sucking the tip of Doc's penis to get what was left. That made it fully erect, and any semen still left in Doc's urethra out of reach. So, she pushed the tip of her tongue into Doc's urethral opening.

This was a new one for Doc, and he liked it. Using his fingers, he pulled the sides back to open it as far as

possible. Gwen, who had excellent control of her tongue muscles through long practice, brought her tongue tip to a surprisingly small point, and inserted it into Doc's urethral opening. That, of course, pushed the opening wider, so Gwen could get even more of her sharp tongue in.

Eve wanted some of this action, so she pushed her face in next to Gwen's, tongue wagging to find Doc's penis tip. Gwen backed off enough to give Eve room (but not so much that she couldn't still feel the heat from Doc's penis and Eve's face on her lips, and cheeks).

Eve's tongue was not as adept as Gwen's. It needed more exercise, and more practice, which Eve gave it by attempting the same trick Gwen had done. She did manage to get the very tip into the opening, but mainly succeeded in filling the tip with her saliva.

Gwen volunteered to suck the saliva out.

By this time, Doc had had enough. No matter what the girls thought up next to do to his genitals, he couldn't hold an erection any longer. He sat up, then leaned down to give each of them a kiss in turn. Then brought them together in a warm three-way kiss.

Doc broke it by simply standing up, which brought his penis dangerously close between the ladies' still not fully satisfied faces. He pushed between them to reach the center of the still running shower. Then, he rinsed off completely, and stepped out of the shower. He hadn't managed to shampoo his hair, but life is full of little disappointments.

The women were not quite done with each other, so they finished up by taking a long time to rinse each other off, with plenty of kissing, and caressing included.

Finally satisfied, they stepped out of the shower to find Doc standing disgustedly in a pool of soapy water with bubble bath foam floating on it. He'd managed to dry himself off, except for his feet. He was loath to dry them off without first rinsing off the soap he was standing in, and hadn't yet solved the puzzle.

The women, when they decided to invade Doc's shower, hadn't bothered with rinsing, or drying. They simply stood up in the tub, stepped over the edge, and proceeded to the shower door, dripping soapy bubble bath foam all the way.

They had the same problem Doc had. It was impossible to exit the shower without slogging through the foamy mess on the floor. They solved it ingeniously, however, by deciding simply not to care. They slogged through, grabbed clean towels, and proceeded to wipe each other dry. Then Eve walked over to Doc, pushed him into a sitting position on the toilet-seat cover, and began drying off his right foot with her towel. Gwen joined her to dry off his left foot with her towel. Doc sat there, and enjoyed the procedure.

Thus, Gwen, and Eve showed the often demonstrated fact that no man, no matter how gifted or powerful, is a match for two amorous women. Had it been allowed, Alexander of Macedon would never have had the chance to cut the Gordian knot, and launch his conquest of the world, two women would already have done it.

41

"So, you guys are rich, right?" Gwen asked, as they munched breakfast while Doc watched the stock ticker pass by the TV screen. She'd watched Doc and Eve poring over their separate newspapers while waiting for room service to bring up their order, then been bored as Doc listened to talking heads droning on about jobs reports, economic figures, and what who thought about what stock sector. That was after Gwen had listened to an all-news channel until they started repeating themselves.

"What makes you say that, Honey," Eve asked. She'd started calling Gwen "Honey" after they'd woken up cuddled in each other's arms. Their heads had been cradled on Doc's pelvis instead of pillows, but it was their arms intertwined, and their eyes that exchanged the first smile of the morning.

"Lots of things. This place. That dress you wore last night. Doc's jacket that must have cost half a grand. The fact that you don't ask the prices of things before you decide to buy. That coat of yours isn't real mink, but it's not

cheap, either, and you wear it the way most women wear ... I dunno. Like it was just another coat.”

“I’m not rich,” Eve insisted. “I’m just a working stiff. I probably don’t make much more than you do. Maybe even less.”

“How much do you bring down in a week,” Gwen challenged.

“I don’t know,” said Eve, who was caught off guard. “I don’t get paid weekly. I’m on salary.” She looked up at Doc, who was listening to the conversation, for help.

“Fifty grand gross is a grand a week. If you’ve done your withholding right, you might take home two thirds of that.”

“So, about a thousand dollars a week after taxes?” Eve suggested, looking to Doc for confirmation.

“How should I know? It’s your pay. If you’re on bi-weekly, it’d be in the neighborhood of two grand in each check.”

“Close enough,” Eve concluded.

“He’s the rich one,” she added.

Gwen looked at him for more information. Getting nothing, she prompted: “So? How much do you bring down in a week?”

“A lot more than that, but I don’t get a paycheck.”

“Waddayamean?”

“I own the company. The company gets money from other companies at different times, and in different amounts. Sometimes it’s more some times it’s less. Then, we have to pay a bunch of employees. Then, we have to pay for the lights, buildings, and that stuff. Then we have to pay for supplies. That’s everything from paper clips to

airplanes. When everything's paid for, I get to keep what's left."

"So how much is left?"

"On average, and on a weekly basis, a couple of hundred."

"C'mon. Unless you just hit it big on the slots, you can't afford all this stuff on that. You don't act like a gambler riding a hot streak. You act like this is just another day in the life. Even I make more than a couple of hundred dollars a week."

"No, a couple of hundred *thousand*."

"Shit!"

But, that doesn't make me rich."

"It does in my book!"

"Rich is relative. I still have to pay attention to what I spend. I couldn't, for example go out, and buy a hundred-foot motoryacht without planning very carefully."

"Tell her about Red," Eve put in. "She's really the rich one."

"Yeah," Gwen said. "On TV, Eve said she was some kind of heiress."

"She is, but that's not what she lives on. Her salary's a little more than Eve's."

"If she's so rich, why does she work?"

"That's what makes her rich. Let's put it this way, if somebody asks you to do something for money, what's the first question you think of?"

"How much, of course," Gwen said.

“When I offered Red a job, she never asked how much. She wasn’t interested in the job until I told her that I’d let her do the things she wanted to do, anyway. That’s what makes her rich. She has enough to do what she wants to do.”

“So, if she’s an heiress, that means her family has money, right? How much does her family have?”

“Add, maybe three more zeros on.”

“Wheew!” Gwen whistled. “That’s like a mil a week!”

“No, not three more zeros added onto Eve’s. Onto mine.”

“That’s like ... “

“A lot of money. There are some countries whose national debt she could pay off with a personal check.”

“How do you guys get so much?”

“Hard work, perseverance, and the willingness to do what other people can’t, or won’t.”

“Take your job, for instance,” Eve pointed out. “You make pretty good money, don’t you. Better than the average girl your age, right?”

“Yeah, but I have to work for it,” Gwen asserted. “I have to bump and grind five nights a week. Then, I have to work out, and watch what I eat, or I’ll be out of a job pretty soon. Nobody goes for a fat stripper. Then, I have to pretend to like those slimy, ugly creeps.

The real money’s in hooking up with dude’s like you after hours. But, most of them are world-class creeps. You guys are fun. You’re clean; you’re polite; you’re nice to me; and you treat me like a person, not just something to jerk off into. Most of ‘em I can barely stand to touch. Some of them scare the Hell out of me. Most girls couldn’t stand it.”

“That’s Doc’s point. You make more money than the average girl your age because you work hard, and are willing to do things most girls won’t. Doc makes bigger piles of money because he does things other people couldn’t do no matter how they tried.”

“Speaking of work,” Doc reminded them, “none of us is on vacation. I have an entire company to keep tabs on. Eve, you have a story to dig into. Gwen, it’s time for you to do whatever it is you normally do at nine o’clock in the morning after working overtime. Let’s blow this joint.”

“Gwen,” Eve said, suddenly, “why don’t you come home with me.”

Doc just stared.

Gwen had had proposals like this before, but not many times, and never from someone she’d actually liked. She didn’t quite know what to say.

Into the silence, Eve started to explain: “Sure. It’d be fun. I don’t know how you feel, Gwen, but I really like you a lot.”

“Eve,” Doc warned her, “You can’t afford her.”

“But, I like her, and she likes me.”

“She’s not a stray puppy, Eve,” Doc reminded her. “I paid her four-hundred-fifty-dollars to like you – us. No, I paid her four hundred fifty dollars to like *you*. She helped me please you, and she did a wonderful job. Thank you, Gwen. But she has a whole life of her own. You can’t ask her to dump everything, and run off to Pango Pango with you. Well, you can, but don’t expect her to say ‘yes.’ It’s unfair.”

Eve looked defiant. Doc looked over at Gwen, and saw a complex of conflicting emotions that had her close to tears.

“Oh, shit!” he exclaimed, quietly, then sat back in his chair to stare at his fingernails for a minute. Then, he

looked back up at Gwen's eyes to read them again. There was embarrassment – more than he'd expected. There was anger. There was defiance. She also felt insulted. Was that a tinge of longing? Mostly, though, he could see loneliness, and fear.

“Oh, no,” he added.

He thought for another minute, then he said: “Gwen, you're not supposed to have to feel like that. Come here. Sit on my lap, and tell the good doctor what's wrong.”

Gwen looked at Eve, whose expression said: “I don't know what he's got in mind, but it'll probably be worth your while to play along.”

So, she stood up, walked over to Doc's chair, and sat in his lap. He held her gently, like one would hold a frightened child. For some reason, that made her feel less alone. She put her arms around his neck, and rested her face on his shoulder.

After a few minutes of silence, she sat up, sniffed loudly, and looked at him steadily, waiting.

“Are you telling me that you like Eve, too?”

“Yes.”

“And you're upset that I assumed you didn't care just because you took money for having sex with her?”

Gwen shook her head, “yes.”

“You have a very tough profession, you know,” Doc advised. “You're messing around with the most powerful emotions human beings can feel. You're supposed to pretend to be emotionally involved with your clients. In fact, you're supposed to try to get them emotionally involved with you, but you can't afford to really get emotionally involved with them. It leads to problems like this.”

He stopped to think for half a minute more.

“I’m about to suggest something that may sound totally stupid, unfair, impossible, or just plain silly, but think about it before answering. You know that Eve can’t afford to pay you as a professional lover, right?”

“Yes, but you can.”

“I’m not in this. I came here for a nice, relaxing dinner, along with a roll in the hay with my fuck buddy over there. I’m not available for romantic entanglements – especially not this tangled! We’re talking about you, and Eve, who appears to have fallen in love with you. Now, maybe you’ve fallen in love with her, which is an occupational hazard in your business. Maybe you haven’t. Only you can tell.”

He took a deep breath.

“I propose that, if you think you *might* have fallen in love with my buddy, there – and I think she’s definitely worth falling in love with – then you two might consider taking a little vacation together. She’s got some work to do, but it can be a real vacation for you. Now, she’s going to be in Carson City on assignment for at least another couple of days, and could easily stretch it out over the weekend. Come Monday, if you want to change your life to be with her, fine. If not, we’ll make sure you get home safely. The worst that can happen is that you get a nice, relaxing weekend. The best is that you get a new start – if you want it. Waddayathink?”

“What about you?”

“You are extremely desirable, and I’d be happy to make love to you with, or without Eve along. But, I don’t pay for sex. I don’t have to. That’s what I meant when I said I paid for you to be nice to *her*. You’re here because last night she leaned over to me in the bar, and said (Here Doc leaned over, and whispered into her ear), “I want her.”

“That’s my suggestion,” Doc concluded. “I can pretty much guarantee that Eve’ll go for it. The question is, do you want to?”

“They’ll be furious with me at the club.”

“You deserve a vacation, and I’ll tell them so.”

“What makes you think they’ll listen to you?”

“Because I’ll make it an offer they can’t refuse.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s paraphrasing a line from one of the *Godfather* movies,” Doc explained. “In that case, when the offeree showed reluctance to make a deal, he woke up the next morning in bed with the severed head of his favorite horse.”

“I should have warned you,” Eve butted in. “He’s a mother lode of literary trivia. You get used to it.”

Pointedly ignoring the interruption, Doc continued: “I’m more of a pussycat. I’ll just make sure they understand that they have a choice between a few hundred dollars, and a traffic accident.”

“You wouldn’t!” Eve exclaimed, not knowing whether he was serious, and hoping he was not.

“I don’t know if I would,” Doc replied calmly. “My bluff’s never been called. I suspect I might be forced to make it happen, though. It’d be a matter of self respect.”

Gwen looked him steadily in the eyes, trying to figure out whether he would or not. Doc just smiled innocently, and batted his eyes playfully.

“I have to take care of my friends, don’t I?” he said.

“Am I one of your friends?” Gwen asked.

“I hope so. What self-respecting Zen sage would hold a beautiful lady in his lap, and *not* want her for a

friend?”

Doc waited a short while, then asked: “So, what’s it to be?”

A look of longing crossed Gwen’s face as she thought about what was offered. Then, a look of fear, when she thought about the people she worked with. Then, a look of hope as she gazed into Doc’s strong, competent face.

“I want to ... ,” she said, not finishing the sentence.

“But,” Doc suggested.

“I’m afraid,” she admitted.

“Don’t be,” Doc said with conviction. “My friends get to do what they want, or I’ll know the reason why.”

She looked at Eve, who was smiling hopefully, and said: “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Doc said, standing up, and popping Gwen off into a standing position with her momentum aimed toward Eve.

“Let’s do what one shepherd said to the other shepherd!” he said.

“I know that one!” Eve exclaimed, “It came from the first film in the *Lethal Weapon* series. The answer is ‘Get the flock out of here!’”

Gwen decided they were both nuts, but in a good way.

42

“You’re a bad influence!” Red scolded Doc, when he showed up at the camp that afternoon escorting Eve,

with Gwen in tow. Gwen was curious to see what her new girlfriend did for a living, and was loathe to be left alone in a strange motel. Doc thought carefully about it, and could see no security or secrecy ramifications of having an unofficial visitor wandering around the camp, with no security clearance, and no legitimate reason for being there. When she saw what was going on, Red pulled Doc out of earshot for a private explanation.

“A bad influence? *Moi?*” he gasped in mock surprise.

“You take a highly professional, hard nosed newswoman like Eve out on a date, and she comes back with a beautiful, blonde, lesbian lover, whom she obviously doesn’t want to keep her hands off. What’s wrong with you?”

“Je suis innocent!”

“I’ve heard that one before.”

“We just went to dinner,” he said in a tone reminiscent of Tom Sawyer explaining what he and Huck Finn had been doing that got them in trouble, “and I asked her what she wanted to do next, and she said she wanted to visit a strip club.”

“A strip club.” Red repeated, hands on hips, and tapping her foot in an exact imitation of Tom’s mother.

“Yes, a strip club, and she found Gwen – her stage name is Blythe,”

“I don’t care about her stage name,” Red said, sternly.

“Eve found Gwen particularly attractive, so I bought her a lap dance,” Doc continued.

“A lap dance!” Red said too loudly. Some heads turned to look at them, sensing some fun was afoot.

“Yes, a lap dance, after which Eve said that Gwen said she was free after ten o’clock.”

“Oh, no!” Red stopped tapping her foot, lowered her eyes, and started rubbing her forehead.

“Well, Gwen put in an extra-special performance in the next set,” Doc explained innocently.

“Dare I ask for details?”

Drawing himself up in mock indignation, Doc said: “A gentleman does not tell!”

“I assume this extra special performance was aimed at Eve.”

“There was audience participation,” Doc admitted.

“Oh, shit.”

“So, Gwen decided she’d done enough for the audience that night, and blew off the rest of the performance.”

“And, she accompanied you two to a hotel.”

“Well, the park would have been uncomfortable.”

“I understand. Then what did you push them into?”

“Eve wanted to take a bath.”

“Humph!”

“Gwen decided to join her.”

“Double humph!”

“So I went off to take a shower. I was all sweaty, and grimy from climbing that ladder, you see.”

“Of course.”

“And, they were afraid I’d get lonesome.”

“So, they decided to join you.”

“I didn’t really mind,” Doc pointed out in the ladies’ defense.

“So, you kindly condescended to blow a load in Eve’s vagina. I know she’s on the pill, and I know why.”

“Well, Gwen helped.”

“I’m sure she did!”

“Do I have to ask what became of the load you left in Eve’s cunt?”

“Be nice. Gwen sucked it out.”

“And swallowed it, right?”

“Well, half of it. Eve got the other half.”

“I take it you did not, like a good gentleman, offer Gwen a ride home.”

“Better. I offered her luxurious accommodations in a bed of her choice.”

“Which happened to also include you and Eve, right?”

“That was the bed she chose.”

“How much did this deal set you back?”

“Well, counting the money Eve stuffed in Gwen’s crotch during the performance, and a few beers, and the bribe for the bouncer who let Gwen leave early, plus the overnight rental on Gwen’s virtue, about four hundred fifty dollars.”

“She saw you coming.”

“No, I did it in Eve’s vagina – completely out of sight.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“She did not see us coming. We were already there when she came on stage. That didn’t come out right.”

“That’s not what I meant, either.”

“I consider it an excellent investment. Well worth every penny.”

“It’s not usually considered an investment,” Red observed.

“Look how happy they are!” Doc said, pointing to the couple who were standing close together talking about what was going on in camp, and what aspects of it Eve would cover, and how she’d do it.

“So, the three of you spent the night cuddled up, right?”

“Well, they cuddled up with my hip for a pillow.”

“I’ll bet that broke your heart.”

Doc ignored the comment.

“In the morning, they woke up, and found that they’d fallen in love.”

“So, what’s a hooker doing in my camp?”

“Uh, oh. I couldn’t see any harm. Eve wanted her to come. She’s staying with Eve in her motel.”

“Eve can’t afford her.”

“Gwen took a little vacation. They’re in love!”

“This sounds like one of *your* harebrained schemes!”

“Well, I did suggest it.”

“What’s your part in all this?”

“I made arrangements, so Gwen could get away.”

“Arrangements with whom?”

“Gwen’s employers.”

“You maniac! I suppose you think Gwen’s going to give it all up to play house with Eve in Phoenix.”

“Not me! Eve hopes she will.”

“Did you explain to her how stupid that is?”

“Of course, you should have seen them. They were practically in tears!”

“Now you’ve got me in tears. Look in my eye. Wet as the Arabian Desert.”

“Suppose the unthinkable happens,” Red continued, “and Gwen really does go home with Eve. What will her employers think about that?”

“They’ll give her their blessing, of course.”

“And if they don’t?”

“I’ll hurt them.”

Red looked at him hard, and said: “I believe you would. That’s what Mark meant when he called you a pirate. You’ll do it, and not give a shit, won’t you. You’ll go look up ‘Ninja Assassins’ in your little black book, and arrange for Gwen’s employers to wish they’d been more cooperative. What do you have in mind? A traffic accident?”

“Something like that.”

“Don’t leave ‘em alive.” Red warned.

“I don’t plan to,” Doc replied. “It would be counterproductive.”

“Does Pat know what a vicious viper you are inside?”

“Who’d ya think taught me?”

“Doc, I know you’re supposed to be the ultimate authority on esoteric Zen philosophy, and I should never question your authority, but aren’t we supposed to be all kindly, and non-violent?”

“Tell that to the victim of a samurai. Besides, I don’t see you turning the other cheek to Luthor whatshisname – Todd.”

“*Touche*” Red admitted.

“Look,” Doc summarized, “I’d like to have Gwen’s employers be nice, understanding people with only goodness in their hearts, but odds are that they’re vicious, brutal scum. I like Gwen, and I think she’s got it really tough. You should see the fear in her eyes when she thinks about those jokers. If, and I do mean *if*, she wants out, why shouldn’t I give her a hand? Maybe she’ll be back with another circus full of clowns in six months, anyway. That’s not my lookout. Maybe Eve will make the difference. You know what they say about the love of a good woman.”

“It’s not supposed to be for another woman.”

“So, the fuck, what!”

“And, what becomes of Eve through all this?”

“Maybe they’ll give her an award. It worked for Saffron Burrows.”

“I’m not sure Saffron was pleased about it, though.”

“Eve will be okay. Besides, its what she wants.”

Red gave him the critically judgmental look that only she, and Pat dared give to Doc, and said: “I think you’re nuts, but it’s one of the things I like most about you. I’ll give you my blessing, my support, and anything else that’s needed.”

“Give it to them,” Doc said, indicating the lovers. “They’re the ones that need it.”

“Good idea,” Red said. “Let’s take them to dinner tonight. Show ‘em that when they join our strange little family, they’re never alone. You pick the place.”

“I dunno, the last time I went out for dinner, I came home with a stray cat. I’d hate to make the same mistake two nights in a row.”

“Mistress Judith says no strip clubs, and no stray cats.”

“Okay, who’s treat?” Doc asked.

“You ultimately pay the bills. You do it.”

“You forget who’s paying for this whole extravaganza. It’s your money, Red, you pay for it. Give your Gulf States Petroleum credit card some exercise.”

“Deal.” Red concluded.

Doc went back to the headquarters tent to find out if anyone needed his inexpert advice. Red strode over to where Eve and Gwen were still deep in conversation.

“Hi, guys. Eve, I don’t think I’ve met your new friend, here.” Extending her hand to Gwen, Red introduced herself: “I’m Judith McKenna. Welcome to my little project.”

“Hello, Ms. McKenna. I’m Gwendolyn Petersen.”

“My friends call me ‘Red.’ Eve’s a friend, and I hope you will be, too.”

Gwen recognized Red from her interview on TV, but still wasn’t prepared for her intimidating presence live and up close. Most surprising, though, was Red’s genuine friendliness. Gwen felt the way a puppy must feel when a new person stops to pet him.

“Doc told me about meeting you last night,” Red continued.

“All about it?” Gwen asked, not sure how she would be received.

“Yes, Doc doesn’t keep secrets from me, anymore. He found out the hard way that I don’t like it.”

“Doc and I were planning to go out to dinner tonight,” she continued. “We’d love it if you came along. Unless you have other plans. Tomorrow’s a big day for us, I’ve a feeling a lot of things are going to change. It’s something I think we should talk about, Eve.”

Gwen had no idea what was happening to her at this point. She hadn’t expected to meet so many people who were, well, just so *nice*. She wasn’t used to it, and didn’t quite know how to react.

“Sure. What time?” Eve agreed for both her and Gwen.

“We should be pretty much done with preparations later this afternoon. Then, we’ll ring up Doc’s Air Line, and chopper out of here. We’re not setting schedules here. One thing just follows the last.”

“Gwen,” she added as an afterthought, “if you get bored watching us bolt things together, Doc’s in the headquarters building twiddling his thumbs. There’s not much for him to do. He’s not really supposed to be here, anyway. Tell him I said to teach you to meditate. That oughta wind him up.”

Gwen decided to take Red’s advice. She’d stood through Eve’s interviewing three people already, and hadn’t

learned anything useful. She barely understood what they were talking about. While they were all nice and polite. They were busy, and barely had time to answer Eve's questions, and had no time at all for Gwen. If Doc had nothing to do, either, maybe he, and Gwen could do it together.

"I hope I did right, suggesting that she go chat up Doc," Red said to Eve.

"It was a good idea," Eve responded. "I think she was getting bored. In her world, she's usually the center of attention. Here, nobody really has time for her. They're all concentrated on other things. I hope it was okay for me to bring her along."

"Sure, it's okay. And, Doc will find a way to help her fit in better. It's one of the things he does best. I assume she'll be here tomorrow, too. It should be more interesting."

"It'll be up to her. She asked to come along, but I don't think she expected anything like this."

Eve then started pumping Red for information about what had gone on so far today, and what she expected for tomorrow.

Meanwhile, Gwen found Doc sitting on a bench outside the west end of the headquarters trailer. He seemed to be watching the trees on the next mesa while sitting in the sun's warmth. Gwen sat down on the bench next to him.

"They're all pretty busy over there, aren't they?" Doc said without looking at her.

"Red said you should teach me meditation," Gwen announced. "She said it would wind you up. What did she mean by that?"

Doc chuckled, and said: "I once told her I wasn't a master because I didn't take on students. A few days later, she'd mastered Zen's central mysteries. So, she thinks I lied, and took her on as a student, anyway."

"Did you?"

“No, and yes. I don’t take on students. But, if somebody comes to me, and asks the way, I’m willing to point. If they’re ready to follow it, they’ll find it for themselves.”

“So, why does Red think you taught her?”

“What she fails to consider is how special she is. She did it all herself, but gives me credit.”

“Am I special?” She didn’t feel particularly special today.

“Of course, but in different ways.”

“In what ways,” she imagined that she knew, but wasn’t sure it was what he meant.

“In a few ways that I know about, but many more that I don’t.”

“You mean that I’m a good fuck.”

“Well, that’s one of them, but most people are good fucks if they want to be. It’s built in. Millions of years ago, the bad fucks didn’t get laid, so they all died out. We’re descended from the good ones. If you do better than most, it’s because you’re willing to try harder.”

“By the way, why’d you pick Eve?” Doc asked.

“Who says I picked her?”

“I do. I was there, remember?”

“The way she looked at me. Don’t ask me to explain. I can’t.”

“You don’t have to explain. I just wanted to know that you knew.”

“It’s quiet over here,” Gwen commented.

“Does that bother you?”

“No, I like it.”

They sat quietly in the sun for a few minutes.

“Have you met Walter?” Doc asked.

“Who?”

“He’s the star of this little show. C’mon, I’ll introduce you.”

43

“Gwen,” Doc announced, “this is Walter Worm.”

Walter was curled up on a square table about three feet on a side, which was mounted behind the Worm control console in the Headquarters trailer.

“He’s charging up right now. Under the table is an electromagnetic field generator that couples electrical power into his batteries.”

“I don’t understand what that means.”

“Basically, the table’s a radio transmitter for electricity. It’s like a refueling station for his batteries.”

“Ah! So, he goes up there to recharge. I get it,” Gwen said.

“Why do you call it ‘him?’ I thought it was just a machine,” she asked.

“It’s a way of making it seem less intimidating. It looks pretty alien, so we give him a funny name, and a little personality to make him more approachable. It’s a marketing thing.”

Doc spoke to Walter: “Walter, wake up.”

Walter’s head came up, and pointed toward Doc to show he was paying attention.

“Good morning, Doc,” Walter said in a pleasant, but slightly mechanical voice.

“Gwen, this is Walter. Walter, this is Gwen.”

“Is Gwen someone I should recognize?”

“Yes, Walter, recognize Gwen.”

“Good afternoon, Gwen.”

“Say: ‘Walter, good afternoon. I’m Gwen.’ so he’ll learn your voice pattern,” Doc whispered to Gwen.

“Walter, good afternoon. I’m Gwen,” she said.

“What a pretty voice you have, Gwen,” Walter said.

“What? How could it ... “ Gwen said in surprise.

“Walter, stop,” Doc said to the worm.

To Gwen, he said: “We precede every command with Walter’s name, so that he’ll know we’re speaking to him, and that it’s a command. If you just say something without preceding it with his name, he won’t pay attention to it. That allows us to talk between ourselves without Walter’s responding to everything we say. Telling him to stop keeps him from responding to anything, except his restart command, which I’ll give in a minute.”

“The reason he complemented you on your voice was to signal that he formed a memory of what it sounds like, noted that you were a female, and relatively young. Had he detected signs of maturity in your voice pattern, he would have said you had a ‘nice’ voice instead of a ‘pretty’ one. If he’d heard a voice deeper than Red’s coloratura,

he would have assumed you were a man, and said something about your voice that was more appropriate to a man. He's not programmed to respond to children, yet."

"What if I get a cold?" Gwen asked.

"You're catching on. He also formed a visual memory of your face. He's probably still watching you, now, to add snapshots of your face from different angles. So, if you come up to him, and your voice sounds different enough that it's hard for him to recognize, he'll ask you what's wrong. You'd then say something like: 'Walter, I have a cold.' He would then add an alternate voice pattern to recognize as you. If you got rid of the cold, your voice pattern would return to normal, and the next time you greeted him, he'd recognize the difference, and say something like: 'Your voice seems better, Gwen.' That would signal that it was switching back to the base pattern it looks for from you."

"It's complicated," Gwen said.

"Yes, but each little piece is simple, and logical. It's also very stylized. That is, every sentence has to have a certain format, like having to start every command with his name. His responses are also formatted to provide certain information, while sounding natural. We call it vocal programming. Would you like to try it?"

"Okay," Gwen said, "yeah!"

Doc noticed that Steve Michels, who was in charge of the Worm project for SST, had taken an interest, and was standing by, listening to the conversation.

Turning to him, Doc said: "Steve, this is Gwen Petersen. She's visiting today, and maybe tomorrow. Could you help her imprint Walter with her voice pattern? So we can show her how to program Walter, maybe at authorization level one. Gwen, this is Steve Michels. Walter's his baby."

It never ceased to amaze Steve how Doc always seemed to turn up with these sexy beauties. He understood why most of them were tall, and lanky. Doc was extremely tall, himself. This one was a cute little female size that

made you want to pick her up in your lap, like a kitten. His wife probably wouldn't approve, though. Anyway ...

"Sure. Gwen is it? To make sure Walter can understand everything you say, he has to be able to translate your spoken words into written program code."

Seeing a blank look on her face, he explained: "It's like reading, only backwards. When you read, you recognize written words, and say the words in your head, right?"

Gwen nodded.

"That's because you think in spoken words in your head. Walter has to do the reverse. He hears spoken words when we speak, but he thinks in written words. So, when he hears you say something, he has to write down the words in his head to understand them. Does that make more sense?"

"It's better."

"Here, let me show you." Moving over to a computer terminal, he tapped at the keyboard, and a window opened with what looked like lines of dialogue.

"Here's what Walter was thinking when you and Doc were talking to him. See, he starts each line with his name for the person who's speaking. He thinks your name is spelled G O O E N. He used to spell Doc's name D O C K, but we corrected that, so we could read what was going through Walter's head more easily. I'm not going to take the time to correct his spelling of your name now, because I want to teach him to understand your voice better."

"I see he's got everything Doc said perfectly, but he's messed up some of the things I said."

"Exactly. He's been trained to understand Doc's voice, but not yours. So, when Doc speaks, he gets it right almost every time. When you speak, he's more or less guessing at what you're saying. We're going to change that."

"Why's he spell my name with small letters, and Doc's with capitals?"

“He’s recognizing that Doc is an authorized programmer, and you aren’t. He’s been trained to recognize and understand Doc’s voice, and we’ve loaded Walter’s memory with a list of things Doc’s authorized to tell him to do. He’s been told to recognize your voice, but there’s no list of things you’re authorized to tell him to do. If Doc told him to walk into a fire, or jump off a cliff, he’d do it because Doc’s authorized to tell him to do anything. If you, who aren’t yet authorized, told him to walk into a fire, he’d basically tell you to go to Hell. In fact, Doc designed this part of the system, and when he first programmed it, Walter literally would tell you to go to Hell. We reprogrammed him to be a little more polite.”

44

Gwen was beginning to see why Eve liked Doc so much, and trusted him even when she didn’t know what he was talking about. He did what he damn well pleased, so you didn’t have to worry about somebody else pulling his strings.

The bouncer at the strip club, for example, was always doing what he thought *his* boss wanted, and so forth up the line. Nobody did what they wanted. They did what they thought they were *supposed* to do. So, you couldn’t just deal with them. You always had to deal with them, and their boss, and their boss’s boss, and so forth.

With Doc, there was none of that. You just had to deal with *him*, nobody else. If, for example, you wanted to change his mind, you just had to change his mind. Then, it was done. Nobody else had a say in what Doc said, or did.

Gwen liked that. It made her want to be close to him. Where was he? Oh, he was over there, just watching what she, and Steve were doing. Nearby, taking it all in, but staying in the background.

“So, the next step in getting you to program Walter,” Steve was saying, “is to imprint him with your voice pattern, so he understands what you say as well as he understands Doc, or any of the other programmers he works with.”

“Okay.” she said. It was all starting to make sense in a bizarre sort of way.

“We imprint him with your voice by having you read these words to him in this exact order. Speak in a natural voice, the way you’d talk to a child, or a dog. Don’t speak extra loud, or soft. Remember, Walter will respond to the *sound* of your voice. He has no idea what you mean until he writes it down.”

To Walter he said: “Walter, wake up. Walter, listen to Gwen.”

He then signaled to Gwen to begin reading the list. The first line was a command:

“Walter, learn my voice,” she said, then,

“aardvark.”

She looked up at Steve in surprise. He nodded for her to keep going.

“able

apple

amulet”

She went on reading the list, which contained about a hundred words. When she came to the end, the last line was: “Walter, stop.”

Calling Gwen’s attention to the computer screen, Steve said: “See, this is what Walter was thinking as you read off the list. It’s perfect because he knows exactly what you’re *supposed* to say. The list of words contains all the sounds we use to make words in English. We’ll go through this a few more times, later, so Walter will get a feel for the natural variation you have in your voice. If you’re here tomorrow, we’ll do it again, because our voices change a little from day to day, and throughout the day.”

“After imprinting,” Steve continued, “he continues to listen to the variations in your voice as you talk to him

over time, so he gets better and better at understanding your voice. Walter's practically letter perfect with Doc's voice because Doc talks to him a lot. Probably more than anybody else, because we all have other things to do."

Sitting down at the terminal, Steve said: "Now, we have to authorize you to teach him commands. I'll start by fixing how he spells your name."

He typed: "WALTER REPLACE SPELLING NAME GOOEN WITH NAME GWEN."

"We always end a typed command with a period, so we can run a long command onto another line without confusing the computers. Now, I'll refresh the screen showing the conversation you and Doc had with him."

He did, and the lines starting with her name changed from "gooen" to "gwen."

"Now, I'll authorize you to program Walter at level one. Basically, that lets you teach him new basic commands, and string together commands he already knows."

Steve tapped a few keys to bring up a wizard screen in a new window. "This dialog box lets me put information uniquely identifying you into the system, and authorizing you to do certain things with Walter. This top box, marked "HANDLE" is the name Walter will associate with your image and voice. It doesn't have to be unique, because your voice pattern is unique. There might be more than one 'GWEN' in the system, but that will be okay. This just gives him something to call you in conversation. Now, your full name is?"

"Gwendolyn Alana Petersen. That's spelled P E T E R S E N."

"You appear to be female," Steve said.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Gwen asked, mildly insulted.

"We must look beyond surface appearances."

"Is that supposed to be a pass?" she asked.

“NO!” Steve said, startled. “I’m married.”

Gwen smiled, amused by a man who thought that made a difference. It was kinda cute.

“We don’t need her address, and contact information right now,” Doc interjected. “As the ‘in case of’ put Eve Salazar. Let me get her phone number.”

Doc pulled out his phone, and looked up Eve’s number.

“four eight zero, three five nine, seven eight two one.”

“Social Security number?” Steve asked.

Startled, and unsure, Gwen looked up at Doc and asked: “Is that necessary?”

“No,” he responded, “but if you want a job as a Worm programmer, we’ll need it.”

Even more startled, Gwen asked: “You’re giving me a job?”

“It’s a possible option. Giving us your social now saves us having to fix up the records later. If you don’t end up joining our team, we’ll wipe this off the system, anyway. It won’t go anywhere else.”

She looked into Doc’s eyes, which told her neither yes, nor no. He was just awaiting her answer. Making a sudden decision to trust him, she recited nine digits to Steve, which he typed into the form.

“Okay, I’ll just give her authorization level one,” he said absently, selecting it from a list. Then, he clicked a button marked “SAVE.”

“Now you have your very own profile,” Steve said to Gwen. “Next, we have to associate it with your voice in Walter’s memory.”

Doc excused himself for a minute, and sat at another terminal, where he started typing at about ninety miles

an hour.

Meanwhile, Steve brought up another dialog box in another window. This had a few blank boxes. He typed “GWEN” into one of them, a date, and a time into others. Then, he copied a number from the upper left of Gwen’s profile window into a box on the new window. Then, he hit the ENTER key. Suddenly the new window changed. It was the same form, but now all the boxes were filled in. Neither the labels on the boxes, nor the contents displayed meant anything to her.

“This new window,” Steve explained, “is associated with Walter’s memory of your voice training session. The information in these boxes is diagnostic of how the training session went. This number, for example, is a score indicating how hard it was for Walter to understand you. I’ve now associated that training with your profile. The next time you train Walter on your voice, he’ll recognize your voice as belonging to your profile, and automatically connect that new voice training session with this session, and to your profile. Walter now recognizes you, in his own way, as a real person whom he should listen to. Before, he didn’t care if you were the Phantom of the Opera.”

“Let’s have her program Walter with a new command,” Doc said. Gwen jumped. She was startled because she didn’t know he had come up to stand directly behind her. The last time she’d looked, he’d been at the other side of the room typing at a terminal.

“Sorry, Honey,” Doc said, and kissed her on the earlobe. It made her think of Eve, because that’s exactly what she would have said, and done. It made her miss Eve, and want to run out, and tell her what they’d been doing.”

“Let’s have her teach Walter a new command, then take a break,” Doc said to Steve. “She’s had a lot to take in at once. Has anyone taught Walter to wag his tail?”

“No, I’m pretty sure nobody has. You’re the only one who thinks of things like that, anyway.”

“Go for it,” Doc instructed.

“Okay, Gwen,” Steve said, thinking about what he would have her do, and the steps she’d have to perform to accomplish it. “What we’re going to do is put Walter in a mode to learn a new movement. I’ll tell you the command to use, and you say it to him, then grab the tip of his tail, hold it a little bit up in the air, and move it from side to side three times, then put it down flat again.” He demonstrated. “Got that?”

“Yes,” she repeated to make sure she had it right. “I’ll say the command you give me, then lift Walter’s tail a little bit, and wag it back and forth for him three times, and put it back down flat.”

“Exactly. Now, take your time. Once you say the command, you’ve got a whole minute to start the movement. We put a timeout on in case something happens to interrupt the training session. He’ll wait a full minute before deciding that something must have gone wrong. Then, he’ll terminate the command himself, and wipe out any record of it. Remember, speak in a natural voice. There’s a tendency to be nervous the first time, which makes it harder for Walter to understand what you’re saying. Here, I’ve written down the command. Just say it after I’ve woken Walter up. No! I’ve an idea. *You* wake him up. You’ve heard Doc do it a couple of times.”

Nervously, Gwen said: “Walter, wake up.”

Walter turned his head toward her, and said: “Good afternoon, Gwen.”

Reading the command, she said: “Walter, learn motion WAG YOUR TAIL THREE TIMES.”

“Yes, mistress,” Walter replied subserviently.

They heard a chortle of laughter from Red, who’d come in while they’d been concentrating on teaching Gwen to train Walter. Red, who hadn’t heard that response from Walter before, but recognized it as Doc’s work, wagged her finger at him, and mouthed: “Naughty boy!” Eve was standing next to her, not quite understanding what was going on.

Steve said: “Go ahead, Gwen. Move his tail.”

Gwen did as she'd been instructed. Then Steve pointed to a second instruction on the paper he'd handed her. She read: "Walter, stop."

"You bad boy," Red laughingly said to Doc. "You made him sound like an S&M slave."

"Hey," Doc said offhandedly, "If you can't have fun, why do it?"

"What are you guys doing to my girl?" Eve asked in a suspicious tone.

"They've been showing me how to train Walter," Gwen said, excitedly. It was the first time anyone had ever shown her anything like this, and even trusted her to do it, herself.

"Okay, now," Steve told her. "Tell him to wag his tail."

Smiling with excitement, Gwen said: "Walter, wag your tail."

Nothing happened. Gwen looked crestfallen.

"You forgot to wake him up first," Steve pointed out. "Try again."

"Walter, wake up," Gwen said.

Walter lifted his head, again, pointed it at Gwen, and said: "Good afternoon, Gwen."

"Walter, wag your tail three times," she said, reading the part Steve circled on his piece of paper.

Walter lifted his tail, and wagged it three times.

Gwen was delighted.

"Okay, now," Steve said, "tell him to wag five times."

Gwen looked at him with delighted surprise, then said to Walter: "Walter, wag your tail five times."

Walter, who had been tracking Gwen's face the whole time, raised his tail, and wagged it five times.

"Wow!" Gwen cried, gleefully.

"That's why I had you include the 'three times' when you taught him the command. We call it a compound command, which includes what he should do, along with a modifier that gives him more detail."

"What if I don't tell him how many times to wag?" Gwen asked.

Red looked up at Doc in surprise at the perceptiveness of Gwen's question. She'd quickly assimilated new data, used it to draw a conclusion, then conceived of a possible exception.

Doc smiled knowingly back at Red, and nodded in Gwen's direction, signaling that he'd noted that perceptiveness before.

Steve, who was just thinking about teaching this pretty girl, who seemed so interested in his work, simply said: "Try it."

Walter was still watching Gwen's face like a puppy in love. When she turned to him, and said: "Walter, wag your tail," he raised his tail, and wagged once, then put it down.

Gwen smiled at her own success.

"Walter, sleep," Doc said, ending the session. "Tamara, did you get all that?" he yelled toward the other end of the trailer, where Tamara had her video production equipment set up.

"Yup!" came Tamara's yelled response.

"Please dub a copy for Eve, in case she wants to use it. Leave out the part about setting up the profile, and associating it with the voice pattern."

"Got it!"

“Eve,” Doc said. “you now have a video of a new Worm programmer being trained. And, you have access to the new Worm programmer, who might consent to give you an interview, if you kiss her right.”

Surprised, Gwen looked from Doc, to Eve, to Doc again with her mouth open, searching for some sign as to what she was supposed to do. Seeing her confusion, Red, who was standing beside her, gave her a friendly hug to get her attention, and said: “He’s just opened a door for you. My advice is to walk through.”

Eve smiled invitingly to Gwen, and asked: “Ready to do an interview?”

Surprised, and pleased; shy, but enthusiastic, she said: “Yes!”

“She’ll need a cup of coffee, first. I’ll bring it over,” Doc said. He went to what had originally been the trailer’s kitchenette, took a yellow ceramic cup with a red SST logo from a cupboard, and filled it with coffee from a drip machine. Then, he carried it to Gwen, who was now sitting with Eve in comfortable chairs in Tamara’s little mini studio.

“Please point the logo at the camera,” he requested. Eve chuckled.

“How long have you been planning this?” Red asked, when he got back to her.

“I didn’t plan it. It just grew,” he replied.

“More detail,” she encouraged. “I’m curious.”

“Well, I’ve been probing her brain since I saw how she was responding to Eve. She listens well. Takes instruction. Responds well to positive reinforcement. Understands numbers, though she’s no mathematician. Uses fuzzy logic well to get answers in uncertain environments. Makes decisions almost as well as you do. Has great survival instincts, so she doesn’t panic in stressful situations. Um, can sit still, and wait for the next thing to happen. And, so forth. You get the idea.”

“And, you just dropped it all into that neural net between your ears, turned the crank, and out came ‘Worm

programmer' as her ideal job title."

"Pretty much."

"Have you told Pat?"

"I've forewarned Pat. As an ex-stripper, Gwen might have trouble getting a security clearance, but we'll see about that. There may be a whole raft of things she's lied to us about, from her age to her criminal record, but we'll sort that out, too. For now, we've got a potential promising new employee. We're quietly assembling the core expertise to exploit a promising new robotics technology, which I think we're introducing spectacularly." He nodded toward the studio, where Eve was interviewing Gwen. "And, we seem to have made two ladies very happy. What could go wrong?"

"Everything."

"I know, but we need to be more specific, if we're going to head off trouble."

45

"Ohh, I like those dresses," Doc said when Eve and Gwen arrived at the restaurant. He'd chosen a steakhouse with an upscale atmosphere to avoid Italian fare, which he and Eve had eaten last night, and to give the ladies a chance to dress up a little.

Knowing what Doc had in mind – because she'd helped him plan it – Red had quit early at the camp to take Eve and Gwen shopping. Her only role at this point was to supervise. Since everyone else knew what they were supposed to do, and knew more about what they were doing than she did, she would just be in the way. So, the best use of her time was to get the heck out of there, and sample Carson City's dress shops.

Eve wore a vibrant pink silky dress closed at the front with a brooch like the one she'd worn last night, but with a halter collar that left her back bare to below the waist. Gwen wore one identical except for the color, which

was royal blue. Eve wore a triple string of white pearls with matching earrings, while Gwen wore an identical set in black. It was a tasteful, but very clear message to the world that they were lovers and pleased about it.

“I don’t know,” Doc continued, “in those outfits, I might have to take you two home, myself.”

“No, you don’t, you leech,” Red warned him. “You leave them alone, and give them some space.”

He had produced a white western-style suit from somewhere, and wore it with a white shirt, and a black bolo with a silver-and-turquoise slide, and, of course, his black hat. Red wore her black velvet dress and the heels that had made such an impression on Greg Michels, along with her squash blossom necklace and a pair of Indian (south-Asian Indian, that is) inspired earrings intricately woven of gold wire.

The head waiter seated them at a comfortably large round table. The ladies were surprised when the waiter didn’t offer them menus, just handed a wine list to Doc.

“I took the liberty of pre-ordering chateaubriand for four,” Doc announced. “I believe we’re all carnivores, here.”

Gwen was a little miffed at being taken for granted, and asked: “And, how do you know I’m *not* a vegetarian?”

“You had a burger last night.”

Stunned, Gwen asked loudly, “How did you know that?”

“Calm down, dear,” Red soothed, “Tom Devore, and some of his friends talked to some of your friends today. It’s one of the things they discussed.”

Gwen looked frightened, and glanced from Eve to Doc, and back again. Seeing this Red continued: “It’s all right Gwen. It’s one of the things we have to do when we want to offer someone a job. It’s part of the background check we always have to do. In your case, there are some other matters to deal with, as well. Tom discussed the

possibility of your coming to work for us with the people at the club. They really want you to come back to work for them, but if you want to work for us, they'll give their blessing. If you want to go back, they'll only take a quarter of what you make, instead of a half."

"Why?"

"Because that's what Tom told them."

"They'll kill me!" Gwen said, obviously believing it was literally true.

"No, they won't," Doc said, "they'll be very nice to you."

"Why? You don't know these people!"

"Of course we do," Red explained quietly. "I told you, our detective, who is an ex-cop, had a long talk with them today."

"After all that, they'll still kill me if I go back," Gwen pleaded. "You can't scare those guys. They're *connected*!"

"Yes," Doc put in. "And, they want to stay that way. They also want to stay alive, and out of jail."

"You'd have them run out of the mafia, thrown in jail, and killed?" Gwen asked, hardly believing it. These people seemed so *nice*. Nice people don't do that.

"That's what happens to connected people who don't do what they're told, isn't it?"

"But, in a way, I'm connected, too. And I'm not doing what they're telling me."

"Yes, and in a way, you're still connected, just a couple of levels farther up," Red explained. "You see, Tom spoke with them, too. He just explained to your bosses' bosses what sterling qualities you have that would fit you for a management position in their organization, but fit you even better for our organization. We paid them to let

you choose.”

“But, those guys are killers. If they want me, they’ll come after me,” Gwen was in a near panic.

Red looked at her sternly, and said: “Enough of this Gwen. My stepfather’s mercenaries are better killers than your bosses’ killers.”

“Another thing,” Red pointed out, “my stepfather refers to that big ... whatever he is ... over there as a ‘pirate,’ and he means it. Doc is nice by choice. I’ve seen him when he decides not to be nice. Believe me, he’s much more dangerous than your bosses. Be glad he likes you.”

“Doc,” Red suddenly announced, “we’re scaring the girl.”

“I know, and that’s not what we want,” he replied.

Doc sat deep in thought for a minute. Eve knew SST well enough to know they were definitely not a criminal organization. She did know that Doc, and apparently now Red, and Red’s stepfather, didn’t take any nonsense from anyone, but they were kindly rather than cruel. Like with that bouncer at the strip club: she’d seen him threatening to cause trouble, but Doc had calmed him down, and bought him a beer, then sat and drank with him, fer chrissakes. All to keep from having to beat him up, which Eve knew Doc could do without breaking a sweat.

Deciding to jump in, she put her hand gently over Gwen’s and said: “It’s alright, Honey, they’re just trying to help. They won’t hurt you, and they won’t let anyone else hurt you, either.”

“Gwen, you’ve at least got the weekend to think about it,” Doc said. “I’m authorized to offer you a job as a Worm programmer trainee. The pay’s not spectacular, only twenty four grand a year, but you’ll earn more as you progress. There’s a big step up when you graduate high school.” Gwen looked up suddenly. “Yes, we know about that, too. If you take the job, you’ll have to study for your GED. We’ll pay for college, if you decide to go. I’d recommend it. You’re already at the forefront of computer science. You might as well get the sheepskin to go along

with it.”

“What?” Gwen asked. His last remark didn’t make sense.

“Maybe I didn’t explain,” Doc said, patiently. “Walter is an advanced prototype of a next-generation robotics technology. There are, maybe, six people in the world who know how to program him, and the generations of Worm robots that will come after him. You’re the seventh. Lots more people will learn to do it, but you’ll be in line ahead of them. Once you’ve learned your trade, companies will pay you whatever you ask to program their Walters for them. If you get a degree, and keep up your education, we’ll pay you one-point-three shitloads of money to help us keep ahead of the pack. You asked this morning how we made so much money. This is how. ‘Sup to you.’”

“Say ‘yes,’ Honey,” Eve urged, still holding Gwen’s hand.

“Why me?” Gwen asked, still suspicious.

“Because you can,” Doc stated. “I spent most of the day testing you. You passed well.”

With a slight shake of her head, Gwen looked at him, then thought over all the things that had passed between them. Now, she could see that he was testing and probing all the time. Learning to program Walter was her final exam.

“But, I’m just a stripper.”

“Not anymore,” Doc stated categorically, “If you take the job we’re offering, you’re a roboticist in training, although they’re calling ‘em ‘mechatronics engineers’ these days. If you go back to Reno, you’re a mafia chieftain in training. If you come to work for us, and miss stripping, Eve knows a couple of people who produce Internet porn for a hobby.”

“What?” Eve yelped. “Who?”

“That guy Hank, and his best girl, what’s her name, Bitsy. He shoots video, and she’s talent, with a taste for

tall women, I might add.”

“How do you know that?” Eve said.

“You don’t think I know *everything* that goes on around my little sister? They propositioned her at the interview.”

“I didn’t see that,” Eve said, doubtfully.

“No, but I did,” Doc said.

Eve looked to Red for confirmation: “Did that really happen?”

“They wanted something. I wasn’t sure what,” she confirmed.

“I was. Hank was thinking about it, but Bitsy asked twice. She wanted to lap you right there.”

Red laughed, remembering: “I’m glad I said, ‘no.’ It didn’t seem quite right.”

“I would have stopped you because of your future in the executive suite at Gulf States Petroleum, but Gwen’s under no such constraint. If she wants to plaster her private parts all over the Internet while developing robotics technology, nobody’s going to bat an eye.”

“What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I go to the executive suite?” Gwen asked, miffed.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, girl, and you can go to the executive suite,” Doc explained. “But, Red has no choice, she basically already *owns* the thing, and when I get done with her, she’ll be ready to run it. Sorry, Red. Life isn’t fair. Ask Louis the sixteenth.”

“Who?” Gwen asked Eve, not wanting to attract any more attention.

“A guy who wanted to be a clockmaker, but they made him try to run France. When he couldn’t, they

chopped off his head. Killed his wife and kids, too.”

Gwen looked shocked.

“Take some history classes,” Eve advised her. “Those clowns you’ve been working for are nobodies.”

Gwen’s face took on that “learn something every day” look.

“Back to our beautiful guest, whom we’ve been browbeating unmercifully,” Doc said. “To our shame, I might add.”

“So,” Red said, “how about it? Do you need more time to think? We can give you ‘til Monday.”

Eve looked like she was praying.

Gwen said: “No, I don’t need any more time. I liked playing with Walter.”

“Good, make sure you remember to think of it as play,” Doc advised. “You started today, so make sure Eve puts you on the shuttle bus by nine tomorrow morning. Steve’ll be your supervisor through your training period, at least,” Doc said. “Monday, you’ll fly down to Scottsdale to meet with Pat for a two-day orientation. Then, you’ll probably need to fly back up here by Wednesday to work with Steve on this project. We’ve still got more holes to explore.”

“Eve, she’ll probably want to go up to Reno this weekend to get her stuff, and say goodbye to her real friends. I’ll have one of Red’s shadows drive her up, and send a couple more to hang around. It’s up to you two whether you want to go along. We’ll hire a small limo so there’ll be plenty of room.”

“Gwen, assuming you want to make the trip, just tell Red or me when you want to go. I do not advise staying overnight. It won’t be *that* safe. If you want to leave a contact where you can be reached, Red’s assistant, Bonnie, can set you up with a half dozen SST business cards. They can just call the main number, and ask for you. The receptionist will get a message through to you wherever you are. Just tell your friends that you don’t know where

you'll be assigned. You can tell anyone anything about what you're doing. They'll believe you after they see your interview with Eve on the news."

"Give your folks in Texas a call. They'll be thrilled to hear from you. They've been worried sick. Maybe Eve could get you a copy of the interview to send them. They seem like nice people."

"You talked to my *folks*?" Gwen screeched. She'd been ashamed to contact them.

"Not directly, and they don't know about it. I figured you'd want to tell them. Tell them about the job, but they won't believe you until you send the tape. Tell 'em you got the job through one of your friends, who's a news reporter. Tell them what you want about you and Eve."

"By the way," Doc intoned, "this is my own personal view, which I want to share with both of you. I hate the label 'lesbian,' as if you somehow weren't women any more. You two are women. The people you've chosen to love also happen to be women. It's no different than that Red has chosen to love Greg, who happens to be a man – as far as I know. He is a man, right Red, not just a really ugly woman dressed up as a man?" He said this last with a facetious smile.

"I can confirm that he is very definitely a man," Red said, smiling wistfully, and fanning herself with her napkin, as if in remembered ecstasy

"Anyway. Don't let anyone make you feel you're not a woman, or that you have to play somebody else's stupid game. That's my two cents worth. End of subject."

Eve and Gwen looked at Red as if expecting something from her. She replied by pointing to Doc, and saying: "What he said."

"This calls for a celebration, and as luck would have it, our dinner is on its way. Red, would you do the honors by selecting a wine. I don't drink the stuff."

He handed the wine list to Red, who sought advice from Eve as to what was best among fine wines. Then, they realized that Gwen could easily have had more experience with fine wine than either of them, depending on the clients she'd managed to find.

Doc simply sat back, and watched the women debate.

When the waiter finished serving the chateaubriand, and stood back, Doc leaned over to him and said: "I'll have heated cognac. Any brand of XO will do."

"And the wine?" the waiter asked, seeing that the women were getting nowhere. Each one, feeling incompetent with the kind of vintage Doc would expect them to have, was trying to defer to the others.

"Ladies," he called out. "may I suggest that you consult this learned gentleman, who probably knows more about fine wines, and certainly more about this establishment's cellar, than all of us put together."

Red, who was senior in terms of position, authority, height, and was ultimately paying for the whole spread, took the lead: "I dunno. Red to go with meat?" she offered.

The waiter nodded approval.

"Maybe something fruity to go with apparently inexperienced palates?" she tried.

"That would be my suggestion," the waiter intoned.

Running out of ideas, Red just said: "And, hang the price. We've a lot to celebrate tonight."

"And how big a bottle?" the waiter asked.

Red had no idea, so she just threw her hands in the air, made a face, and looked at Doc.

He looked at the three women, thought for a few seconds, and said to the waiter: "Let 'em get drunk. I'll stuff 'em in a cab when we're done. A couple of double magnums?"

“Excellent choice sir,” the waiter said, mentally estimating the tip on a wine bill approaching a thousand dollars.

“If they can get that down, and still go for more, we should follow with bottles, but we’ll see when the time comes. The tall one can put away a lot, when she wants to.”

Red looked up, blushing.

“Hey,” Eve said, “my car!”

“Will be perfectly safe right where it is,” Doc insisted. He pulled out his cellphone, speed dialed, and said: “We’ll need a limo for four in about an hour. Is that possible? – Good. I’ll give you a call when we’re ready. We’ll be going to the Plaza.”

Eve, and Gwen looked up at him again. They’d been planning to go back to Eve’s motel.

“It will still be early when we get out of here, and we’ve a perfectly good double suite with a fully stocked – no *two* fully stocked minibars – going spare. When you get tired, you can take over my bed, or, if you’re still ambulatory, we can arrange a cab to your hotel.”

“Where will you sleep?” Red asked, suspiciously.

“There are plenty of spare beds.” he was guessing he wouldn’t be sleeping between sheets tonight, anyway. It was shaping up to be one of those absurd party nights, where he woke up wherever he happened to crash.

By the time dinner was over, and they’d up-ended the two double magnums in their ice buckets along with another bottle, Doc had finished off his cognac, as well as a boilermaker. An hour and a half had come and gone. The limo service had called to make sure they weren’t being stood up. Doc assured them their services would be even more indispensable, now that none of them were competent to walk, let alone drive. Doc called the waiter over, and ordered a double espresso. Red joined him. The anti-twins, as Doc had drunkenly dubbed them, opted for

more ladylike cappuccinos.

When the coffees arrived, Doc called for the limo to come and rescue them. His timing was almost perfect. He gulped the last of his espresso, as the women fumbled over handbags and wraps. It was far too cold at that altitude and time of year to wear those dresses out at night without additional thermal insulation.

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The four piled into the back of what turned out to be a stretch limo, with a riot of high pitched chatter that, clearly, nobody was listening to, including the chatterers. Gwen and Eve took the long bench seat on one side, while Doc and Red flopped on the other.

As the doors closed and the lights dimmed, the driver thought he might get a spectacular show, but was disappointed. The anti-twins did start making out as soon as it got dark, but the big cowboy and the amazon in black velvet just sat together, leaning shoulder to shoulder, trying to meditate while the lights spun.

They looked too young to be an old married couple. Brother, and sister? They didn't look that similar, except for their height. Half siblings? Must be. The driver knew that he wouldn't even attempt to keep his hands off *that* body, especially with the anti-twins kissing and fondling within knee shot.

He watched as they exchanged passionate kisses while hugging each other, with a hand darting from time to time under the halter-top fronts to cop a quick feel, while each had a knee thrust deeply into the slit in the other's dress. He should put the dark dividing window up to give them privacy, but none of them seemed to care. Certainly none of them asked him to run the glass up. Besides, they were all thoroughly inebriated, so he should keep the glass down to watch in case one of them had a problem.

By the time he'd worked this all out, they were pulling up to the Plaza's lobby. Doc and Red unfolded their big frames with some difficulty, but managed to get out and stand more-or-less steadily. The anti-twins, however, took a while to return their clothing to presentability, then attempt to get on the coats they'd taken off to make

fondling easier, then give up, and drag the coats through the limo door, which seemed to keep changing location as they tried to aim for it.

Finally, they stood on the pavement near the door, dragging their half-forgotten coats on the ground while staring at each other, stupidly. Neither noticed the other's tousled hair, or the fact that they'd both completely forgotten their purses.

The limo driver ran Doc's credit card, then checked the back for forgotten belongings. He was surprised to find little sign of female ejaculation. Nothing where the anti-twins had been going hot and heavy – probably absorbed by the stockinged knees. There was just a little dampness where the amazon had been sitting. He guessed that she hadn't been watching so impassively as it appeared, after all. In that case, he wondered why she hadn't joined in. Well, there's no accounting.

He handed Doc the two purses with a knowing look, as Doc handed him the signed credit-card receipt. Doc responded to the look with a full, good-natured laugh.

"So, you took them home with you, after all," the driver heard the amazon say to the cowboy. She followed it with, "Naughty boy!"

Then, she put her arm around his waist, and he put his over her shoulder, and together they walked into the lobby, following the anti-twins, who were making a thoroughly uncoordinated attempt to walk while hugging each other.

The driver would have given a month's pay to be a fly on the wall in *that* suite tonight!

Bonnie happened to be walking through the lobby at that point, and caught sight of the parade. She was too savvy to be shocked by anything Red or Doc might be involved in, especially when they were together to egg each other on. She'd met Eve briefly on a few occasions, and seen her often reporting the news. She'd formed the impression of Eve as a highly professional, no-nonsense, newshound who cared little about anything, but the next

story, with the possible exception of getting her legs wrapped around Doc Manchek. To see her totally swacked, and joined at the hip to a beautiful blonde was beyond her comprehension.

“Bonnie,” Red called, in a slightly slurred voice. Bonnie’s boss was swacked, too.

“Bonnie,” Red repeated, then stopped, confused. “What was it I wanted to say? I wanted to tell you before I forgot, but then I forgot. Doc, help me!”

“You were going to explain that we were celebrating the hiring of SST’s newest employee, namely yon devastatingly beautiful, though badly inebriated blonde named Gwendolyn Petersen. Tomorrow we need to get her name on a small stack of blank SST business cards.”

“Her title is ‘Worm handler,’” he snickered. Red punched him in the ribs, hard. “Sorry, horrible joke in bad taste for which I should be flogged, but I just couldn’t resist.” Then, Red snickered.

“Seriously,” he said.

“Or, as seriously as he can manage at this particular time,” Red interrupted, then added: “Sorry, Bonnie. Blame it on the drink.”

“Seriously,” Doc tried again. “I really mean it. We’ve hired Gwen to learn how to program Walter. So, she’s a robotics programmer. She’s going to be working under ... Steve Michels will be her supervisor. I’m drunk, too.”

“No shit!” Bonnie couldn’t help commenting. She was getting a contact high just talking to them. Maybe it was Red’s breath, which reeked of rotten grapes. Doc was exhaling the sweet odor of pure alcohol. Maybe with an admixture of hops, but definitely he’d been drinking rocket fuel. Bonnie hoped it wouldn’t damage her contact lenses.

“She’ll probably want to go up to Reno Saturday, or Sunday to get her stuff. She’ll need a small limo, and have Edmund drive it. Have him pick a couple of his boys to kinda stand around on streetcorners while she’s up

there. Have him talk with Tom Devore about what to expect. Lessee, what else?”

He began to tick off things in his mind, which kinda dribbled out of his mouth: “Hired Gwen. Business cards. Oh, yeah, get the spelling of her name from Steve. Trip to Reno. Oh, she’ll need a flight to SST on Monday for orientation with Pat. She’ll need a hotel.”

“Why not have her stay at your place?”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, I’m serious. You’ll probably still be here. And, Sam’s there to take care of her.”

“No,” Doc insisted, “bad precedent. Too many mixed messages.”

“Doc,” Red insisted, sobering up temporarily, “I want her watched until we get to know her better. You only met her Monday, and her background check isn’t complete, yet, is it?” This was one time Red wanted her insistence to trump Doc’s insistence. She was thinking back to Doc’s question about what could go wrong. It was not going to be this possibly-ex-hooker screwing things up at SST by taking a powder the first time she’s left alone.

Doc was considering it, seriously.

“Doc, I mean it!” Red said, emphatically.

That was enough for Doc. Besides, he never could say no to her when she really meant it.

“Your whim is my command, Mistress Judith. Bonnie, arrange for Sam to pick her up at SST, have her stay over in the spare bedroom – not Red’s room – and bring her back in the morning.”

“I still have a room at your place?” Red interrupted in surprise.

“Don’t interrupt. This is hard enough in my condition. Yes, you do. It makes Sam feel better.”

“Sam might as well pick her up at the airport. No, just have the charter service fly her down and bring her back. That way we won’t have to kuck around with commercial-airline schedules. The pilots will probably fight over who gets to walk her to the SST building. Sam can pick her up, bring her to my apartment, feed her, tuck her in if she’ll let him, and bring her back to Pat in the morning. Pat can put her on the plane to come back here. That works.”

“Is she a *lesbian*?” Bonnie asked *sotto voce*.

Doc controlled the pained expression the word induced, and replied, in the same voice: “No, she’s a woman. It happens the person she’s in love with is Eve. Eve is also a woman, who happens to have fallen in love with Gwen. Give them some respect. You know Eve. She’s still Eve. She’s just gone ga-ga over Gwen. I think they’re both showing remarkably good taste, actually. They’re both *stupendous* fucks!”

Bonnie looked shocked at hearing this from her company’s CEO, but Red told her: “You started it. It’s a mistake to wind up a drunk.”

“You mean ... “ Bonnie started to say, looking at Red, and realizing the only way Doc could know that they were both stupendous fucks was by a practical test.

Red just closed her eyes, and shook her head up and down.

“Together?” Bonnie whispered.

Red pursed her lips, raised her eyebrows, and renewed her affirmative head nodding.

Now Bonnie was getting excited. Against, her better judgment, of course.

Bullshit! Bonnie was getting excited, and enjoying it.

“Don’t you have some notes to write down for the morning?” Red reminded her. “That’s a lot to remember all at once.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bonnie saluted, and left hurriedly.

By this time, the anti-twins had reached the elevator, and were standing together, trying unsteadily to support each other.

“We’d better take those two upstairs, and put them to bed before they sag into a lump of silly putty on the floor,” Red said.

“Do you think they’re still mobile, or will we have to carry them?” Doc asked.

“I dunno. Let’s see what happens when the elevator door opens.”

They got to the anti-twins just in time to lift them up, and push them toward the opening elevator door. Several people were getting off, so they had to hang onto them.

Doc quickly found himself with Eve’s arms around his neck, while he didn’t even try to fend off a kiss. She was, after all, supposed to be *his* girl.

Red, however, found herself with Gwen’s arms wrapped around her back, while Gwen tried nuzzle her face into Red’s halter top. Red found the sensation much more pleasant than she was prepared to admit. Gwen was supposed to be an equal-opportunity sex kitten. Red didn’t know about her passion for men, but she could vouch that Gwen very much liked women.

Since the only other way to fend off Gwen’s stuporous advances was to throw her to the floor like a rag doll. Red resigned herself to the not unpleasant feeling of having the cleavage side of her right breast thoroughly lapped. Red figured that if this kept up much longer, she wouldn’t have to wash the side that breast for a week. This she corrected to side-and-underneath, as Gwen found a way to get her face far enough inside the halter top to find the underside of Red’s breast below the nipple with her tongue.

The elevator cleared out, and Doc and Red managed to walk their charges into the car, and close the door.

Other people waiting to go up in the hotel elected to let them have the car to themselves, except for one teenage boy, who almost managed to climb in with the quartet before his mother pulled him out from behind. The boy just missed Gwen's success at pulling the two sides of Red's halter top together, and suddenly exposing both of her breasts. Gwen's mouth was headed in a direct trajectory for Red's right nipple, when Red tossed her like a rag doll against the elevator door, and let her slide down to the floor while she rearranged her dress.

"Sheesh!" Red exclaimed.

"It actually looked like fun," Doc commented.

"Between you, and me," Red confided, "it was fun. If she's like that half passed out, I see what you mean about being a stupendous fuck when sober. If you ever tell anyone I said it, I'll find a way to hurt you."

"Between you, me, the elevator, and these corpses, you should try it some time. It won't hurt you, and you'll learn something about yourself."

"What's that? Aren't you afraid I'll end up like Eve?"

"You'll learn whether you like it, or not, and, more importantly, how much. You might get the creepy crawlies after the first touch, which is how I feel about men. There's not much to recommend them to me, and I don't see how you women can stand it. But, that's just me. Lots of men feel differently, obviously. I've no idea how it feels to be a woman looking at, or touching, another woman. It's an experiment you can do, which I can't. But, if you ever actually do the experiment, don't be surprised when I ask for a full report. For scientific analysis, of course."

"I can tell you right now," Red stated, "that Gwen's touching me felt pretty darn good. Annie's touching me felt good, too. They just can't give me what I ultimately want out of life."

"What's that?"

“A house in the country with pretty lace curtains, where I can raise kittens, puppies, and most of all babies. She also can’t give me a warm erection between my legs on a cold winter (or hot summer) night, or a glob of hot semen well up in my vagina once in a while. She can give me some of it, but not the most important parts. *Capisci?*”

“Hah! Italian! I knew I’d catch you out, if I waited long enough. Where’d you learn that?”

“Catechism class. Italians go to Catholic school, too, you know. Where’d *you* learn it?”

“Lisa Mucciarone. She was insisting that I had to marry her first.”

“Obviously, you didn’t.”

“I knew she was lying. She was the one who’d directed my finger to her clit, then came all over it.”

“We’re almost there. Put yours down for a minute, and help me get this one in a fireman’s carry. I’m tired of her playing with my boobs. It’s giving me a headache.”

“That’s the wine. That’s why I never drink the stuff.”

Doc sat Eve on the elevator floor, and helped Red hoist Gwen up over her shoulders. Then, he went back to Eve, and picked her up in his arms. Her amorous advances while he carried her were not giving him a headache.

“I’ll get the door,” Red said as they approached the suites. She’d already pulled her key card out of her pocketbook, and stuck it into her bodice before picking Gwen back up in the elevator. Her fireman’s carry left one hand free to pull the key card out, and let them into her suite. She noted with satisfaction that Bonnie had informed the hotel they’d be here tonight, so the beds had been turned down.

Opening the adjoining door into Doc’s suite, she flipped on the lights before unceremoniously dumping Gwen on Doc’s bed. Doc dumped Eve on the bed next to her.

“Shall we strip them?”

“Nah, they aren’t really that far gone.”

“I remember you stripped me the night Annie got me drunk.”

“You were alone, and passed out. These two have each other, and they aren’t that far gone. They’ll find each other, and strip down soon enough.”

“I wasn’t that far gone, either.”

“You little vixen!”

“Why do you think I had to masturbate to get back to sleep? I was disappointed when you didn’t take advantage of me.”

“No comment,” was all Doc said.

It was still early, so Red turned on the TV, while Doc took the ice bucket out to fill it. He planned to drink lots of water to minimize the pain of his hangover in the morning. When he got back, he found Red had stripped to her skin, and was curled up on the couch in front of the TV with her legs curled under her. She was alert, now, though still having trouble maintaining focus with her eyes. She was flipping channels while squinting against the bright room light. Doc dimmed the lights to make it easier on her eyes.

Unlike Red, who was actually more comfortable nude when lounging around, Doc preferred cloth between his skin and the furniture, so he just took off his suit coat and bolo, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. He sat down beside Red to see what she’d turn up on the screen.

A few minutes later, he was still uncomfortable with the baggy suit pants on. He got up, changed into the oldest pair of jeans he had, which had traveled up from Scottsdale in his flight bag, and put on the old pair of boots.

Red had settled on a program about technological advances made by the ancient Greeks. He sat down next to her to watch it with her, although he'd seen it twice before. She'd seen it before, too, but it was more interesting than watching situation comedies featuring characters they'd kick out if they found them in the living room, or game shows starring congenital idiots. Doc might have wanted to watch the baseball game sent up from the Phoenix station, but Red didn't know any of the players, and was still too hammered to deal with it. Watching a program she'd learned something from the first time she'd seen it was just about the speed Red wanted right now.

Doc felt the same, and was happy to be sitting there, sharing it with her. She moved a little closer to rest her shoulder against his.

An hour later, after that program had ended, and Doc had started hunting for the ball game, Gwen and Eve came wandering out of the bedroom wearing bathrobes. Seeing Red *au naturel*, they tossed those off immediately, and flopped on the couch together, next to Doc.

"Back among the living, I see," he said to them. Giving up his search for the game. Red grabbed the remote from his hand, and started hunting through the on-demand movie list.

Gwen, who'd selected the seat closest to Doc was still pretty far gone. Having drunk the most while weighing the least, the alcohol had affected her more, and was taking more time to clear itself. She started rubbing his groin.

"Gwen, the good doctor's not in any shape to play right now. Please stop. Frustrated, she got up, walked to the other end of the couch, curled up in a fetal position with her head on Red's hip, and went back to sleep.

Eve moved over a little to be a little closer to Doc without crowding him, as Gwen had done. Eve was coming down from the drunk, but just starting the hangover.

"Do you think she's a nympho?" Eve asked Doc with a look of concern.

"No," he replied with a smile, "she's just barely conscious, and probably considerably stressed. Remember,

for some time, the only thing most people have wanted from her is sex. At least, that's been her main occupation. It's a habit, and when one's brain isn't firing on all cylinders, habits come to the fore. If she was a nymphomaniac, she would have been trying to get into Steve's pants instead of listening to what he was telling her. She's okay, just seriously drunk, and out of her usual element. She'll be alright in the morning. How are *you* doing?"

"Getting better. She woke up with the hornies half an hour ago. Frankly, my clit is purple! I came out here for help. I'm sorry."

"Regretting your choice?" Doc asked.

"No, just wondering if I can take it. No offense, Doc, but I like fucking her more than you. Tonight, she's just so persistent."

"No offense taken. I'd prefer her to me, too. As I've said twice already tonight, she's a stupendous fuck. Anybody who wouldn't want to come back for more of her belongs in an institution."

"Don't judge by tonight," he continued. "There are a lot of things going on that conspire to put her libido on the Moon. There's the sex habit that I just mentioned. There's what I call the 'Honeymoon effect.' Whenever someone takes on a new lover, they tend to go nuts. Can't keep their genitals off each other. There's also the new surroundings, so she's reaching out for something familiar to hang onto. Then, there's the fact that you're a stupendous fuck, too. Put it all together, and add way too much alcohol for her little frame. Remember, she was trying to keep up with us, all of whom have many pounds on her. Even you probably have at least ten pounds on her. I'm something like two and a half times her weight. We put her right under the table, tonight."

"No," he concluded, "I'd be surprised if she didn't act like this tonight. So, don't worry. You just stay out here, and cool your jets. If you want, the good doctor will make a house call. Then you take her to bed, and turn *her* clit purple. By that time, the crisis will be over."

"Ooops!" Eve said, and pointed at Red. Doc turned to look, and saw that Gwen had maneuvered herself

around to get one of Red's nipples in her mouth. Red had given up resisting, and was cradling Gwen's head like a baby. Red shrugged, helplessly.

"I'm so sorry," Eve said, apologizing for Gwen, and feeling embarrassed about the whole situation.

"I think you can make up for it by getting Red a clean hand towel out of the bathroom."

Puzzled, Eve did as she was asked. When she got back, Red pulled her nipple away from Gwen, who was passed out again, and stood up from the couch. Eve saw the answer to her puzzle, there was a small, dark stain on the couch. Gwen's suckling had brought Red to an orgasm.

"Better get her another one," Doc told Eve.

Red had grown too wise to be upset about the situation. She just toweled off the fluid from her crotch, and thighs. When Eve brought her the second towel, she folded it double, and placed it down where she'd been sitting. Then, she sat down again, and picked Gwen's head up again to cradle in her arms. Doc kissed her on the forehead.

Doc got the remote control back, and started looking for the game again. It looked like a long night. It was still the bottom of the second inning when Doc located the game, and settled down. Eve put her head in Doc's lap, and watched. A few minutes later, Red cried out in a shuddering orgasm.

The game turned out to be a slug fest, accounting for its length. By the middle of the fourth, Gwen was well and truly asleep. Doc picked Gwen up gently, and put her in the bed, tucking the covers up around her. Meanwhile, Red toweled herself off

"If either of you ever breathes a word of this," Red said, "I'll ... I don't know what I'll do, but it won't be pleasant. Eve, you be nice to that girl when she wakes up."

Doc looked at Red critically, then said: "Doing a little maternal bonding have we been?"

"So the fuck what?" Red replied, defiantly.

“Just interesting,” Doc rejoined.

Eve looked up, not quite knowing what to think. She understood what was going on, but couldn't quite fit it into the grand scheme of her life.

Eve decided that it was unfair for Doc to be the only one who hadn't had an orgasm. She kneeled on the couch, unzipped Doc's fly, and began massaging his penis, which had managed to stay erect through this whole evening, despite his best efforts to concentrate on the game. Eve did her best to swallow Doc's whole shaft. After a few minutes, during which Doc's erection became considerably larger, and harder, Eve stopped, and asked Red: “You want some of this?”

Red had worked hard to break old habits, and didn't want to backslide, so she said, “No, I'll just watch.”

In deference to her abused genitals, Eve told Doc, “I want you to come in my mouth.” Then she concentrated on the best, and longest, deep throat performance of her life. Looking up at Red from time to time, she saw her working four fingers in, and out of her vagina. Reaching over, she pushed her relatively smaller hand, all the way in.

Red, had long since decided to chalk this night up to another experience where she let a woman play with her body. In this case, it was two women, but what did that matter? She moved closer to make Eve's job easier, which placed her tight against Doc's side, and just lay back to enjoy it.

With a nude Red writhing in ecstasy against his side, and his erection an amazing distance down Eve's throat, Doc exploded. His semen filled her mouth, and dribbled out onto her chin. She pulled back so that she could breathe while the spurts of semen pumped into her mouth.

Climbing over Doc, Eve reached her mouth over to kiss her mouthful into Red's mouth. At first, Red intended to refuse. Then, thinking about Doc's comments earlier in the evening, and how bizarre the night had turned out already, she accepted it.

She did not, however, pass it back. In order to not let this go any further, she swallowed it immediately. Only slightly disappointed, Eve licked, and kissed away what semen had ended up on Red's face. In the spirit of this strange evening, Red returned the favor, cleaning up what had dribbled all over Eve's chin, and mouth.

Doc let Eve clean the mess off his penis and belly, too. Then, he kissed her thoroughly, and zipped up his pants.

It was the bottom of the fifth, and Arizona was leading San Francisco twelve to nine. Neither team seemed able to shut the other's offense down.

Thinking about it, Doc decided to pretend that none of this ever happened to Red. Let her deal with it in her own time, and in her own way.

47

The telephone ringing woke Doc from a deep slumber. He'd fallen asleep during the twelfth inning with the score tied fourteen all. It was a bizarre ending to a bizarre evening.

During the eighth inning, Eve had insisted that they switch to the evening news, ostensibly so she could catch up on what had happened during the day, but really to see if her interview with Gwen had aired, and how it looked. It did, but when they tried to wake Gwen to see it, she was successfully pantomiming the dead. The interview went off, however, exactly as planned, which is possible using pre-recorded video, and an hour of time on an A-B editor.

Doc was pleased to see that Eve had identified Gwen as a programmer trainee at Scottsdale Systems Technology, and that Gwen had dutifully featured the SST logo on the coffee cup, as requested. The girl knew where her bread was buttered, which was not surprising, since the difference between her activities in the sex trade and selling any other merchandise is just a matter of what the product is. Basically, you feature the product in an atmosphere that induces in the customer a desire to buy. Gwen could make shit soup seem appealing.

In this case, her primary product was careers in mechatronics. Doc didn't think she'd yet learned how to spell the word, but her enthusiastic description of what it was like to do vocal programming would create a stampede into high-school guidance offices all over the southwest. Her second product was advanced robotics technology, available at your nearest Scottsdale Systems Technology store, of which there was only one – his.

Gwen, herself, looked perfect. She looked like an especially attractive coed embarking on an exciting new career in computer science. Gwen knew a thing or two about proper use of makeup, and how to make herself attractive. Eve had made sure that when she arrived at the field camp, she looked like a young lady on vacation, rather than a hooker between tricks.

The street clothes Gwen had worn from Reno consisted of a pair of broken in, but not worn out, jeans, with a tank top that was one size too small, and sneakers. When Eve brought her to the camp, she'd basically only had to substitute a properly fitting red polo shirt for the overly revealing top Gwen had brought from Reno. Everything else fit in with what everyone else was wearing in camp. Eve had added a light bra to make her look a little more demure. The addition had made it possible for Tamara to position Gwen to take advantage of her bustline, while maintaining the video's G rating.

All in all, Doc was extremely pleased about everything. Eve was pleased because the clip told the story she wanted to tell, which was very similar to what Doc wanted to tell. Eve wanted to sell news about a new technology. Doc wanted to sell the technology. Both had happened on an ideal spokeswoman in Gwen. Too bad Gwen was too hammered to attend her own debut.

Red, who had inadvertently saddled herself with an emotional attachment to the girl, was pleased to see how well she'd shaped up. Red could see the wheels turning in Doc's head about how he could use Gwen to enhance SST's image as a place to get the most advanced measurement and control technology available. Red figured that was the end of Gwen's contact with the sex trade. She'd probably never get to meet Hank and Bitsy, and probably never appear on Internet porn sites – unless it suited Doc's purposes. Well, in the long run it would be good for Gwen.

Doc answered the telephone on the third ring.

“Wakey, wakey! Eggs, and bakey!” called the female voice on the other end. “This is your seven thirty wake-up call. Get your asses out of bed, wash the crusty stuff off your tainted bodies, and pour hot coffee down your throats. You’ve got an hour and a half to catch the last bus to work.”

“Red, it’s for you,” he called out.

“God! Don’t yell. My head hurts enough as is,” Red complained. “Now, what’s this all about?”

“It’s your wake up call,” Doc informed her.

“I didn’t leave a wake up call,” she said.

“Take the damn phone,” Doc ordered, crossly.

“Oh, hi Bonnie,” Red said, hearing Bonnie’s voice delivering the rest of her message, which Doc had rudely ignored while calling Red to the phone. Doc figured it was her project, and her assistant, so she could take the call. He headed off to collect the anti-twins.

“Oh, hi Red,” Bonnie said. “Did Doc give you my message?”

“What message. The bum just handed me the phone. What’s up?”

“Hopefully, you are. From what I saw in the lobby yesterday, I figured you’d need a wakeup call this morning. If what I imagine actually transpired when you got to your suite, all four of you need a lot of washing and combing before you’re presentable. So, you won’t have time to play hide the salami, or bumping uglies in the shower. I’m sending room service up with a continental breakfast for four, with extra coffee and orange juice. They should be there in an hour. That’ll give you guys time to clean up, dry off, and get decent, even if it’s bathrobes. Do the girls need clean clothes?”

“Probably. We came right from the restaurant, and all I saw were spectacular matching evening dresses, and high heels.”

“Then it’s good that I had some of your shadows break into their room early this morning, and lift enough clothes to take them through the day.”

“They actually did a B and E?”

“No, they didn’t really break and enter, the manager let them in.”

“Really?”

“They had a note from Eve authorizing him to let them in to collect some clothes for them.”

“Who forged Eve’s signature?”

“I did, of course. I’ll bring the clothes over right now.”

“Bonnie, I love you. You’re the best.”

“If I’m right about what went on in there last night, I’m not sure I want the love.”

“You’re still the best, but we just watched television.”

“Right!”

“Eve, and Gwen were so tired, they went right to sleep. Doc, and I watched a documentary, then the ball game.”

“Right! What was the score?”

“It went into extra innings. We fell asleep during the commercial break in the middle of the twelfth with the score tied fourteen all. The set’s still on with the sound muted.”

“San Francisco won fifteen-fourteen with a homer in the bottom of the twelfth,” Bonnie reported, to show the boss who was boss, and who was indispensable.

“You’re still the best! See you in a few.”

Meanwhile, Doc had walked into the bedroom to find Gwen, fully conscious, but close to tears with a look of shame, and contriteness.

“Omigawd! I can’t believe I did that,” she said, indicating Eve’s swollen clit. “I’m so sorry!”

“Quit apologizing, Honey. I don’t mind,” Eve was sitting in the middle of the bed with her ankles crossed, and her raw, red genitals exposed, trying to soothe Gwen’s feelings.

Chuckling, Doc observed: “Looks a lot better than it did last night.”

Gwen covered her face with her hands, and tried to run out of the room past Doc. Doc caught her, and smothered her in a hug. “It’s okay. You were drunk, and didn’t know what you were doing. The good doctor has made his examination, and she’s going to be all right. I’ve got some hydrocortisone cream in my little black bag, which you’re going to rub on it. That will make it feel much better. Add a couple of aspirin to the prescription, and she’ll feel fine. Tomorrow, you’ll never know it happened. If you’ll stop crying, I’ll get the cream.”

He made her sit on the edge of the bed, while he went to the bathroom to get the cream out of his toilet kit. He also pulled out a bottle of aspirin. He instructed Gwen to squeeze a bead of the cream out of the tube about a half inch long, then gently rub the cream into Eve’s skin until it disappeared.

“Why me?” Gwen asked, seeming loathe to touch the raw flesh.

“So you can fix what you hurt. Don’t worry, it’ll make her feel better right away. Then, it’ll make her heal faster. Go ahead.”

“Ohh!” Eve exclaimed as the cream took the burning away on contact.

Relieved, Gwen carefully and gently rubbed the cream all over Eve's damaged clit, and labia, wherever it was red. While Gwen was applying the cream, Doc got a cup of water for Eve to wash the aspirin down with.

"Keep rubbing it in until it disappears. It has a vanishing cream base, which is soothing. Rubbing helps her skin absorb the active ingredient. Eve, take the bottle and the cream with you. Take two aspirin every three hours. That will relieve the pain and reduce the swelling. Use the cream whenever it starts to feel raw, and especially if it itches. It'll help take the swelling down, too. You can, of course, apply it yourself. Wearing a sanitary napkin might help, too. You can probably find one in the bathroom."

"But first," he said, changing the subject, "we've got to get washed and dressed chop-chop. Breakfast will be here in less than an hour. We have less than an hour and a half to make the last shuttle."

"We have to go back to our hotel," Eve informed him. "We don't have any clothes except the evening dresses, and we can't wear them to the field camp."

"Patience. Let's see how things play out. Take care of what you need to do now. The future will take care of itself."

He stepped outside, and closed the bedroom door.

"What's going on?" asked Red.

"Minor medical emergency having to do with Eve's abused crotch. I gave her some ointment and a bottle of aspirin."

"Why, may I ask, have you got Gwen massaging Eve's private parts?"

"A little emotional healing. Gwen did the damage. Applying the cream gives her a chance to make up for it."

Red gave him a light kiss on his face between his lips and cheek.

“What was that for?”

“Being thoughtful.”

A knock came at the door. “That’s probably Bonnie bringing clothes for Eve and Gwen,” Red said, running to open it.

It wasn’t until she saw Bonnie’s eyes grow big as saucers that Red remembered she was naked, as she had been for almost twelve hours. Bonnie noticed that Red’s nipples were black and blue.

“I see that I was right, after all,” Bonnie said, “about what went on in here last night.” She looked accusingly at Doc, who had no idea what she was talking about, or what she was accusing him of.

Since the damage, what little actual damage there was, had already been done by her appearing at the door naked, Red decided to hold her head up high, and carry on.

“Thanks,” she said. “Do you want to come in?”

“At this point, I don’t think so,” Bonnie responded. “But, if Eve can give me her keys, we’ll pick up her car from the restaurant parking lot, and bring it here for her to use when she gets back on the shuttle this afternoon.”

“Why don’t you come in, while I bring these to Eve, and get her keys.” Red held the laundry bag full of clothing strategically to cover the parts that seemed to offend Bonnie the most.”

Coming in and closing the door, Bonnie whispered to Doc: “What did you do to her breasts? Those are amazing hickeys.”

“It wasn’t me, but it’s best not to ask.”

Red had a white bathrobe on when she brought out the keys. “Thank you, Bonnie, for all your help this morning. We’d be really screwed up without you. Sorry if we offended you. We’re all kind of in a state this

morning, but we'll bounce back."

"Actually, I'm not really offended. I've just never seen you naked. You're beautiful!"

"Except for being a little marked up at the moment, but thank you."

"As long as you had fun getting that way," Bonnie offered cavalierly.

"To tell you the truth, I did," Red confided. "A lot of fun, in fact."

Exchanging *adieux*, Bonnie left.

Red closed the door, putting her back to it. She leaned slightly forward, and a wicked grin grew on her face.

"Having fun?" Doc asked.

"Yesss!" she responded, then ran up to him, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him on the lips.

"Whoa, there! What happened to baby sister?" Doc asked.

"Baby sister hasn't had so much fun goosing the world in a long time."

"Well, you'd better get in there, wash baby sister off, and put on Mistress Judith, nymphomaniac executive. Food will be here in no time," he said, pointing to the connecting door to her suite.

"What about you?" Red asked.

"I had a very thorough tongue bath last night. I'm in pretty good shape, I'll just take a quick sponge bath when the other bathroom becomes available. Meantime, I'll stay out here, and open up for room service."

Doc turned the TV sound on, and switched to a business news channel to see what silliness was being perpetrated in the name of global socioeconomic development.

Forty minutes later, the four were seated around the coffee table trying to get as many croissants and boiled eggs as possible into their bellies in the shortest amount of time, while gulping down mass quantities of coffee and orange juice. And, aspirin. Don't forget the aspirin.

Doc and Red were seated on the couch. Eve sat in a club chair pulled up to one end of the coffee table. Gwen sat cross legged on the floor, with her back to the TV. All three women were still wearing bathrobes. Doc was the only one dressed, but that was because he'd put on jeans and boots with his dress shirt last night, and was still wearing them.

"I had the weirdest dream last night," Gwen said to Red.

"What was that, dear," Red responded.

"I dreamt that I was a baby, and you were my mother. Isn't that silly?"

The other three looked at each other, meaningfully. Seeing the reaction her remark elicited, Gwen looked from face to face, and asked: "What?"

"Not all of it was a dream," Red informed her, displaying one of her damaged nipples.

"Did I do that?" Gwen asked.

"Both sides," Red said.

"Oh, I'm sorry! What was I doing last night? This is embarrassing! Does it hurt?"

"You certainly know," Red pointed out the obvious. "It's like any other hickey. It hurts just enough to remind me how much fun I had getting it."

"Last night you were being extremely amorous, that's all," Doc explained. "You had too much to drink, and didn't know when to stop. It's all right. You caused a great deal of pleasure, and a little bit of pain. We all thank

you for the one, and forgive you for the other.”

“So what did I do to you?” Gwen asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Nothing, actually. You finally fell asleep with Red’s nipple in your mouth. If you hadn’t, it would have been my turn. I would have been forced to fuck your brains out. By the way, has anyone ever told you what a spectacular fuck you are?”

“You did. And, I’m glad to be of service. It’s my job, you know.”

“Not anymore,” Doc insisted. “By the way, I need to talk to you about something. This is as good a time as any. I’m putting a new condition on your employment.”

“What’s that?” Gwen asked, suspiciously.

“After seeing your interview on TV last night ... “

“My interview was on TV last night? Why didn’t you wake me?”

“We tried dear, but you were dead to the world,” Red explained.

“You can see it later,” Doc said, miffed at being interrupted mid-sentence. “After seeing your interview on TV last night, I’ve come to the conclusion that you would make an excellent spokeswoman representing Scottsdale Systems Technology, and Worm technology in general, in various situations, and at various times. This would be in addition to your work as a robotics programmer, and would, of course, warrant additional pay.”

“Wow!” Gwen said, though she wasn’t terribly surprised. She knew she was pretty, and sexy, and that’s what sells stuff.

“It comes, however, with certain conditions, which are non-negotiable.”

He waited a few seconds to let it sink in.

“If I ever,” he warned, “catch you peddling your body, or flashing your goods on the Internet, or any other medium, I’ll paddle your little keester. It’ll make Eve’s clit look like a mild indian burn. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, but ... “

“No ‘but’s. That’s what ‘non-negotiable’ means,” Doc said, ominously. “You can fuck your brains out with anyone you want in private, but I want you out of the sex trade completely, and permanently. That business about moonlighting with Eve’s crewmembers is out. Permission revoked. Things have changed since I said that. I know Eve would agree with me, and was probably ready to punch me for saying it in the first place. You can back out of the deal, if you want to, but SST’s official position is that you are barred from employment in the sex trade, forever.”

Red joined in: “This isn’t arbitrary, Gwen. I noticed the same thing Doc did. You’re an excellent, natural saleswoman. You can serve as a model for women who want to go into science and technology, but who think it’s somehow not feminine, or no fun. When they hear you talking about what fun it was to learn to program Walter, they’re going to want to do it, too. But, their mothers aren’t going to let them if they find out you’re turning tricks on the side. The same goes for potential clients. When you explain how Walter works, and how robots like him can help our clients’ companies, they’ll listen. But, if they think you’re just a hooker paid to do a sales pitch, they’ll stop listening.”

“Is this your idea?” Gwen asked suspiciously, thinking that somehow Red was trying to limit her, or smother her. She was still slightly under the spell of her dream that Red was her mother, and it seemed that she might be trying to limit her independence. That’s why she left home in the first place.

“No, it’s not,” Red defended. “In fact, this is the first I’ve heard of it. I did, however, see the same thing in that interview that Doc did. I can usually tell what he’s thinking, and I expected this. Another thing, which Doc will not bring up, but I will, is that this will be better for you. You remember the cheeseballs you were working with in

Reno? You don't want to work with anyone like that, again. Now, you don't have to. If you do what Doc's asking, you never will have to."

"But, what if I want to. It's fun, you know."

"You come to me, and we'll work it out. That Big Bad Wolf over there, who's really a pussycat, listens to me. In the meantime, say 'cross your heart, and hope to die' to Doc. Do your job the way he asks, and the next time somebody offers to fuck you for money, I guarantee it won't seem like a very good idea. By the way, there are plenty of people out there to fuck for sport. Ask Eve. Only the slimiest have to pay for it. After all, who'd you want to play around with? Some snot ball other women don't want, or doctors, lawyers, engineers, and guys who ride around in executive jets."

"Speaking of executive jets," Doc put in, "on Monday, there'll be one at our hangar to pick you up, Gwen. You have to fly down to Scottsdale for your two-day orientation. They'll fly you back Tuesday afternoon."

"Same guys who flew me to Miami?" Red asked.

"Same company."

"Those pilots are cute," Red commented for Gwen's benefit.

"Okay, you two," Doc said, indicating Red, and Eve, "go make yourselves presentable. We've a bus to catch in fifteen minutes. Gwen, I need to talk to you alone for about two minutes, then *I* have to go clean up, too."

The two women left, and the third stayed, not sure that anything had been resolved.

"Don't let us scare you," he said, "unlike your former employers, we're not into slavery, here. I want you to understand that if, at any time, you want out, you just say: 'I want out.' When I said this was non-negotiable, I didn't mean it was forever. Dropping the sex trade is a condition of employment as an SST spokeswoman."

"What that means is that we can't use you as a spokesperson if you're hooking, or stripping," he continued.

“We can still use you as a robot programmer, though. We can use you in other ways, too. Appearing in an Internet porn video will burn you as a spokesperson, but not in any other way. I think you’ll like being a spokesperson, in addition to being a programmer, so please give it a try *before* making that video.”

“I’ve already made videos. That’s why I said ‘but.’ You didn’t give me a chance to explain.”

“You don’t think we know that you’ve already made sex tapes? We were able to track down three. I’ve seen clips. They’re very good. We’re not talking about the past. We can deal with that. We’re talking about the future. In a lot of ways, having made those films makes you a more interesting person. We just don’t want you making any *more*. Understand?”

“I don’t understand.”

“It was your *job*. People don’t refuse to hire a person to sell used cars, just because she used to be a bank teller. Sex used to be your job. It’s not, anymore. End of story.”

“Is it that simple?”

“If we handle it right, it should be. Let’s find out, okay?”

“Okay.”

48

“I was starting to get worried,” Steve said to Gwen when Doc finally escorted her into the headquarters trailer. “We’re getting ready to send Walter into the mine, and there are still a few things I need to go over with you. Now that you’re part of the team, we’ve got to start training you right.”

The two Worm techs were still puttering around Walter, as they had been since they got up. They’d already pronounced him fit for service, but could always find something else to check. Greg was standing by, should

anything go wrong.

“Sorry, it’s my fault,” Doc jumped to Gwen’s defense. “Red, and I took Eve and Gwen out for dinner last night, and we all got a little drunk. Neither Red, nor I remembered to set our alarms, so we were late. Then I had a few things to go over with Gwen about her employment. We almost missed the last shuttle. Sorry.”

“How’d you know I was joining the team?” Gwen asked Steve.

“Bonnie told me when she called to check your name spelling, and get your social security number for her paperwork.”

“Oh,” was all Gwen said. The way these people were always one step ahead of her was disconcerting.

Seeing her unease, Steve told her: “You’ll get used to how things work around here. On a field trip, especially, we work fast. That means lots of organization, constant communication, quick decisions, and acting without delay. We’re also just getting used to Red’s management style, which is bang-bang-bang. Grab information, make a decision, then act. It’s SST’s style of operation, but she pushes it to the limit. I hope you don’t mind my saying that, Doc.”

“No, you’re right. That’s one of the reasons we hired Red. And, Gwen needs to get used to that style. She’s used to her boss needing to clear every move with his boss, and so forth. I don’t like that style because it usually degenerates into a cluster fuck. We prefer to start with people we trust, and let them do their own thinking. Remember both parts of that, Gwen. By the way, Steve. I hope you don’t mind if I just hang around here until we get ready to put the Worm down the rabbit hole. I’m kinda at loose ends.”

Steve didn’t believe that business about Doc being at loose ends for a minute. He knew Doc wanted to play fly-on-the-wall while he trained Gwen, but was trying not to make either of them self conscious about it.

“No problem,” Steve said, noting that Doc had brought a chair over, and placed it a couple of paces back from the control console. That allowed him to look over their shoulders, while keeping out of eyeshot. In a few

minutes, they'd forget he was even there.

"Gwen, pull your chair up to the console," Steve continued.

"My chair?"

"That's your chair," he said pointing to a leather-covered rolling desk chair identical to the one he was sitting in, right down to the fact that the arms had been removed. She wondered about that, but couldn't guess the reason. She sat down, and waited for what would happen next.

"I'll start by giving you a quick rundown on what we're supposed to be doing today. In about ... ," he checked the realistic-looking clock appearing in the upper left corner of the control-console screen, " ... fifteen minutes, we'll activate Walter, and send him over to the elevator. Have you seen the elevator we use to get up and down the cliff face?"

"Yes," Gwen replied, "Eve showed me, yesterday. I'm glad I don't have to ride it!"

"Unfortunately, you do, but not for a while. When we get done at this location, we'll have to remove the equipment we have down there. I'm betting that you'll have to help."

Doc stuck his nose into the conversation: "Actually, Gwen, you *do* have a choice. There's a ladder built into the cliff side. I prefer to use that. The downside of the ladder is that it's a long climb. You have to be in shape. You work out, so you might find it easier, and more pleasant than the elevator. Most of these guys don't like the stairs because of the climb."

Steve took up where he was interrupted: "Walter rides the elevator to get to the shaft. I taught him to get to the elevator yesterday, after you guys left. ... You should be writing this stuff down. You see that cabinet over there?"

Gwen looked in the direction Steve pointed, and saw a gray metal cabinet about six feet high, with two doors

on the front.

“That’s our office-supplies cabinet. On the top shelf, on the left-hand side, you’ll find a stack of brown notebooks with heavy covers. Please go get one.”

Gwen did as instructed, and brought back a perfect-bound blank book with “Research Notes” printed on its hard cover. A yellow square of paper was pasted to the front with a number of blanks to be filled in. At the top of the square “CONFIDENTIAL” was marked in large red letters. Underneath, in smaller type was “Property of Scottsdale Systems Technology.”

“Thanks,” Greg said, taking the book from her, and flopping it on the metal desktop built onto the control console. He wrote “Gwen Petersen” in the blank marked “Researcher,” today’s date in the blank marked “Start Date,” and “Personal Notes 1” in the blank marked “Project.”

“This will be your personal notebook. Use it to jot down anything you want to save, such as different commands you need to remember exactly, or ideas you have, or observations, or anything else. You can doodle in it if you want. It’s yours to put anything into that you want. However, it is a legal document. Open it up. See how it’s perfect bound? The pages are sewn in, so you can’t tear them out. Each page is numbered, too. To see why, imagine that you’re working with Walter, and you get some wild idea about how we could improve the way we program him. You write it down in here. Then you tell me, or Doc, or Red about it, and we all decide to go ahead with developing it. One of the things that big guy behind us will do while we’re developing the idea, is to patent it, or copyright it to establish a legal claim to it as intellectual property. We call it IP, and you’ll hear a lot about it around here. It’s our main product.”

“Anyway, five years later, it becomes an important part of a software product we introduce. Then, another company, like Microsoft, or Apple, or somebody else, decides it’s a pretty good idea, and copies it. They’re supposed to pay us to use it, but they come back, and say: ‘No, no. We thought of that ten years ago, and have been developing it independently. In fact, we think *you* copied it from *us*!’”

“What happens next is that Doc will come to you, and start quizzing you about where you got the idea, and why you thought of it, and, most importantly, when. You’re not going to remember all that. You have to dig out this notebook – by then, you’ll probably be on your fifth or sixth one – to look up the details. Most importantly, you’ll at least photocopy all the important pages, and give the copies to Doc.”

“He’ll hand them to a lawyer, who’ll wave them in front of the other company’s lawyer, and say: ‘Bullshit! Here’s the start of our idea, and all the backup of how we developed it.’ There’s a big legal fight, and the company that wins – to the tune of millions of dollars – is the one who can produce the best original documentation. That is your notes in this notebook.”

“So, it’s important that you write it all down, and date every entry, and save the book forever. If you leave the company, give it, and all the others you write, back to the company for us to save. We have warehouses full of them, all carefully cataloged Any questions?”

“If I think of it, why does the company get to claim it?” Gwen asked.

Steve deferred to Doc for that answer.

“You have a right to every thought that passes through that pretty head of yours. Writing it down in this book establishes *your* claim to it.”

“Next week, during orientation, you’ll sign a piece of paper called an employment contract, which lays out the deal between you and SST. Read it carefully. One of the clauses in that contract will be what’s called a pre-assignment of rights. That means you automatically license any work ideas you come up with to the company.”

“It does not mean you give up your rights. It means you give us the exclusive right to develop your ideas, and use them in products, and services. You still own them, though, and we have an obligation to compensate you for them, and you always have the right to say, ‘That was my idea.’”

“This helps you, because a person by themselves is in no position to exploit a high-technology idea, but

companies are. Where you hear about companies stealing ideas from their employees is when a manager gets greedy, and tries to get out of paying proper compensation. That's stupid, though, because if you screw an employee out of their fair share when they make a small invention, like the hula hoop, they're not going to play ball with you when they come up with a block buster, like the light bulb. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, the guys I work for ..."

"That you *used* to work for," Doc corrected her.

"That I used to work for," Gwen accepted the correction, "tried to screw everybody out of everything."

"Which is why you left a vapor trail jetting out of there the minute you got the chance."

"Vapor trail?"

"We're an aerospace company," Doc explained, "so you'll hear a lot of things like that. Keep asking for explanations. When a high-performance aircraft takes off at full throttle on a humid day, the air going over the wings leaves white streams of condensed water vapor behind it. We call 'em vapor trails, although it's an incorrect description. If you leave a vapor trail, you're going at maximum velocity. That better?"

"Yeah, like I didn't even say goodbye!"

"Right. They're now sitting around with sad kinds of looks because they've lost all the money you could have made for them. That's why Red calls 'em 'clowns.'"

"You called 'em clowns. Red called 'em 'cheeseballs.' But, I see what you mean. They don't look like much from here."

Steve, who was not privy to Gwen's previous employment history – because it was none of his damn business – had no idea what either of them were talking about, but he understood the management theory behind it. He figured that because they didn't explain, it probably was none of his business.

“Good girl!” said Red, and kissed Gwen’s forehead, giving her shoulders a quick hug. Red had used the excuse of reminding Steve that it was almost time to deploy Walter to come in, and see how Gwen was doing on her first real day on the job. Gwen had managed to trigger Red’s maternal instincts, despite their being only a year apart in age.

“How are you guys doing,” Red asked. “It’s almost time for Walter to do his thing. Will you be ready?”

“According to the techs, Walter *is* ready,” Steve reported. “I was setting Gwen up with a notebook, and was about to explain the procedure for the day.”

“Okay, make it fast. Our guest experts have arrived, and we’ll want to get started as soon as they get in here.”

“Our main job for today,” Steve explained to Gwen, “is to visually explore the contents of the mine shaft through Walter’s eyes. You and I will control him, but we don’t know what we’re looking at. We’ve got a Park Ranger who’s an expert on caves and mines, and a mining engineer who will be looking over our shoulders. They’ll know what they’re looking at.”

Doc put in: “Gwen, I’ve a free gift for you. Your first note for your notebook. Open it up, and write down today’s date in the left margin. That’s right. Now, write down ‘Add an observer’s station to the control console.’ I don’t know why we didn’t think of it before.”

“Tom Devore is coming in, too,” Red informed the group. “He agrees that we might be looking at a serial killer here, and wants to look at the scene from a forensic point of view.”

Doc didn’t want to tell her that he’d already applied his Taoist methods of divination to predict what they would find that day. They would need Tom Devore’s expertise. It wasn’t going to be easy for Red to see, and it would both complete her quest, and shut down the McKenna project indefinitely.

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Steve had figured out that Doc wanted Gwen to be a featured performer on the Walter Worm show, and that Red had also joined the Gwen Petersen Fan Club, so he suggested: “Doc, why don’t we have Gwen jump right in, and be today’s Worm pilot. I’ll work out the commands, and she can actually deliver them through the microphone.”

Doc broke into a grin, and gave an emphatic thumbs-up signal. Then, he said to Red: “Why don’t I do something useful, and gather our flock in here. If you could organize some chairs. Let’s see, there’s Tony Edmunds, Tom Devore, Pete Smith, Eve, Zeke is in his office, ... Is there anyone I’m forgetting?”

“With you, and me, ain’t that enough?” came the reply.

“Okay. Let’s just stack some chairs over there for when folks’ legs get tired. It’ll be more space efficient if we encourage them to stand around.”

Doc stepped through the door into the compound as the thump of rotor blades came from the North. Tony Edmunds and Tom Devore should be aboard. Pete and Eve were already around here, someplace. He went in search of them, since it would be a few minutes before the others would exit the chopper.

Meanwhile, Steve wrote a list of commands that Gwen would have to give Walter, so that he could just point to them at the appropriate time, and she could read them off. She was nervous and excited, but had confidence it would work out. Unlike when she’d worked at the strip club, she knew these people had her back. She’d realized that they believed in helping her succeed, instead of just punishing failure.

Eve was the first one to reach the control console. “How’s it going, Honey?” she asked. She’d been avoiding the trailer to let Gwen start her new job with minimum distraction. Since covering this procedure was what she was here for, she had to be here now. She took up a strategic position right behind Gwen to ensure that she missed nothing, and, incidentally, to be close to her girlfriend at what Eve considered to be her big moment.

Pete followed immediately after Eve. Doc had found them sitting together sipping espresso in the mess hall, while they waited for the show to begin. Eve had reached Gwen sooner because she was more motivated.

A few minutes later, Tom and Tony entered, followed by Doc. To make sure everyone was on the same page, Red described the program for the day: “We’ve already gone through Walter’s diagnostic checks, to make sure he’ll perform as we need him to. Steve and Gwen will be guiding him through the operation, and we’re all here to interpret what he finds down in his deep, dark hole.”

“The first task,” she continued, “is to get Walter into the hole. Because Walter’s self-propelled, all we have to do is tell him what we want him to do. So, he’ll start from his charging bed, there, and crawl out to elevator, and climb out onto the platform. We’ve got a number of cameras set up, so we’ll be able to monitor his progress both from his point of view on this screen, and from other points of view on this screen.”

“When he’s on the platform, we’ll lower it to the shaft level, then order him to proceed to the shaft head. There, he’ll look for his hoist rope and safety line. He can attach the safety line to his body by himself. The hoist rope is just a steel braided-wire rope with a weighted hard rubber ball attached to the end for him to grab onto. When he’s attached, we’ll raise the rope, reposition it over the shaft, and lower it to within a few feet of the wreckage jammed in the shaft. That will be our first obstacle. We’ll have to rely on Walter’s sensors to see what’s there, so we can figure out what to do next.”

“At this point, we can’t predict what we’ll do then, because it will be the first time we’ve seen into the shaft,” Red explained. We’ll need your help, Tony, to interpret what we see, and guide Walter to the safest way to proceed. The goal at this stage will be to make observations and measurements to create a three-D computer model of the wreckage that we can use to devise a plan to get through it. Then, we have to go below it to explore the rest of the shaft. Ultimately, we hope to determine if my father’s remains are in there, somewhere. Any questions?”

Nobody spoke up, so Red said to Gwen: “Let’s go.”

Taking a deep breath, Gwen said into the microphone mounted on her headset: “Walter, wake up.”

Walter's head came up. He recognized Gwen's voice, but, since it was coming through a radio link, rather than directly, he didn't bother looking for her. "Good morning, Gwen," came from a loudspeaker mounted on the control console.

"Walter, get down," Gwen instructed.

Walter climbed down from his padded table by extending his head and the forward part of his body down from the table to reach the floor without taking his after segments off the table. When his forward segments were solidly planted on the floor, he began walking with them across the floor, while his after segments walked off the table. Eventually, all his weight was on his forward segments, and the after segments cleared the table and slowly lowered to the floor. Then, he stopped and waited for the next instruction.

"Walter, go to the door."

Walter crawled to the door.

"Walter, open the door."

Walter stood up, and opened the door with his pinchers.

"Walter, locate the elevator platform."

Steve had downloaded into Walter's memory a photo of the elevator seen from this perspective, so the robot could find its target through its vision sensors. There were two screens on the console that showed the scene from Walter's perspective. The one Red had pointed out was a raw feed from one of his cameras. Next to it, was a cartoonlike illustration of what he was perceiving based on the raw image. It showed the outlines of the features he was using to identify what was part of the elevator platform, and what was extraneous clutter in the visual field. The elevator itself was color coded in yellow, the rest was color coded red, or blue. The red included objects Walter considered important from a navigational point of view, such as objects near the path he planned to take to his goal, and the cliff edge, which he wanted to avoid. Light blue colored objects Walter considered unimportant

background. The ground appeared as a light-green grid pattern. As he moved, some of the objects changed color.

“I’ve located the elevator platform, Gwen,” came the voice through the speaker. The screen showed a cartoon version of the platform colored yellow, surrounded by red objects leading up to it, and light blue objects toward the edge.

“Walter, proceed to the elevator.”

A white dashed line appeared on the perception screen leading from Walter’s position to that of the elevator platform. The dotted line switched around as Walter sampled various possible paths, then turned to solid white when he chose the most direct, given preprogrammed navigational rules, such as climbing down steps along a path at right angles to their edges.

Walter crawled down the steps outside the trailer, across the compound, and stopped half a meter from the elevator platform’s edge.

“Walter, proceed to the elevator platform center.”

As with many complex instructions, this was easier said than done. While crawling to the elevator platform, Walter had been visually discovering new details about the elevator platform, sampling many new visual perspectives as he crawled closer to it. So, by the time he reached the platform, he had located its edges with high precision. With this information, he was able to calculate the geometric center, and mark it as his new target in the perception display.

Walter crawled to the center of the platform, and stopped.

“Walter, stay.”

Steve switched the view on the screen Red had identified as displaying various external cameras to a new view, which showed the cliff face, with the elevator at the top. Then, he told one of the techs, who was sitting at the

right side of the control console next to Gwen, to lower the elevator.

When the elevator reached bottom, a light on the control panel came on.

“Walter, turn right forty five degrees,” was Gwen’s next command. This aimed the robot toward a spot directly in front of the opening in the tent sheltering the hoist over the mine shaft.

“Walter, proceed forward ten paces.”

This put the robot in the tent entrance.

“Walter, locate the safety line.”

“I’ve located the safety line, Gwen.” Walter’s perception screen showed the safety line highlighted in yellow.

“Walter, attach yourself to the safety line.”

Walter crawled over to the safety line, and attached it to his body.

“Walter, grab the hoist rope.”

Walter clamped his pincers to the rope just above the ball.

“Walter, stay.”

Walter went rigid.

“Alan, lift him up,” Steve said to the technician on Gwen’s right. The young man pushed a rocker switch mounted on the end of a joystick forward, and held it until the hoist reached the top of its travel, at which point it automatically stopped. Walter hung below the ball with his tail pointed almost straight down.

Then Alan pushed the joystick forward to position the bridge crane over the hole’s center. Then, he pushed the rocker switch back, which caused Walter to drop into the hole as seen on the external-camera monitor screen.

Steve switched Walter's raw image feed to another of the robot's vision sensors. The perception monitor switched with it. The scene now showed the end of Walter's tail descending into the hole. As it descended into the dark, Greg said: "Please hit the lights, Alan." Alan flipped a toggle switch on the panel, and floodlights came on, brightly illuminating the scene around Walter.

Soon, the wreckage loomed out of the darkness beneath Walter's tail. When it filled the screen, Alan stopped the hoist. On Walter's raw-image screen, a mass of broken beams, and twisted metal slowly rotated around one way, then slowed to a stop, then began rotating the other way.

"You're on, Ted," Steve said.

Ted waited until the scene rotated to a position he liked, then punched a button. A bright light flashed on the raw-image monitor, and a frozen image appeared on another screen located in front of Ted. Ted touched this screen at a prominent point in the image – a rusted bolt head holding an iron plate onto a beam – that appeared near the image's center, and seemed close to the top of the wreckage. When Ted took his finger away, the bolt head glowed yellow.

Then, he did the same thing with another point that appeared in the upper half of the image. This time it was the point of a corner of the sawn-off end of a board. The two edges meeting at that corner glowed as intersecting straight lines.

"Alan, please do a nine-view scan," Ted said.

Alan pulled a wireless keyboard off the console desk onto his lap. Gwen then understood why the arms on all the chairs had been removed: it made holding a standard-size wireless keyboard easier.

Before quitting high school, Gwen had taken a keyboarding course, where she'd learned that positioning the keyboard as low as possible reduced the shoulder cramps and neck strain everyone complained about. Balancing the keyboard on your knees brought it as low as was physically possible. The chair arms would have interfered, so

someone had simply removed them. Gwen thought it was clever.

Alan typed an instruction into the keyboard, and smacked the enter key with a loud clack. Walter's raw-image monitor started moving, as the console's computer system took over, and moved the bridge crane to one side. It looked like the long hoist cable's swinging was going to make getting a useful image impossible, but the computer did a couple of corrections so that the swinging came to a halt just when the crane reached the correct position. The camera on Walter's tail tilted to keep the bolt Ted had identified centered in the image.

A few minutes passed as the cable's residual motion died away, then the raw-image monitor flashed again. Then, the crane moved back to the center position again. The computer then proceeded to move to different points, until it had shot eight images from the eight points of the compass. Together with the center image, that made a total of nine images to complete Ted's nine-view scan.

Steve then announced: "If anyone wants to take a break, now's a good time to do it. The computer will take about ten minutes to process this information, and return the three-D image of just the top of the pile."

"Could we go down, and view it from underneath?" Tony asked.

Something in his voice set off an alarm bell in Red's head. She looked over at him, and saw that he was wearing the look of a man who saw the repair bill on his wife's car was way too low, thought perhaps he should be concerned about how she'd managed work off the rest, and wanted to check her underwear for greasy fingerprints.

"The test protocol says that we should probe the wreckage from above before attempting to penetrate below it," Steve informed him.

"Bear with me for a moment," Tony requested. "There's a great whacking hole on the lower left. You see how the wreckage consists of largely beams that are oriented mainly from the upper left to lower right across the middle of the hole. It leaves two, more or less triangular, holes, one in the upper right, and the other in the lower left. At its widest, the one in the lower left looks like it's about four feet wide the short way, and six to eight the

long way. Can we drop Walter through there, and just look up? If we stay away from the jammed beams, we should be able to eyeball the underside without touching anything. It should be perfectly safe, and we might get some idea what's holding the whole mess up."

"But, we won't be able to do a good scan to make a reconstruction," Steve objected.

"I just want a look-see while we're waiting. What can it hurt?"

"Let's try it," Red advised. "Go slow, and keep an eye out for hidden problems. If we can get through there, and it looks like we certainly can, without touching anything, Walter should be okay. The worst that can happen is we end up saying: 'That was a waste of time.' Since we have the time to waste, I don't see a problem."

She looked to Doc for confirmation. He gave a non-committal shrug that was part half-hearted nod.

Since Red was the boss, Steve relented. "Okay, Alan, please place Walter over the geometric center of that hole on the lower left," he said, "but shade a bit toward the corner. If we scrape something, I want it to be the shaft wall, rather than the wreckage. Take the time to be careful."

Alan did as he was asked, carefully calculating the position he wanted to reach, and letting the computer figure out the movement profile that would leave the hoist line with as little residual swinging as possible. When Walter was lined up over the hole as he intended, he waited for the residual swing to die out. Then, he lowered Walter until his head was about ten feet below the pile.

As Walter's head sank below the level of the pile top, Steve switched from the camera he'd been monitoring, to one mounted in Walter's head. The bright light from above dazzled the camera. "Alan, please shut off the upstairs lights," Steve requested.

With the floodlights out, Walter's LED lights provided enough light to see features underneath the pile. They could see that the rubble pile was supported by four heavy timbers that had once been bolted together at one end. Those ends had been shaped to fit the apex of a pyramidal structure that could be held by just two long bolts one

half inch thick. The bolts were there, and twisted. But, the nuts were gone. The rest of the wreckage consisted mainly of two-by-six timbers that probably had been used to hold up a floor, along with one-by fours that had been used as flooring.

“Can you pan around to look at the ends of those beams?” Tony asked. “I want to see what made all this stop at this particular place. How far down is it?”

Steve asked Alan, who reported that they’d run down sixty seven feet of cable. Not even a quarter of the way down to the expected top of the lode. It was, in fact, barely far enough to be beyond reach of sunlight at certain times of day.

“What time of year did your father disappear?” Tony asked Red.

“Late summer is when we last had word from him,” she said.

“So, it would have been mid-Fall when the search party came up here,” Tony calculated. “The noon sun would have been low, so this wreckage would have been invisible from above. Only the guy who came down here would have been able to see this, and not very well. He would have been using a handheld torch light. Why did the lower ends of those beams jam in this particular spot, instead of going all the way down?”

Steve aimed Walter’s camera at the rock wall at the end of the beams. It was hard to see the actual ends. Something looked like it was in the way.

“Could you back Walter away from those ends a bit?” Tony asked. “I want to look at the wall in that corner.”

Alan carefully maneuvered the bridge crane so that Walter hung next to the wall in the part of the triangular hole as far from the corner in which the timbers’ lower ends had stopped as possible.

“There!” Tony said excitedly. “There was a hard piece of rock that McKenna didn’t bother to take out of that corner. The timbers’ ends were scratching along the rock face in opposite corners, but when the lower ends hit that,

they just stopped. The upper ends kept going, and jammed into the opposite corner. Then, other stuff came down, and piled on top. The more weight was piled on, the tighter it jammed. What I don't understand is why the timbers didn't just fall down one-end first."

"Aerodynamics," Doc answered. "Contrary to intuition, which would tell you that an object would orient itself to fall with the least resistance as it moves through the air, it will actually do the opposite. That's why falling leaves come down flat-face first, and Frisbee are so stable. The way it works with a long, thin body, like a timber, is that the air rushing by actually turns it so it lies more or less horizontal as it drops. In this case, however, the timbers were too long to fall horizontally. Whenever one end or the other touched the wall, it tried to bounce away, but the aero forces were strong enough to push it back toward horizontal, so it hit the wall again. When that end came to the obstruction, it was guaranteed to jam."

"So this junk pile is in no danger of slipping further," Red concluded.

"That's right," Tony stated with conviction.

"Then, why did Luthor Todd say it was dangerous?" Doc asked as if he already knew the answer.

"Because the bastard didn't want anyone coming down here to find what's at the bottom," Red said through clenched teeth.

"So, let's cut to the chase, and get to the bottom, both figuratively, and literally," Doc advised. "Good call, Tony. Thanks."

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"So, there isn't any jog in the shaft, after all," Pete observed. "It just goes straight down. I thought that jog sounded odd."

"Do we really know how far down this shaft goes?" Doc asked.

“No,” Pete responded. “It was planned for something around five hundred feet, but we’ve no way of knowing how far McKenna actually got. We’ve got his field notes from previous seasons. They tell us he got down over one hundred fifty feet, but his notes for the last season disappeared with him. From his previous rate of progress, we estimate he could have made two-fifty to three hundred feet his contacts ceased, but that’s just a guess.”

“Use the laser range finder built into Walter’s tail,” Greg suggested. “That’s what we put it there for.”

“How far’s it really good for?” Doc asked.

“Under these conditions, probably three hundred meters, or about a thousand feet. It should be plenty for this job, providing the shaft really is straight.”

Doc thought for a few seconds, and then asked: “Pete, how straight do you really think it might be?”

“McKenna seems to have been a pretty careful worker, and meticulous about measurements,” Pete said, thinking out loud. “I’d be amazed if he let it wander more than a foot from the line he intended.”

“So, our laser should be able to see right down to the bottom. Okay, Steve, let’s bring Walter back as close as we can get to the center of the shaft without coming near the wreckage – there’s always a chance that the cable might dislodge something that would take Walter out on the way down – and see what his little tail light can tell us.”

It took about fifteen minutes to carefully bring Walter into position with his laser ranger pointed straight down. Then microseconds to get a reading: Two hundred thirteen point three five one feet.

“Okay,” Red ordered. “Let’s go!”

“But, we haven’t surveyed the wreckage, yet!” Ted squawked. “We haven’t gotten any photos of it to work with.”

Doc jumped in. “Our priority goal is to reach the bottom,” he said. “We can come back to survey the wreckage later. Before we go to the bottom, however, we need to document the two views we’ve seen underneath to show *why* we abandoned the approved test procedure,” he said. “We need to go back, and shoot the picture of the underside to show the lay of those beams, and that view of the lump in the corner jamming the whole mess, but first we need to record the depth.”

“Gwen,” he instructed, “please write down the measurements Alan made, along with the result he calculated. Let me show you the right form. Skip a line, and start a new line with ‘Shaft depth measurement’ for a heading. That’s right. Underneath, write ‘laser range below Worm’ then leave some space on that line – go to the right about here, just to the right of this vertical line. That’s what they’re there for, to make it easier to line entries up vertically, and keep neat records, so they’re easy to read. Now, Alan, what was the laser ranger’s measurement, again?”

“Two hundred thirteen point three five one feet.”

“Gwen, write down that number right there. Don’t forget the units.”

“Units. Millions of dollars and even lives have been lost because somebody mixed up the units on a measurement. In this case, it’s two hundred thirteen point three five one *feet*. Good. Now, on the next line, all the way to the left, write ‘cable length.’ Alan, what’s the length of cable from the winch to the Worm attachment?”

“Sixty seven point one nine two feet,” Alan read off a digital display on the control panel.

“Gwen, write that just under the last number. Yes, right there. Line up the columns. Good.”

“And, the distance between the Worm’s pincer, and the laser?”

“Seven point seven nine zero feet.”

“Write ‘Worm length’ on the left, and seven point seven nine zero on the right there.”

“Now we have to take away that part of the line that’s above ground. Alan, what’s the distance from the

bridge crane to the ground?”

“Eight point five feet.”

“So, Gwen, on the next line put a minus sign, then ‘Distance from crane to ground.’ On the same line, in the right hand column, put a minus sign, then eight point five. Since everything else is quoted to three decimal places, pad this one out with zeros to the right of the decimal point. So, it’s eight point five zero zero feet. Keep the columns lined up.”

“Now,” Doc concluded, “Draw a line under the bottom of the list. That’s right, all the way from the left margin to the vertical line just past the last entry in the right hand column. ... Good. What we do next is add up all but the last entry, then subtract the last entry from the total. Alan’s already done it, but we’ll do it again as a double check. Here, we’ll use my calculator. He pulled out his cellphone, and selected the calculator application. Then, he did the calculation, and got two hundred seventy nine point nine four one.

“Okay, write ‘Shaft depth’ in the left column under the line, and two hundred seventy nine point nine four one feet under the right column. Draw a box around the whole entry, then a vertical line along here to separate the columns. Now, put a line under each row. Now double up the line just above the total. That makes it a data table. The reason we draw the lines is so they’ll show up if we have to photocopy this later. Those blue lines are colored especially so they won’t show up in a photocopy. The black ink from your pen will. You can try it later to see what I mean.”

Eve realized that Doc had stopped everything, using up the time of a number of valuable people, to give Gwen a training lesson. Red estimated that the five minutes it took cost Doc several hundred dollars. Gwen was just grateful for the attention. It made her feel important, like she was contributing something.

“Now,” Doc said, “you guys can go capture those two shots, then we can drive to the bottom of the shaft.”

Taking Red aside, Doc suggested: “It’ll take them twenty minutes, or so, to retrace their steps and get those

photos. Then, it'll take another half hour to drive to the bottom of the shaft. That's going to be bringing us past lunchtime. What say we break a little early, and I call the mess hall to order up three or four pizzas? We'll more or less finish eating about the time we start to explore the bottom."

"Go for it," Red said.

Eve walked over to where Doc and Red were talking, and said: "It was really nice of you, Doc, to take that time with Gwen. I can't imagine how much it cost to have all these people standing around while you showed her how to take notes."

"Several hundred dollars," Red interjected. "But, Doc was right to do it. It was a good investment."

"Well, thank you both for the votes of confidence," Doc replied. "But, we needed the records, and she needed to learn."

"I was surprised when I saw you guys jotting things down in paper notebooks. I thought that was all done electronically, now."

"There have been several efforts to develop electronic research notebooks for scientists and engineers," Doc explained. "Certainly, there's a lot to be said for it. We'd love to be able to capture extemporaneous ideas in digital form, but it hasn't worked so far, and I'm not sure why. For some reason, it takes a lot longer to type your thoughts into an electronic form than to scribble 'em down on a piece of paper, and handwritten notes turn out to be more useful later. I've given up trying to get rid of paper notebooks, myself. Excuse me, I have to order a pizza delivery."

"Is he serious?" Eve asked, when Doc stepped outside.

"Yes, why?" Red replied.

"He's going to order pizza – out here?"

Red laughed. “He’s just getting it from the mess hall. At SST, we like to live well. It’s not that hard, really. There are three things that go into living well: good food, pleasant surroundings, and a nice place to sleep. Out here, nature provides the surroundings, and this spot isn’t half bad. You’ll notice we’ve got comfortable bunks, not old army cots. The big item we had to provide was good food. So, we hired a good cook, gave him good tools to work with, and good helpers as well. Pizza on order is just another perk.”

“Don’t tell me you brought a pizza oven out here! Those things weigh a ton, don’t they?”

“I believe that depends on the pizza oven, but you don’t have to have one to make pizza,” Red said, enjoying the diversion from high tech exploration. “It’s just flour, salt, yeast, olive oil, and fresh toppings. Any oven that’ll reach five or six hundred degrees will do, and that we have. Mom, and I used to make pizza at home every week.”

“I forgot,” Eve said. “You didn’t grow up rich.”

“No, my mother got her money the old-fashioned way. She married it. But, it’s got nothing to do with rich or poor. Let’s just say I didn’t grow up empty-headed.”

“They’ll be here soon,” Doc said, returning from the mess hall. “Chef keeps pizza dough on hand, so it’s just a matter of making the pies and cooking them. I ordered one pepperoni, one veggie, and two with everything.”

Sure enough, soon after Walter finished his pictures and started on his long trek down to the shaft’s bottom, two men in white aprons carried four pies into the headquarters trailer, and set them out on Walter’s charging table. Doc turned the Worm charger power on to keep them warm.

“Are you insane?” Eve accused, when she saw it.

“Yeah!” Doc replied, rolling his eyes. “Ain’t it fun?”

Red laughed, then explained to Eve: “He’s crazy like a fox. Ever see a movie called *Real Genius*, where a bunch of physics students do all kinds of crazy things with equipment they have laying around the lab? It’s actually

one of the most accurate Hollywood films of all time. In fact, the most outlandish parts of the film are the most accurate. That's what hanging around with experimental physicists is like. The Universe is just one big sandbox to them. They just *do* things!"

"I thought you were one of them," Eve pointed out.

"Me? No, I'm a mathematician. We don't do things, we just think them. I like to think we do less damage, but we're probably less fun to watch, too."

By the time Walter reached the bottom of the shaft, three quarters of the food was gone. Everyone in the room was full of pizza and soda, and was gulping strong coffee to keep awake.

They were all watching Walter's raw-video monitor. He touched down tail first, and allowed his rear segments to turn so that they stood independently on the ground. As the hoist line descended, his segments turned one by one to lay flat on the ground, until he was laying flat through his full length, and the hoist line was slack. Then, Walter let go of the rope, and released the safety line. Alan raised the hoist line until the ball hung a few feet above the ground, within Walter's easy reach.

All of Walter's LED lights were on to provide as much illumination as possible. Between that, and the sensitivity of his cameras, there was plenty of light. They improved the shadow contrast by putting the lights on his tail up to maximum brightness, while reducing those on his head to half power, and maneuvering his tail around to shine the light from his tail onto the scene at an angle.

While trying these experiments, Steve took over keeping notes for Gwen, while she operated Walter. So, Steve would tell Gwen to have Walter make a movement, she would give the orders, and Steve would take notes on what they did and what results they got. It was a clumsy seeming system, but it helped them meet three objectives: explore the mine, experiment with techniques for using Walter to best advantage, and train Gwen in controlling Walter.

The floor, or bottom, of the shaft was more or less flat. It had been created by breaking rock via shock waves from small dynamite charges placed in holes approximately a foot deep, then “mucking,” or digging out the broken rock, then transporting it to the surface in a bucket, or tub, which was approximately four feet on a side, and two feet deep. McKenna would use a pneumatic jack hammer to drill the holes, then, he’d put the charges in them by hand, then go all the way to the surface, set off the charges electronically, then go all the way back down to muck out the broken rock, then go all the way back up to raise the bucket, and dump the contents off the edge of the shelf onto a tailings pile below. To save having to transport his tools up and down the shaft for every shot, he only shot half the floor at a time, using the other half as a work surface where he left tools and equipment he’d need later.

Walter had come down on the high side. That is, the side where McKenna had set his tools while setting off the last shot. It appeared that McKenna’s work was interrupted between firing a shot, and starting to muck out after it. At that time, he should have been outside the shaft waiting for dust to settle.

The tools were there on the high side: his jackhammer, a shovel, crowbar, pickaxe, and other tools needed for mucking out. The bucket was there, too, left empty during the shot. Some small bits of wreckage were also there, fallen from above. They saw no sign of McKenna in the frame, though.

Doc was concerned about Red’s reaction when she first caught sight of the body, if they did, so he moved to stand right next to her. Greg wasn’t thinking about Red, so much as carefully studying Walter’s performance, and the tricks the Worm team figured out to use him better.

“Let’s have Walter stand up,” Steve said, “and do a panoramic scan of the floor.”

Knowing this was where they’d find what they would find, and being pretty sure he knew what they would find, Doc slipped a reassuring hand around Red’s waist. She knew, too, and leaned toward him for support.

“Walter, stand up,” Gwen said.

On the monitor, Walter’s point of view rose up about four feet.

“Walter, look down forty five degrees.”

The camera angle dropped from horizontal to forty five degrees down. At Walter’s standing height, a forty-five degree down angle put the center of his visual scene about half way to the nearest wall. He was now standing approximately in the middle of the ten foot square floor, near the edge between the relatively clean, and flat work floor, and the raised rubble lifted by the last shot. Looking at the tools neatly placed on the floor during the shot.

“Walter, photograph a fifteen degree panorama three hundred sixty degrees right.”

Walter began a procedure in which he’d take a still image using his strobe lamp, then rotate fifteen degrees, then take another image, and repeat. That would create a set of twenty four overlapping images of the floor from approximately the same position at nearly the center. Those images would capture everything that could be seen from that vantage point.

The sixth image showed toes of a skeletal foot at the right-hand edge of the frame. Doc felt Red’s body go rigid. The seventh image showed a foot, and skeletal leg attached to the toes, with another leg beside it in flexed position. The body was laying on its back on the rubble pile, with one leg extended off the pile with the foot laying on the floor. The eighth image showed a partially broken pelvis and a few dislocated vertebrae. The next image showed more badly damaged vertebrae, and a largely intact ribcage.

“Where are the clothes?” Ted asked in horror.

“The body was stripped,” Tony explained.

Red grabbed Doc’s body for support. Everyone else stared in horror, except Tony and Tom, who had seen such scenes before. They were looking at the images with clinical expressions, trying to take in evidence as quickly as possible.

The next image showed the upper body, and head. The upper body had been smashed, with shoulder blades, upper vertebrae, and collar bones splintered. The back of the skull had been flattened, while the front retained its

dome shape. The body had clearly dropped straight down the shaft on its back, aerodynamic forces causing it to lie flat as Doc had described, but the arms and legs streamed out above the body as it fell downward. It had landed on the rubble pile neck and shoulders first, crushing the bones in that area, while the legs and arms remained relatively undamaged. The back of the skull had been crushed between the head's momentum, and the unyielding rock below.

In the middle of the forehead was a perfectly round hole a little less than a half inch across.

"Jeezus!" Tony exclaimed.

Red turned her face into Doc's chest, and began sobbing.

"Shot in the head, then stripped, and tossed down the shaft," Tom concluded. "The derrick was disassembled, and tossed down on top to hide it."

"Greg!" Doc called, pushing Red into his arms. "Take her to her room, and get her to lie down. Zeke, can you find something to calm her a bit, and make her sleep?"

Greg walk-carried Red into the room she shared with Tamara. Zeke said: "Sure," and rushed off toward the kitchen cabinets for the emergency medical kit. Everyone else stood transfixed by the images Walter was still recording one by one.

Eventually, the skeleton disappeared past the left edge of the frame. Walter continued snapping pictures showing rubble and small bits of wreckage, then the floor of the work surface. He finally stopped when he reached his original position. He shot an extra image for comparison with the first one.

Everyone stood in total silence.

"This is no longer a research project," Tom Devore announced. "It's a crime scene."

"Why?" Ted asked.

“Because that, young man,” he said pointing to the image showing the skull, “is a bullet hole.”

“What do we need to do?” Doc asked Tom. Preparing to hand off to the police crime-scene investigators would be Doc’s job. That’s why he’d asked Greg to take Red into her room, instead of doing it himself.

“Get Walter out of there. We’re amateurs who have no business stomping around in a crime scene before the forensic guys get here.”

“What about leaving him there for the medical examiner to use for a first look? Steve, how long can we leave him in there before his batteries get low?”

“If we shut off his lights and everything but his communications, maybe twenty four hours. Twelve for sure.”

“What about bringing him up to survey the wreckage, then pull him out of the hole?” Ted suggested, still chafing about never having finished his three-D map. He figured that once the cops got ahold of the place, everything would be shut down for a long time.

“Tom, what do you say?” Doc asked.

“We have all the pictures, and a video record of what we did today,” Tom said, thoughtfully. “I’d say that’s all the cops will want from Walter.”

“After they review all that material,” he continued, “they might want to use him for some of their work, but I doubt it. They’re going to want to go down there personally to examine the body, and explore a virgin crime scene. They’ll want the wreckage to be virgin, too, because that tells what happened after the crime took place. They’ll want to see the grate that was put in to cap the hole, too, and that entire shelf. They’ll probably want to go over the top of this mesa with a microscope. Basically, we have to close this place off, and get everyone out of here, but not before the cops grill us all for an hour each.”

He took a deep breath, then announced: “I’ll make the call. I’m now thinking Doc’s right about leaving Walter in the hole, but not for the reason he thinks. We leave Walter in the hole because he’s now part of the crime scene. Doc, start thinking about getting yourself another Worm to explore the other shafts.”

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“Until today, all we had were suspicions,” Doc told the Sheriff’s Department detective. “We had no information you hadn’t had in your possession for years. So, we kept our ideas to ourselves until we had something concrete to add. We got that today, and called you immediately.”

“What’s all this about having a private army out here combing the woods?” the detective asked, suspiciously.

“It’s hardly an army. This camp contains some extremely expensive state-of-the-art scientific equipment, along with a large staff. That, coupled with the suspicion that we might – I repeat might – be invading territory frequented by a serial killer, made it advisable to secure the area. In addition, this project is funded by Gulf States Petroleum, and it is their standard operating procedure to protect field operations in this way.”

“I understand there are also personal bodyguards, as well,” the detective kept probing.

“They are to protect Judith McKenna. As you know, she is the stepdaughter of Mark Shipton, who owns Gulf States Petroleum. It would be worth a lot of money for anyone to kidnap her for ransom. The bodyguards are there for her personal protection, and have been in place for years. They have nothing to do with this project, or McKenna’s murder. If she came here to go skiing, they’d be here.”

“Why are they undercover?”

“Would you like to have a gang of thugs hanging around you all the time? Would you do that to your daughter? They stay undercover to give her some kind of normal life.”

“I understand they’re mostly ex-military, special forces, and such.”

“If money were no object to protect your family, who would you hire? Certainly not the bouncer from the local bar. If you could afford to hire ex-special-forces people, you would. I know I would!”

“Speaking of bars, I understand that one of the people in the control room is a stripper in a Reno nightclub. Can you explain that?”

“Your information is out of date. Gwendolyn Petersen is a friend of a friend, Eve Salazar, who is a feature news reporter for Channel Five in Phoenix, Arizona. Gwen was looking to change her career, and, as a favor to Eve, I interviewed her for possible employment with our company. It turned out that the girl’s personality and background fitted her for an open position we had as a robot operator trainee. So, I hired her. This was her first day on the job.”

“You hired a stripper as a robot operator? I find that hard to believe.”

“I didn’t hire a stripper. I hired a young woman who has good communication skills, above average intelligence, listens well, obeys instructions, asks questions when she doesn’t understand, and shows motivation to join the team. Those are the main criteria for this particular position, and she demonstrated all of them during the interview process. We hire people we think will do a good job. We don’t care what they’ve done for a living in the past.”

“Have you had sexual relations with her?”

“That’s none of your damned business. My personal life, and that of my staff members have no bearing on this case. We’re trying to help *you* solve a cold case you’ve had on your books for a decade. If, instead, you want to invade the privacy of anyone on my staff, we can call in a gang of lawyers, and you can get your own facts while fighting harassment charges. Might I remind you that the individual you seem fascinated by was introduced to us by a television newswoman who has been covering this operation. I don’t think she’ll like the direction you’re taking this investigation. Neither will her viewers.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No, I’m feeling threatened. Now, do you want to discuss how I can help with your investigation, or is this interview at an end?”

The detective looked Doc in the eye. He came to the conclusion that this was an individual who simply would not take being pushed around. Looking around the control room at the resources at Doc’s command, the detective also concluded that Doc could be very helpful, indeed. He’d certainly uncovered more facts, and turned up more clues in the case, than the Sheriff’s Department, the National Park Service, and the FBI had in ten years. He’d also called as soon as they’d uncovered the new information, and offered to put all their resources at his disposal. He’d very much like to solve this case before the Feds got here to take the credit. Putting all these considerations together led him to the conclusion that Doc would make a better friend than an enemy.

“Okay. Maybe I was out of line. Certainly, this young woman has nothing to do with a cold case from an era when she was a little girl in Texas. I was just suspicious about something that seemed out of line.”

“It’s your job to be suspicious. Just as it’s my job to protect my employee. You’re right, she has nothing to do with the case. She just happened to be sitting at the desk as part of her training program. Perhaps if I tell you what I know in my own way, then you can ask questions, and we’ll make more rapid progress.”

“Okay, go ahead,” the detective said.

“A lot of this you know, but there may be some pieces I have that will help things fit together. There are others here who can fill in more details than I can, too. My role as Chief Executive Officer at Scottsdale Systems Technology is as a corporate-level manager. I have to understand the overall picture, find the right people to handle the details, make sure they have what they need, and then stay out of their way. So, I can give you an overview, but you’ll have to get the relevant details from the people more immediately involved.”

Doc then proceeded to outline the McKenna project from its genesis to present, including Red’s relationship

to McKenna, and to Shipton. He left out many details that he felt were not pertinent, such as Red's problems accepting her stepfather, and her brief affair with Doc.

"I notice, if you'll pardon another personal question that might not be pertinent, that Ms. McKenna is another beautiful woman who you've hired to work in your company. Does this happen often?"

"Not especially," Doc replied, "except from the point of view that we search for highly intelligent, highly motivated people. Generally, such people – both men, and women – take good care of themselves physically, as well as mentally, so they tend to be more attractive. That means you're likely to find the women we hire at SST are, on average, more attractive than the general population. We don't especially hire beautiful women, but the type of woman we would hire tends to be more beautiful. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," the detective responded, "although a lot of people think beautiful women are stupid."

"That's a very stupid thing to think," Doc said acerbically.

"Ms. McKenna is extremely intelligent – she has a full academic scholarship at Harvard University – and scores high on management aptitude," Doc continued. "When discussing this project with me, her stepfather pointed out these qualities, and suggested I might consider her for employment. It turned out he was right, and I hired her. Because of her special knowledge and motivation, it would have been stupid to put anyone else in charge of this project."

"Because her stepfather was paying for it?"

"No. I'd planned to run it, myself, originally. She turned out to be so good as a manager, however, that I've continually given her more, and more responsibility. She organized all this herself. All I had to do was encourage her to try."

"And, provide a staff of experts to pull it off," the detective added.

“That’s how a good manager works. Yes, I assigned the staff, but she led them. It’s a complex undertaking. A lesser manager would have screwed it up. That’s about all I have to say about her, except to forewarn you against underestimating her. She’s extremely bright, and extremely independent.”

“What’s your theory of the crime?”

“Based solely on my interpretation of the facts we have so far, it appears that some person or persons came into James McKenna’s camp in late summer ten years ago, looked at what McKenna had, and decided he wanted it for himself. So, he abruptly shot McKenna in the head, stripped his body, and threw it into his prospect hole. If the bullet didn’t kill him, the fall would. Our killer, or killers, then proceeded to strip the camp, dismantle the derrick, and throw it down on top of McKenna to hide the body. Because of the physical strength this scenario implies, I think the killer is more likely to be a man than a woman. My favorite candidate is Luthor Todd.”

“Luke Todd! Why?” asked the detective.

“Several bits of circumstantial evidence point in his direction. I’ll start with the least important and work up. As a wilderness guide, he certainly had opportunity and means. As for motive, that could have been a matter of theft. McKenna’s outfit could no doubt be sold off piecemeal for a significant sum. The most damning evidence that points to Todd is the fact that he had the greatest opportunity to cover up the crime. He was hired, I believe it was by your department, to search McKenna’s prospect holes for the body, and not only reported a negative result, which we now know was untrue, but claimed that three of the holes, including this one, were too dangerous to enter. As a result, the holes were blocked off. We don’t know about the other two holes, but we do know that this one is not as dangerous as he claimed, and contained McKenna’s body.”

“Now, we enter the world of pure speculation,” Doc warned, “and I’m probably stupid to say this in front of you, but color me stupid. Anyway, I’d bet a box of doughnuts and a gallon of coffee that Luthor Todd shot and killed James McKenna, hid the body as I’ve described, and sold everything he could find in his camp. Furthermore, I think he was so pleased with the results that he repeated the crime on a number of occasions, hiding the bodies in

McKenna's other prospect holes. I'll bet a particularly big, juicy jelly doughnut that if you search his place thoroughly, you'll find one or two souvenirs to connect him directly to McKenna's murder, and other mysterious disappearances."

"Unfortunately for your theory, it is, as you say, all speculation. All that evidence is circumstantial. The only thing you have that actually points to Todd is the fact that it was his reluctance to crawl into that hole out there that caused us to miss finding McKenna's body. There's nobody who could prove that it wasn't an honest mistake. I couldn't even get a search warrant to look for the 'souvenirs' you suggest."

"I know," Doc agreed. "A week ago at a planning meeting, we briefly considered the possibility of foul play in McKenna's disappearance, and all but dismissed it. We have little more to go on, now, except that we know McKenna died by gunshot, and that Todd at least exaggerated the conditions in this mine. The investigation is beyond our expertise, but our technology can help."

"Let me offer the use of my robotics team to help explore McKenna's prospect shafts under your department's direction," Doc volunteered. "From what I've seen down there, your people would be a lot safer gathering evidence that way, than by going down there yourselves. At least use our technology to carefully survey these mines before you put any people at risk. We've already provided initial photos of what's down there. Our robot's still there for you to work with. We have the technology to do a complete survey, retrieve samples, and anything else you think would be worthwhile."

"If I were to take you up on this, how would it work?"

"Well, I'm kinda thinking on my feet here, so bear with me," Doc explained. "We've established this as a legal mining claim, so it's private property. I don't know whether that's relevant, but it's there. I assume you'll want to make the shaft, the surface around it, and the top of this mesa all part of the crime scene. We can keep a crew here to operate the camp, and operate the robot. After you've done all the interviews you need, we'll send everybody else home. That'll keep them out of the way of your crime-scene folks going over all the surface. Just

have one experienced forensics person work with our robotics team to get every bit of information possible using the robot in the shaft. We've probably got about six hours left before we have to retrieve the robot to recharge its batteries. Then, of course, it can go down again. If you still need to put a person down there, we'll do what we can to help, but that's not our expertise, either."

"Who's on the robot team?"

"It consists of Steve Michels, who's the team leader, two technicians, and our operator trainee. Your investigator will call the shots – tell Michels exactly what to have the robot do. Michels and his people will then make it happen. Your person will be right there to make sure they do it correctly."

"Why do you want to do this?" the detective asked. "As you pointed out, this is expensive equipment, and it must cost a ton to keep this place operating."

"I have an ulterior motive. This Worm robot technology was developed especially to do this kind of work. While helping you, we learn how to apply this technology to crime scene investigation. We end up being the world experts on it, which is good business for us."

"What's in it for the Sheriff's Department?"

"Do you want to climb down in that hole? It's dark, and it's dangerous, and it's a long way down. I'm hoping that maybe, just maybe, you can get enough evidence with our robot so you don't have to do it. Beyond making this investigation easier, and safer, it will mark your department as being at the cutting edge of criminal investigation technology."

"Maybe," the detective said. "Are you willing to describe all this to the District Attorney, and maybe a judge, to make sure we're not going to get thrown out of court on a technicality?"

"I'm eager to do so. We also have the robot's inventor here, who'd be thrilled to talk to them, too. If you give us twenty-four hours notice, we can put together a presentation that will show them exactly what we're proposing,

and what the technology is capable of.”

“It sounds intriguing,” the detective concluded, “I’ll let you know after we’ve concluded our interviews. In the meantime, don’t go telling anyone else your theory. You’re likely to end up at the wrong end of a slander suit.”

“I understand fully. In fact, it gives me the willies to think that I described it to you, but I trust that telling you will do more good than harm. By the way, you’ll find other people here that have come to the same conclusions.”

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“I will *not* leave, and you can’t make me!” Red yelled after all the police interviews were done, and Doc had suspended the McKenna project. He’d put Zeke in charge of keeping the camp running with a skeleton crew, and sending all non-essential personnel back to Scottsdale. He’d put Steve in charge of leading the Worm team’s work under the Sheriff’s Department’s direction. And, he told Red her presence was required in Boston.

“You will, and I can,” Doc growled. “You’re done here. You’ve found your father. The police will find his killer. You have a life to restart, and I’m not going to let you blow it trying to chase down some piece of shit killer who’s not worth one of your fingernail parings. You’re going immediately back to school. You will not pass ‘GO.’ You will not collect two hundred dollars. In fact, I’m tempted to tie you up, pack you into the luggage compartment of my plane, fly you to Logan Airport, transfer you to the trunk of a limo trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey, and not untie you until you’re sitting in front of your computer doing your homework. And, I know some big, strong ex-Navy SEALs who would be only too happy to stand around holding your nose directly to the grindstone.”

“No! No! No!” she stamped. “You know the police will never be able to prosecute on the evidence they can get, with, or without, Walter. They’ll be able to prove everything, but who did it. The only way they can prosecute the guy is with a confession.”

“I forbid your mucking around here,” Doc responded, “getting yourself into trouble messing with this thing. You let the police take care of it. You have to go back to school right away. It’s what all the people who care about you want; It’s what I want; It’s what Mark wants; It’s what your mother wants; and it’s what your father would want.”

“That’s unfair.”

“It was meant to be.”

“I have one more thing to do, and you know it. It has to be done, and I have to do it.”

“Yes, I know it,” Doc gave in. As usual, he was unable to say no to anything Red really wanted. “Okay, against my better judgment, I’ll give you two weeks. Then, you go back to Boston, no matter what.”

“Thank you!” she effused, wrapping her arms around his neck, and kissing him.

Stopping, and letting go, she held him at arms length, and asked: “Do you really think he’s that stupid?”

“I’ve no idea,” Doc admitted. “You have two weeks to find out. You be careful, now!”

Doc allowed Red to remain in Carson City, but she was not allowed to set foot on the crime scene. Eve, who was staying on to cover the new, exciting criminal-investigation phase of the story, promised to bring her daily updates. Eve had wheedled exclusive access by agreeing to a number of conditions, such as letting the cops see her information before releasing any of it, and promising to share her information with other news outlets.

With nothing to do, Red rented some camping gear and went off by herself. A person who had lived and worked alone for years, she’d been surrounded by people for weeks. Now that the pressure was off, she headed out to the woods for a bit of solitude.

She stayed fairly close to the Shaft Six camp, so that Eve and Gwen could stop by every evening to share news of the investigation, as well as supper from the camp’s mess hall. Red knew a thing or two about camp

cooking, but she'd hired a chef who could do much better. Solitude was one thing, but good food was another.

Eve produced a number of profiles on people connected with the McKenna project to spice up her story. Her profile on Greg Michels made him look like the greatest technical innovator since Bill Gates, and Worm robots as the hottest product since sliced bread.

She made Doc look like a combination maverick millionaire genius, and playboy. Why she wanted to portray him as the hottest social prospect in the southwest nobody could figure out, but that's what she did, going as far as pointing him out to the Channel Five society editor.

It was certainly easy to find interesting things to say about him. She dug up stories of past exploits, and included news that he was vacationing in the Reno fleshpots. Showgirls and one female casino executive figured prominently.

Eve combined the heiress story with the idea that Red was a workaholic executive being groomed to take over her stepfather's corporate empire. Eve conducted an interview with Red at her camp near Carson City, where she was taking a break from her grueling schedule.

The profiles began airing over the weekend, following Thursday's announcement of Red's discovering her stepfather's murdered body, and an update Friday. The Thursday announcement included graphic footage of the broken skeleton, and a closeup of the bullet-holed skull. It included a dramatic shot of her expression, captured by Tamara's documentary crew, when she saw the bullet hole in her father's skull. The Friday update repeated some of that video, and added shots of the jammed wreckage suspended over the mine shaft.

The detective got several minutes in the Friday announcement to describe a sanitized version of Doc's theory of the crime – *sans* Luthor Todd's name – as if it was actually his own theory. As to the killer's identity, he said the investigation was ongoing, and they expected to apprehend a suspect within a few days. Yes, he believed the culprit was still in the Carson City area, and would be cornered very soon.

The idea, of course, was to stampede the killer into doing something absolutely stupid that would connect him to the crime. The detective, knowing Luthor Todd professionally as an occasional guide and tracker, and a perennially unpleasant character, had little doubt that Doc was right about his role in McKenna's death. He also believed that Todd could be stampeded, and had some ideas about how it could be done.

An update on Monday included the detective's comment that they were making progress on finding the killer. He repeated his prediction of an arrest by the end of the week.

Tuesday's update included the news that the Sheriff's Department was beginning to close in on a suspect. Arrest was imminent.

Wednesday evening, when Eve and Gwen arrived for their daily *tete-a-tete* with Red. The camp was gone.

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Red woke up with a headache the size of Rhode Island, with Providence, the capitol city, located at a fiery point on the right side of the back of her head. Fearing that her plan had gone terribly wrong, and that she'd been shot in the head like her father, she tried to reach up to the fiery point, only to find that her right wrist was shackled to the wall she was propped against. She tried to move around, and found her left wrist shackled, too.

"You're even prettier than on TV," came a raspy voice. "I oughta fuck you before I give you up. If I give you up."

"You, and whose army?" Red replied derisively.

"Your stepdaddy won't mind if he gets you back a little beat up, and pregnant, as long as he gets you back."

"He's not the one you have to worry about," Red commented. She was trying to work her way around to feel the back of her head with her hand.

“Oh, who is?” the raspy voice continued.

Red was having trouble focusing her eyes well enough to identify the owner of the raspy voice. The light was a little dim, and the pain in her head made focusing difficult. She hoped he hadn’t shot away important parts of her brain. She couldn’t think of any parts of her brain that she didn’t consider important.

“There’s me,” she pointed out.

“What could you do?”

“Hunt you down to the ends of the Earth, then cut off your balls and shove them so far down your throat you’d choke to death. That’s after I tore your dick off by the root, and shoved it so far up your ass that shit would come out of your eyes.”

“Oooh!” said the amused voice. “Feisty! I like that.”

“You won’t when it happens.”

“What if I fixed it so you couldn’t pursue anyone anywhere ever again?”

“Then, you’d have to deal with Doc Manchek,” Red informed.

“He don’t give a shit about you. He’s off fucking starlets in Reno. He gets plenty of pussy. He don’t need you.”

“He’s my brother, you asshole!”

She finally got her fingers up to the fiery point, and found a lump the size of a golf ball, rather than the bullet hole she feared.

“What’re you doing, anyway?”

“Checking to see if you’d shot me, like you did my father.”

“Naw. I just beaned you with a baseball. I want you in good enough shape to sell back to your stepdaddy.”

That explained the headache, nausea, and blurred vision: She had a concussion. Hopefully, it wasn’t too serious.

“How long have I been out?” she asked.

“Not long. Ten minutes, or so. Don’t worry, you’ll still have all your marbles. I just rung your bell pretty good.”

She hoped he was right. She *liked* her brain. She considered it her best feature, and wanted to keep it that way.

The voice sounded familiar. “Who are you, anyway?” she asked.

“You know,” came the response. Then, she recognized the voice: Luthor Todd.

“I saw you on TV, too,” she said. “You’re a lying motherfucker.”

“Leave my mother out of this, although you’re right.”

“About your lying?”

“About my mother. She was damn good in bed!”

“Ugh! You remind me of the joke about the fastidious man.” It had just suddenly popped into her head, thinking about Luthor Todd with his mother.

“What’s that,” Todd asked, intrigued.

“His mother was fast, and his father was hideous.”

Todd doubled over in laughter. “That’s a good one!” he said.

“You mean, you’ve never heard it?” Red couldn’t believe even this lummo was that ignorant.

“I’m gonna go up, now, and clean out your camp,” Todd informed her. “Don’t you go fallin’ asleep, y’hear. Them concussions can be tricky. You might not wake up. Then where’d I be?”

“Right where you are now: screwed, blued, and tattooed,” Red responded cheerfully. “I’ll just spend the time thinking of juicy ways to torture you. You shouldn’t have done it, you know.”

“I shouldn’t ‘a done what?”

“Killed my father, or any of the others,” she said, trying to get at least a verbal confession out of him. If she got out of this alive, she planned to tell this story at his trial.

She heard him walk out and shut the door.

It took over an hour for Todd to make three trips to clear out her camp. That meant it couldn’t be more than ten minutes walk away, and probably less. He didn’t bring anything in, so he had some kind of storage outside.

Things weren’t too bad, then. If she could only get him to confess before he did any permanent damage, it would be alright.

“I have to pee,” she said when he came back in. Her head was beginning to clear, and she could see she was in a small, one-room cabin somewhere in the pine forest.

“So, pee,” he waved his hand to indicate she should just do it where she sat.

“Thanks, Galahad,” she said, sarcastically.

“Where’d you get these shackles?” she asked after a pause, trying to draw him out.

“I put ‘em up for those college girls. There’s another set right next to yours. Kept ‘em nice, and close. Made ‘em put on a show before I balled their brains out right where you’re sitting. Two, or three times a day for a week. I do believe they were beginning to like it, towards the end.”

“How’d the one escape?”

“Her hands were smaller than I’d figured, so she slipped out in the middle of the night. It took days to track her down. By then, she was in the hospital.”

“What made her leave the hospital?”

“I tapped on the glass. Scared the shit out of her, but she wouldn’t move. I had to do it three or four times before she panicked, and tried to run away. When she got out, I herded her toward the woods. Then I had her! It was just a matter of time. I tracked her down, and brought her back here.”

Red felt a horrible fascination to find out what happened next. She didn’t have to ask. Todd sat thinking about it for a few minutes, then told her.

“I tied them bitches together with their legs kinda forked. Y’know, so they’re cunts was together. Left ‘em for a couple of days like that ‘til they pissed, and shit all over each other. I was real pissed about her runnin’ off. Anyway, then I shot ‘em so I could clean up the mess. It was gettin’ stinky in here.”

Red had thought that his story would make her horrified and ill, but it didn’t. It made her angry – mad clean through. Doing that to two girls who’d just come out here to have some private fun loving each other was even worse than what he’d done to her father. A lot worse!

There was nothing she could think of to do to him that could make up for what he’d done. Maybe crucifixion by the side of the road. But, the cops would just come, and cut him down, then come after *her*.

No, she decided. Doc was right. The best thing to do was to tell the story in a court, then let the judge put

him in jail. Let the other prisoners play with him for the rest of his life. She had enough now to make that happen. She might not have a confession about her father's murder, but she now wanted to punish him more for the torture of those two girls, and she had enough for that.

"When are you going to make the call?" she asked.

"What call?" he asked in turn.

"The ransom call. A few million dollars, and a helicopter ride to Mexico. Someplace out in the Sierra Madre, where you could just disappear from. Then, you tell them where to find me. More likely you lie to them, and leave me here to rot. That sounds like more your speed."

She needed that ransom call to get out of here.

"I won't do that 'til tomorrow. Let 'em sweat a bit," Todd explained.

"Jesus, stupid. They already know you did it. They just don't know where to find you. If you give them enough time, they'll figure it out, and come storming in here. Then, no millions of dollars, no Mexico, no disappearing. If it's my stepfather's goons that get here first, they won't be handing you to the cops. They'll find a nice cave someplace to hang you upside down, then wall up the entrance. You'll die of thirst screaming into the dark."

"They'll give me what they want. I have you."

"Humph!"

"Anyway, they won't know anything's wrong until your two girlfriends show up for dinner. Maybe I ought to grab them, too. Bring 'em here for a party."

"If you do that, who's gonna tell Doc that you've got me?"

“Why tell Doc? It’s your stepfather who has the money.”

“Mark’s in Florida. He’ll just call Doc, who’ll make all the arrangements. Hell, it’d probably be Doc flying the helicopter. He can, you know. You’ll end up dealing with him, anyway. Might as well do it from the start. You’d be better off, anyway.”

“Why?”

“Doc’s a pacifist. Violence is against his religion. He’d rather pay you off and help you get away, than to let Mark get ahold of you – or for me to. I saw him once grab a drunk and hustle him out of a bar to protect him from me.”

“You?”

“Hey, buddy. I’m over six feet tall. I’ve muscles from working out every day. I’ve a black belt in karate. Take off these shackles, and I’ll let you see what broken bones feel like. The drunk didn’t know that, and tried to slap me. Doc saved him, like he’ll try to save you. I told you what Mark’s goons would do to you. Doc wouldn’t want that to happen, so he’d try to help you get away. You’d still spend your life running from the cops, but you have to lie in that bed, anyway. Make the fucking call!”

“Nah, I’ll wait ‘til after dark. Then they’ll know for sure you’re gone. Then I’ll claim a prize for giving you back.”

“Stupid!”

Todd stopped talking to her, then. He went out to wherever he’d put her camping gear, and started clattering it around. Probably, he was trying to figure out what was most valuable, and how he could take it with him.

Another hour went by. The sun was high, and it was getting hot. He came in, and heated a plate of beans for himself on a small gas stove. After eating, he sat back in the old, dilapidated easy chair with a porn magazine.

Soon, he unbuckled his pants, and started masturbating over the pictures. Then, he looked up at Red.

“Ohh, shit,” Red murmured.

He grabbed Red by the ankles, and pulled her out from the wall until the shackles stretched her arms over her head. Then he sat on her hips, so she was virtually helpless.

This was not going to be pleasant.

He tore open her blouse, and started fondling her breasts. Then he started rubbing his erection over the nipples. Finally, he started masturbating in earnest, until he ejaculated into her belly button. Then, he wiped his now flaccid penis off between her breasts.

She had to think of a way to get him to make that ransom call before he decided to do something that wouldn't wash off.

Leaving Red on the floor, he put his penis away, readjusted his clothing, and went back to the chair. He picked up the magazine again, but instead of opening it, he lay it in his lap, and went to sleep.

A couple of hours later, with the shadows getting long outside, he stirred again. “I see you took my advice, and peed,” he said, pointing out the fact that she was sitting in a puddle with her jeans soaked.

“I thought you might enjoy the smell,” she taunted. If he thought forcing her to break toilet training would break her heart, he didn't know with whom he was dealing. She'd known from the beginning that she was risking far worse than that.

She'd had the foresight to wear a western style blouse with snaps in the front, instead of buttons. Instead of ripping her shirt, he'd merely popped the snaps open. She'd pulled herself back to a sitting position, and used her shirt tails to wipe her belly. Her shirt tails were now a mess, but that was better than her belly. She'd reclosed the top snaps, leaving the mucky shirt tails out.

“Eve and Gwen have had time to report me missing, by now,” Red reminded him. “Make the damn call. Or, are you too much of a pussy to do it. It’s easy to go around jacking off onto a chained up girl, but when it’s time to deal with real men, you’re chickenshit.”

“Who’re you callin’ chickenshit?”

“I’m calling *you* chickenshit, mister chickenshit. If you had a hair on your ass, you’d pick up the damn phone, and call Doc to get your money. What’re you waiting for? Scared he’ll yell at you? Stupid killer’s afraid of Doc?”

“Watch it, you. I’ll call when I’m good, and ready.”

“What are you waiting for? Every minute you spend dragging your chickenshit feet is another minute you’ll be poor.”

Todd didn’t like it, but he couldn’t find a flaw in her logic. “I been waiting for you to give me his number.”

“You really are incompetent, aren’t you,” Red laughed in his face. Then she gave him Doc’s cellphone number.

“Manchek here. What can I do you out of.”

“I got that McKenna broad ... ,” Todd began to say.

“Luthor!” Doc interrupted him. “I know you have her. I’ve been waiting for your call, buddy. What took you so long?”

Doc’s jovial, friendly tone threw Todd completely off stride. “I want ...” suddenly he realized he’d never figured what he wanted.

“Fifteen million dollars,” Red prompted.

“Fifteen million dollars,” Todd repeated, becoming even more confused. “Or I’ll ...”

“Yeah, you’ll mail the girl to me in little pieces,” Doc finished for him. “Say, have you told her that you killed her father, yet?”

“Naw, she kept askin’ but I didn’t say nothin. Why?”

“Well, she’s not entirely rational when it comes to her father. If she knew you’d killed him, she might hurt herself killing you. Are you sure she doesn’t know?”

“I thought she knew already. That’s why I wouldn’t tell her.”

“Okay, Luthor, I’ve got the fifteen million in the back of a chopper. Just leave the girl there, and come to her camp, or where her camp was before you hauled it off. I’ll meet you there with the chopper.”

“How do you know I can trust you?”

“You mean ‘How do I know I can trust you?’ don’t you, Luthor? Take a deep breath, and calm down. We’ll get you through this. You know you can trust me because I need you to tell me where the girl is. The deal is that I fly you where you want to go. Then, you tell me where the girl is, right? This isn’t rocket science, you know.”

“Don’t you want to know if she’s alright?” Todd was getting confused. Nothing was going as he expected it to, but it seemed to be working, anyway.

“Fine! Put her on the phone.”

Todd placed the phone in Red’s manacled left hand. She had to maneuver it to her ear. “Would you quit cucking around, and come get me?” she yelled. “This piece of shit made me pee my pants. If you don’t come and get me, I’m gonna kill him right now, and have done with it!”

Todd took the phone back, and heard Doc saying to someone else at the other end of the line: “She’s madder

than a wet hen, so she's okay!"

"Hello?" Todd said.

"Luthor! You heard her, quit cucking around, and get your ass out here. Time's a wastin', boy!"

Todd shut off the phone, stepped out the door, and stopped dead as four men in military camouflage outfits stepped from the trees, and pointed automatic weapons at him. He just got a glimpse before the two men standing against the wall on either side of the door took him from behind.

As the two men from behind pushed him to his knees, a big, bearded man wearing a black tee shirt and a black cowboy hat stepped from the trees and said: "You didn't think we were gonna leave a beautiful woman like that laying around loose for a shithead like you to just waltz in and drag off, did you?" Then, to the men holding him, he said: "Get this moron out of here."

Doc stepped through the door, and wrapped the wool blanket he was carrying around Red, then pulled a pair of eighteen inch bolt cutters from his back pocket to cut her shackles off. Pulling her to her feet, he wrapped the blanket tight around her, and hugged her.

"He didn't hurt you did he?" he asked her.

"Except for this lump on the back of my head, everything will wash off. Thanks for helping me."

"I was afraid that if I didn't, you'd try to do it on your own." He hugged her again, and she realized that *he* was the one who was trembling.

She was too angry to tremble. "What he did to those girls ... I hate him!"

"I know, we heard. We got it all on tape. I don't know if it will be admissible in court, but you'll tell them about it. You'll tell everybody about it."

“He’d better hope that they lock him away. If he gets off on a technicality, I’ll go hunting! Calling him a piece of shit is insulting to shit!”

Eve quickly showed up carrying a microphone. “I was so scared when we found your camp vanished. Then, Doc told me they were on top of it. Are you up for an interview?”

“Eager!”

Eve thrust the microphone in Red’s face, and brought her own face close enough to speak into it as well: “We’re here with heiress Judith McKenna after the apprehension and arrest of accused serial rapist and killer Luthor Todd, who has confessed to murdering her father and others during a ten-year crime spree. This brave woman voluntarily endured over six hours of captivity leading up to Todd’s apprehension. Ms. McKenna, did Todd confess to you that he’d murdered your father?”

“Actually, he confessed that to Dr. Manchek, here, who was negotiating with him via cellphone. More importantly, though, Todd bragged to me about kidnapping, raping, torturing, and finally killing two young women in this cabin. He admitted inflicting degrading torture and repeated rape on them for two weeks before shooting them to death.”

“Did he rape you?” Eve asked in horror.

“No, but he did masturbate all over me. I need a shower!” The grim smile she was forcing for the camera was beginning to slip.

“Who planned, and executed this sting operation?”

“It was my idea, but ... Doc, help!” She buried her face in his collar, and started sobbing.

Doc took over : “We have a great deal of circumstantial evidence implicating Todd in James McKenna’s murder, as well as several other crimes. To assure conviction, we wanted extract a verbal confession as well. Ms.

McKenna volunteered to set herself up as a target. She hoped to get him bragging until he admitted the crimes. The operation was a cooperative effort of the County Sheriff's Department, private security forces in Ms. McKenna's employ, myself, and, of course, Ms. McKenna herself, who literally put her life on the line to make the operation a success."

"So, what actually happened?"

"Todd took the bait. He lay in wait, knocking Ms. McKenna unconscious with a thrown baseball, then he carried her to this remote cabin, where he shackled her to the wall, and tormented her for six hours while she tried to extract a confession from him. During which time she succeeded in extracting a confession of the other, far more heinous, crime she just described. She finally got him to talk to me on the telephone. It was then that he confessed her father's murder to me. We were then able to isolate Todd, and arrest him."

"Did he torture Ms. McKenna?"

"Well, that depends on your definition of torture. I'd say being knocked unconscious, shackled to a wall in a sitting position for six hours, being forced to urinate on herself, having to endure having her shirt ripped open, and his ejaculating on her body, probably qualifies as torture. I know I wouldn't like it."

"There you have it," Eve started her outro, "through the self sacrifice of a heroic young woman, a ... "

Doc led Red off to a waiting ambulance, and held her hand enroute to the hospital. There, despite Red's vehement protests, she was forced to undergo an examination of her bruised scalp, x-ray, and MRI examination of her skull, and a thorough physical examination before being allowed to take a shower.

Finally, a nurse came in, tucked Red into bed with a sedative, and physically pushed Doc out through the door. Whereupon Red fell asleep for twenty four hours.

Epilogue

Tamara got her documentary finished and on the air in record time – less than a month after Luthur Todd's arrest – partly through cooperation of Eve Salazar, who contributed raw video footage from her real-time news reporting of the events, and profiles of the participants. Eve also narrated the entire documentary.

Its story line was the ten year search for Red's missing father conducted by his widow and daughter. The message was that it took Red's determination, and advances in robotics technology to finally make resolution of the mystery possible. Eve and Tamara shared the national news-reporting award for that one.

Red and Gwen Petersen never dropped their *ersatz* mother/daughter relationship, which quickly morphed into a mentoring relationship. Red's maternal instinct turned out to be, shall we say, easily triggered, with her being quick to adopt any strays that came her way, from kittens to orphaned children.

Gwen sort-of qualified as the latter, as she, like Red, had been a runaway. Gwen's mother had never been able to deal with her lifestyle choices. Red's Zen attitude, picked up from Doc, made her much more tolerant. Unlike Gwen's real mother, she was able to guide Gwen to make choices by what would ultimately make her happiest, rather than what best fit some inherited moralistic code.

As Doc predicted, Gwen became an outspoken advocate for women in engineering, and a well respected engineer, herself. Ultimately, she combined her engineering talents with her innate ability to sell just about anything to anybody to make herself very wealthy.

Eve and Gwen Petersen stayed together for the rest of their lives. They went as far as having a civil wedding ceremony in Carson City before the Worm crew finished its work exploring Red's father's mines.

Luthur Todd spent seven years being repeatedly gang-sodomized by inmates of a Nevada penal institution. At his second parole hearing, he suddenly got all kinds of help. A lawyer showed up to help him navigate the interview. Several prominent psychologists wrote *pro bono* letters suggesting that he had suffered sufficient

punishment, and was no longer a danger to society.

On his release, he was met by a black Lincoln Town Car driven by an enormous black chauffeur. He was never heard from again.

When he never checked in with his parole officer, an investigation was started. The investigator who talked to Red about it got the cryptic response: "How should I know where he's got to? For all I know, he emigrated to Borneo."

Not even Doc knew what it meant. The only one who made any sense of it was Red's freshman roommate, Cheryl Thompson. When she heard about it, she broke into belly laughs, but refused to explain. It became a private joke between Cheryl and Red, who would both burst into laughter at the mere mention of Luthor Todd's name.

Doc was pleased with the message of Tamara's documentary. Of course, he loved the portrayal of Worm robots and vocal programming, which rapidly propelled sales for both SST and Robotic Concepts into the stratosphere.

He also liked her portrayal of Red, with whom he was still hopelessly in love. It made Red an instant celebrity, which both outwardly annoyed her, and inwardly pleased her. She constantly complained about not being able to go out of the house without being recognized, but secretly enjoyed the attention.

Doc's fixation on Red was why he wasn't terribly upset when Eve fell in love with Gwen Petersen while out on a date with him. He wasn't all that serious about Eve, anyway. He also wasn't at all serious about the showgirls, the female casino executive, or anyone else he happened to get on fluid-swapping terms with, and all for the same reason. While he liked girls, and enjoyed playing around with them at every opportunity, they all had the same problem: they weren't Red.

The only one who came close was Red's wild-child freshman roommate, Cheryl Thompson, who came back into Red's life soon afterward and never left.

But, that is another story. ...