

Vengeance is Mine!

A Red McKenna Novel: The Dark Side of Red

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For Helen Hewes

“La vengeance se mange très-bien froide.”

– From *Mathilde* by Marie Joseph Eugène Sue, 1841

“Revenge is a dish best served cold.”

– Translation from *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* by Quentin Tarentino, 2003

1

“Do you think I’m fat?” Red asked while posing her taut athletic body in front of a full-length mirror, but with a look of critical concern on her face. At a height of six-foot three-inches, her long, narrow figure belied uncommonly strong muscles from working out nearly every day. Covered head-to-toe with freckles, and with fire-red hair cascading down below her shoulder blades in back, it was obvious where her nickname came from.

Once a hopeful for the Olympic tennis team, she still worked hard to keep her body fit and trim. When people saw her, clothed in anything from a string bikini to a formal evening dress, “fat” was not the first adjective to come to mind.

“Fat, relative to what?” Doc questioned, exasperatedly lowering the book he was trying to read. He’d been waiting for Red to come to bed, and was tired of fielding this same question time after time. He was trying to think of some way to get Red to stop obsessing about her figure.

Like his wife, Doc, aka Dr. Michael Manchek, was serious about body building and fitness. His roughly two-hundred-fifty-pound weightlifter’s body had been described as “built like a cement truck.” Some three inches taller than Red’s, it took up an enormous amount of real estate in their oversize bed. In contrast to her red hair and freckled complexion, his skin showed a dark tan under dark brown hair and full beard. Both hair and beard were longer than the current fashion – the better to show off his hair’s waviness – but neatly trimmed.

Depending on how he was dressed at the time, Doc’s features variously reminded people of hippies, cowboys, beach bums, or, most often, pirates (those who knew him best tended to refer to him as an “old pirate,” despite his being only in his late twenties) – anything but the technology-genius founder of a successful private research company. The piratical impression stemmed mainly from his tendency to do pretty much whatever he damn well pleased – and get away with it. Nobody ever expected conventional behavior from him, and they were almost universally not disappointed.

Red, aka Judith McKenna, had at least tried to fit in. Lordy, how she’d tried! The combination of a physically dominating presence, a mathematical genius mind, and an extremely independent personality had, however, robbed her of the ability to behave the way society in general expects a young lady to behave.

Influenced by Doc’s example, she’d eventually dropped the attempt as a losing proposition. The question of what she was

supposed to do in any situation seldom crossed her mind, anymore.

“Look,” Doc continued. “You’ve had two babies in less than twelve months, and, per doctor’s orders, had put on fifteen pounds to give them the best start you could. Now, you’re trying to lose those fifteen pounds and get back to professional-athlete trim, while being a wife, and mother, and full-time student, and corporate executive. Baby, it’s time for you to set some priorities.”

“I suggest that you say ‘Bye, Bye’ to the six-pack abs,” he continued. “So what if you’ve only lost ten of the fifteen pounds? So what if you’ve got twenty percent body fat instead of eighteen? You’re still the most gorgeous woman I know. Settle for being the MILF I know and love.”

“MILF?”

“Acronym for ‘Mother I’d Like to Fuck.’ I thought you’d heard of it.”

“I’ve heard it, but I never knew what it meant,” Red explained. “Now, I do.”

“But, do you think I’m fat?” she asked again after a pause, still posing in front of the mirror and not looking satisfied with what she saw.

“Goddamn it, NO! You look like a bikini model. Better, because you still have your bodybuilder’s muscles underneath. You’ve got just enough fat to smooth out the cuts around your muscles. I don’t *want* you to lose any more weight. I *like* the way you are.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better,” Red complained.

“Don’t call me a liar! I said it because I mean it. Now, stop obsessing and give us a kiss and a cuddle. I’m feeling neglected.”

Appeased, at least for the time being, Red pulled out the sheets near the foot of the bed, and crawled in between Doc’s feet, sliding her body up over Doc’s, and emerging between his arms, which were still holding the book. She smiled beguilingly, her eyes inches from his.

Tipping his head slightly to one side so that he could see the book, he carefully slipped a bookmark between the pages to mark his place, and tossed the book to the floor beside the bed.

With his arms still wrapped around Red’s neck, he pulled her close for the kiss part. He was already enjoying the cuddle part, with her nude body laying on top of his.

She squirmed around a little, just to renew the sensation.

For both of them.

Mustn't let the ol' nerve endings forget that they're being stimulated!

"Speaking of feeling neglected, I got a call from Suby today," Doc said, interrupting the kiss.

"Crap!" Red complained, "I thought we were going to kiss and cuddle."

"Oh, we are," Doc assured her. "It's just that I promised I would talk to you about it, and if I don't bring it up now, in about five seconds you'll drive it from my mind, and I won't think of it again for ... the foreseeable future."

"Okay, what's my best friend's hubby pestering you about?"

"He's feeling neglected."

"I can't see Bud neglecting him. She's too fond of what he has in his pants."

Bud was the nickname Red had given her college roommate, best friend, research partner, and onetime lover, Cheryl Thompson, who'd married Suby soon after Red and Doc were wed two years ago. The nickname was short for 'Fuck Buddy,' meaning, at the time, *her* fuck buddy, and Cheryl was such a rebel that she insisted everyone use it.

Doc was also fond of Cheryl, treating her like a favorite sister-in-law, and he objected to anyone calling her a "fuck buddy," as if she were nothing but a sex object. He felt strongly enough about it that he refused to use the appellation, despite the fact that Cheryl, herself, liked it.

Suby had picked Bud up on the rebound when Red "left" her for Doc. Actually, it had been Bud who picked Suby up, but who's going to quibble?

"I only report what he said," Doc responded. "He thinks she's cheating with someone else."

"She's got enough on her plate without screwing around behind his back. Who's he think she's playing with?"

"You."

“Me!”

2

“He thinks you’re shacking up in your stateroom on the *Mary McKenna*. I only report what he told me. He must think it’s important, he called from Florida to pester me with it.”

Cheryl was a marine archaeologist working on her Ph.D. mapping debris fields from shipwrecks lost in storms. Red’s Ph.D. thesis involved developing computer models to help interpret those debris fields. The *Mary McKenna* was Red’s stepfather’s hundred-plus-foot motoryacht, named for Red’s mother, which he’d loaned to the women to use in their research.

“What did you say?”

“I told Suby I didn’t know, and the only way to find out would be to ask.”

“Do *you* think we’re shacking up?”

“I truly have no idea.”

“What does your Zen-sage intuition tell you?”

“That it’s none of my business. Except for obsessing about not being anorexic, you seem happy. I know I’m happy. You don’t appear to be keeping any little secrets, so if you *are* playing around with Cheryl, you don’t feel guilty about it. You’re happy. I’m happy. Where’s the problem?”

“In Suby’s head! That’s where,” Red accused.

“I notice you aren’t denying it,” Doc observed.

“I wanted to find out what was going on in that pumpkin you keep on your shoulders before I answered,” Red explained. She hesitated, thinking carefully before finally answering.

“Okay. Sometimes Bud and I sleep together for company. You know how I hate sleeping alone. She has trouble sleeping without company, too. When you and I are separated for a few days, I get lonesome and can’t sleep. But that’s as far as it goes. I didn’t

think you'd mind."

"Baby, I don't mind anything you do," Doc assured her. "You know damn well I only want what makes you happy."

"I've never fathomed that non-jealous streak in you," Red said. "I went nuts that time I saw you making love to Bud, even though I'd broken up with you, and had told her to go ahead. It hurt so much! I'd never give you an excuse to do it again."

"I've more experience with casual sex than you have," Doc explained briefly, "so I see it more objectively. For you, sex has always been part of building a larger relationship. I, on the other hand, know that it can be just for fun, too. But, that's not the point. FYI, I have no desire to fool around with Cheryl or any other woman. I like *you*."

Doc took a breath, then summarized: "So, we've established that you and Bud do snuggle up at night, but for company, not sex. That doesn't look good, by the way, but nobody we care about is looking. I don't give a shit because you make me sooo happy. You're happy, and I'm happy. Suby's showing green eyes, but that's between him and Cheryl. We can erect a big S.E.B. field around it, and get back to our regularly scheduled program of kissing and cuddling."

"Yeah, S.E.B. field: somebody else's business," Red said. "Namely, Bud and Suby's."

"Should I say something to Bud?" she asked as an afterthought.

"Hmm. She could probably use a heads-up that Suby's having doubts," Doc agreed. "She's almost as smart as you are, so she'll know how to deal with it. Let her know about the call, then let her take it from there."

"I hate to say this," Red speculated, "but *my* Zen intuition is starting to buzz. The Tao is whispering that maybe Suby's concerned because he's been looking around, himself."

"You mean he's having ideas, and projecting them onto her? That's a real possibility. It happens an awful lot between married couples."

"Not very Zen of him," Red pointed out.

"Suby has a lot to learn," Doc said.

"I thought you were going to train him."

“I don’t take on students.”

“You trained me,” Red said, bringing up another perennial *contretemps* between them. She claimed him as her *sensei*, or Zen master, but he refused the title.

“I did not. I pointed the way, and you took off down the path like a bloodhound on a scent. You did it, yourself,” Doc explained. “But, when I pointed for Suby, he looked at my finger.”

“Oh, to Hell with both of them,” Red grouched, and turned on her left side with her back nestled against Doc’s body, distracted from cuddling, but not wanting to give up.

He turned to hold her, reaching around her body to cup her left breast with his right hand. A minute or so later, he adjusted his hand position to pull her breasts together, pressing her left nipple with his fingers, while her right nipple pressed into his palm. Within a couple of minutes, they completely forgot about Bud and Suby. It was another hour, however, before they shut off the lights and went to sleep, with kissing and cuddling taken to its natural conclusion.

Despite her complaints, Red had achieved the lifestyle she’d always wanted. She liked to describe herself as “a mommy who plays with computers.”

She played with computers under the auspices of Doc’s aerospace-technology development company, Scottsdale Systems Technology (SST) in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she held the position of research analyst. “If she’s so rich, why does she work?” Gwen Petersen had once asked Doc, when she first found out the extent of Red’s stepfather’s fortune.

“Let’s put it this way,” Doc had explained: “If somebody asks you to do something for money, what’s the first question you think of?”

“How much, of course,” Gwen had said.

“When I offered Red a job, she never asked how much,” Doc reported. “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 so that she can do what she wants.”

On the Mommy side, what Red wanted to do was build a home and a family with a husband she loved and respected. She’d found that husband in Doc. While Red always referred to Cheryl as her best friend, she was lucky enough to have her “bestest” friend be her husband.

3

“That skinny, four-eyed son of a bitch has a girlfriend!” Bud practically screamed at Red a few weeks later. Bud was referring to her husband, Suby, who’d filed for divorce on grounds of infidelity. Bud had countered by hiring Tom Devore, SST’s go-to guy for all things private investigative, to check on Suby’s activities.

“He was just looking for an excuse to shack up with a skinny, four-eyed bitch at work. She’s another computer jock, and probably reminds him of you. He always had the hots for you, anyway. So, he accused me of shacking up with you as an excuse. Not that I wouldn’t mind doing it, but for once in my life I was being a good girl.”

“Excepting that lesbian *Kama Sutra* website you modeled for with Gwen Petersen,” Red pointed out.

“That was *modeling* for crissakes! It was a one-time deal, and for a good cause, which Suby fully supported. Hell, he designed the website! This is different.”

The two women had taken Doc’s forty-five foot cabin cruiser *Strange Brew* out for a spin off Bermuda so they could discuss Bud’s marital problems away from nosy crewmembers aboard the *Mary McKenna*. Bud wanted to vent uninhibited, and Red never passed up an excuse to take the *Strange Brew* out for a spin. With twin thousand-horsepower turbine engines and a PT-boat-inspired mahogany hull, the boat cruised comfortably at fifty knots (sea conditions permitting), and could achieve a hundred knots upon request. That was heady stuff for a young woman with a taste for exotic machines.

As a fluid dynamicist and systems engineer, Doc found designing unique yachts a nice, relaxing hobby. His father, a professional custom yacht builder himself, built Doc’s toys at cost – and offered tamed-down versions for his sport-minded customers. There’s nothing like having a Doc-Manchek-designed forty-foot speedboat swinging from davits on your megayacht. It makes running up on the beach at Copacabana that much more fun for your guests.

Red and Bud had been using *Strange Brew* to shuttle back and forth to the *Mary McKenna*. Doc had programmed *Strange Brew*’s biometric anti-theft system to respond to Red’s and Bud’s fingerprints, as well as his own, so they could take the boat out whenever they wanted. Anyone could operate any of her controls, but only Doc, Red and Bud could fire up the turbines.

The boat’s systems were run by an embedded computer-control system custom built at SST. Doc was constantly coming up with new features and capabilities to try out on her, such as the GPS-based emergency-locator system. It was a kind of combined Lo-Jack and emergency beacon for boats. Using Iridium-satellite communications in conjunction with the global positioning system of

navigation satellites, Doc could locate the craft anywhere on Earth. A simple telephone call to the system, along with a ten-digit authorization code, would return the vessel's exact location, speed, and direction. The system could also call out in the event that the boat's control software sensed a critical emergency. Doc had designed the hardware, and Red had written the software to make it work.

After weeks of practice under Doc's watchful eye, both women had become expert at handling the boat either together, or alone. Red couldn't get enough of having something that big and powerful under her sole control. Truth be told, neither could Bud. When they brought her into her slip at the yacht club in Miami Beach, both women couldn't stop grinning ear to ear.

Bud was five inches shorter than Red, but that still made her extraordinarily tall for a woman. Tall and blonde, with a smooth, even tan, her figure was even fuller than Red's, which made her jaw-droppingly sexy to look at. The ladies knew what it looked like for two statuesque bikini-clad women to precisely handle a boat that intimidated most men. Delicious!

This, however, was not a time for delicious. Bud wanted to rant and rave, inveighing against her husband. It amused Red to note the similarity between what Suby was trying to do, and what her step father had pulled off years before.

Mark Shipton had used a fabricated lesbian affair to scrape off his first wife, a cold, conniving woman who'd married him for his money. An experienced veteran of cutthroat business wars, Mark had made the gambit work, clearing the way at very little cost for him to marry Red's widowed mother.

It wasn't going to work for Suby. Suby had made the mistake of letting Tom Devore catch him cheating before the divorce was settled.

The fact that Red could do her work almost anywhere – the apartment she still kept in Boston, Massachusetts; her office at SST; her second office in their new mountainside home overlooking Phoenix; her workstation aboard the *Mary McKenna*; or even on a laptop while sitting by the pool at the yacht club – made it possible for her to work full time while fully participating in the upbringing of her two children.

The kids' governess, Maryanne Beckett, took care of basic chores, like changing Judy's diapers, and helping Mike keep his balance while trying to walk, while Mommy was always nearby to supervise. Well, not always, because Red frequently made week-long trips to support Bud's shipboard data-gathering efforts.

Bud's research, on the other hand, required her to be at sea for weeks on end using remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) to map underwater archaeological sites. The fact that Bud had found a happy hunting ground for shipwrecks within a hundred miles of

southern Florida, where Suby's company was headquartered, meant that Bud could get home on a weekly basis. In archaeology, where field work half way around the world was the norm, it seemed an ideal situation for her.

From Suby's perspective, however, having his wife away from home five days out of seven during the field season was a problem. It was a problem he'd obviously decided to solve by dumping her for a woman with a shorter commute to work.

"Bud, I don't know what to tell you," Red commiserated. "This is not a problem that's going to go away when you get your Ph.D. Both our guys already put up with our living in Boston for a year to attend classes at Harvard. Doc even came up to be with me when Mike was born. Except for coming here to help out with the ROV data, I can be home pretty much all of the time, now. But, you'll be away a lot as long as you do field work. Unless you want to become a librarian, or give up your career to be an unemployed beach bum, like my Mom, you're going to have to come to terms with it. Is your marriage to Suby worth cancelling your career for? That's what you have to decide."

"Some beach bum," Bud retorted. "Your Mom's married to a billionaire. All beach bums would like to live like that! But, I know what you mean. Suby's already voted with his feet – more accurately with his dick – for dissolving the marriage. Somehow, I can't get enthusiastic about fighting for a man who's already made it clear he doesn't want me."

She thought about it for a few minutes, lapsing into pensive silence that Red patiently waited out.

"Fuck the bastard!" Bud spat out suddenly. "I'm gonna let him buy his way out of this – for as much as I can squeeze out of his philandering hide."

"Okay," Red responded. "If there's anything Doc and I can do, or that you need, let me know. That includes leaving a honey trail to lead ants into Suby's bed. Do you want me to look for a supplier that'll sell us some fleas? Dust his hat rack with head lice? You're my best friend, and I love you. You were there for me when I needed you, and I'm here for you now. And, Doc thinks the world of you, too. So, don't be shy."

"Well, could I stay at the marina aboard this boat? You guys aren't using it much this Summer. Except for you and me using it to go back and forth to the wreck site, it just sits at the dock. If I could just live aboard until we get this settled, I wouldn't have to sit around the *Mary McKenna* with a bunch of people feeling sorry for me, or giving me advice I don't need. I want to be alone."

"Sure. We'll have to clear it with Doc. It's still his boat, but I'm sure he won't mind, seeing how it's you."

4

“Oh, God, baby! They *raped* me!” Bud cried, reaching out to Red, who was sitting on the side of the hospital bed where Bud was propped up with an IV tube in her arm. She’d been living aboard the *Strange Brew* for two months before things went very badly wrong for her.

“Who raped you?” Red asked, mostly to get Bud to keep talking. Red knew that describing her ordeal was the first step for Bud to deal with the emotional trauma. The physical effects – sunburn, minor cuts and bruises, hunger, and raging thirst – would quickly heal. It was that horrified, frightened look, which Red had never believed she’d ever see in Bud’s eyes, that worried her the most.

When she’d pulled her best friend out of the Atlantic swells into the semi-inflatable boat, Red thought she still saw that indomitable spirit Bud always displayed. But, by the time they’d reached the Coast Guard cutter, Bud, by then wrapped in a heavy wool blanket and nestled under Red’s long arm, had seemed to fall apart, mentally.

Crying and shaking while Red handed her up to the cutter’s crewmen, she kept making a grunting sound and thrashing around, as if she were making a supreme effort to escape something, but couldn’t get free. Red swore eternal vengeance on whoever had done this to her friend.

The look on Doc’s face up on deck was a combination of concern and anger. The reason for the concern was obvious.

The anger was another matter. It was an anger Red had never seen Doc express. Doc had infinite patience. He never lost his temper, or even his sense of humor.

Red knew that she, herself, didn’t have Doc’s patience. When she felt wronged, her heart turned toward revenge. Doc joked about her cannibalistic tendencies with respect to her enemies’ livers, but the joke was in the way he said it, not what he was describing.

For the first time since she’d known him, Doc looked *pissed* – implacably, thoroughly, remorselessly pissed. It was new territory, and she wasn’t quite sure what to expect next.

Red knew why Doc was angry. (Red couldn’t imagine describing any mood of Doc’s as “mad.” *She* got mad, reaching anger levels where she wasn’t quite rational. Doc didn’t get mad. Sometimes he got *even*, but never mad.) When she’d told Bud that Doc thought the world of her, she wasn’t exaggerating. Doc saw Cheryl as a rare spirit who made the Universe a better place in which to

live. Red could see that he'd already decided that whoever had done this to her he wanted *out* of the Universe. There was no second way.

A scream coming across the water drew their attention to Doc's boat, where the pirate leader jumped to the *Strange Brew's* controls, and jammed the turbine power levers fully forward. The boat leaped onto plane, and skated away so fast that the Coast Guard gun crew couldn't get off a warning shot.

The scream had come from one of the pirates, who was no more than a teenager. The leader had thrown him against the cockpit bulkhead while jamming the controls forward. The third pirate, who'd been standing on the cockpit deck with his hands on his head in a gesture of surrender, had lost his balance and fallen over the boat's transom into the wake, bouncing once on the swim platform edge before disappearing under the foam.

"Sink her!" Doc shouted at the gunner, who was lining up for a transom shot as *Strange Brew's* course took her directly away from the cutter, making for a temptingly easy shot.

"No!" Bud screamed, briefly coming out of her fit. "That boy's still aboard! Don't kill him. He's not a pirate." Turning to Red, she pleaded: "Help him, please!"

Not quite knowing what to think, Red tried to calm her down, saying: "Alright. We'll help him."

Doc, flashing a surprised glance at Cheryl, shouted "Belay that, sailor," to the gunner. "*Don't* shoot!" It was Doc's call because it was still Doc's boat.

He stepped aft to where Red was still hugging Cheryl.

"What's that all about?" he asked, but Cheryl was no longer coherent. She'd gone back to fighting her internal demons.

That was hours ago. The sedatives in her IV had calmed Cheryl down enough for her to become lucid. Except for having shakes and complaining of a headache, and that all her muscles and joints ached, Cheryl was calm enough to start telling her story. In fact, she couldn't stop telling her story.

"Who raped you?" Red repeated.

"They *all* did!" Cheryl cried, then reached out for Red, but suddenly pulled back before touching her. When Red tried to embrace her, she pulled further back.

“Don’t touch me,” Cheryl yelled.

“What’s wrong?”

Shuddering, Cheryl hugged herself defensively.

“They were so filthy. Ugh. God knows what diseases they gave me. Stay away.”

Clearly, Cheryl felt unclean. She shrank back as if she didn’t want to contaminate Red by touching her.

“They didn’t give you anything that will stop me loving you. Come here,” Red ordered, smothering her friend in an affectionate hug.

Gratefully, Cheryl let Red hold her. She buried her face in Red’s shoulder, sobbing.

“I’m so scared. What’s going to happen to me?”

“You’re going to get well again,” Red replied, “then we’re going to hunt those bastards down and introduce them to Hell. Then, we’ll kill ‘em.”

5

“How’s our girlfriend doing?” Doc asked when he came into Cheryl’s hospital room the next morning. Red had stayed the whole night, cradling Cheryl in her arms like a frightened child.

“She had nightmares,” Red reported.

“I’m not surprised. It’s her subconscious trying to come to terms with what’s happened to her. Pat says we should take her home to Arizona to be with us until she gets over it.”

Dr. Patricia Dacy, Red’s supervisor at SST, was everyone’s unofficial godmother. As a retired clinical psychologist specializing in the problems of exceptional children whose mental development outstripped their emotional development, she usually had a pretty good idea of how to handle traumatized superbrains.

Upon hearing what Doc said, Cheryl, who’d woken up depressed, with a forelorn, hopeless, lonely look on her face, despite

still being wrapped in Red's motherly embrace, looked up with a hopefully wistful expression.

"Do you mean it?" she asked.

"Of course I mean it," Doc replied. "You're part of our family. You need some time to recuperate. Where else would you go."

"But your kids. I've got syphilis, and I let them do that to me," she moaned.

"The tests came back positive for syphilis," Red explained. "But, she's clean otherwise. Not even a sniffle. The med techs started her off on penicillin right away just in case, even before the tests came back. The doctor said the chills, aches and pains yesterday were caused by her body flushing the dead bacteria out."

"See," Doc smiled to Cheryl, "the bugs are dead. You aren't contagious. It wouldn't make a difference, anyway. You're our sister. You're coming home with us. No further discussion."

"But, I have to keep coming back for tests for *three years!*"

"And the test results will all come back negative," Doc predicted. "You're going to be okay."

Turning to Doc, Red asked, "What happened to the creeps?"

"Make it creep, singular," Doc replied. "It turns out that the boy on board was another captive. He'd been taken along with his mother and father on a chartered sport fisherman out of Key Largo a week before they got Bud. Nobody knows what happened to the parents, or the charter captain."

"I know," Cheryl said. She looked hollow-eyed, as if staring at a horrible image seared into her memory. "At least, I know about the mother. When the pirates took the *Strange Brew*, they were aboard a sport fisherman. There was a woman tied to the ladder going up to the flying bridge. She was naked, and looked like an Auschwitz inmate. They hadn't been feeding her. Her skin was burned and blistered from being left out in the sun. The captain pointed at her and said in Spanish that would soon be me. Then he ordered the crew to gang rape her while he forced the kid to watch."

"They just lined up like chimpanzees, and did her one at a time. It took the better part of an hour. The kid screamed the whole time. She was so far gone I don't think she even knew what was happening. She shrieked once when she saw them coming for her, but then just went catatonic."

“The captain was the only one who didn’t join in. He’s queer as a three dollar bill, and as sadistic as Josef Mengele. He just enjoyed watching the crew torment her. He liked hearing the kid scream, too, the sadistic bastard. Anyway, when the crew was done, he walked over and shot her in the head, then had the crew cut the body loose and throw it overboard.”

“Then they dragged me across, and tied me up in the same place. I thought they’d start on me right away, but they sat down to dinner instead. While the crew ate, the captain dragged the kid over onto your boat. When he dragged the kid down into the cabin, the kid started screaming again. We could hear it for what seemed like hours, but it couldn’t have been because the crew hadn’t finished eating when it stopped. I could see that hearing the kid scream ruined their appetites, but they didn’t dare say anything. They were scared to death of the captain, themselves. Anyway, then the captain came out alone. At first I thought he’d killed the kid, but then I heard the kid crying himself to sleep below.”

“When the captain came out, he decided it was my turn. I hoped that if I pretended I liked it, maybe the crew would treat me better than the kid’s mother.”

Seeing Red’s grimace, Cheryl explained: “I know what you’re thinking, but I was scared to death. I didn’t want to end up like her, and couldn’t think of a better idea. I figured I could take the five of them one at a time because I’d done four guys at once before.”

She paused, seeing the surprised look on Red’s face.

“You didn’t know about that? You remember that party we went to at the math fraternity the beginning of our sophomore year? You went home around one o’clock, but I stayed around to help finish up the beer keg. By about three there were just five of us left: me and four of the guys. They were all cute, and I knew them from freshman year. They were all basically decent guys, and all of a sudden it seemed like a good idea at the time. So, I had them take turns until each of them had had an orgasm in my vagina.”

“It was fun, jerking one off with each hand while another stroked his dick in and out of my throat and the fourth banged my pussy. Then, I’d have them switch places. They enjoyed it. I enjoyed it, but I’d had a choice, and I knew all of them, and liked them. They were nice.”

“This time, though, I didn’t have a choice – the pirates were going to do it, anyway. They were filthy, smelly, and they had sores. It was awful. I was afraid they’d give me some horrible disease, but, at the same time, I was sure they planned to kill me, anyway. If nothing changed, I wouldn’t live long enough to show symptoms from the diseases they gave me. I hoped that if I played along and gave them a good time, they’d want to keep me around longer, or at least not kill me right away. I figured it was a choice between being alive with a foul disease, or dead with a foul disease. I chose life.”

6

“Then,” Cheryl continued her story, “the captain found he couldn’t start the *Strange Brew*’s engines because of Doc’s biometric gizmo. I told him it’d been rigged so only I could start it. I figured that gave me better leverage, so I offered to run the boat for him.”

“I guess it worked because they let me sleep on the transom seat and gave me a blanket. They also let me put on some clean clothes.”

“The next morning, they wanted to gang bang me again. I told ‘em I wouldn’t restart the boat unless they went over the side and washed first. I hoped they’d think I really liked it, and I could get them all in the water at once. Then, I’d fire up the turbines and leave them there.”

“The captain ruined that plan by staying aboard while the crew went over the side. My not fighting the rape wrecked his fun, especially since the kid didn’t scream. He just looked sorrowful and sullen. Basically, it turned into a battle of wills between the captain and me, and it looked like I was getting the crew on my side.”

“After the morning rape, we had breakfast. My plan was working well enough that they fed me like I was one of the crew. Then the captain sent two of the crew off to sell the sport fisherman in Cuba. Apparently, they have some connections in a port called Nuevitas. I say the crew was coming over to my side because they argued over who would take the boat in. Nobody wanted to go. None of them wanted to leave, and miss their turns on me. The captain got pissed, picked two men, and sent ‘em off at gunpoint.”

“We spent the rest of the day puttering around near the Florida Keys looking for prey. We saw a couple of tankers, but these guys aren’t Somalis. They had no safe place to bring a captured tanker. For sure Castro wouldn’t put up with their taking it to Cuba, and everywhere else folks would just turn ‘em over to the U.S. Navy. They were looking for a lone boat with a small, unarmed crew to hijack. They couldn’t do their business too close in, either, where there were lots of boats. If they did, while they were holding up one boat, the next boat would call the Coast Guard.”

“Anyway, we had no luck that day. In the afternoon, when it got hot, they all went down below for siesta. They left one guard in the cockpit with me while I cruised along at best-fuel-mileage speed of twenty-five knots.”

“I waited until the kid stopped screaming, and I figured everyone below had fallen asleep. I set the autopilot, and started seducing the guard. I maneuvered him aft, as if I wanted him to take me on the transom seat, then I pushed him overboard. He was too surprised to yell, and by the time he came up for air, we were out of earshot. I waited until he was well out of sight, then started

yelling. The pirates came up from below, and I told ‘em the guard had been peeing off the swim platform, and slipped. I made a big show of circling around to look for him, but of course I took them nowhere near where I’d dumped the guy. That whittled the crew down to two.”

“After that, I started mumbling about curses. I pointed out that we’d found no prizes, and lost a man overboard, and now we didn’t have enough men to take anything bigger than a rowboat, anyway, because the captain had sent the two men off to sell the sport fisherman. Then, I pointed out that the captain had left Juan (that was the drowned guard’s name) too long without relief while he was down below tormenting the kid. That’s why Juan had to go out on the swim platform to take a leak, and fell overboard. Besides, bugging a kid was an offense before God, so what could they expect but a curse? This last I added because I noticed that one of the two remaining crewmen wore a crucifix, and always wanted to pray before meals. The captain upbraided him for praying too much, so I figured it’d screw discipline up a little bit more.”

“It was working because the next morning, after rape and breakfast, what was left of the crew were grumbling instead of hopping to when the captain barked. When the guy with the crucifix started giving the captain some lip, he shot him, and heaved the body overboard. He ordered me to fire up the engines, and we started heading back to the Keys for another patrol.”

“The captain went down below to sulk, and the last crewman sat on the transom seat with his machine gun in his lap, just watching the wake, and pouting. I saw the cutter coming over the horizon, and made for it. By the time the crewman saw it, too, we were already under your guns, so I put the engines in neutral even before your order to heave-to. The crewman just stood up, threw his gun in the water, and put his hands on top of his head in surrender. I think he was actually relieved to be captured. The captain stayed hidden below with the kid.”

“When I saw Red in the Zodiac coming over, I yelled at the kid to follow me, and dove over the side. I saw him start moving up the companionway before I turned, but apparently he never made it. I just swam as fast as I could to get to you, baby.”

She hugged Red tight as if she never wanted to let go.

7

“What in Hell were you doing out there to be captured in the first place?” Doc asked. “*Strange Brew* can outrun any sport fisherman afloat, and you can handle her at top speed. I made sure of that in case something like this came up.”

Cheryl looked embarrassed.

“I think it was my own damned, stupid fault,” she said. “I’d been getting horny, and wanted to hurt Suby, so I started going barhopping in Freeport on weekends. I met this beautiful black guy in a bar. He was about six feet tall, thin, but with great muscles. He liked me, so I took him back to the boat when the bar closed. Turned out he had a big schlong, too. He stayed hard for hours banging me. I lost count of how many orgasms I had. He never came, but by the time he said he had to go home, I couldn’t get enough of him. I’ll bet you know what it’s like, Red.”

“We all know what it’s like,” Doc put in. “It’s an addiction. In fact, it’s probably the reason we have a mechanism for addiction.”

Doc hoped that explaining it would help Cheryl feel like less of a dope: “It’s nature’s way of keeping mating pairs together. Part of the mechanism for sexual pleasure is feedback involving dopamine in the brain. You associate the pleasure of orgasm with that particular partner, so afterward you’ll be programmed to seek him out again. It works the same way with men. Addictive drugs work by triggering the same feedback pathways. He probably kept himself from having an orgasm to avoid falling in love with *you*.”

“Well, if that was his plan, it worked,” Cheryl allowed, acidly. “When I came back the next week, he was waiting for me at the dock. He quizzed me about where I went after clearing the harbor, what time I left, whether I did the same thing every week, and a lot of other things. Then, he banged me six ways from Sunday again before going home. The following week – same thing. He met me at the dock, but that time he stayed all night. He helped me cast off the lines at just the time I’d told him I would. I didn’t think anything about it at the time, but I figured out later that he was setting me up. After I got well away from the harbor – away from other traffic – the pirates were there.”

“What possessed you to let them aboard?” Doc asked. “Why didn’t you just hook up and get out of there?”

“I was loafing along, not even on plane, just thinking about Jamal. That’s the black guy’s name: Jamal Dupree. He said he was from Haiti.”

“That might be the only accurate thing he told you. I don’t believe the name for a minute. Did you think to test his French?”

“No,” Cheryl said, “he liked to use Spanish.”

“Hmm,” Red said to Doc, “Could be Cuban. Or, he could really be Haitian and didn’t know Cheryl could speak French. Most people don’t know as many languages as she does, or as well.”

As part of her preparation for doing archaeological field work, Bud had developed a working knowledge of all the world's major language groups. There were few places she could go without being able to at least understand the local dialect.

"So, why'd you let them board you?" Doc probed again.

"When I first spotted them, they were dead in the water. They waved and shouted as if they were in trouble. I went closer to see what was wrong. They said they'd run out of fuel. They wanted me to throw them a line, and tow them back to Freeport. I put the engines in neutral and picked up a coil of rope to toss. When I looked up again, I found myself looking into a bunch of machine gun muzzles. If I'd moved, they'd have cut me in half."

"Didn't you see the woman tied to the ladder?"

"No. They'd covered her with a tarp. She was too demoralized to move or cry out. She may not have even been conscious. It just looked like a tarp thrown someplace out of the way. The boat didn't look generally very neat, anyway. I remember thinking they weren't much as sailors to have such a cluttered deck."

"Where are they now," Red asked Doc, already thinking of hunting them down.

"We can't be sure," Doc replied. "We tracked them to Nuevitas, where they stopped. This morning the GPS tracer went dead. I expect that they ripped out the entire computer system to get at the anti-theft controls. The only thing they could do would be to rewire the whole thing for manual control. Unless they've got someone who knows about aircraft turbines, they'll have a Hell of a time making the engines run at all. Still, it's just like wiring up a turbine-powered helicopter."

"Oh, your beautiful boat," Red lamented.

"At this point," Doc said, "I don't really want her back. We wouldn't want to use her. It'd always remind us of what happened. If we get her back, I'll probably just salvage the turbines, and burn her, or scuttle her in deep water."

"You're not going after them?" Cheryl asked, not sure whether she wanted revenge, or just to forget them.

"Oh, we're going after *them*," Doc said. "We'll also recapture the boat. I may not want her, myself, but I don't want her used for piracy, or anything else those people would use her for."

"What's your plan?" Red asked.

“First, we’ll get Cheryl out of here and home to Arizona. Then, we’ll get Tom DeVore, and a few other investigative types busy hunting for leads. We’ve got two to start with: the port of Nuevitas, and Jamal Whatshisrealname. Cheryl knows what he looks like, and at least one place he hangs out. It sounds like he’s practiced at seducing female victims. That ought to be enough.”

8

“Is that him?” Doc asked, showing Cheryl a picture of a handsome, clean-shaven, smiling negro wearing a black straw hat with a narrow brim, and a cream-colored dress shirt open at the neck.

They hadn’t brought Cheryl directly back to the house Red had built in Scottsdale, a twenty-minute ride from SST. They figured that coping with the triple-digit temperatures common in the low desert at that time of year – thirty or forty degrees warmer than Cheryl was used to in Florida – was something she just didn’t need right now. Instead, they all moved up to the dude ranch Doc owned with a friend located some thirty miles away in the mountains outside Wickenburg. The higher elevation there kept temperatures below one hundred for most of the day.

Cheryl was surprised when, upon her seeing the face in the picture, her clit involuntarily jumped with excitement. The feeling was immediately followed in the pit of her stomach by a surge of anger at his betrayal.

“That’s him,” she said, embarrassed by her body’s reaction.

“Tom Devore took this picture in the same Freeport bar where you met him,” Doc reported. “His real name is Charles Washington. He grew up in Georgia, where he was a petty thief. Then, he moved down to Florida, where he got rid of the Georgia accent, and upgraded to con artist. Later, after stabbing a man to death when a con job went bad, he took off for Haiti. After that place started getting too hot for him, too, he escaped to Cuba. Apparently, he minds his P’s and Q’s in Cuba because the Fidelistas take a dim view of crimes committed on their soil. They’d clap him in irons and make him cut sugar cane without thinking twice. The fact that he’s still walking around means they tolerate him.”

“Apparently, in Cuba he made contact with your pirates, who are also tolerated as long as they’re polite. If they bring in revenue by snagging stuff from capitalists, and don’t cross the Cubans, they can safely hide there.”

“What about our boat?” Red asked. Usually, she called *Strange Brew* “Doc’s boat” because she was so proud of the way he’d designed her. This time, she said “our boat” because she felt the loss acutely. She really liked that boat.

“Satellite photos showed her tied up to a dock in Nuevitas for about a week. Then, she showed up in Havana harbor for about a month, that’s probably where they refitted her with manual engine controls. Then, she disappeared. Without knowing where to look, it’s like finding a needle in a haystack. By now, she could be anywhere in the Caribbean. All we’re sure of is that she’s not berthed anywhere along the Eastern Seaboard, or the U.S. Gulf Coast. We’ve alerted every harbormaster to be on the lookout. If she so much as stops to refuel, she’ll be spotted and interdicted. The way sailors feel about the kind of piracy your captain engaged in, he’ll be lucky if the Coast Guard gets to him first.”

“So, what can we do?”

“We’ll pick up Washington, and wring him dry for information about your pirate captain’s contacts in Cuba. That is, before Red, here, chops him up for fish bait.”

“Won’t the cops have something to say about that?” Eve Salazar asked. The story about Cheryl’s abduction had made the local news in Florida, then was picked up by the national media. As soon as Phoenix-based newshound Eve connected the story to her friends Doc and Red, and found out that Cheryl had been moved to Arizona, she showed up on the family’s doorstep for followup interviews.

When Eve heard about their intention to hunt the pirates down, she smelled a Pulitzer Prize, and insisted on being involved – with exclusive rights to break the story when Doc gave the word. Doc welcomed the idea, hoping to control the media spin to protect Red from fallout from whatever she might do. The facts that Eve was a longtime friend, and lived with Red’s protoge, Gwen Petersen, made it palatable to have the persistent newshound sniffing around most of the time.

Doc always worried that his wife might get herself in trouble by making good on her private threats. He knew they weren’t idle threats – Red seldom said anything she didn’t mean – and only finding a more satisfactory alternative stopped her from following her instincts, which could get violent.

For example, she’d nearly killed a man when she and Cheryl were threatened in a bar fight, and Doc wasn’t around to control the situation. Only rapid intervention by the discrete bodyguards Mark Shipton always surrounded his stepdaughter with had kept her from arrest that time.

A six-foot three-inch female bodybuilder with a black belt in karate and a hair trigger could be a dangerous item when provoked. Too often there seemed to be some lame-brain around who was intent on provoking her. Doc sometimes wondered how people that stupid could survive to adulthood.

“Who’s going to invite the cops?” Doc answered Eve’s question with a question. “We’ve got the resources to chase this down, and don’t have any red tape to get in the way. We’ll provide a neat little package to satisfy the Law when the time comes.”

“You mean, like you did with Luthor Todd?” Eve asked. Luthor Todd was a serial killer who’d gotten his start by shooting Red’s natural father, then hiding the body in a mine shaft. When the local Sheriff’s office was stymied by lack of evidence linking Todd directly to the string of crimes, Red engineered a scheme to extract a confession. Under Doc’s direction, Shipton’s private security forces then threw a sack over Todd, and handed him to the local police. There had been some moments, though, when Doc thought Red might lose her temper and violate Todd’s constitutional right to life.

“It’ll be something along those lines,” Red replied. “Remember, everything we did then was in cooperation with the Sheriff’s Department. We’ll try to keep it all legal, but slipups do happen.”

9

Charles Washington knew he was pretty. Women all eyed him whenever he walked by. He knew they wanted what he had in his pants. Truth be told, he enjoyed giving it to them, too.

He especially liked the blonde ones, like that cute little blonde who’d been eyeing him while dancing with that enormously tall redhead. The redhead had been sitting with that big hippie in the black leather cap. She’d gotten up, and picked out the blonde for a dance. They’d danced with a lot of body contact, but the blonde had, when she found she had Charles’ attention, performed more for him than for the redhead. Afterward, the disappointed redhead had thanked her, and went back to sit with the hippie. The blonde had returned the redhead’s thanks perfunctorily, and went to stand by the bar, sneaking sidelong glances at Charles.

Clearly, the blonde was interested in him. She looked like a college girl down here on vacation, and looking for a risky-sex adventure before going back to school. There were so many like that.

He was interested in her, too, but for other reasons. He would enjoy making her his sex slave. He’d done it before, many times. The thing he liked most was getting them so hooked on him, that he could get them away from their protectors, whoever they might be, and turn them over to Caliche.

Caliche would pay handsomely for a sexy blonde like that one. Charles knew that the girl would never find her way home again, but that just made the whole process more exciting: he could get them so hooked on him that they essentially sacrificed their

lives for him. It was intoxicating.

That hippie gave him pause, however. The guy was huge, and, unlike the usual hippies, he was all muscle. His steady gaze missed nothing, either, and he looked like he was ready for anything.

The redhead looked familiar. Maybe she was some celebrity looking for a bit of forbidden sex, herself. Slumming with a naughty college girl. They all did it, he believed. The big hippie, who wasn't really a hippie, would be her bodyguard.

Luckily, the blonde had brushed her off when she spotted Charles. The hippie probably wouldn't take any more notice of him, or the blonde, as long as they had nothing more to do with the redhead. Perhaps he hadn't noticed Charles at all, anyway. Besides, they soon left the bar. Charles thought maybe to try another place. He decided to chance it.

"*Bonjour, je m'appelle 'Pali,'*" Charles said after sidling up to the blonde, who was still standing at the bar. "My name is 'Pali,'" he repeated in English with a thick Haitian accent.

"My name is 'Gwen,'" she cooed with a West Texas accent. "It's short for Gwendolyn. Do you live around here?"

"My home is in Haiti," Charles replied. "I come looking for a job, but there are none," he lamented. "I would buy you a drink, but soon I must go home empty." He gestured with empty hands.

"Can *I* buy *you* a drink?" Gwen asked.

It was an old con-artist's trick. Get them to do something for you, then they feel obligated. It sounds backward, but it works. They try to prove to themselves that their generosity wasn't misplaced. It seemed like it was working well on this one.

"Oh, I do not wish to impose."

The next step in the dance was for her to tell him it was no imposition, and talk him into accepting the drink.

"Well," she replied, acting offended instead, "if you don't like me ..."

"Oh, no! I like you very much," Charles did a quick recovery. "Yes, you may buy me that drink."

He didn't notice that she'd turned the gambit around. Now *he* was doing something for *her* by allowing her to buy the drink.

"I'm staying on my uncle's boat," she explained, "but they're off gambling someplace. I find gambling boring, don't you?"

“Oh, very boring,” he agreed. “What do you like to do for excitement?”

“I’m looking for some black dick,” she whispered confidentially.

“What?” he said, so surprised by the frankness that his Haitian accent slipped. He’d heard about this kind of invitation, but thought it was somebody’s bragging bullshit. It had never happened to him. It was usually what these girls wanted when they came to him, but they were never open about it. They wanted *him* to seduce *them*.

“I want some black dick,” she repeated. “I hear you guys are really well hung. I want to try it for myself.”

For a moment, Charles was speechless while he analyzed the situation.

Okay, he thought. She wanted some black dick. He’d give her black dick alright. He’d give it to her, and give it to her, until she couldn’t take any more. Then, he’d turn her over to Caliche. She’d find out what happens to curious little girls who stray too far from the reservation!

He smiled lecherously, “My dick is very black,” he whispered in her ear. “It is also very long, and very hard.”

“Mmm,” she cooed again. “Why don’t we go to my uncle’s boat to try it out. They won’t be back until tomorrow. They’ll gamble all night, then party with their friends in one of the hotel rooms, and fall asleep ‘til noon, at least.”

Charles allowed her to lead him outside, then down to the docks, and to an enormously expensive brand-new forty-foot yacht. She wiggled and cooed all the way there. Then, when they were alone on the dock, she reached up and kissed him on the lips while fondling his penis through his slacks. Stretching the kiss out, she pushed his lips apart with her tongue. He opened his teeth, and she pushed her tongue deep into his mouth, practically down his throat. Meanwhile, she massaged his penis to full erection without even unbuttoning his fly.

Pulling him by his penis, held through the fabric of his slacks, she led him up the gangway to the cockpit. There, she stopped to push her tongue down his throat again, while unbuckling his belt, unbuttoning his waistband, and unzipping his fly. Reaching in past his underpants, she began stroking his erection until he was nearly ready to come, despite himself.

Without letting go, she led him by the penis down through the companionway to the dark salon. Suddenly the lights came on. He saw the big redhead from the bar standing at the forward end of the salon. Then, his head seemed to explode, and the lights went out again.

10

“By the way, thanks Gwen,” Doc said to the young blonde woman sitting next to Eve. “I hope it wasn’t too much of an ordeal.”

“Oh, no, boss. It was fun,” Gwen enthused. “I haven’t done anything like that in a couple of years. Not since you hired me to program robots.”

“There is one thing,” she added as an afterthought, “maybe if you could let Eve and me have this floating hotel suite for a few days. Kind of a delayed honeymoon? We never got one because you made me work through it.”

Doc laughed: “Take the boat for the rest of this week, and next. Vacation with pay, unless Eve has to go back to work.”

“I’m on assignment following up this piracy story,” Eve said. “I just have to file this item about Charles Washington, then I’m clear until you come up with something new for me to report.”

“Hey, don’t look at me! I’ve got a company to run,” Doc replied. “Somebody’s got to work to pay for all this stuff. Talk to the tall ones over there. They’re running this show.”

“Now, however, it’s time for you two to go elsewhere,” he said to Gwen and Eve, “while we finish up with this piece of garbage here.” He indicated an unconscious Charles Washington, slumped in a folding deck chair in the middle of the salon.

Eve squirmed uncomfortably on the couch’s leather seat cushion while looking back and forth between Gwen and Doc.

“I need to stay, if you’ll let me,” she told Doc.

“We’ve got an unpleasant task wringing Big Stick, here for information,” Doc advised. “Are you sure you want to see it.”

“It’s part of my job,” Eve replied.

Then, to Gwen, she said: “Honey, I think I know what he’s talking about, and it is going to be ugly. I don’t want you to have to see it. Please go back to the hotel, and pack our stuff up, if you want that honeymoon.”

Gwen thought back to some of the things Doc had joked about doing when the Mafia guys were threatening her a couple of years ago. At the time, she hadn’t really believed him, and, as far as she knew, he’d never had to follow through on his threats. This

time, she realized, was different, and she'd had a part in setting it up. Suddenly frightened, she turned to Red for advice.

Gwen had learned to look to Red as a surrogate mother. Her real mother lived twelve hundred miles away, and couldn't deal with her lifestyle choice: a lesbian monogamous relationship with Eve. They basically never talked.

Red was a senior executive at SST, so she was right there all the time. She also understood exactly Gwen's situation, the pressures she was under, and what choices she faced. Having had a brief affair with Bud, she could understand that part of Gwen's life, as well. As a tolerant Zen Buddhist, Red could see things from Gwen's viewpoint as well as her own, and so could usually help Gwen make good choices.

"She's right, Gwen," Red said. "There's no reason for you to get involved. Jeremy has the car at the end of the dock. Have him give you a ride back to pack, and then bring yours and Eve's stuff here in about an hour and a half. By that time, we'll have this mess," indicating Washington, "cleaned up."

"So, what do we do with *him*?" Cheryl asked about an hour later, pointing to Charles, slumped dazedly in the chair.

"We'll drop him in an alleyway in Port Au Prince," Red said. "Then, we'll give the information about Caliche's operation to the cops – anonymously, of course. They take a dim view of white slaving around here, especially when it's tourists who get nabbed. They'll put a dent in Caliche's operation, and maybe even burn the whole thing down. Caliche, or whoever's left, will know Charles was the one who talked, because we'll start a rumor it was him who spilled the beans. It'll spread like wildfire throughout the Caribbean. Next thing you know, this guy will wake up as guest of honor at a Voo-Doo sacrifice ritual."

"How's that sound, Big Stick?" Doc taunted Charles, who was awake enough to see, hear, and understand, but too groggy to move. "Wanna be a zombie?"

"Finally," Red concluded, "we'll chase down the leads he gave us to the pirates, and give *them* what for."

Charles was starting to come out of his drug-induced torpor. He recognized Cheryl sitting opposite him. How she came to be there, how she could even still be alive, he didn't know, but in desperation he appealed to her. He'd never known one of his conquests to turn on him afterward.

"Baby, help me," he pleaded. His voice came out as a thick whisper.

Cheryl fixed him with an implacable stare. She got up, stepped across to his chair, and started punching him in the face with

both fists. She blackened both of his eyes, cracking the orbit of one and damaging the eyeball, smashed his nose to pulp, knocked out his front teeth while tearing ragged gashes in his lips and cheek in the process, and broke his jaw in two places before Red stopped her. Red took her time about stopping her.

Then, Cheryl sat back down in her chair, and placed two one-pound lead fishing weights on a table beside it. After glaring at Charles for a quarter minute, she started sullenly checking the damage to her bruised knuckles.

Charles had failed to notice that Cheryl's shoulders and arms were somewhat more muscular than when he'd seen her last. Red had thought that boxing would be a good outlet to help Bud deal with some of the negative energy she was carrying around after her visit with the pirates. She'd spent hours every day since he'd seen her last taking out her frustrations on a punching bag.

Just as the two burly young men started lifting Charles out of the chair by his armpits, Cheryl reached into his mouth, pulled out the loose teeth, and threw them out of an open porthole. Then, she sat back down, finally smiling with grim satisfaction. Charles would never be pretty again.

After the garbage had been taken out, Doc warned Eve: "None of that ever happened. Use of scopolomine in interrogation is now classed as torture. Beating the crap out of a helpless prisoner is also frowned upon. Holding a man against his will is violation of his rights. Grabbing him and transporting him against his will is kidnapping. I don't know what you'll be able to report when you break the news, but it can't be what really happened."

"Oh, I'll just report an update to the Cheryl Thompson kidnapping story," Eve ad libbed. "Charles Washington, identified as being linked to the gang of pirates who attacked Ms. Thompson's boat, and several other private yachts in the waters between Cuba, the Bahamas, and the Florida Keys, was found beaten in an alleyway in Port Au Prince, Haiti. It is speculated that he was beaten by a white-slavery syndicate operating in the Caribbean region led by an individual known only as 'Caliche.' The attack on Washington was thought to be in retaliation for his providing incriminating information to international law enforcement agencies. Caliche is a Spanish word for a hardened clay mineral found naturally all over the world. It's a nuisance for anyone trying to have a nice lawn or garden. And, so on. And, so forth."

"Do you mind if I include the true story in the fictionalized account?" she added. "It's a blockbuster!"

"Well," Doc allowed. "We'll see about that as you flesh out the manuscript."

"Maybe there's a human interest angle for my next update," Eve speculated to Red. "What's happening with your regular lives while you're chasing down pirates? Seeing and doing stuff like this has to affect you. How *does* it affect you, and your families?"

Red had been through all this before, during the hunting and capture of her father's murderer. That was when she first met Eve, who had covered that story, too.

She knew just how to use the media to help her cause. She also knew there was no way to escape media coverage, so it was either work with them, or be hounded by them. If she worked with them, at least she might exert some control.

"Well, what do we have to tell?" Red asked nobody in particular. "Our research is pretty much shut down. Cheryl's on medical leave until Pat Dacy pronounces her recovered from the emotional trauma. She's a tough girl, but repeated gang rape by a bunch of syphilitic murderers egged on by a sadistic psychopath can be a bit trying."

Cheryl, who had been sitting in a sullen pout since beating up Washington, made a face that was half smile at the humor, and half the kind of grimace you make when you bite down on something hard and break a tooth. Then, she turned away to blink back tears.

"This is all kind of therapy for her," Red continued. "We want to help her get closure, and hope that her helping to put away the people who attacked her will make her feel empowered again. That's the worst: she feels beaten – defeated. Of course, we want to make sure the creeps never do anything like that again."

"For my part," Red said, "I'm taking personal leave from both my Ph.D. studies, and work at SST. The wrecks Cheryl's mapping aren't going anywhere. The same goes for my work. The basic algorithms and programs are all done. It's just a case of verifying that they work by analyzing Cheryl's data. There's still work to do, but it's not going anywhere, either."

"As for my family, that goes on like always, except that Auntie Cheryl is staying with us for a while. For obvious reasons, we keep the kids out of all this. There's no way I want my babies exposed to it!"

"That's why we got that big suite at the hotel downtown. If it were just a family vacation, we'd be staying aboard here, but it's not. Actually, it helps us adults, too. After dealing with pirate stuff, we get to go 'home' to the hotel, and be with Mike and Judy in a loving environment. I don't know how I could cope without it."

"Especially, Cheryl gets to do things with the kids that don't involve shipwrecks, ROVs, rape, murder, or pirates. She's never had kids of her own, and I think the experience is helping her a lot. This thing makes *Pirates of the Caribbean* look a whole lot different. It's not fantasy, anymore, and the pirates aren't romantic, like Johnny Depp."

"Do an interview?" Eve prodded.

“Okay, but not ‘til we get back home. There, we can emphasize the family-as-a-healing-force angle. Here, it’s all blood and guts, and an eye for an eye. There’s enough of that, already, and more to come.”

Eve let her friend, Red, get away with not actually answering the question she’d asked. Politicians do it all the time: say what they want their audience to hear without addressing the question they’ve been asked because they don’t have a satisfactory answer. Had Red really known the answer to Eve’s question, perhaps she would have rethought her plans for the future.

11

“Whatcha doin’, big guy?” Cheryl asked, as she wandered into the big library at the Mancheks’ Scottsdale home, and over to the corner where Doc had set up his workstation with the seventy-two inch monitor. He was leaned back in a button-tufted leather desk chair with his feet up on a glass-topped mahogany desk pushed up to the wall under the monitor. The arms of the chair had been removed to allow him to carry the computer’s wireless keyboard on his lap comfortably. With no place to put a mouse, he used a trackball built into the keyboard to move the cursor.

“Working on our new boat,” Doc said, pointing to the engineering drawing on the screen showing an overhead view of a long, relatively narrow hull containing a layout specifying interior spaces and their contents. “She’ll be fifty five feet long, and twelve wide. The extra ten feet over *Strange Brew* will let me add a couple of bunkrooms for the kids, and lengthen the salon a little bit.”

“What’s wrong with the Marinette?” Cheryl questioned. “She’s brand new, and beautiful.”

The Marinette was the forty-foot boat Doc and Red had bought to use until the new boat was ready. It was also the one they’d used to capture Charles Washington, and that Eve and Gwen had used for their delayed honeymoon.

“Two things:” Doc explained, “I didn’t design her (and that’s half the fun); and we need more room to accommodate our growing family.”

“Oh, you mean the kids,” Cheryl surmised.

“We mean you, too,” Red corrected her. Red had accompanied Cheryl into the library.

In the months since Cheryl had been rescued, she and Red were practically inseparable. Cheryl wanted Red around because she’d developed a fear of being alone, and she always felt safe with Red nearby. Red, for her part, was very concerned about her

friend's emotional recovery. She felt a compulsion to monitor Cheryl's every mood.

The fact that Red had no training to qualify her as a therapist was eclipsed by Red's easily triggered maternal instincts. If Red didn't instantly volunteer to mother anyone she thought might be in need of mothering, she just wouldn't be Red.

"For a while, anyway," Cheryl said, feeling like a timid guest who had little business being there. "I'll get out of your way when I can."

"Why? Are you planning to ditch us?" Red scoffed.

"You have your own family to take care of," Cheryl suggested.

"Cheryl, you've been an important part of *my* family since I've known you. Now, you're an important part of *our* family. Where else would you live? You're with us until you find somebody to make your own family with."

Red had stopped using the "Bud" nickname she'd coined for Cheryl when they experimented with a lesbian affair before breaking that up to marry their men. As a contraction of "fuck buddy," Red was afraid the nickname's sexual connotations would be too uncomfortable for Cheryl, after the emotional trauma of repeated gang rape followed by a bout with syphilis.

"Fat chance of that ever happening," Cheryl moaned.

Doc understood the dynamic between the women even better than they did. He perceived that Red had mistaken the effect of her dropping the nickname. Rather than avoid reminding Cheryl of her developing sexual hangup, hearing Red avoiding the nickname reinforced her negative self image.

She really wanted to be somebody's "fuck buddy," and hearing Red – of all people – drop the name made her feel that would never happen again. If Red didn't want her, who would?

Seeing this play out in Cheryl's eyes, Doc decided to step in and do something about it.

Swiveling his chair around to face the two women, and placing the keyboard on the desk as he dropped his feet to the floor, he said: "Bud, come here."

Surprised to hear the nickname from Doc, and grateful someone would use it, she did as she was told. When Cheryl walked up to him, he swiveled the chair around so his legs touched behind her knees, then he gently pulled her down to sit in his lap. Being

nearly a foot shorter than Doc, despite being uncommonly tall for a woman, Cheryl could easily fit in his lap with her toes not touching the floor.

“You are a beautiful, wonderful woman,” he said, flashing a stern look to Red, who was looking like she was about to object to Doc’s getting familiar with another woman, even if it was her buddy. Red just generally didn’t like to share, especially certain things, and Doc was at the top of that list.

“You are fantastic to look at,” Doc continued, “unforgettable to touch.” This he emphasized by hugging her close, nuzzling her hair, and kissing her behind the ear. “And, have one of the most beautiful minds on seven continents. *Anybody* who doesn’t want to take you home, and love you forever is mentally defective.”

“Thank you,” Bud said, “and I love you, too, Doc.”

“Now,” Doc said, in a tone like a father laying down the law, “you’re our sister, and our kids’ aunt. You stay with us until you find the person you want to go with. Even then, you’ll always have a home with us.”

“Sniff,” was all that Bud said, while tears leaked from between her eyelids onto the collar of Doc’s shirt.

Watching, Red decided that she agreed with everything Doc had said. Everything was okay.

That night, about an hour after going to bed, Red woke up to hear a gentle sobbing outside her and Doc’s door. Her first thought was that maybe Mike, Jr. had had a nightmare, and needed comforting. Stepping out into the hall to find out what was wrong, she found that it wasn’t Mike standing in the hallway crying, but Cheryl leaning against the wall with her face buried in her hands, crying like a frightened child.

Red folded her in her arms, and asked what was wrong.

“I can’t sleep,” Cheryl complained. “Everything’s so wrong, and I can’t make it right.”

With a determined look, Red marched Cheryl into the bedroom, and said: “We’ll fix that.”

Rolling Doc more onto his side of the bed, Red pulled Cheryl in on her side. They cuddled up as they’d done so many times on the *Mary McKenna* when either or both of them couldn’t sleep for missing their husbands.

Doc barely woke up enough to roll back with his face nuzzled in his wife’s hair, his body positioned with hers like spoons in a

drawer, and his arm thrown across the two women.

This is not what she'd planned her home life to be like, Red thought. But, thinking about the situation, she could come up with nothing she felt she should change. Except, perhaps, to turn down the thermostat. It was definitely a little too warm.

She threw off the sheet she and Doc habitually slept under, then joined her two bedmates in sleep.

12

"This has definitely got to stop," Red said two weeks later, looking up from the pile of papers she'd arranged around her laptop computer at the end of the work table in their library. She'd been trying to process the monthly household bills, but couldn't stop thinking about the Bud situation, instead.

Doc had been happily "working" away at the design he was creating for their new boat.

Cheryl was out in the yard playing with Mike Jr, Judy Jr., and the governess, Maryanne. While Cheryl tended to disrupt the routine Maryanne tried to establish for the children, she made up for it by adding wonderful stories, songs, and games from other cultures she'd studied as an archaeologist or picked up during her travels abroad.

Personally, Maryanne got along well with Cheryl. She knew about her claimed preference for women as sex partners, as well as her failed marriage, and recent emotional trauma at the hands of pirates. She was somewhat surprised (and relieved) that Cheryl had never approached her for sex. Perhaps she wasn't Cheryl's type. Or, maybe Cheryl's current delicate emotional state kept her from approaching *anybody*. It never dawned on Maryanne that Cheryl was too intelligent, and too decent a person, to abuse the domestic help.

Doc could think of a number of things Red might want to put a stop to, from the encroachment of red ants onto their patio to global warming, but had little idea what she specifically wanted to kaibosh now.

"What, my dear," he asked quietly, "do you want to kaibosh, now?"

"Our girlfriend crawling into our bed every night because she's too damned timid to get off her fuzzy pink behind and find someone to love of her own."

“I might point out that it’s not actually *every* night, but in principle I think I know what you mean.”

“You damn well know what I mean,” Red continued unreasonably. “I want my lewd, uninhibited, unrepentant, *happy* best friend – and, yes, fuck buddy – back. I may not want her messing with you, but I loved that she wanted to mess with everyone else. I even enjoyed cunt blocking her from you. I want my ex-lover back, not this frigging *nun!*”

“It’s all in her head. What do you propose we do? I’d be willing to take her out back, and fuck her brains out, but I don’t think that’s what you have in mind, and I doubt that it would work, anyway.”

“It might be just what she needs,” Red allowed, “but it sure as shit isn’t what *I* need. You just forget *that* idea.”

“Oh, darn,” Doc said with an amused smile.

“You’re right, though,” Red continued. “I think what she needs is to get laid, but good. She doesn’t feel lovable anymore. She is, I think, simply scared of sex.”

“Maybe you should talk to Pat,” Doc suggested, “but all I can think of to do is rub her up against a lot of interesting prospects, and encourage her to try them on for size.”

“I thought,” Red recalled, “that she’d stop feeling like a leper after we got through convincing her that, since we got her syphilis infection treated before she showed any symptoms – not even a hint of a chancre – she wasn’t and never had been contagious. But, when she got together with that city cowboy in Wickenberg, she froze. She just couldn’t do it. I’m afraid she might have given *him* a complex.”

“I talked to him afterwards,” Doc said. “He was pretty shaken, but I explained that she was recovering from having been kidnapped and gang raped. That seemed to help, but I think he’s going to insist on a third-party background check next time he goes out on a date.”

“Serves him right for picking up strangers in a country-and-western bar,” Red concluded. “In fact, I think it was too much like the situation with that black creep with the no-longer-sexy smile who got her into this mess in the first place. I thought that turning him from a beauty into a troll would help, but it didn’t. Or, it didn’t help enough.”

“On one level, it helped a lot,” Doc soothed. “She stopped feeling helpless and afraid. With the guy in Wickenberg, she yelled and pushed him away, instead of cowering. I’m sure she knows what that kid on the boat’s mother felt like, and why she went

catatonic in the end.”

“Speaking of that kid. I can imagine what’s happened to him, if he’s still alive. Doc, I want to try to help him. I promised Bud, but I feel bad for him, too.”

“First things first. First, we save our friend. Then, we save the kid.”

“Then, we kill the pirates,” Red said through clenched teeth.

“But first, we save our friend,” Doc brought the conversation back. “There’s a fund-raiser at ASU next week. Lots of polite, intelligent, witty eligibles there. We could start by wheedling an extra invite for Bud. Hopefully, we can get her into a relationship that progresses along more conventional lines. If she gets to pick out her own Don Juan, and gets to know him ahead of time, and lets the relationship progress from friendship to intimacy, instead of jumping right to banging their brains out first, it might work better.”

“Don’t forget it might be Doña Juanita,” Red reminded. “I’ll bet she still likes the girls. In fact, she might prefer them more than before. Her last three relationships with boys haven’t worked out satisfactorily.”

“Three?” Doc queried.

“Yeah, Suby’s one. The black creep is two. The pirates are three.”

“You’re right. And they were all rush-em-into-the-sack jobs, too. Maybe we should encourage her to go slow this time. Suggest that it might work out better.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

13

“Why don’t you take the Ford,” Red said to Bud, handing her a set of keys. “In fact, use it from now on.”

“Thanks,” Bud replied, somewhat confused. “What Ford?”

“Here, let me show you,” Red answered, leading her past Doc’s collection of exotic vehicles to her side of the garage, past her collection of classics, and on to her daily drivers.

“You can use this one from now on. We’ll call it yours,” Red pointed to her two-year-old black Mustang convertible.

When she’d first started working at SST, Pat Dacy had told her to rent “a car she’d want to drive” while in Scottsdale to search for her father. Her assistant, Bonnie, had found her a beautiful black Mustang convertible. When Red decided to make Scottsdale her home so she could bear and raise children with Doc, one of the first things she’d bought was a nearly identical black five-liter Mustang convertible. The main difference was that this one had a five-speed manual transmission instead of her rental car’s “slush box,” as she disparagingly called it’s automatic transmission.

“I was expecting some old sedan that you didn’t want to drive,” Bud exclaimed. “Baby, you love this car! What will you drive?”

“Come here,” Red said, grinning and leading Bud outside. “This is my new daily ride. Doc brought it home for me this morning as an anniversary present. I have to give him a ride back to get his chopper at the dealership, but I wanted to show you first.”

Bud walked around it. It was low. It was swoopy. It was a beautiful pearl white with a wide, blue double racing stripe down the middle from the bottom of its scoop nose, over the top, and down between the exhaust ports under its duck-tailed rear. The scoop at the front led air immediately through a radiator and out through a NACA vent let into the car’s hood. Humongous scoops behind the door panels let air in from the sides to feed the mid-engine’s intake and cool the enormous rear disk brakes.

“Red, this is a GT40!” Bud said in surprise. Bud was not anywhere near the car nut that her tall friend was, but could instantly identify the iconic Ford supercar, which had dominated sports car racing for years in the mid-1960s. Discontinued then, but reintroduced decades later for the company’s most selective customers, the new version was again a fixture at sports car races, often still winning in its class.

“Well, no,” Red corrected. “It’s just called a Ford GT because somebody else has the rights to the GT40 name, so Ford can’t use it anymore. It’s also bigger than forty inches at the roofline. This baby’s probably the only real supercar I can fit into comfortably,” Red explained. “Those Ferrari’s are wonderful, but they’re made for Italian midgets. Besides, this design is absolutely the most classic rear-engine sports car. Everything else is an imitation of *this!*”

Red was exaggerating somewhat, but the Ford GT *is* an icon. The original GT40 *was* the first really successful mid-engined production supercar. It was the only American-produced sportscar to win Le Mans four times in a row. And, it has a very special place in the hearts of classic-car nuts, like Red.

Giving Bud a quick kiss and a hug, Red went off to find Doc so she could drive him over (nobody was going to get to drive her

new baby, but her) to pick up his motorcycle, which he'd left at the dealership when picking up the car.

Bud went into the house to get ready for her date with Glen. Glen Trudeau was a professor in ASU's Archaeology Department. His specialty was the Far East, and the Phoenix Art Museum had, he said, a very interesting collection of ancient Chinese objects. They were going to spend a few hours at the museum, which Glen was very familiar with, but which Bud had never visited.

This was the first time she was going into downtown Phoenix alone, hence her need for a car. When she'd first arrived in Arizona, she'd spent time up in Wickenburg on Doc's high-desert ranch, which was run as a profit-making tourist enterprise by Brad West (a perfect name for the foreman of a dude ranch, Bud thought, if ever there was one). Brad was one of Doc's many partners in various small enterprises.

When Fall in the desert brought daytime temperatures at the lower altitudes to bearable levels, Red had finally brought her home to Scottsdale. Bud had been too timid to want to even go out of the house. Red hoped having the Mustang be designated as "her" car would encourage her to get out more on her own.

Bud had met Glen at the ASU fund raising dinner Red and Doc had brought her to. At first, both had been shy, but, when they found they had a common interest in archaeology, they forgot their shyness. Bud was also fascinated by ancient Chinese culture, which had spawned the Zen philosophy she'd been hungrily absorbing for two years. Glen had told her about the collection at the Art Museum, and suggested they meet there a few days later to do a quick tour, and then have lunch at the museum restaurant.

Today was the day, and now was the time – at least the time to start getting ready. Bud was already dressed in a knee-length gray skirt that hugged her hips, a pair of low-heeled sandals, and a cream-colored blouse with a Peter Pan collar. A light bra held her breasts together to form a not-at-all-demure cleavage. For jewelry, she put on a necklace consisting of a number of rhinestone dangles hanging from a rhinestone chain that reached into the cleavage, along with matching dangle earrings. On her wrists, she added a number of inexpensive metal hoop bangle bracelets. The ensemble was calculated to give the impression that she'd made an effort to appear sexy in a mature way without spending a lot of money. It was just what she imagined a single woman college professor would wear to be attractive to a male college professor.

Suby's quickie divorce settlement had made her comfortably well off, and Glen knew she was living with the Mancheks, who had (from his viewpoint) limitless financial resources, so she could have, through her own resources and borrowing from her housemates, thrown on an outfit costing more than Glen made in a year. Bud, however, wisely decided the best way to attract him would be to wear stuff just a little nicer than what he saw on his female colleagues at work.

Frankly, that meant digging through her jewelry box to find items that Red wouldn't wear to the grocery store.

14

Between driving the unfamiliar car conservatively in an unfamiliar city, taking not the most efficient route into downtown, and circling the block three times to find what seemed to be the best place to park, then finding it to be inconveniently far from where she'd agreed to meet Glen so she'd had a longer than expected walk, Bud arrived fifteen minutes early because she'd left a lot more time for getting lost and sidetracked than she actually needed.

To quote Joe Walsh: "It's the best thing to come too early, so you have some time to wait."

Glen arrived ten minutes early in hopes of being there before her, only to find her already there.

Not surprisingly, wandering around a museum with someone who really knew the cultural history behind all of the objects on display, and could add anecdotal stories because he'd actually *been* there, and could help her fit what she saw into the history and culture she was learning about was a lot more interesting and fun than just wandering around reading the short descriptions on the index cards pasted next to the objects.

Lunch at the Arcadia Farms restaurant in the museum was great, if a little pricey. Bud opted for the French Dip Sandwich ("Thinly Sliced Beef Tenderloin on Crusty Roll with Melted Provolone Cheese and Au Jus," according to the description on the menu), while Glen opted for the Tomato, Basil, Mozzarella Sandwich ("Locally Grown Heirloom Tomatoes, Organic Basil and Fresh Mozzarella on Focaccia Bread").

Glen gallantly wanted to pick up the check, but Bud, pointing out that her ex-husband was sending exorbitant alimony checks while she had basically nothing to spend them on, insisted on making lunch, at least, her treat. She promised he could pick up the tab another time when she had the shorts.

It took three more dates before Bud got up the courage to tell Glen about her brush with the pirates. They'd gone to dinner at McCormick & Schmick's Seafood Restaurant just off Camelback Road. For a chain restaurant, the food was excellent and the décor tasteful, if a little heavy on the oak millwork.

Each time they'd gone out, they'd become more comfortable with each other, until Bud finally came to believe that Glen might possibly like her for herself. She could see spending a lot of time with this man.

Since coming to Scottsdale, watching Doc rolling around and playing with Mike and Judy had been her happiest times. Fantasizing about it being Glen playing with *her* babies had given her new hope. The next step was to take some of the skeletons out of her closet, and hope they wouldn't scare him away.

"Glen," she said, reaching across the table to hold his hand, "there are some things you should know about me. I'd like us to be more than just friends, but you need to know more about who I am."

Glen sat and waited. He'd actually been waiting for this, and wondering when it would come. He'd been running out of patience, but wasn't sure how to bring it up, himself.

"You know I'm staying with my friends Red and Doc Manchek over in Scottsdale."

"Yes, that's how I met you in the first place," Glen said, repeating what they both obviously knew.

"Red and I are research partners doing our Ph.Ds. Mine's in underwater archaeology – mapping debris fields in shipwrecks – while Red's developing software to help interpret the data."

So far, still no revelations. They'd already talked about this at length.

"Last summer I did something stupid that let me get captured by a bunch of pirates off the Bahamas while I was cruising alone on Doc Manchek's boat."

"I know," Glen interrupted her, "I watch the news, too. I recognized you the minute we were introduced. You were held for three days on the boat, during which time you managed to whittle the pirate crew from six down to two, then managed to deliver them to a Coast Guard cutter off the Florida Keys. If you ask me, you're a hero."

"I didn't see the news reports," Bud admitted. "I was scared to think about it. Did they tell you that the pirates gang-raped me every morning before breakfast?"

"Yes, it was mentioned, but not emphasized. It sounds pretty rough. The way you tell it, it sounds like they were pretty offhand about it."

"It was part of their morning routine, like brushing their teeth would have been if they'd brushed their teeth."

"Sounds ghastly."

“It gets worse. Did you know that when they captured me, they’d already had another woman captive?”

“No. Wait, I do remember they’d also captured a chartered sport fisherman, and murdered everyone aboard.”

“Not quite. It was a charter captain, and a husband and wife, along with their teenaged son. They’d murdered the two men right away. They kept the wife for the crew to play with. The captain kept the boy for himself. He liked to force the boy to watch while the crew gang raped his mother. I’ll never forget his screams. Then, he took the kid below to rape by himself.”

“Oh, God. What happened to them.”

“By the time they nabbed me, they’d destroyed the poor woman psychologically and physically. I never really met her because by the time I showed up, there was practically nothing left to meet. She was basically catatonic – not much fun for the pirates, anymore. As soon as they had me, they didn’t want her, so they shot her to death, and dumped her body overboard for the sharks.”

Glen was speechless. He just stared, openmouthed.

“They said they were going to do the same thing to me.”

“So, what did you do?” Glen asked in horrified fascination.

“I pretended to like it,” Bud admitted.

“I hoped they’d enjoy me, and keep me alive a little longer,” she explained.

“You didn’t have a choice,” Glen soothed her. He knew, and Bud knew, that he really couldn’t understand what she’d faced, but he was trying to say what he thought would help.”

“That’s not the worst part,” Bud admitted.

“The worst part was that I got myself into that mess through being a stupid slut,” she concluded.

“I’d fallen in love with a beautiful man I’d picked up in a Freeport bar. He set me up for the pirates. I’d wanted to hurt my ex-husband, but I really ended up hurting myself.”

“But, you’re okay now,” Glen said, hopefully.

“This is the part you need to know: they gave me syphilis,” Bud said, fighting back tears.

“But, that’s curable,” Glen opined. “They have drugs for it, now, don’t they.”

“Yeah, penicillin’s supposed to clear it up fast. Doc says they got it early, before I even became contagious. The tests have come back negative, and he says it’s completely gone. But, I still feel *unclean!*” At that, the tears started to overflow.

Glen sat back. He really liked this woman. He wanted to help. He’d come to realize that she was smart, funny, vivacious, witty, devastatingly intelligent, on top of being stunningly beautiful. He wanted her so much, he ached. But, she was also broken. If he could only fix her

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

“Love me?” she pleaded.

He stared. As much as he found himself attracted to this woman, knowing she’d had syphilis gave him pause.

“I’m worth it,” she promised, “I promise.”

“I know you’re worth it,” he said flatly. In making that simple statement, he found he’d made a decision. He was going to take her home right now, and make her feel loved.

“Where’s the waiter with that bill?” he said without preamble. Spying the waiter, he waved him over, presented his credit card – this time Bud didn’t try to arm wrestle him for the check – and sent him off to run the card, saying: “We’re kind of in a hurry, now.”

The waiter had seen them dawdling over their food, and engaged in animated conversation. Then, he’d seen the mood change, as the woman came to tears. Now, the man said they were in a hurry. The waiter didn’t know what that meant, but decided to take it at face value, and ran through the process as fast as his computer would let him.

Bud still wasn’t sure what Glen was going to do. She’d seen the uncertainty on his face, tinged with a little fear, a little repugnance (which she feared), and finally a generous mixture of pity (which she loathed).

She didn’t think she could go through with it. She didn’t believe he would be willing to, either.

In the parking lot, she started heading for her car, dejectedly planning to drive directly home – another failed attempt.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Glen said, grabbing her gently by the shoulders. “You’ve ditched me three times already when I hoped you were following me home. You’re not going to get away with it *this* time! You ride with me. We’ll come and get your car later.”

She stopped him in his tracks to give him an enormous hug. Squeezing him tight, she nuzzled her face into his neck. Then, she let go and marched directly to the passenger-side door of his car, and waited for him to unlock it with his key fob. Without a word, she got into the passenger’s seat and pulled the seatbelt across her chest, shoving the tang into its clasp with a loud clack. As he got into the driver’s seat, he looked over to see her sitting fully erect in her seat, smiling like an eleven year old promised a trip to get ice cream.

15

“Thank you,” Bud said when they woke up together the next morning.

“For what?” Glen asked without thinking. He was old school enough to believe that the man was supposed to thank the woman after sex, not the other way around.

“For taking a chance, and loving me,” she replied.

She’d been scared at first. But, then she found that it felt the same as it had before ... when she liked to have sex for sport. She didn’t know if she’d ever do it again for sport, but it felt awfully good again.

She felt that she could trust Glen. He seemed to care about her as a person. It seemed that he wanted her to want him, as well. She believed that he wanted to make love to her because he wanted to be with her, rather than wanting to be with her because he wanted to have sex with her. Especially, she didn’t feel she had to be afraid of what he’d do to her when they were done.

“Do we need a condom?” he’d asked. “I don’t know if you’re on birth control, or if you want to practice safe sex.”

“I’d rather not,” she’d replied. “I don’t want to be scared of it anymore. Just love me like ... you loved me.”

That, he felt, he could do. In the end, however, he’d pulled out of her at the last instant to deposit his load on her belly. Then, he’d laid on top of her, hugging her and kissing her neck.

She’d started to cry again, but when he looked at her face, she was smiling through the tears.

Happily, he concluded, he didn't have to understand women. All he had to do was love *this* one.

That, he figured, he could definitely do.

Sitting up in bed, Bud said to him in a serious tone: "Glen, I still have some things I have to do. That poor kid is still being sodomized by that animal. I've got to save him. Red wants to, too. Doc wants to get his boat away from them so they can't misuse it. He designed it himself to be a great high-performance boat. Now, he knows they want to use his creation to do bad things. He's not quite sure what those bad things are, but he doesn't really care. He just doesn't want them using his boat to do them. Finally, none of us will be fully satisfied until that animal pays for what he did to me, to the kid, to the kid's mother, and everyone else whose lives he's ruined. He's gotta be stopped, and we're going to stop him."

"I understand," Glen said, turning toward her and raising himself on one elbow.

"Just promise you'll be here when I get back," she begged.

"You're going after him *now*? *This minute*?" Glen asked, incredulously.

"No. Of course not," Bud replied. "We've got to find him, first. Then make a plan. It'll take weeks, at least, before we can go after him. Maybe months."

"Why can't you stay here until then? I know it's not a two-thousand square foot mansion overlooking Phoenix, but ..."

"Eight thousand square feet, actually," Bud interrupted, "but they belong to somebody else. I've nobody and noplac of my own."

"Bullshit! You've got me. You've got here."

"You mean it? You really want me?"

"I really want you. We'll go give the Mancheks the bad news and pick up your stuff. Then, we'll pick up your car at the restaurant. Then we'll come home."

"My stuff's scattered all over the Southern United States. Some of it's in my ex-husband's basement. Some of it's in the middle of the Caribbean Sea on our research vessel. Luckily, my research notes are there, but my laptop and all those files are still on Doc's boat, being abused by that rotten fag pirate. All I've got here are some clothes Red bought for me so I wouldn't have to run around

naked. I really am homeless!”

“Not anymore,” Glen said. “You live here, with me.”

Before running off half cocked – Red wouldn’t approve of her ersatz sister *cum* research partner running off half cocked – Bud called to forewarn of the change in the program, and to coordinate schedules.

“Sam insists that both of us have to come to breakfast right now,” Bud said, holding her cellphone away from her ear. “He said he’d hold it up for twenty minutes to give us time to get there, but if we’re late, he’ll scold.”

“No showers?”

“No showers. My baby likes the way I smell, anyway.” Bud still referred to Red as “her baby,” as she did when they were lovers. Glen would just have to get used to it.

“But, she might not like the way *I* smell.”

“I like the way you smell,” Bud stated, “so *she’ll* like the way you smell.”

Glen started to make a comment about irrationality, then decided that if Bud wanted to be irrational, he’d go along with it as long as she was happy. Just then, he thought he’d do anything just to make sure she was happy.

The simple act of copulating had changed everything for Bud. The fact that someone – someone nice, and kind, and smart, and ... cared enough for her to have an orgasm with her made a world of difference. She now knew that she was still lovable, and, more importantly, felt she was loved.

Cheryl “Fuck Buddy” Thompson was back!

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Special agent Raul Vargas of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration stopped at the wooden gate closing off the lane-and-a-half-wide paved strip snaking from Highway 87 up a half mile to the small oasis of palm trees, Italian cypress, palo verde, and smoke trees surrounding the one-story hacienda backed up against a foothill of the Superstition Mountains. There had been a five-strand barbed-wire fence along the highway, and the narrow road ran through a gap in that fence across a cattle guard that prevented

livestock escaping onto the highway.

As he followed the paved path, Vargas had seen off to the right a small ranch consisting of a handful of buildings with several vehicles parked around them. On either side of the path a few head of cattle wandered aimlessly among the creosote bushes, and the cholla, paddle and saguaro cacti that made up the chaparral plant community in this part of the Sonoran Desert. It seemed like a poor place to raise cattle, and a lot of cowboys – judging from the number of vehicles – for the number of cattle he saw. But, what did he know about cowboys and cattle?

The wooden gate looked like it had been there since Arizona was a territory. Rough, weatherbeaten timbers were held together with black square-headed nails. Despite appearing weather beaten, however, the gate looked like it was still stout enough to stop a truck.

The gate closed an opening in a seven-foot-high stucco wall surmounted by red roofing tiles through which the roadway led. If the construction was over a hundred years old, as it appeared, it was in remarkably good condition. Then, Special Agent Vargas noticed the name “Manchek” emblazoned in six-inch-high talavera tiles fitted into the stucco arch over the gate. Since one of the few things he knew about the mysterious “Dr. Manchek” he was there to see was that the man had grown up in New England, and hadn’t moved to Arizona until about seven years ago, he surmised that the whole structure was a new construction made to look old.

Next to the gate was a stucco kiosk – again styled to look ancient – with a push-button intercom for calling the house to gain access. He pressed the button. The words “Please Wait” appeared on an LCD screen next to the button.

“Yes?” came a response from a sultry female voice after a delay of nearly half a minute. Whoever this Dr. Manchek was, he’d apparently gone out of his way to hire a female security guard with an exceptionally sexy voice.

“My name is Special Agent Raul Vargas of the Drug Enforcement Administration. I’m here to see Dr. Manchek.”

“Come up to the house, and park in the shade under the palo verdes next to the fountain, then come to the front door,” the voice advised. A crude map showing the path he should take, and where he should park appeared on the LCD screen. Then, the gate swung open with a sigh. Apparently, the gate leaves were operated by a quiet pneumatic system, rather than the more common, and noisier, electric motors.

Vargas had to drive another five hundred yards along the curving driveway to reach a circular cul-de-sac with a large, ornate, three-tiered fountain at its center. Water sprayed out gaily, evaporating rapidly and making the air around the fountain many degrees cooler, despite the fact that nobody was around to enjoy it. Vargas thought that was an awful waste of valuable water.

What he didn't realize was that the fountain was part of the air conditioning system. Evaporation cooled the water, as well as the air surrounding the fountain. The cooled water was piped back through a heat exchanger to help cool the house.

Palo verde trees had been planted all along one side of the brick-paved cul-de-sac surrounding the fountain, and their needles had been allowed to pile up to form a soft carpet under the trees. He pulled his DEA pool sedan off the pavement onto this carpet between two of the palo verde trees, putting it completely under the open shade formed by the trees' long needle-like leaves. These palo verdes were quite mature, with branches reaching fifteen to twenty feet high, and double that wide, so they provided numerous places to park vehicles out of the sun. There was a shiny black Ford Mustang convertible already parked in one of these spots with the top down.

The other side of the cul-de-sac, opposite the palo verdes and past the covered portico over the front door, showed only a single, though unusually wide, garage door. It seemed odd that a house with such extensive and well-maintained plantings would have a garage only large enough for one or two cars. Vargas had no way of knowing that the garage was nearly two hundred feet deep, and had several doors on sides he couldn't see because of the row of Italian cypress trees.

Before reaching the cul-de-sac, the driveway had taken a wide bend in full view of an enormous flagstone patio surrounding a huge swimming pool, which must have been as long as an Olympic size pool, but only half as wide. There was no diving board, but there were a number of round tables, and several chaise lounges on the patio, three of which were shaded by the nude bodies of three women.

One, an extraordinarily tall, athletic-looking redhead, stood up to watch Vargas' car pass by, with her hands hanging by her sides, and what appeared to be a cellphone dangling from one hand. She showed no hint of surprise or embarrassment at being caught naked. She just watched him intently as he drove past.

A second, almost as tall, well-stacked blonde was stretched out stomach-down on a second lounge, but leaning on her elbows to stare at him with wary eyes, as if trying to memorize his face. Instead of hiding her nipples behind crossed arms, as most women would have done, she raised herself up to get a better view as he drove past, incidentally raising her breasts above the limited cover afforded by her muscular arms. She, too, showed no hint of embarrassment.

These, he surmised, must be Dr. Manchek's female security guards. The guy must have seen too many old James Bond movies. The phrase "more money than brains" passed across his mind.

The third nude female – a brunette – while showing the shapely curves of a healthy young woman, was neither athletic, nor

well stacked. She showed curiosity, but not the intense concentration of the other two. She also appeared somewhat embarrassed at being caught nude sunbathing by a total stranger. She kept her breasts pressed down into the lounge cushion, and had pulled a towel up to cover her buttocks. A wife? What kind of wife would put up with her husband having security guards that looked like those two? A sister? Who was she? Vargas' investigator's instincts filed it as a possibly important piece of information that needed to be discovered.

As Vargas stepped up to the front door, and looked for a doorbell button to press, the front door opened to reveal a dark-haired, clean shaven man in his middle twenties. He was of medium height, and medium build: fit, but not particularly muscular. He wore a black tee shirt, black slacks, and thick-soled black leather sandals.

“Please come in, Agent Vargas,” the man said, “Dr. Manchek is in the library – this way.”

The man led Vargas across a round vestibule past a round laquered table – black with a Chinese dragon design inlaid on its upper surface. A large red-and-gold Chinese vase stood empty in the middle of the table in the middle of the round room. The man continued to a curved double door made of square panes of glass held in a wooden latticework painted gloss black to match the interior woodwork. There were no baseboards between the white plaster walls and the terracotta tiled floor. The brick-red terracotta tiles were set into black grouting.

The second door led into a large, open living room divided up into several seating/conversation areas, a dining area, an entertainment area facing an enormous television screen, and an area simply devoid of furniture. Thick oriental rugs of appropriate sizes and shapes helped define these various areas. Even the big, empty area had its own thick rug. He was just thinking how quickly his three children would adopt that rug as their private play area, when he noticed a toybox in one corner, and some toy trucks on the floor nearby.

The solid wall on the right was hung with what looked to be original paintings by several artists. Most were abstract, but there were also a few vibrant seascapes with crashing waves, as well as desert landscapes. There was one large, arresting charcoal drawing of a nude woman with flowing hair that reminded him of the tall redhead he'd seen outside.

There were also numerous statues scattered in and between the seating/conversation areas. Most appeared at first to be tall abstract pieces featuring sinuously flowing forms fabricated from blackened steel. Then, he realized that they were actually floor lamps commissioned as original works of art. No two were alike.

Vargas saw some quarter-scale bronze sculptures of lithe nude women in ecstatic poses that made them appear to be floating in

air. There were also a couple of full-size male figures. Both had rough, unfinished-looking surfaces that enhanced the power they exuded. One sat on the floor in a pensive pose. Another stood over and behind a very comfortable looking wingback reading chair, appearing to look over the shoulder of any person sitting in the chair. He was holding a reading lamp for the chair's occupant.

Glancing to his left, he could see the exterior wall was all sliding glass doors leading onto one end of the patio. This part of the patio was shaded by the roof's wide overhang. Several comfortable chairs and a children-sized outdoor dining set were set up in this shade.

Clearly, Dr. Manchek – despite the 007-inspired grounds and architecture – was a family man. So, what's with the titillating bodyguards hanging around the pool?

At the far end of this large room, the houseman/valet/whatever slid open two large glass doors that led into an even bigger room containing rows of bookcases. The exterior wall of sliding glass doors continued to the far end of this room. Altogether, Vargas estimated, that wall must have extended at least a hundred fifty feet.

To the right, between the door and the book stacks, was a seating area surrounding a large coffee table approximately three feet wide and four feet long. Except for having a glass top, the coffee table resembled a rough Mexican-colonial carved-and-painted wooden table. Two matching wooden benches (with comfortable-looking cushions) provided seating along the table's long sides. There was a matching chair at each end.

What was most striking, however, was the moving pattern on the coffee table's glass top. It consisted of slowly undulating multicolored swirling patterns that reminded Vargas of a computer monitor's screen saver.

At the far end of the right hand wall, a very large man sat with his bare feet up on a mahogany desk under a wall-mounted TV screen. The screen showed an engineering drawing of what looked like a speedboat. The man wore a white polo shirt untucked over a pair of cut-off jeans with ragged strings hanging from the unfinished hems. He had longish wavy brown hair, and a full beard.

"Agent Vargas is here," the guide said.

"Thank you, Sam," the large man replied, turning to regard Vargas with a friendly, questioning expression.

"Dr. Manchek?" Vargas asked, as his guide quietly withdrew. "I understand you own a cabin cruiser named *Strange Brew*, which was hijacked off Bermuda several months ago. I can tell you that we've located your boat, and will be able to recover it, but not immediately."

“I’m going to blow her up, anyway,” the big man said simply.

Just then, a glass door opened, and the two tall women stepped in from the pool area, and closed the door. Both had thrown cover ups on. Vargas didn’t know whether they’d done so to cover their nudity, or to ward off the relative chill in the air-conditioned room. It was actually at least seventy five degrees in the library, but chilly compared to the nearly-hundred-degree temperature outside, and these women had been out in the Sun, at that.

The shorter, blonde one was wearing a clingy caftan that matched the color of her sun-bleached hair. The taller, redheaded one was wearing a knee-length wrap-around dress of red Chinese silk with gold and green dragons embroidered on it.

“Please sit over here,” the redhead cooed in that deep, sexy voice he’d heard over the intercom at the gate. She indicated a place on one of the benches beside the glass-topped coffee table.

Vargas wanted to talk to the principal here, not be told what to do by the hired help, so he tried to ignore her. He’d had enough of this Hollywood-spy crap. He got plenty of that from the Miami-Vice-fan drug kingpins he was trying to put out of business. He wasn’t going to put up with it from some rich would-be-playboy civilian who just wanted his boat back.

Wait. What was that he’d said?

“What was that you said?” he asked.

“I’m going to blow up the boat,” the man repeated. “With all the crappy memories surrounding her, we wouldn’t want to keep her. We don’t want the pirates using her, either. So, we’re going to blow her up – at the appropriate time, of course.”

“And, when will that be?” Vargas asked.

“That’s what you’re here to help us decide,” the tall redhead explained, no longer cooing. “It’ll be when it will cause the most annoyance to the scum that nabbed her.” Then, she added, crossly pointing her finger at the seat she’d just asked him to take: “Now sit the fuck down. Over there!”

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“I’d do as she says,” the big man advised. “She gets grumpy when she’s disobeyed.”

Vargas sat down where he'd been told to.

"Perhaps proper introductions will save further, ah, friction," the man said.

"As you correctly surmised," he continued, "I am Dr. Michael Manchek. 'Doc' to my friends," he said, walking over and offering his hand for Vargas to shake.

"I do own *Strange Brew*, which was built to my own design."

"The tall one with the short fuse is my wife, Judith. I'd tell you that she's 'Red' to her friends, but right now I don't think you're on her 'friends' list."

"It would be infinitely useful if you two could change that!" he added, throwing a stern glance in Red's direction. She stood, hip locked, with a stern expression of her own, clearly waiting for an apology.

Not knowing the right thing to say, Vargas blurted out the wrong thing: "Sorry, I thought you were the chief of security."

"It's my goddamn house!" she exclaimed, angrily.

"It's her goddamn house," Doc repeated, softly. "She lets me live here only because I am her abject slave."

The blonde broke out laughing, then turned away and covered her face in an effort to suppress it. That caused Dr. Manchek to break out laughing, too. Finally, the stern look on Mrs. Manchek's face slipped, and she started laughing. Vargas didn't know what to think.

He was a Special Agent for the DEA, here on official business, for crissakes! Who did these people think they were?

With an effort, Doc controlled himself, and said: "Sorry, but you asked for it, jumping to conclusions like that. You also happened to show up in the middle of siesta, when the kids are taking naps. It's the best time for the lovely ones around here to work on their tans, or freckles, as the case may be, and you interrupted that."

"It's hard to teach the kids to keep their clothes on," Red put in, "if they see Mommy, Auntie Cheryl, and Nanny running around the house nude. We'd do it all the time, otherwise, except when we go out, or have company. That subtlety, however, is hard for little kids to grasp, so we decided to make clothes the official uniform. You accidentally interrupted our free time."

Vargas followed Red's eyes outside to see the brunette now wearing shorts and a tank top, and setting up a tea party in the shade for a toddler and a baby.

"Let's start over," Doc attempted. "Did they explain to you what this is all about?"

"Well," Vargas began, having been thoroughly put off his stride by the family's apparent disregard for conventional behavior, "I got a phone call from an agent at the National Security Agency asking me to come over here and talk to you about Hector Rodriguez. He said it would be well worth my while. When I asked what was your connection to Rodriguez, he told me that Rodriguez had hijacked your boat, and used it to get his introduction into to the drug trade. He said that you had intercepted the boat once, and rescued one of Rodriguez' captives, but failed to recover the boat or detain Rodriguez. I assumed you were some Senator's biggest contributor, and wanted your boat back. I guess I assumed the NSA wanted to butter you up for political reasons."

While Vargas had been speaking, Doc had walked over to and sat at one end of the glass-topped table. Red sat in the center of the bench seat directly across from where she'd told Vargas to sit. The blonde plopped herself in the single chair at the coffee table's other end.

"That would be Smitty, over at NSA," Doc laughed. "They often need a lot of high-tech gizmos that nobody can supply. I'm CEO at Scottsdale Systems Technology. We specialize in supplying those unobtainable gizmos to the military. It was a short step to adding Smitty at the NSA to our customer list."

"When your Hector Rodriguez snagged my boat, he also got our best buddy, here, Cheryl Thompson, more frequently known as 'Bud,'" Doc continued, nodding toward the buxom blonde. "It took us three days to get to her. By the way, we can't forget that it was the Coast Guard that intercepted the boat. They let us tag along mostly to help Cheryl when we got to her."

Here, Doc paused, then said: "We wanted *her* back. We don't really give a shit about the boat. I'm already starting on a better one. We were ready to blow *Strange Brew* out of the water after we intercepted her and got Bud off, but she said there was another captive, and begged us not to kill him. That's why Rodriguez is still alive."

"That would be David Landry," Vargas added. "He's dropped out of sight since. Rodriguez likes to take young male captives and abuse them until they're used up. They eventually become unresponsive. There's only so much punishment a human mind can take. When they no longer provide him any fun, he tucks them away somewhere, and looks for a new one."

"I'm gonna kill that guy," Red pointed out.

Ignoring her comment, Doc resumed his narrative: “Rodriguez managed to mess Bud up pretty badly in only three days. She didn’t laugh for months after we got her back. Afraid to go out. Couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t form a relationship. Clung to Red like a frightened puppy. Red was furious! She still is.”

“Damn straight!” Red agreed.

“Anyway, when we talked to Smitty at the NSA, asking for a little help in return for our tax dollars, and calling in some favors as well, he said you were the most knowledgeable guy about Rodriguez, and we should pool resources. I think he was also concerned that by barging in with no cross-cooperation, we could really screw things up for you. I agree. If you have, for example, a deep cover agent in there, we’d want to get him off the boat before we blow it.”

“You seriously think you can just waltz in there and do that whenever you want, don’t you,” Vargas said in wonder. “How do you think you’re going to pull it off? It’d take a team of Navy SEALs, inside information, and months of preparation. Well, weeks, anyway.”

Red started to open her mouth to say something, but Doc held up his hand to stop her.

“Hmm,” he said. “Of course, you don’t know.”

He paused.

“When you assumed Red’s function around here was head of security, you actually weren’t too far wrong,” he said. “Basically, she’s got her own private security company, like the outfits being employed in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. It’s staffed with special forces veterans.”

“Her step father has used ex-special forces types for decades to guard his oil-company interests all over the Americas. He’s also kept a special cadre to quietly protect himself, his wife, and his step daughter. They cover a few key people in his company, as well, but mostly they’re to protect his family.”

“Over the past couple of years, Red’s taken over responsibility for that part of Mark’s operation. You may have noticed that the ranch down below has more cowboys than cows. That’s because the cowboys spend an inordinate amount of time sitting on horses looking at scenery while taking frequent and lengthy breaks. Those things in their saddle holsters aren’t Winchesters. They’re M-16s set for full auto. If you’d gotten close enough, you would have noticed the intercom headsets. Your picture was relayed to their computers as you crossed the cattle gate. It had been cross-matched with your DEA identity photo before you reached the wooden

gate. Otherwise, you wouldn't have gotten near the house."

"I don't know if you're aware," Doc added, "but we – actually Red – tracked down the guy who set Bud up so that the Rodriguez crew could hijack my boat. It turned out that he also made a regular business of recruiting young female tourists, whom he delivered to a white slavery ring. We gave the information to Interpol, who burned the syndicate down."

"I do recall that," Vargas said. "We noticed it because it had a peripheral connection to Rodriguez. In fact, losing Charles Washington from his piracy organization probably had a lot to do with Rodriguez switching to the drug trade."

"Well, that white slavery ring had been in operation for years, and dozens of American girls had been sold into slavery in other countries. Their parents wanted them back. Interpol managed to collect the information needed to locate most of them, but in some cases, they couldn't get them back. Many of their new 'owners' hold high offices in foreign governments, or are protected by corrupt regimes. Interpol just isn't set up to mount rescue operations like that, anyway."

"Ahh, but you're saying that your wife is," Vargas said.

"Exactly. After some of the parents heard about our getting Cheryl back, they contacted us about getting their girls back. Interpol helped, too, by sending them to us. Have you ever tried telling a set of parents that you know where their daughter is, that she's being forced to work as a prostitute or harem girl, and you know where, and by whom, but you can't rescue her because of some red tape? They were only too happy to suggest that maybe Red could help."

"For a price," Vargas put in, skeptically.

"Well, we don't run it as a profit center, if that's what you mean," Red responded. "We're not going to leave some poor girl to rot just because her parents aren't rich. If they *are* rich, we encourage the parents to pay what the operation costs, and a bit more to help others. Sometimes nobody can pay, so we end up footing the bill, ourselves. Happily, we're in a position to do it."

"The point is," Doc brought the discussion back to their current problem, "that Red not only has the resources to pull off this sort of thing, but she has a track record of doing it successfully. You suggested she'd need a SEAL team, inside information, and weeks, or months of preparation. Well, she's got the SEALs. You're here to help us with the inside information. We're about to start our weeks or months of preparation. We've a saying around here: 'Better right than fast,' although we don't usually waste around when we're ready."

Vargas nodded noncommittally. He heard the right things, but would wait to see whether it was real, or just boasting.

“Anyway, that’s why we know we can do it. Smitty knows it, too. But, nobody wants us to be a loose cannon rolling around on the deck of *your* ship. On the other hand, you probably have information and resources that could help us streamline our efforts. I think we all want to put Rodriguez out of business. We should be able to do it faster, better, safer, and with less collateral damage if we work together.”

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“Your boat’s in Tampico, Mexico,” Vargas reported. For the time being, he would work with these people. He wasn’t buying any used cars from them, however, until he saw them in action. Then, maybe, it could be a collaboration.

“Rodriguez has a mansion behind the breakwaters at the mouth of the river that runs past the city,” Vargas continued. “The commercial docks are on the northern bank of the river, and there are a few big estates on the southern bank, with long piers that extend into the river. Rodriguez has your boat docked there.”

Reaching over to the glass-topped table, Red tapped a small yellow patch on one side of the swirling display. Suddenly, the swirls disappeared, the glass turned an even, deep blue, and an array of icons appeared in a strip going around just inside the glass panel’s periphery. She then tapped one showing the familiar Firefox Web browser logo. Instantly, a keyboard-size window opened under her hands. It contained the usual Firefox toolbar over an illustration of an ordinary QWERTY keyboard. She used the keyboard to type “Tampico, Mexico” into the search textbox, then hit “enter.”

Suddenly, the whole table top filled with a list of URLs for hits on “Tampico, Mexico.” They were arranged with what the computer behind the display believed were the best matches placed closest to Red’s seat, and lesser ones farther away.

One entry – nearly under her fingers – showed a credit-card-size map centered on Tampico, Mexico. She tapped the middle of the map.

The display listing all of the search-engine hits disappeared, to be replaced by a satellite photo of the area around Tampico, Mexico. A second strip of icons appeared around the display’s periphery just inside the first strip, which remained.

Vargas could see that it wasn’t just a raw satellite photo, though. First, it covered too much area in too much detail, so it had to be a photomosaic. Second, it was annotated with place names, roads, and highways. Certain important features, such as airports, were marked by special icons. It looked, in fact, exactly like a Google Maps satellite-image display, but much bigger.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Vargas said in surprise.

Red looked pleased. Doc said: “It’s one of Red’s little hobbies.” As if every housewife developed innovative variations on proprietary commercial computer software between watching soap operas. “It’s really just an HDTV monitor laid on its back with a touch screen laid over it. The trick was coming up with a screen layout that could be viewed by someone sitting in any one of the seat locations. Then, of course, she had to modify the application software to fit the layout.”

When Red tapped once on Tampico’s location, a cross-hairs cursor appeared there. Then she tapped an icon on the inner strip, and a set of controls to manipulate the display appeared near her hand. She used a slider to zoom the display in toward the cursor’s location.

Now, the display showed a large-format image of the city of Tampico, along with the river and its protecting breakwaters extending into the Gulf of Mexico on the right.

“Show us where,” Red said.

Vargas pointed. When his finger touched the display, the cursor moved to the location touched.

He jumped involuntarily. He hadn’t expected the display to respond to *his* input.

Red then used the slider to zoom in further to the location Vargas had specified, until slightly fuzzy images of roofs appeared. Still in awe of the system, Vargas pointed to one of the rooftops. “That’s Rodriguez’ house.”

“Shit! There’s your boat!” he gasped in surprise. “How old is this image?”

“A few minutes,” Red answered. “Through our NSA contacts, we get access to the latest satellite images as they come in.”

Red added this image to the favorites list, so they could come back to it quickly at any time.

“So, what’s this bozo using my boat for?” Doc asked.

“He likes to take it out on high-speed runs in the Gulf of Mexico for fun. He takes it out once or twice a week.”

“Any pattern to when he takes her out?” Red asked.

“Not that we’ve noticed so far, but we don’t have much data. We just found it last week, so we can’t see repeats on a weekly

time scale, yet. All we know is that it isn't every day."

"We also believe he's using it to run drugs," Vargas added, "but we can't yet predict when he'll ship a load."

"I can set up an agent," Red said, "that will watch the boat to see when she moves, but it would be better to have one of your GPS trackers back aboard, Doc."

Vargas thought she was talking about sending in an actual human secret agent. "It would take weeks to get someone in place to watch the boat," he opined.

"No," Red responded, seeing his confusion. "I mean a software agent – a program that will run continuously, watching available satellite multi-spectral imagery. It'll run on this computer in the background, and alert us when the turbines fire up. It'll know the turbines are running when it sees the exhaust stacks heat up."

"Hmm. Raul, can you find out who Rodriguez uses to maintain the *Strange Brew's* turbines?" Doc asked in an apparent *non-sequitur*. "There can't be too many turbine-engine mechanics in Tampico."

"He may not have anyone in Tampico," Vargas replied. "The boat was rewired in Havana before he brought it to Tampico, so he may not have needed any work done there."

"Let's confirm. He's going to need them serviced pretty soon."

"How do you know that?"

"Because we're going to fix 'em so they need to be serviced," Doc explained. "And we'll do it in a way that leaves him desperate for a turbine-engine mechanic. Then, we'll make sure he has trouble finding one. Then, we'll supply him with one who'll do the job *our way*."

"What do you have in mind?" Vargas asked, beginning to like the plan.

"We'll find a way to introduce about a half gallon of water into one of the fuel tanks. That water will find its way right to the fuel sump because it's heavier than diesel fuel. Maybe we'd better use salt water, or ethylene glycol. They're even denser. We'll settle that detail later."

"Anyway, we'll dump in about half a gallon of something that turbines don't like to drink. That will be enough to overload the

fuel separator. Depending on how long he warms up the engines, and how fast he drives getting out of the river mouth, he'll get out into the Gulf, and start his high-speed run. Then, suddenly, the engines will gag. He'll be dead in the water."

"A kindly fishing boat captain will happen by, because we'll estimate where the boat will break down and have him waiting. The fishing boat will offer to tow Rodriguez back to his dock. The captain will just happen to know a cracker-jack turbine mechanic who's looking for work. The mechanic will be an American who learned to service turbines in the Army. He retired, then got into trouble up here – maybe something vague involving a chop shop – and had to go down there to hide out."

"You're thinking of Jack?" Red asked.

"Exactly."

"Who's Jack?" Vargas asked.

"He works for me," Red explained. "Ex-Green-Beret. Expert with turbines, diesels, and gasoline engines."

"He'll tell Rodriguez that the FADEC modules on both engines have crapped out," Doc explained further. "Probably due to the heat. Those old ones are famous for not being able to take the heat. He'll replace them with newer units that'll take the heat better. He'll order them from us."

"What's a FADEC module?" Vargas asked.

"Full-authority digital engine control," Doc answered. "You know the computer that runs your car engine? FADEC's the same thing for aircraft turbines. The ones that are in the *Strange Brew* will last forever, but Rodriguez won't know that. This is the story Jack will tell him, and he'll have no choice but to believe him."

"The units we'll ship will look exactly like the old ones on the outside. Inside, they will have the same electronics, too, except we'll hollow out some of the potting material to make room for a GPS unit wired into an Iridium satellite phone. It will phone home every time he starts the turbines, and send updated reports every few minutes until the turbines shut down."

"After installing our modules," Doc wound up his narrative, "Jack will quietly clean out the fuel separators and fuel lines, so the turbines will run like new."

"Won't they notice? They sweep for bugs all the time."

“They probably won’t sweep for bugs when the turbines are running, and that’s the only time the modules will be active. Besides, if they find the signal, by the time they figure out that the transmitters are hidden in the FADEC modules, we’ll have blown the boat into low Earth orbit.”

“That would be kinda dangerous for Jack,” Vargas suggested. He’d had undercover agents’ covers blown before. It wasn’t pretty.

“Jack will get himself fired and disappear before we activate the tracking modules, anyway,” Red explained. “He’ll be back here spending his bonus check on a new Corvette.”

“We know what we’re doing,” Red intoned, still not putting Vargas on her “friends and family” list.

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Vargas, however, was getting convinced. He’d check these people out when he got back to his office, but they certainly seemed to be for real.

“What do you need from me?” he asked.

“We still haven’t worked out a plan for getting the icky juice into the fuel tank,” Doc said. “At present, we have no assets in place in Tampico. Or, do we?”

He looked over at Red.

“Does Mark ship out of Tampico, Red?” he asked.

“Of course, it’s one of his biggest ports,” she replied. “But, I don’t know if he has any covert types. I think it’s all stand-around-by-the-fence-looking-tough duty. Bruce Davis handles that stuff, not me. I haven’t anyone down there.”

“We should check with Bruce on that,” Doc said, “but proceed as if the answer’s ‘no’ until we find otherwise.”

He turned to Vargas: “Do you have people in place who could help? The jobs we need done are to, first, find out if Rodriguez has a regular turbine mechanic he would turn to; second, get a sample of the diesel fuel available to Rodriguez; third, introduce our icky juice into the *Strange Brew*’s tank; and fourth, we need a fishing boat and captain we can trust. I’m guessing you can’t take care

of all those jobs, but anything you can handle saves us trying to set things up to cover it.”

Vargas jotted the list down in a small notebook he pulled out of his pocket. “I’ll let you know what we have available in a day or so,” he said. “It’s the Miami office that works cases involving smuggling through Florida. I’m really just running an errand for them, meeting with you.”

Red’s eyes narrowed while staring at Vargas. Then, she looked up quickly into Doc’s eyes. His face held a bland expression.

Vargas looked up, and saw the concerned look grow on Red’s face.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Red said. “I just have the feeling I’ve forgotten something. It will come to me.”

“How do you plan to blow up the boat?” Vargas asked.

“We haven’t worked that out,” Red said quickly, before anyone else could speak. Doc continued looking bland. Bud flashed Red a surprised look, then lowered her eyes.

“No ideas at all?” Vargas continued to probe.

“None,” Doc said quickly. “At this point, it’s only an intention. We’ll develop a plan after we’ve closed the holes in this one.”

“I guess that’s it until you let us know what assets you have in place that can help us, agent Vargas,” Red concluded.

“Alright,” Vargas responded. “I’ll let you know as soon as I find out what we can do to help.”

“I’ll show you out,” Doc said to Vargas, leading him back the way he’d entered.

“Your wife doesn’t like me,” Vargas said, as they walked to the circular foyer and the front door.

“Sometimes it takes her a while to warm up to people,” Doc lied.

Red was normally charming and friendly until she had some reason not to be. Clearly, she thought she had a reason. Doc thought he knew what that was, but was not jumping to any conclusions. He’d found that his best strategy was always to follow Red’s lead, when she started leading. Doc decided to play the part of the innocent: charming and friendly in a non-committal way, while

keeping his cards close to his chest.

After the two men had left, Bud started to say something to Red, who shushed her, and pulled her outside onto the patio.

Earlier, Red had noticed Maryanne and the kids finishing their tea party. She could now be seen setting up a playpen for Judy on the big empty area Vargas had noticed on the way in. She smiled politely and nodded to Vargas as Doc escorted him to the front door. Mike Jr. was already zooming a toy truck around on the carpet.

Satisfied that Maryanne had everything under control, Red turned her attention back to Bud, who was asking: “Why wouldn’t you say anything about our plan to use an ROV to plant a mine on the boat?”

“Because I think agent Vargas is dirty,” Red explained.

“Oh, no! We explained our whole plan for following Doc’s boat, and you think Vargas is going to tell Rodriguez. That’ll be a disaster!”

“No, it’s okay,” Red soothed. “It just means we won’t be able to use that plan. We’ll use another.”

Just then, Doc came back from showing Vargas out. Seeing the two women out on the patio, he joined them.

“You think he left a bug?” Doc asked Red.

“Best to assume,” she responded. “It shouldn’t be hard to find. He didn’t have much opportunity to hide anything. Probably under the display, or behind the seat cushions. Did anyone notice him scratching his ass?”

Doc and Bud just shrugged negatively.

“Neither did I,” Red said, “so he probably didn’t put it in the seat cushions. We’ll have Sam check under the monitor when he dusts. He can check the cushions and around on the floor as well. We can’t trust cellphones, either.”

“That’s annoying,” Doc complained. “When did you decide he was dirty?”

“I haven’t, yet,” Red admitted. “When he suddenly pulled out that notepad, and started jotting down your list of jobs to do, I realized that if he *were* dirty, or somebody we don’t know at the DEA in Miami was dirty, we could get into a whole lot of trouble. On the other hand, he could just be backing up his memory. That was a lot to commit to memory all at once, especially since he needed to

send it back to Miami for action. Maybe I'm just being paranoid.”

“My experience indicates that paranoia pays,” Doc intoned.

“We're not dealing with just a lone pirate, anymore,” Red pointed out. “Rodriguez' hooking up with a Mexican drug cartel raises this to a whole 'nother level. We need to think about the kids. Maybe we should talk to Mark about what to expect from the cartel. He's had to deal with them for years in Mexico, and before that in Colombia.”

“Good plan,” Doc agreed.

“How will we know if Vargas and his friends are dirty or not?” Bud asked, bringing the discussion back to their most immediate concern.

“We won't,” Red said. “Even if Sam finds a bug, there are a number of reasons for Vargas to spy on us without his being dirty. I'm sure he wants to know if *we're* dirty.”

“So, what do we do?” Bud asked, starting to look panicky.

Noticing this, Red said: “We don't worry about it. We'll clean out any bugs, and be very careful about what information we give to agent Vargas.”

“There is one way we *can* verify if there's a double agent,” Doc suggested. “Disinformation. If we make it juicy enough, and make it something they have to react to, and they do react, then we'll know he leaked it. That's all I can think of.”

Twenty minutes later, after Sam vacuumed and dusted the library, he silently handed Doc a small multi-chip module with a short, stiff wire attached.

“Nice try, Raul,” Doc said to the thing, “You shouldn't spy on your friends. It's impolite. Next time you want to know something, just ask,” he added before tossing it into the deep end of the pool.

“That oughta take care of that,” he said.

“I found it stuck to the underside of Mrs. Manchek's computer,” Sam reported when he was sure the offending object could not report his statement. “Is there anywhere else you'd like to have me check?”

“No,” Doc said. “I don’t think he had time to plant anything else. Well, please vacuum and dust the living room and front hall. He might have dropped something while passing through.”

20

Roberto Peña hoped that something was finally going to be done about the so-called “Gulf” cartel. Especially, he wanted to see something bad happen to it’s newest rising star, Hector Rodriguez. Roberto considered Rodriguez to be the worst kind of psychopath.

Roberto Peña was not the name his parents had given him as a child growing up in Colombia. He barely remembered what that name was. Years ago, when he was an adolescent, a drug cartel had recruited his mother to act as a drug mule. After his father had been killed by a stray bullet during a drug-gang battle, she had no way to support her four children. When the drug cartel approached her, it seemed the answer to her prayers.

The cartel paid her to swallow latex condoms filled with heroin before boarding a plane from Cartagena to Miami, Florida. In Miami, she would wait until the condom passed through her gut, and deliver the contents to a Cuban gang, who would move the heroin on along the distribution channel.

One day, his mother didn’t come back. The man who had filled the condom in Cartagena had been drunk, and the condom leaked. His mother had died of a massive heroin overdose on the plane.

Roberto swore he would fight to end organized drug trafficking.

He’d been at it for fifteen years, and, if anything, things had gotten worse. True, the Colombian drug cartels had been broken up. Colombia was now a much safer place to live. Its renaissance had given him hope that his battle could be won. After the demise of the Colombian cartels, however, the center of the organized drug trade had moved North into Mexico.

By that time, he was working as a deep cover agent for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. His was not a prestigious position. He had little education, and no real skills. What he did have was the ability to blend into the background anywhere in the slums of Latin America, and a zealot’s willingness to take unspeakable risks to accomplish whatever mission his superiors asked him to undertake.

Currently, he had been watching Hector Rodriguez’ waterfront mansion for three weeks, taking note of everything that transpired. Rodriguez had shown up from nowhere with that beautiful mahogany motoryacht, and moved into the huge house on the

Pánuco River across from the commercial docks where the big oil tankers loaded.

His superiors at the DEA had arranged for Roberto to get a job as a security guard at one of the Gulf States Petroleum docks across the river. His supervisor at Gulf States Petroleum must have known something, because he made sure Roberto was always posted someplace where he could easily watch anything that went on at Rodriguez' house, and had little else to do.

Now, however, he'd gotten a specific request. He was to find out exactly where Rodriguez bought the fuel for his motoryacht, and find a way to purchase three liters of diesel fuel *from the same pump*.

He already knew where Rodriguez bought his fuel. It was a small operation that catered to the tugboats that helped the big tankers and freighters maneuver near the commercial docks.

The only thing he could think of to get the sample, however, was to get a small diesel-powered boat that carried extra fuel in a deck-mounted drum. He would empty the drum, then stop at the dock to refill it, telling the dock attendant that he was going far upstream, and would need the additional fuel to reach his destination. He would rail against boat builders who always seemed to put in tanks that were too small. He could then take three liters out of the drum, and deliver it to whoever wanted it at the DEA.

The problem, of course, was that Roberto didn't have a boat anything like that, didn't know where to get one, didn't have money to secure it if he could find it, and wouldn't know how to run it if he got it.

Surprisingly, just before his night shift ended that morning, his Gulf States supervisor had asked him to guide a thirty-foot launch belonging to the company somewhere where they could refill their deck-mounted auxiliary fuel tank with diesel fuel.

The launch skipper pointed across the river at Rodriguez' mahogany yacht, and asked where it got its fuel. Realizing that this was the boat he'd asked for, Roberto guided the skipper to the floating steel dock where Rodriguez' crew had refueled the yacht yesterday evening.

The floating dock was an old steel barge roughly thirty feet long by fifteen feet wide. It looked to be several decades old, beaten up, and blackened with rust. As they tied the launch up, Roberto could feel heat radiating off the black deck, which had been baking in the sun. He could smell the odor of spilled diesel fuel cooking off the steel plates.

There was only one pump, and the skipper joked with the attendant as he filled the auxiliary tank. After leaving the dock, the skipper proceeded further upstream, not back where he came from. On the way, a deck hand produced a brand new three-liter jerry can, and filled it from the auxiliary tank.

Then, the skipper had pulled up to the dock of another beautiful home on the South side of the river, a few miles upstream from Rodriguez' place. The crewman handed Roberto the jerry can, and waved his hand to indicate that he was to get off onto the dock, and walk to the house.

By the time Roberto reached the end of the dock, a tan sedan pulled up, and his DEA supervisor waved to him.

The next day, Doc exclaimed: "Wonderful! This stuff's at the low end of the specific gravity range for diesel fuel. Fresh water would do the job, but we'll use brackish water from the river just to make sure. It'll gum up the fuel injectors, and Jack can chew them out for letting the injectors get dirty while he cleans out the fuel system.

"How will you get the river water into the fuel tank?" Agent Vargas asked. "It would be really hard for our guy to get access."

"Just let us handle that," Red responded. She'd decided to make no bones of the fact that she distrusted Vargas. If he were honest, he would understand, and probably appreciate her caution. If he were dirty, he'd be on notice that he wasn't being given enough information to hurt them. In either case, the strategy would work for her, while Doc played at being nice and friendly to pump Vargas for all the information he could get.

What Red didn't tell Vargas was that a Gulf States Security SEAL team was already staging at the company's Tampico facility. They were just awaiting final word on which fluid to introduce into the *Strange Brew's* starboard fuel tank.

Roberto had been working the late shift for a week, and reported that overnight the only security around the boat were two guards who walked the long pier from the house to the float where Doc's boat was tied up.

At three seventeen in the morning, when the tide was highest and the water in the estuary was at its saltiest, two divers in black wet suits surfaced by the starboard side of Doc's boat. That was the side away from the float. While they silently treaded water, they gazed across the river toward the guard shack at the Gulf States Petroleum facility. They could hear the two drug cartel guards talking as they smoked cigarettes at the end of the pier overlooking the float.

The guards were supposed to walk up and down the pier separately, one moving shoreward while the other walked toward the float, but they didn't. They were friends who liked to talk and joke and smoke cigarettes together. Nothing ever happened, anyway, and nothing was going to happen tonight. Nobody was watching them, so they'd do whatever the Hell they wanted.

After finishing their cigarettes, they started walking back toward the shore together. They'd stop at the other end, and smoke again. It generally took about three minutes to walk the length of the dock, and five minutes for their cigarette break. They smoked a

lot of cigarettes each night.

As the two guards turned to start back toward the pier's shore end, they failed to notice a white light that flashed in the window of the guard shack overlooking the commercial dock across the river. It wouldn't have been their business if they'd seen it. It was a quarter mile away.

The SEAL team waited sixty seconds for the guards to get out of earshot, then climbed up onto the *Strange Brew's* swim platform. One team member watched the guards walk along the dock away from them, while the other opened the boat's starboard fuel filler cap, and poured a half gallon of water that he'd dipped from the river into the fuel tank, and closed the cap. Then both divers silently slipped into the water, and swam away.

"See," one guard said to the other at the end of their shift. "Nothing ever happens at night around here."

21

Hector Rodriguez was in fear for his life. If these people found out who he was, he would be lucky to be assassinated on the spot, rather than tortured to death. So far, however, they'd bought his tale about being an absentee landlord for thousands of acres of farmland in the interior.

He was out for a pleasure cruise on his yacht just for fun, he'd told them. He was so busy, it was hard to find time to just have fun. Out on the water, miles offshore was the only place he could get away from secretaries, lawyers, and creditors.

They'd even believed his story about having bought the boat in Cuba from a man who made such boats for high officials in Fidel's Communist Party. The official who'd ordered this one had gotten into trouble, and couldn't take delivery, so he (Rodriguez) had gotten it for a song.

That morning, he'd gone aboard his boat for a little joy ride. Luckily, he'd decided not to take his little boy today. The boy had given up screaming when Rodriguez sodomized him while using a cigar to burn holes in his skin. The worthless kid just whimpered pathetically. It was a lot more fun when they screamed and struggled against the ropes tying them to the bunk. It was boring. He'd have to find somebody new.

He had been furious when, as his high-speed toy shot past the breakwater at seventy miles an hour, the engines started to misfire, and stopped dead in the water three miles out. He'd already beaten one crewmember senseless with a pipe, when he heard a

hail from a SEMAR cruiser. The huge ship belonging to the *Secretario de Marina - Armada de Mexico* dwarfed his little boat.

Petrified, he pushed the unconscious crewman down the companionway out of sight. He resisted the impulse to raise his hands, and put them on top of his head in surrender. Being boarded by the Mexican Navy, which performed functions that in the U.S. were delegated to the Coast Guard, was his worst nightmare.

“Are you in need of assistance?” a mechanical sounding voice had asked over a loudspeaker.

Swallowing hard, the captain had called out: “Our engines have stopped. We do not know why.”

The huge cutter had launched an inflatable boat with an outboard motor, which tossed a tow line, and brought him right into the lion’s den! They towed him right into their own dockyard, and even sent a mechanic down to look at his engines.

There was an awkward moment when the mechanic saw the beaten crewman on the bunk. “He tripped on deck,” Rodriguez explained, “and fell down the companionway.”

Amazingly, the Naval officers bought even that lame story! They just loaded the crewman onto a stretcher, and took him away to a hospital. Rodriguez didn’t care what hospital. He never planned to see the crewman again. In fact, after he recovered, the crewman would be found dead – probably of a drug overdose. Drug overdose was always a good way to dispose of underlings who could no longer be trusted.

The Navy mechanic had found the problem right away. That idiot in Havana who’d rewired the boat so Rodriguez could start it, instead of having to rely on that nasty blonde all the time, had screwed up the electronics that ran the engines. Luckily, his boat used the same engines as the Navy helicopters, and they had two spare ignition modules to put right back in. The mechanic had clucked over the state of the engines, however, saying that the whole fuel system was full of crap, as well. He had to change the filters, and the fuel injectors, then flush out the lines.

Rodriguez had been lucky, though. Three hours after having the engines quit, he had them back running better than they ever did before. The naval officers had smiled and wished him well, and sent him on his way.

He was amazed.

Four hours later, and a thousand miles north and west, Agent Vargas was confused. “What happened?” he asked Doc over the telephone. “You were supposed to send a fishing boat to intercept Rodriguez, not the Mexican Navy!”

“Slipups do happen,” Doc explained sorrowfully. “Our boat was out there, but a SEMAR cruiser was already right where our boat was supposed to have been, and saw the *Strange Brew* dead in the water, and got to her first. There was nothing our captain could do. Then, instead of towing the boat to Rodriguez’ dock, they brought it into their own facility, and one of their mechanics fixed what we rigged. I told you it was a plain old off-the-shelf FADEC module used for all kinds of turbine power plants. They just replaced the ones in the boat with new ones from their spares stores. We never got near the thing.”

“So, your tracker never got onto the boat?”

“Our tracker never got onto the boat.”

“Can we try again?”

“How? It was a risky enough operation the first time. To try the same thing again would be suicidal. No, we’re just going to have to work with Red’s satellite images. Sorry.”

“How reliable will the information from the satellite images be?”

“It will be reliable,” Doc explained, “but incomplete. We can only see something when there’s a satellite over Mexico taking pictures of Tampico harbor. When there’s a gap, we’re blind. Also, it’s hard to follow at night. During the day, we can identify *Strange Brew* by size, shape, and color as well as infrared signature. So, if, for example, they change course when we’re blinded, we can pick them up again on the new track. At night, all we have is an infrared signature, and we can’t tell it from any number of other vessels, or even turbine-powered aircraft. If we lose their track, we’re sunk.”

“How often does that happen?” Vargas asked.

“Well, it varies by location, of course, but for any given location, there’s a regular pattern,” Doc said. “For example, in Tampico, there’s a blind spot every third night from two twenty three to three forty seven. We can’t see the city and about twenty-five miles beyond the breakwaters during that period. So, if Rodriguez takes the boat out at, say, two thirty Friday morning, we won’t know about it until three forty seven, and all we’ll know then is that the boat’s gone. We won’t know where.”

“And, that happens every three days?” Vargas asked to confirm his understanding.

“Yes,” Doc replied.

“And, the same thing will happen the following Monday? Blind from two twenty three to three forty seven?”

“Exactly,” Doc confirmed.

22

“Explain to me why you’re doing all this?” Eve asked after Doc’s telephone conversation with Agent Vargas ended. Eve had stopped by for an update on the progress of the campaign of retribution against Rodriguez, so she happened to be sitting in the shade by the pool with Bud, Red and Doc when the telephone call came through. “If you just want to blow up the boat, you know where it is. Why not just blow it up?”

“There are a number of facets to this project, Eve,” Red explained, “and blowing up the boat is a relatively minor part of it. Another goal we have is to kill Rodriguez, which permanently stops him from ruining lives, but doesn’t really make him pay for the trouble he’s caused already. Doc would be happy with that because he considers retribution to be a waste of time and effort. Bud and I are not so ... what’s the word I’m thinking of?”

“The word you’re trying to think of is the antonym of vindictive,” Doc said with an unsupportive expression. “The reason you’re having trouble coming up with it is that it doesn’t exist. The closest I can think of is ‘forgiving,’ which isn’t what you want to say, either. What you want to say is that you and Bud are a couple of vindictive shits, who imagine that hurting someone else will make you feel better. It won’t work.”

Surprised at being called a “vindictive shit,” but trusting Doc too much to take offense, Red took a deep breath instead, and asked: “Then, why are we doing it?”

“Because you haven’t thought it all the way through. You’re angry, and you hope that taking your anger out on somebody will clear the anger. It’s normal. Everyone needs to act out anger to clear the adrenalin that thinking about the injury you’ve suffered pumps into your system.”

“Every time you relive the experience in your memory, it triggers your fight-or-flight response. You want to go back and take action *then*, but then is gone – footsteps in the snow – so you hope that taking some action *now* will make you feel better. What you’re ignoring is that doing harm now doesn’t erase harm done before. It just adds more harm. Then, you’ll have to live with the aftermath of that additional harm.”

“So, why are you helping us?”

“To help you learn. In the end, you’ll realize that it’s been a waste of time.”

Red just looked at him, nonplussed. Bud was looking at her hands.

“I also hope that we can do some actual good for the Universe along the way,” Doc continued. “Fucking up Rodriguez’ life before killing him won’t do a damn thing for anyone, but maybe the collateral damage you do to the cartel will make the Universe a slightly better place in which to live.”

“It’s like when we encouraged Bud to maim Big Stick. Punishing him did nothing to make Bud feel better. Convincing herself that she was still capable of injuring an enemy did, however, help her have the courage to face the world. And, making it that much harder for Big Stick to seduce coeds into slavery might save a few lives that he would otherwise have ruined.”

“Teaching Rodriguez a lesson is pointless, however, if you’re just going to put him to sleep afterward. But, you aren’t going to teach Rodriguez a lesson, anyway. The only effective deterrent for him is to put a stop to his misbegotten existence, which we’ll do whenever we’re ready. In the meantime, letting you fuck up his life in an effort to make him miserable while still alive probably will do little actual harm.”

“On the contrary, I’m hoping your efforts will throw a wrench into the works of the Gulf Cartel. Making ineffective their efforts to turn Mexico into a third-world toilet is something I can get enthusiastic about. I like that country, and I like the people. I don’t want to see the place reprise the collapse of the Roman Empire. It’s unnecessary and unconscionable. Stopping the sons of bitches trying to do it sounds like a really good idea.”

“How does not blowing up your boat help that?” Eve questioned, reviving her earlier query.

“Our ability to monitor Rodriguez using the boat in the performance of cartel business gives us a window on that business,” Doc replied. “Hopefully, we can see enough through that window to really muck things up for the cartel.”

“And, if he’s *not* using it to perform cartel business?” Red challenged. “Which we have not yet determined.”

“Then, we blow the boat with him on it, say ‘job well done,’ and walk away,” Doc concluded.

“Does that answer your question, Eve?” he added.

“I guess so,” she said.

She thought for a minute, and speculated: “So, not being able to get your tracer onto the boat puts a wrench into *your* plans.”

Bud and Red smiled knowingly to each other.

“Of course not,” Bud laughed. “That’s all part of the plan. That’s what we call our ‘Vargas insurance.’”

“Huh?”

“We’ve decided not to trust Vargas,” Doc put in. “Red’s got a hunch. She listens to our hunches, so we return the favor.”

“We’re concerned that Vargas is in a position to do us a lot of harm by feeding information about our plans to the bad guys,” Red explained. “If we’d gone ahead with our plan as originally laid out, and if Vargas spilled the beans to Rodriguez, then our people – especially the mechanic who installed the trackers, but also the captain and crew of the fishing boat – would be in a very bad spot. Certainly, Rodriguez would remove the trackers. The mechanic would get to be shark bait. The fishing boat and its crew would have been subject to a revenge killing. It’s how those bastards operate.”

“But not how you operate,” Eve speculated.

“Opinions on that vary,” Doc said.

Red looked unconvinced, but receptive. Bud went back to studying her hands, now paying particular attention to her fingernails.

“So, what really happened?” Eve asked, now really intrigued.

“As soon as we – Red really – conceived doubts about Agent Vargas’ reliability,” Bud explained, “we looked to modify our plan as we’d outlined it to him. Assuming he was dirty – we still don’t have any evidence that he is – we wanted to get the trackers aboard in such a way that he was convinced they were *not* aboard.”

“For all their ability to destabilize Mexican society,” Doc started detailing, “the cartels are still no match for a modern navy – which the Mexican Navy is – in a pitched battle. A bunch of thugs with surplus Uzis and rocket launchers can’t take on an armored cruiser armed with cannon, torpedos, and missiles. Similarly, Mexican naval personnel, and especially naval facilities, are still relatively secure.”

“The thugs are simply outgunned. So, instead of our putting covert operatives, who are basically unarmed, at risk to put the

trackers aboard our boat, we asked the Mexican government to do it for us.”

“They are highly motivated to help us screw things up for the cartels. They’re fighting for their country. If they lose, Mexico as we know it will cease to exist. It’ll be Somalia all over again. No real government, and all the power in the hands of criminals. It’ll make Chicago during Prohibition look like a church picnic.”

Doc hung his head, thinking about it. Imagining it gave him a deep sense of loss.

“That would be pretty bad for us,” Eve pointed out.

“Of course,” Doc agreed, coming out of his reverie. “*Some* Americans are starting to realize what it would mean to us, which is why there are so many border states trying to take border security into their own hands, with Arizona at the forefront. The Federal Government has basically failed to secure the border, and they’re worried that the folks in Washington won’t wake up until it’s too late.”

“If the Mexican Government falls into the hands of organized criminals, it’ll take ‘em about an hour and a half to start coming after *us!* The Southwest will turn into Afghanistan before the bozos in Washington realize there’s a problem. And, there’s a Hispanic gang problem in every major city in the United States, already, which is linked directly to the Mexican cartels. Phoenix has already suffered the same kind of violence that the cartels use in Mexico, where gangs single out police for execution-type killings. In Mexico, it’s already escalated to targeting civilian government officials. How’re you going to feel about reporting the abduction/murder of the Governor of Arizona?”

“Not good,” Eve said, looking worried.

“*That’s* why I’ve come to this party,” Doc avowed.

“And, you think you can use your boat to stop that?” Eve asked, doubtfully.

“It can be part of the solution,” Doc stated.

“So, what’s with the worry about being blind at certain times?” Eve started probing again. This wasn’t idle conversation for her. She was on the job, doing an interview. It might be deep background, but you work it the same way. “If you can track it, anyway, why worry about blank periods.”

“That’s our disinformation testing program,” Bud said. “If Vargas, or someone at the DEA in Miami, is dirty, they’ll tell

Rodriguez, or at least it'll get back to Rodriguez. Then, Rodriguez will schedule his important runs during the periods we said we'd be blind. Red will see that pop up in the statistics, and we'll know there's a problem."

"And if that doesn't happen, you'll know Vargas is okay?"

"Absence of proof is not proof of absence," Bud intoned, sadly. "But, in this case it would be a strong indication he and his buddies were okay. It's hard to imagine Rodriguez planning smuggling runs when he knows he's being watched, and there's a period he's been told that we're blind."

"You said something about statistics. What's that mean?"

"Chaotic universe," Red said, cryptically. Then, she explained: "There are many possible reasons for making a particular voyage, and we have no way of knowing which is correct. If we plot the characteristics of a large number of voyages, however, we may be able to see clearly separated groups that fit a profile."

"For example, if we see a bunch of runs made at odd hours to distant ports that could be smuggling destinations, we can infer that the boat may be used to smuggle something to those destinations at those times. It would be especially telling if those runs started during the period we told Vargas we were blind around Tampico. Then we could go to work determining patterns that we could use to disrupt the distribution channels. Like, for example, we could consistently nab shipments, but only *after* the boat got away. That would look very bad for Rodriguez. If he doesn't know anything about it, what's he going to say when his bosses ask him why?"

"That's what we've been concentrating on – doing things that make Rodriguez' life miserable," Bud said. "I guess Doc's counting on the things we'll blame on Rodriguez disrupting the cartel's operations."

"Doc," Red said, turning to him, "I think you're right. What you want to do is a lot more worthwhile."

"Thank you, dear," Doc acknowledged.

23

This was his favorite perk on these diplomatic missions.

It had started years ago, when he was a junior senator visiting Japan with a trade commission. One night, he'd found himself

bar hopping in Tokyo with six executives from a Japanese automobile manufacturing company. They were all pretty drunk, and he was having trouble understanding what they were saying.

A matronly woman in a tight red silk dress and heavy makeup had come to their table in a little bar and introduced herself. His hosts all laughed and jabbered among themselves. Then, the one who spoke the best English tried to introduce the woman to him.

“This is ... “ and he jabbered off a name that was unintelligible. “She is madam.”

“What?” he’d asked, assuming he’d misunderstood what was said.

“She is madam,” his host repeated.

“Oh,” he’d said, still not believing he’d heard correctly, but not wanting his hosts to think he was an idiot. So, he smiled affably, and said: “Okay. Sounds good.”

The next thing he knew, he was being escorted through an unobtrusive side door, and down a quiet corridor. The madam ushered him into a small sitting/bedroom, and motioned for him to sit down. Moments later, a beautiful petite girl with long black hair, perfect skin, and a seductive smile shyly crept into the room, and presented herself before him.

The madam had rattled off a staccato burst of Japanese, none of which meant anything to him. Seeing the look of blank incomprehension on his face, the woman slowed down. She pointed to the girl and said, quite clearly: “Mei-Lin.”

Seeing that this seemed to get across to the Senator, she added: “Thailand.”

He smiled enthusiastically and wagged his head up and down to signal that he finally understood something.

The madam, satisfied, smiled, bowed, and left the room.

Mei-Lin had felt no need to communicate verbally, and simply didn’t try. Taking him by the hands, she’d stood him up. She seemed thrilled that he was so tall – the top of Mei-Lin’s head reached only to his collarbone. At this, she smiled, and hugged him close. Feeling his tie pin scratching her cheek, she proceeded to undo his tie, slide it slowly from around his neck, and drop it to the floor.

Then, she started unbuttoning his shirt from the top button to his navel. She spread the shirt wide to expose his hairy chest. She proceeded to rub her face on his chest hair, then kiss and lap his sternum. Pushing the shirt further open she began to kiss around his

breasts, finally kissing and sucking on the nipples.

He'd never had a woman suck his nipples before. It felt totally bizarre. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not. It didn't seem erotic. In fact, it kinda hurt. Maybe guys' nipples weren't wired up to be erogenous zones. But, he was a guest, and his hosts had probably spent a ton of money (He hoped he wasn't going to get stuck with the bill! How'd that look on his expense report?) securing this woman's services. (He further hoped she was a woman, not the fifteen year old she resembled.) It would be impolite to show any hint of dislike, so he let her suckle on his nipples as long as she wanted.

It actually did start to turn him on!

Holding her by the shoulders, he leaned down to kiss her, but she refused to let him kiss her on the lips. So, he went to work putting a dynamite hickey onto her neck.

She opened her kimono to encourage him to put the hickey lower – just above her right breast. Before that started to leave a mark, however, she moved around so that he lost that location, and found himself sucking on the skin next to her nipple. Then, she moved again until he had her right nipple in his mouth.

As he sucked on it, the nipple lengthened and became rubbery. He got a hint of a vague milky taste.

She stopped him, and pulled off his suit jacket and shirt, then led him over to the bed, and pushed him down onto it.

Taking off his shoes, socks, and trousers, she began chewing on his underpants over his growing erection. Kicking off her shoes, she opened her kimono completely. He saw that her skin was perfect, except for an arrangement of lily blossoms tattooed on her belly. The stems started in the short Vee-shaped bush trimmed over her mound. Coming straight up from the vee's center, they turned to curve first to her right, then, blossom by blossom, sinuously led back across her belly above her navel, and off around her waist on her left side to be lost beyond the folds of her kimono.

He thought that was cute. It looked like an arrow with a curvy shaft pointing the way to her clit. The hairy Vee being the arrowhead, it looked as if someone were leaving directions to point to the most important part of her anatomy.

She lay on top of him, rubbing her small breasts into his chest. Then, she slid down to rub her nipples on his underpants, cooing excitedly. Moving down further, she chewed some more on the underpants fabric over his erection, then pulled the waistband down to expose his penis fully.

At first, she ran her tongue up and down on the sensitive outer side of the curve of his penis, then started running her tongue around the rim. Finally, she took the knob-shaped glans in her mouth, wrapping her lips over it, and caressing it with her tongue. Suddenly, he realized that she was salivating over it, as her saliva began leaking out to run down the shaft.

She trapped the dripping saliva by opening her lips, and taking his entire shaft in her mouth, then closing her lips around it, and sliding back to the glans, wiping the spit off.

Taking it in her hand to stroke it, she looked up at him with an excited smile.

Then, she gave her full attention to stroking her mouth up and down on his penis. At each stroke, she took it in a little farther, until it was reaching into her throat. Then, she stopped trying to close her lips over the shaft, but kept her mouth wide open while she stroked the tip in and out of her throat.

Increasing the tempo, she began making little gagging noises as the tip went deep into her throat, then she stopped with the tip in her throat while she wriggled with her own orgasm.

When she shucked the kimono all the way off, he saw that the lily tattoo wound all the way around her body to end with a particularly large and beautifully rendered blossom on her right shoulder blade.

Climbing up onto his pelvis, she pushed his saliva-soaked erection deep into her dripping vagina. She straddled his pelvis, rubbing her clitoris over his bush, and moaning excitedly. Then, she brought her feet up under her, and began stroking her body up and down, occasionally putting her weight directly on his pelvis and grinding his penis deep into her vagina.

He exploded inside her.

When he'd got home, he felt guilty about cheating on his wife. After three days of not being able to look her in the eye, he'd admitted the incident. To his surprise, she was actually pleased! It turned out that she, too, liked young women. In fact, she liked young women more than she liked him.

They'd made a pact, where he helped her hide her hobby by using his influence to secure career advancement for her lovers, while she encouraged his extracurricular activities.

It was an excellent arrangement, enthusiastically embraced by all.

24

This Middle-East trip was a joke, anyway. He was supposed to be here negotiating arrangements for getting a new round of peace talks going, but he knew it was a waste. What would happen would be that his opposite numbers would promise everything, but at the last minute cancel the talks, or maybe walk out of them.

They always had some excuse. In fact, they probably had already thought up the excuse they'd use this time. It was always something else – they excelled at thinking up new reasons why they couldn't do anything constructive.

They would never let the peace process succeed, of course. If they did, they'd be out of business in a trice. Their regimes' *raison d'être* was to wage war on Israel. If that ever stopped, they'd actually have to do something for their people to stay in power.

Omigawd! They might actually have to *govern!*

Most of them didn't give a dingo's fart for their people. They considered them cattle whose sole purpose was to support their rulers' lavish lifestyles. Part of that lavish lifestyle – the harem part – he was about to partake in.

If they didn't care about their citizens, they sure didn't care about their concubines. Harem girls to these characters weren't human. They were just chattel, like furniture. These guys had no more regard for them than for their lawn tractors. It was “Slam, bam,” without the “thank you, ma'am.”

But, they had the most beautiful girls from every culture around the world. In fact, after indulging in Indian, Hispanic, Asian, even a Samoan, he'd developed a yen for a good-old fashioned American girl. It was like the traveler who's been treated to delicacies around the world, coming home and asking for a hamburger. The Emir had laughed and promised him an American.

The door opened, and in walked a statuesque young woman with long light-brown hair, and beautiful pinkish skin. She walked up to him, and pirouetted for inspection. Then she stopped, and stared directly into his eyes.

“Senator Bosley?” she asked in surprise, then dropped her veil.

“Cara?” Bosley exclaimed. He instantly recognized Carolyn Mayn, his daughter's best friend from home. He hadn't seen the girl in three years, since he'd moved his family to Washington, D.C. to become part of the Beltway lifestyle.

Cara didn't really seem glad to see him. On one level, she was embarrassed and ashamed by being caught doing what she was

doing. On another level, she hoped her friend's father, who was a U.S. Senator, could help her get home.

"Cara, what are you doing here?" Bosley exclaimed.

"Didn't my folks contact you? I thought they would have turned the world upside down looking for me when I was kidnapped two years ago. I thought sure they would have asked you for help."

She seemed devastated that he didn't even know she'd been gone.

"Oh, yes. They contacted me, and we searched. But, we couldn't find any trace at all," he lied. He vaguely remembered something about her disappearing while on vacation. The parents were desperate. He'd promised to help, but forgot about it. There was something important going on that he couldn't interrupt. He couldn't remember what.

Confused, embarrassed, and not a little guilty, he questioned the girl about what had happened.

She'd gone on vacation for a week in Bermuda with his daughter and some of their other friends. One night, she'd met a man in a bar. He'd taken her to a motel, and they'd made love for hours. He made her promise not to tell anyone – he was in the middle of getting a divorce from his wife – and to meet him back there the next night. She'd never gotten back to her hotel, though. Three men had grabbed her outside the motel room, and bundled her into a big car. They'd injected her with something, and the next thing she knew, she was here.

At first, she tried to fight them, but they locked her in a room with no windows. That was when they started giving her morphine injections. After a while, they let her out. They wanted her to do things for some man. He was ugly, and he stank. He didn't use any deodorant. She refused, and they put her back in the room, but this time they didn't give her any morphine.

After two days, she let the man do anything he wanted to her. And, he did things she'd never even heard of. From then on, she'd been very cooperative.

She begged Bosley to help her get away. She promised that if he got her away, she'd go into rehab, and get off the drug. She wanted to get off the drug, she said, but they wouldn't let her. They shot her up on a regular schedule to keep her addicted. That was, except when they wanted to punish her for something, or just to remind her what withdrawal was like. Then, they let her go through withdrawal for a while. But, before she could break her addiction, they shot her up again.

He said he'd certainly get her out of there as soon as he could. She'd have to be patient, though, until he could set it up. He

didn't tell her that he didn't have the least clue how to get her free, and feared for his career if he tried. He'd have to admit where he found her.

He started to leave, but she pulled him back down on the cushion they'd been sitting on. She said he'd have to make love to her.

"I can't do that," he cried in near panic. "You're the same age as my daughter. You were her friend. I couldn't!"

"You HAVE to!" she shouted. "They're going to check me. If I don't have your semen in my vagina, they'll punish me. PLEASE!"

Here, she burst into tears. She was so frightened that he might not make love to her, that she was nearly hysterical.

"Okay. Okay. Calm down. I'll do it," he said.

Then, he sat there for a few seconds. Then he threw up his hands. "I don't know how to start," he admitted.

She pushed him down, and started kissing him on the mouth hungrily. He'd never had a woman make love to him so passionately. Every time he would reach the point of orgasm, she would stop, and calm him down. Then she'd start on him again in a different way. It took hours. When he'd finally come inside her with a back-breaking orgasm, she still wouldn't let him go. She made him lie down next to her until he was ready to do it again. During that night, she'd made him have three orgasms before she allowed him to fall asleep in her arms.

On the flight home, he couldn't stop thinking about her. In fact, he even held up a line at the first-class washroom to masturbate over her memory. He couldn't think of anything but trying to get back to her to do it again.

At the same time, he'd never felt so guilty in his life. He'd known that girl since she was a baby. Her parents had contributed to his campaigns. They'd even hosted "meet the candidate" parties at their home in his honor. And, he'd let them down. They'd lost their daughter and come to him for help, and he'd blown them off.

He was a complete shit.

When he got home, he could barely look at his wife. His daughter was home for the weekend, and he couldn't even speak to her. He hid in his study and drank himself into a stupor.

25

“So, why are you coming to me?” Doc asked. He knew why, but wanted the Senator to admit it out loud. “It’s my wife who handles this sort of thing.”

“Well, I know you from my work on the Appropriations Committee,” Bosley said, lamely. He was sitting in one of Doc’s guest chairs on the other side of Doc’s paper-cluttered desk at SST headquarters in Scottsdale. For once, Doc was sitting feet on the floor, leaning his elbows on the desk to engage the Senator. The Senator was having trouble telling the story he’d come twenty-five-hundred miles to tell.

Bosley had made an appointment, then flown all the way out to Arizona from Washington to meet with Doc, but he’d been secretive about what he wanted. Once seated across the desk from Doc, he’d hemmed and hawed about the purpose of the visit, then started asking for help for one of his constituents who’s daughter had gotten herself in a jam in a foreign country.

For someone who shot his mouth off incessantly, Bosley was having trouble saying anything with information content. Doc had finally pried the truth out of him about finding Cara and not knowing what to do to help her. Not knowing what to do is a common situation for a politician, but one that is almost impossible for them to admit to. Doc was still trying to break through Bosley’s reserve to get at the full story.

Doc sat, waiting for more to come.

“And, I heard that your wife might be able to help.”

Doc continued to wait.

“And I was embarrassed. I’d hoped it would be easier to talk guy-to-guy than to say this in front of your wife.”

“Good,” Doc said. “It’s better to be up front with things like that. Saves a lot of trouble later.”

“Then you’ll help?”

“No, but my wife might. Tell me about the girl. What’s her name? Cara?”

“Carolyn Mayne. She was my daughter’s best friend all through high school. Then, we moved to Washington. After their freshman year in college, they took a vacation in the Caribbean with some friends. Oh, God. It could have been Tracy!” Bosley said,

burying his face in his hands.

“Maybe. Maybe not. If a girl shows a reasonable amount of caution, and has any instincts for self preservation, she won’t even get approached. These guys go after girls who let their gonads get the better of their brains. Like you.”

“Like me! How dare you. I’m a U.S. Senator.”

“Which means *you* work for *me*. I help pay your salary, so get off your high horse. You’re a middle-level manager who not only failed to do his job, but has been regularly screwing around, and finally got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Now, you’re coming to me for help because you feel so guilty you can’t look in the mirror, but not guilty enough to ask for help from my wife.”

“If you’d helped your friends, Cara’s parents, as you should have and as you’d promised, then Cara might have been saved two years of slavery and drug addiction.”

“Think of that: *slavery* and *drug addiction*. Two things no young lady should ever have to experience. *Your fault!*”

“If you’d helped when you should have, the ring that took her might have been broken up then, saving other girls from the same thing, including my wife’s best friend. You may be a U.S. Senator, but that doesn’t stop you from being a piece of shit.”

Doc picked up his cellphone and speed dialed a number.

“Hey, babe. Do you have a few minutes to talk to a piece of shit who happened to find one of your girls?”

“She’ll be right in,” Doc said. “Let me warn you, she has even less patience with people who try to string her along than I do. Tell her everything. Don’t try to hide anything. Don’t try to make yourself look good. Just blurt it out. It’ll go a lot better for you if you do. Remember, her best friend was taken by the same bunch that got Cara, and you could have prevented that. Don’t forget it. She won’t.”

“So,” Red said when she’d finally wormed the whole story out of Bosley, “she wouldn’t let you go until you’d had three orgasms. In her vagina. And fallen asleep in her arms.”

“Yes,” Bosley replied contritely. He’d ignored Doc’s warning and tried to sound like a U.S. Senator helping a constituent in trouble. That lasted no time at all with Red. She’d been through this before. More than once.

“Good girl!” Red congratulated her, even though she was nowhere to hear. “How’s it feel to be a sex slave? Don’t try to renew

the affair when she gets back.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bosley mumbled.

Deciding that the Senator had had enough abuse for the time being, Doc started soothing him.

“Don’t feel too badly,” he said. “This sort of thing has been going on for at least a hundred thousand years, and shows no signs of abating. Now that you know how it works, try it on your wife.”

“What?”

“Try it on your wife,” Doc repeated. “That’s who you’re supposed to be with. Get her hooked on you, and get yourself hooked on her. You’ll both be happier in the end. Maybe it’ll get you out of that beltway swinger lifestyle that got you into this in the first place. Then, you can concentrate on doing your job for the people who need you.”

“So, Red, what do you think?” he asked.

“The simplest thing to do is to buy her. From what the Good Senator here says, her captors don’t really give a shit about her. Maybe they’d sell her for a reasonable price.”

“It would certainly save a lot of headaches,” Doc allowed. “Senator, how much money do the Maynes have?”

“A little. Not a lot. I could help.”

“You could help a lot!” Red snarled.

“Be kind, dear,” Doc advised. “The Senator’s being contrite. Allow him to seek forgiveness.”

“Senator, does your wife know about this?” he asked.

“She’s the one who sent me here. She wanted me to come to Mrs. Manchek, but I was too weak.”

“Buck up old man,” Doc encouraged. “The meek act’s getting boring. Show some backbone to help us get Cara out of this. She needs help, not you. Then, you can be a man again.”

“When this gets out, it will end my career.”

“No, it won’t,” Red fell in with Doc’s encouragement routine. The senator would be more useful as a powerful politician with something to prove to himself and others, than as a sniveling penitent. “You do your part to help Cara get home, and we’ll tell the story of how you heroically went out on a limb to help her.”

Looking up, surprised and hopeful, Bosley said: “I thought you hated me.”

“Doc’s trying to teach me not to hate anyone,” Red explained. Doc made an exasperated face, as if she still hadn’t quite gotten something. Red ignored it. “It’s counterproductive and pointless,” she concluded. Doc looked more pleased at that.

“Let’s just say I am angry about what you did. *Don’t do it no more!*” she warned, shaking her finger in front of the Senator’s nose.

“Okay, what can I do?” Bosley asked.

“Think about how you can lay your hands on about a hundred grand to buy Cara,” Doc said. “I doubt if she would cost more than a fifth of that, but we don’t yet know. Waddayathink, Red, two weeks to find the right connections, a week to get to Cara, and another week to settle the deal?”

“Settle the deal quicker, I think. Once they decide to sell her, haggling won’t take long, especially since we won’t be too hardnosed.”

“Gotta be hardnosed enough that they believe it.”

“It’s not like we’ll be trying to screw them out of anything,” Red pointed out. “It’s a simple sale.”

“If they think it’s something like an Interpol sting operation,” Doc warned, “they’ll get cold feet. Might even hurt the girl, or our agents.”

“Okay,” Red concluded. “Squeeze to get a bargain so she’ll be a paying proposition at the Bunny Ranch.”

26

“You shoulda seen the looks on the faces of the guys in Reno,” Gwen laughed, obviously still enjoying the encounter, “when I showed up in their offices after two years wanting to buy a girl on the black market. I thought they’d bust!”

“They couldn’t help me directly,” she continued. “Nevada checks prostitutes pretty carefully, so that kind of crap can’t really be gotten under the radar by legal operations, and prostitution’s so easy to do there legally that as an illegal business it’s a non-starter. They were, however, able to put me together with a guy in England named Corky McInnes who supplies brothels over there. Red, I’m going to need a bodyguard for this one, I think. I don’t want to end up as fishbait in the Thames, or as Cara’s bunkmate.”

“Of course, take Jeremy. It’ll look good for you to have a chauffer-slash-bodyguard. He has an international drivers license, so you can just rent a limo wherever you need to, and have Jeremy go with you *everywhere*. If he thinks he needs help, he knows to phone home.”

A week later, Corky McInnes was sizing up the stunning blonde sitting in his office while her chauffer stood behind her chair. She looked pretty young to have her own brothel, especially an illegal one in New Jersey.

She might be young, but her bodyguard was all grown up. Looked like ex-special-forces. Had a scar that didn’t come from a shaving cut. Had that implacable look of someone who’d already made his bones – killed another human being deliberately. She also had good recommendations from the guys he knew in New Jersey.

“There aren’t too many girls that fit that bill,” Corky said. “Exactly five foot four. That exact shade of light brown hair.” Gwen had shown him the color on the box of hair coloring Bosley’d picked out in the Walgreen’s aisle, which was exactly the color he remembered for Cara’s hair. Cara’s parents had confirmed that it was her natural color. Her mother had cried grateful tears that she was finally going to get her daughter back – somewhat abused, but generally whole. She thanked Bosley profusely for spending years tracking Cara’s whereabouts down without giving up, even when it seemed hopeless. Bosley had looked embarrassed.

“That exact build. That exact age – really, you can’t fudge that?”

“It’s a special order for a special client,” Gwen said. “You wouldn’t want him to think you’d fudged.” She made a face and shook her head.

Corky shrugged. He’d dealt with such types before. In fact, he liked to think that *he* was such a type. “Midwestern accent. I wouldn’t know a midwestern accent from anything else in the ‘States.’”

“I would,” Gwen stated flatly. “That’s why I’ve got to see her before we make any deal.”

“And the rest of this stuff. It’s quite a list,” Corky concluded.

“If you can’t find her,” Gwen warned, “we’ll go find somebody who can. We were told you were the best.”

“Does this girl have to be fresh?” Corky asked.

“Absolutely not. We want a girl who’s already thoroughly trained.”

“Haven’t I seen you before?” Corky finally asked. “You look familiar.”

“I did some porn a few years ago. I called myself ‘Blythe.’ Look it up on the Internet. The stuff’s still there.”

“Why’d you quit. You could make a mint as a hooker yourself. You’re a real looker.”

“There isn’t that much money,” Gwen pointed out, “unless you like to do guys, too.”

“Oh,” Corky said. He imagined how the interview would go between Gwen and the girl she wanted to buy. Shit, he’d buy a ticket to watch that!

Two weeks later, Gwen was seated on a cushion at the Emir’s palace. She had been wined and dined, while the Emir decided whether to trust this American woman with the bodyguard. His own bodyguards had searched him for weapons. The man had freely given up the 9 mm automatic, and the two throwing knives. They’d found nothing else, yet the man wasn’t the least bit nervous. Did he think that unarmed he was still a match for the Emir’s picked elite guard. Looking at him, the Emir thought maybe he was.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to marry me, and join my harem?” the Emir asked Gwen again.

“I might like to spend the night in your harem,” Gwen allowed. “But to marry you, no. You’re a man.”

“But, I am very rich,” the Emir said. “I could make you very comfortable.”

“Not rich enough, or comfortable enough,” Gwen said, showing annoyance. “Don’t you have a girl to show me? I’ve come ten thousand miles to meet her.”

To cement the illusion that she was shopping, rather than trying to get to a specific girl whose whereabouts she already knew, she’d already endured this same scene and treatment in Paris, Madrid, Rome (Rome? She’d thought Italy was more civilized than that!), Istanbul, Moscow, and Tehran. Iran scared the living shit out of her. She was afraid she’d get stoned to death, or worse.

“Yes, of course. You insist on being left alone with her?” the Emir asked. From Gwen’s comment, he assumed he knew why.

“Yes. I want to be alone with her for about an hour. I need to inspect her very carefully. It’s a special order for a very special client, and I must know everything about her. Especially, I must verify her skills.”

“I see,” said the Emir. He would see, too. There would be a camera hidden in the room.

The Emir led her into a room with a divan and a futon, and nothing else. As Jeremy tried to enter the room, the Emir’s guards moved to stop him.

“He comes in, too,” Gwen ordered sharply. “I’m not going to disappear through a side door while he stands outside the main one.”

“My dear,” the Emir said in a hurt tone, “Don’t you trust me? I am insulted.”

“You just go outside and be insulted,” Gwen replied crossly. “I don’t trust anyone who buys and sells girls.”

“But, *you* buy and sell girls,” the Emir pointed out.

“Damn straight,” Gwen growled. “I buy and sell girls. I’m not the one who’s bought and sold. Now, do you want to do business on that basis, or do I ask Jeremy to test the effectiveness of *your* bodyguards?”

Taken aback, the Emir considered having the bodyguard turned into a eunuch to guard his principal as part of his harem. But, he wasn’t sure it could be done. He also had been warned that this woman was protected by an organization that understood the concept of vendetta every bit as well as his tribe.

Better to do business.

With a gesture, the Emir told his guards to admit Jeremy, who was passing the time estimating the breaking strengths of their necks.

He liked Gwen, and it wasn’t because she was mouth-wateringly beautiful. There were lots of beautiful women around. He liked *Gwen* – the girl inside. Like all of Doc Manchek’s hand-picked proteges, she was amazingly intelligent, highly resourceful, tough as nails, and heroically courageous, which were all characteristics a military man like Jeremy would prize in anyone. At the same time, she had the nicest personality you could imagine. The fact that she was also one of Red’s favorites – and Jeremy was devoted to Red – just doubled his estimation of her. There was no way he would allow this towelhead to turn her into a sex slave.

With another gesture, the Emir signaled for the girl to come in. When she appeared in the door, Gwen immediately knew this was Cara, even with the thin veil covering her face.

Gwen removed the veil to make sure. Then, she signaled for the Emir and his servants to withdraw. Jeremy took up a post just to one side of the door.

Jeremy knew exactly what the rest of the process was all about. Gwen would have to go through the motions of testing Cara's skill set as a concubine. They could safely assume that the test would be observed.

He knew that Gwen had been a prostitute in the past, and was in a lesbian relationship now. So, he knew that she knew what she had to do, and why.

Poor Cara didn't. When Gwen pulled her veil away, her face held an expression of near panic. Apparently, she'd never been with a woman, and didn't want to be.

"Don't worry, dear, I won't hurt you," Gwen soothed. "What's your name, darling?"

"Cara."

"What a nice name. What's it short for?"

"Carolyn. Oh, I'm scared. What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to find out what you know, dear. Then I want to take you home."

"To America? You're American."

"Yes, I'm American. You'd like to go back to America, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, God! Yes! Please help me."

"You just do what I ask, and I'll take you home."

Gwen moved in to kiss Cara on the lips. She felt Cara's body trembling.

"You have to relax, Cara, if we're to get through this. Can they hear us?"

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure, no.”

“We’ll have to chance it. Cara, do not react to what I’m about to tell you. Your parents sent me to get you. Senator Bosley put up enough money for me to buy you from these people, but we’re not safe, yet. If they think I’m with Interpol, they’ll kill Jeremy, and make me your roommate. I’m telling you because I have to make love to you, and you have to act like you’re enjoying it. I can tell you’ve never been with a woman, but I have, and it’s not bad. Do this once, and we’ll get you out of here, and you’ll never have to do anything like it again. Understand?”

Cara hugged her close, and whispered “Thank you.”

27

“Can you believe this?” the Emir asked his brother in Arabic while watching the video feed from the room. “That girl has never wanted to *touch* another woman. All the harem girls like to play with each other, except this one. In comes this American blonde, whispers in her ear, and suddenly she wants to fuck her like a bunny.”

“The blonde,” the Emir’s brother speculated, “probably just told her that if she fucked her, she’d take her home to her mommy and daddy. The balls on that broad! You are right to let her go, my brother. If you kept her here, she’d eat you alive!”

Both brothers laughed at that.

On the video monitor, the brothers could see that the women were now engaged in a deep French kiss, with Cara’s tongue pushed deep into Gwen’s throat. Gwen then slowly disrobed Cara, caressing her breasts, the curve of her waist, and her hips in the process.

In the room, Gwen told Cara to demonstrate how she would undress her if she were a man. Cara had noticed that Gwen wore a mannish suit, even taking the chance of wearing slacks in this country where it was illegal. Gwen had apologized to the Emir, pointing out that it was necessary as part of testing the girl’s skills.

When she got to the pants, Cara realized that Gwen was wearing a strap-on dildo! “You have to demonstrate how you would do it with a man,” Gwen warned her.

Cara demonstrated her skills with fallatio, taking the dildo deep into her throat while holding her breath. Then, she lay Gwen

on the futon on her back, and demonstrated riding the artificial cock. She demonstrated properly satisfying moans and cries, as well as simulated orgasms. Gwen noticed that not all the orgasms were simulated.

Then, they rolled over with Gwen on top, and demonstrated the missionary position. Gwen expertly hooked her arms behind Cara's knees to lift and separate her legs, while pounding her deeply. Again, not all of Cara's orgasms were simulated.

"Have they made you do anal?" Gwen asked. She didn't want to force Cara into that if it wasn't necessary.

"No," Cara reported. "It's illegal here, but so isn't girl-on-girl sex, which they obviously encourage so they can watch. They're just as likely, however, to then stone you to death for it afterward, if they take the notion. But, the Emir really doesn't approve of anal, so nobody around here does it. Maybe in other households, but not here."

"Okay. We're done, I think. Sorry to put you through it."

"Thank you for being gentle. You were right, it wasn't bad. Some of it was fun. You obviously know how to do it. Where'd you learn?"

"Cara, I'm married to a woman. Except for the dildo, we do this every night."

"So, you're cheating?"

"It's not cheating if you have her permission. In this case, it's doing a job that we both know needs to be done."

"What's that?"

"Why, to take you home, of course," Gwen concluded. "Now, we only need to dicker on price."

The Emir started out asking one hundred thousand dollars.

Gwen laughed: "If she were fifteen years old, and a virgin, she might be worth thirty. No, she's old, and she bangs like a sailor. Ten thousand, no more."

"You wound me! She is beautiful. All of her training must be worth something. Twenty five thousand, no less."

"We have to transport her to the United States, which is very dangerous. Then, we have to hide her carefully. It is not like here, where having harem girls is expected. In the United States, they put you in jail for having even two wives. Then, we have to be able to

make a profit. Fifteen thousand, and we are losing money.”

“Twenty thousand, and that is my final offer,” the Emir claimed untruthfully.

“Oh, my principal will be furious! Yet, he has searched the world for a girl just like her. And, he is very rich. I accept. I will give you cash when she is sitting in my car. Will you walk us out?”

The Emir thought for a few seconds. He really enjoyed being near this dilectible creature. And, he wanted to feel that money. It wasn't much to him, but he enjoyed collecting cash, no matter how little. He would walk them to the car.

“I will walk you to your car,” he said.

With Cara safely bundled into the back of the stretch limosine, and Jeremy holding the door for Gwen, she counted out the money into the Emir's delighted palm. As a bonus, she handed him a paper envelope containing a CD.

“A momento of our visit,” she said, and climbed quickly into the car.

Jeremy just as quickly closed the door, and jumped into the driver's seat. Gunning the engine, he raced through the open gate of the walled compound before anyone could change their minds and close it.

In the back, Cara was smiling through chills and sweats. She was starting morphine withdrawal, but she was going home.

“Hang on just a few more minutes,” Gwen told her. “We're almost at the airport. We'll start your treatment as soon as we get to the plane.”

“What is that?” the Emir's brother asked about the CD.

“I do not know,” the Emir responded. “I can't see how it would hurt us. Let's play it on someone else's computer.”

They went into the guard shack, and borrowed a laptop. Then, they inserted the CD. They were delighted when it turned out to be raw footage from Gwen's pornographic videos. As an added attraction, there was a copy of Gwen's and Bud's lesbian *Kama Sutra* website video. They decided to make a copy of the latter for the harem.

28

“Do you feel a little better about what happened to Charles Washington, now?” Red asked Gwen. “Cara was another one of his victims.”

Gwen had gotten to know Cara well on the way back to the clinic in New York. She stayed with her through her treatment, and then brought her home. She was impressed with the girl’s courage when she refused to allow the med techs to alleviate her withdrawal symptoms with methadone. She didn’t want to go home addicted to another drug. She didn’t want to go home addicted to *anything*. So, she spent days cradled in Gwen’s arms, screaming and crying, but refusing to take the methadone. Gwen had seen withdrawal before, and knew addicts who’d tried to go cold turkey, and failed. She understood why they failed.

Cara had told her the entire story, from picking up Washington – it actually *had* been Washington who’d trapped Cara as he had done Bud – to their making her an addict, and finally to meeting Bosley. She asked Gwen never to tell anyone about Bosley fucking her. It would ruin his career. Gwen said he’d already told them when asking them to help get Cara out. But, she warned Cara, she’d need to stay away from Bosley, or it *would* ruin his career.

It took three weeks before the clinic pronounced Cara “clean.” But, they warned her, she would always be an addict. The drug made permanent changes to her body. She could control the craving, but it would never completely go away.

“Now I know why you let Bud damage Washington’s face so badly,” Gwen told Red. She hadn’t been there to see it happen, but had seen news photos of the result. “At the time, I thought you were just being cruel. I’d never known you to be cruel, so I didn’t understand it. Now, I realize that by doing that to him, you were protecting all the other Buds and Caras out there from him. The only other way to stop him was to kill him.”

“Well,” Red admitted, “we could have put him in jail until he grew old and toothless. But, Bud needed to take out her pent up anger on something, and he seemed the most deserving target. It did help her stop being afraid, on top of quickly having the desired effect on Washington’s career.”

“Are we going to do anything about the Emir?” Gwen asked, changing the subject.

Red looked to Doc. This was more his area of expertise, as inexpert as that might be.

“I don’t think there’s much we can do,” he speculated. “Everyone already knows he’s the scum of the Earth. In his country, he’s both a civil and religious leader. And, his country is protected by similar countries surrounding it, as well as more sophisticated

regimes who can't afford to be seen to line up with us against him."

"It's the main problem with theocracies – governments run by religious leaders," he continued. "There's nobody to say 'naughty, naughty.' Even in Medieval Europe, you had military dictatorships with secular power competing with the Catholic Church, which had enormous sectarian power. The Church couldn't go too far without encountering resistance from the aristocracy. The aristocracy couldn't go too far without being censured by the Church. Modern regimes all have similar checks and balances – with separation of church and state the most important one. It's why I get antsy when I see scientific organizations getting too cozy with governments, and why everyone gets nervous about weakness in religious organizations. No matter what your creed, we have to have organized religion of some kind to balance the sectarian power of governments."

"Islam was founded as a theocracy – both sectarian and secular power concentrated together in one or a few individuals. At the time, nobody understood the need to separate them. Most thinkers have since grown up to embrace the separation concept, realizing that the dynamic tension is needed to keep the whole culture centered, and able to respond to changing conditions. Fundamentalist Islam, however, has steadfastly refused to modernize. That's why psychopaths like your Emir are able to achieve high office, with its accompanying state protection, in some Islamic countries. The only way to touch him is to topple his government, and the Manchek family isn't going to do that."

"What about people like Senator Bosley?" Gwen asked. "Can't they do something?"

"They can seek to marginalize the regime in various ways," Doc replied, "but change really has to come from within. The faithful have to question the authority of the faith, or at least *his* authority as leader of the faith. That doesn't come easily. Unfortunately, radical Islam now seems to be gaining adherents, like Communism a hundred years ago. Eventually, Communist governments became so radicalized that they became inefficient, and collapsed under their own weight."

"You're comparing Islam to Communism?" Red questioned.

"Well," Doc replied, "they may be at opposite ends of the spectrum doctrinaire-wise, but they share the same flaw. Communism was (and still is) an atheistic doctrine. Its answer to the question of religion is to deny the validity of religion. That kicks the pins out from under the competition. Since people need some sort of ethical, moral guide, they appealed to the Communist dogma. That blows the separation of church and state, again. There's nobody to say, 'naughty, naughty.' Abuses go unchecked. Psychopaths find happy homes, and so forth. Witness Stalin."

"The problem isn't what philosophy you have, it's the inability to correct abuses because there aren't separate, competing

authorities. The strength of the American system is that there's no absolute authority. The checks and balances are built in. Abuses happen, and can persist for a while, but eventually they get slapped down because there's somebody around to slap them down."

"The weakness is that it's difficult to get anything done."

"The strength is that it's difficult to get anything done."

29

Julio Azul was troubled. He had grown up in a strict Catholic household, and he felt what he was being asked to do would endanger his immortal soul. He was ashamed to be part of what they were doing to these poor boys. He didn't know *how* they were doing it, but he could see the results, and he knew it was wrong. Terribly wrong.

His job hadn't always been like this. Years ago, when he'd started this job at the small, highly secure prison reserved for the worst enemies of whatever regime was in power in Mexico City, he could see that the people he was keeping behind bars were, for the most part, dangerous to the stability of the Mexican Government.

He didn't always agree with what was done by the Mexican Government in those days, but they had always maintained strict order in the country. If you did things that caused trouble, you could be pretty sure the Government would hunt you down, and punish you. And, you could rest assured the punishment would be severe – often out of proportion to what you had done.

Often arbitrary; sometimes cruel; the response of the *Federales* was effective at controlling disorder. Disorder, Julio understood, was the worst enemy of a civilized society. The chaos these people tried to create was the antithesis of the order the Mexican people needed to prosper.

Of course, Julio wouldn't use the word "antithesis," or its Spanish equivalent, either. He would only have a vague idea of its meaning. He just recognized civil disorder when he saw, or heard about it. He also knew in his heart that it was bad for his country, his church, and his family. The people he had been guarding at this special prison had devoted themselves to creating civil disorder, so they were the worst enemies of his country, his church, and his family. He was proud to keep them safe behind bars where they could do little or no harm.

In these past few months, however, things had changed. The prisoners that came were not political activists, terrorists, or anything like that. Those prisoners had stopped coming long ago. Only a few of the forgotten ones were left. In fact, the number of

guards needed to guard them had been drastically reduced. Only he and a few others were left.

These new prisoners who had started coming recently were torture victims. They were harmless to the state. In fact, they were barely functional. Especially, those who had encountered *El Chile* – literally “the chile pepper.” It was a reference to his homosexual tastes, and what happened to those he chose.

These new prisoners were all adolescent boys or young men. While they had often been beaten savagely, that was not what bothered Julio so much. Many people had been beaten on the way to his prison, and it had always been so.

No, it was other things that bothered Julio. What made Julio ashamed to go to work was the fact that *El Chile* had destroyed their souls. He had somehow sent them to Hell without taking them out of their bodies.

It appeared that they had no understanding of their surroundings. They seemed to inhabit some horrible inner world full of demons who tormented them unmercifully. Most of the time, they just sat or lay in their cells catatonically. If you put food in their cells, they would curl up in a corner, staring at it until you left. When you came back a while later, the food would be gone, but the boy would still be huddled in the corner, just as he had been when you left.

The very worst was if you had to touch them for any reason. They would scream in fear. It was as if you were a demon intent on inflicting the worst kind of torture.

Julio did not want to go back there, but he had to feed his family, and he thought maybe *El Chile* would punish him if he tried to quit. What if he tried to quit, and *El Chile* decided to punish him by taking his little Pablito!

He decided to confess to Padre Olvera. The priest had been his spiritual guide all his life, and would know what to tell him to do. Please, God, help Padre Olvera find a way to save his soul without endangering his life, or his little Pablito.

Padre Olvera was kind and understanding. No, he had never heard of such a thing being done to a human being, but it must have been the result of some savage mental torture. He wanted to know how many victims there were. Did Julio know their names? Could he describe each and every one of them? Could he find out when each one was brought in?

He told Julio he'd done the right thing. It was a horrible thing to have to deal with such victims. To protect his soul, Julio should try to be as kind and humane as possible to them. Try to make them as comfortable as possible, and protect them from injuries and disease caused by living in unsanitary conditions. His kindness would be a shield against the devils infesting the poor boys' minds. Padre Olvera told Julio that he was probably right that *El Chile* had somehow put devils in the boys' minds that were tormenting them.

The boys were still there, but they could not see, hear, or feel the real world because of the devils.

Padre Olvera promised to try to find someone who could help them, and put an end to *El Chile*'s predations. He had heard of an *Americana* who had been tortured by *El Chile* and escaped, and had been taken care of by a couple in Arizona. Perhaps they would be able to help. Padre Olvera would try.

He would make inquiries. Julio should tell no one. Of course, Padre Olvera would never divulge what Julio told him in sacred confession. Julio should show the prisoners as much kindness as possible, and pray that God would help them. Meanwhile, Padre Olvera would seek help, both divine and earthly, as well. He and Julio prayed for Julio's soul, and his family's safety, and for deliverance for the victims.

30

"As you know," Senator Bosley pontificated, "since we saved Cara, I've made locating and saving victims of white slavers throughout the world a high priority. I've formed a special committee to look into the matter."

Red resisted the temptation to tap her fingers. She also resisted the temptation to make a comment about "too little coming awfully late." She took an extra bit of time to look into what the future would be like if she made the comment, and compare it to what it would be like if she kept her stupid trap shut. She decided that the Universe would be a better place in which to live if she kept her stupid trap shut, so she did.

Instead, she waited for Sen. Belfry (Red's unkind comparison to the beltway blowhard appearing in the comic strip *Shoe*) to come to the point. Doc seemed to think that Bosley's conversion from life in the fast lane to model statesman was a real phenomenon, which should be encouraged and supported. While Red could see that *acting* as if she shared Doc's point of view would be the most productive strategy, she planned to keep her hand on her wallet, and regularly inspect the hobbles on all her camels.

While Red smiled and nodded in Senator Bosley's direction, and thought her secret thoughts, she kept a watch out for anything that came out of his mouth that might be worth hearing. Eventually, it happened.

"We got a report recently," Bosley informed her, "through irregular channels, that a Mexican priest has been asking about abductees that had been brainwashed in some unspecified way. He believes he knows of such victims being held in a facility formerly used for political prisoners, and was asking if anything could be done to help them. I thought it might be of interest to you."

“It is of great interest to me,” Red said, suddenly all ears. She’d been searching for leads to the whereabouts of David Landry, and this sounded like just what she’d expect to hear. “Do you have any details? Who is this priest? Can we contact him? Above all, is he credible?”

“Taking those in order: Not really; the priest’s name is Father Francisco Olvera, and he works (or whatever it is you call what Catholic priests do) in one of the suburban parishes outside Tampico; we should be able to put you in contact with him through regular channels within the Church; and I’ve no idea if he’s credible, but I’ve no reason to think he’s not.”

Several days later, Padre Olvera sat lonely in his confessional. It was a Tuesday evening. Monday had been busy with parishoners confessing the sins they’d enjoyed over the weekend. If it were raining, perhaps there would be a few inveterate sinners who’d done something noteworthy since last night, and wanted to come in out of the rain to confess it, and incidentally dry off.

It was not raining, however. The air was soft and warm. People were out in the plaza working on plans to do something worth confessing next Monday. Padre Olvera sat alone, and had sat alone for a half hour.

He heard soft footsteps on the marble floor outside the confessional, then the door to the other side of the booth opened quietly, and closed, again.

When he slid the screen open, a whiff of a subtle perfume wafted through. It was a nice perfume. It made you want to stand next to the woman wearing it, and talk to her. It was not one of the lustful erotic scents common to the younger women. It had a quiet seductive quality, like what you’d imagine a young señora from Old Mexico, who was wise beyond her years, might have worn.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned,” a young, female, American voice said in English. “Oh, boy! Have I sinned! But, that’s not really what I came here to talk to you about.”

Surprised, the priest asked, quietly in English: “Then what is it that you have come to the confessional to talk about, if not to confess your terrible sins?”

The young lady laughed, quietly: “I have already come to terms with my sins. I have done my penance and need no absolution. I have come to talk to you about some other sinners, who are in desperate need of salvation.”

Coming on his guard against what he did not know, Padre Olvera wasn’t sure he wanted to listen to any more of this. Many people who were, perhaps, well meaning in their own way, might come to a poor parish priest, and want to talk about saving sinners. It sounded a lot like the way some members of protestant evangelical sects talked. Why they might come to him to evangelize he could

not imagine. Sometimes they did and said things he found very strange, however. Still, he had nothing else to do. He might as well hear this person out.

“Can you be more specific about the sinners you want to talk about?”

“Yes, they are young men who have been taught their sins by a man you call *El Chile*. I have friends who would like to help absolve them of their sins.”

“And, who are you my child, and who are your friends?”

“I was once a sinner like the victims of *El Chile*. My friends saved me, and brought me home. When they heard of *El Chile*’s victims, they wanted to help them, too. They asked me to come and meet with you.”

“May I ask your name?”

“Call me ‘Cara’”

“What do you think you can do for these sinners, Cara?”

“What I hope to do for them is to take them someplace safe, where they can get help to live with what has happened to them. Until I know much more, I cannot say anything about how that might be accomplished.”

“What do you need to know?”

“For starters, we should find out where they are being held.”

“It is a facility on the Calle de Cortez in Tampico. It has been used for decades to imprison those whom the Government has deemed too dangerous to allow on the streets – for political reasons.”

“Does that sort of thing still go on in Mexico? I thought you had progressed far beyond that.”

“There are always people considered too dangerous to walk around loose. But you are right. Not so much anymore. The facility is almost empty. A few cells are used to house the sinners we were discussing.”

“How many of these sinners are there?”

“Five.”

“You know much about the inside of this facility! How is that?”

“I have a good source, who fears for his life, and the souls of his family.”

“Ahh. We must protect them, then. I’ll ask no more about him – for now.”

“What about later.”

“A wise friend of mine often says: ‘The future’s uncertain, and the end is always near.’”

“A very wise friend.”

“She is. Perhaps sometime you will meet her.”

“In the meantime,” Cara continued. “Let’s get some more information about the sinners. Have you been able to ascertain their names?”

“ ‘Ascertain?’” Padre Olvera asked. “I am unfamiliar with that word in English.”

“It’s a fancy way of saying ‘find out.’” Cara laughed. “Sometimes educated people become too fond of what they’ve learned, and want to show it off. It becomes a habit. Sorry.”

Padre Olvera laughed in his turn: “I think your wise friend is not the only one who is wise. It is refreshing to meet someone who sounds so young, but is honest enough to see her own little weaknesses, and wise enough to laugh at them.”

“Thank you, Padre,” Cara said. “Some things can happen that burn away all one’s self delusions. Another of my friends taught me that what is left is something to cling to.”

“Another wise friend. I hope to meet them someday.”

“If you meet him, you might have to stop being a priest. But, on second thought, I don’t think he’d let that happen. He’s also very kind and thoughtful.”

“In answer to your question,” Olvera brought the conversation back to the point, “I do not know any of their names, yet. I am

hoping to get detailed descriptions of each of them, and to find out when they were brought to the prison.”

“We should probably also have a detailed description of each one’s condition,” Cara added. “Symptoms would be very important. Another of my friends may be able to figure out what has happened to their minds, and maybe how to reverse it. It will also help us figure out how to handle them.”

“Will you really be able to save them?”

“We probably will be able to get them to a safe facility, where they can get treatment. Whether they can be cured is another matter. I was forced to become a drug addict. I’ve learned to live without the drugs, but I will always still be an addict. Some things cannot be cured.”

“I am sorry,” the priest averred.

“So am I,” Cara stated. “But, you are not to blame. Another thing my wise friends insist on is that we never dwell on the past. Nor worry about the future. We take care of what is before us right now.”

“Ahh,” the priest recalled, “the Prayer of Serenity.”

“Very much like that. You already know what my friends say about the future. They call the past ‘footsteps in the snow.’”

“What an interesting image,” the priest took time to analyze it philosophically. “Footsteps because what made them has already passed on. In the snow, because they are doomed to fade, then disappear as the snow melts. So, they are saying that the past lives only in memory. Interesting.”

31

“Where is your wife?” Agent Vargas asked in an unpleasant, policemanlike way.

“She is away on business,” Doc answered, patiently. He had always found the best way to respond to policemanlike bullying was to use patience. Sometimes he would be cross, but in a patient way.

Vargas had visited Doc with no warning in his office at SST, and was sitting in one of Doc’s “guest” chairs on the other side of his desk. Doc, as usual, had his feet up on a corner of the desk, which was otherwise covered with papers.

“I’ve been trying to contact her to get an update on Roderiguez’ movements with your boat, but I can’t get in touch with her. Nobody will tell me where she is or why she won’t give me a report.”

“I can tell you why she won’t give you a report,” Doc said. “It’s because she has nothing to report.”

“How do you know that?” Vargas insisted.

“Because she hasn’t reported anything to me, which, knowing her, means she has nothing to report.”

“What’s taking so long?”

“Her methods rely on analyzing statistics based on observations,” Doc explained patiently. “She cannot analyze any statistics until she has made the observations. She needs enough observations to make statistical inferences from them. She can’t make observations until the boat moves.”

“Perhaps it would be clearer if I explain it another way,” Doc said, patiently putting on his professor hat. “There is an old saying in experimental physics that a single data point provides practically no information. It can be graphed as any line of any shape that goes through that point. Two data points determine a straight line, but can’t tell you if the line really is straight, or some other kind of complex curve. Three points determine a simple curve, but can’t guarantee that the curve you’re dealing with is really simple. And so forth. Red is trying to paint a very complex picture for you – for us – and that will require a lot of data points.”

“That’s not very concise for an old saying,” Vargas observed.

“Physicists don’t often say it in English. They say it in Algebra,” Doc responded, patiently. “It’s more concise that way.”

“Think of a pointillist picture,” he continued, warming to his subject. “One made up of separate individual dots of paint. The more dots you apply, the clearer the picture becomes. In fact, the picture is completely unrecognizable until you get a certain number of dots.”

“How the Hell many dots does she need?” Vargas questioned, getting heated. Doc’s patient attitude was wearing his patience very thin, indeed.

Zen patience can have that effect on the impatient.

“She will know only when the picture starts to emerge,” came the unsatisfying answer. “Then, if you want, you can ask her to

count the dots, but by then she'll be much more interested in the picture they paint. I assume you will be, too."

Zen sages have great respect for the power of water, as in the fabled Chinese water torture. It comes from the practice's Taoist roots, where water's power is seen to come from its ability to seek the lowest level – the subordinate position – and exploit that position to control everything else.

Unfortunately for the analogy, the Chinese water torture isn't really very effective. It's actual effect is to make the victim grumpy and cross. Much like the result of making a hen wet.

"Where in Hell is she?" Vargas was approaching apoplexy by this time.

"She's not in Hell," Doc explained, patiently, "but her whereabouts are confidential. That would be on a need to know basis, and obviously she thinks you don't need to know."

"Why would she keep *anything* from me," Vargas was now becoming desperate.

"Haven't you noticed, yet? She doesn't trust you."

"Why not?"

"She is concerned that *if* you are untrustworthy, and I stress the word 'if,' you are in a position to do her and her associates great harm. She is willing to work with you, but she will provide you only the information she thinks you need to know."

"Do you trust me?"

"I don't have to. I'm designing my new boat, and once in a while I poke my nose into things that are interesting to me, and where I can make a positive contribution."

"You don't even know where your own wife is?" Vargas scoffed, disbelieving.

"I didn't say that," Doc pointed out, "but, in this case, I do not."

"She could be anywhere doing anything!"

"Yes. Well, the Universe is full of things she would be very unlikely to do, but otherwise, yes."

“You trust her that much,” Vargas said, pointedly.

“Well, I trust her to not do any of the things she is very unlikely to do. And, I trust her judgement.”

“She could be shacking up with another guy,” Vargas baited.

“Unlikely,” Doc responded, mildly.

“You really believe that?” Vargas needled, trying to take his frustration out on Doc.

“As I said, I trust her judgement,” Doc responded, then added: “Agent Vargas, this conversation has degenerated badly. Let’s get back to the point.”

He summarized: “You are frustrated because my wife cannot give you answers you want, undoubtedly because she’s still trying to get them. Furthermore, you’re additionally frustrated because you can’t pester her because she’s off doing something that, apparently, has nothing to do with you. As an added bonus, you’re frustrated because she’s made sure nobody can find her to pester her about anything not having to do with what she’s doing now, which includes what you want to pester her about.”

He stopped, looked off into space, and pointed to invisible things while rechecking the logical correctness of what he’d just said. Satisfied, he nodded to himself.

“It’s good to want things,” he added. “It builds character.”

“I think your most important take away from this conversation,” he added some more, “is that my wife does not trust you, but is willing to work with you on a limited basis until such time as she comes to trust you.”

“The sooner the better, as far as I’m concerned,” he concluded. “These schoolyard scenes are annoying.”

Vargas had learned not to dwell on certain of Doc’s pronouncements, such as the latter. He chose, instead, to take encouragement from the former.

“What can I do about it?” Vargas asked.

“Be trustworthy,” Doc explained.

32

“I think Vargas and his buddies in Miami are clean,” said Red’s voice over the cellphone.

Several days after Red pointed out that if they were to *really* be concerned about security, they should recognize that cellphones were highly insecure, Doc had handed Red a cellphone that looked and behaved exactly like the cellphone she’d been using, except that it exclusively employed encrypted messages that were virtually hacker proof. Virtually in that, while they *could* be hacked, by the time a hacker got in, the message would be over and the code reset.

The only outward difference was that, whereas her regular cellphone was a tasteful dark gray, this one was blood red. He’d eschewed the usual SST official color of yellow as a playful nod to the fact that it was Red who’d pointed out the need for secure telecommunications. He’d informed her that the technology was available to any of her associates, such as Bud, Cara, and Gwen, who might need it.

“The things still give away your location, though,” he had reminded her. “If you don’t want to be found, you still have to shut it off.”

“Why do you think Vargas is clean?” Doc now asked.

“Because your boat has been taken out eleven times on obvious smuggling runs, only one of which came during the times that we told Vargas we are blind. My analysis says that’s virtually impossible unless he’s clean. Of course, it’s still a small sample, but we’re talking better than ninety percent probability.”

“That’s not all that good, when lives are on the line.”

“But it’s good enough to go to the next phase. We’ll start feeding Vargas information about when the boat’s going smuggling, and help him make some nice busts.”

“Speaking about nice busts, when do I get to see yours? I miss you.”

“If that’s your way of asking when I’m coming home, it shouldn’t be too long,” Red said. “Since I’ve decided to trust Vargas ninety percent, you can tell him that I’m down in Mexico trying to locate the Landry boy. That’ll satisfy him that I’m not cutting him out of anything having to do with smuggling. It’s purely humanitarian.”

“Good,” Doc said. “He’s been pestering me almost daily about what you’re doing. Lying to him that I don’t even know where you are has been getting very, very old. I much prefer telling the truth. It’s easier to remember.”

Changing the subject, Red said: “I’m thinking of putting Bud on the payroll to lead this kind of mission. I think she’d be a natural.”

“I’d go easy on her. She’s been through a lot. Keep her away from any situations that might involve actual fighting. Of course, Pat’s the authority on how to treat her. She’s not yet completely over the PTSD, you know.”

Post traumatic stress disorder was the emotional problem remaining from Bud’s pirate adventure. It is treatable, but the cure is neither quick, nor certain.

“I know, so I’m thinking of using her in an executive capacity,” Red explained. “Decide what to do, then keep everybody moving in the right direction. That sort of thing. She wants to help, and I’ve been letting her get experience assisting me on this one, which isn’t a simple one.”

“Remember, though, she’s already got a career,” Doc reminded her.

“So have I, and this isn’t exactly it. I don’t want to be a spy, or a mercenary. I want to go back to being a mommy who plays with computers. I miss my babies.”

“I’d like that, too,” Doc agreed. “Disrupting it is another score I’ve got against Rodriguez.”

“Anyway,” Red changed the subject, again. “What I *don’t* want you to tell Agent Vargas is that we’re all set to take down the prison where David Landry is being kept. We’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Catch me up to date,” Doc said. “Who’s ‘we’ and which prison?”

“You knew that he’s being kept in a disused prison in Tampico,” Red recapped.

“Yes, I knew that, but not much more.”

“The prison was a special one used to house political prisoners by an earlier regime. The present government doesn’t go in for that stuff, so they took all the political prisoners out, and sold the prison, lock, stock, and dungeons to a business consortium, fronted by a corporation, fronted by ..., and fronted by ..., and so forth. It appears that all the fronts were hiding the fact that the building,

guards, and everything else is owned and operated for their own purposes by the Gulf Cartel. That's where David is, along with, we believe, four other of *El Chile's* victims."

"Who?"

"*El Chile* is the pet name used by the prison guards, as well as those in the Cartel's organization, for one Hector Rodriguez. Apparently, it's a joke based on the guy's penis and what he does with it. And, the effect it has on the people he does it to."

"Seems fitting."

"We have information that seems to indicate there are still a few overlooked political prisoners left there, as well. Probably in the high single digits, or low double digits."

"So, five to fifteen political prisoners, and five plain old kids who've been abused to distraction. Is that about right?"

"That sums it up," Red concluded.

"How do you plan to get them out, and what do you plan to do with them when they are out."

"The governor's given orders that the prison is to be shut down, and the building's been condemned. All the prisoners are to be removed into Gulf States Petroleum's Security Branch – us – for processing, and a detachment of *Federales* is standing by to do it tomorrow. I'm going to let Cara and Bud take care of sorting them out, and getting them to wherever they need to go, while I come home and fuck your brains out."

"Sounds like a plan. I assume you've got all the details filled in, per the usual highly efficient Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive operational methods," Doc concluded.

"Yeah, kick whomever you've got in my bed out, so I can crawl in between the sheets with you in a few days. By the end of the week, for sure, God willing and the creek don't rise."

That night, Bud and Red were curled up together in Red's hotel room, trying unsuccessfully to get to sleep.

Correction: Red was trying, but Bud was fidgeting. She couldn't stop her mind from going over the plans for tomorrow again, and again, and again.

“What’s wrong with you, tonight?” Red asked.

“I can’t stop thinking about tomorrow,” Bud replied.

Bud was curled up on her left side in a fetal position, with Red’s big frame wrapped around her from behind. Bud had her arms crossed over her chest, and her head rested on Red’s left upper arm. Red’s right arm crossed over Bud’s crossed arms, to cup her left shoulder with her right hand. Bud kept shifting her position because she couldn’t stay comfortable, and waking Red up.

“C’mon, just clear your mind, and it will all go away.”

“I tried, but I can’t,” Bud whined.

“I thought Suby taught you to meditate.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never been able to really stop my thinking for more than a few seconds. Why won’t you teach me the kind of Zen you and Doc practice?”

“What’s to teach? You know it already.”

“What do you mean? I don’t know *anything*.”

“Saying that indicates that you already know all there is to know. Suby taught you the basics of meditation, and that’s all there are – the basics. You learn them, and just practice, practice, practice. You had to learn basic physics, which is the next piece of the puzzle, and analytical thinking as part of your archaeology program at Harvard. We studied them together, remember?”

“So?” Bud challenged.

“So, you’ve gone on to get a good grounding in scholastic Zen – the third piece. You started right with Alan Watts, then went on to Lau Tzu, then Chuang Tsu. You’ve read Suzuki’s *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, and a few other classics. You’ve read the *Upanishads* to get a feel for Buddhism’s roots, and the Dalai Lama for current events, so to speak.”

“Yeah, but you keep pointing out that your practice involves understanding of higher math concepts.”

“What do you think all that stuff about fuzzy logic and chaos theory was for?”

“That was for our project. So I could understand what you were talking about.”

“We went far beyond just enough for you to understand what I was talking about. You really understand the subjects, now.”

“Well, yeah. Once I got the point, it turned out to be fun.”

“Now, you’re walking around with a copy of the *I Ching* in your briefcase. I’ll bet you’re using fuzzy logic to understand the hexagrams, and chaos to see how the hexagrams point the way from the present to the future, which is the whole point. You can’t get much more esoteric than that, girl!:

“Yeah, but I still can’t stop my mind so I can go to sleep.”

“Alright. Turn over here, and give me a hug,” Red ordered, straightening her knees so Bud could do so. Bud put her arms around Red’s waist, and pulled their bodies together so they lay there, eye-to-eye. The motion naturally left them with Red’s arms crossed behind Bud’s neck, and their breasts and bellies pressed together. Bud liked that. It felt like when they used to be lovers, years ago.

“Alright, now give me a long kiss,” Red instructed.

They pressed their lips together, each feeling the warmth of the other’s breath, and the softness of her lips.

It reminded Bud even more of when they were lovers. She compared kissing Red with her memory of kissing Doc. Bud felt that nobody kissed better than Red, but Doc did just as well. She tried to compare Suby’s kisses, but she was still sufficiently put out with him to make an honest comparison impossible. She compared Red’s kiss with Glen’s. Glen was more forced. That was it, Glen tried harder, whereas Red just let it happen. She would have to work with Glen to help him relax more about lovemaking. Bud wasn’t sure why he felt he had to try so hard. Maybe he was intimidated by her promiscuous past. He might feel outclassed experiencewise. She hoped that’s what it was.

Red broke off the kiss.

“Now, do it again, but this time kiss me like you loved me, and *nothing else mattered.*”

They kissed again, but this time, Bud felt Red’s warm, motherly lips, and the warmth of her body against Bud’s. She didn’t think about kissing Doc, or Suby, or Glen, or anyone else. She didn’t think about past exploits, or David Landry, or Padre Olvera, or the pirates, or underwater archaeology. She concentrated on feeling Red’s lips on her lips, Red’s breasts against her breasts, Red’s belly against her belly. She became aroused, but didn’t think about being aroused. She didn’t think about anything, just immersed

herself in the feeling of loving and being loved.

Soon, she found that they'd stopped kissing. Yet, she didn't start thinking again. It wasn't necessary. She smiled warmly, and turned over on her side again, curled up in a fetal position, and went to sleep. Red curled back around her, and went to sleep, herself.

33

The next morning, Padre Olvera sat with Red, Bud, Eve Salazar and Cara at a round table, eating a very nice breakfast supplied by the Gulf States Petroleum commissary. They were in a large temporary office in the Gulf States Petroleum local headquarters building in Tampico.

The office was large because it had had been converted from a conference room into an office to be shared by three visiting executives. It was temporary, because when the visiting executives ceased visiting, it would go back to being a conference room. The temporary sign outside the office read:

Gulf States Security
Judith McKenna, CEO

For readers confused by Red's sometimes being called "Judith McKenna," and sometimes "Mrs. Manchek," I'll explain that Red had decided to use her maiden name professionally, and adopt Doc's name socially. Her driver's license still read "Judith McKenna." To people who might meet her both socially and professionally, she introduced herself as "Judith McKenna-Manchek."

Her friends and associates knew who she was, and she didn't care if anyone else got confused. If anyone wanted to object, they could go pound sand for all the sympathy they'd get from Red.

Bud, for her part, had kept her maiden name because she couldn't take her husband's family name for the simple reason that he didn't have one. Like many Brahmins throughout history, he'd renounced his caste affiliation, and his family name along with it.

Doc found it all endlessly amusing.

At first, it tended to give Agent Vargas apoplectic fits. Then, he gave up and got used to it. He was getting used to dealing with these people who tended to put convention in a can, and then play kick the can.

Padre Olvera was of medium height for a Mexican male, which made him come up almost to Red's shoulder. Bud, too,

towered over him. Cara, who was about average for an American woman, he saw eye-to-eye, as he did Eve.

He was also of medium build, but on the thin side due to his ascetic diet. His was a poor parish, meaning that his parishoners were poorly fed. He would have been embarrassed to be a fat priest ministering to an emaciated flock.

He had reached a balding middle age. That is, he was bald as a cue ball from the top of his head down to an inch or so above his ears, but from there his salt-and-pepper hair reached to his shoulders. The hair was thin and straight, just tending to do a little flip up at the ends. His beard was neatly trimmed to a point to accentuate his long face. The beard covered, but failed to hide, the acne scars on his cheeks.

His eyes were at the same time intelligent and sympathetic, while exhibiting the ascetic's penetratration. All who engaged Padre Olvera in conversation got the impression their souls were an open book to him, which he read with sympathy. It was an interesting experience.

He was there to finalize plans for *after* they took over the prison, but they were starting out socially. He had come to know Cara well, but had only met briefly with Bud, and had never met Red at all. Eve's role was a total mystery to him, as she really wasn't part of the operation he and Cara had been setting up, and nobody had bothered to introduce the visiting TV news reporter.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for last night," Bud said to Red during a lull in the conversation.

"You're welcome," Red responded, simply. "You've entered a new world."

"Okay, what's with you two," Cara asked. "You're both sitting there pleased as punch with each other. What gives?"

Cara knew that they had formerly been lesbian lovers, and still often cuddled up at night together. She suspected the difference was that they'd taken the opportunity to renew their former relationship.

"Been bumping uglies in the night?" she accused.

"Cara," Red warned, "you'll embarrass Father Olvera."

It should be remembered that Red was raised Irish Catholic, and was quite familiar with, and appreciative of, the etiquette of dealing with Catholic priests.

"I, too, notice something different with Ms. Thompson," Padre Olvera agreed, "and am curious about what could have made

such a profound change. Please do explain. I will not be embarrassed.”

The Bud he’d met before had seemed to be an intense, almost driven, woman who possessed great intellect, was highly resourceful, but was on a mission that left no room in her mind for anything else. Yet, the Bud he sat next to at the breakfast table, was completely different. She still seemed possessed of great intellect, and great resourcefulness, and was still on a mission, but today – when Padre Olvera would have expected her to have her “game face” on – she was happy, smiling, and joking. Something had happened, and he was curious as to what.

“Okay,” Red began the explanation, “you asked for it.”

She took a deep breath.

“Bud and I are both Zen Buddhists,” she explained. “Bud complained last night that she has never been able to reach the final goal of Buddhist practice.”

“And what is that final goal?” Padre Olvera asked.

“We call it *satori*, in Zen practice,” Red continued. “Others call it enlightenment. But, both words fall short of expressing the concept.”

“Understand that Buddhism is not a religion in the way Catholicism is,” she put in as an aside. “It’s more like a self-help technique. In fact, most of the advice you find in self-help books is Buddhist technique in disguise.”

“I thought Buddhism was supposed to be a religion,” Padre Olvera prompted. He was familiar with Catholic literature describing Buddhism. He wasn’t sure if what he’d read was quite accurate, though.

“Buddhism, quite simply, is not,’ Bud jumped in, “but is typically allied with a real religion. Tantric Buddhism in India is allied with Hinduism. Tibetan Buddhism is very similar, but allied with traditional Tibetan beliefs. I met a Japanese Buddhist once, whose practice was allied with Shintoism. Zen was developed in China as a fusion between Buddhism and the Taoist religion. I suspect you already know all this.”

“Yes,” Olvera admitted, “but it has never been very informative to me.”

“That’s probably because Taoist beliefs are light years away from Catholic beliefs,” Bud resumed. “For example, Taoists leave off the concept of God. There is no creator, or creation. There is no separation between, say, God and man. They are both aspects of a

single thing called, simply ‘Tao.’”

“That echos the Catholic belief that God is everywhere,” Olvera countered.

“In truth, however, it is not at all similar,” Red rebutted. “It only seems so on the surface. But, I don’t want this to turn into a religious debate. Especially not about Taoism, because that is not the part of Zen we are interested in, now.”

“What, then, are we interested in, now?” Olvera asked.

“We are interested in the Buddhism side, which bears on what Bud was thanking me for.”

Cara, who was still convinced of the validity of her lesbian-sex hypothesis, wanted to hear how they would explain it as some kind of Buddhist ritual.

“This I gotta hear!” she said.

Ignoring Cara’s comment, Red continued: “Bud’s ex-husband ... ”

“The four-eyed piece of shit!” Bud interjected.

Giving Bud a severe glance, Red continued: “ ... who is also a Buddhist, taught her meditation technique. Between hanging around with me and my husband, Doc, as well as her own reading of Buddhist literature, she got a good grounding in the doctrine. The only thing missing was her ability to achieve *satori*. Last night, she complained that she couldn’t do it. She complained that she couldn’t sleep because she couldn’t stop the wheels spinning in her mind, which is what meditation is supposed to let you do. *Satori* is what happens when the wheels stop. Am I being clear?”

“Except for the fact that most people believe the wheels cannot be stopped,” Olvera pointed out. “They think at that point consciousness ceases.”

“Most people aren’t Buddhists,” Red countered. “We know it can be done, because we do it all the time.”

“To understand what happened next,” Red continued, “you have to know that what people, including Buddhists, often call ‘enlightenment,’ is more accurately called ‘awakening.’ The way Doc explained it to me, the real world is hidden behind a curtain. Awakening happens when the student peeks behind the curtain. When they do that, they achieve *satori*. That’s what Bud did last night.”

“But, she thanked *you* for it,” Olvera pointed out.

“Often, a student, when they are having trouble finally achieving *satori*, needs the help of a master, who provides a spark that triggers the event. She thanked me for providing the spark.”

“And what was the spark that you provided for Bud?”

“A kiss.”

“Hah! I knew it!” Cara exclaimed.

Both Bud and Red silenced her with a look.

Eve just sat back, taking it all in. Her relationship with Gwen was frankly and unashamedly lesbian, with no quibbling. She was also experienced enough to know that cuddling and kissing do not have to have anything to do with sex. Companionship is an entirely different dimension of human activity that is more often than not entirely unrelated to sex. Thus, she did not share Cara’s fascination with the idea of a lesbian relationship between Red and Bud.

“More accurately,” Red explained, “I had *her* kiss *me*.”

“Just a kiss?” Padre Olvera asked. He knew that a kiss was a very powerful act in Catholic lore, fraught with all kinds of symbolism that had nothing to do with sex. He was probing to find out what these self-professed Zen Buddhists understood about it.

“She told me to kiss her like I loved her, and that nothing else mattered,” Bud reported. “It made all the difference.”

“Is that the usual way of triggering this awakening?” Olvera probed some more.

“No, actually,” Bud explained. “It’s pretty unusual. But, it’s always unusual because the trigger is tailored to the student. Since no two students are alike, their triggers will be different as well.”

Turning to Red, she asked: “How did Doc do it for you?”

“He made me watch a candle,” came the reply.

“Candles don’t do much,” Cara pointed out.

“You’ve no idea what a candle can do under control of a Zen master,” Red responded. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it.”

“And, who did it for him?” Bud asked.

“Nobody,” Red replied. “You don’t need a master to achieve enlightenment.”

“Hunh?”

“This is getting pretty theoretical,” Red pointed out, “and persuing it would be impolite to our non-Buddhist friends here, so I’ll make this short: there are supposedly three types of buddhas; *samyaksambuddhas*, who achieve buddhahood through their own efforts and pass their enlightenment along to students; *pratyekabuddhas*, who achieve buddhahood through their own efforts, but keep it to themselves; and *sravakabuddhas*, who achieve buddhahood through training by a master. The third type gets all the press because all the literature is written to pass enlightenment on to them. Obviously, there have to be the first type, otherwise how would it get started? Siddhartha Gotama – whom most people think of as ‘THE Buddha’ – is the most famous one, today.”

“Doc *claims* to be the second type – he says he never takes on students – but their line always ends with them. They never leave any disciples, yet here we are. Doc passed it on to me, and I’ve passed it on to you. *Ergo*, he’s a *samyaksambuddha* master, no matter what he says. He’s running out of epistemological wiggle room. Someday, I’ll get him to admit it.”

Red returned to the story for the benefit of everyone else: “Last night, Bud was keeping me awake with her fidgeting ...”

“You were sleeping together?” Padre Olvera was surprised. He knew very little about these women, and nothing about their long history together.

“We often cuddle up at night,” Bud explained, not expecting understanding from her listeners, but not really caring, either. “We both have trouble sleeping without company.”

“She complained that she couldn’t stop her mind,” Red summarized. “So, I stopped her mind. She went to sleep. I went to sleep. End of story.”

34

“So, what’s supposed to happen today,” Eve jumped into the ensuing silence with what was uppermost in her mind. Then, to Padre Olvera, she said: “*Hola, me llamo es Eve Salazar. Soy una periodista de televisión en Estados Unis,*” and offered her hand for Olvera to shake.

“*Me llamo es Padre Francisco Olvera. Estoy feliz de conocerte,*” Padre Olvera responded, shaking the offered hand.

Seeing blank looks from Red and Cara, who, unlike Bud, were not fluent in Spanish, Eve explained: “We just introduced ourselves.” To Olvera, she said: “I guess we should be polite and speak English.”

“It would be best, I think,” he agreed.

“I’ve been covering the story of Bud’s adventures with the pirates practically since the beginning,” she explained further. “It’s beginning to look like a bigger story, though.”

Red interjected for Padre Olvera’s benefit, “At first, we just wanted to get even with *El Chile* for what he did to Bud, but then Doc pointed out what the cartel was doing to this whole country. In a sense, it’s not our fight, but while we’re doing something about *El Chile*, we can do a little to help out with your fight, too.”

“And, many of my viewers have strong ties with Mexico,” Eve added, “so your fight is their fight, and I want to report it. I think it is important for Mexican-Americans, and Mexicans *living* in America to understand how our gang and drug problems are connected with your problems down here. It also bears on our illegal immigration issue.”

“Yes,” Olvera replied, “from your point of view, it is a very complex issue. From our point of view, it is simple. We are fighting for our country against organized criminals who want to take it over. Our ancestors did not fight for independence only to have a new kind of usurper take over.”

“I’m not sure that it’s a new kind of usurper,” Bud opined. “I see little difference between a drug cartel and Emperor Maximilian. They’re both outsiders trying to take over. The only difference I see is that Maximilian’s thugs wore French uniforms.”

“Thank you for understanding so well,” Olvera replied. “Unfortunately, the drug cartels are better financed than Maximilian was. As hard as that may be to believe.”

“Now that you point it out,” Red said, “I see what you mean. You have a difficult fight. Frankly, we’re frightened that your fight may soon be our fight as well. That’s another reason we’re interested. As you can see, there are many reasons for us to help you all we can.”

“We are not, however, soldiers,” she continued. “Nor do we represent the United States government, or anyone else. It happens that I am able to tap the resources of Gulf States Petroleum, but that is an accident of my mother’s second marriage.”

“Of course,” Olvera speculated, “if the cartels win, it would be bad for the company.”

“Perhaps, but Mark, my stepfather, who owns Gulf States Petroleum, managed to do business in Colombia when they had the same problem with pretty much the same people. That’s why his facilities are so well guarded.”

“I notice that you are listed as the head of the company’s security forces,” Olvera pointed out to Red.

“Well, not exactly,” Red explained. “Mark’s security has always consisted of two arms. One arm protects the facilities, and includes both the typical guards you see walking around on the docks, as well as SEAL teams ready to undertake specific combat missions as needed.”

“The other arm consists of covert bodyguards specifically intended to protect Mark’s family,” she continued. “They openly perform the kind of duties needed to run any big household, such as chauffeurs, groundskeepers, and yacht sailors, but they are ready to swing into action at a moment’s notice, should anyone in the family be threatened.”

“We’ve recently organized this bodyguard service as a separate corporation, which is what I head. It makes keeping track of everything that’s going on a lot simpler: central paymaster, duty rosters, and that kind of thing. With my stepfather’s three houses, two yachts, and now me setting up with a house, two condos, and another yacht, it was getting to be an organizational nightmare. It incidentally makes it easier to mount operations like this.” She waved her hand around the room to emphasize the point. “When we decided to organize it formally, we moved the SEAL teams into it as well.”

“So, today we will be taking over a facility on Mexican soil, owned by Mexican nationals, and staffed by Mexican citizens – using American mercenaries?” Padre Olvera said, with a look of distaste.

“Absolutely not!” Red rebutted. “The Mexican National Defense Army is evicting the inhabitants of a building that a Mexican court has condemned. I thought you were aware of that. Gulf States Security is there to provide humanitarian aid to those we find there who need it. We’ll be moving them to a secure facility – here – where they can be cared for and protected while we, in

cooperation with the Mexican Federal Government, ascertain their identities, medical and psychological conditions, political status, *et cetera*.”

“That, my friend, is why *you* are here. The Catholic church has the personnel and equipment to take care of these people. We provide the facilities in our secure location, and you take care of *El Chile*’s victims. Basically, we provide a security umbrella under which you can provide the humanitarian aid that’s needed. Isn’t that what you and Cara have organized?”

“Well, yes it is,” Olvera said. “We just hadn’t discussed how we were going to get them out of the prison.”

“Ahhh!” Red exclaimed, “That’s what was bothering you. We have a habit – good or bad – of compartmentalizing. Each of us knows only what we need to know to do our jobs. We find it a good way to control confidential information.”

“In this case,” she continued, “it protects against leaks that could endanger lives. I don’t think we want anyone connected with the cartel to get wind of what we’re doing, when we’re doing it, who is involved, and, most of all, where the victims will be housed. We’ve gone to great lengths to keep this both legal and quiet. We couldn’t have done it without the help of a judge who is even more concerned about what the cartels are doing to Mexico than we – meaning the Anglos here – are.”

35

Col. Inigo “*El Lobo*” Berger was proud of his heritage. He inherited his odd – for a Mexican – surname from an ancestor who had come to Mexico a century and a half before as a mercenary in the employ of Emperor Maximilian. Josef, as this ancestor was named, was an idealistic young man, little more than a teenager at the time, who had received basic training in the Prussian army before yielding to the call of adventure in the New World, where Maximilian was in need of mercenaries to bolster his hopelessly outnumbered French garrison. Completely naïve about the situation in Mexico, Berger was disillusioned when he saw how much antipathy his employer met with from ordinary Mexicans.

Soon, he met and fell in love with a young Mexican girl of what would have been called a “good family.” Politically, they openly opposed the foreign emperor’s reign. Naturally, the father refused to let his daughter be courted by one of Maximilian’s mercenaries.

Fortunately, from Col. Berger’s point of view, the girl’s father was both perceptive, and devoted to his daughter. Seeing that his daughter really was in love with the young German, he granted Berger’s request for an audience to ask for the girl’s hand in marriage.

The father summarily refused the request, however.

When Berger asked why, the father told him. At length.

In fact, the audience lasted hours, and resulted in the father's realization that the young man had many sterling qualities, including intelligence, honesty, and a strong sense of right and wrong; that he really was devoted to his daughter; and he had known absolutely nothing about the situation when he joined Maximilian's forces.

On Berger's side, he learned from his prospective father-in-law just what was going on in Mexico at the time. He asked why the Mexican people so reviled Maximilian, and the father told him in detail, and in no uncertain terms.

Berger came away with a realization that the man he worked for had absolutely no business being where he was, so he deserted Maximilian, and volunteered for the forces of the legal Mexican President, Benito Juarez. That, of course, canceled his ticket for a ride home, so he never went back.

Berger and the girl were wed in a Juarista camp. The young man volunteered his services as an instructor, since he had some formal military training. While his training had not included knowledge of strategy or military history, what he did understand – how to obey orders, stand his ground in the face of deadly fire, coordinate his actions with others in his unit, and, most importantly, trust his fellow soldiers and be trustworthy to them – were the skills most needed by the peasants that made up the bulk of Juarez' army.

As the struggle went on, Berger gained a reputation for turning frightened farmers into effective footsoldiers.

The modern Col. Berger inherited his first name from the father whose perceptiveness won his daughter a devoted husband, and Benito Juarez a cadre of highly effective soldiers.

Inigo Berger earned the nickname *El Lobo* for his leadership, courage, resourcefulness, and fierce devotion to Mexican independence. His pursuit of those he considered enemies of the Mexican people was implacable.

The duty he was called upon to perform today was something both of his ancestors would be proud of. He was to strike a blow against foreign enemies who were trying to subjugate the Mexican people. These enemies came from all over Latin America, and beyond. They came not to govern, but to use his country as a staging area for their corrupt business.

To them, the Mexican government was simply a force trying to reign in their rapacity, and so they meant to sweep it away. They did not view the Mexican people as human beings with hopes, dreams, families, and needs – or rights. They thought of them as

brute animals to be bullied into slaving for them.

He was to work with volunteers – both Mexican and American – who shared his hatred for these enemies of his country. He saw the actions of these American volunteers as reflecting the actions of his ancestor Josef Berger, who came from a foreign country, and, out of a sense of what was right, volunteered to help the cause of people not his own.

This was going to be a good day.

He checked his uniform, which was spotless. It had been tailored to fit his tall, muscular frame perfectly. It was adjusted perfectly, with the epaulettes showing his rank laying absolutely straight on his shoulders. His hat sat perfectly straight on his head over the curly black hair. His dark sunglasses complemented his strong features and perfectly trimmed black mustache. His shoes were polished to a mirror shine.

The whole ensemble was calculated to instill in his troops a sense of pride in their corps, in their unit, and in the job they were asked to do. Like the peasant-soldiers his ancestor trained, they would know their duty, and would do it without question, relying on their officers for direction, and each other for support.

In his pocket was a copy of the court order condemning the old prison building. He also had a copy of his orders from his commanding officer to secure the building, and remove everyone inside. The inmates were to be placed in the custody of one Padre Francisco Olvera, who would take them to a facility set up behind the protective barriers of the Gulf States Petroleum compound for treatment.

The prison guards, whom he would be putting out of work, would be offered positions with Gulf States Security. Col. Berger doubted that prison guards formerly working for the Gulf Cartel would be of much use to the company, but he supposed that a guard was a guard. Besides, it would be better to have them guarding the docks where tankers loaded, than wandering the streets of Tampico looking for work – or trouble. Anyway, in a few hours they would be the problem of this Judith McKenna, CEO of Gulf States Security. What kind of woman could be head of an international security company was something he looked forward to finding out.

His job was to secure the building, turn the inmates over to the priest, and the guards over to the Americans. The building would then be demolished. What they would then do with the property he did not know.

Padre Olvera and Red McKenna knew. It was Red's suggestion, relayed by Cara, and enthusiastically embraced by Olvera. After the building was demolished, they would turn the grounds into a park. It would be a beautiful park filled with green grass, paved walks, and benches for sitting under beautiful trees and looking at wonderful outdoor sculptures, murals and mosaics. It would be

dedicated to the memory of a hero of Mexican culture, such as painter Diego Rivera. Red would personally start the building fund with a donation of two million dollars. Padre Olvera would raise additional funds, and oversee construction.

Its function would be to uplift, inspire, and educate the people of Tampico, not to oppress and intimidate them.

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“What we need you to do,” Manuel Sanchez told the assembled prison guards in Spanish tinged with a thick American accent, “is help us find and identify all of the inmates in this facility. We don’t care who they are, or what they did to get here. We’re taking them all out for medical examinations, then interviews to determine what to do with them.”

Sanchez was not Mexican. He was Mexican-American from East Los Angeles, California. He was second generation – his parents had gained entry to the United States as fruit pickers. They had managed to stay, and create a new life for themselves. Manuel had been born in the U.S., so he was automatically a U.S. citizen, no matter what his parents’ immigration status was.

With above average intelligence, he had done well in school, and had joined the U.S. Army as a way to get a college education, as well as to serve the country his parents had adopted. He had qualified for special forces training, and, following a distinguished career that took him to places he was not always allowed to describe while doing things he was not at liberty to discuss, left with an honorable discharge and a chest full of medals whose meaning was confidential.

He then found a very good paying private-sector job at Gulf States Petroleum doing pretty much what he had been doing for the Army. He worked directly for its CEO, Mark Shipton. Part of his duty included following Shipton’s stepdaughter around at a discrete distance to make sure nobody did anything to her that she might not like.

Now, he was taking orders from her, directly. This time somebody had been doing something she *really* didn’t like, and it was his job to help make sure he couldn’t do it ever again. This facility contained some of his victims, and they were rescuing them. Sanchez considered that to be a for-really-and-truly good thing. He’d seen some of those victims while gathering up these guards. He didn’t like what he’d seen, and considered stopping it to be one of the best things he’d ever done.

Red had made it clear that these guards were not the enemy. In fact, it had been one of them – he didn’t know which – who had put himself at risk to seek help for the victims. So, his job was to make them part of the solution, not part of the problem.

At the same time, there may be one or more of these guards who might not be so kind hearted and generous. He had to watch

his back.

“We need you to help move them to the waiting vehicles for transport to a temporary clinic set up at Gulf States Petroleum,” he explained to the gathered prison guards. “There will be a doctor and nurses from the Catholic hospital ready to take over. Our job today is to get them to that clinic safely.”

“You’ll notice that there are two uniforms here today beside your own: those of the Mexican army, and those of Gulf States Security. The Mexican army’s job is to secure the building and grounds, while our job is to secure the inmates.”

“Once we have all the inmates safely at the clinic, your jobs at the prison will be over. We’ll be meeting with each of you individually to discuss the possibility that you might want to work for Gulf States. There will be jobs for each of you, if you want them. If not, you’ll be free to seek employment elsewhere.”

Julio Azul was relieved that Padre Olvera had kept his promise to protect him. Clearly, nobody would ever know that it was he who had told the priest about the prison. These people all treated him exactly as they treated all the other prison guards. He had realized that saving these unfortunate prisoners would end his job and those of the other guards. He was gratified that these Americans were going to offer them new jobs where they wouldn’t have to be ashamed of what they were doing.

After the brief meeting with the American who spoke Spanish, they each sat down with a priest or nun to tell them everything they knew about the prisoners. Then, they started taking the prisoners out of their cells.

The prisoners were frightened and confused. It was better, however, since the guards had taken Julio’s advice to be kind to the prisoners as protection from the devils that inhabited their minds. In the few weeks they had been doing this, the prisoners had started associating the guards with kind treatment, and they were thus much easier to handle. They were, however, petrified by the prospect of leaving their cells. They knew that *El Chile* was outside, and feared he might come to torment them at any minute.

The tall, beautiful, blonde American particularly wanted to find the American boy. Julio led her to him. When the boy saw her walk into his cell, he recognized her immediately, and ran to her for protection. He clung to her, shedding tears.

“It’s okay, now, David,” she said. “I came back for you as soon as I could. I’m going to take you home with me where you’ll be safe.”

“Momma?” David asked.

“We’re going to go live with my Momma, David. She took care of me, and now she’s going to take care of you. It’s all over. You’re safe. He won’t ever be able to touch you again.”

Julio was amazed that the boy let her guide him out of his cell without needing any injection to calm him down. He was frightened when he saw the even taller redheaded woman, but accepted her when the blonde woman hugged her, and told him she was going to protect him as she’d protected her. She was going to be his new momma.

“Why am I not surprised that you brought home another stray kitten,” Doc asked, when Red showed up three days later with a sedated teenaged boy in tow.

Red had immediately put David to bed in a guest bedroom so he could wake up in a warm, comfortable place. Bud dragged a comfortable chair over next to the bed, to sit in for as long as it would take.

“You mean David?” Red asked in turn. “Where else does he have to go? His parents are both dead. He’s barely coherent. He has horrible nightmares, which frighten him even when he’s awake. We have to take care of him.”

“Doesn’t he have any relatives who could take him in?”

Red gave him a look as if he’d just proposed drowning a litter of newborn kittens.

“So, what’s your plan, oh golden-hearted one?” Doc asked.

“We’re going to adopt him.”

Doc goggled.

“Don’t look at me like that. You know we have to. We’ve plenty of room. We can take care of him until he’s better. Then, we can find a way for him to be useful and productive.”

“You mean, like, put him through college and teach him to be an accountant, after what he’s been through?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. It won’t be for that long. He’s seventeen now. He’s missed less than one year of school. We don’t know his personality or his capabilities, yet, but he can’t be too bad. His parents were successful enough to be able to take fishing-charter vacations, so he’s probably got something on the ball in there.”

“Right now, he has the personality of a frightened marmot, and any ball he had when he got captured has been thoroughly deflated.”

“He’s going to be all right. You’ll see.”

“Has Pat seen him, yet?”

“Does that mean we can keep him?”

“You make him sound like a puppy you picked out of a box a little girl had outside the grocery store.”

By this time, Red was actually getting worried that Doc would stop her from adopting the boy. This reaction was not what she’d expected.

“Doc, please!” she begged.

“Of course we’ll adopt him. I wouldn’t let him down any more than you would.”

“Then why have you been giving me all this crap? You had me worried.”

“I dunno. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I guess I wanted to know how serious you were about it. It is a big decision, but you’re right. We’re probably his best chance at a normal life.”

“If you can call anything around here ‘normal,’” Red said.

“I dunno,” Doc quipped. “You started wearing clothes in the house. I hear that’s normal, isn’t it?”

“So, really, what is your plan?” Doc asked again.

“We get him together with Pat, so she can evaluate his marbles. Assuming he still has all of them, we put together a plan for putting them back in order. Then, he has to finish growing up. It’s not like it’s forever. He’s seventeen. He’s got to finish high school, then think about a career. Three years from now, he should be on his own.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” Doc pointed out. “If you adopt a son, you’re going to get a son. You’ll have that son for the rest of your life.”

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“They have made a fool of you, *El Chile*,” Alejandro Escobedo said to Hector Rodriguez.

Rodriguez knew that Escobedo and the other leaders of the cartel disliked him. They disliked him because he was Cuban, while they were from “real” Latin American countries, like Colombia, and Venezuela. They especially didn’t like him because of his hobby of abusing boys and young men. It was something they found distasteful. The use of this dishonorable nickname was a way Escobedo had of pointing out this dislike.

He knew they put up with him, even sheltered him, because of his other special talent: he enjoyed inflicting pain and degrading torture on anyone. That made him an ideal instrument of vengeance whenever one was needed. A visit from *El Chile* to one who disobeyed taught others the advantage of doing what they were told.

Rodriguez was also an accomplished smuggler. He had gained their attention in the first place by coming into Tampico harbor on a long, hugely powerful speedboat, which combined the best qualities of a luxury yacht with those of an offshore racing boat. While keeping the surface appearance of the boat’s luxury interior, he had gutted everything that lay behind the facade to make room for whatever he wished to smuggle. The boat could motor out of the harbor looking like it was on a leisurely Sunday cruise, while carrying a load of cocaine worth many millions of dollars on the street.

He had organized a regular smuggling route between Tampico and several American ports, but mostly Miami, Florida. The boat’s distinctive mahogany hull was too recognizable to bring into any harbor – he knew that the American Coast Guard was on the lookout, and had alerted harbormasters up and down the Atlantic seaboard to watch for it – but he had no intention of taking it into any U.S. harbor.

Instead, he hove to at a predetermined location pinpointed by a GPS fix, where several smaller boats would rendezvous with it. They would carry the contraband, which was nearly always drugs, and almost exclusively cocaine, the last few short miles in to shore.

It wasn’t always drugs, however. Once, he’d ferried a small group of terrorists, along with a big load of explosives, to within three miles of the harbor mouth at Annapolis, Maryland. They were planning to drive cars full of explosives into American national monuments when they were crowded with tourists, and blow them up. He couldn’t understand what they were jabbering about, but he could tell by their hand gestures that they were bragging about what would happen to their bodies when the explosion happened.

He was not surprised to hear, three weeks later, that these idiots had been captured by the Americans’ Homeland Security

Department. Anyone deranged enough to want to blow themselves up was too stupid to live, anyway. Better to set the bomb and get out, yourself, before it blew. Then, you could go back and do it again!

He did admire, however, the people *behind* the terrorists, who could convince these idiots to turn themselves into strawberry jam voluntarily. Now *that* was a trick he'd like to learn!

Imagine being able to take those hollow shells he had left over after taking his pleasure out on the boys that once inhabited them, and, instead of locking them away in a refuse bin, watching them slowly cut themselves to pieces, and finally kill themselves.

That, however, was not the problem he had today. Today, he knew that if Escobedo came to believe he was no longer able to inspire fear in those the cartel needed to control, *he* would be the one being tortured to death. The problem with being valued for your imaginative cruelty was that the people who valued you were unimaginably cruel, themselves. He wouldn't put it past them to already know how to make one torture oneself to death.

He didn't like that. He was a sadist, not a masochist.

"They made a fool of you," Escobedo repeated. "This American woman – a *woman* no less – walked right into the prison building we gave you to hide your playthings in, and took them all away. Right from under your nose! She took away your guards, too, and gave them jobs guarding *her* facility in Tampico. Now, the government is tearing down the building, and that priest is planning to turn the ground into a park dedicated to *an artist!* What are you going to do about it?"

"I will destroy her!" *El Chile* vowed. "But first, I will kill her friends, and her children, and everyone and everything she cares about."

"You can't do that," Escobedo warned. "They are back in the United States. If you go on a rampage in Arizona, it will bring the U.S. government into this. Then, we'll have both the Mexican and American governments to contend with. Do you want *El Lobo* on your doorstep, with a battalion of *Federales* backed up by U.S. Marines? *We* don't want it. Find another solution."

Two days later, as Cara stepped out of Padre Olvera's church, her head was filled with the plans she and the priest had for the park that would fill the vacant lot where the prison had once stood. Most of the building was already gone, but a small part, including three of the cells, would be kept to serve as a reminder of what oppression was like. It would be a dark corner in a beautiful park filled with happy children running and playing amongst beautiful statues, mosaic patios, and muraled walls.

As usual, she had visited Padre Olvera at his Tuesday confessional. Cara wasn't a Catholic, had never been a Catholic, and had

no intention of converting to Catholicism. She did, however, enjoy visiting her friend in his confessional, just as she had when she'd first met him.

Perhaps it was nostalgia – she didn't really know why – but she especially liked their Tuesday evening talks. She'd even begun taking confession, telling him about her sins, which were mostly self doubts, feelings of helplessness, fears for the future, and such like. The fact that such problems were common among recovering morphine addicts did nothing to lessen the distress. Like everyone else, she was alone in her mind, so when the walls started closing in, they closed in on *her*. She found confessing to Padre Olvera could help.

Today, however, there were no walls. She still had some errands to run, so she left early, her head filled with her hopeful plans.

She stepped out of the church's huge front door, and turned left to cross the street. As she stood by the corner of the building, smiling happily while waiting for the streetlight to change, the ground jumped. At the same time, all of those beautiful stained glass windows blew out into the street.

She heard distant screams through shock-wave-numbed ears, and turned to look at the building. All the windows were in the street. Passersby had been cut by flying glass, and lay bleeding on the sidewalk. Smoke poured from the building. Concerned about her friend, she looked in to where his confessional booth had stood. It was gone. There was a small crater where it had stood. Padre Olvera was no more.

Dazed, she turned to a man trying to stop blood spurting from a cut in his leg. She saw a jagged piece of glass three inches long sticking out of the cut. Dropping her pocketbook, she knelt down to pull the glass out, and help him hold the wound closed.

"The past is footsteps in the snow," she told herself.

She tore the sleeve off her blouse, and used it to bind the cut on the man's leg.

"The future's but a probability field," she added.

Then, she comforted a boy while someone else tried to help his injured mother.

"Take care of what's before you right now," she reminded herself through her tears.

Thirty minutes later, she stepped into the church's ruined sanctuary, looking for some sign of her friend. She found the cross he always carried with him embedded in the wood of a shattered door.

He was gone.

“They killed him,” Cara sobbed into the telephone two hours later. “That nice little man, who only wanted to help. They killed him. All those people hurt and killed just to destroy one nice little man, who never did anyone any harm. All he wanted to do was build a park. They blew him up because he wanted to give the people a park!”

She burst into tears again.

“You have to come home, now,” came Red’s voice over the telephone. “They wanted to kill you, too. You’re alive because you left earlier than usual. It’s not safe. We have to get you out of there.”

Cara didn’t care that they wanted to kill her. She’d been through worse than being killed before, and had come out of it alright. Well, mostly alright. Right now, all she cared about was her friend who was no more. She put the telephone handset back on its cradle, and buried her face in her hands.

A few minutes later, Bud came in, gathered Cara up in her arms, and bundled her out of the room. They were *all* going home – for a while.

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“I should think you would want to cover those scars up,” the nice lady, who was a Congressional Representative from Rhode Island, said.

“I keep them visible to remind me,” Cara responded. “I’ve been a drug addict for two years because of that man over there.”

She pointed to the Emir, who stood off by himself, looking lost. Even the other representatives of Middle Eastern states had found something to do far away from him.

Even his brother was talking politics with the Saudi Sheik – out in the garden.

Surprised by the directness this young lady displayed, the Representative from Rhode Island didn’t know how to respond. She’d started talking to the beautiful young lady in the line at the buffet, while picking up another cucumber sandwich. They were especially good, here. After replenishing her plate, she’d kept up the conversation with the young lady. She’d started by

complementing her on her sleeveless dress, which was light blue chiffon. The only incongruous note was the strange scars marking the girl's arms.

The nice lady from Rhode Island mumbled something surprised about the barbarism the young lady's words implied.

"Yes," Cara continued. "He bought me from people who kidnapped me while I was vacationing in the Bahamas. When I refused to perform sex acts for him, he had me made into a morphine addict, so I'd cooperate better."

This was what she was there for. Red's father was throwing this big soiree to help Senator Bosley gather support for his committee on white slavery. Since the work had international implications, representatives of several foreign countries had been invited, including those in the Americas, Europe, the Far East, and the Middle East.

The Emir had come, hoping to improve his image by showing support for his old friend's committee. He did not expect that one of his former slave girls, Cara, would be there. He still didn't realize that it was Bosley who'd raised the money to buy Cara's freedom. In fact, he hadn't known that Cara was actually free. He'd thought she was safely tucked away in some brothel in New Jersey.

Her role tonight was to tell her story to everyone she could find.

Bud was also there to tell her story, as was David Landry.

David didn't talk much, though. He spent most of the time standing as close to Doc as he could, and looking scared. It was going to take a lot longer for him to heal than it had for Bud.

Gwen was there, also, regaling the Saudi Sheik and the Emir's brother with her version of the story.

"Yeah, the Emir started out asking one hundred thousand for her, but we got him down to twenty – and you've got him negotiating peace treaties!" she laughed. "You know what's funniest, though? We had half a million in the briefcase, just in case. If he was a good negotiator, he could have gotten it all."

The Saudi Sheik laughed. The Emir's brother did not. He saw the Sheik laughing, and made a decision. After Gwen had gone on to talk to others, he said – in Arabic – to the Sheik: "I'm afraid my brother has lost his ability to govern. We will have to make some changes."

The Sheik smiled, and nodded agreement.

“You have killed me,” the Emir told Gwen later. “My brother will have me assassinated and take over the country.”

“That was my plan,” Gwen explained, smiling. “Warn him to treat people better than you did, if he doesn’t wish to share your fate.”

Then, she walked away, satisfied with a job well done. It was something she’d wanted to do since seeing what he’d done to Cara. When she’d heard that the Emir might be coming, she’d dropped everything to attend the party, and complete this one task.

Doc had made sure that the former Mayor of Tampico had been invited, and had chartered a jet to make sure he got to Red’s stepfather’s Washington penthouse safely. Sr. Perez had been hiding out in Texas to avoid Gulf Cartel henchmen.

“I am afraid for my successor,” he told the Ambassador from France. “She has vowed to take the city back for her people, but the Cartel won’t want to let go. I’m afraid her administration will be cut short, violently. And, she really is a nice lady. She’s a former schoolteacher, you know. She’s also a very devout Catholic. She hopes her faith will protect her.”

“It didn’t help my friend Father Olvera,” put in Cara, who’d been standing quietly with them, listening. “He just wanted to create a park for Tampico’s citizens, and they blew up his church with him in it. They killed or wounded thirteen people in the process. I was there. I’d just been talking with him, and was outside the church when the blast went off.”

“In France,” the Ambassador said, “we consider this an American problem.”

“You should not,” Sr. Perez explained. “The Cartel’s aim is to flood the world with their cocaine, and destabilizing governments is how they work. They see any organized government as a threat. First, they hope to destroy Mexico, then the United States. How long before they come knocking at *your* door?”

“How can they destabilize the United States?” the Ambassador scoffed. “Nobody has ever even come close to doing that!”

“It has already started,” Sr. Perez informed him, “violent drug-related gangs are established in every U.S. city. You will know you are in trouble, too, when they start taking over the drug trade in Paris, if they haven’t already.”

“But, what can Europeans do?”

“Support Interpol’s efforts to suppress international drug trafficking,” Cara suggested, “and other illegal activities. Education is an especially important key. If people who think it’s fashionable to use drugs knew what monsters they were supporting, they might think better.”

“And what does a young girl like you know about international crime and criminals?” the Ambassador asked, pointedly. He was inclined to ignore the ravings of this spoiled American teenager, whom he assumed was there only because she was the daughter of an important guest.

“Probably not much,” Cara allowed. “Although, I was kidnapped in the Bahamas, then transported to” she named the Emir’s country “where I was kept as a slave for two years. They did this to make me more cooperative.”

She showed the Ambassador her needle scars. Unlike the Representative from Rhode Island, he recognized them for what they were.

“Then, Senator Bosley located me,” Cara continued, “and sent people to buy my freedom. When those people wanted to help other captives held in Mexico, I went there to help. That’s where I met Father Olvera, and learned about what the Cartel is doing down there. I now know how they operate. They’re like conquerors in the ancient world – they see something they want, and just go take it. They start by following the drug trade, then they take over everything. In towns around Tampico, they even monopolize liquor traffic. The bottles have little stamps on them, like excise stamps on liquor bottles in the U.S., except that they’re issued by the cartel, and the cartel collects the revenue. They set themselves up as an alternative government, but with no constitution and no laws, except the rules they want *other* people to follow.”

“But, how can that affect Europe?” the French ambassador asked, realizing his mistake.

He meant, of course: how can it affect France?

“Do you remember the Nazi occupation in the 1930s?” Cara asked. “Do you have drug addicts in France?”

The Ambassador just clamped his lips together. He immediately saw her point.

“You see,” Sr. Perez said, “this is a problem for governments all over the world.”

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Doc, however, was not talking about geopolitics. He was schmoozing a group of Japanese dignitaries about how automation and robotics could be used to fight international crime.

“In Mexico, for instance,” he told them, “we use satellite imaging combined with automated real-time database analysis to monitor drug smugglers. The three Ds of robotics – what engineers use to determine if a particular application can be helped by automation – are ‘Dull, Dirty, or Dangerous.’ There are few tasks in international drug interdiction that don’t make a hit on at least one of those, with dangerous being number one, and dull being number two. By using remote imaging, we can avoid putting human agents on the ground at risk watching suspect facilities.”

“But, automation can only be used to gather information,” Dr. Fujimori pointed out.

“Well, ‘can only’ is putting it strongly,” Doc answered. “We avoid letting automated systems take action on their own because we want to keep human judgement in the loop. We like to have a human with his finger on the trigger so that he can refuse to fire if he chooses. We don’t trust automated systems to make life-or-death decisions. It’s too final.”

“Restraining criminals, however,” he speculated, “might be another option, or use of non-lethal force. I don’t think the technology has been very well developed, though.”

“Why is that,” Fujimori asked.

“It’s harder,” Doc pointed out. “It’s easy to kill someone, or blow something up. Disabling someone with a minimum of trauma is much harder.”

“Why is that?” a man to Fujimori’s left asked.

Doc suspected that the asker actually knew the answer, but was asking for effect. Probably trying to look good in front of his boss.

“To kill, or destroy,” he answered, “requires only that you do *enough* damage. There’s no such thing as too much. They don’t get any deader than dead. If that’s your goal, all you have to do is make sure you do more than enough damage. To disable without doing permanent damage is much, much harder. You have to control both the quantity and quality of the damage. There’s also fitting the damage to the situation, because what may be right in one situation, may be way too much, or not nearly enough, in another.”

“But,” he continued, “for now, the systems we’re developing are mainly used for gathering information, which is what my company is best at, anyway, and we almost always have a human in the loop, somewhere.”

“Why is that?” the man to Fujimori’s left asked again. He was getting annoying, but Doc hadn’t yet decided he was doing so

on purpose, so he tried to answer. Besides, he was giving Doc openings to continue his sales pitch.

“Because it’s humans who ultimately want the information. The machines just do what they’re told. They don’t actually care about any of it.”

“For example,” he continued, “that tall blonde over there ...” he indicated Bud standing at the buffet on the other side of the room “... is an archaeologist. She uses ROVs – remotely operated vehicles – to map underwater shipwreck sites. So, she cares about what she sees and finds. We program the ROVs with sophisticated navigational software that allows her to concentrate on what she’s looking at, rather than the details of piloting the vehicle, but she’s in constant communication with it because *she* cares what it does. It doesn’t.”

“I’ve heard that you’ve developed a special user interface for communicating with your robots,” Fujimori prompted. This was why he was in the conversation in the first place. He wanted to know about the software from the source.

“Actually,” Doc corrected, “it was developed by one of our suppliers, Robotic Concepts in Santa Clara, California. We’ve developed some enhancements and adapted it for underwater and aerial vehicles, but the framework was developed by Greg Michels at RC. He designed it initially a couple of years ago for piloting their Worm-class robots. They’re the ones used all over the place for exploring crime scenes and disaster sites. They’re regularly featured on that crime-scene investigation TV show. We do a lot of application development for them.”

“It’s called ‘verbal programming,’ and it allows the operator to direct the robot in real time, just like a handler working with a dog. Advances in microprocessor technology have allowed these robots to achieve intelligence almost at a dog’s level. They’re starting to show signs of independent volition. For example, they can complain that their batteries are getting low, and even decide to go find their charging station to recharge without being told to. That’s what I consider a key level. If they can feed themselves, they’re not too stupid to live.”

“So, you’re suggesting these robots are becoming life forms?” Fujimori asked, doubtfully.

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call them ‘life forms.’ I think we’re going to have to clarify what we mean by ‘life’ very soon. These robots are beginning to achieve a level of sentience, though. They certainly are capable of goal-directed behavior. It’s a short step from there to defining their own goals, such as wanting to keep their batteries charged, and avoiding being run over by a truck.”

“Why would you program a robot to avoid being run over by a truck?” the man to Fujimori’s left asked, suddenly coming alive with a real question. “I thought one of the advantages of these mobile robots was that they are expendable.”

“They are expendable from the point of view that humans are *not* expendable. Humans complain when you tell them to go on a suicide mission. Robots don’t. I think we’d like to keep it that way. Robots are, however, very expensive, so we want to make sure they don’t get wasted. It’s the difference between a weapons platform and a missile. We like to keep the weapons platform around for re-use. Certainly, we want our expensive ROVs to avoid fatal accidents.”

“You really do speak of them as if they were alive,” Fujimori pointed out.

“You should come down to our robot-development facility in Scottsdale, Arizona,” Doc suggested. “Our chief robot wrangler, Gwen Petersen, can give you a demonstration that will – what is the phrase? – ‘blow your socks off.’ You’ll see what I mean about state-of-the-art robot intelligence, and why we tend to treat them as if they were alive. How long do you plan to be in the ‘States?’”

“I plan to fly back to Yokohama next week, but I would very much like to see your demonstration.”

“Gwen was here, but has already left to go back to Scottsdale, or I’d introduce you. We are planning to fly Sr. Perez back to Texas tomorrow. Perhaps, if you’re available, you could go along, then take the plane on to Scottsdale. Our facility is right on the Scottsdale Airport flight line. In fact, it’s right next to the charter service’s hangar. Hmm, before I get too free with the seats on the plane, how many people would you want to take with you?”

“Myself and Masada San would like to see your demonstration. How long would it take?”

Masada was the annoying man standing to Fujimori’s left.

“We could probably get you back here late in the evening. It’s a long flight, though. I’d estimate six hours from here to Scottsdale, with a stop off at Brownsville to drop Sr. Perez off. Then, probably four or five hours back, depending on weather and the jet stream. It’s a ten place aircraft, and Sr. Perez’ party numbers four, so there’ll be plenty of room. Or, if you’d rather stay over in Scottsdale, we can do that, too. If you really want to do it, I’ll set it up.”

“Yes, I would like that very much,” Fujimori said. “Unfortunately, we have a meeting planned for the day after tomorrow, so we cannot stay the night. You are sure you can get us back here tomorrow night?”

“Let me just double check,” Doc said.

He pulled out his cellphone, and speed-dialed a number. “Glenn?” he said into the instrument. “This is Doc Manchek. Do we have room for a couple more passengers on the flight to Brownsville tomorrow? ... We’ve friends from Japan who would like a quick

ride on to Scottsdale and back. They need to be back by midnight.” He looked up at Fujimori to make sure that was okay. Fujimori nodded pleased assent. “Good. They’ll probably need to be at the SST hangar for about two hours. I’m figuring six hours going West, two hours in Scottsdale, and four hours coming back. Will that work with the jet stream, and the stop in Brownsville? ... Good. What time do you plan to take off? ... Nine o’clock sounds good. It’ll give them a three-hour float in case something goes wrong.”

To Fujimori, he asked: “How about tuna sandwiches for lunch on the plane. Then, what would you like for dinner on the way back? Filet mignon? Prime rib? Or, maybe some Atlantic salmon?”

“Prime rib for me,” Fujimori said.

“I would like the salmon, if it’s not too much bother,” Masada asked.

“No bother at all,” Doc said. “Unless you’d like something else. Those were just suggestions.”

“Actually,” Fujimori put in, “I’d prefer something Italian, like spaghetti and meatballs. If you don’t mind.”

“They’re going to cook it up specially for you, so you can have anything you want.”

Into the cellphone, Doc said: “Put on an assorted sandwich plate for lunch. Then spaghetti and meatballs with meat sauce for one dinner, then salmon ...” He looked up to Masada to make sure he didn’t want to change his order, too. Masada nodded assent. “ ... for the second. Thanks. Talk to you later.”

“Now, let’s get you to the plane. Where are you staying?”

“At the Watergate,” Fujimori said.

Doc looked around for Red to see about organizing transportation for the Japanese.

She was nowhere to be seen. She’d decided that Judy and Mike were cocktail-partied out. They’d started getting cranky, and Maryanne was looking frazzled. Red had sat Maryanne down with a glass of white wine, and taken the kids up to put to bed. Senator Bosley could just do without her support for a while.

Instead, Doc spotted Bud, who was taking over more and more of Gulf States Security day-to-day operations, anyway. She was still not far away, and he called to her, waving one arm for her to come over. She walked over carrying a sparsely loaded dinner plate from the buffet.

“Bud, we want to get Dr. Fujimori and Masada San out to Scottsdale tomorrow so Gwen can demonstrate Worm programming to them. I’ve been assuming that’s all doable. We’ve got them flying out with Sr. Perez tomorrow at nine o’clock, then taking the plane on to Scottsdale. I’m not sure when they’ll be back – sometime between nine in the evening and midnight. They’ll need a ride from the Watergate to the airfield, and back. And, somebody has to call Bonnie to set up the demo. Gwen’s on her way back, now, so Bonnie can fill her in tomorrow morning.”

“Darrell has the black stretch taking Perez to the airport,” Bud said, thinking out loud. “Alex can use the white one to pick up Dr. Fujimori and Masada San. Do they need extra security?”

“Shouldn’t. It’s a business trip.”

“I’ll have Matt ride along, anyway. You call Bonnie to set up the demo, since you know what you want them to see.”

Bud stepped away to make her call on her cellphone, while Doc speed dialed Bonnie’s personal number.

“Sorry to disturb you, Bonnie,” he apologized. “We just found some friends from Japan who’d like Gwen to demo Walter tomorrow afternoon. Is she available? ... It’s important. ... Yeah, more important than that. ... They should appear about one or two o’clock your time at the executive hangar. We’ll have fed them on the flight out, but they might want coffee and donuts. Have Gwen start with the standard overview, then expect to *ad lib* from there. ... About two hours, but they can go longer without blowing the schedule. I wouldn’t want to see it go past three hours, though. ... Then bundle ‘em back on the plane so they can get back here at a reasonable hour. ... Okay. Thanks. And, once again I’m sorry to disturb your evening, but we just met them at Bosley’s soiree, and they’re on a tight schedule, themselves.”

40

“Walter was our first Worm robot,” Gwen explained to Fujimori and Masada. “We built him to explore an abandoned and partially collapsed mine, then to investigate a crime scene three hundred feet underground.”

“What was the crime?” Masada asked for no apparent reason, except morbid curiosity

“I believe you met Ms. McKenna – the tall redhead – at the party last night. She’s Doc’s wife. Her father was murdered a dozen years ago. We used Walter to locate the body.”

“So, this is definitely proven technology,” Fujimori probed.

“Oh, yes,” Gwen assured him. “It’s being used by agencies all over the world. There are several dozen Worms in police and fire departments, and more being deployed every day. The Verbal Programming software is running all kinds of remotely operated vehicles, as well as fixed robots. There are over a hundred VP users worldwide. Again, more are being deployed every day.”

Gwen launched into her standard demo, showing how Walter could be guided in real time by simple verbal commands, and progressing to more complex commands, and then showing how he could be sent off to perform complex tasks on his own. She ended the demo by showing both Fujimori and Masada how to teach Walter new commands, themselves.

“Do you always have to train him to recognize your voice?” Fujimori asked.

“No, he will respond to commands he already knows from anyone, but we don’t want him learning new commands except from authorized users. Training him on your voice patterns is part of the authorization process. We don’t want him responding to just anyone. There are also different authorization levels allowing you to tell him to do certain things. It’s a protection for him as well as anyone around him. I, for example, would be able to program him to go on a shooting spree, but we wouldn’t allow just anyone that kind of access.”

“How difficult would it be to hack his systems?” Masada wanted to know.

Suspiciously, Gwen responded: “No system is really hacker-proof. We have, however, built in various security layers an unauthorized user would have to navigate through. Then, Walter would use his own judgement about whether to accept a command.”

“How does that work?” Masada asked.

“I’m not really at liberty to say,” Gwen responded suspiciously. People often asked these kinds of questions, but Gwen was always on guard about *why* they were asking.

“Let’s just say that Walter has various ways of verifying your identity. He doesn’t like to talk to strangers.”

“Ahhh,” Fujimori intoned.

“Do you have a specific need, or are you just gathering information for future reference?” Gwen asked.

“Yes, we do have a specific need,” Fujimori said, “but I’m not yet at liberty to explain it. My company will be evaluating my

report when I get back, and then we will get in touch with you about what we're looking for."

"I understand, but the more information you provide us, the better we can help you evaluate our technology," Gwen pushed. "Perhaps if we signed mutual non-disclosure agreements, that would make it easier. We work with many clients on highly confidential projects. That includes the U.S. Central Intelligence and National Security Agencies, as well as the Department of Homeland Security, and of course all the military branches. We also work with many commercial corporations who have intellectual property concerns. Let me give you a list, as well as a writeup on our robotics technology."

She stepped over to a cabinet set up in the hangar's office area, and pulled out a multi-page list of featured clients, an SST brochure describing VP software capabilities, one from Robotics Concepts describing the Worm robots, a more detailed document describing mobile robot technology, a ten-page white paper on mobile robots, another similar white paper on vocal programming, and a general backgrounder on SST's capabilities.

"These should answer most of your questions about our company and the robotics we're working on. This is all public record, so feel free to copy it and distribute it to your engineers and managers as needed. Here's my card."

She presented her business card to each of them in the correct formal Japanese way, holding it in two hands so that it was right side up for them to read, and bowing.

"Is there anything else I can do for you? Have you any other questions?"

Fujimori looked at Masada. They made eye contact and seemed to come to a common decision.

"Yes," Fujimori said. "I understand that you have applied verbal programming to underwater applications. Can you tell us a little more about that?"

"Yes, we have applied VP to underwater applications. In fact, you may have met Cheryl Thompson at the party last night. She's a rather tall, blonde woman. She is an archaeologist and has been using VP-controlled submersibles for a couple of years to map underwater archaeological sites."

"Yes, we met her briefly," Fujimori recalled. "But we did not speak with her about her archaeological work. She seemed to be managing security people."

"Ms. Thompson is on temporary leave from her research to help organize some things in Mexico. Ms. McKenna and I have

worked with her to make the underwater navigation interface particularly user friendly. We can't demonstrate it here in the desert very well, but we use virtually the same software to control unmanned aerial vehicles – UAVs – which we fly here quite often. If you have some more time, I can show you how that works.”

“Certainly. Please do,” Fujimori said. He shot an especially pleased look at Masada, who responded in kind. Gwen caught the glances, and figured that the UAV software was what they were really interested in, but for some reason didn't want to actually mention it.

Having experience manipulating people's perceptions, herself, Gwen was difficult to put something over on. It's one reason Doc had wanted her doing the demo, rather than one of the other engineers.

Gwen led them over to a triangularly shaped object on the floor near the hangar wall. It was about three feet high, fifteen feet wide and about the same long. No more detail could be seen because it was covered by a tarpaulin.

“This is Angela,” Gwen said, pulling the tarpaulin off to reveal a small, delta-winged aircraft. “She's a jet-propelled experimental UAV. And this,” she said, pulling another tarp off a tall box-shaped object with a desk built onto one side, “is her control console.”

Gwen flipped a switch on the control console, and it began a typical computer startup routine. “It takes a while for the console to boot up,” Gwen pointed out, “but that is a function of the Linux operating system we use.”

“I thought you need a real-time operating system to control a UAV,” Fujimori said, in surprise.”

“Yes, and no,” Gwen replied cryptically. “For minute to minute control, we need the RTOS, and Linux can be set up for real time operation, but Angela flies herself, so we don't really need real-time communication. We do have a backup manual-piloting mode, which does operate in real time, but we generally communicate verbally over a link with higher latency. That's what we're waiting for, now.”

“I see,” Fujimori said.

“There it is,” Gwen said when a rectangular dialog box appeared at the center of the large flat-panel display. The box said “Scottsdale System Technology UAV Operator Interface,” and gave five options: Start Up, Verbal Mode, Manual Mode, Diagnostic Mode, and Shut Down. Gwen poked the space marked “Start Up” on the display.

“We use soft keys on a touch-screen for most non-verbal command inputs,” she explained. “Start up automatically turns on the real time systems, does diagnostic checks, fires up the aircraft, and puts the system in verbal programming mode.”

Various lights blinked on the aircraft, and a picture looking at the hangar door appeared on the display. Then a warning sign appeared overlaid on the screen in bright, reddish-orange letters:

“WARNING: PLEASE OPEN HANGAR DOOR AND POSITION AIRCRAFT FOR ENGINE STARTUP”

Gwen opened the hangar door, then picked up a small towbar next to the aircraft, attached it to the nosewheel, and pulled Angela out of the hangar, turning her so her jet nozzle pointed parallel to the hangar door, instead of facing into it. As she did this, the display showed what she was doing from the aircraft-nose’s perspective.

The display changed to:

“AIRCRAFT PROPERLY POSITIONED. THANK YOU.”

While Gwen removed the towbar, and returned it to its position on the floor next to the control console, Angela’s jet engine fired up. Gwen then went over to the control console desk, and put on a wireless headset with a microphone positioned near her mouth.

“Angela, wake up,” she said.

“Good afternoon, Gwen,” a sultry female voice announced from the console’s loudspeaker. “It looks like we have excellent flying weather this afternoon. What would you like to do?”

“The aircraft mentioned the weather to let me know that she’d already picked up a weather report, and evaluated flight conditions,” Gwen explained, carefully avoiding saying the aircraft’s name. Saying the name alerts VP controlled robots that what follows is a command.

“Angela, make preparations for three touch and goes in the traffic pattern,” Gwen ordered.

“Okay, Gwen. I’ll call the tower and ask permission to make three touch and goes in the traffic pattern, perform the touch-and-goes, then return here.”

“Angela, no. Angela, after you make three touch and goes, exit the traffic pattern and enter the holding pattern over the

McDowell Mountains.”

“Yes, Gwen. I’ll call the tower and ask permission to make three touch and goes in the traffic pattern, perform the touch-and-goes, then exit the traffic pattern to enter the holding pattern over the McDowell Mountains.

“Angela, that is good to go.”

“Scottsdale Ground Control, this is UAV ‘Angela’ uniform three niner niner six xray requesting permission to taxi to the active runway for immediate takeoff,” came Angela’s voice over the loudspeaker.

“She’s calling in to the airport’s air traffic control system,” Gwen explained to the two men. “We’re monitoring it because we want to.”

“UAV ‘Angela’ uniform three niner niner six xray, this is Scottsdale Ground Control,” came a metallic sounding male voice. “Proceed immediately to runway three, and turn to tower frequency one one niner point niner.”

“This is UAV ‘Angela’ uniform three niner niner six xray. Thank you Scottsdale Ground Control.”

Fujimori stood transfixed. He had never heard a UAV communicating directly with air traffic controllers before. It was always a human UAV pilot at the ground station who did it.

Seeing his look, Gwen laughed: “It took us months of meetings to develop this script, so that the UAV could talk to ATC herself. This is, of course, totally experimental both on our part and with the FAA. No other tower is set up to do this, but it’s working here. Hopefully, they’ll let us install it elsewhere. It’s mainly a question of training the ATC folks to use VP formats when talking to the UAV. If we have our way, it’ll become standard operating procedure, and we’ll have a leg up on supplying the software for *all* UAVs.”

During this conversation, Angela taxiied away from the hangar. The display changed to five windows: the top center looking forward, the bottom center looking aft, the right looking to starboard, and the left to port. The fifth panel appeared across the bottom, showing digital readouts of all Angela’s flight instruments.

When Angela reached the runway’s runup area, she turned to aim her cameras so Gwen could check all the panels for traffic.

“Gwen, I see no potentially interfering traffic.”

“Angela, I concur. Angela, GO.”

“Scottsdale Tower, this is UAV ‘Angela’ uniform three niner niner six xray, ready for departure on runway three. I will be making three touch and goes in the pattern, then exiting to the East.”

“UAV ‘Angela’ uniform three niner niner six xray, you are cleared for immediate takeoff. Squawk one four seven zero. Have a good flight.”

The four panels showed Angela taxiing onto the runway, then accelerating straight down it for about a hundred feet, during which time she picked up speed rapidly. Then, she nosed up into the air briefly, then leveled off to accelerate over the runway, gradually gaining altitude as well as speed until she seemed to be several hundred feet above the runway.

At the end of the runway, she nosed up to pattern altitude, and started a gentle bank to the left. She then straightened out for a minute or so, then banked left again. On the left display panel, Gwen and the two men could see her progress along the runway on the downwind leg of the traffic pattern. She went past the end of the runway, and banked left, again. They could hear the whine of Angela’s jets drop in volume as she powered back to make her approach for the first touch and go. Angela then made a much gentler turn to make her final approach. She descended nose-high to touch down on the runway, then accelerated again to take off.

She repeated the procedure two more times, then called the tower, again: “Scottsdale Tower, this is UAV ‘Angela’ uniform three niner niner six xray departing the pattern to the East. Have a nice day.”

The displays showed Angela climbing rapidly, then leveling out over some mountains. She then started making slow circles around one of the peaks.

“Gwen, this is Angela, I’m now in the holding pattern over the McDowell Mountains.”

41

“It worked out great,” Doc effused over the telephone a few days later. “The Japanese want to license the UAV technology, and distribute it throughout the Far East. They’ll use our software, and install it in their hardware platform. Part of the license will include specifications on the hardware, so they can’t put our software aloft in a crappy UAV, and give it a bad name.”

“It seemed like they were mainly interested in the UAV,” Gwen responded. “Masada turned out to be a UAV pilot. Fujimori is a

corporate exec. They were obviously really here to see if our ROV technology could be applied to UAVs. When they found out we'd already done it, they went ga-ga over Angela."

"Masada wanted to fly her," she continued, "but he started out trying to give too-detailed commands. When I explained that he only had to give her mission goals in terms she could understand, he acted like a kid with a new train set. The guy's actually a pretty good aerobatics pilot. He picked up VP programming fast, then taught Angela aerobatics maneuvers I'd never heard of. You know what a 'Cuban Eight' is?"

"Yes, Gwen, I do," Doc replied, patiently. "If you want, I'll teach it to you, sometime. In fact, maybe you need an aerobatics certification."

"Oh, yeah," Gwen said, abashed at having forgotten Doc's piloting skills. She mainly saw him doing cross country flights and basic test maneuvers. He almost never flew UAVs, and when he did, he was timid without the "seat of the pants" feedback he was used to. "Of course you do. Anyway, we went over your three-hour maximum, but they both wanted to keep going. They said they could sleep on the flight back to D.C."

"We're going to give you a commission on everything we sell to their company under the licensing agreement," Doc informed her. "How's it feel to be a rich woman?"

"I don't know, yet," Gwen said, honestly. "I'll tell you when I start cashing the checks."

"Better get your passport up to date, they want you to go over to Japan, and help them set up the software, and develop a training program. Their idea is to market the things to local, regional, and national governments all over the Far East. They'll build the hardware locally to our specs. English is standard for ATC systems all over the World, so the commands won't need to be changed. The main problem will be translating the manuals, and training their ATC folks."

"Do they already have a UAV with the necessary brains?"

"They're buying one of ours to help kick start their development program. They wanted Angela, but I told 'em Betty would be a better choice."

"Who's Betty?"

"The next UAV we commission. I want 'em to have a new plane with low time on the engine and airframe. I told 'em that

Angela's just a prototype, and that Betty incorporates all the stuff we learned from testing Angela. They seemed pleased."

"How much did you sell the plane for?"

"I told 'em it was worth \$2.5 million, but we'd give it to 'em for free as part of the licensing package. They loved it."

"So when do I tell my wife I have to go to Japan," Gwen asked, "and for how long?"

"They wanted you and the plane there in two weeks, but I told 'em Betty wouldn't be ready for three. You're to go over a week earlier to start setting things up. Start 'em off with the simulator, then they'll be ready to hit the ground running when Betty gets there."

"Any idea how long they want me on site for?"

"They want permanent, but I'd rather see you training a local to take over for you. It'd be better for everyone. They have some very bright people over there, who can do the job better than a *gaijin* who doesn't speak a word of Japanese, or know anything about their customs."

"Hey, wait a minute," Gwen said, miffed. "I know a little about their customs, and know some Japanese."

"Not enough, Honey," Doc said, using Eve's pet name for her. "It takes a lifetime of study, and then you'd still be a *gaijin*. Best to put the whole program in the hands of a hand-picked local. I think Fujimori will agree."

"Besides, we need you here. You've got a degree to finish as well as more advancements to think up. I don't want them short circuiting that. They only want you there so they'll have someone to point fingers at if anything goes wrong. You can serve that purpose in a couple of months. So, I'd expect to stay there for two weeks, at least – better make that three – then shuttle back and forth for another month or two. I'll try to find a local manager to be liason after that. Then, you can come home to spend your commission checks."

"Would there be a problem if Eve came along to do a series on, say, technology transfer to the Far East?"

"No, I was going to suggest it," Doc agreed. "Let me know how the Japanese react to your bringing your wife along on a trip. That oughta be a hoot!"

"Is that some sort of heterosexual harassment?" Gwen asked, not entirely kidding. "Watch it fella."

“Not intentionally so,” Doc said. “The Japanese are actually a very traditional society, despite all their posing as techno geeks. I think they’ll have trouble dealing with a woman engineer, let alone one married to another woman. I’m curious about how they’ll react. I’m sure they’ll be polite about it, but you may be able to get some feedback about what they’re thinking. I’m curious, that’s all.”

“You mean there aren’t *any* women engineers, there? I find that hard to believe.”

“Oh, there are women engineers, and scientists, and so forth. There just aren’t very many. Highly intelligent women are highly regarded, but most Japanese men don’t quite know what to think of them. They end up being *expected* to be non-conformists. Fujimori and company will give you a great deal of respect, and may go overboard being deferential. Bringing Eve along openly as your wife will probably be viewed as an eccentricity that may actually make them *more* comfortable with you. I dunno. That’s why I’m curious.”

42

“It may be time to blow up your boat,” *El Lobo* told Doc over the speakerphone in the library. “One of our agents overheard Alejandro Escobedo warning Rodriguez that the Cartel was unhappy with him after the prison shut down. They think Señora McKenna made a fool of him. That’s probably why the church was blown up. Now that you and the American DEA have been harrassing his shipments, they’re going to be even more angry with him. It is time to terminate him.”

“Instead, let’s make it worse,” Doc suggested. “We’ve been taking down less than half of his shipments. Let’s start taking down *all* of his shipments. That’ll do two things: it’ll convince the Cartel that he’s a worthless screw up, and it’ll put a dent in their finances. Do you agree?”

“Yes, but it will do a third thing: it will make you and your wife his number one enemies. He will blame you for all of his problems, since he has no idea where the trouble is coming from, and you are already at the top of his enemies list. Our agent reported that Rodriguez specifically singled Señora McKenna out to blame for the prison. He will probably blame her for wrecking his smuggling operation, and he is vindictive. He has already threatened to attack your family. Do not take the chance. Kill him now, before he can do any more damage.”

“Red, what do you think?” Doc asked her.

“I said I wanted to introduce him to Hell, *then* kill him. I still want to do that,” she replied.

“So, you don’t think he’s been through enough, yet?” Doc asked to confirm.

“No. I like your idea of twisting the knife before letting him die.”

“Okay,” Col Berger capitulated. “But, I have warned you.”

“Are you sure you can tell whether a particular run will be a drug run,” Berger went on, “rather than a pleasure cruise, or something else?”

“It’s pretty easy to tell, at this point,” Red explained. “Basically, he starts his drug runs in the late morning or early afternoon. It takes half a day at *Strange Brew*’s top speed to reach their rendezvous point off Miami. I’m amazed these guys still use that port. It seems so obvious, and the DEA has so many assets surrounding the place. They could go in through, say, St. Petersburg, or Sarasota with half the trouble.”

“They aren’t very imaginative,” Berger pointed out. “And their people in Miami would get very angry if they diverted their product to another entry point.”

“Anyway,” Red continued, “they heave-to about five miles off the breakwaters near Miami Beach. Then, eight or ten small boats rendezvous with her to offload the goods. Then, they make high-speed runs to different places along the coast where they can pull their boats out of the water, and trailer them, with the cargo still aboard, to wherever the stuff needs to go. These idiots always use the same routes, too.”

“As I said,” Berger reminded them, “they are not very imaginative.”

“They’re stupid!” Red opined.

“If they weren’t,” Doc pointed out, “they’d realize that crime’s hardly ever worth the effort. They’d all stand a better chance of making more money with less effort if they did it honestly. So, as Henry Fielding said, many times, criminals are *ipso facto* stupid.”

“That’s not how he put it,” Red countered.

“Well,” Doc replied, “accounting for language developments since the early eighteenth century, and a different audience, I think Henry would approve of my condensation.”

“To make a long story short,” Red summarized, cutting off the digression, “we know when *Strange Brew* goes out; where she

goes when she goes out; and where the bozos land their cargos. On top of that, we've typically got a six hour heads up when it happens. So, the next time she goes on one of these runs, we'll give the DEA a call. Then, they can go out and nab the lot of 'em. They'll be shut down until they set the whole network up again. Then, we do it to them again. And, we keep doing it until the Cartel puts Rodriguez to sleep. Then, we blow the boat. Do it during the funeral, if they have one. Otherwise, the next time someone tries to take her out."

"No," Doc interrupted. "I want to do it at the dock. A few pounds of C4 under each fuel tank should take out the whole facility. Try to get the house, too. A couple thousand gallons of diesel fuel blown up into the air, then ignited ought to make one hell of a fireball! Make 'em think they picked the wrong boat to grab."

After that conversation, Red called Vargas to explain the scheme to him. Vargas agreed that it was worth a try. It should, as they'd expected, simultaneously discredit *El Chile* and temporarily shut down the Miami drug corridor. It was not standard procedure, since it would net only low-level busts, leaving the bigger fish still swimming around, snapping at each other. It was not how law enforcement was supposed to work, but what the heck.

The next morning, *Strange Brew* started her next drug run. Roberto Peña reported that the boat had been loaded to the gills with packages wrapped in plastic. He reported that it had sunk two centimeters lower than normal at the waterline. Doc used that information to calculate the weight of cocaine that had been loaded aboard. DEA Agent Vargas used that estimate to calculate its value on the streets in the U.S. It was enough to put a serious, but temporary, dent in the Cartel's income statement.

The DEA simply scooped up all the little boats ferrying loads from *Strange Brew* to shore. They were all little fish that individually didn't mean a thing to the Cartel, but by taking every one of them out at once, they'd effectively severed the distribution system until they could be replaced.

That took a little over two weeks. Then, the DEA did it again. They captured every boat that rendezvoused with *Strange Brew* before it reached shore, so Rodriguez had to start recruiting all over again. That made it a month during which time no product reached Miami.

That time, it took Rodriguez a lot longer to re-create his network because people didn't want to take the chance of working with him. After another three weeks, he was only able to find enough ferry boats to carry half the shipment. But, half was better than none, and prices for cocaine in New York, New Jersey, Baltimore, and Washington – in fact the whole Eastern U.S. – had gone through the roof. The demand was still there, but there was no supply.

So, Rodriguez tried another run, this time trying to cram twice as much product into each skiff used to shuttle the stuff the last five miles to shore.

The DEA struck again. They took everything. It was days before the Cartel even knew what had happened. The sea simply seemed to swallow up the boats on their way to shore.

After a month and a half with no supply entering through Miami, the Cartel's customers started looking elsewhere to feed their habits.

Escobedo blamed *El Chile*.

43

El Chile discovered that his bosses at the Gulf Cartel did not actually know how to cause one to happily commit suicide. He'd speculated about it when smuggling some terrorists, along with a load of dynamite, to a skiff waiting offshore not far from Washington, D.C. The terrorists seemed enthused about their coming self destruction while blowing up crowded national monuments.

Those terrorists had never succeeded, but *El Chile* had speculated about how one could convince someone to kill themselves enthusiastically like that. He'd figured that his Cartel bosses would already know how to do it. He was wrong.

They *thought* they knew, but they were wrong, too.

This is how they planned to do it:

First, they would burn off his legs. Simply put, they would burn his legs to stumps. The flesh and bone would burn away to powder. There would be no blood, because the stumps would be cauterized while being burned away.

At first, it seemed to be working fine. They used the burner from an oil furnace. It was smoky and stank. It took hours because they started at his toes, and worked up.

El Chile found that his torturers were not completely devoid of humanity, though. His screams, as they burned away his right leg, bothered them. To stop the noise, they cut his vocal cords, so he couldn't scream, anymore. While they were at it, they removed his tongue, too.

That, they cooked and fed to the dogs.

While he watched.

So far, so good.

Then, they planned to burn away his left leg.

Then, they would burn away his left arm.

Then, they would give him time to realize that his brain invented phantom limbs to replace the real ones they'd burned away. The phantom limbs would hurt, too.

Then, they planned to put a loaded and cocked pistol in his right hand, and help him put it to his head.

Gratefully, he would pull the trigger.

Unfortunately for their plan, their enthusiasm got the better of their medical knowledge. He died of shock half way through burning the right leg.

There was no funeral. In fact, nobody ever found a body. *El Chile* simply vanished.

The big house stood empty. Nobody patrolled the dock. The mahogany yacht sat mouldering at the end of the dock.

Alejandro Escobedo couldn't see leaving all that property – it was pretty nice property – disused. His customers in Miami were clamoring for product, and he had product to send, and prices were going through the Moon. So, he decided to restart *El Chile's* smuggling operation. He decided to move his nephew, Manuelito Porfirio, up to running the operation, and let him have the house and the boat as incentive. The boy was young – only twenty years old – but his mother pestered Escobedo to give her son a chance.

The boy had watched others set up such operations, and knew what had to be done. He went to Miami, himself, and personally met with the leaders of the gangs he needed to move his product into the distribution channels throughout the Eastern U.S.

He promised that, with *El Chile* gone, there would be no more trouble from the DEA interdicting shipments. He had personally seen to cleaning out the traitors who had leaked the information about the shipments.

That was what he told them.

What he'd actually done was to simply kill everyone who'd worked with *El Chile*, or knew anything about his operation. If there was a DEA mole in there, the clean sweep would get him, too.

He didn't believe that the culprit could be that beautiful mahogany motoryacht, itself. To make sure, though, he'd had the thing hauled out of the water. His men had cleaned it thoroughly top to bottom, and checked for any bugs or tracking devices. Then, they'd gone through the boat carefully, inspecting every nook and cranny. They found nothing. Finally, they went over the whole thing with state-of-the-art equipment for sniffing out hidden transmitters. They found nothing.

They'd done the same thing with the house, and the dock, and all the grounds. They found nothing that could alert anyone about shipments.

Everything was clean.

Manuelito guaranteed to the Miami gang leaders that there would be no problem. He said he would go with the shipments, himself, and ride in with the skiffs.

How he was supposed to ride in a half dozen skiffs, all going to different destinations at the same time, he did not specify. He led each skiff captain to believe that he would be personally escorting *their* shipment. They were all stupid enough to believe him.

He would go in on another boat, and touch base with each of the shipments *en route* to satisfy his customers that he was personally taking care of them. That way, if the DEA somehow interdicted even some of the shipments, he'd not accidentally be on any of the skiffs interdicted. He'd tell the gangs that he'd been on another one, which had gotten through.

He was not as stupid as the gang leaders. At least, that's what he told himself.

He used a different boat to carry the stuff North to Miami and then offload to the skiffs. It was a sport fisherman similar in size to *Strange Brew* that the Cartel had actually purchased legitimately. He'd take that beautiful mahogany boat up to Miami, pull up to the transient dock at one of the marinas long before the sport fisherman reached the rendezvous point, and take a car to each of the dropoff points. It would take longer to make the shipments, but, so what?

As soon as Red's computer got the call from Doc's tracking system that *Strange Brew's* turbines had fired up, it began following the boat's course. It had started too early in the day – early morning – for the usual smuggling pattern, so it might be nothing. But, seeing that the boat was headed in the direction of Miami, again, it automatically called Agent Vargas and reported a possible smuggling run.

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One thing was odd, however, instead of making nearly a hundred knots, *Strange Brew* was moving only at thirty five.

Red, whom the computer also alerted via cellphone, went into the library to check what was going on. From the satellite imagery on her coffee-table computer, she saw that *Strange Brew* was accompanying another vessel. That, of course, was the sport fisherman, which she could see by the visible-light imagery. Red could tell from the infrared imagery that it was a boat powered by conventional twin diesels. She told Vargas over the telephone that she figured that was why *Strange Brew* was making the passage so slowly. It could move only as fast as the diesel-powered boat could go. She thought it was a smuggling run set up by somebody else.

When Vargas arrived at Red's Scottsdale ranch a half hour later, he recognized what was happening right away. "Escobedo's put his nephew in charge of restarting the smuggling operation," he reported.

An agent in Escobedo's household (not the one who reported to *El Lobo*, but another one) had reported that information earlier, but, since *El Chile* was no longer in the picture, Vargas had figured Red would have no interest. He didn't know that Porfiro would use *Strange Brew* as part of the plan.

"The sneaky little kid's not taking any chances," Vargas surmised. "He's using the second boat to actually smuggle the goods, while he accompanys it in Doc's boat. That way, he can take off at high speed if anything goes wrong."

"So, what do we do?" Red asked. This was not anything she'd been prepared for.

"We'll just wait to see what happens," Vargas replied. "Are you sure you can track both boats?"

"Yes. *Strange Brew*'s easy to track, with that distinctive turbine exhaust plume, as well as the GPS tracer. The second boat's running twin diesels, which don't show up as well, but the infrared imaging can see it adequately. See how the cockpit appears orange? That's because the heat from the diesels warms the cockpit deck. The standard marine exhaust cooling system dumps the rest of the heat out into the wake in the form of hot water. You can see that trailing behind the boat for miles. The only problem is that it looks like any other twin-diesel watercraft."

"How long will it take for them to reach the rendezvous point at that speed?" Vargas asked.

"The computer estimates twelve hours total running time, or about eight hours more," Red said.

“Is it all right if I camp out here so that I can be on hand if anything develops?” Vargas asked.

“Sure,” Red said, “That’s what I plan to do, too. I’ll ask Sam to make some coffee.”

Two hours later, and four double espressos each for both Red and Vargas, *Strange Brew* suddenly accelerated to seventy-five knots, and headed directly for Miami.

“Porfirio seems to have gotten bored loafing along with that second boat,” Vargas surmised. “Looks like he’s taking off on his own.”

To Red’s amazement, three hours later Doc’s boat pulled into the marina at the Miami Beach yacht club where Doc was a member. *Strange Brew* had been docked there for four years before being hijacked.

“Is that kid a complete idiot?” she asked. “They’re going to recognize that boat in an instant.”

Sure enough, three minutes later, Doc stormed into the library carrying his cellphone. “The harbormaster at the marina in Miami just called. Our boat just pulled up to the transient dock!”

“We saw,” Red replied. “The idiot who’s taken over *El Chile*’s operation just brought it home. I’ve no idea what he’s thinking.”

“He probably doesn’t know a thing about it,” Vargas said. “I’m torn over what to do. We could bust him for possession of the boat, and implicate him in *El Chile*’s piracy record. I’ve no idea how he’d be able to explain that! Or, we could tail him to the drug-shipment drops, and throw a net over everyone. I’m inclined to do the latter.”

“I have to agree with you,” Doc said. “We’ve got two choices, and it’s unclear which would be better for us.”

Then, he said into the cellphone: “Smitty, my boat’s being used by some idiots smuggling drugs. I’m with a DEA agent, now, and he says to do nothing. Just watch. Call me if anyone tries to take the boat out. Otherwise, just pretend you don’t recognize it. If they want fuel, sell ‘em fuel. Hopefully, none of the neighbors will blow the whistle. If anybody reports it to you, tell them that you’ve seen it, and alerted the authorities. They should just stay away. We’re going to try to snare everybody involved all at once.”

“You wanted to blow the thing up,” Red said to Doc. “She’s in the harbor. The *Mary McKenna*’s in the harbor. Is there any way we could set your charges while they’re both there?”

“Let me think,” Doc said. “*Diane*’s aboard the *Mary McKenna*, along with the charges we were going to set once we’d figured

out how to get the ROV close enough to set them. The little moron's brought the boat right to us. Yeah, let's see what we can do. All we need is an ROV pilot to drive *Diane*. Bud's here in Scottsdale. Gwen's headed for Japan. Shit, there's nobody there good enough at running *Diane* to do the job."

On sudden inspiration, Doc asked Vargas: "Would you be willing to bust Porfirio, then allow him to get away?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Vargas said. "We've got him dead to rights on a number of charges. Why would we let him go?"

"I dunno," Doc said. "But, can you keep him there for a few days, then let him out on bail, or something? Meanwhile, we'll set the charges on *Strange Brew*. Then, we can blow it sometime later. I'm just thinking that maybe we can cause more mischief for the Cartel with the boat in Tampico loaded with C4 than we can with it interdicted in Miami. If Porfirio is stuck in jail in Miami for a few days, we can get Bud out there to set the charges using *Diane*, then let him go home, bringing the charges with him."

"You're really hot to blow up Tampico harbor, aren't you," Vargas said to Doc.

"Just the Cartel's part of it," Doc replied. "We'll control it so that nobody else gets hurt."

"It is true that if we bust Porfirio along with all the rest, then let him go, the gangs will all think the Cartel rolled over on them," Vargas thought out loud. "After what's been going on, they won't trust anyone from the Cartel ever again. I can't think of a better way to put them out of business."

Vargas stood for a minute in deep thought, then he sighed, and said: "Folks, what you're thinking about doing is illegal. The DEA can't condone it, or be a party to it, or do anything but warn you against doing it."

"On the other hand, I like your idea about letting Porfirio get away," he continued, "but only to make the Miami gangs distrust him, and damage the cartel's credibility. I think Miami will agree. Just don't put explosives on the boat. We'll be watching."

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"*Diane*, wake up," Bud said into her headset microphone.

"Good morning, Bud," came a throaty female voice over the headset's earpieces.

“*Diane*, check your package.”

“Bud, I’m carrying an SST XP5000A remotely detonated explosive package.”

“Okay, Norm, please launch *Diane*.”

Norm was the launch/retrieval system operator aboard *Mary McKenna*.

Doc and Red had not heeded Agent Vargas’ warning against blowing *Strange Brew* up in Tampico harbor. Their friends in the Mexican government were fighting an insurgency, and were looking forward to having a powerful weapon available. They *wanted* those charges aboard the boat. And, of course, it was *their* harbor, not Vargas’.

Blowing up Doc’s boat might be illegal in Miami Harbor, but they weren’t going to do it in Miami Harbor. Attaching explosives to the bottom of Doc’s boat wasn’t illegal. Doc could attach anything he wanted to his own boat. As a technology developer for a number of government agencies, SST designed, built, and tested all sorts of explosive gadgets, and had all the proper federal licenses to do it legally.

As for any moral qualms based on Vargas’ warning, Doc didn’t really care. Cara’s comment to the French Ambassador at Bosley’s party about education being the best way to reduce demand for illegal drugs was something she got from Doc. He considered the whole idea of making the use and distribution of “bad” drugs illegal to be wrongheaded. It just made an entire segment of the population want to take the drugs, who wouldn’t bother, otherwise. Doc felt a campaign of education and persuasion would have been much more effective, but there was a whole industry built up around drugs being illegal, so Doc’s opinion didn’t matter, and he knew it. Doc, likewise, wasn’t concerned about Vargas’ opinion of *his* plans.

Doc had come to the party because the creeps had been hurting his friends, and were on track to hurt more people. He wanted to make that stop. He felt that, with the technology at his disposal, he was in a position to help make it happen. So, he planned to do it.

He wasn’t worried about the DEA watching the boat. There wasn’t much the DEA could do about it if they caught them installing the mines, anyway. As a stealth mission, it would be a good test of the ROV technology, and his other customers, such as the Department of Homeland Security, would be pleased if it succeeded. It would be another weapon they could buy for their arsenal.

Diane was a specialized submersible ROV that Doc had designed for the Navy to perform all sorts of underwater tasks, from scraping barnacles, to repairing hulls. She had a storage platform on her upper side to carry anything needed to perform her task, and two manipulator arms to reach out with whatever tools were needed. Six thrusters allowed her to maneuver precisely in three

dimensions.

Bud had been experimenting with using *Diane* for working around underwater archaeological sites when her pirate adventure began, so she was thoroughly skilled as the ROV's pilot. In fact, she was probably, with the possible exception of Gwen Petersen, the person most adept at piloting verbally programmed ROVs.

When Doc had decided to blow *Strange Brew* up, the SST engineers had designed an explosive package that *Diane* could attach to the boat's bottom. Bud had spent days testing the attachment system with *Diane* under a mock up of Doc's boat in Miami harbor to make sure she could do what they wanted her to do.

With *Strange Brew* in Tampico harbor, and the time for blowing her up in the unspecified future, they hadn't worked out the logistics of how to get *Diane* to the boat, however. They had vague ideas for a mid-ocean transfer from *Mary McKenna* to a Mexican Navy vessel, which would carry *Diane* to their base in Tampico, from which she could reach *Strange Brew* under her own power. They might also use the Gulf States Petroleum facility in some way.

Doc had said there were still too many uncertainties to make developing detailed plans worthwhile. It turned out that he was right. Porfirio bringing *Strange Brew* into Miami harbor changed everything. All they needed to do was to get *Diane* into the water without anyone knowing about it.

They decided to do that via the simple expedient of anchoring *Mary McKenna* in the harbor, but away from the marina, launching *Diane* over the side away from the marina, and piloting her back into the marina underwater to attach her mines to *Strange Brew*'s hull. With a three hour battery range, she could easily make the round trip and attach a mine with power to spare. It would take two trips to deliver two mines.

Unlike other ROVs, which were generally tethered to their mother ships by a communications cable, *Diane* could communicate with Bud on the *Mary McKenna* using ultrasonic signals that propagate very nicely underwater over reasonably large distances. As long as *Diane* could hear the signals, she was fine. Actually, she could do the entire job without Bud's help, but it was best to have an operator supervise in case anything unexpected occurred that was outside *Diane*'s capacity to handle. That was even more likely in a busy harbor than at a remote archaeological dig site hundreds of feet underwater.

Bud downloaded a location to *Diane* telling her where they were launching her. She didn't have to tell the ROV to double-check her initial position and orientation because it was part of *Diane*'s launch procedure.

"Bud, I'm in the water," *Diane* reported.

“Bud,” *Diane* added ten seconds later, “water temperature is twenty six point one degrees Celsius; visibility is eight meters; current is one point three four meters per minute; overall dive conditions are fair.”

“Bud,” *Diane*’s voice said twenty seconds later, “I’ve determined that I’m at the planned location plus two point six meters along zero three four degrees.”

“How can she tell where she is?” asked Cara, who was sitting in the observer’s chair next to Bud at *Diane*’s control console. Cara could see by the video display that what *Diane*’s machine-vision cameras saw resembled what one might expect to see while poking around in a landfill on an exceptionally foggy day. Eight meters’ visibility, about twenty-five feet, would be called “pea soup,” if it were fog on land.

Cara had started taking an interest in the technology SST was developing, especially the mobile robots. While she had no engineering background, she was showing interest in what was possible and what wasn’t. Bud and Red had decided to encourage this interest, and had assigned her to learn about SST technology in Scottsdale with Bud, until Red decided it was safe for her to go back “home” to Tampico. As part of that training, which had so far been pretty much theoretical, she’d accompanied Bud to Miami to observe *Diane* in action.

“As you can see,” Bud replied, pointing to the monitor, “The hard part is navigating underwater, where visibility is poor, and ordinary navigation aids, such as GPS, don’t work. Instead, she has to figure out where she is and where she’s supposed to go using what cues are available. Obviously, we’ve downloaded all the surface-navigation information we have, such as tide tables and the most detailed navigation charts we can find. That doesn’t tell her much about the underwater environment, though.”

“But, she has a very good memory,” Bud said. “Luckily, we did a lot of practicing in this harbor, so she’s quite familiar with what the place looks like underwater. For her, it’s like playing in her own back yard. She just gave the horizontal displacement from the planned launch location, which she calculated based on underwater features she recognized, and triangulating an actual location from them. Reporting the results ensures that *Diane*’s navigation systems are working.”

“But all she can see is a bunch of junk laying around,” Cara pointed out.

“Yes, but it’s junk she’s seen before, and there are enough items that are big enough that they haven’t moved much. See that pile of rocks over there? It’s been there since the last time this harbor was dredged. And, that rusty paint bucket? Somebody tossed it overboard, rather than lug it back to shore and dump it in a landfill. She remembers where these things are with respect to each other, and to the surface features. She’s got a mental map of every part of this bottom that she’s seen. She can also see in infrared, and has

side-scan sonar. Every once in a while you hear a slight tapping on the ship's hull. That's her sonar beam. Even the ambient sounds underwater are different in different parts of the harbor."

"She can take all that information, and work out a pretty accurate model of her immediate surroundings, and compare that with her memory of the bottom. It's not one cue, but a whole bunch of cues that help her triangulate her position. That cartoony display next to the video monitor is her mental model of her surroundings."

"*Diane*," Bud said into her headset microphone, "target is in slip bravo-four."

That was enough information for *Diane* to plan a route to *Strange Brew*'s location. Once at the boat, the ROV could plan her own approach to the location on the boat's hull where she'd affix her first charge.

On the cartoon version of the underwater environment, various features were outlined in different colors. A small yellow box identified slip B4. Most of the features, including bottom profiles, but especially underwater portions of bouys, pilings, and other noticeable features, such as a sunken refrigerator lying on the bottom out of the channel, were colored red. These, *Diane* would use to help her navigate. Other features, such as the hull of a boat moving away from her in the channel, were colored light blue. These, she considered unimportant to her mission. The surface was represented by a grid pattern picked out in green lines, and the bottom showed as a similar pattern in orange.

A dotted white line from the bottom-center of the screen to the yellow box identified a path *Diane* was thinking about taking to get to the slip. She checked several such paths before choosing the one she liked best. Then, that one turned solid white.

"Bud, I'm proceeding to slip bravo-four," *Diane* said, and then began moving along the white track.

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Suddenly, Cara heard a staccato burst of light taps coming up from the hull, which meant *Diane* was actively sonar pinging.

A deep-draft yacht, highlighted red, appeared approaching along the channel. The display briefly flashed a ghostly version of the hull moving rapidly along its course and intersecting the white line.

"Bud," *Diane*'s voice said, "I have interfering traffic crossing my intended path. I'll reroute to avoid the interfering traffic."

“That ghost ship was her imagining what would happen if nothing was changed,” Bud told Cara. “She first noticed it by hearing its sound approaching. She used her sonar to measure its length, width, depth, and speed. Then, she ran the path of that moving volume rapidly into the future to see what would happen if it continued. She saw a high probability of a collision, and decided to rethink her path.”

The section of white line crossing the channel then became dotted, and then dipped to pass below the ghost-vessel’s keel. The ghost ship rapidly repeated its motion, missing the re-routed path. Then, the new path turned to solid white.

“Bud,” *Diane* then reported, “I’ve plotted a new route to avoid the interfering traffic.”

“*Diane*,” Bud replied, “I concur with your revised path. *Diane*, please proceed.”

To Cara, Bud said: “The ROV tried out an alternate path that she thought would be safer. She checked in with me only because she could, and she knows humans are smart enough to consider a lot more than she can. If she’d been on her own, with no communications to me, she would have gone ahead using her own judgement about the new route.”

As *Diane* approached the channel, the foggy shape of the yacht’s bottom loomed out of the mist on the video monitor. *Diane* dove deeper to follow the revised path as the yacht passed overhead, then *Diane* rose up on the other side.

Aboard the yacht, the depth sounder suddenly erupted with a warning signal. The captain looked at the instrument, saw a sudden jump from fifteen feet to five feet, which had set off the warning, then the trace jumped back down to fifteen feet. The captain, who’d seen this happen hundreds of times, dismissed it as unimportant. He knew he was in the channel, and knew that the depth should be fifteen feet, and his boat only drew three feet, anyway. It could have been anything from a dolphin to a gas bubble under the boat that set off the alarm.

As *Diane* followed the path, the yellow box got bigger, and soon included detail outlining *Strange Brew*’s bottom as it became visible on the machine-vision monitor.

To starboard, a boat hull began moving slowly out of its slip. As soon as it started moving, its color changed from blue to red, and *Diane* stopped immediately.

“Bud, I’ve detected potentially interfering traffic. What should I do?” *Diane* asked.

“*Diane*, hold position until the interfering traffic passes,” Bud advised.

“That time,” she told Cara, “she didn’t have enough information to guess what the other boat was likely to do, so she decided to stop immediately, and ask for help.”

On the console display, the moving boat hull pulled out of the slip, executed a sharp right turn as her helmsman used her twin engines to spin the boat in place, and moved slowly across *Diane’s* path, and off to port.

“I didn’t hear her using her sonar,” Cara pointed out. “How did she know what the boat was doing in real time like that?”

“She could hear the props, and the engine vibrations transmitted through the hull. So, she could form a picture of what it was doing. It *sounded* like a boat pulling out of a slip. She could estimate size, weight, speed, and power based on the volume, harmonic content, and direction of the various sounds, so she didn’t need to ping it.”

“That must involve a huge amount of data, and a tremendous number of calculations.”

“Not as much as you’d think,” Bud replied.

“It’s worth it,” she continued, “because active sonar pinging alerts anyone in the area to her presence. Since this is a stealth mission – and she knows it – she won’t ping unless she really feels she needs to. The closer she is to the target, the more dangerous using active sonar is, so she’s more reticent now than she was way over on the other side of the channel. Active sonar contributes to underwater noise pollution, anyway, so it’s better not to use it unless you need it.”

“If this is ...,” Cara started to ask.

“Bud,” *Diane’s* voice interrupted: “the interfering traffic has passed. I see no other interference.”

“*Diane*, proceed.”

On the screen, the ROV began following the white path the last few meters to the underside of *Strange Brew’s* hull. Once there, *Diane* positioned herself just to starboard of the boat’s keel about two meters forward of the transom. That placed her directly under one of *Strange Brew’s* thousand-gallon fuel tanks.

A yellow rectangle appeared on the boat’s bottom directly over the ROV.

“Bud, is that the correct location for the package?”

“*Diane*, that is the correct location. *Diane*, place the package.”

Diane’s manipulators lifted a flat rectangular object about two feet wide, three feet long, and an inch thick painted the same color as *Strange Brew*’s bottom – in fact it was painted with exactly the same brand of bottom paint – and placed it gently against the boat’s bottom. It fit exactly in the yellow rectangle on the console screen. Its hydrodynamic shape would allow water to flow around it at high speed without significantly affecting the boat’s performance. Doc had run hundreds of simulations to make sure of that.

“Bud, are you satisfied with the package’s location?”

“*Diane*, yes. *Diane*, proceed with attaching the package.”

A pump aboard *Diane* pumped water out of a thin reservoir behind a membrane on the package’s upper side. This pulled a vacuum between the membrane and *Strange Brew*’s hull. That vacuum caused an underwater adhesive to migrate through the porous membrane to fill the narrow space between the hull and the package and begin to cure. It would take thirty seconds for the adhesive to cure, binding the package permanently to *Strange Brew*’s hull.

After waiting for the adhesive to cure, *Diane* retracted her manipulator arms, unplugged the pump connection, added a plug that would restore the package’s hydrodynamic shape around the pump port, and turned to follow her original track back to the *Mary McKenna*.

Cara then asked the question that *Diane* had interrupted before: “If this is a stealth mission, and active sonar would give us away, how can we be talking back and forth using ultrasonic signals?”

“We’re not really sending voice signals,” Bud explained. “The computers here recognize our speech, and convert it to text, which is then digitally encoded and sent over a spread-spectrum channel along with all the other data we’re sending back and forth. It’s very quiet, not very distinctive, and virtually impossible to home in on. It also occupies a spectral band that is relatively noisy underwater. *Diane*’s voice is generated here based on digital messages she sends, just as the video feeds are. To pick *Diane* up, someone would have to use the same equipment the Navy’s attack subs use to hunt enemy subs. Not likely, here.”

By the time *Diane* reached the *Mary McKenna*, her batteries were well below half charged. The crew hoisted her aboard, and plugged her in for recharging. They also ran a number of diagnostic checks to make sure she was still in good working order, and then clamped a second SST XP5000A remotely detonated explosive package onto her stores tray.

Two hours later, they relaunched *Diane* to attach the second mine to the underside of *Strange Brew*’s hull.

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Manuelito Porfirio couldn't believe his good fortune. He had managed to avoid getting picked up in the dragnet that had scooped up all of the drug shipments, along with the boats and crews that had carried them, and the shore crews that helped them. A couple of times, he'd left just minutes before the busts occurred. One time, he'd actually seen the DEA agents coming to the bust as he was driving away!

Then, when he arrived back at the boat, a police launch was right there, blocking the end of the slip. His crew had already been arrested, and he was hauled off to a Miami jail along with them.

The crew, of course, knew absolutely nothing. All the sailors *El Chile* had used to operate the boat when he was alive had been killed to make sure any DEA mole was eliminated. Porfirio had hired new sailors from other towns for his crew. So, nobody there knew anything about anything in Tampico, including the mahogany boat.

They didn't even know what this voyage was about, since they hadn't been carrying any drugs. They'd been keeping pace with the sport fisherman, but there had been no need for them to know anything about what it was carrying. They'd left it long before it made its rendezvous.

Porfirio knew very little about the mahogany yacht, too. All he knew was that *El Chile* had brought it with him to Mexico. He was pretty vague about where it had come from. He knew the story *El Chile* had made up about it having been originally built for some Fidelista in Cuba. He knew the story for what it was – complete fiction.

How it had come to carry a name in English, he was in the dark about, although he figured it had been stolen from some *gringos*. He'd heard that the name came from an English rock and roll song from the 1960s, so he assumed that whoever had originally owned the boat was a fan of classic rock and roll music.

Sailors tend to be superstitious, and renaming a boat without proper ceremony is considered very bad luck. So, *El Chile* had only changed the registration port painted on the transom from Miami, Florida, to Tampico, Mexico. Changing the hull identification number burned into the transom, as well as the one in one of the engine bays, was virtually impossible. Well, it could be done, but wasn't worth the effort. If the police got that close to a smuggler's boat, he was sure to be arrested, anyway.

Porfirio knew, of course, that *El Chile* had been a Cuban pirate, but he wasn't going to tell that to the officers who interrogated him. He told them he'd bought the boat at auction in Tampico, and he knew nothing about it before that. The forged Mexican

registration papers and title certificate bore out that story.

They'd believed him. They held him in a cell for seventy-two hours without charges, which is the longest you can be held without charges under Florida law. Then, at the last minute, the U.S. Coast Guard came in and arrested him on several counts of piracy, rape, and murder. It looked very bad, but he was confident that they couldn't find hard evidence linking him to the crimes, since he hadn't done them. They'd given him specific dates and times, and he knew he'd been on the mainland in Mexico at all those times. He was on Cartel business, so he couldn't say what he was really doing, but he knew the Cartel would provide witnesses to corroborate whatever he told the investigators. It was close enough to the truth to be easily remembered.

Maybe they'd actually taken the time to check his alibis, because they held him for another forty-eight hours, then delivered him and his crew to the slip where the harbormaster had moved the boat to allow others to use the transient dock. They handed him the keys, and wished him good sailing.

He had no idea what had happened to his drug shipments, or to the members of the gangs he'd worked with. What little he did know didn't sound good. He decided that trying to contact them to find out more was suicide. Better to just leave the United States as quickly as possible.

He fired up the *Strange Brew's* turbines, and left with a full load of fuel bound for ... somewhere. Anywhere. Where?

Should he go back to Tampico? His uncle would probably be furious with him. Clearly, his mission had been a failure. The best he could hope for there was a scolding. More likely there would be punishment. He was not into punishment.

Should he go someplace else? Where? Whom did he know?

Perhaps a little vacation was in order – someplace where nobody would look for him.

“What is that idiot doing in Havana?” Red asked Agent Vargas the next day. “We figured he'd beeline it right home to Tampico. I thought these guys were supposed to be all family oriented. Shouldn't he be going to them for help?”

“They're the ones he's afraid of,” Vargas surmised. “They gave him his big chance to run a major operation, and he screwed it up. Everybody got busted, except him. We had his ass in jail, but never charged him. Then, the Coast Guard brought him in for having a pirate ship, and he'd gotten out of that. He figures that everyone at home would assume he got out of it by rolling over on everyone else. That would make him the biggest stoolie in the Western Hemisphere, as well as a major screw up. He's afraid to go home.”

Red stood there with her balled-up fists on her hips, and pursed lips. Doc sat at his desk in the library, leaning his jawbone on his fists. For once he had no idea what to do next.

“I have no idea what to do next,” he said.

“I don’t think there’s anything we *can* do, is there?” Red speculated. “I don’t see any point in blowing up the boat in Havana harbor. Nobody there has done anything we don’t like, and it would cause a major international incident. Unless the fruitloop decides to haul the boat to repaint the bottom, he isn’t going to discover the charges. If he takes the thing out on the high seas, we could blow it, then, but what would be the point of that?”

“I’m beginning to doubt the point of any of this,” Doc said.

“Wait a minute,” Vargas said. “You mean you put those charges on the boat after I expressly warned you not to?”

Vargas was not terribly surprised that the Mancheks had ignored his warning. He had enough experience with them to know that they’d do as they damn well pleased. He’d expected them to try it, and had warned the DEA to be on the lookout. What upset him was that the Miami office had reported back that nobody had gone near the boat. Apparently, the Mancheks had done the deed without getting caught.

That was both distressing and encouraging. It was distressing because they were good enough to sneak past his agency’s surveillance. It was encouraging because they might share how they did it for him to use in the future.

“Your people are not the only people involved in this, Raul,” Doc pointed out. “There are a few million folks in Mexico who are a whole lot more interested in this situation than you are. It’s their country being attacked. The Mexican Government *liked* the idea of having their fingers on the ‘detonate’ button of a cartel boat loaded with explosives and two thousand gallons of diesel fuel sitting in Tampico harbor. You’re enforcing drug laws, but they’re fighting an insurgency. They hoped for a weapon. Now the fruitloop has screwed them out of that.”

Vargas was trying to think of how to get access to their apparently very good stealth technology. It didn’t occur to him to simply ask.

“Okay, Red,” Doc announced, suddenly. “Grandfather say: ‘If there is nothing to be done, then nothing is the best thing to do.’”

“Who is ‘Grandfather?’” Vargas asked. He’d been busy with his private thoughts, and had missed the transition. It was easy to get lost when Doc was talking extemporaneously. It was *very* easy when he was talking extemporaneously with Red, because when they synched up, ideas flowed faster than most everyone else could follow.

“So, shut everything down,” Red picked up Doc’s thought and ignored Vargas’ question, “and set an agent program to watch *Strange Brew*’s movements. If she goes out farther than, say, thirty miles, it will alert us. Anything under thirty miles from Cuba is a sightseeing or fishing cruise. Until then, we’ll go do something else.”

“What am *I* supposed to do?” Vargas asked.

“Don’t you have some other drug smugglers to catch?” Doc asked him. “Surely, there must be some bad guys out there that have nothing to do with us. Go get *them*.”

“From your point of view, Raul,” he continued, “the mission was a success. Porfirio is canceled as a drug dealer. The Cartel, if my calculations are right, is washed up. Tamaulipas State is not going to be the hotbed of drug smuggling into the U.S. East Coast, anymore. Druggies all over the Atlantic Seaboard will be checking into rehab until somebody else jumps in to restart the trade. Hispanic gang members will be signing up for classes to pass their G.E.D. exams, so they can get real jobs. Job well done!”

Agent Vargas looked like a man who’d just been laid off. Shaking his head sadly, he walked out to his car, parked again under the palo verde trees, and drove back to Phoenix.

On the way back to Phoenix, he thought about all the leads the DEA got from the arrested smugglers. Following all those leads would take months, and result in breaking up of drug gangs all the way up into Canada. Yes, Doc was right. There was still lots for him to do.

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“He is *where*?” Escobedo shouted.

“We found him drinking tequila on the boat in Havana,” Escobedo’s lieutenant reported. He spoke carefully, ready to jump back if Escobedo tried to strike him.

“Alejandro,” Porfirio’s mother, who was also Escobedo’s sister, begged, “he is afraid of what you will do to him if he comes

home.”

“He should be!” Escobedo raged. “He has single-handedly destroyed our family business! Just when we trusted him to restart the Miami corridor, he delivered them *all* to the Americans. If he comes home, I’ll boil him in a vat of olive oil.”

“See, Alejandro, that is just what he is afraid of,” Escobedo’s sister pointed out. “Please let him come home and explain what happened. Please let him try to make amends.”

“Sure. I’ll let him come home to explain what happened. I’ll listen to his explanation, *then* I’ll boil him in a vat of olive oil.”

“See what that horrible *gringa* has done to our family!” the woman blubbered. “She has turned us against each other. We are now threatening to kill our own children. *Maria Madre*, help us!”

“Listen to her, Alejandro,” Escobedo’s wife begged. “As head of the family, you *must* fix this problem. Otherwise, *Los Zetas* will take over control where we could not, and feed us to the catfish.”

The Zetas were a rival gang started by deserters from the Mexican special forces. A previous Gulf Cartel chieftain had talked them into going AWOL to join the drug trade. They’d then broken with the cartel, and set themselves up as a rival gang.

Whereas the Gulf Cartel had, like traditional organized crime syndicates, avoided involving ordinary citizens in their activities, the Zetas had no compunction about it. Organized criminals in general seek to be an underworld largely separated from the general population. The Zetas, on the other hand, acted more like the ancient conquerors Cara had described to the French Ambassador at Senator Bosley’s party. They sought to subjugate the general population. To do that, they had to eliminate, first, their criminal rivals, then the legitimate government.

Escobedo’s wife was really, really scared. They all were.

Escobedo had moved them from their comfortable palace in the state’s capital city of Ciudad Victoria to hide behind these walls at this ranch in the mountains to the South. Here, he was protected by high concrete walls, barbed wire, and a cadre of loyal followers. Yet, who might be paid to lead the Zetas to them? Who could be trusted to protect them? Who might turn assassin if enough money were offered?

Even worse, here he couldn’t escape the constant nagging from his wife and his sister. He had to make some big gesture to show that the Escobedos still held terrible power.

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Diego was confident. He was driving his big, lime green, 1962 Chevy Impala convertible with the 409 cubic inch engine out to the foothills of the Superstition Mountains with five members of his posse crammed into the front and back bench seats. Each carried a brand new Uzi submachine gun, and one hundred rounds of ammunition. Two more low-riders, much like his, carried twelve more picked men from his gang. One car ahead of Diego's, and the other behind.

Diego had told his cousin Enrique that *he* would have the honor of leading the charge on this momentous day.

Diego failed to tell him that if anything went wrong, the lead car would find out about it first – the hard way.

They were going to make their bones today for the biggest criminal gang Diego had ever known: the Gulf Cartel out of Mexico. This is how the cartel's leaders had gained control of Colombia a generation ago. This is how they were taking over Mexico, today, and this is how *his* posse was going to take over Arizona tomorrow. It was starting. No more Anglos making the rules. They'll be cowering under their beds tomorrow morning.

They were going to take down the house of a big *gringo* who lived up in the hills. The stupid *gringo* thought the police could protect him, but by the time the police heard about it, everyone there would already be dead. An hour from now, he'd be calling that pretty *chica* at Channel Five to tell her there was a new gang running Arizona – his! Then, everyone in the southwest would know about it. He'd already recorded his statement in Spanish and English, and she'd broadcast it tonight.

As the first car roared across the cattle gate, Diego saw cows stampeding away from the road. The cowboys, however, just let them go.

At the ranch off to the right, the barn doors flew open, and five black SUVs piled out, all headed toward a place on the road a quarter mile ahead. One pulled across the paved track, and stopped. Two others stopped on either side of the track a hundred yards further along. The final two SUVs turned to pace his three cars ten yards to either side, so they couldn't leave the pavement.

A man with a rocket launcher took aim at the lead car. He was leaning across the hood of the SUV parked in the road. Enrique either didn't see the rocket launcher, or didn't believe what he saw. He kept plowing ahead. Just before Enrique would have to swerve to go around the parked SUV, the rocket streamed from the launcher into Enrique's grill.

Momentarily, the car jumped into the air, bouyed on a bubble of flame. Then, it simply came apart with a deafening bang, pieces scattering in all directions. Moments later, the valley was filled with reverberations of the sound. The echos combined to make

a sound like a freight train. The cowboys now deployed all around – some behind the SUVs and some in prone firing positions in hollows on the desert floor – didn't even flinch at the explosion.

Automatic machine gun fire shredded the tires on the two remaining cars. Armor piercing bullets punched holes in Diego's engine, which seized instantly, braking his car to a stop with its rear wheels locked up. The third car skidded to a stop on flat tires to avoid plowing into Diego's car.

One of the gangsters in that third car stood up with his head and torso sticking up through the car's moon roof to return fire. Before he got off a round, the upper half of his body exploded into globbets of bloody flesh as bursts from several machine guns hit him simultaneously from different directions.

Diego threw his Uzi out of the car, and the rest of his crew did likewise. Seeing this, those in the third car threw their guns out of the windows, and raised their hands, too.

"Just stay where you are," a voice ordered over a bullhorn. Diego wasn't quite sure where the person using the bullhorn was.

"You have carried loaded weapons onto private property with the apparent intent to commit murder. By the laws of Arizona, we have the right to shoot you dead. I see that at least some of you have thrown loaded weapons on the ground, but we have no way of knowing if you still have other weapons in your possession. We have to assume that you do. If you move, we will shoot you. We will shoot to kill."

The voice repeated the message in Spanish. Then, it repeated it in French, then German

It did not ask if they understood. Diego realized that these men didn't care. The message provided legal cover for them, not a warning to him. If any of his *cholos* moved a muscle, they would all die in a heartbeat. What frightened him the most was he didn't know how long they could all sit immobile before somebody panicked and got them all killed.

They sat in the hot sun for ten minutes, while cowboys from all over the ranch continued to arrive on horses. Each carried a very businesslike-looking M-16 with telescopic and laser sights. The cowboys aimed these weapons at them. Each gang member could see laser dots on his chest. Each had at least one dot. Most had several. Other laser sights moved back and forth as if searching for a promising target.

Diego heard Pedro in the back sobbing. He smelled urine as several members of his posse peed on his seats. Then, he felt wet warmth as he peed in the driver's seat.

He was actually grateful when he heard sirens of a dozen Maricopa County Sheriff's squad cars screaming along the highway toward them.

"I guess you were right to skip that story on technology transfer to the Far East," Becky, a film editor at Channel Five News, told Eve Salazar later. "Maybe Gwen will forgive you when she hears about this."

"Gwen knows I have to do my job, just like she has to do hers," Eve responded.

On a hunch, Eve had passed up Gwen's invitation to follow her to Japan. She had a feeling that Arizona wasn't going to remain quiet for long. There was too much going on just across the border. She, in fact, had started worrying what might happen to her friends, the Mancheks. She wasn't sure they knew enough about the people whose toes they were stepping on in Mexico. From the looks of things, here, maybe they did.

This attack wasn't random. It wasn't, as the gang leader she interviewed believed, the opening salvo in a terrorism campaign aimed at taking over Arizona. That moron had been fed a pack of lies, and believed every one.

No, this attack was carefully aimed directly at Red, and her family. It was meant to tell her that the friends she'd made in Mexico were thousands of miles away, but the enemies she'd made could reach her here at home.

These bozos hadn't been given enough information to mount a successful attack on a mansion owned by the head of Gulf States Security. It might have caught Joe and Irma Blodgett, retired from a farm-equipment business in Minnesota, and living out their golden-years dream. It wasn't, however, likely to catch the step daughter of Mark Shipton, who'd run a successful natural-resources exploitation business while surrounded by drug cartels in Colombia. Either these *cholos* had been set up to fail, or whoever sent them didn't know with whom he was dealing.

Eve did an English-language version for her Phoenix station, which was picked up and repeated all over the United States and Canada. She also did essentially the same story in Spanish, which was picked up by both Telemundo and Univision, and broadcast to Spanish-language markets all over the Western Hemisphere.

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Alejandro Escobedo holed up in his study with a case of tequila, and no salt. He'd forbidden *El Chile* from mounting a personal attack on the Mancheks in Arizona because he feared that the act would unleash forces with which his organization couldn't

cope. Then, when things went badly for him, he'd made the mistake, himself.

"Alejandro, come out here!" his wife shouted through the door. "Tell us what we need to do."

"There is nothing we can do," he shouted back. "You have killed us!"

"I have killed us? What are you talking about?"

"It is you who talked me into making that stupid raid on the ranch in Arizona. You and that dumb-assed sister of mine. Now, you see what those people are capable of, and you come to me asking what we can do. It's already done. You know we are on *El Presidente's* hit list. And, because of your stupid raid, those Americans would like nothing more than to help *El Presidente* reach out and squash us like bugs. I knew this would happen, but you nagged and nagged until I gave in. Now, we are doomed."

"We must fight them!" Doña Escobedo shouted.

"With what?" Don Escobedo countered. "Our guards are scared to death, themselves. If the *Federales* showed up ... No! *When* the *Federales* show up, they'll probably open the gates, invite them in, and ask for a reward for turning us in. It is hopeless."

Doña Escobedo wasn't convinced.

El Lobo was only slightly concerned when he heard about the attack on Red's home. He had come to know much about the magnificent redhead he'd seen in action at the prison takedown. There, he'd been impressed by her efficiency as well as the thoughtfulness with which she'd handled her part of the operation. He was also impressed by the professionalism displayed by her staff.

He was especially impressed by the tall, blonde, Spanish-speaking assistant, who had been so kind and understanding to the unfortunates they found in the prison, while taking no nonsense from anyone else. She'd issued orders, but in a way that they didn't really seem to be orders to underlings. They were cues and reminders to coordinate actions of fellow professionals. To the prison guards, they were instructions to adults who had no way of knowing what they were expected to do if she didn't tell them.

To the burly prison guard she caught raising his hand to one of the inmates, however, she'd been – shall we say "firm?"

"Hey!" she'd yelled. "*No tocar a ese hombre!*" – "Don't touch that man!"

When the guard, surprised, had looked toward her over his shoulder, she'd said, in a quieter tone: "*No es un enemigo. Va a*

responder mejor a la bondad.” – “He is not an enemy. He’ll respond better to kindness.”

Then, she’d walked over to the whimpering creature, petted his head and shoulders despite the filth and the smell, and led him gently out of the cell. Then, she encouraged the guard to take over, doing likewise. If this statuesque lady could do it, then the tough guard was shamed into doing it. The guard found that the kind approach worked better than the stern approach, and had no more trouble with inmates after that.

It certainly was not military discipline, but it was discipline, and appeared very effective. *El Lobo* didn’t know if it could be done by a man, but it certainly worked for her.

She was beautiful, too, in an exotic, *anglo* way.

El Lobo was not concerned that a bunch of *cholos* in Arizona might try to do Señora McKenna harm. He expected that her standard security measures would take care of them without fuss. That’s pretty much what happened.

What he didn’t expect was her reaction.

“*Jefe*,” she said, using the correct informal form of address for a Mexican officer, “I will need your help to eliminate the Gulf Cartel.”

“*Señora*,” he responded to her over one of the secure cellphones she had acquired weeks earlier for him and his officers – at no cost – “we have been trying to do that for years, with little success.”

To his surprise, she laughed pleasantly.

“Perhaps I said that backwards,” she said, still with an amused sound in her voice. “I should have said, ‘I would like to offer my assistance, and that of my friends and family, to help you take down the Gulf Cartel. Is that better?’”

He realized that she was laughing at herself. “Yes, much better,” he responded, with a pleasant tone of his own. If she wanted to speak lightly while discussing a deadly serious matter, he could go along.

He found it amazing that these Americans could laugh at themselves – even in front of their troops – while still maintaining their focus on what they had to do, as well as strict discipline. It was more than strict discipline, he added to himself. The Gulf States Security people – operatives? – seemed devoted to their leader, and willing to die for her in an instant.

“We are not without resources,” she continued, pointing out what was very obvious to him. “We have trained personnel, some financing, although perhaps not as much as some may think, and access to the World’s best technology.”

These things he knew, and valued them highly. Her offer was actually very good news to him.

“We have highly trained, well motivated soldiers of our own,” he probed. “We do not need additional troops, or weapons, or anything like that.”

“Perhaps you could make use of our technical resources. Also, as private citizens, there may be things we are in a position to do that a territorial government is not in a position to do.”

This was more like what he hoped for.

“But, what can you do?”

“We have access to the best satellite surveillance systems on the planet,” she started ticking off a list that she’d been thinking about for some time. “We build and operate the most advanced remotely-operated vehicles in the air, on land, and in the sea. We have access to the private facilities of Gulf States Petroleum, which are both highly secure, and in very useful locations. We also have some very brave, intelligent, and resourceful people who do not like what is being done to your country. I think it is more a question of what you would like to have done that your brave soldiers and sailors are not in a position to do.”

She added, “We have already worked with your government on two successful operations: the prison takedown you and I accomplished together; and inserting a tracking device on my husband’s boat, which we used to put the cartel in the position they are in right now.”

“I was not aware that we were involved in the latter,” *El Lobo* probed deeper. “What was the Mexican Government’s part in that?” He, of course, knew Red had a tracking device on *Strange Brew* that alerted her to its movements, but he knew very little about how it had gotten there. He’d just heard a sketchy report told as a funny story around the barracks.

“It was actually a complex operation that proceeded in several steps,” Red believed *El Lobo* would appreciate the entire story. “I believe you are aware that earlier this year, one of our people was captured by *El Chile* while piloting my husband’s personal boat. We recovered her, but not the boat. The cartel began using it for running drugs, so we decided to use it to gain a window on their operation.”

“First,” Red continued, “a local agent for the American Drug Enforcement Agency supplied information that we couldn’t get any other way. Gulf States Petroleum provided facilities and equipment to stage the operation. A Gulf States Security SEAL team fixed the vessel’s engines so they would need emergency service. The *Armada de Mexico* provided the emergency service, at the same time slipping a hidden tracking device onto the boat that my husband’s company, Scottsdale Systems Technology, had fabricated. We then used the tracking device, our access to real-time satellite imagery, and our own computers to monitor the vessel as it made its smuggling runs. At first, we, working with the DEA again, harrassed shipments, then we decided to cripple the smuggling operation. You helped make that decision, and see the result.”

He did see the result. The Gulf Cartel had essentially been eliminated from the drug trade, at least temporarily. The Escobedo family, however, had not been eliminated, nor had their ambitions to take power in Tamaulipas State. He pointed these facts out.

“You have eliminated our enemy by marginalizing the Gulf Cartel,” he said, “but not your enemy. There is now a personal vendetta between your family and the Escobedos. Do you understand the concept of vendetta?”

“It is not part of my family’s tradition,” Red allowed, “but we learn fast. I’ll look it up on the Internet,” she quipped facetiously.

Col. Berger wasn’t quite sure what to make of that statement.

“You have,” he said, “to use an old analogy, cut the head off the snake, and the body died, but the head is still alive. That is the most dangerous part. Here in Mexico, when we cut the head off a rattlesnake, we hang it on the fence for twenty-four hours because the poison in the venom glands is still deadly for that long.”

“We do that also in Arizona,” Red pointed out. “Tourists from other parts of the country sometimes see them, and mistakenly assume they are cruel trophies, but they are not. They are a way of keeping a dead snake from hurting others.”

“Clearly, as the attack on your home demonstrated,” Berger continued the analogy to drive home his point, “the cartel’s head is still very dangerous, indeed. I think it’s just as dangerous to us as to you.”

“Yes, so we want to eliminate the head,” Red concluded. “It would be best for us to work together to do it the best way for all concerned.”

“Then, we are in agreement,” Berger said. “We have a common cause, and we can be more effective working together, than working separately.”

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“I’m flattered,” Ted Manchek said, “but why come to us – beside the fact that my son is married to your daughter? There are any number of yards that could build the kind of ship you’re talking about. We’re limited to two hundred feet, and we’ve never actually built anything longer than one hundred ninety.”

“But, is it doable?” Mark Shipton asked Doc’s father.

When Red and Doc realized that Hector Rodriguez had joined the Gulf Cartel, they knew their campaign against him would be courting retaliation. At that point, they had packed the kids (now including David) and Maryanne off to stay with Red’s step father, Mark Shipton.

Red and Doc figured it would be better if the kids were vacationing with Grandpa and Grandma, rather than sitting ducks at home. With Mark moving around so much while looking after his various business interests around the Western Hemisphere, the kids would be a moving target, and that much harder to attack. At the same time, they would share the security arrangements already protecting Mark and Mary.

After all, Grandpa and Grandma Shipton were not exactly the Blodgetts from Minnesota, either. Red had learned all she knew about personal security from Mark and his staff. By the time Diego’s attack came, the house in Scottsdale had, except for staff, been empty for weeks.

One of the trips Mark and Mary had taken the kids on was to visit their *other* grandparents up in Amesbury, Massachusetts, where Doc’s father’s boat-building business was headquartered. It would give David a chance to visit some of the private residential academies in the area, as well. He was well enough to start trying to rebuild his life. The first step was to finish high school, and Red and Doc wanted him in a private residential school, where he could be well looked after.

While in Amesbury, Mark had taken time during a weekend outing on a fifty-foot cabin cruiser the yard had just launched, and that needed a shakedown cruise, to approach Ted about a new yacht he was daydreaming about. They’d started with a six pack and a one-hundred-fifty-foot boat. As the six pack got smaller the boat got bigger.

“Well, yes, it’s doable,” Ted said, “but please make sure it’s worth your doing. A two-hundred foot wooden motoryacht today is unheard of. That’s one heck of a big boat! The cost for all that plywood and epoxy will be astronomical.”

“Look,” Mark said, “Mary and I want to start winding down, and enjoying our money. It will take a few years, still, but I hope

Red will take over my company someday, and then Mary and I would like to do some *serious* cruising: Monaco; Singapore; Tahiti; and so forth. You get the idea.”

“We want a vessel that will be safe in all kinds of weather, and comfortable except in a storm” he began listing the specifications he and Mary had settled on. “To cross an ocean in any reasonable time will require a cruise speed North of twenty knots. I figure a deep-vee hull for stability and comfort in heavy seas, twin twenty-thousand horsepower turbines for propulsion, and a few hundred horsepower bow thruster for maneuverability in close quarters; one of Doc’s speedboats swinging from davits on the side; overnight accommodations for twenty guests; room for up to a hundred visitors; maybe do a real Art Deco interior and retro superstructure. What do you think?”

“We can build it,” Ted said, scratching his head. “It will be a stretch for the yard. Take at least a year, but I can’t be sure of that until I work up a rough design. I’ve no idea what it’ll cost at this point. It will be in the tens of millions at least. Are you sure you want to use cold-molded process?”

“I want to have the biggest classic wooden boat afloat. I think that means cold-molded.”

“Maybe, if that’s what you want. It’s actually easier than building a one-off FRP job.” Ted opined.

“FRP?”

“Fiber reinforced plastic,” Ted explained. “What people generally call fiberglass. Fiberglass is actually glass fiber woven into cloth, then laid up in a plastic resin, such as epoxy. FRP is a more general term covering other fabrics, such as Dacron, polyester, carbon fiber, Kevlar, and so forth. Basically, it’s an engineered composite structure made up of different components, each designed to do a particular job. It’s another option you should consider.”

“You might even think about doing an FRP hull with an outer skin of an exotic wood, such as teak or mahogany. Doc’s boat, for example, has an oak frame, Douglas fir core, and a mahogany outer sheath. We then laid on a single, transparent layer of dacron for abrasion resistance over the mahogany skin. You could do the same basic thing, but substitute FRP for the Douglas fir.”

“I actually would rather that you consider an aluminum hull,” Ted urged. “It would be too big to bend, so we’d weld it from pieces, making the sharp bends at seams. It would be lighter, and at least as strong.”

“Whatever hull construction you decide on, a two-hundred foot boat is going to have a hull at least several inches thick. Otherwise, it’ll fold up like an egg carton the first time it hits a big wave.”

“I didn’t realize that,” Mark admitted.

“That’s why good naval architects, like Doc, are so rare,” Ted said. “They have to be expert with a number engineering disciplines: mechanical, structural, electrical, and then there’s the whole field of hydrodynamics to worry about. Of course, people like that have a number of career options, so most of them, like Doc, again, find themselves doing something else.”

“For a basic shape,” Ted asked, changing the subject slightly, “what are you thinking of? Something based on one of the old Chris Craft designs? Or, maybe more of a Coast Guard Cutter shape, with the bridge forward? You and Mary should do some mooning over old boat photos. You might spend some time with back issues of *Yachting* and *Motoryacht* magazines, too.”

“What about PT boat designs?” Mark asked. “I understand some of those ran pretty big.”

“They were all about eighty feet,” Ted answered. “You can check those out, too. We generally can just scale up the hull dimensions.”

“Ganpa! Ganpa! Come see!” Mike Jr. came running in. Eighteen-month olds have only one speed: top speed.

“What is it, Mike,” Mark asked. He wasn’t sure which “Ganpa” Mike was referring to, since the boy had two there, and was having trouble sorting them out. Since Mike ran over to Mark, Mark assumed he was the “Ganpa” of current focus. Mike grabbed his hand, and started pulling him across the salon toward the companionway. As soon as Mark stood up to follow, Mike reached over, and grabbed Ted’s hand to pull him, too.

There was a traffic jam at the companionway as Maryanne, following far behind the racing toddler while carrying his little sister, was coming down the ladder – steps on boats are usually called “ladders” – while Mike was trying to drag both “Ganpas” up.

Maryanne backed up the ladder to the cockpit deck to make room. Simultaneously, she tried to bring the men up to date on what Mike probably wanted: “I think he wants to show you the Bourne Bridge.”

Both men had seen the Bourne Bridge many times before, but Mike had not. It was new to him, so he assumed it must be new to everyone.

The Bourne Bridge, winner of an American Institute of Steel Construction award when it opened in 1934, is still worth coming out on deck to see, even for the hundred-and-first time. An arch-type bridge, it has a four-lane deck suspended one-hundred thirty-four feet above the Cape Cod Canal. The longest span is six-hundred-sixteen feet long. Its arch is beautiful, and its scale is large enough to

be awe inspiring.

Much larger bridges, such as San Francisco's Golden Gate, are so huge that they seem like natural features, like clouds or mountains. Smaller bridges, such as the Bourne, actually have more impact because they are closer to human scale.

Ted picked Mike up, and carried him up the ladder (this time a real ladder, with rungs, supporting side rails, and all) to the flying bridge atop the deck house. The best place to experience the Bourne Bridge is from a flying bridge, with nothing between you and the underside of its four-lane highway. Even over a hundred feet away, the noise of four lanes of traffic can be deafening.

"Gamma! Gamma!" Mike yelled, climbing up onto Mary Shipton's lap as soon as Ted put him down on the deck.

"Bourne Bridge! Bourne Bridge!" he yelled in her face, pointing straight up and jumping up and down in her lap.

Eighteen-month olds can be very punishing to grandparents.

Mary McKenna Shipton was an older, slightly shorter version of her daughter, Red. At just about six feet in height, she shared her daughter's head-to-toe freckled complexion, and flowing red hair. Realizing that a smart, successful billionaire, like her husband, was destined to be a babe magnet for gold-digging supermodels, Mary had long ago decided that her key to marital security was to be as fit as the supermodels, and twice as much fun to be with. Natural good looks, and a personal trainer with a sadistic streak took care of the former, while being generously endowed between the ears, and having a lifetime of experience to draw on, put her a leg up on the supermodels in the fun department.

Her husband agreed.

On the flying bridge, Mary sat next to David at the helm. David's attention was divided between the task he was learning – steering the boat – and the sultry raven-haired vixen standing behind him, teaching him how to do it.

Equal to Mary in the height department, and just a touch heavier, with larger breasts, and smooth, tanned skin, Auntie Alice was eye candy for photographers specializing in making boats look good. She was Doc's bikini-model little sister. At six feet herself, she was seldom characterized as little, except when standing between her brother and sister-in-law. The few inches and few years she had over David made no difference to the hormones he was now struggling with, with Alice standing so close, and guiding his every move. Feeling the heat from her scantily covered body just inches from his bare back was making him sweat more than the weather, which wasn't all *that* hot.

Under Alice's guidance, David had steered the boat to pass directly under the center of the bridge's center span. Knowing that Mike was there to have his first experience of the Bourne Bridge, she'd slowed the boat to no-wake speed as they approached it. Passing underneath, they could hear the brrr of car tires roaring over the span.

As they passed under the bridge, Mike turned in place, still standing on his grandmother's lap and punishing her thighs with his sneakered feet, to watch the bridge pass slowly over and behind. Soon, Aunt Alice began slowly advancing the throttle levers to accelerate back up onto plane without throwing others off balance with a sudden jerk of acceleration.

Mary took the opportunity to settle Mike into a sitting position on her lap, which was much less likely to turn her thighs black and blue.

The boat's bow first picked up high in the air, then, as the boat climbed up onto its bow wave, dropped to a nearly level position. Alice throttled back slightly to keep the boat on plane without accelerating further.

"Finding just the right throttle position to balance thrust and drag at the speed you want is always the hardest part," she told David. "As the speed rises, you get less drag because the hull rises out of the water. That lets the boat go even faster. If you throttle back too much, though, the hull sinks back, and you fall off plane. When you fall off plane, the hull starts plowing through the water instead of skimming over it, and it slows down fast while ruining your fuel mileage. It's a delicate balance."

"Why don't we just let it go faster?" David asked.

"Then, you'd start running over things before you could see them," Alice laughed. She was enjoying making David sweat. If she didn't like the attention of testosterone-addled males, she wouldn't pose on boat decks in bikinis.

That was when Doris – Mike Jr's "Gamma Manchek" called up for the "boys" to help her carry up the lunch basket.

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"Do you think the kids are in trouble?" Ted asked Mark around a bite of roast beef sandwich. Ted was giving voice to every parent's constant fear for their young-adult children. He was especially concerned because he knew that Doc and Red were playing a dangerous game with a dangerous adversary.

The men had found seats on the flying bridge far enough from the rest of the family gathered around the helm console to hold a

separate conversation. The three generations clustered around the helm chattered excitedly about all the things Mike was seeing for the first time.

“I think,” Mark said carefully, “those two will always encounter challenges that most people never face. They go looking for them. Look at the things they get into: they both like to play with fast cars, boats, motorcycles, airplanes ... always looking for something to challenge themselves with. Of course, constantly betting their company’s future on pushing the limits of technology has to be as thrilling as performing a circus high-wire act. From that point of view, they’ll always be either ‘in trouble,’ or close to it.”

“If you mean,” he said shifting gears, “as I think you do, ‘Are they in over their heads?’ I don’t know, but I doubt it. Doc, for all his bravado, is really a very careful and thoughtful man. Look at this business with the kids. When they were dealing with a lone pirate who couldn’t really come after them, it was all something to do between lunch and dinner. They didn’t let it affect their home life.”

“As soon as they realized that they were coming up against a vicious, violent cartel with tentacles reaching into the United States, they showed up on my doorstep to debrief me on my experience dealing with essentially the same thugs in Colombia. That conversation started with: ‘Tell us what these guys are like,’ and ended with: ‘Can you babysit the kids for a few months while we try to settle their hash.’”

“They generally don’t go into something without having studied it thoroughly. They use the ‘ready, aim, fire’ approach. First, they find out what they’re getting into, set reasonable goals, and make a plan with a good chance of success and fallback positions in case something goes sour. Then, they follow their plan with dogged determination. It’s the best formula I know of for success in anything.”

“I’ve watched Doc do this for years,” Mark continued. “I don’t think he goes to the bathroom without a plan.”

“I noticed that Judith, even when she was young, would do the same thing on her best days, but she could sometimes stampede herself into jumping the gun – doing something without having thought it all the way through. It was one of the reasons I wanted her to work with Doc for a while. I hoped that some of his careful planning would rub off on her, and it has. Having them turn out to be so compatible that they wanted to get married – for all the right reasons, I think – was just icing on the cake.”

“I don’t worry about Judith when she’s with Doc,” Mark finalized. “Does that answer your question?”

“It tells me why *you* aren’t especially worried: you trust my son to take care of your daughter,” Ted said. “My problem is that I remember all the times he screwed up learning to be careful. I’m always afraid he’ll do it again.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” Mark confided, “Doc remembers those mistakes, too, and he’s also concerned that he might repeat them. You can see it in his eyes. When he approaches something, there’s that little bit of tension that tells you he knows it can go horribly wrong. That’s why he always gives himself an out. He knows that in the past, he’s needed it. It’s one of the things we look for when deciding whom to entrust a company to, and whom not to.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Ted asked.

“We’re doing it,” Mark replied. “We’re making sure that their children are safe, and happy, and won’t be scarred by Mommy and Daddy having to look away for a while.”

“I think I know the answer to this,” Ted said, broaching another subject, “but I have to ask: why did they leave the little ones with you, rather than us?”

Mark could see where Doc got his courage to ask difficult questions, and wait for the answers. This was a difficult question for a father to entertain.

“They know that we run a secure household where threats from outside are constant,” he replied. “We’ve set our lives up to protect ourselves and our families because we’ve had to. You heard about what happened in Scottsdale. What would have happened if those thugs had shown up at the boatyard?”

“We would all be dead.”

“Right. It’s no reflection on you, except the positive reflection that you’ve managed to protect your family by not inviting attack. That’s the way Doc did it for years.”

“I’m afraid I’m the one who screwed that up. I was born into a family whose business made us targets. We’ve a lot of assets, and when you have a lot of assets, there are always a lot of people who would like to relieve you of responsibility for those assets.”

“We have assets,” Ted said defensively.

“Yes, and you lock them up at night. We do the same. The principle’s the same, just a matter of degree. In your world, the bad guys are armed with bolt cutters. In our world, they have submachine guns.”

“Anyway, when Mary was willing to put up with me, that dragged Judy in, too. When she decided to marry Doc, that dragged him into it. I note that neither of them has complained, yet.”

Ted smiled: “You expected complaints?”

“I hope we’re not going to get into one of those tedious ‘rich vs. poor’ discussions. You aren’t exactly poor, you know. Most people don’t make enough in a lifetime to buy one of your boats.”

“True,” Ted admitted, “and my son’s done pretty well for himself, already.”

“I’d say so,” Mark laughed. “Do you know that right now, he’s making a sales pitch to the President of Mexico? That boy amazes me. He just finished making a deal to sell UAVs to every government agency in the Far East big enough to have two police cars, and now he’s doing the same thing in the Americas. Of course, it’s difficult to tell who invents the most technology between those two. It’s gotta be a tossup because they do so much of it together.”

“I feel better,” Ted said. “I started this conversation worried that my grandkids were about to be orphaned, and came out of it feeling my son has the world by the tail. I just hope we haven’t indulged in a monumental self deception.”

“Me, too,” Mark allowed.

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Almost three thousand miles to the South, and a little West, Doc was wrapping up his presentation to representatives of the City of Tampico, the State of Tamaulipas, and the Federal Government of Mexico. When Mark said Doc was making a sales presentation to the President of Mexico, he was laying it on a little thick. The President, himself, wasn’t there, and wasn’t expected to show up. There were, however, a number of functionaries intently taking down notes, and preparing to report everything Doc said to people who would actually recommend whether to take Doc up on his offer of technical assistance for those fighting crime – especially organized crime – in the streets of Mexican cities.

“And what do you hope to gain out of this?” asked a sharp-nosed young man wearing thick glasses. His opinion was important because he reported to the Federal Government of Mexico. Doc was hoping that he’d tell his superiors that Doc’s technology could make the difference between winning and losing the battle for the Mexican nation.

“We develop tools that embody advanced technology,” Doc repeated for the *n*th time. “To develop effective tools, we need to know what tools are needed, and have a place to demonstrate the effectiveness of the tools we develop. By developing tools to help you fight your battle with organized criminals, we achieve both of those goals.”

“So, what you are telling me is that you plan to equip our troops with untested technologies that only you know how to operate, while our people risk their lives to test them for you.”

“We never deploy untested technology,” Doc insisted. “Your people will have the assurance that the tools we provide them will work as intended. We’re very careful about that. Also, we will train your people to use the tools we give them. We don’t want failures of untested equipment, or inadequately trained operators to mar the image of our technology. Remember that I said we hoped to *demonstrate the effectiveness* of our tools. You don’t make a demonstration until you’ve already tested the equipment to make sure it will work properly during the demonstration. At the end of the day, we want you to be pleased with the results you’ve achieved.”

“Why do you wish to do this, aside from the hope of gaining profits?”

“We believe that you face a new kind of enemy, which can best be countered by new kinds of tools. We believe we are in a position to develop those tools. We want to provide them; we want you to use them; and we want you to achieve your goals.”

“What do you think those goals are?”

“To preserve your State, and eliminate the threat of anarchy, which is what your enemies would visit upon your people if you don’t stop them.”

“What do you care about our people. You are not Mexicans. This is not your country.”

“We like this country. It has a rich culture that we appreciate. By and large, you have wonderful people, whom we are pleased and proud to have as neighbors. Many people in our country also have strong family ties to Mexico, as do many of our personal friends. And then, there is the realization that if you lose your fight, your enemies will quickly become our enemies. We have not become a great country by allowing enemies to become strong enough to invade us. We prefer to help our friends stave off conquest before that can happen.”

“In other words, you’d like to fight your battles on our soil.”

“Let’s rather say that we prefer to help you win your battles before they become our battles. It is better that you don’t have these battles to fight, but if you do, we want you to win them, and are willing to provide any help we can.”

“Basically, we believe a strong, stable Mexico is good for us. That way, we can remain close trading partners, allies in fights like this one, and friends when times are good. Yes, we want to make a profit, but we want to make a profit by doing things that make

the World a better place in which to live for us and for our friends.”

“Speaking of trading partners, where would the equipment you develop be manufactured?”

This question pleased Doc no end. It meant that they wanted to go ahead, and hoped to get some profit out of the partnership, themselves.

“We do not have manufacturing facilities at Scottsdale Systems Technology. We are not a manufacturing company. We are a technology development company. We would be looking for manufacturing companies to whom we could license the technology. Mexico has many such companies capable of producing this equipment in quantity and with excellent quality.”

In other words, there’s no reason the equipment couldn’t be manufactured in Mexico.

“I suspect that there are many people in your country who would object to your licensing advanced technology for manufacture in Mexico. They would prefer to save the jobs for Americans.”

“There are *always* people in my country to object to just about anything one might wish to do. We don’t let political rhetoric interfere with business decisions. We base those decisions on what is best for the business.”

In other words, we aren’t going to let a bunch of politicians tell us how to run our company.

“How can we get ahold of you to answer additional questions, should they come up?”

In other words, don’t call us, we’ll call you. It’s advice Doc had heard before, and never found it wise to listen to. He’d be calling them, anyway.

“In the folder we’ve provided are two copies of my business card, along with the number for our local field office in Tampico. You can always get to the right person at Scottsdale Systems Technology by calling that number. Our agent will put you in touch with the right person to answer your questions.”

After the meeting broke up, Red cornered Doc, and asked: “Okay, fella. Where’s your local office in Tampico, and who’s the local agent who will field those phone calls?”

“It’s your office at Gulf States, and Bud will field the calls. It’s her cellphone number. She speaks perfect Spanish, and has a good grasp of the technical basics. She’ll make an ideal contact person.”

“She’s an *archaeologist*, not one of your marketing staff!” Red was getting upset about Doc’s dragging Cheryl into his company. “She’s already got a career. She’s also got a boyfriend in Tempe. What are you doing?”

“At the moment, she’s an archaeologist who’s not doing any archaeology. She’s joined you as a volunteer Mexican freedom fighter. Let’s put her where she can do the most good. As for her boyfriend in Tempe, she left him in Tempe to fight drug cartels in Mexico.”

“Does *she* know about this?”

“Of course, I talked to her before leaving to come here. I wouldn’t do that to anyone, especially Cheryl.”

“You could have told *me*, instead of springing it on me like this.”

“Oh, I see the problem,” Doc said. “You’re upset because you have plans for her in your little organization, and it seems like I’m pulling her away. I’m sorry for the confusion, baby. I would have told you earlier, but there was no opportunity. It’s not like that at all.”

He explained: “It’s not like she’s going to sit at a desk in the lobby waiting to field sales calls. The people she’ll be talking to for you are going to be the same people she’ll be talking to for me. They’ll be talking about the same projects. They’ll be asking things like: ‘How does this damn thing work?’ She’ll tell them, or find somebody at SST who can tell them. As your executive assistant, or whatever you’re calling her these days, she’d be asked the same question by the same people, and give the same answer. This just means that the bean counters in Mexico City will have the same contact person as *El Lobo*. When somebody needs a bodyguard in Tampico, they’ll call Bud, and she’ll assign a bodyguard. If the bodyguard needs a state-of-the-art surveillance UAV, they’ll call Bud, and she’ll get ‘em a surveillance UAV. Seamless.”

Red pouted in the back of the limo while mulling this over. Halfway to the airport, she punched Doc in the arm, hard. Then, she said: “You’re right again, dammit!” Then, she grabbed the arm she’d just punched, hugged it, and nuzzled her face into the shoulder, smiling. It was okay, then.

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“Inigo, don’t you have a wife around here someplace to go home to?” Bud asked, pointedly. She’d noticed that the Mexican Army Colonel had been finding a lot of excuses to visit the office in Tampico, despite being headquartered in Monterrey – a day’s

drive away in another state!

“No, I do not,” he answered, simply. “I am staying at the Howard Johnson Hotel on Calle Nuevo Leon. I was hoping to buy you dinner tonight. If it’s not too much of an imposition.”

“No, I meant in Monterrey,” she continued, ignoring the invitation. “You’re stationed in Monterrey, aren’t you?”

She knew that perfectly well. She was just trying to make a point while drawing him out.

“Yes, I’m stationed at Monterrey. I have a room in the officer’s barracks on the military base there. I have no wife.”

“I’ll be right back, Inigo,” she said, suddenly. “There’s something I have to discuss with Red.”

Since returning from the sudden, and in Cara’s opinion ill advised, evacuation after Padre Alvero’s murder, Gulf States Security had been in larger quarters befitting its status as a semi-permanent tenant in Gulf States Petroleum’s Tampico headquarters building.

Cara had wanted to stay. She’d found an empty adobe mansion not far from the Gulf States facility that she thought could be made defensible, and was big enough to provide comfortable apartments for all of them, plus visitors and staff. She wanted them to move there, set up security, and brave it out.

“We shouldn’t let them run us out,” she’d argued. “That’s what the cartel wants to do. We’re a security company. We should be able to protect ourselves. Running away would be a mistake.”

What Cara wanted most was to continue the humanitarian work she’d started with Olvera. She didn’t want anyone to think that the cartel’s attack had derailed that effort. She felt the best way to avenge his death was to make the cartel’s effort to stop his work fail.

She being a junior person on staff, with approximately zero training or experience in security matters, Bud and Red had overruled her objection. Cara still thought they were thinking with their hormones, not their brains.

She’d enlisted the help of Gwen Petersen, whom everyone knew Red kept a special place in her heart for, to help convince Red to go back to Tampico as quickly as possible. Gwen had pointed out to Red that running away just wasn’t her style.

Their efforts bore fruit when Red gave Cara permission to come back early and set up the adobe as she’d outlined. Lieutenant Davis, one of Red’s most experienced men regarding setting up security systems, accompanied Cara as technical advisor.

They'd repaired and reinforced the walls surrounding the adobe, installed automated security cameras with facial recognition capabilities, and organized active security – guys with guns – before starting on renovations of the building itself. Amazingly, Cara had gotten the security systems set up in less than two weeks, and three apartments in the building ready for occupancy a week later.

In the meantime, she'd restarted work on the park, which she'd renamed in Padre Olvera's memory.

Only then did she organize larger and more permanent office space for Gulf States Security in the Gulf States Petroleum headquarters building. Bud, Cara, and, of course, Red, each had private offices along one connecting corridor.

Col. Berger had been haunting that corridor, mostly pestering Bud about inconsequential details of ROV capabilities. She hadn't been able to figure out what he really wanted. Now, it had come out, and she wasn't quite prepared to deal with it.

Bud knocked on Red's door. On hearing Red's "Come in," invitation, she opened the door, stepped into Red's office, closed the door, and leaned her back on it as if to hold it shut.

"Whatamigonnado?" she asked, breathlessly.

"About what?" Red asked, looking up from the duty roster she'd been studying.

"Inigo Berger just asked me out for dinner!"

"I've been waiting for that. He's been lurking out there all day looking for excuses to talk to you. I figured he was working up courage to ask you out."

"Why?"

"Obviously, he thinks he's in love with you."

"He's in love with me?"

"Is there an echo in here? That's what I said."

"Whatamigonnado?" Bud asked again, almost in a panic.

"You're going to let him wine you, dine you, and entertain you. Eventually, we hope you'll let him fuck you. You need it, you know."

“But ...”

“No buts. Get back out there before he gets cold feet. Tell him you’d love to go to dinner with him. Ask him where, what time, and what should you wear? Haven’t you ever been on a date before? For someone who brags about gang bangs at frat parties, you’re not doing this very well.”

Red paused a minute, staring at Bud still standing with her back pressed against the door.

“What are you waiting for,” Red prompted. “Do you need to bum some condoms, or what? Get out!”

Blinking, Bud stood up, turned around, and stepped out of the door. After the door closed, Red smiled affectionately, then went back to studying the duty roster.

Bud went back to her office, opened the door, and sat down opposite Inigo across her desk.

She cleared her throat. Then, as if making a speech she’d practiced too much, but at the same time not enough, she said, brightly: “I’d love to go to dinner with you Inigo. Where would you like to meet? At what time? And, what should I wear?”

“How about right here, right now? You look wonderful the way you are.”

She had on a fairly standard light blue cotton suit with a knee-length skirt, and a pink blouse with a Peter Pan collar laid over the suit jacket’s lapels. At her throat, she wore a small amethyst pendant on a light gold chain.

“Please allow me to escort you,” Inigo said, standing up and offering her his arm. He was sure he was making a clumsy mess of it, but he was out of practice. He was pleased that she didn’t seem to mind his ineptitude.

She held up her index finger as a signal that he should wait just one minute. As she made the gesture, she reached with the other hand for the telephone handset. Picking it up, she poked at a button on the desk set.

“Alberto,” she said to the telephone, “this is Bud. I’m letting a handsome Mexican wolf take me to dinner. Please meet us in the garage with the car.”

“Red would never let me take a cab, or walk in this city without protection,” she said to Inigo by way of explanation. Then, she stepped around the desk, put her arm in his, and said: “*Vamos a ir, señor Lobo?*” – “Shall we go, Mr. Wolf?”

She smiled like a schoolgirl as they walked to the elevator.

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“This is actually kinda weird,” Bud told Inigo. “We’ve gone out of our way to find a great, authentic Italian restaurant – in Tampico, Mexico.”

“Why is that strange?” he asked.

“Most Americans would expect to be thrilled to find real, authentic Mexican cuisine,” she explained, “and be gorging on it all they could, not hunting for shrimp scampi.”

“I’m still not sure I understand,” Inigo said, looking slightly perplexed.

“We’re surrounded by wonderful food from one of the great cuisine cultures in the world, and we’ve gone out of our way to find food from another.”

“Ah,” he said, thinking he’d gotten her point, finally. “You’re surprised that Mexicans seek out Italian food. But, you’re forgetting that to Mexicans, Mexican food is not exotic. When we want to show a pretty woman a good time at an exotic restaurant, we go to an exotic restaurant. For us, Italian is exotic.”

“You listed Mexican and Italian as two great cuisine cultures,” he went on, trying to draw out the conversation, “but you implied that there are others. What are they?”

“There are, maybe, three really superb food cultures in the world,” she elaborated. “Mexican, Italian, and Chinese. There are a lot of other, really great food cultures, but only those three stand out as being distinctive, almost invariably wonderful tasting, and ... I dunno. Extraordinary. There’s something about those three cuisine styles that make them stand out, and I’m not sure how to put my finger on it. They’re just there. The dishes are varied. They’re almost all delicious. People almost universally agree that they’re wonderful.”

“You forgot one: American,” Inigo added. “To us, that is an extraordinary and distinctive cuisine style as well.”

“I guess you’re right,” Bud admitted. “If you think about dishes we typically think of as American, like cheeseburgers with

fries and a milkshake, they are distinctive, almost always delicious, and varied.”

“Perhaps it has to do with the cultural setting. In this restaurant, you feel like you’re in Italy, not Mexico. There is another restaurant down the street that feels just like an American diner from the 1950s.”

“That probably has a lot to do with it, but not all. For example, Doc’s favorite Mexican restaurant is in New Mexico. It doesn’t look like a Mexican restaurant, but the flavors are spectacular. We stopped there once when riding back from Texas to Arizona by motorcycle.”

“You ride a motorcycle?” Inigo would not have been surprised. Bud was certainly big enough and strong enough to handle even a heavy motorcycle, and she seemed to have the forceful personality that he would expect in a woman who rode a motorcycle. He’d just never heard her talk about motorcycling before.

“Actually, no,” Bud admitted. “Both Red and Doc have big touring bikes. I rode with them. Sometimes with Red. Sometimes with Doc, but mostly with Red.”

“I’m confused about your relationship with them,” Inigo said, confused.

Bud realized that her free-spirit lifestyle might not set well with him. She looked at her hands for a long time before answering, trying to figure out what she wanted to say. She realized that he probably had a strict Catholic upbringing, and her attitudes could very well shock him, or even be repugnant to him. Finally, she decided that it would be best to tell him everything. If it bothered him, it would be best to get it out right away.

“Inigo,” she started, “I have always been what a lot of people might call a ‘loose woman.’ I’ve always enjoyed sex, and have enjoyed it with a number of partners. Before they were married, I had affairs with both Red and Doc.”

She let that sink in.

“Together?” was what Inigo decided to ask.

“No, Red wouldn’t like that. She’s very protective of Doc. The way I usually like to put it, is that she doesn’t like to share. I know of only one time she shared a man, and that was her with two men, and she dumped them both immediately afterward.”

“Let me try to explain,” Bud attempted.

“Red and Doc are like that,” she held up her right hand with the index and middle fingers tightly crossed.

“There’s no room between them, but it wasn’t always like that,” she added. Then she backed up, “Red and I were roommates in our freshman year at Harvard. In those days, I liked women more than men, but I’ve always been attracted to both.”

Inigo looked surprised, then a little shocked, then a little disappointed. Bud had expected this, but plowed ahead, anyway. If he decided not to like her, he’d decide not to like her. Period.

“Anyway,” Bud continued with a sinking feeling, “she and I played around a little together, but she wasn’t at all serious about it. She really likes guys a lot. In fact, I don’t think she’s ever really had a sexual relationship with any woman, but me.”

“After freshman year, she got her own apartment, and we kinda drifted apart. We didn’t have any more classes together, and hardly ever saw each other. Besides, she was looking for a husband, and I was just looking for fun.”

“Just before graduating, Red took off on this quest to find out what happened to her natural father. Mark Shipton is her mother’s second husband. The first one disappeared mysteriously when Red was just a little girl.”

“That was when she met Doc,” Bud continued. “Doc helped her find out what had happened. In the process, Red fell head over heels for Doc, and he pretty much did the same for her.”

“Anyway, for some reason that’s never really been clear to anyone but Doc, and maybe me (but I’m not sure I understand it, really), Red refused to marry Doc for the longest time. He asked her every day for what seemed like forever, but she still kept saying ‘no.’”

“Doc was actually the one who got Red and me back together. After graduation, I was working on this project for my Masters in archaeology. You did know that I’m really an archaeologist, didn’t you.”

“No, I did not,” Inigo responded, looking like a man who was getting information faster than he could process it.

“Well, I am. To do this project I needed help doing some computer modeling. My advisor suggested I talk to Doc, who’d written some software I needed to use. Doc, in turn, shoved me at Red, who, it turned out, was working on a new user interface for that same software.”

“I hope I’m not boring you,” she said, tentatively. She’d realized that all this talk about research projects, computers, and software might not sound very interesting to him.

“No,” he responded, “I’m trying to find out more about you.”

“Thank you,” she blushed.

“Anyway,” she took up her narrative again, “Red was living up in Boston, mooning over Doc, but refusing to admit it. At the same time, she was looking for a project for her Ph.D. thesis. Doc thought my research problem would work for her thesis, so he connected us up.”

“Now, you remember that I’d been hot for Red for years, even though she was kinda luke-warm on account of really, really wanting a husband, not a girlfriend. Just at that time, however, she wasn’t dating anyone. She was too busy trying to sort out her feelings for Doc.”

“So, I got her to try the other side of the street. We moved in together, working together during the day, and sleeping together at night. I realized I’d been in love with her all the time. For a while there, she thought she might feel the same.”

Inigo was having trouble dealing with this, but was trying to be patient. He had, of course, wanted to start a relationship with Bud, but hadn’t known about this aspect of her life. He was still deciding how much of a difference it made.

“When I finally got to meet Doc, face-to-face, I found out why Red loved him so much. She was still trying to stay away from him, though, so I snuck in between them.”

“Red didn’t like that. It’s what made her finally realize how much she wanted him. As soon as I showed interest, she started fighting for him.”

“She won. I lost,” Bud concluded.

“But, you are still dear friends,” Inigo observed.

“That’s just the right way to put it,” Bud agreed. “Red and I are dear friends because we were best friends long before we were ever lovers. Doc and I are close friends, too, as strange as that may sound.”

“So, what happened on the motorcycle trip?”

“Oh,” Bud had forgotten how they’d gotten onto this subject in the first place, “nothing, really. We’re all good friends. Red, however, doesn’t want to share, and Doc’s only interested in her. So, ...”

“So, that leaves you out,” Inigo observed, although he was surprised at himself for how easily he was empathizing with her point of view. If you’d asked him yesterday, he would have said that he could never understand the feelings of a homosexual, male or female.

“That leaves me out.” Bud agreed. “I’m still looking for someone of my own. I thought I’d found him. He’s a vice president in a company that’s partly funding Red’s and my research. We were married for a couple of years, but then he dumped me for – another girl.” She growled that last part between clenched teeth.

“So, I’m looking again,” she concluded.

“You have nobody in the United States?” Inigo asked. He wasn’t sure, anymore, what he wanted his relationship to be with this woman. She was *very* attractive (perhaps exciting was a better word), and he liked her as a person, and respected her professionally. He was no longer sure whether he wanted to take her home to meet his mother, though.

“Actually, I do have a guy there,” Bud explained. “But, he’s there and I’m here. And, I don’t know how long I’m going to have to be here.”

She thought for a moment, and then said: “This is a wonderful country, but I don’t want to be a mercenary. I don’t want to fight drug cartels. I want to go home. I want to finish my Ph.D. I want to be an archaeology professor. This is all something some very bad people dragged me into when I was minding my own business, and now I don’t know how to get out of it. I resent it, and want to get back to my life.”

She stopped for a moment, then said: “And those bastards are all dead, now.”

“So,” Inigo asked, “what is keeping you here?”

“Your fucking drug war!” she exclaimed, heatedly.

“I see what the cartels are doing down here,” she continued, “and I can’t just leave them to it. If I went back, I’m afraid I’d read in the newspaper how you, and my other friends down here were all killed by the Escobedos, and this wonderful country was turned into a toilet. I’d never forgive myself.”

“Do you know,” Inigo said, seeing her perplexity, “why a soldier is willing to stand up to be shot by the enemy?”

“No, I’ve never understood that. I’ve studied history. I know all about battles from the stone age to today. I know about

weapons technology, and what it does to human bodies, and I'm learning what it does to human minds. I've never understood why someone would be willing to set themselves up to be on the receiving end of all that. I've always vaguely assumed that each soldier somehow believed it wouldn't happen to *them*. That somehow, the guy to the left might die, and the guy to the right may die, but they would, somehow, be spared. But, I can't imagine anyone being that delusional."

"They aren't," Inigo explained. "They do it for the same reason you are here. Most of them would much rather be somewhere else. But, each soldier knows that if he deserted, the guy to the left, and the guy to the right would be much more likely to be killed. And, he knows that the side he is fighting for would be weakened, and might not be able to hold. He would be letting his friends down when they needed him the most, and he couldn't live with that. That's why they stay."

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"Baby, what are we going to do?" Bud asked Red over breakfast the next morning. "We've gotta wind this thing down, and get back to our lives. We both have Ph.D.s to finish. You've got to get back to your kids. I need to get back to Glen before he finds someone else, like Suby did."

Cara had organized the adobe mansion like a small hotel. It had a large dining room with several square tables that could be set up individually, or pulled together, depending on who was there at the time. With half a dozen security people just to guard the place, as well as a cook and a housekeeper for staff, it made no sense to try to set everyone up with a separate apartment with a full kitchen. Everyone had a suite consisting of a bedroom, sitting room, and bathroom.

For each day, Cook planned a *prix fixe* menu – with the price fixed at zero. Meals were served on a when-you-get-there basis to allow for different schedules. Breakfast was available from five in the morning to noon; lunch served from eleven to six; and dinner served from five to ten. At other hours, anyone could go to the buffet corner to help themselves to cold drinks and sandwiches from the refrigerator, or coffee from the espresso machine.

Since the Gulf States Security executives (Cara, Bud and Red) had taken up residence there, they'd made it a regular thing to meet in the dining room at eight o'clock in the morning for a breakfast-and-strategy meeting. That morning meeting often stretched out until ten.

"Did you talk to Inigo about this?" Red countered Bud's complaint.

“Yeah, it ended up being just about all we talked about,” Bud said. “After dinner, we went to a nightclub to dance all that Italian food off. Then, we went back to my room to fool around a bit, but ended up just talking. He isn’t going to have a permanent relationship with a bisexual *gringa* with hot pants. I’m no more in the running for Mrs. Lobo than a hooker at the local brothel.”

“I haven’t noticed you having hot pants recently, Bud,” Red pointed out. “I wish you’d show more enthusiasm, in fact. We used to have lots of fun comparing adventures.”

“It’s not so much fun, anymore,” Bud complained. “I look at your family, and I want one of my own, not another in a long series of one-night stands. I want to get back to Glen, and *make it work!*”

Red’s friend was growing up.

“Yeah, but we can’t leave the people down here in the lurch,” Red pointed out. “Besides, if I don’t do something about the Escobedos, they’re going to keep coming after me until they get me, or Doc, or the kids, or all of us.”

“I know that. That’s the problem,” Bud agreed. “Otherwise I’d be on the first plane back to Arizona. That’s about all Inigo and I talked about: what to do about the Escobedos.”

“Doc was right, again,” Red recalled. “We didn’t do anything positive for ourselves. We just created more problems, and now we’re having to live with them.”

“Let’s make sure we don’t create any new ones from now on,” Bud suggested.

“Easier said than done,” Red concluded.

“So,” Bud returned to her original question, “What are we going to do?”

“Let’s start by setting some realistic goals, just like we did when we started our research,” Red suggested.

“First, we’ve gotta settle the Escobedos,” Bud pointed out. “We can’t have them chasing you around forever.”

“Doc still wants to erase his boat,” Red reminded them, “although I think that’s a second-level priority for us.”

“And, we have a drug-cartel problem,” Bud finalized.

“I don’t think we can realistically expect to see that through to the end, ourselves,” Red opined. “It could take years. By the

time its over, our lives would be used up, and we don't want that. We've already achieved our original goals of destroying the pirates. Let's not make winning the war on international crime a new major goal. Let's just say we want to do something to help."

"You know," Bud said, "we can do that by setting up a local office of Gulf States Security *cum* sales office for SST anti-insurgency tools."

"Inigo once told me," Red recalled, "that they have all the troops and weapons they need here. What I told him we could bring to the party was superior technology, and people who are in a position to do things a territorial state is not in a position to do. I still think it's true."

"Well," Bud pointed out, "the superior technology is really Doc's. We can funnel that here by setting up the local sales and development office in Tampico, like he already wants to. Doc has me running that, now, but that can change. I can get it started, then hand it off to someone else."

"The idea of a joint venture between SST and GSS to provide advanced technology for homeland-security-type applications is not crazy," Red pointed out. "What Gwen is setting up in the Far East could work here: license the technology for local manufacture, supply software, and set up training facilities. You weren't there, but when Doc and I met with the government types in Mexico City, they very pointedly asked about licensing for local manufacture."

Cara interrupted with: "I'm staying!"

Red and Bud each looked at the other to see if she was surprised, too. Then, they both looked back at Cara, questioningly.

"I've no life anywhere else, anymore," Cara explained. "I'm too old to go back to living with my folks. I love it down here, and I've got a *lot* of unfinished business."

"Such as?" Bud prompted.

"Such as finishing the park Father Olvera and I started. Such as keeping those cartels from ruining this country, which I'd like to make *my* country. Such as fighting the drug trade, everywhere. Such as, I dunno. I don't want to stop, go home, and do nothing."

"I'll run your local operation here. I can learn enough to get answers from Scottsdale for any questions I can't answer, myself. I can work with guys like *El Lobo*, and her honor the Mayor of Tampico. I can sure as hell sell technology as well as Gwen can. Give me a chance."

“Alright, you have your chance,” Red said. Cara was making a regular habit of surprising her by displaying unexpected initiative, independence, and competence. “Bud, make sure she knows what to do, and let her do it.”

“Okay, Cara,” Bud took control. “We’ll start by setting up SST’s local operation here. I think your first order of business is to learn Spanish. It’s not really a difficult language, and you’re in the right place to practice. Second, you need to learn all you can about the technology Doc wants to export, especially vocal programming of robots.”

“You’ll start out as *my* assistant,” she concluded. “As you gain experience, you’ll take over more and more responsibility.”

“How long do you think it will take?” Cara asked, meaning before she’d get to run things on her own.

“As long as it takes,” Red said. “It won’t happen overnight, but it won’t take years, either. You did a good job working with Father Olvera, and setting up the facilities here. You’ve nothing to prove. You just need to make the contacts, and learn things like operating ROVs and setting up training facilities. You also need to get flawless with your Spanish. It probably wouldn’t hurt to see what Gwen sets up in the Far East, either, so you can mimic it here.”

“I guess that settles the third item on our list,” Red concluded, “Thank you, Cara.”

“What about Doc’s boat?” Bud asked, bringing up the second item on their revised list of goals.

“That’s Doc’s problem,” Red answered. “He’s my husband and I love him, but he’s a big boy, and can run his own operations. He doesn’t need me holding his hand.”

“That leaves us with the Escobedos,” Bud said.

“That leaves us with the Escobedos,” Red agreed. “I still don’t know what to do about the Escobedos. We could just kill ‘em all, but I don’t really think that’s the answer. It’s the problem, not the solution.”

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Gwen had been disappointed when Eve decided not to go with her to Japan. Gwen had been fantasizing about their visiting places like Mount Fuji, Nagoya Castle, and Kyoto together. While she understood that Eve had her work, and recognized that events

were likely to move fast in Arizona just at that time, she didn't think it would be anywhere near as much fun to play tourist in Japan on her own.

She was right. Every time she visited those places, she missed Eve. She wrote letters, picked out post cards, and shot tons of photos, all of which she sent home to Eve.

Doc was right that Dr. Fujimori mainly wanted Gwen there as a token *gaijin* to blame for any problems. Of course, problems did crop up. First, there was trouble getting the simulator to work with the computers, which were different from those used at SST. Gwen and JD burned up the Internet passing software updates back and forth until they got that squared away.

Then, the verbal programming interface had a terrible time understanding the Japanese pronunciations of English words. For example, Gwen found that the Japanese constantly swapped pronunciations of the letters "L" and "R." So, they pronounced "fly" as "fry," and "fry" as "fly!" She'd had a long, hilariously frustrating discussion over lunch with one of her Japanese counterparts over that one!

Not that it really bothered Gwen. She'd noticed that Bud, who had a Harvard accent you could stand a spoon in, pronounced the word "spar," meaning a horizontal structural member of a ship's rigging, as "spah" at the same time she called a "spa," meaning what is essentially a big hot tub, as "spar." "Cuba" was "Cubur," as well, and "sugar" was "shuggah." Gwen thought Bud's accent was a hoot.

The VP interface, which had been developed by Robotics Concepts folks, whose clear California accents were easy to decode, wasn't so amused. It had taken only one training session for it to get Gwen's West Texas accent practically letter perfect. It needed at least five sessions to understand a Japanese speaker, though.

That was until Gwen and JD added a dozen words to the training list. The new list, which did include "fly" and "fry," cut the typical number of training sessions to between two and three.

Then, there were the manuals. The manuals were written in English. To help Japanese technicians, who were not as English-proficient as the pilots tended to be (because pilots had to interact with air traffic controllers whose official language was English), she had the manuals translated into Japanese.

Doc warned her that translations are fraught with peril. So, rather than handing the translated manuals directly to the technicians she was trying to train, she asked Masada San to read them over, first.

Gwen could see by the look on his face after he'd read the manuals, that Masada was troubled. Clearly, the translations had been botched. They had been botched badly, in fact.

An American would have been blunt, possibly even making jokes about the mistakes. Masada San, however, did not want to criticize. First, he did not want to tell his guest, Gwen, that she'd screwed up by hiring an incompetent translator. Then, he did not want to tell her that the translator, who was a native Japanese, was incompetent. Yet, he did not want anyone else – including his boss, Dr. Fujimori – to see the botched translations.

“Perhaps you could help me find someone to help polish the translations,” Gwen suggested, diplomatically, while Masada was still trying to figure out how to tell her the bad news. He was grateful to be spared the chore of explaining the problem to her.

Masada San agreed that a second editor, who could “polish” the translations – meaning do the job over again – would be a good idea. In the end, they had three translators do the job separately. Then, Masada pieced together the best parts of the three translations, and they had a *fourth* person, an editor for a Japanese-language technical magazine, produce the final manuscript.

Masada San was pleased with the result.

Gwen breathed a sigh of relief.

Doc grimaced when he got the bill for over one hundred thousand dollars for translating the manuals. In the original agreement, Fujimori had agreed to foot the bill for manual translations, but when things started getting out of hand, he'd asked Gwen if SST could help cover it. Doc, who, it turned out, had expected this kind of problem, agreed to cover the whole cost to help soothe ruffled feathers.

Fujimori was delighted.

Again, Gwen had managed to handle a potential disaster.

Gwen finally got herself into real trouble, however, one Friday night when her hosts decided, as a cruel joke, to take her to a strip club after work. It was the kind of thing they did on a Friday night, and what they would have done with a visiting male engineer. After a few drinks, taking Gwen suddenly seemed like a good idea at the time.

They didn't know Gwen very well.

Instead of being embarrassed, as the Japanese engineers had expected, Gwen was delighted with the show. What they didn't

know was that Gwen had once made her living as a stripper in Reno, Nevada before Doc decided she'd make an excellent robotics engineer. That was, in fact, where Eve and Doc had first met her.

Red seemed to be the only one on the planet who claimed to understand the thought process that led Doc to peg a stripper/hooker/porn star as a promising candidate for a job as a robotics product engineer. And, even she'd made the comment that it would have gotten anybody but Doc locked in an insane asylum. Once again, however, his crazy logic had proved to be right on the money.

Gwen and the engineers started drinking right after work. Then, they started bar hopping, and ended up in the strip club about nine o'clock. By eleven, they were all roaring drunk.

They'd gotten the strippers to hang around with them between sets.

One of the girls, who had even less of an idea about Gwen's background than the Japanese engineers did, challenged Gwen to get up and perform. Everyone expected Gwen to be embarrassed and struggle for a way to politely avoid it. They figured watching her squirm her way out of it would be entertaining.

Gwen, however, took the challenge and performed. She performed as well or better than the regular strippers.

Then, she challenged the girl who'd challenged her to get up for a duet performance.

And, the girl did.

They started out wearing brief panties, which is how far Gwen had gotten with her solo performance. It was as far as the strippers were supposed to go at that bar. The Japanese stripper made it clear to Gwen that the rules said they had to keep their panties on.

So, they worked on what could be done without taking the panties off. First, Gwen started pulling the front her own panties down to show her clit to the patrons – in return for their stuffing money in to join it. Then, she started showing the other girl's clit – for cash. Not to be outdone, the other girl sold more peeks at Gwen's clit.

The next thing was for Gwen to rub her clit for a price. Then the other girl followed suit. Soon, they made a franchise out of each rubbing the other's clit. Next it was stroking a finger into the vagina. Then, the other girl hit upon rubbing breast nipples.

By one o'clock, with Gwen drunkenly trying to show the Japanese stripper how they could rub their clits together without

pulling their panties down below their knees, they were thrown out of the bar. Gwen left with about forty thousand yen in cash – equivalent to several hundred dollars.

Some of her underwear had disappeared. Six months later, it turned up in an eBay auction.

Come Monday, there was a lot of joking around water coolers in Japanese. The other engineers, however, were overly formal and polite to Gwen.

Dr. Fujimori complained to Doc. Doc explained that Gwen was young, out of her element, and unsure of what she'd been expected to do. All of which was plausible, but Doc didn't believe it for a minute. Doc knew what an accomplished stripper Gwen had been, and figured she couldn't resist showing off.

He used the situation to suggest that it might be good to start training a local Japanese manager to take over the program after the initial start-up period. Fujimori agreed.

When did Doc think Gwen would be recalled? Fujimori expected some disciplinary action. Doc didn't bother to tell him that he was actually delighted by the turn of events. He wanted Gwen back in Scottsdale to continue her engineering career. He was also hoping to find a bootleg video of the performance to add to his collection.

Doc opined that it would take at least another two weeks to find a local to replace Gwen, and train him. Would Fujimori help with the recruitment process? Nobody at SST knew anything about recruiting engineers in Yokohama, nor did they have any contacts.

In addition, Doc wanted one of his people to come out and observe Gwen's operation to make sure it met SST standards. This person, Carolyn Mayne, was setting up SST's Latin American operation, but could be spared for a week or so to observe in Japan. He did not tell Fujimori that Cara would be learning from Gwen, not the other way around.

"I'm sorry, Boss," Gwen said when she met with Cara and Doc in his Tokyo hotel suite a few days later. He'd flown out with Cara to assure Fujimori that SST was taking the matter seriously. "I didn't know it would get back to Fujimori, or that it would upset him if it did. The way the Japanese ..."

"Don't be sorry, Honey," he interrupted. "It's not the smartest thing you've ever done, but I'm delighted with the way things have worked out. Did any of those guys happen to record your performance?"

"No," Gwen reported, thinking (correctly) that she knew why he was asking, and that it meant Doc wasn't at all angry with her.

It reminded her, again, why she was so grateful that he'd come into her life, and why she was ready to do absolutely anything he asked her to. "They don't allow cameras in that club because the management wants to control who sees what. I'm sure the owner's kicking himself that he didn't get it on tape, though. It would have been great publicity for the bar on the Internet."

Cara knew generally what had happened, but not details. She'd just heard that Gwen had been called on the carpet for doing a strip in front of some Japanese engineers. Since Gwen had helped her – more than once – when she needed it, she was worried about Gwen, and wanted to help her all she could.

She was having trouble dealing with Doc's reaction, though. It just wasn't what she expected a company CEO to do. She thought he'd be stern with Gwen.

Seeing Cara's confusion, Doc explained: "The Japanese originally wanted Gwen as a permanent part of the Far East operation. I'd never intended that to happen. We need her much more in Scottsdale, and she needs to be in Scottsdale. This provides a convenient excuse to recall her."

"You mean," Cara asked, dumbfounded, "that you guys set this up on purpose?"

"No," Doc replied, "we didn't plan it. We're just taking advantage of it. If it hadn't come up, we would have had to engineer something else."

"Aren't you afraid the Japanese will be mad?"

"Cara, they need us more than we need them," Doc explained. "SST is providing them with an 'in' on the most advanced UAV technology around. Without us, they'd be out in the cold. Remember, they practically crashed Senator Bosley's party in an effort to contact us. Gwen is not in trouble. You aren't really here to evaluate her performance."

"You're here for two reasons," he explained to Cara. "Most importantly, we want you to copy as much of what Gwen's set up here as possible for your operation in Latin America. That's top priority. You also need to become really proficient with verbal programming, and helping Gwen teach it to the pilots is a good way to learn it."

"Secondly, we need you to help Gwen get the local operation here cranked up, PDQ. She's already gone over the time I'd allotted for her to be here. She's got a life in Scottsdale, and a degree to finish. Red would skin me alive if I let her baby's life get screwed up. You know Red has a special place in her heart for Gwen."

“Yeah, I’d heard about that. I wish somebody would take care of me like that.”

“I plan to, baby,” Gwen said. “I pulled you out of that harem, didn’t I? I helped you convince Red to go back to Tampico. Now, we’re going to do this, and then we’ll work on setting up your Latin American operation.”

The penny finally dropped. All along, Cara had felt guilty about always going to Gwen when she needed help. To find out that Gwen actually *wanted* to help her gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling inside.

Not knowing what else to say, she said, simply: “Thank you.”

“Making a show of checking on Gwen is a distant third priority,” Doc continued. “We want the Japanese to think we’re really serious about supporting their efforts to introduce our technology to the Far East. We want them to think that mostly because it’s true. While they need us more than we need them, we *do* need them. This deal will vastly increase SST’s revenue – at relatively little expense, by the way. It’s a huge coup for us as a company, and for Gwen individually. So, we really want the Japanese to be happy with SST.”

“That’s where you come in. Officially, you are here to review Gwen’s operation, and to report back to me. So, I want you to act like a senior executive. You aren’t her boss, but you are supposed to be an impartial third party here to make an evaluation. So, be critical, and ask questions. Ask *hard* questions. And, learn all you can.”

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“What is that idiot doing, now?” Red asked nobody in particular.

Doc was in Japan sorting out the craziness surrounding Gwen’s impromptu strip show. Red would have liked to go, if for no reason other than to protect her “baby,” Gwen, whom she treated like a daughter. But, nobody had asked her to go. Doc was the right person to go. She would have just been in the way.

Before Doc had left, she’d made sure he wasn’t going to be too hard on the girl, though.

The kids and Maryanne were still with Grandpa and Grandma Shipton visiting up in Massachusetts with Grandma and Grandpa Manchek. Bud was in Tampico, getting that operation organized. Red had come to the conclusion that she wasn’t really needed anywhere for a few days, so she took the opportunity for a mini-vacation back in Arizona.

Red had decided to camp out at Doc's apartment overlooking the Scottsdale Municipal Airport flight line. Doc still kept it open in case somebody worked late and needed a place to crash. It was only a five-minute drive from SST headquarters. Sam stopped in for a couple of hours every Thursday to make sure things were in good order, that the place was clean, and that the freezer was stocked with things an over-tired executive could throw into the microwave, then use to fill up the empty hole behind the navel.

Other than that, the place was generally empty. It was one place Red could go, and not have to see another person for a while. She liked people, and liked having them around most of the time. But, once in a while, she had to get off on her own.

She'd been seated in one of the red leather club chairs in Doc's big bedroom, with her feet propped up on the round, solid-marble coffee table while staring out of the glass wall, idly thinking about whether she should put on some clothes – she'd gone back to the nudist habit she and Bud had started as roommates in the freshman dorm all those many years ago – and go downtown for breakfast, or should she just defrost something here, or should she skip breakfast and dive back into the novel she'd pulled out of Doc's library.

While sort of thinking about these things, she'd been mostly absorbed in watching the morning Sun paint the buildings of downtown Phoenix red, then change its mind and re-color them orange, then have another change of heart to make them yellow-gold. She figured that about the time it settled on the bright blue-white of full daylight, it would be time for her to actually make a decision and do *something*.

She hadn't gotten that far. Her cellphone had buzzed insistently. It turned out to be her computer trying to tell her that Manuelito Porfirio had taken Doc's boat out past the thirty-mile limit from Havana harbor, which she'd set as the dividing line between casual putt-putting around and a serious cruise that might be significant.

She'd used Doc's computer in the library to monitor what her computer at home was gathering from its various information sources. Her computer linked to NSA satellite multi-spectral imagery, the tracker the Mexican Navy had snuck onto Doc's boat, Google Maps, and various other information sources to assemble a real-time picture, which it could flash via the SST intranet to the seventy-two inch screen above Doc's desk in the library.

For half an hour she'd watched the boat heading at high speed toward the Florida Keys. After convincing herself that the destination really was Key Largo, and that the boat wouldn't get there for at least another couple of hours, she had put on a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt and a pair of boots, and headed down Scottsdale Road to Einstein Brothers Bagels near the ASU campus. She'd decided that she had a yen for a ham, egg, and cheese bagel for breakfast, washed down with a double espresso, and a big dose of orange juice.

The whole trip ate up an hour and a half, including getting out her red Triumph motorcycle, driving it down to the parking lot that the bagel shop fronted behind the Cornerstone Mall, ordering, waiting, taking her breakfast in its little take-out bag outside to eat while sitting on the wall by the big funny artsy thing on the corner near the mall entrance, then going back for a second double espresso, taking *it* back to the wall to dawdle over while watching everybody else going by to do something they thought must be important, then getting back on the motorcycle to roar back up Scottsdale Road to Doc's building, then finally stripping down again to watch the Manuelito Porfirio show on Doc's computer monitor. By that time the boat was coming up on the Florida Keys.

The boat slowed to twenty-seven knots – roughly best fuel-mileage speed – and began cruising up and down from North Key Largo to Marathon and back, keeping about five miles off the coast. She watched for hours as it kept up the monotonous pattern. Once in a while, it would head off in some apparently random direction for a few minutes, then go back to the monotonous back-and-forth pattern paralleling the coastline. This kept up all day, and into the night.

After an hour of watching, herself, she had set a software agent to monitor the boat's course, and beep if it varied by too much. That meant that she would get a beep when it turned around at the end of each pass, as well as one whenever Porfirio changed course for reasons of his own. Then, she'd pulled out the novel.

The boat's pattern reminded Red of how Bud had described patrolling the Keys with the pirates, looking for pleasure craft to hijack. She called Bud at her office in Tampico the next morning. Bud didn't pick up, but Red left her a voice-mail message to call back.

"Bud, the little nebbish who's got Doc's boat is doing something weird with it," she explained when Bud returned her call.

"Weird in what way?" Bud asked.

"Weird in that he took it out of Havana yesterday morning, and sailed up to about five miles off Key Largo. Since then, he's been going up and down paralleling the coast from North Key Largo to Marathon. It takes two or three hours to make one pass, then he turns around, and goes back. He spent all day yesterday doing it. About midnight, he crossed under the bridge between Long Key and Lower Matecumbe to anchor in Florida Bay. This morning he crossed back to the Atlantic side to start his pattern again. He's making his second pass, now. Any idea what's going on?"

"Have you plotted his track?" Bud asked.

"Yes. I can email you the whole thing from the time he left Havana yesterday morning. Here it comes ..."

About thirty seconds later, Bud said: “There it is. Wait a minute while I open it. ... Yeah, it looks like he’s doing the same thing Rodriguez did to hunt for boats to hijack. Your little nebbish has turned pirate!”

“The asshole! I wonder what Doc will want to do about it. I can guarantee he’s not going to want Porfirio to catch anyone. How big was the bomb you put on the boat?”

“It was a few pounds of C4,” Bud explained. “But it’s not the explosive itself that would give it its punch. The stuff’s right under the fuel tanks. It was designed to blow the fuel up into the air, then ignite it. I wouldn’t want to be within a hundred yards of it when it went off, especially if the tanks are full.”

“Thanks, Bud,” Red said. “I don’t know where, exactly, Doc is now, but I’ll try to get in touch with him to see what he wants to do. Meanwhile, I’ll monitor the boat in case Porfirio tries to take down a victim.”

“Don’t let him get anybody. They’ll murder anybody they can find just to get their boat. It’s really a nasty business. I’m tempted to tell you to just blow the boat now, before they try to hijack somebody. Kind of like prophylactic use of antibiotics. Kill the baddies before they have a chance to do something bad.”

Red’s next call was to Doc. She got an “out of service area” message. So, she sent an email to him at his SST address explaining what she’d observed, Bud’s interpretation, and including the map of the boat’s track as an attachment. She asked him to call her ASAP to say what he wanted her to do. She told him about Bud’s concern.”

Half an hour later, Red’s cellphone buzzed. It was Doc.

“Hey, baby. Love you. Miss you. I got your email saying Porfirio’s taken *Strange Brew* out on a pirate run. I agree with your and Bud’s assessment. We don’t know if it’s actually Porfirio, though. He might have sold the boat to somebody who’s taken it out. He’s had time to do that. Otherwise, I don’t know why he’d have waited so long before turning pirate. If he was going to do it, I would have expected him to do it sooner.”

“Maybe he’s run out of money,” Red speculated. “He didn’t have time to plan his little Cuban vacation before he bolted from Miami. Maybe he’s run out of cash.”

“Yeah, but I can almost guarantee that he’s in touch with his mother, wherever she is now, and she’s probably able to send him money. If he’s turned pirate, it’s not because he’s got the shorts.”

“It really makes no difference who the pirates are,” Doc continued. “They’ve got my boat, and it looks like they want to start this whole sad story all over again.”

“What do you want to do?” Red asked.

“Call the Coast Guard in Miami. They already know we can track the boat. Let them know what’s going on and that we’re tracking the boat in real time. Let them know we’ve got the boat wired with explosives. Altogether, there’s twenty-two pounds of C4 aboard, and it’s positioned under two one-thousand-gallon diesel-fuel tanks. They should be able to take down the boat without setting off the charges. If not, dropping an explosive round into the cockpit should light off the whole package. Or, if they’d prefer, we can light it off remotely. You’ve got the codes, haven’t you? If not, Capt. Warren on the *Mary McKenna* has them. Just call the Iridium phone number for the bombs, then key in the detonate code. If need be, I can do it from here.”

“Where, exactly, is ‘here,’ by the way? I wasn’t able to contact you before.”

“Los Angeles International – LAX. We’re refueling. We should be back in the air within the hour, but we’ve got cellphone coverage the rest of the way to Scottsdale.”

“Ohhh! Come see me when you get in,” Red enthused. “I’m taking a few days off at your apartment. Really private. Nobody around. We can run around naked all day feeling each other up.”

“I’d like that. See you around noon.”

“Will your phone-bomb work under water?” Red asked, getting back to the reason for the call. She hadn’t paid a great deal of attention at the time they’d planned the bombs, since Doc was making the technical arrangements. Now, she wanted to know.

“The electronics aren’t really under water, unless the bilge is flooded. There’s just a few inches of hardwood and epoxy between the antennas and the sky. The Iridium system was originally planned to work in the bottom of a rainforest. It was supposed to be the phone system of last resort for people who lived so far out in the boonies that they had no telephone infrastructure, so it’s designed to work in tough environments, including under a rainforest canopy. There should be no problem with just the boat bottom and deck between the antenna and the sky.”

“I think, however, that the Coast Guard will want to catch ‘em in the act, and arrest them,” Doc opined. “We can scuttle the boat later. The main thing is to keep the pirates from ruining some innocent pleasure boaters’ day.”

“Okay, Doc,” Red replied. “I’ll let you know what happens.”

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Doc was right. The Coast Guard didn’t want to summarily blow the boat up, even if its owner did. They wanted to at least board her to find out who was aboard. For all they knew, Porfirio had hired it out for a wedding, and the only people aboard were a bride, a groom, and a four-piece mariachi band. It *looked* like a pirate cruise, but didn’t have to be one. They should be able to tell what was going on when they boarded her.

Porfirio wasn’t particularly concerned when he saw the Coast Guard cutter, and got their hail while making his turn off Marathon Key. He’d already gone through this with the Coast Guard in Miami. He’d been in jail for seventy-one hours on suspicion of drug smuggling, but the DEA had let him go. At the last minute, the Coast Guard showed up with a piracy charge. That hadn’t gone anywhere, either. They’d just held him for another forty-eight hours, and then sent him on his way.

He still had no idea that Doc had used the time to attach two remotely detonated mines to his hull.

They’d scared the pants off him that time, but he’d had a chance to think about it since. They’d already arrested him for drug smuggling and piracy, and let him go. He didn’t think they could arrest him again on the same charges, so he figured he was safe.

What he failed to understand was that he’d never been charged with either crime, so there was no double-jeopardy issue. And, double-jeopardy did not cover similar but separate crimes, anyway. Also, he had no idea that he was sitting on enough flammable material and explosives to turn him into flaming fish bait whenever Doc’s unseen hand decided to strike.

So, when the Coast Guard cutter ordered him to heave-to for inspection, he wasn’t worried at all.

Rafael, however, was worried. He was Porfirio’s second in command, and an experienced pirate.

It had been Porfirio’s striking up a friendship with him in a Havana bar that had set the whole cruise in motion. Rafael had been looking for a fast boat to take pirating, and Porfirio had a fast boat sitting idle in the harbor.

Rafael didn’t know if the Coast Guard would recognize him. There might be outstanding warrants for him, but he didn’t know. He was smart enough, however, to think maybe.

Having more experience with American law than Porfirio, he was under no illusions with respect to double jeopardy. He also knew that the Coast Guard could shadow *Strange Brew* forever, or until she returned to Havana, whichever happened sooner. Certainly, they could be right there to stop them if they attempted to hijack a boat.

Unless, by some miracle, the Coast Guard just went away, this trip would be a bust. They weren't going to take any prizes with the Coast Guard hanging around out there. If they did, the Coast Guard would arrest them for piracy, and then try to hang every unsolved pirate attack for the past twenty years on them. Of course, if any of the crew had more than a single marijuana joint, they'd all go down for smuggling.

What Rafael needed was to avoid being boarded, and get back to Cuban territorial waters where the Coast Guard couldn't follow. Instead of heaving to, Rafael wanted to hook up and boogie on out of there! A cutter might make thirty, or even forty knots, maximum. Rafael knew *Strange Brew* could make double that. He wanted to run. He *needed* to run.

Porfirio told the crew – all six of them – to wave and smile. Sure, the Coast Guard would come and look over the boat, but they'd already smoked most of the weed they'd brought on board. They were well armed, but there was nothing the Coast Guard could say about that. They had a right to carry guns aboard for protection.

In fact, with a Mexican registration, he didn't think they could even legally board the boat. The registration was fake, but the Coast Guard had no way (Porfirio thought) of knowing that. They'd just ask some questions, and then the Coast Guard would go away.

He really believed that.

Lt. Taylor, skipper of USCG 347, *Hustler*, had no intention of going away. He knew what boat he was hailing. He knew it was not legally registered in Mexico, no matter what was painted on the transom. He knew that whoever was on that boat had no legal right to be there. He wasn't going to stop at asking a few innocent questions. He was going to board that boat, and go over it with a fine-toothed comb. He already had an excuse to interdict it – it was stolen property. He was looking for an excuse to clap everyone aboard in irons for the next twenty years.

His counterpart on the USCG 465, *Tally Ho*, was coming over the horizon to head the pirates off should they try to run. So were two other vessels. All were converging from different directions.

"We must leave," Rafael told Porfirio, who was standing at the helm. Porfirio liked standing at the helm, as if he were in control. He was the captain, right? He should be in control, right?

“No!” Porfirio shouted back. “We have nothing to fear. We just have to answer a few little questions. They won’t even board the boat.”

“No, WE MUST LEAVE!” Rafael shouted, and tried to get at the power controls.

Porfirio blocked him.

Rafael pushed Porfirio out of the way, and leaped for the controls.

By this time, the seaman behind the machine gun on *Hustler’s* foredeck had a bead on a point ten yards ahead of *Strange Brew’s* bow. He could see that, depending on who won the struggle aboard the mahogany boat, he might have to fire a warning burst instantaneously. He’d already taken up the trigger slack.

Rafael tripped as he reached for the controls. He managed to push the port control forward half way, but missed the other completely. Then, he fell on his face against the wheel, spinning it to starboard. The combination made *Strange Brew* leap sideways, and spin to starboard, toward *Hustler*.

Surprised, the gunner tried to simultaneously fire his burst, and swing the gun around to track the boat. Swinging the gun too fast, he accidentally shot away *Strange Brew’s* port stern cleat, along with a big chunk of gunwale.

He hoped none of the bullets or flying debris hit anyone. Courts, even military courts, took a dim view of sailors who shot anybody by accident. You can shoot ‘em on purpose all you want, but not accidentally. We’re supposed to be professional when handling loaded firearms!

Lucky for him, nobody was hit by anything. Porfirio had fallen face-up on the cockpit deck when Rafael pushed him. Rafael landed face-down in the footwell between the helm seat and the bulkhead forward of the steering wheel. The five remaining crewmen hit the deck when they heard the first pop of the machine-gun burst, except for the one who was close enough to the companionway to dive down below. He knocked himself out by landing head-first on a mahogany table in the salon.

The table had a piece of tempered glass set into the top, covering a navigational chart of the Caribbean. When the crewman’s head hit the table, the tempered glass exploded into hundreds of tiny cubical shards, and his head crashed through the thin plywood veneer underneath. He lay there, unconscious, with his head poked through a hole in the chart.

The boat, however, was now spinning wildly in place, with the port engine at half throttle, and the starboard engine at idle, and

the helm all the way over to starboard.

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At this point, the only thing anyone on the Coast Guard ships could do was stand off and wait for someone aboard the *Strange Brew* to bring her under control. Having been briefed by Red to expect high explosives aboard the boat, the cutters backed well away from the spinning cabin cruiser to avoid a collision. A collision would not have set off the charges under the hull, but they didn't know that for sure, and nobody wanted to do the experiment. They were prepared to sit and watch the boat spin until it ran out of fuel.

Porfirio was probably the first one in a position to bring the boat under control, but he was too panicked for rational thought, anyway. After getting up from the deck – the sound of the machine gun burst hadn't registered on his consciousness – he just stood there, trying not to fall over.

Rafael was barely conscious, himself. He stayed face-down under the helm console, shaking his head.

One of the younger pirates, who had more experience with boats than with crime, managed to get to the controls. Not knowing what to do, he screamed: “*Jefe!* What do I do?” at Porfirio, who didn't even look his way.

The young pirate, seeing that nobody was going to give him any guidance, fell back on his sailor's instincts. He throttled both engines back to idle, centered the wheel, and put both transmissions in neutral.

The boat quickly stopped spinning, and lost what little headway it had. Looking around, the lad saw his boat ringed by gunships with everything they had on deck aimed at *Strange Brew's* center of mass.

He raised his hands over his head.

As soon as *Strange Brew* stopped moving, four launches full of armed sailors converged on her. The pirates were immediately taken off, hands bound together by zip ties. A second wave of small boats carried off the stash of weapons. Then, a forensics team did an initial search of the vessel, turning up enough cocaine left over from earlier drug shipments to arrest everyone aboard for drug smuggling.

The only thing the Coast Guard couldn't prove was piracy. They'd stopped the cruise before the pirates had a chance to find anything to hijack.

Once the forensics team finished their initial reconnaissance, Lt. Taylor assigned an Ensign and two crewmen to bring *Strange Brew* into Station Marathon on Vaca Key for a more thorough search.

As soon as Red had learned how the Coast Guard planned to handle the situation, she contacted Eve, so she could cover the story. Eve managed to get a film crew from a Miami affiliate on board the *Hustler*, and so had first-hand video available. The film crew managed to get pictures of the whole operation, as well as interviews with the officer in charge of the forensics team, who displayed the confiscated weapons and drugs.

The unfortunate machine-gun burst that took out the port stern cleat was edited out. The film crew liked being allowed aboard during the operation, and wanted to be invited back. No disciplinary action was taken against the seaman, although he did get a private lecture in Lt. Taylor's cabin aboard *Hustler* about making sure of his target before pulling the trigger.

The next day, Eve got to Vaca Key for interviews with several officers and crew, and even Porfirio. A local DEA agent explained how *Strange Brew* had been modified for smuggling. He showed the empty spaces created behind the pleasure-boat facades, and explained how drugs could be packed in to make best use of the space.

The DEA agent made a big deal on camera out of the hidden tracking system and explosive mines that Doc had managed to get aboard, and keep hidden for months. He explained how the DEA had used the tracking system to disrupt the cartel's smuggling operation. It made the Escobedos look really, really stupid on national – no, *international* – television. Both Telemundo and Univision pushed the Spanish language version, which was more detailed than the English one, for all they could get out of it.

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Meanwhile, in Yokohama, Gwen and Cara were putting the finishing touches on Gwen's vocal-programming-for-UAVs school.

Gwen had been running a similar operation at SST for over a year to train pilots for all of their robotics customers. In Scottsdale, there was a basic VP class, which lasted a week, followed by classes that specialized in air, land, and underwater mobile robots, and fixed robots programmed using VP. Those were for operators who would be using VP robots. After taking the basic VP course, and at least one of the specialist courses, a student could take a developers course, which taught him or her how to create new application programs for autonomous robots, which were expected to do their tasks without immediate human supervision.

Since the Japanese technology transfer agreement only covered UAVs, that was the only specialist course that would be offered

in Yokohama. Following general aviation practice, English would be the official language, and the course would be set up as immersive. That is, students would have to pass an English proficiency exam as a prerequisite, and all classes would be conducted in English. So, Gwen was able to take the UAV portion of the Scottsdale curriculum, and transplant it to Yokohama verbatim.

Her modification of the VP-interface-training word list, and adaptation of the simulator for the Japanese computers had already been done, so it was just a matter of turning out the first class of students, who were to become the school's instructors.

Bud had already taught Cara the basics of VP programming using simulators in Tampico. She'd also spent a day in Scottsdale working with both Walter and Angela, so she had practical experience as well. That, plus a bit of cramming before each teaching session, allowed Cara to stay ahead of the first batch of students. By the time they got that first batch of students through the program, she was competent to teach VP programming on her own. She didn't have a pilot's license, yet, but in a bizarre twist of the rules, that would be okay, since the students would all be licensed pilots to start with.

In the end, it was decided that there was no need for SST to maintain a representative in Yokohama. Masada ended up having all the expertise needed to administer the school. Production of the hardware would be Fujimori's responsibility. If anything came up they couldn't handle, they would contact Doc directly.

Gwen and Cara could go home.

For Cara, that meant going back to Tampico and setting up a similar school in part of an under-used warehouse at the Gulf States facility.

"We'll need about four thousand square feet," she told Bud when they met for their daily breakfast-and-planning meeting.

Cara had spent most of the twenty-four-hour flight from Yokohama to LAX fantasizing with Gwen about what she wanted her VP school in Mexico to be like. By the time the chartered jet had reached Tampico, after dropping Gwen off in Scottsdale, she had a complete plan, including spreadsheets, lists of equipment, and even a project timeline.

"First, we'll need about five hundred square feet for a classroom – basically for lectures," Cara explained. "Then, we'll need another five hundred square feet for a simulator room. We'll need a big space – at least thirty feet by fifty feet – as a robot lab for demonstrations and practicing. That leaves fifteen hundred square feet for break room, wash rooms, and storage."

"I'm going to make all students start with Worm programming. Those learning about UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) and ASVs (automated submersible vehicles) will have to make do with simulators for now, until we can find a secure airfield, and a

harbor.”

“I dunno,” Bud countered. “I don’t want to see UAV or ASV operators going into military operations who have never flown or sailed a live robot. I think we’ll have to send them to the ‘States to get practical experience before graduating them. Let’s talk to Gwen and Doc before making that decision. Otherwise, your plan looks good. Have you worked out an equipment list, yet?”

“Here it is,” Cara said, handing Bud a three-page printout of a spreadsheet. “I printed it out to make scanning by eye easier. After we’ve gone over it, I’ll make any changes and email you the file.”

Bud studied the spreadsheet for about five minutes while Cara waited.

“I see you’ve got two Worms: one for demos and one for a spare. I think you should increase that.”

“Why?”

“Just a gut feeling. I’m imagining a class of ten to fifteen students trying to share one unit. It’s going to mean a whole lot of people sitting around bored, or fighting over the headsets. Let’s increase that to at least one Worm for every three students – say five robots and two spares – and enough headsets for all. How many students can you work with at once?”

“In Japan, all we had were five students, but I can see having more in each class. We did a lot of standing around watching while students did their thing. I think we could be watching more students at once.”

“In Yokohama,” Cara continued with more detail, “we had one UAV for those five students. You’re right. They spent a lot of time watching each other fly. They could have learned more in less time with more robots. The downside is that, at a hundred grand a pop, our cost, for Worms, that’s a lot of cash to ask for when we don’t yet have any students.”

“Well, we have one – Inigo Berger,” Bud informed.

“Why him?” Cara asked, surprised. “I expected to be training enlisted men, not commanding officers.”

“He wants to understand the technology,” Bud explained, “so that he can plan strategies using it. The guy’s very professional. I think he wants his name in the history books, and he wants them to say very complimentary things. For that, he needs to do extraordinary things, and do them well. He sees this technology as a chance to upstage everyone else.”

“Makes sense,” Cara agreed.

“Tell you what,” Cara added. “I’ll teach him all about VP if he’ll teach me Spanish.”

“He’s not a language-arts teacher, Cara.”

“It’s conversational Spanish that I need. For that, I need conversation. Long talks about nothing in particular with someone who will correct my pronunciation, and teach me the local idioms – help me sound like an educated person.”

“I can do that,” Bud pointed out.

“No offense, Bud,” Cara said carefully, “but I’d rather have long talks about nothing in particular with Inigo Berger.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” she added quickly. “I know you and he have been dating ...”

Bud laughed: “Cara, my kinky streak is way too wide for Inigo, and his is way too narrow for me. Besides, I’ve got a guy in Arizona, who I hope is still waiting for me. I’m anxious to get back as soon as I can. If you have the hots for Inigo, I won’t stand in your way.”

Cara flashed a grateful smile. Once again, one of her friends was being unexpectedly generous to her. She resolved to be worthy of it.

“I think,” Bud returned to discussing the VP school, “that you should see about sending UAV and ASV students to the ‘States for their final class. The airport is already set up to accommodate UAVs, and there are several small airfields that could be used if the UAV-school traffic gets to be too much.”

“Gwen suggested that,” Cara admitted. “She said we could teach the ASV course in Lake Meade, or Lake Havasu, or even right in the Colorado River.”

“There are also a bunch of canals off the Salt River that runs right through Phoenix, too,” Bud added. “Why did you reject the idea? It’s not in your plan.”

“I figured we’d want to keep everything down here.”

“Let’s plan to do the practical classes for UAVs and ASVs up there until you get something set up here. It’s better than trying to field half-trained operators.”

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“What I’d like to do, Inigo, is combine your learning verbal programming with helping me develop a Spanish-language version of the software,” Cara explained. This seemed an appropriate way to rope him into long talks in Spanish. At least this way, they’d be sure to have something to talk about.

She was making a brave effort to keep a professional demeanor while talking to him. Once in a while, however, he caught her making doe eyes at him, anyway.

He did not mind that at all. His father and mother had been pressuring him to find a wife, and he was well aware that the personal relationship he’d thought to have with Bud was going nowhere. She was fun to be with, and he had great respect for her professionally, but as a love interest: no.

He had reason to believe that he and Cara were much more compatible. The nearly ten year age difference was not a problem, since Mexican men traditionally took younger wives than Americans. And, Cara would be much more acceptable to his family.

For example, Bud always greeted Red with a warm, affectionate kiss and hug that bordered on the erotic, whereas Cara just shook hands, like a proper lady.

No matter what Bud was wearing, she managed to make it look provocatively sexy. Cara was much more demure, without being in any way unfeminine.

Cara even made her habit of wearing sleeves that revealed her addict’s scars seem virtuous. She made sure everyone knew that they were symbols of the organized crime she dedicated her life to opposing.

She showed great personal courage, often defying her enemies by appearing openly on the streets of Tampico. Everyone knew that the bomb that killed Olvera was aimed at her, too. True, she was always accompanied by bodyguards, but even so, she was at great risk whenever she appeared in public. Yet, she refused to hide.

From the standpoint of religion, she was much more acceptable as well. As a devout Zen Buddhist, Bud had no use for Catholicism, and no ties to the Church. In fact, the heavy decoration of Catholic churches, with its emphasis on death, guilt, and suffering – all of which are major taboos for Buddhists to dwell on – made her skin crawl. She felt the way she imagined a Baptist would feel at a witches sabbath. She tried to be patient whenever circumstances required her to enter a Catholic church, but after ten minutes, she felt ready to scream.

While not formally a Catholic, Cara had been close friends with Padre Olvera, and had often visited him at his church. In fact, she spent more time in Catholic churches than Berger did, himself. She still kept close ties with the priests in Olvera's parish, helping them raise funds for repairing the damaged sanctuary, and showing an interest in church social activities.

Her great passion was the park she and Olvera had planned on the site of the old prison. She'd dedicated it to his memory, and never tired of pushing the construction project forward.

These were actions worthy of a consort for an ambitious officer rising through the ranks of the Mexican army to ... who knows what rank.

It wouldn't hurt that she cultivated ties with civic leaders, either. It was necessary both for her work as an executive for Scottsdale Systems Technology, and for her humanitarian work for the people of Tampico. Yet, it was the right thing for his future wife to be doing. Even her looks, which were most attractive, were less overtly exotic than Bud's lofty height and spectacular blondness. Yes, Cara would be an excellent match for him.

"We use English for the UAV interface," she was saying, "because it's the international language of aviation. But it makes sense to program AGVs (automated ground vehicles) and ASVs (automated submersible vehicles) in local languages, which is Spanish throughout Latin America."

"Except for Brazil," Inigo pointed out.

"Except for Brazil," she agreed, "but, Brazil is not our primary focus at this time."

"In the future?" Inigo asked.

"The future's uncertain, and the end is always near," Cara said, as she so often did.

"You are a fatalist, dear lady," Inigo observed.

"I am a realist, my friend," Cara responded. "It would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that our lives and fortunes always hang by a thread."

"How can I help you develop this Spanish-language interface?"

"Well, as we go through your training, we can try to develop a Spanish-language equivalent for each command. We'll use

Spanish names for the robots, instead of Anglo names. If we want to call a robot named ‘Steven’ over to us, instead of saying, ‘Steven, come here,’ we’d say ‘*Esteban, ven aqui.*’ That’s the kind of thing I want to do. Can you help me?”

“Surely.”

“I’d also like to have you help me polish up my Spanish. I don’t want to sound like a half-educated *gringa*. Perhaps we could spend some time just talking in Spanish.”

“We’ll start by not letting you call yourself a ‘*gringa.*’ It’s a very impolite word.”

“What should I call myself, then?”

“Well, ‘*Americana*’ is good. ‘*Anglo*’ is not too bad. It’s a little informal, but not actually insulting. ‘*Estadounidense*’ is proper, but it’s a lot to say. Probably ‘*Americana*’ would be best most of the time.”

“And, ‘*Americano*’ for a man.”

“Yes, ‘*Americano*’ for a man.”

“How much do you need to know about verbal programming, really?” Cara asked, getting back to the main issue.

“I need to know *all* about it. I should also know something about the hardware, too. It is always important to understand the capabilities and limitations of every weapons system one deploys. Would you be the person to ask about that, as well?”

“I will be the person to ask about everything involving robotics, but I don’t know very much about the hardware, yet, either. We can learn it together.”

“How much time can you spend away from your regiment?” Cara asked. “A regular training program is three weeks long just to learn to program Worm robots. If you’re going to learn about aerial and submarine vehicles as well, that will add another two weeks, and that will have to be done in the United States. We don’t have the facilities here, yet.”

“If,” she continued, “we’re going to work on the Spanish-language interface at the same time, it will take longer. Probably, it will take twice as long. If we’re going to learn about the hardware, that should be done in the United States, too, and I don’t know how long it will take. Can you commit to all that?”

“Not all at once, surely,” Inigo replied. “Is there some way we can break it down? Do it in pieces separated by time back with my unit?”

“I believe so,” Cara said, “the regular program breaks down into one week of basic robot operation using a simulator. The second week is *practicum* using a Worm robot. At that point, you get certified as a VP operator. The third week is application programming, where you learn to train robots to operate autonomously – without human guidance. At that point, you become certified as a VP programmer. Learning UAVs and ASVs are separate week-long courses leading to pilot certifications. Actually, you have to have a pilot’s license to start the UAV program.”

“I already have that. As I said, I consider it critical for a commander to be familiar with all the weapons systems he deploys.”

“Very good,” Cara said, noting this practical example of what Bud meant when she said Inigo had a very professional attitude about his work. She hadn’t yet found *anything* not to like about this guy. “I’ll have to check with Scottsdale to find out what we can do about hardware training.”

“Basically,” she summarized, “it breaks into a bunch of week-long courses, which we can do one at a time, with time back with your unit in between. I’d like to see you do the first two together, however, if possible.”

“How much does this training cost?”

“It’s not cheap. I think we could talk Doc into letting you go through the program at cost, but that’s a couple of grand a week. Of course, when we train regular operators, we’ll do it ten or fifteen at a time, and that will spread the cost out. I haven’t worked it all out, yet, but it will be a few hundred per student per course. You, however, we want to be more thoroughly trained, I think, so that you can work more closely with the engineers to develop new ideas and strategies. And then, there’s working on the operator interface.”

“Let’s try this: ask for two weeks leave to come down here. That’ll give us time to do at least the first class, and work on the Spanish interface. We’ll put you up at our place. It gives me the willies thinking of you at that tourist hotel. It’s not very secure by our standards. I’ll ask Bud to cover for me, so I can spend the whole time on your program. It’ll cost your regiment two thousand dollars, which will be below our cost.”

“Is that two thousand per week?”

“No, that’s two thousand for the two weeks,” Cara assured him. “I figure we’ll spend half of the time working on your training, and half on the Spanish-language interface. We won’t charge for that, of course. It benefits us as much as it benefits you. You’ll

probably save most of the cost through not having to pay for meals and lodging, though. So, what you're asking your superiors for is two thousand dollars, and two weeks of your time."

"And, what do my superiors get out of this?"

"A commander who knows more about mobile robots than anyone else in the Mexican army. If you go through the whole program as I've outlined it, you'll probably be one of the half dozen or so most knowledgeable people in the world as far as VP programming, and mobile robots in general."

"You wouldn't be ready to design them," Cara amplified. "That's a degree in mechatronics engineering. Gwen is doing that now at ASU. It's a six-year program."

"You will, however," she continued, "be ready to work with SST's mechatronics engineers to create specifications for whole new classes of mobile robots intended for military and homeland security applications. On that front, the rest of the world will be stumbling to keep up with Mexico. So, what your superiors get is an exceptional commander ready to field a regiment armed with next-generation insurgency-fighting tools."

Inigo liked the sound of that.

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Thursday noontime a week later, Cara stopped to buy tamales for herself and her bodyguards outside the construction site for the new park. She made it a regular habit to visit the site at least twice a week – Monday afternoons and late Thursday mornings – to see how the project was progressing. On Thursdays, she usually treated herself and her bodyguards, as well as the construction manager, to lunch from the tamale stand on the corner after inspecting the site.

Reyna, the lady who operated the tamale stand, liked serving the tall *Americana* who was reputed to be doing so many wonderful things for the people of Tampico. The woman might not be especially tall for an *Americana*, but she towered over Reyna.

Reyna thought her name, which means "queen," fit the *Americana* much better than it did her. She was so gracious, and friendly, although a little sad at the same time. Everyone knew that the scars on her arms were from being tortured by criminals, like the ones causing so much trouble these days. Perhaps that was why she was a little bit sad. It was said that "*La Reina Americana*," as Reyna's friends called her, had dedicated her life to making the city safe from those criminals.

It was said that *La Reina* was not *Católica*, and she seldom appeared at Mass, but she visited the priests often, and was said to have given money to help rebuild the sanctuary. Often, she would go right from visiting the construction site for the park honoring poor Padre Olvera to see how work was coming on the church.

One time, it was said, the construction company tried to cut some corners on the church. When *La Reina* saw what they had done, she was very angry with the supervisor. She threatened to take both the job on the sanctuary *and* the job on the park away from the construction company if it ever happened again. The work was corrected immediately.

Even so, she always took time to talk to Reyna about how the tamale stand was doing. What about Reyna's family? How were plans for Consuela's confirmation coming? It was even more of a thrill the time *La Reina* brought that handsome Col. Berger as well. They made such a wonderful couple. Just think, the famous *El Lobo* eating lunch at her tamale stand!

Reyna, as usual, did not want to take Cara's money. "You must," Cara said, "I want you to take it for the *niños*."

"Si," Reyna agreed, once again, "*por los niños. Gracias.*"

Cara started to give the formal "*por nada*" response, but she suddenly felt herself being crushed to the ground under a huge, soft, warm weight. She heard the staccato brrrr of machine gun fire, and people screaming. She tried to get up, and found herself drenched in hot, slippery liquid.

She squirmed her way out from under the weight, and found it was Leonard, one of her bodyguards, with half of his head shot away. The right side of his skull was gone, and she could see an empty space where his brain should be. The hot liquid was blood pouring from the wound.

Cara looked up for help, and saw the tamale-stand lady standing behind the stand covered in spattered blood. She didn't appear to be hurt, but she stood with her mouth comically open, eyes large as dinner plates. Suddenly, she started screaming.

More gunfire.

Looking in the direction of the gunshots, Cara saw a police car with shredded tires stopped in the middle of the street. Two uniformed officers hung out of half-open doors. She saw another running away at full speed. As he ran, another of her bodyguards shot his right kneecap away, and he collapsed to the ground.

"*¡Su policías maldito pervertido trató de matar a uno de mi gente!*" Bud screamed at the Tampico police commissioner. "Your

goddamn crooked cops killed one of my people!”

“They were trying to kill my friend,” she continued. “They almost got two innocent bystanders. The poor tamale lady is in the hospital under sedation. What kind of a backwards-assed, fucked up, ...” She hesitated, too angry to think of any more Spanish expletives to express her anger. “... operation are you running, here?”

“Señora Thompson,” the commissioner tried to calm her down, “we will do everything in our power to find out who was responsible for this horrible act.”

“You know damn well who was responsible,” Bud yelled in his face. “It was one of the two goddamn cartels you have running around loose in this shithole of a city. You’ve got about fifteen minutes to start making some arrests, or *I’m* going to go hunting!”

The commissioner turned purple, and tried to think of something forceful to say.

He didn’t get the chance because Bud added: “You know, stupid, that the woman your bumble-fingered, blue-coated thugs tried to kill is *El Lobo’s* fiancée, don’t you?”

Bud could tell by the lightning speed at which the commissioner’s complexion changed from purple to white that he did not. Bud was getting a bit ahead of the facts when she said Cara was Inigo’s fiancée. They’d had a grand total of one date, so far. But, the fib had the effect she wanted.

“See that man out there in the hall?” she continued, pointing at one of the Gulf States Security agents, standing outside the door talking on a cellphone. “He’s on the telephone now with *El Lobo*, telling him what happened. How long do you think you have before Col. Berger is down here with a regiment of *Federales* to turn your department upside down and inside out to find out who tried to kill his girlfriend? I want to see a lineup of cops for eye witnesses to choose from in no-time-flat! We think two of those rats got away.”

“Señora,” the commissioner begged, “if we could talk to the man you captured. ...”

“The man we captured is in the hospital having his leg sewn back together. We have his badge number, and we’ve given it to your internal affairs people along with a demand for an investigation. I want to see everyone in his precinct, from his captain down to the patrolman on that beat suspended – *NOW!*”

“But, Señora ...”

“No buts! It’s going to be *your* butt on the griddle before I get done!”

With that, she stormed out of the building, barely slowing enough for her bodyguards to catch up and escort her to the car.

As Bud predicted, an hour and a half later, Inigo Berger reached the Mayor’s office just in time to co-sign the faxed order declaring martial law over an area covering about one third of the City of Tampico.

Helicopter gunships full of his troops began arriving almost immediately.

They set up headquarters for the occupation in the police commissioner’s office. The commissioner was told to go home and get his computer. No, on second thought, a squad of *Federales* would escort the commissioner home to get his computer, and bring both man and computer back.

Federales started removing the hard drives from all the computers in all the police stations in the martial-law area. All of the police officers were told to report immediately to their precinct stations, *or else*.

Gulf States Security generously provided a warehouse large enough to serve as a detention center. Nobody was going home tonight.

“We’re trying to figure out whether it was the Escobedos – what’s left of the Gulf Cartel – or the Zetas that ordered the hit,” Col. Berger told Bud. “Actually, we don’t care which it was. We’re going to use this as an excuse to burn them both. How is Cara?”

“Sedated,” Bud laughed. “I tried to get her to go back to the ‘States until we clear this up. She threw a vase at me. The nurse said she’d be out for ...” Bud checked her watch. “ ... another two hours. She’s ready to spit nails. Leonard was one of her favorites. He’d been with her since she first came down here.”

“I’m sorry,” Inigo said.

“Don’t be,” Bud advised, “It’s not your fault. What Cara needs now is for us to find out who did this, and drop sixteen tons on them.”

Inigo didn’t know what she was talking about. She was referring to a post-world-war-two animated cartoon where the bad guy’s punishment was to have a huge weight – labeled 10,000 lb. – dropped on him at the end of the cartoon. She mixed that image with an old Merle Travis song about a coal miner’s quota for the day being sixteen tons of ore.

Bud could be very confusing when she got wound up, which she was. Very.

Seeing that Inigo was not quite following her, she tried to clarify: “The best thing we can do is to mount a full investigation and bring the people responsible to justice.”

“That’s what we’re doing,” Inigo said.

“Right,” Bud agreed. “We’re doing the right thing. When Cara calms down, I think she’ll be satisfied.”

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Satisfied would not be a good description of Cara’s mood when she learned about Bud’s and Inigo’s progress finding Leonard’s killers. It was, she felt, equivalent to twenty-thousand lawyers being chained to the bottom of the sea – a good start. She would not be actually satisfied until she was sure that everyone responsible was chained up in Hell, and she’d probably want to go there to inspect the chains, personally.

Spitting nails was a good description of Cara’s mood.

“How can we find these people, Inigo?” she demanded to know.

“It won’t be too hard,” Inigo replied. “These people,” indicating the prisoners milling around outside the windows of the warehouse office, “have been surrounded by corrupt fellow officers for so long that they have had no fear. They have been openly bragging about their corruption, so everyone knows who the killers are and what they’ve been doing. They thought the cartels would protect them. Now, it’s just a matter of getting them to talk to us.”

“So,” Cara surmised, “we just have to make everyone more afraid of us than of the cartels.”

“Correct,” Inigo agreed. “Our sudden and complete reversal of the situation by declaring martial law and bringing in tough troops from outside to enforce it should scare them silly. Isolating them from the cartels by locking them all up incommunicado in the detention center will help reinforce that. Now, we have to pump them for everything they know before they start to get their bearings.”

“How long will that take?” Cara wanted to know.

“We must do it quickly,” Inigo replied, “humans have a great capacity to adapt. We need to break our prisoners’ loyalty to the

cartel, and make them loyal to us, before they start to organize resistance among themselves.”

“Again,” Cara insisted, “how long do we have?”

“It must start immediately,” Inigo said, “and proceed rapidly. We’ve a day or so at most. Our interrogations started as soon as prisoners started to arrive. Part of the interrogation strategy is to convince the prisoners that, when our troops appeared, the cartels became helpless.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” Bud interjected. She had been keeping silent while watching how Cara and Inigo would work together to handle the situation. She was generally pleased. They were pushing each other to maximize results while keeping focus on their common goal.

“Each prisoner will be concerned with what is happening to them here, and with what is happening to his family out there,” Inigo explained. “We want them to fear for themselves in here, while worrying about their families out there. So, for example, we get their addresses, ask who is living at home, and tell them that we will be checking. The implication is that if they cooperate, we will take care of their families. If they don’t, we won’t.”

“Ahh,” Cara brightened. “What if we offer a reward for information, and promise to pay it directly to their families in cash?”

“That would help,” Inigo said. “Even a few dollars a week would be a godsend for their families.”

“Can we do that?” Cara asked Bud.

“How much are we really talking about – in aggregate?” Bud asked Inigo.

“We have a few hundred cops affected right now. If we gave each of them a few hundred dollars, it could add up to several tens of thousands of dollars.”

“Leonard’s life insurance alone is more than ten times that,” Bud scoffed. “Cara, you can take that out of petty cash. I’ll talk to Red, and see how much she’ll authorize in addition. Perhaps the Mayor could set up a regular ‘Good Samaritan’ payoff fund specifically for people who roll over on the cartels. Now that we’re thinking of it, we could put out a pretty sizable reward for the cartel leaders, especially the Escobedos. I’ll talk to Red about that, too. Let people know it’s coming, but not how much. ‘Huge reward’ might be more effective in the short run than a specific number.”

A few thousand miles north, Red wasn’t thinking about offering rewards for apprehension of criminals, though. She was

getting the surprise of her life.

She and Doc had flown up to get advice from Mark Shipton about the situation. Mark, Mary, and the kids were still visiting with Doc's family in Massachusetts.

Instead of talking with Mark about vendettas with drug overlords, however, Red found herself playing school with Maryanne, Mike, and Judy. Maryanne was playing teacher. Red, Mike, and Judy played students. The lesson was the alphabet song.

First, Maryanne sang the first stanza: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G ..."

Then, Red repeated it: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G ..."

Delighted, Mike repeated in his turn: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G ..."

Judy, happily snuggled in her mother's arms, was sucking contentedly on her thumb.

By the time Mike got to singing, "Now I know my A, B, Cs, tell me what you think of me," Red didn't give a shit about Escobedos, Mexican drug cartels, or anything else going on outside that room. If she never saw another Gulf States Security duty roster, it would be too soon.

"I think you are the smartest little man I know," she told Mike, reaching over to rub noses with him, happily.

When Red had heard about the attack at the tamale stand, she and Doc had been curled up together in the big bed in his apartment, watching the Phoenix skyline slowly age. They'd been doing that, on and off, ever since Doc got back from Japan. Except for Doc's spending about four hours a day at SST, they'd taken it as a long, impromptu second honeymoon.

For Red, it had been a real vacation from everything she had been involved in. No corporate executiving, no software engineering, no household supervising. Just unwinding.

The phone call from Bud had been a wake-up call.

"Oh, God, Doc," she'd complained tearfully. "I hate that place. Can't it just go away? I don't want to go back down there. I don't want to fight anymore. Help me!"

She'd hoped he would tell her how to fix her problems in Tampico. She'd hoped he would give her a magic formula to

straighten the whole mess out. Instead, with an odd, determined look on his face, he'd picked up his cellphone, and speed dialed Bonnie Wells at SST.

"Hi, it's Doc," he said. "Red and I are going to see Mark Shipton for a few days. He's still up in Massachusetts, isn't he? ... Good. Please have my plane fueled up and ready to go in – let's see" he checked his watch "about an hour. ... Thanks."

To Red he'd said: "Get dressed. Grab an extra set of panties, and let's go."

She realized that his advice must be to have a war council with the person they knew with the most experience dealing with drug cartels – her step father. Mark had spent years fending cartels off while running an oil business with assets in Colombia, then the drug-cartel capital of the Western Hemisphere.

"Why don't we just call him up instead of spending the whole day flying up there?" she asked.

"Because we're flying up there," he stated flatly.

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Instead of jumping into a war council with Mark, however, Doc's first order of business had been to push Red to check up on what was happening with the kids. It hadn't taken much pushing.

While being drawn into playing with her children, Red noticed that Doc didn't seem to be taking care of business, either. He spent hours holed up with Mark and Ted discussing plans for Mark's new yacht.

Red was surprised, but strangely not displeased. Ted didn't care. He was spending time with his son on something they both cared about: custom boats. Mark was neither surprised, nor displeased. He could see exactly what Doc was doing.

He was putting his family back together.

Mark was, however, somewhat surprised at Doc's reaction to Bud's second telephone call.

Mark, Doc and Ted were in Ted's conference room, estimating the amount of power needed to drive the new yacht. The conference room was roughly twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide, and was dominated by a large antique mahogany table that must have weighed five hundred pounds. The table was piled high with two laptop computers, many hard-bound reference books pulled

from the bookshelves lining two and one half of the four walls – the rest being devoted to light-admitting windows and a door – and reams of letter-size white-lined paper that the men had, sheet by sheet, ripped from tablets.

Most of the sheets were wadded up into mini-basketballs that had been tossed unceremoniously toward the wastebasket, which had been set up on the far end of the table for the purpose. Whenever they decided what had been written on a sheet was junk, one or another would wad it up and toss it toward the basket. The basket was already overflowing onto the table.

Each of the remaining sheets had a hand-written number in the upper right hand corner enclosed in a circle. These numbers allowed them to keep track of which sheet carried what information, and the order in which the sheets fit together. In addition, each was covered on one side with diagrams, equations, and numbers in Doc's neat, methodical handwriting. Here and there, what looked like an answer to somebody's physics homework problem was enclosed in a rectangular box. Many of the pages had big Xs crossing out half or more of the writing.

Doc's cellphone buzzed, interrupting the mens' animated conversation involving those sheets.

"Hi, Bud," Doc said into the instrument. Having once started calling Bud by her "fuck buddy" nickname to help her feel attractive again, he'd simply kept up the practice without further comment. Sometimes, however, he called her "girl" for variety, or even "babe" to be more intimate. The latter was a nickname he generally reserved for Red, but sometimes used it for Bud, too, when he wanted her to feel especially cared for.

"What can I do you out of?" he added, as a greeting.

"I've been trying to get ahold of Red," came Bud's voice, "but she's not answering."

"She's keeping her phone shut off while playing with the kids," Doc explained.

There was a long silence on Bud's end of the line.

"I wanted to talk to her about posting a reward for information leading to capture of the Escobedos and other cartel leaders." Bud's voice had suddenly started sounding thick, like she was holding back tears.

"Sounds like a good idea," Doc said. "Make it big."

Then, he stopped for about fifteen seconds, deep in thought.

“You should come up here to discuss it with her,” he said, finally.

“What?”

“Come up here to discuss it with her.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

When Doc gave a flat order like that, Bud knew it was time to obey without question. It meant he had something in mind that was important, but that, for some reason, he didn’t want to explain.

“When?”

“Now.”

“I can’t just pick up and leave,” Bud complained.

“Yes, you can. Cara can take care of everything on that end.”

“But ...”

“No buts. Fly up here. *Now!*”

Something was up, but Bud had no idea what it could be. She hoped everything was okay with the kids. Could something have happened up there at the same time as the attack down in Tampico? She thought back to the foiled raid on the ranch in Scottsdale.

“Is everything okay up there?” she asked. “Are the kids alright?”

“Everything is fine here. The kids are fine. You need to come here *now.*”

“Alright. Where should I fly into?” Bud had no way of knowing where they were at the time. She assumed they were in the U.S. somewhere, but the last time she’d talked to Red they were in Arizona, but the kids had been somewhere else. The problem with mobile phones was that they were mobile – you never knew where the people you were talking to were physically.

“We’re in Amesbury. Fly into Logan. I’ll pick you up there, and fly you to Plum Island. Wear your leather jacket and boots.”

Bud was surprised at that last part. It meant Doc was planning a motorcycle ride. Bud hadn't been on a motorcycle since all this stuff with the cartels started. It was too risky.

What in Hell was he thinking?

Bud called the charter service they'd started using at Tampico International Airport, and set up a direct flight to Logan International in Boston, Massachusetts. Yes, they did have a plane available that could make the trip non-stop. It was a ten-place jet, however, and wouldn't be cheap. Yes, they could take off in an hour.

Bud would take two bodyguards with her. They, apparently, would have to stay in Boston if Doc was picking her up in his plane. His plane had only two seats. Maybe he'd have them rent a car, and drive to Amesbury. Bud decided that they should have a car, anyway. It took about fifteen minutes to make all the arrangements.

By eight o'clock that evening, Bud was standing, shivering, at the foot of the stairs outside the chartered jet, waiting for Doc to show up. It felt strange to be back in Boston after so many months. It had, in fact, been over a year since she'd been this far north. The air temperature was still in the sixties, but it felt cold to her, even with her leather jacket.

She looked off down the long runway, seeing plane after plane take off on one runway, or land on another. It was like rush hour on a superhighway, except that it was aircraft of every description, rather than cars and trucks. Soon, she noticed one small aircraft taxiing across the tarmac toward her. In the dusk, she could barely make out its yellow blended-wing-body shape behind the bright landing lights. That must be Doc's plane. She hoped she'd not packed too much in her knapsack to fit into its luggage compartment.

As the plane approached, she felt her excitement build. She'd been in a dangerous situation so long ... As soon as it got here, she'd be safe again.

The plane slowed, then turned abruptly to point back toward the runway, then rocked to a stop. The canopy opened, and she saw Doc's big frame emerging. Her heart started pounding as he climbed down to the tarmac, and turned toward her.

She found herself running toward him, and jumping into his arms. For weeks, now, she'd been the strong one; the leader; taking care of everyone else. She just wanted to have someone take care of *her* again.

Without thinking, she wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him down for a lingering kiss. She felt a vague guilt that she was making out with the husband of her "baby," Red, but she couldn't help it. She didn't want to help it. She needed his help, his protection, and his strength. The rest would work itself out, in time. Right now, she didn't care. She just wanted to be safe and happy

in his strong arms.

“Sorry,” she apologized, breaking the kiss, but still holding him close, “I missed you guys so much. I want to go home. Please take me home.”

“It’s okay, now, babe,” Doc said. “We’re going home.”

66

After the Coast Guard and DEA had completed their work on *Strange Brew*, and returned her to Doc. He took her out to scuttle in over five hundred feet of water South of Vaca Key. He did salvage the turbines and transmissions, which were together worth over a quarter of a million dollars on the used market. Then, he filled both tanks with diesel fuel, and had the boat towed out to what was to be its graveyard.

In the presence of Eve and a film crew, Doc made the call and punched in the code to detonate the mines.

As he’d predicted, the C4 blew the two thousand gallons of diesel fuel into the air, atomized it, and ignited it. The fireball was as large as a football stadium, dwarfing the hundred-ten-foot Coast Guard cutter stationed nearby to provide scale.

The sea burned for twenty minutes after the explosion.

The environmental impact statement had cost Doc fifty thousand dollars, and held the operation up for an extra two weeks.

Eve got together with video producer Tamara Jones to assemble a one-hour documentary, which expanded out to two hours by the time they were done. It followed *Strange Brew*’s career from design to scuttling. It prominently featured the innovative power plant that made it so fast, and the biometric anti-theft system that may have saved Bud’s life by making her indispensable to Rodriguez’ pirate crew.

The true story of how they interrogated Charles Washington never came out, although Eve eventually used it in a luridly fictionalized account she published several years later.

Eve’s documentary incorporated video records showing Bud’s placing of the charges under *Strange Brew*’s fuel tanks, and an interview with Red explaining how the tracking devices were smuggled aboard in the FADEC modules, as well as security-camera

footage of the attempted home invasion in Scottsdale to show how the cartel's minions had been outgunned, outclassed, and outmaneuvered every step of the way.

The story line followed *Strange Brew's* life from beginning to end, with asides to follow events, such as the prison takedown, and the church bombing, that did not directly involve the boat, but were part of the whole story.

The first few minutes told about how Doc designed the boat, himself, and his father built it in the Amesbury boatyard. A few minutes provided a tour of the boat as a pleasure boat. Since the facades had been left original, it was easy to walk through and point various features out.

Next came a more technical description of the powerplants and computer control system. Here, Doc explained how they worked in a voice-over, with still photos and watered down schematic illustrations providing visuals. The biometric hardware had been destroyed in Cuba months before, so Red demonstrated how similar technology was used to secure her locker in the female pilots' locker room at SST.

Red and Bud together, wearing bikinis despite the relatively cool weather they were experiencing in southern Florida when that material was shot, demonstrated how the systems were used to operate the boat. They showed how to start it (this material was, of course, shot before Doc pulled out the engines and transmissions), take it out of the slip at the yacht club, and make a high-speed run. The high-speed run was shot at over seventy-five knots with the high rises along Miami's Collins Avenue flashing by in the background.

They used still photos and on-camera interviews to tell about Bud's living aboard *Strange Brew* during and after her divorce from Subramanian, and her subsequent encounter with Charles Washington. Eve resurrected interviews she'd made with Bud right after her moving to Scottsdale describing events on the pirate vessel, and her subsequent rescue. The contrast between Bud as a secure, confident woman in the other interviews, and the physically bruised and shell-shocked Bud who appeared right after her captivity, did more than anything else to drive home the point of Rodriguez' sadism.

The Chief of the DEA Miami section explained how the rescue led to Rodriguez' switching from piracy to drug smuggling. He explained how the drug smuggling racket worked, and showed how *Strange Brew's* innards had been gutted to make room for contraband.

Eve then launched into a biography of Rodriguez, which she had pieced together slowly over time. Red explained how she, as head of Gulf States Security, had tracked down Washington and, with Gwen's help, lured him onto the *Marinette*, where they captured

and interrogated him about Rodriguez' operation. There was no mention of scopolamine or a beating.

The documentary used news footage to tell exactly the same story that had been put out in the media. It made it appear that, once captured, Washington had voluntarily provided information about both Rodriguez' piracy and Caliche's white slavery racket, and that it was providing the latter information that led to his brutal beating. There was nobody left from Caliche's ring to gainsay the official version. Sen. Bosley got a few minutes to describe the evils of the white slavery trade and his committee's efforts to stop it.

Cara's involvement with the story didn't really start until she first contacted Father Olvera as an operative working for Red. She did, however, tell the story of Rodriguez' brutality, with a short first-hand account from David Landry. She then described the prison takedown, and efforts to relocate and rehabilitate *El Chile's* victims.

Her narrative ended with graphic footage an amateur had captured of the church bombing. The photographer was a German tourist, who'd been across the street with a video camera taking pictures of the church. He'd happened to be filming when Cara came out of the church and stopped at the crosswalk waiting for the light to change. The German had noticed her, and kept filming because he thought she was pretty. So, his shot was perfectly composed to catch the glass blowing out of the windows on either side of her. He then followed the woman as she tried to help victims, all the while covered in blood from the man with the cut leg, and with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Doc paid him a lot of money to secure rights to *that* video!

Eve's documentary then moved on to the DEA's efforts to harass the cartel's drug shipments. Red explained how she used a combination of satellite imagery, and real-time tracking to follow the smuggling operation. So, it was she who described how her SEAL team rigged *Strange Brew's* turbines, and how the Mexican Navy had put the tracking equipment aboard while replacing the FADEC modules.

The Miami section chief then explained how the DEA had used Red's information to cripple the Gulf Cartel's smuggling operation, which led the Escobedos to retaliate by instigating a raid on the Mancheks' Scottsdale ranch.

Eve used her own coverage, which included security-camera footage showing the one-sided gunfight between Red's security guards and the gangsters, to tell the story of the attempted raid. Eve let the prerecorded bragging statement by the gang leader, Diego, make the case that American cities were in danger from organized drug-smuggling criminals. She used her interview after his arrest to point out that the danger was not over. He still believed.

An interview with former Tampico Mayor Perez in his Texas hideout described how the cartel's influence had affected life in

Tamaulipas State, and Tampico in particular. His successor as Tampico's Mayor pitched her efforts to take back the city for its citizens. She pointed out that the city had turned the corner since Col. Burger's *Federales* had cleaned the city's police department of corruption, and praised Cara and Red for their efforts to improve life there by removing the prison and replacing it with a park dedicated to Padre Olvera's memory. The President of Mexico pitched his agenda to wage war on Mexico's drug cartels.

Doc got to insert a section on how advanced technology – available from his company – was being used to fight smugglers. It included material from Gwen's Far East operation showing how they had started to use UAVs to track smugglers, and a long sequence on Bud's using *Diane* to attach mines to *Strange Brew*'s bottom.

He used that experience to point out how difficult it was to pull off even the best planned crime-fighting operation. They'd planned everything out, and done everything right, but were foiled by Porfirio's unpredictable behavior. Instead of taking the mines to Tampico, where they could be used to help the Mexican war on the cartels, he took them to Havana, where they were completely useless.

Finally, Eve came to the *dénouement* where Porfirio closed the circle by taking *Strange Brew* out on a pirate cruise. Red re-enacted her two days monitoring the pirate cruise, right down to the breakfast run by motorcycle. She wore flannel pajamas – with pictures of duckies and bunnies on them – during the in-house scenes where she'd actually been running around nude. Of course, they had the Miami news crew's footage of the arrest.

Eve ended the program with the scuttling of *Strange Brew*. Doc calculated the size of the fireball, and the area that would be covered by burning diesel fuel, so that they could set the cameras up ahead of time to get the best shots, and position the Coast Guard cutter out of danger.

Eve included footage of removing the turbines, and readying the vessel, then showed the Coast Guard cutter towing it far out to sea, then standing by while Doc set the charges off.

To make the point that their reach was global, Doc made the call from Agent Vargas' office in Scottsdale, Arizona, nearly three thousand miles away. Tamara used a split screen, showing Doc placing the call on the left, with the boat sitting in position in the Caribbean Sea on the right.

When Doc keyed in the detonation code on the left, the boat disappeared in a ball of fire on the right. The concussion from the C4 blast saturated the sound track, and was followed by the roaring sound of the subsequent fire.

Eve rolled the closing credits over footage of the enormous circular lake of diesel fuel burning on the ocean, with a diameter

several times the length of the Coast Guard cutter standing nearby. There was no closing music. The only sound was the roaring of the fire.

The point was unmistakable. Governments around the world were locked in a battle for civilization with vicious organized criminals funded by a steady stream of drug profits. But, the fruits of civilization – in the form of advanced technological systems – gave the governments an overwhelming advantage.

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After the Escobedos saw the Spanish-language version of Eve's documentary, it was once again very quiet around their hideout. Alejandro Escobedo holed up again in his study with a case of tequila, and no salt.

"Alejandro, come out here!" his wife shouted through the door, once again. "Tell us what we need to do."

"There is nothing we can do," he shouted back, again. "I told you that raid on the ranch in Arizona was stupid, but you didn't want to listen. Then, you called down *El Lobo's* wrath on us by going behind my back to hire Tampico cops to kill his girlfriend. Now, he and the Mayor have made an example by cleaning up the whole police department. Between that, and General Villa's work in Torreon, they are marginalizing both us and the Zetas."

General Carlos Villa, descended from the family of Pancho Villa, had made an international name for himself by coming out of retirement to clean up the city of Torreón, in the state of Coahuila. He faced the same police corruption that *El Lobo* dealt with in Tampico, and used similar methods to defeat it.

"Now, *El Lobo* has put a huge price on our heads. Who knows who will show up to assassinate us?"

Escobedo did not realize that Pepito, one of the remaining loyal guards, was standing next to Señora Escobedo as he yelled this through the door. Pepito said nothing right then, but made a mental note to relay the conversation to his friends among the other guards. He was beginning to think that working for the Escobedos had very little future.

By morning, there were no guards left around the Escobedo ranch. The servants also disappeared, taking the dog with them. Escobedo's cook had come to love that dog.

Three days later, six hard-bitten characters brought the bodies of Escobedo and his wife to the local police station in a beat-up

SUV. They wanted to collect the ten million dollars per head reward. Doc, after all, had told Bud to “make it big.” Mark Shipton agreed. It was a lot of money, even for him, but he felt it was worth it to eliminate the threat to his grandchildren.

Several hundred miles away, in the Zetas headquarters, the Zetas second in command asked: “What does this mean, *Jefe*?”

Despite being now nothing but a gang of criminals, the Zetas still liked to maintain the outer trappings of an elite military organization. When honor is gone, ego is all that’s left.

“We now see how the Americans operate,” his *Jefe* responded. “They do not come at you directly, but stealthily, as we would. They, however, have technical tools we have never seen before. And, they are ruthless about using them. When they want to use the resources of their government, they can do that, as they did to stop Porfirio. Or, they can go right past them, and take matters into their own hands. Look what happened when those idiots in Arizona tried to attack that ranch. The *gringos* were ready for them, and shot them to pieces.”

“So, we need to get ahold of their technology, and use it against them.”

“That is the only hope that we have.”

Altogether, however, the Zetas were unable to get more than the most general information about what Gulf States Security was up to. They did know that GSS was bringing in high-tech tools for *El Presidente*’s anti-drug war, and training picked troops from *El Lobo*’s regiment to operate them.

The Zetas even got a few agents considered for training on the SST technology. Somehow, however, the agents never managed to progress in the training. They all washed out early in the program.

They *did* manage to steal one of the units, however. One of their technicians then managed to get the thing turned on.

It wanted to *talk* to them!

They found out the thing’s name was Federico.

“*Federico, despierta*,” the technician said. “Federico, wake up.”

“Who are you?” Federico asked.

“Federico, I’m your new programmer,” the technician lied.

“Where’s Cara?” Federico asked.

“Federico, Cara’s not here today,” the technician tried. “She asked me to work with you until she gets back.”

“Where did she go?”

“She went back to the United States on family business.”

“And, who did you say you were?” Federico insisted.

“My name is Estevan,” the technician told it, “I hope we will be friends.”

The robot didn’t acknowledge the opening.

“Federico, follow me.” Federico followed the technician.

“Estevan, I need to talk to Cara.”

“Federico, Cara is unavailable.”

“Estevan, I need to talk to Manuel.”

Manuel was one of the Gulf States Security operatives that Federico worked with most.

“Federico, Manuel is not here now, either.”

“Estevan, I need to talk to someone at Gulf States Security.”

“Federico, I am with Gulf States Security.”

“Estevan, I do not have you in my database as an authorized user. To become an authorized user, you must ... ”

It was at that point that a SEAL team from Gulf States Security blew the door off the warehouse, arrested everyone in the building, and recovered the robot. They turned the technicians over to a special anti-cartel unit under *El Lobo*’s command.

Federico had realized early that he had been removed from the GSS facility without authorization, and called home for help. He'd been told by the dispatcher to keep his captors busy talking until the GSS team arrived. Part of Federico's initial message had been GPS coordinates for his current location.

The response time had been seven minutes.

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"I need some advice about Bud," Glen Trudeau said. He was sitting in the shade on the patio by the pool at Red's Scottsdale ranch with Doc. Sam had brought each of them a double espresso. The cups were now sitting in front of them, cooling slowly. Nobody else was around because Gen felt he needed to talk to Doc alone.

The whole family had arranged to go back to Scottsdale the day after Bud arrived, not even staying another night in Amesbury. Doc had hired an enormous – at least enormous compared to the corporate-size jets they were used to using – plane to carry himself, Red, Bud, Maryanne, Mike, Judy, and a squad of bodyguards to Phoenix Sky Harbor, where a small motorcade of limosines waited to take them home to the ranch in Scottsdale.

Bud had called Glen to meet her at the airport, and take her home in his car. She decided not to ask if she could move back in with him, since that had been the arrangement when she left. She made a show of assuming that was still where she belonged. If he'd had a change of heart, he'd have to throw her out. She wasn't going to make it easy for him. She wanted him, and would fight for him if necessary.

Glen had sounded enthusiastic about her coming home with him. That at least meant that he hadn't installed a new live-in girlfriend. In fact, when she got home, Bud found her relationship with Glen picked back up seamlessly, as if it had never been interrupted. She'd been home for six months when Glen showed up at the ranch looking to have a private *tête-à-tête* with Doc.

Glen had come to believe that Doc knew Bud better than anyone else in the world, with the possible exception of Red. This, however, was not a subject that he would feel comfortable talking to Red about. He'd also come to trust Doc's judgement, and to feel that he could talk freely with him, man-to-man.

"Yes," Doc said, as if answering a question.

"What?" Glen asked, surprised by the response, and not sure what the question was that Doc seemed to be answering.

“Yes, you should ask her to marry you.”

Even more surprised, Glen opened and closed his mouth a few times, trying to think of what to say next. It made him look like a fish.

“What makes you think that was what I was going to ask you?” he finally got out. It seemed anachronistic. People didn’t ask for permission to ask a girl to marry them, anymore. True, Doc was the closest Glen knew of to a father figure for Bud, but, really ...”

“It wasn’t what you were going to ask me. It is, however, what you would really like to know, so I cut to the chase.”

“How do you know that’s what I want to know?” Glen was still having trouble keeping up with Doc’s leaps of intuition.

“If you didn’t want to marry Bud, you wouldn’t be here hemming and hawing. You’d be off chasing coeds in Tempe.”

Tempe was where the ASU campus was, where Glen taught. That’s where they kept the coeds.

“Oh. I guess you’re right,” Glen said, surprised that he hadn’t thought of it, himself.

“Now, that we’ve gotten that out of the way, what is it that you’d planned to ask me? What’s bothering you?”

With a sly smile, Glen asked: “Don’t you already know?” He was trying to be sarcastic about Doc’s intuitive leaps.

“Yes, but I want you tell me, anyway,” Doc said, exasperatingly. Sometimes, Glen thought, Doc seemed to enjoy being exasperating.

“It’s about Bud’s relationship with Red,” Glen said. “I know Red’s your wife, and the kids’ mother, and she seems devoted to you and to them.”

Slowly, Doc nodded affirmatively.

“But, at the same time, she treats Bud almost as a lover would. The way they talk to each other. The way they run to each other when they’ve been apart for a while. It’s like they’re in love.”

“They are in love,” Doc stated. “They have been for years.”

“But, would Bud want to marry me, then?”

“She’s dying to marry you.”

“I’m confused,” Glen admitted.

“It’ll be easier if we step back and first talk about Bud’s best friend, Red,” Doc suggested. “In a lot of ways, they’re very much alike. Start with accepting the fact that Bud and Red have been in love practically since they first met each other, what, six years ago? Almost seven!”

“Okay,” Glen allowed, carefully.

“Red, however, all along knew that what she wanted most was to have a home, a family, and the whole nine yards. She can’t have that with Bud. She never could, always knew it, and it has nothing to do with her relationship with Bud.”

Glen slowly nodded that he thought he understood that.

“That family is the part of Red’s life that she and I share.”

Glen seemed to think things were starting to make some sense.

“You can love more than one person, you know,” Doc pointed out. “It’s allowed. People do it all the time. Ask any parent with children.”

Glen started to look happier.

“Now, back to Bud,” Doc said. “Bud was always the free spirit just looking for a good time. In that, she was always the leader. All through college, when she and Red were together, Bud would come up with dandy ideas for escapades, and Red would cheerfully follow along. That was their life together, and why they fell in love.”

Glen sat, pensively taking that in.

“All that changed when Red and I married. All of a sudden, Red was taking the lead – having a family, running a household, building a career, and so forth.”

“Um, hum,” Glen mumbled.

“Bud tried to follow along, latching onto her first husband right after Red and I married. But, she wasn’t ready.”

Light started to dawn in Glen’s eyes.

“She and Suby screwed around with things they were both interested in, like their *Kama Sutra* website, while working on their separate careers. That, however, just didn’t work out. And, I don’t think either of them ever thought about making a family together.”

“Both of them had things rattling around in their heads that they *thought* were wrapped up in their marriage,” Doc continued, “but really weren’t. For example, Bud’s career wasn’t important to Suby. Suby imagined that Bud was suddenly going give it all up to become Suzy Homemaker, and that just wasn’t going to happen. The marriage was preordained to be a train wreck.”

“So, that’s why they broke up,” Glen guessed.

“That, basically, although I don’t think either of them could have explained it at the time, is why they broke up.”

“When Bud had her little visit with the pirates, it got her thinking about what her life was all about. She saw Red balancing home life and career, and liked what she saw. Then, she saw you, and realized that you could understand her career. It’s something you guys can even share, if you want to. They have shipwrecks in China, too. But, in any case, you each understand, and can be sympathetic with, the other’s available choices.”

“In addition,” Doc continued, “she wants a family of her own, likely now more than ever, and likes the idea of making it with you.”

“Another thing is that she now understands how much effort it takes to make a life, and she’s ready to put in the work. She’s also had a taste of what it’s like to be a single woman living alone. She can now say: ‘Been there. Done that. Didn’t like it.’ It’s lonely, scary, and not all that much fun.”

“It’s not all that much fun for a man, either,” Glen pointed out.

“Very true. You know it, and I know it. But that is irrelevant to our discussion. It explains why *you* would like to marry *her*. We’re talking about why *she* would like to marry *you*.”

“She could marry almost anyone. She’d beautiful. She doesn’t need exactly me,” Glen observed.

“Ahh, but it’s you she’s chosen,” Doc pointed out.

“By the way,” he added, “you probably don’t know this. She had a chance to change her mind in Tampico. A colonel in the Mexican army – who, by the way, is a very good catch, himself – made a play for her. She chased him away. The next day, she started pestering Red about how they could get disentangled down there, so she could come back here to *you*. Does that tell you anything?”